

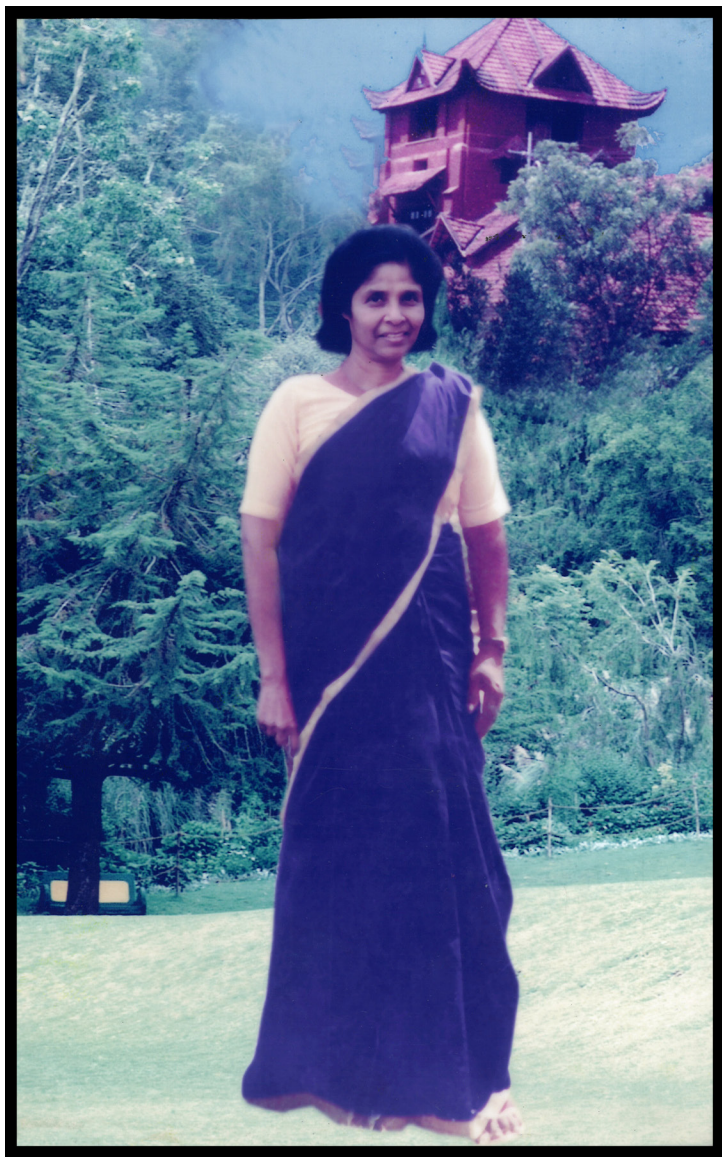
The Door



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In the Summer of 2017, Salma traveled to Italy and stayed in Rome, near the Vatican. She presented her scholarly husband's books and writings to the Vatican Library. In September of 2017 she received a thank you letter from Pope Francis expressing appreciation, acknowledging the gift of inscribed copies of Dr. Ben Michael Carter's writings with his personal photo with the Papal seal.



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A Novel By
Ben Carter

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For Ialɓ Prochaska

My soul is among lions

—Psalm 57:4

Prologue

The question becomes "Is the universe analogical or digital; that is, is it ultimately seamless or discrete?" To appeal to matter as mostly empty space does not really address that question. It is space/time as fabric for the expression of matter that is more basic, and because time is the sine qua non of all phenomena, it is generally imagined as more fundamental than space, so the answer to our question may hinge on how we imagine time. If time is infinitely divisible, then the universe is ultimately analogical, but if time is particulate, then the universe is probably digital.

Particles of time?

Agreed. A misleading image. Let me explain it this way: according to Einstein's theory of special relativity, time has no flow. It is better thought of as a coordinate. Our perception that time flows is based on our recognition that things happen, but phenomena, that is the happenings we associate with time, are perhaps better conceived as causalities unfolding through space/time coordinates. From such a perspective, our temporal language is more usefully imagined as causal language. Since time and space are so

Prologue

closely associated, and in view of the fact that space does seem to be particulate, time might be discrete as well. The idea certainly works mathematically, and it does help to describe phenomena on the quantum level. Indeed, if the string theorists are right, this could hold the key to harmonizing special relativity and quantum mechanics. But we're wandering. My main point is this: the more we discover about the universe, the more digital it appears, and a digital universe would be very like the Wachowski brother's matrix.

And you're telling me that time as discrete and universe as matrix has something to do with demons?

The man stretched his shoulders, stood and walked over to the window. The city below him sparkled in the darkness like a display of jewelry under black lights. Gazing into the night, the man clasped his hands behind his back and nodded thoughtfully. Yes, he said, *it has everything to do with demons.*

Are they jacking in? his companion asked with ill disguised sarcasm.

No, the man responded still staring intently over the city, *they're incarnating.*

Chapter One (a)

Squinting against the midmorning sun, Jeffrey Swofford picked his way toward a dusky outcrop of granite that loomed like an English folly near the far trees. The brambles coiling over the Appalachian meadow scraped and jabbed at his jeans. Plowing through such thorny brakes always made him nervous. They were “mouse magnets,” which meant they attracted copperheads. He knew a copperhead bite probably would not kill him. When she was in her seventies, his great grandmother had been stung by one hiding in a corn crib and had lived for another twenty years, but he also knew the snakes packed enough poison to make him wobbly sick. He hoped his army surplus infantry boots would protect him if he kicked one up.

His legs, though conditioned by years of hill climbing, had begun to ache agreeably. When he first saw the rocks and decided to make them his goal, he guessed that the ascent from the overgrown logging road would be difficult, but a challenge always put an edge to his exercise. Knee high grass waved lazily in the hot wind, and he could taste sweat on his lips, feel it sting his eyes.

Hiking had become his passion. To pit himself against indifferent nature made him feel young again. It was one of the reasons he had purchased the mountain hideaway with its 150 acres. Completed in 1972, the building was small, intended more as a summer cabin than a permanent residence, but Jeffrey loved it. He imagined Shalan would have loved it too. They met as students at Howard University and married shortly after they graduated. Their four and a half years together had been the happiest in his life. She was killed by a drunken driver in the autumn of 1970. The years that followed had not been easy. At first he buried himself in his work. Later there had been a few girl friends, but none had been—could have been—Shalan, and the relationships had not lasted. He made a good deal of money during the Reagan boom, fleshed out his fortune in the Clinton years, and now he had enough to take an early and comfortable retirement. He moved into his new home as the first green of April dusted the forest, and had never doubted the wisdom of his decision.

As he approached the rocks, he put his head back and cupped his hands over his eyes. The ledge of granite, comprised of several outcroppings crowded with laurel, was much larger than he had imagined. He moved along its border, paused to pick at lichens that crusted the weathered stone, then turned and scanned the slope he'd just climbed. He glanced at his watch. Noon was an hour away. He could see the remnants of the logging road fading into the ridges below. As he started to descend toward it, he slipped

and, catching himself, glanced to his right. That was when he saw the opening.

From Jeffrey's perspective, the granite mass resembled a cluster of broken spires and gigantic boulders that had collapsed into one another and fused. At the base of that gray confluence, and just visible through the laurel, a tear in the rocks gaped like a crippled triangle. Almost unapproachable behind the dense brush, the fissure was plainly high and broad enough to easily accommodate even a man as large as he. Intrigued, Jeffery stooped and shouldered and broke his way through the thicket until he reached the entrance of the cave.

For cave it was as Jeffrey could tell from the chilly feel of the air as he stood in its entrance. The passage quickly vanished into darkness, but the first few shadowy feet looked easy enough to traverse, almost inviting. Jeffrey stepped cautiously forward, stopping only when the darkness became impenetrable. Then he glanced back at the sunlight that filtered through the laurel, then into the darkness again. There was the feel of adventure here, the hint of mystery. This, Jeffery decided, could prove interesting.

Though not an expert spelunker, Jeffrey had done some caving and owned some equipment back at his cabin that he was sure would be quite serviceable for any cursory inspection of the cave. Most of the day still lay ahead of him. He had plenty of time to get the equipment and investigate the cave that afternoon. Enthused with the idea, Jeffrey stepped

quickly into the late morning sun and, pushing his way back through the laurel, he started for the logging road. Behind him, the cave waited, a crooked, enigmatic gate.

Interlogue

Incarnating? Like Jesus?

The man's almost ephemeral frown was reflected in the window. *No. The Christ had a mother, a virgin, and was the child of the Holy Spirit. There is no reason these creatures would choose to be born, much less to have a virgin mother, and there is no sense in which they are children of the Holy Spirit. They incarnate as any other angel might. They assume a form, then allow the world to congeal upon them like mist.*

Ah, I see. A digital universe.

Yes, digital, like a fine grained mist. Think of a two dimensional hologram of points. Our universe is like that hologram. It is a frame of length and width in which depth and time are expressed as coordinates. Angels can enter that hologram and participate in it with us.

But mist settles on something more solid than itself. Spiritual beings have no solidity. How can these points coalesce around them?

What is the source of order? Would you say it is a property or a force of some kind? Yet we do not see it.

It has no mass. Nevertheless it controls that which has mass. It allows mass to be expressed as something. Think of these creatures as forces with personalities, properties that are aware.

And you claim these aware forces, the cognizant properties, incarnate by letting the universe condense upon them?

The man nodded slowly. *Yes, something like that.*

I'm sorry, but that's an image that is pretty hard for me to grasp.

A slight smile played across the man's face as he continued to gaze into the darkness. *Is it? Use yourself as an analogy.*

Chapter One (b)

Jeffery walked briskly, following the remnants of the logging road as it bent and ducked among the trees. He did not plan to give the cave serious attention. He just wanted some idea of how big it was, how deep it might be. In any event, he possessed neither the skill nor the equipment to plumb it in earnest, and he certainly did not intend to delve very far into that unknown cavern alone. If it looked promising, he might invite Hank and Sesiom up to explore it with him in the next few weeks. If it turned out to be a shallow notch, which he did not think it would, he would leave it to the laurel. Indeed, he might do that anyway even if it looked like he had discovered another Mammoth Cave. What drove him was his curiosity at that moment and the fact that he had nothing in particular planned for the rest of the day. Space to indulge a whim. That was one of the more refined luxuries of retirement!

Ahead of him, the road drifted right through grass and brush, but Jeffery moved left, looked for the path he was beginning to wear toward his newly purchased home. There it was! Leaving the road behind, he pushed deeper into the forest, scarcely slowing his

pace. A fly circled his head, but Jeffery brushed it away. His thin shirt was streaked with sweat, his breath easy, his heart strong. He was in remarkably good condition for a man in his early sixties and he knew it. His eyes scanned the forest floor, searching for the slender track that would take him home.

And then he saw it, built beneath a slope, dappled by forest shadows, its corrugated roof painted green, its walls white with a coat of latex that was only months old. The cabin was small, comfortable, welcoming, and his. He bounded up to the porch, through its unlocked door, and into its air conditioned dimness. Striding to the refrigerator, he poured himself a tumbler of unsweetened lemonade, gulped that down, then poured another and took it with him into his small paper-strewn living room where he punched on his computer to check his email. There was nothing but a couple of ads that had slipped past his spam blocker. Deleting them unread he glanced at MSNBC for headlines, then, having finished his second glass of lemonade, he turned his computer off and went to the garage behind his house to collect his spelunking gear.

With its green roof and white paint, the garage looked as crisp as the house. It had no front door, so the noon light pervaded its cluttered interior. His Jeep took up most of the space. To its right some gardening implements dangled. He glanced at them ruefully. Despite his best intentions, he had planted nothing this year, but when spring came round again, he promised himself, there would be cabbages and roses. He had even picked out a spot for the vegetables.

A couple of saws, an ax, and a coil of rope hung next to the gardening tools. On a table built into the wall, a powerful flashlight and a fishing rod lay next to a carpenter's box. He picked up the flashlight and, though he had replaced its batteries the week before, clicked it on for a moment to assure himself it worked. Rum-maging in the back of his Jeep, he found an army surplus blanket. Next he scooped up the fishing rod and dropped a couple of lead weights into his pocket. Then, carrying all this, he went back to his house. He deposited the gear on his porch, went inside for a small rucksack he kept in the closet by his door, then went back to the porch where he bundled the rope and blanket into the pack, disassembled the fishing pole and put it on top of the rope next to the flashlight. Now he was ready. Shouldering the rucksack, he began his trek back to the cave.

Interlogue

The other man snorted. *Use myself as an analogy? But I had a mother.*

True, but you yourself are enfleshed awareness.

Well sure. It's called being an animal. You could say the same thing about a mosquito or a squid.

True. They too are examples of enfleshed awareness. It is, as you suggest, a very common phenomenon.

Okay, at this point what you say ceases to have any credibility for me. In fact, it is a primary reason why the entire scenario you are laying out seems problematic. What is this awareness if it is the same thing an insect has?

What is awareness if it is NOT the same thing an insect has?

Don't be Delphic.

I'm very serious. The older man turned to face his interlocutor. What is awareness? What is life itself?

The general thinking today is that life is a chemical phenomenon and that awareness is an emergent

property expressed as a consequence of the interacting complexity of some forms of that phenomenon.

The older man grinned. *You said that very well. And that is a fair summary of contemporary thought, even among a few Christians. But in the past, people imagined souls rather than emergent properties. The Scholastics in fact proposed three types of souls: the vegetative, which made things alive and from which we get our word vegetable, the emotional soul, which animals have, and the rational soul, which humans share with higher spiritual beings. I am not saying the Scholastics were correct. In fact, I don't believe they were. But I mention them by way of illustration, to suggest that various systems of thought, though entirely distinct, can account quite well for the same phenomena. We both imagine mosquitoes as aware. You explain their awareness by conceptualizing it as a property emerging from the mosquito's chemistry. I think of it in a different way.*

I swat a mosquito. Does it have a soul that lives after it, or do I exterminate its soul when I crush its body?

Nothing about a soul requires its immortality. The mosquito dies. Its soul dies. As the ancient Hebrews might have said, life lost is as water spilled out on the ground that cannot be gathered up again, or man and beast are one breath and as one dies so does the other. The first description comes from II Samuel, the second from Ecclesiastes. Water and breath are distinct from the container, which is dust,

but both are lost when the container is destroyed and its dust scattered.

But I thought the Hebrews—the Jews—believed in the immortality of the soul.

Jew derives from the tribe of Judah. Hebrew refers to Abraham and later the twelve tribes. We are not quite sure what the Hebrews believed concerning an afterlife because the Old Testament, which, by the way, is a collection with a generally Judean slant, has, from our perspective anyway, remarkably little to say about an afterlife.

Look, let's not go in this direction. I don't want to get involved in a discussion about the etymology of names or the biases of texts. Under the circumstances, I am much more interested in the demonic. You are suggesting that evil souls are demonic and that they can dress themselves in matter, because the universe is digital.

Yes, that is what I am suggesting.

And that my problem—our problems—derive from this?

Yes.

I think I may have wasted my time coming here. But I want to ask you one more question before I go. What about transplants or blood transfusions? Surely transplanted tissue is alive. It would not follow, would it, that blood or a liver has a soul? It must be chemical! And if life is chemical, then the Scholastics

were wrong to see evidence of a soul in it and were most probably wrong to interpret emotions and reason as evidence of soul.

You make a fair point. Of course the Scholastics knew nothing of organ transplants, and I don't know what they would have said had they been confronted with that technology. But I am not defending the Scholastics so I don't wish to speak for them. I already told you I disagreed with them. I think the answer the Hebrews gave is more pertinent to our situation. They said that life is in the blood. That contrasts sharply with an early conceit that life was in the bones.

Chapter One (c)

Jeffery unshouldered his rucksack at the mouth of the cave, reached into it, and brought out his flashlight. Then he reshouldered the pack, flipped the flashlight on, and stepped into the chilly dimness. The light stabbed the darkness back as he moved slowly ahead. The shaft, though it began to descend at a noticeable angle, remained remarkably straight. This was much easier than he had expected. It was almost as though the cave was a corridor, something hewn from the rock for a purpose, but who would have cut a passageway here and for what reason? He played his flashlight along the walls, over the floor. The walls showed no tool marks but the floor looked as if it might have been scraped. He knelt to examine its texture more intimately. He couldn't be sure. If equipment had passed here, it had been many years ago. But of course that was obvious. The laurel growth at the cave's mouth was dense and must have been undisturbed for decades. He stood up and move forward, taking his time. He had to be careful. He had already gone some distance into the cave and, if he injured himself back here, he knew he would not be

found. Then he saw something that removed all doubt about human activity.

He stopped and played his flashlight over the scene. Ahead of him, the cave floor, sepia in the flashlight's beam, dropped way into darkness, and above it and on the wall to his right near where he stood, he could see two massive iron rings dangling from hooks that had been bored into the rock. Jeffery moved forward for a better look. Rust caked the iron. Whatever their purpose, the rings had been idle for a long time. He moved to the edge of the pit and shown his flashlight into the darkness. He expected the beam to be lost in the darkness, but instead it puddled on another floor.

Jeffery lay his flashlight on the floor where he stood, took his pack off and removed his fishing rod. He snapped the rod together and strung line from the reel through its eyelets. Then took a weight from his pocket, tied it to the line, and let the weight drop to the lower floor. When the weight came to rest, he began to walk backwards, holding the light forward until he could see the weight come out of the pit. Then he laid the rod down and paced the distance to the weight. It came to roughly fourteen feet. He had thirty feet of rope, so if he chose to, he could fasten one end of the rope to one of the loops and let himself down to the lower floor. He would have to be careful, but there did not seem to be anything particularly difficult about the maneuver.

Jeffery picked up the rod and wound the weight until it was snug against the reel. He then disassembled the

rod and replaced it in his rucksack. Lifting out the bundled rope, he let the mass of it drop to the rock floor, tied one end to the ring on the wall beside the pit, and, when the knot was snug, tested it by leaning against the rope with increasing strength until he had assured himself that it would hold. Then he tossed the mass of the rope into the pit. As it thumped on the lower floor, he took the army blanket from his pack and spread it under the rope where it rested against the lip of the pit. He then tucked the long handle of the flashlight under his belt so that the beam pointed down and, taking the rope with both hands, began to ease himself into the pit. As he slipped into that black cavity, the cavern passage from whence he'd come collapsed into darkness while under him the second level floor grew brighter as he lowered himself toward it. As soon as his feet touched the smooth stone floor, he let go of the rope and, taking his flashlight from his belt, turned it into the depths of the new corridor.

Interlogue

Hunting peoples imagined bones as the substance from which the rest of the body renewed itself. When the body dies, the bones remain, so perhaps this created the impression that all flesh came from bones. Whatever the reason, bone was for them the essence of life. But the ability of bone to endure also suggested that the essence of life was beyond change, a conceit that fit well with the image of time as a process expressed in recurring cycles, that is, time understood as manifesting the appearance of change but void of any actual transformative power. For this reason, the shaman will imagine himself as a skeleton, for in doing so, he escapes time by anticipating his own death and returning to the source of life. One discovers, in this timeless quality, a relationship between bones and stones which, after all, are the bones of the living earth. Such fecund imagery feeds on itself, multiplying connections and suggesting all manner of tropes. Wood is like bone, so trees become haunted with life. Horn is like bone and so becomes a symbol of vital power and of fruitfulness. This implies a connection to the erect phallus. And so it goes. But the key point is that by identifying bone as the source of life,

early humanity pictured the roots of life as static. Notice how different this is from the biblical perspective that life is in the blood. Both bone and blood are in some ways distinct from the flesh, but while bone supports the flesh, blood saturates it. And, as I mentioned before, blood spills out like water. It is a fluid like breath. I find it fascinating in this regard how water and air, both being fluid, become the focus of the fourth day in the biblical creation story and are allotted their own creatures: birds and fish, creatures which within that context are revealed as being opposites. Birds are the fish of the air, fish the birds of the water. Each flaps its appendages and glides through its respective medium. But the key point is the image of how life as blood can be lost. In the one case, the flesh falls away and the bones remain, in the other case, the blood flows away and the flesh remains.

Look, this is all very interesting academically, and I readily concede that the worldviews you describe have a certain plausibility within their historical contexts. One would expect that to be the case since they did become dominant ideas. Your heritage is Celtic, mine African. Our ancestors doubtless shared many of the same conceits, but so what? What have your lectures to do with me? I'm desperate. When I called the number on your card, you indicated that you could help me, and I am sitting here at 1:30 in the morning listening to you pontificate about blood and souls and a digital universe. What kind of wizard are you?

The older man sat down heavily behind his desk. Part of what we know is shared, and part of what we know

is sui generis. It is unique to us, to our circumstances and histories. We each have a way of looking at the world and our experiences reinforce and modify our peculiar perspectives. I am trying to explain to you that things are not as you imagine them. You have had a demonic encounter. These are not so uncommon as you might think, though the one you have had is far more powerful than most; but they are always dangerous, even the lesser ones, and more so if you lack the conceptual framework to appreciate the nature of the threat. I would suppose you are thoroughly imbued with a twentieth century metaphysic. Howard University, didn't you say? A sophisticated successful investor who obviously has some grasp of the current scientific paradigm. I am trying to reach you where you are, help you build from there, because you have unleashed something—I don't know what yet—and if we are going to confront and deal with this thing, you are going to have to have a better grasp of the facts than you have now.

Sesiom sighed. *Okay. So explain to me how things are.*

Chapter One (d)

Darkness swallowed the flashlight's beam when he pointed it straight ahead. Playing it across the floor and along the walls, Jeffrey moved forward slowly. The chilly silence was broken only by the brushing sounds of his own motion. He became aware that his mouth was opened slightly and that he was breathing through it, as though he was trying to taste the air. Years ago, he had noticed that happened when he was very cautious. He glanced at his watch. The numbers were intensely bright in the pitch blackness: 3:47. He would have to be getting back pretty soon, but he had no doubt he would return. This cave felt stranger, was stranger, than any he had ever been in. It was more like a tunnel than a cave. The two iron rings in the higher shaft indicated that, whatever its origins, humans had once been active here. Yet where was the machinery, where were the tracks, the struts and braces, the evidence that the tunnel had been dug or at least shaped, that one would associate with human presence? There was nothing like that, only those two rings and this weirdly smooth corridor stretching away behind a crooked laurel-shielded mouth. He would be coming back, and he knew just

who he would bring: Sesiom and Hank. Sesiom was in his early thirties. Hank had just turned forty. Jeffrey had been to that celebration though he was not a party-goer. Both men were experienced cavers. He was sure they would agree to spend a weekend at the cabin, especially after he told them of his find. Hank might even want to bring his son.

Step by step Jeffrey continued forward. The darkness was becoming almost tangible, almost suffocating. He would definitely have to turn back soon. He paused for a moment, played the light along the wall. Then he froze. In the light ahead, he glimpsed the outline of something that seemed to fill the corridor. He could not make out what it was. He moved ahead a few more steps, and it distilled out of the darkness. There before him cutting off the passage was a massive wooden door. It would be hard to overestimate the extent of Jeffrey's astonishment.

He approached the door, scanning it with his light. It was cumbersome, made of vertical timbers that looked like railroad ties and that did not fit snugly together. A band of corroded iron was bolted to the top and bottom of the door. On the left was a huge bolt from which hung an imposing padlock. Both were thickly coated with rust as were the three large hinges that secured the door to the cave wall on the right. Jeffrey pointed his light through one of the gaps between the door's beams. On the other side, the corridor disappeared into darkness. Jeffrey slowly searched around the door but found nothing else, no tools, no scrap of ancient paper, no warning sign that might have rusted

off and fallen. There was simply the enormous door that, however crudely it was made, effectively sealed the back of the cave from the front.

Jeffrey had come as far as he could. Hoping to find out what the door was made of, he picked off a bit of the wood and slipped it into his pocket. Then he scanned his light beyond the door one last time and, turning, began to retrace his steps. As he made his way back to the ledge and the rope, he pondered his discovery. This must be some kind of mine, though what had been extracted he could not imagine. It looked like no mine he had ever heard of, but he knew next to nothing about mining. These mountains were a source of gemstones, or had been at one time, so maybe this was a jewel mine. He thought of Snow White's dwarves and smiled. No, that did not seem very likely. But this cave was plainly an artifact of some kind. Artifact. What an odd word to apply to a cave, yet it seemed somehow appropriate. The cave in its present form had been created for something, though it had obviously not been used in a very long time. In fact, it seemed like it had not been used much at all, and that bothered him a great deal. Had it not been for the two rings and the door, this would have look very much like a cave, as he initially believed it was.

Jeffrey arrived at the ledge where the rope waited, slipped his flashlight under his belt, and clambered up hand over hand until he reached the brink. Then he swung his legs forward, braced his feet just below its rocky lip, and swung himself over. It was a difficult

maneuver, one he had not executed in years, and it left his heart pounding.

Pulling the rope up, he untied it from the rusty ring and, quickly folding it by looping it over his hand and elbow, replaced it in his rucksack. He put the blanket on top of the rope, shouldered the pack, and started toward the mouth of the cave. Then it struck him. Where were the bats? This would have been an ideal roost for bats, yet there was not even a speck of guano on the floor. It did not look as though a bat had ever visited the place. Here was another mystery to tease him. As always, the more one explored something, the more questions one had. Ahead, the cave's mouth gaped, a crooked splinter of daylight.

Emerging into the sun, Jeffrey pushed his way through the laurel and turned to take a last look at the cave. It was scarcely visible behind the screen of brush. How easy it would have been for him to have missed it that morning. Having lived in the area for some months, he knew few people hiked this section of mountains. Little industry remained. Agriculture was for the most part confined to the valleys. Plainly the cave had remained forgotten for many years, probably decades. Suddenly he was convulsed by a pristine thrill of terror. What had he been thinking to venture solo into that place? What if the rope had broken or the knot had failed to hold? What if he had fallen when he went over the ledge or when he climbed back up? And the way he had mounted the lip put a great deal of sudden strain on the ring and hook assembly. What if they had not held? What in the world had possessed him to do

something as crazy as he had just done? He was a very intelligent man and had a powerful imagination. Notions of disaster flooded his mind. Had something happened, he would never have been found. He would have died in the darkness, possibly suffering for days. His breath caught and he wrestled to gain control of his panicked thoughts. Then the moment of horror evaporated into the heat of the late afternoon.

Relieved, Jeffrey hiked home, chiding himself for his own stupidity, resolving never again to go into that place alone. Yet the cave was certainly puzzling, even fascinating. Tonight he would see what he could google up on mining operations in this part of the state. And who knew? Some of the locals might remember something about the cave and could tell him a little of its history. He would definitely be calling Sesiom and Hank. And he would urge Hank to bring his son Drew. Drew was a very responsible boy and could wait outside the cave in case something went wrong. There was no doubt about it. This had been a excellent day.

He walked a little faster. Behind him the cave waited like a big secret.

Interlogue

One of the more remarkable, even astonishing, things about the universe is its ability to accommodate a myriad of diverse interpretations. Of course, interpretations are creatures of perspective, but that such a multitude of perspectives should be both plausible and in the end unpersuasive is quite extraordinary, especially when you consider that each interpretation produces a result which, though distinct from other results, enables the organism associated with it to survive. A robin's perspective, though radically different from yours and mine, is no less real, and quite appropriate for the robin. This suggests that reality is a construction of biology, or, if you prefer, it suggests that reality expresses its potentialities through biological structures. That is the first point.

Here is the second: animals communicate. They do this by means of symbols that have arbitrary meanings but that are nevertheless understood by others of their own kind and sometimes even by other species. For example, the female prairie chicken finds the drumming dance of the male prairie chicken alluring in a particular way. She recognizes it as an invitation to mate. One bee grasps the complex meaning of

another's waggle dance. The stickleback parades himself to attract a partner. And so forth. The meaning conveyed by such activity can be very precise, as in the bee's waggle dance, or more general as in the prairie chicken's drumming, but the point is, first, that meaning is conveyed and, second, that there is no obvious connection between the activity and its meaning. That disconnect between activity and meaning tells us that the activity is a symbol to be interpreted and understood, a signal intended to affect the behavior of the one signaled.

When a species reaches a symbolic threshold, when it has developed a certain number of symbols, and those symbols can express meaning at a sufficient level of complexity, the species generates a culture. This has happened several times, but in our species, probably about forty thousand years ago, maybe earlier, culture became definitive in a way it was not in others. And of course it is well known that culture deeply impacts the way we understand the world.

What I want you to see here is that perceived reality is plastic. We shape and interpret, maybe in some sense even create, our reality. Biology and culture are deeply implicated in this process, and in that process, some aspects of the world are revealed, others concealed.

What is important to us right now are those aspects of reality that are concealed. Much of the real world is hidden. Instruments can be designed to reveal aspects of that hidden reality. Scientific and philosophical

investigations can help us understand laws or principles that we intuit but cannot see. But there is another method that can disclose aspects of reality. It is more ancient than science or philosophy though it shares some of their formal aspects. It is probably not as old as religion or myth. We are first and foremost religious beings and storytellers. But certainly it is ancient, and, this is very important, unlike religion, it is conceptualized in terms of principles rather than tales. It may refer to myths but it has no mythos as such. Instead, it has theory. I speak of magic.

Chapter One (c)

Jeffery had showered and changed and scrambled some eggs for his supper. Now, thoughtfully crunching a carrot, he was on his computer googling for information about mining in the area. It was a disappointing search. There seemed to have been none. Logging had been an important part of the local economy from the 1890s until the Depression though at least one company maintained its sawmills into the 1940s. Of course, that was no surprise. Vestiges of logging roads crisscrossed this region. But he was surprised to find no information about mines. Some mining must have been going on. After all, there was the irrefutable fact of the cave. But there was no record of it online. Tomorrow he would go into town and research the old fashioned way. He would consult the local library. He popped the last bit of carrot into his mouth and stretched back in his chair.

Then standing, he walked over to the telephone and punched in Sesiom's number. The phone buzzed and Naketa, Sesiom's twelve year old daughter, answered.

"Good evening, Keta," Jeffrey said. "This is Uncle Jeff. Is your daddy there?"

"Hi, Uncle Jeff." Naketa was delighted to talk to him. He and her father had been friends since forever and he almost always made her laugh. "How are things up there in the mountains?"

"Oh," Jeffrey smiled, "things have become quite interesting. You want to escape to a simpler life but complexity pursues. I sometimes think we want complication, or maybe it just seeks it out. Maybe that's just the way the world is. Makes life entertaining, I suppose. And that is why I want to talk to your daddy. Today I have discovered a complexity."

"What is it?" Naketa was not sure she understood everything Jeffrey had said, but it sounded exciting.

"A cave," Jeffrey replied. "And I want to find out if your daddy can explore it with me."

A cave! It was exciting! "Daddy," Naketa shouted, "it's Uncle Jeff. He wants to talk to you about a cave."

Sesiom rose from his Lazy Boy and walked over to the telephone. "Hello, Uncle Jeff," he teased, pleased to hear from his friend. Emails between them were frequent but Jeffrey called less since he had moved to his new home, and Sesiom missed him. It was only a couple of hours drive, but family and work were inevitable priorities, so visits between the two men had been infrequent. He had only been to visit Jeffrey once, shortly after Jeff had moved into his new place, and Jeffrey had only been to see him twice. "What's this about a cave?"

"Well," Jeffrey said, "it's the damnedest thing. This morning I was hiking up on Slab Town about a mile or so from the cabin when I decided to check out some rocks. I had seen them before but I'd not been up to them, and it was something to do. I got there, looked around a little, and started to leave when I saw the cave. It's screened by some pretty thick laurel and I almost missed it. Anyway, I checked it out a little bit, decided to take a closer look, so I went back to the house and got some gear. It's pretty good sized and looks like it was the site of some kind of activity within the last few decades, but I can't figure out what that could have been. There are a couple of rusty rings on hooks at a ledge and on the other side of the ledge further back down the tunnel there is a wooden door. I've got a little of the wood. I am going to have it analyzed tomorrow if I can . . ."

Sesiom could not believe what he was hearing. "Wait a minute. You mean you went down in that cave alone and no one knew where you were? Have you gone crazy up there? What in the hell were you thinking?"

"I know. I know," Jeffrey said. "It was a stupid thing to do. I don't know what I was thinking. But nothing happened. And I have found something really interesting. I want to know if you can get up here this weekend. I'm also going to call Hank. Maybe he can bring Drew. The three of us can go down there. Drew can wait outside. We can take some tools, an ax, a crowbar, whatever, to get past the door, find out what is on the other side."

Sesiom listened as his friend's voice became increasingly animated. Jeffrey was obviously excited by his discovery. "Well," he said, running his hand over his close-cropped hair, "it does sound intriguing. It's probably just some kind of mine, but it could be interesting to have a look at it."

"But that is another thing," Jeffrey interjected. "It doesn't really look like a mine, and I've done some research on the Internet and can't find any evidence that there was any mining around here. Logging yes. But mining? Well, I plan to do some more research in the library tomorrow."

"That sounds like a good place to start," Sesiom agreed. He too was becoming animated by Jeffrey's enthusiasm. "And it would be a great opportunity to get together. It's been a while since I've been up to your place. Be interesting to see what you've done with it."

Naketa, who had been standing by the telephone table, tugged on Sesiom's shirt. "Are we gonna go to Uncle Jeff's cabin?"

Sesiom looked down at his daughter. "When I said 'we,' I meant Hank and me. I don't think it would be safe for you to go poking around in an old mine."

"But I want to go. I haven't seen Uncle Jeff in a long time either."

Jeffrey could hear their conversation and agreed with Naketa. "Why not let her come, Ses? She and Drew can hang together, and if Drew can't make it for some reason, she can wait at the mouth of the

cave for us. She's twelve years old. She's not really a little girl anymore."

Sesiom, aware that he was being double teamed by his daughter and his best friend, turned to his wife for support. "What do you think, Mel? Have we got any plans for this weekend? Would it be all right to run up to Jeff's place and do a little spelunking? Take Keta? Maybe you could come too."

"That's a great idea," Jeffrey said. "Bring the whole family."

"Jeff thinks it's a great idea," Sesiom added.

Melody grinned at her husband and daughter as they looked at her expectantly. She could see so much of Keta in him, especially at moments like this. "I don't see why not" she nodded. "I was hoping we could see *Out of Time*, but it should be in the theaters for a couple of more weeks and, if we miss it, we can always rent the video."

"Then it's done," Sesiom said into the telephone. "We're all coming. We'll leave early. Should be there by 9:00. That will give us most of the day for the cave. And Mel can keep Keta company even if Drew can't come. You gonna call Hank, right?"

"Yeah, I'll call him soon as I get off the phone with you. And don't worry about chow. We can eat at Pauline's Buffet. The food is good, and if the weather agrees, we can have dinner outside overlooking the valley. It's pretty spectacular."

Interlogue

Now I said that magic has theory, but for most practitioners, magic is about power only. The common run of magicians are pragmatists. They are concerned with ritual and spell, with recipes that work. They are cooks. Perhaps we can think of a handful of the better ones as chefs, but no matter. It comes to the same thing. They mix and murmur and dance and out pops a love philter, or the wart disappears, maybe someone sickens and dies. They might as well be Aunt Heidi whipping up another of her famous German chocolate cakes. But throughout history some few have been profoundly interested in magic as theory. We are the wizards.

Sesiom nodded. *So that's what you are, a magician with theory?*

In a sense, yes. But by understanding the theory, I am not bound by the cookbooks. I write the recipes as I need them, and I apply them with stunning effect.

Do something magical now.

Daddy! Sesiom jerked in his chair and spun around. Standing near the door was Naketa dressed in the

white frock she had worn to Easter service when she was eleven. Sesiom remember how they had struggled with its blue sash and how, when they arrived at the Open Arms Baptist Church, the end of the sash had caught in the car door when it closed so that the sash had to be retied. She smiled and waved, then, as Sesiom watched in slack-jawed astonishment, a globule of blood, then another began to slip from her scalp and trickle down her forehead. Naketa's expression changed from excitement to surprise, then dismay. A string of blood curled around her left eye, spilled along her cheek. She reach up and touched it with her left hand, looked at her fingers in bewilderment. Suddenly she threw back her head as if to scream and disappeared. Sesiom exploded in rage. *You son-of-a-bitch*, he roared, spinning toward the wizard.

The wizard waved his hand dismissively. *Her name is Naketa, I believe. She was your daughter. You called her Keta. There was a little boy named Drew who called her Skeeter. But that wasn't really her. It was just an apparition, something I conjured because you asked me to do some magic. You wanted to know what kind of wizard I am. Well, that is an example of what kind of wizard I am.*

Chapter Two (a)

Jeffrey backed his Jeep out the garage and began to clutch and shift as he maneuvered along the gravel road that led to the secondary highway that would take him into town. It was just after 8:30 AM so a little mountain coolness still hunkered under the trees, but already the cloudless sky was burning that chill away. Jeffrey knew the library opened at 9:00 and he wanted to be there when it did, to talk to the librarian before she got too busy, to have plenty of time to do whatever research would be required. He steered his jeep out onto the blacktop and eased down on the accelerator. He was cautious, fully aware of the vehicle's tendency to tip. He occasionally chided himself for purchasing the Jeep. He would have probably been better off with a Porche. The crew that built this road must have had to strictly ration their dynamite for it looped and back-tracked along the side of the mountain as though it had been dropped there.

Jeffrey felt great. The calls last evening had gone better than he could have hoped. Sesiom was coming and he was bringing his family. Hank and Drew would also come. Everyone would try to be there by 9:00. That would assure them several hours in the cave. And

Hank, who had a wire caving ladder, had suggested they could use it to negotiate the ledge. Jeffrey had not thought it would be necessary at first, but Hank made a good point. The ladder would make it easier for them to get up and down with their tools. When it came to caving, Jeffrey usually deferred to Sesiom and Hank. They were the experts.

Jeffrey guided his Jeep, touching the break, down shifting when necessary. He had his cell phone with him but had turned it off before he left. Calls were difficult to handle when one drove a manual. Besides, the road being what it was, talking on the phone was an unwelcomed distraction. Jeffrey preferred to be free to concentrate. His CD player was off and he had not turned his radio on. He had removed the canvas cab covering, so the Jeep cab was opened to the mountain air. It rushed over him, gulping him into itself. All he could hear was the gush of the wind, varied scraps of bird song, and the Jeep engine as it strained and relaxed. Hadn't he seen a book somewhere *Retire Early and Live Well*? Seemed to ring a bell. If it hadn't been written, then he might write it. He smiled. This was the life.

The highway ran through the middle of town. At the central stop light, he turned right, went down two blocks, turned right again, bumped over the railroad crossing, turned left, and there the library was. Its parking lot was almost empty. He turned the Jeep off and pocketed the key as he walked quickly toward the building.

The library was a remarkably well furnished for a town this size, he thought as he entered the main lobby. Someone must have willed a fortune to build it or maybe it was the beneficiary of some kind of charitable largess. He saw two women seated behind the lending counter and a third standing at a desk under a sign that read "Information." He strode over to her.

"Hello," Jeffrey said, thrusting his hand forward. "My name is Jeffrey Swofford and I moved into the Camden place up on Hook-n-Tie this spring. I've driven past the library before, but this is my first visit. It's very impressive."

The woman smiled and shook his hand briefly. "Yes," she said, "we're very fortunate to have such a fine athenaeum." Jeffrey raised his eyebrows at the unusual word. "It is a real asset for the town. Not used nearly as much as we would like though. Perhaps you will help us remedy that."

Jeffrey smiled back. "Well, I'd like to start today. Get my card. Maybe do a little research."

"You can get a card at the lending desk," the woman gestured in that direction. "What kind of research are you interested in?"

"I want to find out about the history of the town, particularly its economic history. I understand logging was once important here. Mining too."

"I think we can help you with that," the librarian nodded. "A local history was published back in the 1980s so that should bring you almost up to date. And the

Bryar Logging Company, they worked this area, use to publish an industry journal. A quarterly. It only ran for a few years, but we have all the issues. I'm afraid you are mistaken about the mining though. There has never been any mining here."

Jeffrey frowned slightly. "None at all? You're sure?"

"I'm positive, Mr. Swofford. I was raised in this town. My family has been here for three generations." She began to escort him to an area near the rear wall. "My grandfather moved here, went west, as they used to say, to work in the sawmill. I'm something of an antiquarian, and local history is a hobby of mine. There was logging. For a time there was a paper mill over in Aston that employed a lot of people here. There is agriculture, dairy mostly, and poultry. Some tobacco. But no mining." She bent forward to peer at a line of titles on one of the shelves, then plucked out a slender volume. "Here you are," she said as she handed the book to him. "Almost looks like it's never been read. In fact, except for me, I'm not sure anyone has read it." She laughed. "Don't let its size fool you though. It's really quite thorough. Just that not much has happened around here. Now let me get the logging journals out of the archive. I'll be back in a few minutes." And she bustled off.

Jeffrey slipped into a chair at a nearby polished wooden table and began to go through the index of the little history book, checking sections that were of interest to him. The town had been founded in the middle of the nineteenth century with farming as its

mainstay. At the end of the nineteenth century, the loggers had come in, just as he'd read on the Internet. There was reference to the paper mill the librarian had mentioned. But nothing about mining. He was skimming a section on regional politics in the 1950s when the librarian returned.

"That took a little longer than I expected it would. I apologize. I had to take care of another patron and I thought you would have enough to keep you busy for a while." She handed to him a cardboard upright labeled "The Bryar Logging Journal." It was packed tight with yellowed copies of the periodical.

"Oh, I had plenty to keep me occupied," Jeffrey agreed. "Thanks for bringing me these." He nodded at the upright she had placed on the table. "It looks like what you said about the mining is true though, and that is what I am really interested in. I don't know if I will need to see the magazines. But I was curious. You said your grandfather worked in a sawmill. What did your family do when the lumber industry shut down?"

The librarian was more than willing to share a little of her family history. "My grandfather was killed in an accident at the mill. He and his mule team were sliding logs down a chute. A grabjack failed to release and they lost control of the log. It dragged him to his death. The mules were dragged down too. They survived but had to be shot. Accidents were not uncommon. It was dangerous work. After my grandfather died, my grandmother took a job clerking at the general store and for a while got some help from the

widow's fund the churches maintained. My father grew up working as a farmhand and eventually drove a poultry truck. He later enlisted in the army and fought in Korea—used the GI Bill to go to college and then got a job at the bank. I was fortunate enough to attend the University of Boston where I studied library science. My family helped me pay for that, of course, and I also won a scholarship. That helped too obviously. And here I am.”

“But with a degree from Boston, why did you come back here?”

“It was my choice. After I graduated, I worked in the Boston city library system for awhile, but I missed the mountains. My roots are here and at heart I guess I’m just a small town girl. When I came back on vacation, I heard of an opening at the library here, and applied. Of course I was hired. The job was practically mine for the asking. It did not pay as much as my job in Boston, but the cost of living here is a lot lower, so I think in taking the job I actually got a raise. And I lived by myself so it was easy to move.”

“You’ve never married?”

“No,” she said, “never did.”

Jeffrey, who had laid the book aside as the librarian was talking, rose and said. “That’s a very interesting story. Thanks for sharing it with me. And thanks for all your help.” He gestured toward the cardboard upright. “I don’t think I’ll need the journals after all. Sorry I put you to so much trouble getting them.”

Then, changing the subject, he asked, "By the way, are there a lot of caves in these hills?"

"Caves?" the librarian nodded. "Sure. The area is riddled with caves. You find one?"

"Yes, when I was climbing up on Slab Town yesterday I found one that looks fairly large and that seems to have been used in some way. I thought it might have been miners."

"I don't know anything about a cave on Slab Town, but that isn't surprising. Could be you found an old moonshiner's lair or maybe a place where outliers hid during the Civil War."

"Outliers?" The word was unfamiliar to Jeffrey.

"Yes," the librarian nodded. "That's what they called military deserters or people who were trying to avoid service during the Civil War. Some of them formed gangs and preyed on the local population. Created some real hard feelings since they themselves were from the local population. They pillaged their friends and neighbors. Bad time, the war years."

Jeffrey mulled over this new information. "That is a good suggestion. I suppose it's possible the cave was a hideout for deserters and such, but I think moonshiners are more likely. Anyway, it doesn't look like its been used for a long time."

"Well, you be careful in those woods," the librarian said as she walked him toward the door. "It's not just illegal whisky anymore. Some moonshiners also grow

a little marijuana. You stumble across a patch of that, and you could get yourself killed. No offense, but a black man living up in the mountains alone, well, it probably wouldn't hurt to get yourself a dog if you don't have one already. This was Klan country not so long ago, I'm sorry to say. If the moonshiners and potheads thought you were snooping around . . .” Her voice trailed off. Then she said, “Didn't you want a library card?”

For the first time since he had moved here, Jeffrey felt a jab of angry fear. This was the twenty-first century, for Christ's sake, yet a librarian who tossed off words like ‘athenaeum’ and had a degree from the University of Boston was warning him about the Ku Klux Klan, the Coo Coo Klan as his wife Shalan used to call it when she was alive. Men and women died, he thought ruefully, but evil lives forever. “These moonshiners,” Jeffrey asked, his voice edged with a thin razor of sarcasm, “do they drive pickup trucks with Confederate Flag decals on them?”

The librarian looked at him steadily for a second before responding, “We don't see many trucks like that around here.” Then she said briskly, “Let's get that card for you.”

After he picked up his card, Jeffrey walked back to his Jeep and got behind the wheel. His trip to the library had been a mixed bag. He was now certain that the cave was probably not a mine, and had uncovered a couple of alternative explanations that sounded pretty convincing. That was on the plus side. How-

ever, the visit had also turned his day a little sour. He supposed the librarian meant well. She was a pleasant woman and could not have been more helpful or informative. But what she said at the end sounded a bit ominous. There was probably nothing to it. He had lived here for months and no one had bothered him. And the locals with whom he had contact had been quite nice. Like the librarian.

He pulled out of the parking lot and began to drive back to the main road. His next stop was the hardware store. He had been there before to buy nails and screws and boards from a small lumberyard in the back. He was going to take the strip of wood he'd pulled from the door in the cave and ask the proprietor to identify it. Jeffrey thought it was oak, but he wanted to be sure. And then it hit him. The librarian had mentioned that he lived alone. He did not recall having told her that.

Interlogue

No, no, the wizard waved his hand again and Sesiom slumped back into his chair, that wasn't her soul. I've not got her essence locked away somewhere. It was only an image of her, something I plucked from your own thought patterns.

You're a mind reader, Sesiom said dully. He felt sapped by the shock of seeing his daughter. Her apparition, coupled with the complete improbability and horror of everything that had led him to this small cluttered room, left him drained. His life as a loving father and successful businessman was irretrievable and seemed like something from a distant century. What had he done to have been visited by this terrifying energy that had sundered his world?

Yes, the wizard was saying, I can read minds, and I can focus mental constructs and render them as though they were objective for the person who entertains them. I could not see the child, but because I know what you are thinking, at least in part, I know what you saw, though I don't know all the details.

You didn't see her, the dress, the blood?

The blood? No, I saw nothing. She was projected for you from your mind. I only facilitated the event. And, by the way, you've done nothing to deserve any of this any more than the picnicker does anything to deserve being mauled by the bear in the berry patch. This is something you have stumbled into. You have attracted the attention of a power, a pretty nasty one by the look of it, or become the locus of a power struggle of some kind. If it is the first case, we must determine what the power wants and how we can overcome it or, failing that, appease it. If it is the second case, we must extract you from the maelstrom. Very different skills are involved, depending on the circumstance, but finding out what is going on entails simply taking a look.

But you sent for me. What is all this to you? Do you want payment of some kind?

For the first time since he had entered the apartment, Sesiom saw the wizard laugh. *Payment? I have more than enough, and if I want anything, I can conjure it. I neither need nor desire your money. But your question is a natural one so let me explain. Many centuries ago, we wizards became participants in a spiritual struggle that has been going on since before the creation of the world. In fact, the creation of this world is a key component in the resolution of this mighty conflict. We became participants, or rather learned we were participants, through our studies of magic. We discovered that the world was infused with opposing forces that seemed aware of one another and worked to counter the effects each produced. In*

other words, these forces struggled with one another. They were at war. For a long time, we did not know what we had found. We knew only that the clash between these two forces was intense, even desperate, beyond our imagining, and that it involved energies or powers unlike anything we knew. Most of us feared to get involved. Some few believed the powers could be manipulated. And there was a long running debate among wizards about this. We were Zoroastrians. We thought of the world as a theater of combat where Good and Evil were engaged in a particularly decisive battle. It raged all around, invisible to most, and that battle was what we had discovered. But when we learned of Judaism during the decades of the Jewish exile, the nature of our discovery became more clear. The world, we came to believe, had not been created by a demigod but by God himself, and he created it as a trap for Satan. To this end, he used human beings as his bait. It worked, and now Satan, who once roamed the galaxies rages within this realm and sees his destiny in the fate of this small planet. In this war, humans have been given the option of choosing sides and they reveal what they are by the side they choose. Indeed, our ability to make such a choice was part of our allure as bait. And we wizards, being human, had such a choice.

You're Jewish?

Oh, no. I'm Christian, Catholic to be precise. There were once many Jewish wizards and Jewish magic was a staple in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds. But there are no Jewish wizards today.

Within a couple of centuries after the advent of the Messiah, wizards had made their choice and Judaism was no longer a viable option. We simply knew too much. One chose either the Christ or his adversaries. Of course Jewish magicians remained, but after 300 AD, so far as I am aware, there were no more Jewish wizards.

But some chose Satan?

Oh yes, and not just a few. We have our Gandalfs and, I'm sorry to say, a good number of our Sarumans. These were disastrous centuries for the brotherhood of the staff and the entire enterprise became thoroughly compromised. Sin runs deep in the human psyche, all the way down. You cannot cleanse it even with magic theory. It warps everything. But those of us who became Christians were able to employ our particular skills and knowledge to the furtherance of the Kingdom. We wizards tend toward arrogance so this discipline in humility was a real crucifixion. The scientific age dawned and our chapter in the human adventure began to dribble to a close, but a few wizards endure. I am one of them.

How many are there today?

Counting me, I am aware of seventeen true wizards, most in Europe. The rest are scattered around the world. The brotherhood has always been small, but we have never been so small as this. Perhaps we are becoming extinct. Much is demanded of a wizard and few people, even among those who know about us, are willing to pay the cost.

What are the demands?

Well, education for one thing. My bachelor's was in biology. I have several masters degrees: theology, psychology, archeology, history, and three Ph.D.s, one in physics from Princeton, another in anthropology from UCLA, and a thir'd in ancient languages, my specialty is Babylonian cuneiform, from Harvard. That, by the way, was my apprenticeship. I did not complete it until I was in my early forties. After that, the hard work began, and it took fifteen more years before I won my wizard's staff. But to return to your original question: I am helping you because I am a committed Christian engaged in this struggle. You, as I suggested in the beginning, have unwittingly unleashed a concentration of wickedness, evil with a personality, a demon. And one with a great deal of power. It must be stopped and you must be rescued. I am like a missionary doctor. My purposes are more than humanitarian, though that is part of it, they are preeminently religious. I work for Christ.

Chapter Two (b)

The small lumberyard was fragrant with sap and sawdust. The clerk who had come to assist him turned the sliver of wood over in his hand and nodded. "Yep, that's oak. You thinking of redoing part of your house and want to use the same wood?"

"No," Jeffrey said. "I thought it was oak, I just wanted to make sure. I peeled it from a locked door I found in a cave up on Slab Town. Can't imagine why it matters what kind of wood it is. But I was curious. I am just trying to find out everything I can about the cave."

"A door in a cave up on Slab Town? That sounds pretty weird. What are you talking about?" the clerk wanted to know.

"I was hiking up on Slab Town yesterday and found a cave, or what I took to be a cave. I went inside to look around and discovered a padlocked door some distance inside. I could go no further so I went back but I stripped this bit of wood and took it with me. I wondered what the door was made of."

"It would seem to be made of oak," the clerk said, handing the wood back to Jeffrey who slipped it back

into his pocket. "But a door in a cave up on Slab Town? That is really crazy. That is all federal land now. Hasn't been worked for decades. No one lives up there but you. Must have been pretty old."

"I would say so," Jeffrey nodded. "I thought it might have been some kind of mine, but that seems like a pretty silly idea now. I am sure it is a cave, and besides I understand there was no mining done here."

"No, that's true," the clerk agreed. "There was never any mining. More likely you found an old moonshiner's hideout."

"Yes," Jeffrey nodded, "one of the librarians suggested that when I talked to her awhile ago. She also suggested deserters from the Civil War days. I suppose either is possible, but why would moonshiners or deserters have built a door way back in a cave. Besides, as I think about it, I don't believe the padlock would have dated back to the Civil War. I think it was more recent."

"Well, who knows?" the clerk said thoughtfully. "Sounds like someone went to some trouble to build it so there must have been a reason."

You've no idea, Jeffrey thought, remembering the ledge with its fourteen foot drop. "Well, thanks for your time," Jeffrey offered his hand to the clerk. "I've other errands to run so I won't take up any more of it."

"Not a problem at all," the clerk said, shaking Jeffrey's hand. "Come back and see us soon."

"Will do," Jeffrey smiled.

As he slipped behind the wheel of his Jeep, Jeffrey mulled over his next move. He decide to stop by the grocery store for a couple of items. Since he was already here, it made sense. Then he would gas up his Jeep and return to his cabin.

The errands did not take long, and Jeffrey was back home before noon. He parked his Jeep in the garage, put his groceries in the pantry, then decided to record what he had found on his trip to town. Turning on his computer, he opened a new file, titled it "Notes on the Cave," dated the page, then wrote the following.

- > Cave not mine. No mining in this area. Internet search revealed nothing about mining.
- > Librarian and hardware clerk agree. Both suggest cave might be connected to moonshiners.
- > Librarian thinks it might have been a hideout for deserters or outliers during the Civil War.
- > Hardware clerk confirms my identification that the door in the cave is made of oak.
- > Speculation: I think the cave may been associated with moonshiners. I find the Civil War connection unlikely because I think the padlock is of far more recent manufacture.

It was not much when you wrote it up, but it was a start, and he was sure that the expedition they had planned would generate additional data. He closed the file and his mind ran over the rest of the day. Why not defrag his computer? He had not done that since he had set it up when he moved in. And while the

computer was running its defragmentation program, he could go back to the cave for another look around. He would not tackle the ledge of course, just see if he could find evidence of animal habitation. The absence of bats struck him as truly peculiar, but maybe it wasn't. That would be something he'd have to look into as well. He would take his flashlight, spend a little time in the front section of the cave looking around. He reopened his file and typed: "Where are the bats? Check cave for signs of animal life." Then he closed the file again, then went to Accessories, then to System Tools, then clicked on his Disk Defragmenter. That would keep the computer busy for awhile. In the meantime, he would get a little exercise.

He went out the back door, leaving the cabin unlocked, picked up his flashlight in the garage, then made for Slab Town. As he disappeared down the almost invisible path that led into the forest, a deep silence fell over the cabin.

Interlogue

Sesiom watched as the wizard rose from his desk and stepped over to a small refrigerator wedged between a bookcase and a file cabinet. It was piled with Xeroxed articles, yellowed newspapers, and, atop them all, several ancient copies of the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*. Stooping to open the refrigerator door, the wizard said sympathetically, *You looked exhausted. Let me get you a little pick me up from the icebox.*

What is it? Sesiom asked. *Eye of newt and hair of dog?*

Better, the wizard grinned. *Red Bull*. He came up with two cans and tossed one to Sesiom. *This stuff was developed in Germany back in the early 1990s, I believe, for the disco crowd.* Then, as he walked back to his desk, he popped the other open and, sitting, took a long pull from the can. *We'll probably get no sleep tonight and we've a long day tomorrow, so drink up. Now, as I was saying, I work for Christ.*

Sesiom downed his Red Bull in a couple of gulps and set the empty can on the wooden floor beside him. *Look*, Sesiom said, *I'm not an unreligious man. I was born and raised a Baptist, still am a Baptist. I also*

believe in Jesus. But the world you are describing just doesn't make much sense to me. By that I mean it seems so alien to the world I've known all my life. Were it not for the cave, Naketa's murder, what I've seen since as well as what I saw just saw a few minutes ago, I wouldn't believe any of it.

And the world you lived in and knew worked quite well for you. What you are seeing, what you are hearing about, has always been there, but you've not been aware of it until now. And there is so much more, much more than even we wizards know or can know, much more than humans will ever know. Each individual awareness within its special species of awareness actualizes a distinct aspect of the cosmos, and that actualization evolves moment by moment over the course of the life of that aware entity until it is snuffed out and remembered only by God to whom it was foreknown anyway. Reality is vast with a vastness far beyond our ability to fathom. As a totality, it is held in the mind of God, of course. We can even think of the mind of God as the conceptual framework that makes the whole thing possible. Newton did. But we glimpse only the tiniest fragments. Even our libraries built over thousands of years contain a sliver of what there is to know. We have scarcely set sail on that ocean. One could say that the pursuit of knowledge is the ultimate Quixotic quest. To know is to dream the impossible dream. And, in a sense, that is true because that quest embodies our fundamental rebellion. We seek to know as God knows, but we were never made for

that. Knowledge is an expression or creation of the kind of being one is, and we are not God. We are instead creatures and we were made to serve.

I sure know that line: you can show your love for God by your service to his representatives in this world. That is the claim made by every tyrant—every slave master—in history! But Christ frees us. I am, as I said, a Baptist. And my Bible tells me that we are free. Paul tells us not to take up the yoke of slavery again.

Yes, Christ frees us from sin and, in freeing us, makes us his servants and invites us to be his friends. But we cannot be free in the sense you seem to be suggesting, any more than we can know as God knows. We are radically dependent creatures, creatures made to serve. We serve our passions, ourselves, our families or countries or companies or careers. We serve love or goodness or art or a vision that motivates us. And ultimately we serve truth or we serve a lie. Indeed, it is through service that we find our happiness, our fulfillment. That is because we were made to bow beneath the yoke. Some are heavier than others, and Christ tells us his is light, but all we are offered is a yoke.

At least I am free to choose whom to serve, and my motives are my own. If I serve in the sense you are saying, I serve under my own terms.

Well, perhaps. One could argue that service like this expresses a form of self interest. But that is a somewhat different question and takes us further afield than I want to go right now. Perhaps we can explore it

later. The point I am making now is about service itself. God made us for a reason. He did not make us to be rivals to him, nor did he need us in any way. He is after all fully complete in himself. That means he needs nothing. So why did he make us? I will tell you.

Chapter Two (c)

Jeffrey, walking along the logging road, could see the rocks to his left frowning on the side of Slab Town. Moving through a break in the trees, he pushed his way through the thicket of undergrowth that lay deceptively beneath the high grass. It was difficult to break through these concealed briars, and Jeffrey had to struggle in places, but he scarcely noticed. His mind was focused on the cave and its enigmatic door. And those two hooks with their rings, what were they for? Probably they were the remnants of a pulley system that had been used to lower the oaken timbers, but if that were true, he reasoned, then they were there because the door was there. And he had seen nothing else in the cave but the door and the hooks. That suggested the door was the main thing. This was no moonshiners' hideout. No outliers had used it as a base. Had that been the situation, there would have been evidence. The men would have built fires and the walls would have been caked with carbon. And they would have left litter, stills or copper tubing or spent cartridges, something like that. But there was nothing. Besides the rocks were conspicuous. People involved in long term criminal activity would have been

unlikely to select such a place since it offered no concealment. The cave was hidden only because no one went there. If people started going there with any frequency, it would be easily seen. And if no one went there, that meant that no one knew about it except those who had set the hooks and built the door. Of course, he thought as he debated with himself, the mountains had been logged. Perhaps back in the middle of the nineteenth century, Slab Town had been thickly forested. But he was almost positive the padlock on the door was not that old. He breathed in the hot afternoon air, wiped his hand over his brow, and came up beside the rocks.

Walking briskly up the slight incline, he followed the rocks looking for the laurel screen and the cave. There it was! He marveled again that he had seen the cave's mouth behind those dense branches. It would have been so easy to miss. Ducking and pushing into them, he reached the cool entrance and aimed his flashlight inside. Its beam pierced into the darkness only a little way.

His heart tripping with excitement, Jeffrey stepped into the cave. It was just as he remembered it: smooth walls, level floor, empty of life—almost clean. He glanced behind him at the dim entrance, then moved forward cautiously. All was silent. Even his footstep and his breathing seemed to make no impression in the tunnel's lush soundlessness. The cave's mouth behind him dwindled away, seemed to close into darkness. Jeffrey did not notice. He continued forward, his flashlight playing along the floor, then the

granite walls. Ahead he saw the ledge, the two hooks, one hanging from the ceiling, the other protruding from the wall, their rings dangling from them. Jeffrey moved to the ledge and shined his flashlight onto the floor below. It would be easy, he thought, to set a ladder down there. Hank's idea had been a good one. And if they needed it, he knew the hook in the wall could hold a man and a rope.

Jeffrey stepped over to the hook and, clasping it, gave it a tug. It moved slightly under his hand. That was odd. He tugged it again. Yes, it definitely seemed to be loosening. Had it become unfixed when he used it before? Setting his flashlight on the cave floor, Jeffrey reached up with both hands and gave the hook a powerful yank. With a pop, it let go of the wall. Jeffrey staggered backward propelled by his own surge of energy, caught completely off guard by the sudden loss of inertia. His right foot landed on his flashlight, which rolled beneath him and turned Jeffrey's backward stagger into a backward fall. With a cry Jeffrey, still clutching the hook, pitched upside-down over the edge and into the darkness. The flashlight rolled forward into the wall. It gradually dimmed, and in a couple of hours, the cave was completely black again.

Interlogue

God has created multiple realms, many universes, if you will. Each is unique, and yet, as creations of the same being, they are expressions of the same mind and share certain similarities. For example, in each, the laws of reason obtain, though not always in the same way, and that means that to some degree, each of the realms, the universes, is in some measure comprehensible by all species of intelligence. And in so far as each is conceivable, it expresses an aspect of its being in the unique perceptions of those aware of it. By creating, God brings into being vastly more than can ever be known by his creatures, and yet, by creating different species of intelligence within that mighty framework of realms, he also creates vehicles that, by the act of knowing, are able to bring subsets of those distinct realms into being in unique ways. God's creatures know God's creation in ways that are appropriate to them. As suns affect the fabric of space and can reach across it, and (if you want to know) even beyond it, so minds affect the nature of reality itself, structuring and illuminating its potentials in various ways. In the first case, mass is the transforming power; in the second, the mind. In our

universe, God brought these two together: mass and mind, material that embodies awareness. That, Mr. Peterson, is an extraordinary miracle, and it is why the sons of God shouted out with joy when they looked upon what God had done as we read in the great creation hymn of Job.

Look, I don't know what I think about this because I've not thought about it before. Maybe you're right or partly right, maybe you're wrong. Maybe I'll never know, and maybe it doesn't really matter. But I'm not here for some high blown or screwball philosophical discussion. I'm here because . . . well, I suppose because you invited me here when I called the number the raven brought. I don't usually respond to birds with business cards, but then I'm not often visited by them. So I came. I did come, and I came because the world I knew is dead and, in this new one, I am without allies or cues. And I thought maybe you could help me. And I don't see . . . I completely fail to see . . . where this is going and how this can help me at all.

We're getting to the spine of the thing, but I wanted you to have some background first. We can think of this universe as one defined by space/time, but it might better be thought of as one defined by matter/mind. And it was universe as matter/mind that the sons of God found so astonishing and enthralling. And they responded as they were intended to respond for, as I indicated before, this was a trap for them, and they incarnated into it. And they incarnated into it because they wanted union with us. We were the

bait in the trap. There is a story, or rather the fragment of a story, about this in the third and sixth chapters of Genesis. You know the story of the Fall of course, but in the sixth chapter of Genesis there is a brief sequel to that story. Let me read it for you. The wizard rose from his desk, walked over to a bookcase against the wall opposite the refrigerator, and plucked a worn Bible from one of its shelves. I'll read from the King James, if you don't mind. It is not the most accurate translation, but I love its Elizabethan resonance. Perhaps it is an elitist affectation to which I have succumbed, but it is not my worst sin so please indulge me. Besides in this case, the version will do quite nicely. The wizard cleared his throat and began, "And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came into the daughters of men, and they bear children to them, and the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown." The wizard had returned to his desk as he read and, as he finished reading, lay the opened Bible upon it and sat down. *Now let's unpack this. The ancients knew this story, but were no longer sure what it meant. Some argued that the sons of God were humans descended from the righteous line of Seth, and the daughters of men were humans descended*

from the unrighteous line of Cain. That is initially plausible, but there is a problem. This is an account of a pre-Noachian world, but the author uses the phrase 'and also after that.' This phrase is the writer's way of indicting that the sons of God continued to woo the daughters of men in the post-Noachian world. But the unrighteous line of Cain was destroyed in the Flood. It was the righteous line of Seth that endured, so how did the unrighteous line of Cain manage so remarkable a feat? After all, they were dead. There was also a second interpretation according to which the sons of God were rebellious spirits from another realm. That interpretation is more nearly correct.

Wait right there. You said before that the spirits did not need to come into the world by being born, that they put it on as a mist. Something like that. That was the whole point of the digital universe concept.

Excellent, the wizard nodded approvingly. You are listening. And you are right. In order to have physical union with the daughters of men, the spirits had to take on the physical form of men. And others took on the physical form of women. These had a different purpose. Perhaps we can discuss that later. But the Genesis account focuses on the ones who became male. And the point of the union was not incarnation, it was children, the giants.

Sesiom nodded thoughtfully. The Bible does refer to giants both before and after the Flood. That is true.

Yet, the wizard continued, no remains of such giants have been found. Strange, isn't it? Giants appear in

all the world's stories, yet none have been found. Perhaps they were projections from childhood. To young children, parents look like giants and they know many things. But parents nurture and protect. Most of them do anyway. If they did not, our species would not have prospered. So parents are not the enemy. But in most of the stories, the giants are the enemy. They must be killed and overcome. That is a problem for the "giants are projections of parents" school. Some psychologists believe that tells us something rather unpleasant about the mental world of children, but there is a better answer. The giants were one of the ways the demons lashed out at God when they realized they had been trapped. We are made in the image of God, so by having sexual relations with us, the demons were trying to vandalize God's image.

That makes sense, Sesiom agreed. In the same way the murderer or the abortionist, even if they don't know it, would vandalize God's image.

Exactly. By striking at us, by striking at what we are as images of God, they vent their rage at God in a particularly nasty way, and they are fully aware of what they are doing. For the demons, we were the divine substitute. Jesus was God's countermove, the final solution, and the ultimate purpose of the whole thing. For humans he was the divine substitute and the sin qua non for the next stage in creation.

It was not dark. That was the first thing he noticed. He was floating. He could see his body sprawled on the cave floor, blood from his fractured skull pooling under his head, reaching his shoulders. Its eyes were opened. The pupils were different sizes. He was amazed at the clarity with which he could see. Perhaps the flashlight beam on the ledge above made everything so clear, but, no, he could see that too, and its light, though still strong, would not have illuminated the cave like this. He twisted slowly and looked down the tunnel toward the door. Its oaken slates were black. A gray light gleamed behind it. Around the door, the cave walls looked shiny as though they had been varnished. And that, he realized, was because the light was getting brighter. It was getting brighter because it was coming toward him. It was coming toward him because it was aware of him. Abruptly he understood that it had been waiting for him, that somehow it had used the cave to trap him. And when he realized this, he also understood that the trials he had faced before were as nothing to what was to come. He wanted to escape, but felt as though he were a frog struggling in molasses. Then above him he saw two beings suspended in the rock itself, beings for whom the rock was pervious. They were luminous, azure, vaguely humanoid. They watched him, apparently indifferent to his growing desperation. They watched him as gray rays from behind the door reached him, pierced through him, as he began to revolve lazily, infused with terror, horror, and his first inkling

of what was happening. They watched. As the gray light filled him, the cave grew darker. The door grew closer, and he was drawn through it, drawn into the passage beyond. The process seemed almost leisurely. There was no hurry. He would find out soon enough that time as he had known it was not so important anymore. On the cave floor, his body twitched, groaned, and was still again.

Chapter Three (a)

Hank could not have been prouder of Drew. Though only fourteen, his son behaved more like a young man than a conflicted, hormone fueled adolescent and seemed impervious to the dangling lures that hooked and distracted, even crippled, so many of his peers. Hank had no idea why this was so but, if pressed, he supposed he would attribute it to the amount of time the two of them spent together, especially since Margaret died. The shock of losing her to cancer when she was so young, coupled with the rapid progress of the disease (it was far advanced when she was diagnosed and she had passed away within the year), had devastated them both. When Margaret was alive, Hank had left most of the child-rearing decisions to her. He loved his son, but they had not been particularly close. However, in their grief after her death, the two had turned to one another, and within a few months, Hank had begun to take Drew camping and later spelunking. Though they remained father and son, Hank was confident they were well on the way to forging a relationship that, when Drew became a full adult, would have matured into a deep friendship. He reached over and tousled the boy's sandy hair. Drew, who had been staring out

the window of the Ford Bronco, looked over at his father and smiled.

Hank had not been to Jeffrey's cabin before and was unsure where the turnoff was, but he knew it had to be close. Turning off the radio, he asked Drew to dial Jeffrey's telephone number. To his surprise, Sesiom answered. "Hey, Ses," Hank said. "This is Hank. I'm think I'm close, but I'm not sure where to turn. Since you're there, I guess you can help me out."

"Where are you?" Sesiom's voice sounded serious, not at all what Hank had expected.

"I don't know. We drove through town about twenty minutes ago."

"You're right. You're close. You should be seeing the turnoff on your left any minute. It's a dirt road, but quite visible. The mailbox has Jeff's name on it."

"Yeah, I see it. Here it is." Hank handed his cell phone to Drew, and turned into Jeffrey's driveway. He lurched over the ruts through the trees, then came into clearing where Jeffrey's home was. Sesiom's Hummer was parked in front of the house. Naketa was standing near it on the rider's side. Melody and Sesiom were on the porch. Hank pulled to a stop on the driver's side of the Hummer. Sesiom waved and he and Melody came down from the porch and walked toward the Bronco. They looked grim.

As Hank and Drew emerged from the Bronco, Hank, who was becoming increasingly apprehensive, asked, "Is something wrong? Where is Jeffrey?"

"He's gone," Sesiom said flatly. "And I think he's been gone since Wednesday afternoon."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he's gone. He's not here. He left his computer on though. It's been idle since Wednesday afternoon."

"You don't think he went to the cave, do you?"

"I've no doubt about it," Sesiom said. He sounded almost angry. "His Jeep is still in the garage. He left the house unlocked and, like I said, the computer was on, so he wasn't planning to be gone long. He might have been hiking and had a heart attack or broken a leg, but I doubt it. He's healthy as a horse and stronger than most men twenty years younger. No, I think he went back to the cave and had some kind of accident. I think he is probably badly hurt or dead."

"God!" Hank put his hand on Sesiom's shoulder. "Let's hope not. Have you any idea where the cave is?"

"We should be able to find it," Sesiom said. "Jeffrey told me it was up on Slab Town under an outcrop of rock that could be seen from a logging road. Slab Town is over there," Sesiom pointed to the mountain rising kitty-corner to the cabin above the forest. "But the area is crisscrossed with logging roads. Hunters have kept a few opened, but most are overgrown. I don't know if we can find the one he took."

"Look," Hank said, "this shouldn't be too hard. The mountain is right there, and the cave is apparently an easy walk from the cabin. If we go into the forest this

way, we'll probably come up on the road. You said the computer was on. Did he leave any message in it?"

"I didn't check," Sesiom said. "We just got here a few minutes ago."

"Let's see," Hank motioned to Drew and said, "This could turn into a job for your generation. Let's see if there is anything on the computer." The entire group filed into the house.

Hank sat down at the computer and moved the cursor to the start button. Mouse click. Up came the options column. Hank moved the cursor to Documents and they appeared on the right. There were not many. One marked "Letters," another entitled "Investments." Another labeled "Finances." And there was "Notes on the Cave." Hank clicked on that and the text came up. The group gathered around the screen read the following:

- > Cave not mine. No mining in this area. Internet search revealed nothing about mining.
- > Librarian and hardware clerk agree. Both suggest cave might be connected to moonshiners.
- > Librarian thinks it might have been a hideout for deserters or outliers during the Civil War.
- > Hardware clerk confirms my identification that the door in the cave is made of oak.
- > Speculation: I think the cave may been associated with moonshiners. I find the Civil War connection unlikely because I think the padlock is of far more recent manufacture.
- > Where are the bats? Check cave for signs of animal life.

"Now that is something we'd not thought of," Hank mused. "Possible criminal activity. You don't suppose he was murdered, do you?"

"I doubt it," Sesiom said. "What do they do to moonshiners? A year in jail? A fine? No one is going to kill anyone over that. Besides it's a tradition up here. Goes all the way back to Scotland, I think. I'll bet the local sheriff kicks back over a jar of the stuff when he and the state representative get together. No one is going to murder anyone over illegal whisky."

"You're probably right," Hank agreed. "Anyway, we've found out what we can here. Let's get the equipment out and see if we can locate the cave."

Interlogue

The giants were not only big and physically powerful, some of them were brilliantly intelligent, but, as creations of two very different kinds of beings, their bodies were unstable. They grew more rapidly than humans, did not live as long, and, when they died, their corpses decayed very quickly. Even their bones did not last. Doubtless had the demons seen this as a problem, they could have corrected it, but the unstable nature of the giants' bodies fit quite well into their strategy. It added to the supernatural aura the giants enjoyed and in the long run covered the demon's tracks when they adopted another strategy. After all, the rapid and complete decay of the bodies meant there were no remains for later humans to investigate, no bones to run DNA analysis on.

You are suggesting that demons can see the future, but I thought that was the province of God.

It is, but we ourselves can predict some things, and the demons can predict vastly more. They would know DNA analysis is a possibility, and it would not have been difficult for them to forecast our eventual mastery of the technique. In any event, that is what

happened to the bodies of the giants. But of equal importance is what happened to their souls.

They had souls?

Of course they had souls. They were aware, and awareness is as basic to soul as mass is to matter. Each kind of creature has a particular expression of soul, and each individual within that expression has a particular expression of that type of soul. Expressions within expressions. All those souls apprehend reality in ways appropriate to them, and, in their apprehension of it, bring to light the myriad potentialities inherent in existence. The giants, in their case, had their own perspective, actualized their specific expressions of reality. And that too is what the demons wanted. They imagined that monstrous souls which it was a vile sin to create would concretize potentials that God has not intended and that they could use these potentials against God. It was a daring stroke of imaginative genius, frustrated by God, of course, and finally abandoned by the demons, but it gives us some idea of the kind of battle being waged and the level of creativity employed by those waging it. These monster souls were as depraved and as powerful as their name suggests, but, these souls were not poured out like water, they did not have the same destiny as the giants' bodies. They endured and are at work in the world today. I don't yet know what kind of entity you've freed, but it could be one of these.

You talk about the level of creativity employed. Are you telling me these demons can create?

No, not in the sense that God can. They cannot, for example, call something from nothing, and they are not in full control of what they make. However they can manufacture things even as we can, though on a much more profound level, and manufacture on that level can look like creation. Demonic incarnation is an example of that. They might construct a body shell out of the surrounding environment. That can be done very rapidly. Or they might take over a dead or dying body as apparently happened in Mr. Swofford's case. They can also make things out of the surrounding environment in the same sense that we can transform platinum into gold. That is not to create something, even though an elemental transformation is involved, it is more akin to manufacture.

Chapter Three (b)

Sesiom, Melody, Naketa, Hank, and Drew pushed single file through the woods, Sesiom leading along with Hank and Drew. The three men carried packs that held the gear and Hank had belted a hatchet around his waist. They struck out toward Slab Town and found the logging road without much difficulty, as Hank suspected they would. They had agreed that if they found the cave and Jeffrey was in it, they would call 911 for help, then Melody and Drew would return to Jeffrey's house to meet the police and paramedics when they arrived and guide them back to the cave.

The morning was cool and luminous, and Melody noticed that the forest colors were so intense they seemed mildly hallucinatory. A breeze, trickling over the leaves, occasionally puffed ostentatiously. To Melody such ruffles and rustlings took on an almost preternatural aura, but otherwise the forest was hushed save for the crunching of the five friends as they snaked along, saying little, eyeing the slopes of Slab Town. Half an hour passed before Sesiom, coming around a bend in the logging road, spotted the rocks on a slope above the trees. He called out to the others and pointed. "There it is."

They came up beside Sesiom and Hank, putting his hand above his eyes and squinting at the rocks, nodded, "Well, that was easy. Do you suppose they're the ones."

"There is only one way to find out," Sesiom replied, and the group scrambled up the road's red and eroding clay bank, shouldered their way through the brush, and then plunged into the briar tangles. This hiking was much more difficult and they were soon panting. Melody stopped for a moment to catch her breath and looked behind her. The panorama from the slope was spectacular. The forested mountains stretched away, dissolving into a bluish haze. She could certainly understand why Jeffrey, who loved to hike, was charmed by the place. She was not much of an outdoors woman and had usually been content to stay at home when Sesiom took a weekend to "rough it" with his friends, but she could see where part of the allure lay. Under other circumstances she could have lost herself in the view . . . "Hey," Sesiom yelled from above, "let's try to keep it together." Melody looked up slightly startled and realized that the group had continued up the meadow and was now some distance from her. She turned and hurried to catch up.

Sesiom reached the rocks first, the others following right behind him. Melody was last. Sesiom let them catch their breath, then said, "Jeffrey said the cave was screened by laurel and difficult to see. But since we know that, we should be able to find it, if these are the right rocks, so keep close," he looked at Melody, "and keep your eyes peeled. Now come on." And with that

Sesiom began to walk along the side of the rocks. They found the laurel quickly and Sesiom spotted the cave. "There it is." He motioned the others around. "And look at the breakage, you can tell the laurel has been disturbed recently. This must be it."

Sesiom, Hank, and Drew unshouldered their equipment and went to work. They began by chopping through the laurel to open a way to the mouth of the cave, then the three men took up their gear again and Hank distributed flashlights to everyone. Melody, who was beginning to feel distinctly peculiar refused hers. "I would rather not," she said. "I think I'll just wait out here. Maybe it is better if Naketa stayed with me. I'm feeling a little odd."

"What's wrong?" Sesiom was immediately concerned.

"Nothing's wrong," Melody smiled a little wanly. "I just feel funny. I don't want to go in the cave and I don't think Naketa should either."

"Okay," Sesiom said. "That's understandable. You and Naketa wait here. If Jeff's in there, we'll send Drew out and you three can get on back to the cabin and bring the rescue team in, or the police."

"I don't want to wait here," Naketa said, dismayed at this turn of events. "I want to go look for Uncle Jeff."

"Well," Sesiom said, "I think it's better if you stay with your mother. The cave could be a little tricky and I don't want you to get hurt. Besides, if she's not feeling well, she may need you. If we find Uncle Jeff inside, we'll send Drew out."

Melody nodded, "Yes, I think that's better." And as the three men—Melody noticed that Drew was looking more like a man every time she saw him—disappeared into the cave, she and Naketa settled down beside the rocks to wait.

The body was dying—no, dead now—but still warm. It curled and settled among the moist layers of the corpse, filtered past the damage which in a couple of places was extensive but still repairable, felt its way along the veins and flowed through the marrow. It knew the body could be saved if it could draw humans here. It was powerful but not yet able to escape the cave. The spell had been powerful too, keeping it pinned here for decades. It hated the man who had trapped it, and sensed through its hatred that he was still alive. If it could finally break free of the cavern, it would hunt that man down and have its revenge. Now that would be a consummation! Locked in darkness within those two skulls, it had played out that moment of vengeance again and again obsessively as it struggled to unweave the spell. It had been tough. The man had knowledge, but he had made errors and those would cost him. It worked on the body's tissue, mending what it could, relquefying the thickening blood, generating new corpuscles from the quickened marrow. And it learned what it still could from the body's memory shadows. The soul carried memory with it but memory left scraps of itself everywhere. It had been aware of the body when the body first entered the cave, and it had

come to investigate. From the beginning the brain, made vulnerable by belief, had been opened to its influence. And the body lived near-by. That facilitated a more continuous influence since it left the brain within reach much of time. But the spell continued to interfere, like a storm on the sun might interfere with radio transmissions on earth. **Lub-dub. Lub-dub.** It worked to get the heart started again. **Lub-dub.** The back of the skull was fractured and the cerebellum in that area badly traumatized, but most of the brain could still be serviceable if it could get the body's cardiovascular system operating before excessive damage occurred to the neurons. **Lub-dub. Lub-dub. Lub-dub.** That was a promising start. It began to concentrate on the rest of the body, making repairs, stabilized the body's systems. Then, using the memory shadows to launch part of itself out of the cave, it turned its energies toward the cabin. The house was almost beyond its range, but could see that three bodies had arrived and were looking for this body. They were concerned. That was useful. It scanned their brains. The child's was of little interest. The man was of much greater interest but it was the woman that riveted its attention. Her brain had been opened before, and that would make it much easier to influence and eventually control.

Interlogue

We are pawns in this game, place holders with limited maneuverability and range, but, if well used, we can be lethal. A pawn, after all, can capture a queen or checkmate a king. We occupy this little square but we cannot stay here. We must begin our hunt, move out onto the board, as it were. God knows what we are doing but this spirit, our quarry, may not, so we might have the element of surprise. Our next step, then, is to identify the spirit and, if we can, determine what steps we might take against it. There are no guarantees here. We cannot destroy this spirit and we are not engaged in an exorcism. We don't want this spirit cast out. We want to catch and imprison it, hopefully for a very long time, maybe send it into the deep, and, God willing, we shall do exactly that. But, as I just said, there are no guarantees.

The wizard stood up from his desk and began to pace. Let us explore another aspect of how the world really is. In one sense, of course, it is a material realm structured by quantifiable events that are best apprehended via inductive logic, but in another and more basic sense, it is a spirit-saturated realm where unique events are possible, a realm that can on

various occasions transcend logic. To make the point another way, let me put a question to you: is the world in which we live more nearly akin to the mechanistic universe of Isaac Newton or to the enchanted forest of the Blair Witch? As Christians, we would say that the world as it really is is more nearly akin to the enchanted forest of the Blair Witch than it is to the mechanistic universe of Isaac Newton, that the world, though it may bear a Newtonian veneer, is in fact haunted. Have you seen "The Blair Witch Project" and "The Book of Shadows"?

Sesiom nodded, *I saw "The Blair Witch Project."*

The wizard continued to pace, Good, then you'll remember how the characters, when they entered the woods, also entered the witch's spell and how the deeper they got into the forest the more pervasive and malevolent the spell became. You could gage the spell's growing power by the rising confusion and panic of the characters, their increasing anger with one another, their coarsening language. Eventually, and this was particularly evident in "The Book of Shadows," they could no longer discern illusion from reality and the witch was able to dispatch them as she willed. The real world, the world in which we live, is like that kind of enchanted forest except that the malicious spirit who dwells here, the one Jesus identifies as the prince of this world, is far more powerful, far more subtle, and far more evil than any Blair Witch could ever be. Indeed, he delights in allowing us to imagine that our world is not an enchanted forest at all but

is instead the orderly, rational, and Edenic world that God originally created. He hides behind the veil of predictability so that only rarely do we glimpse his hand at work. Startled, we may look again, thinking we misperceived, but then he is gone, and the veil—what in India they might call the “maya” of the world—has fallen back into place and everything appears as normal as before. Indeed, one might say that one of science’s most fundamental mistakes is studying this fallen corrupted world as though it was the uncorrupted original creation given to us by God. But this point is in no way original with me. Martin Luther, commenting on Paul’s challenge to the church at Galatia “who hath bewitched you?” explains that by spiritual witchcraft the Devil bewitches not the senses of people but their minds so that they mistake the false for the true. Of course what Martin Luther did not know, and in fact it is something we are only beginning to get some sense of, is that when the mind is bewitched, the senses are bewitched too. The senses are only projections of the mind.

Chapter Three (c)

Their flashlights lancing the darkness, Sesiom and Hank entered the cave, Drew right behind them. The three moved forward cautiously, playing their lights across the floor and long the walls. "I can see what Jeff was talking about," Hank remarked. "It's not like any cave or mine that I've seen. And where are the bats?"

Sesiom grunted, "It's weird."

They continued forward, then Hank said, "Looks like that's the ledge. Be careful." Then, "Look. That looks like a flashlight." He beamed his own light toward the object on the cave's floor. They hurried forward, stopped at the edge of the drop off. Sesiom's light caught the rusty hook and ring above the cavity, then he pointed his light into the pit. Three light beams fixated on the body fourteen feet beneath them.

"That's him," Sesiom said. "Damn!"

"Come on," Hank said, "let's get down there."

Working quickly Hank unshouldered his pack and, knelling on the cave floor, dug out the wire ladder. Their hammers rang in quick sharp strokes as Hank and Drew fixed the ladder to the rim of the ledge.

Silence returned briefly, then the ladder rattled to the floor below. Next Sesiom, leaning away from the ledge and holding the ladder with one hand while bracing the other against the rock floor, felt for a rung with his right foot, tested to see if it was secure, then, trusting the ladder with his full weight, clambered down into the darkness. Once on the floor, he unhooked his flashlight from his belt and knelt over Jeffrey's body.

"You wait up here, Drew," Hank told his son. Then he too descended the ladder. Drew, knelling at the edge of the pit, kept his flashlight trained on the two men.

"My God," Sesiom said, feeling the pulse of Jeffrey's jugular under his warm flesh, "he's still alive."

Hank's light fixed on the dried flood that had pooled under Jeffrey's head. "Still alive," he said in wonder. "It looks like he landed on his head. The man is as strong as an ox." He took off his backpack and, holding his flashlight in his mouth, opened it and removed an OD green army surplus blanket. "Don't move him," he said to Sesiom. "His neck might be broken."

The two men spread the blanket over Jeffrey, then Hank shouted up to Drew. "Get back to the girls. Call for help, then meet them at the cabin like we planned and bring them here."

"Right," Drew said. His light swept the scene one more time, then he was gone.

Hank knelt beside Sesiom who was still examining Jeffrey's body. "This is incredible," Sesiom said. "It's a

miracle. Look at that blood. And he must have laid here for two-and-a-half days. Just astounding.”

“True enough,” Hank agreed. He lifted one of Jeffrey’s eyelids with his finger, examined the eye briefly, then checked the other eye. “Pupils are of different sizes,” he said. “That means his skull is broken. Broken skull, all that blood.” He shook his head in amazement, then said, “I hope there is no brain damage.”

The two men fell silent as they considered the implications of that. Then Sesiom said, “I hope not. But there is probably some. He hit hard. But they can do wonders with stroke victims now. There is a new concept of brain development I’ve read about. It’s based on a theory called neuroplasticity. The idea is that the brain, even if it suffers severe trauma, has the ability to restore some of its functions by, in effect, rewiring itself. It takes time and intensive therapy of course, but the doctors have some remarkable success stories.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” said Hank. “I hope Jeffrey doesn’t need it, but if he does, I hope it’s true.” He shone his light on a rusty iron hook that lay near Jeffrey’s body. The ring lay a short distance from it. “Must have pulled out. Caused the fall,” he mused. Then he shone his light down the tunnel. “Didn’t Jeff say there was a door back there? Who in the hell would have gone to all the trouble to build a door down here? And why?” He stood up, continued to direct his flashlight down the dark tunnel, then he said, “Come on, Ses, let’s have a look at that door. We can’t do anything

more for Jeffrey, but at least we can have a look at what drew him here.”

Sesiom continued to look at the crumpled body of his friend, then slowly nodded. “Yeah, let’s have a look at the door.”

He rose. The two men’s flashlights stabbed away the darkness as they started down the tunnel.

Interlogue

The wizard was warming to his subject now. *Obviously the focus here is interpretation, and interpretation is fundamentally imaginative. That means the basic problem is two fold. In part, it involves the way we imagine things, and in part, it involves the things we allow to inform our imagination. Recognizing that we shape and are shaped by our imaginative faculty, and recognizing that our imaginative faculty serves to fill the gaps in our perceptions and knowledge, we begin to appreciate how great the potentially destructive role played by misinformation and misconception can be. The more misinformed we are, the more likely we are to misconceive a subject. In this regard, our reliance on accurate information should awaken us to how vulnerable we are to the pernicious influence of lies. In problem solving, intuition or imagination is key. Without the capacity to imagine or intuit, it is not possible to know where to begin when one confronts a problem. It might not even be possible to recognize a problem! Science of course has become our preeminent approach to problem solving. Thus, at a basic level, science is intuitive or imaginative.*

Surely science is not art, Sesiom objected.

No, it is not, the wizard agreed. *But it shares some things with art, including a preference for the elegant and the beautiful. After all, whoever said the universe had to be elegant and beautiful? Why must it conform to our categories at all? And some sciences—archeology, for example—have more in common with art than others like chemistry. And that distinction is important. Originally, natural science was divided into two major fields: the life sciences like biology, botany, and entomology, and the physical sciences like physics, chemistry, and geology. In this division, the physical sciences (most particularly physics) set the agenda, in part because the physical sciences led chronologically and the methods that were honed as they developed became identified with the scientific approach. There is an irony here that is worth reflecting upon for a moment. These scientific methods assumed a Newtonian worldview. . .*

Newton, again, Sesiom said. *You seemed obsessed with Newton.*

Yes, Newton again, the wizard said, *but my obsession, if that is what it is, is as nothing compared to the obsession with Newton that Western intellectuals had for centuries and in some cases still have. What if there were just a few basic laws understood as universal and operating without exception that underlay and governed the complexity of our world. Know those laws and we could explain and predict everything. However, the Newtonian worldview has been transcended with*

the advent of quantum mechanics and by things like complexity theory, chaos theory, and the like. Let's think about quantum mechanics for a moment. Assuming that physics on this level does not really impact them, most other sciences have yet to make that transition and continue to take a Newtonian world for granted. But quantum mechanics, precisely because it allows a significant role for mind, in fact impacts all areas of science, especially if those sciences seek to construct an accurate model of the world.

The wizard sat down again and, looking intently at Sesium, leaned toward him across his desk. *To the life sciences and the physical sciences, the historical sciences like archeology, economics, sociology, and history itself were added, generally in the nineteenth century, though modern economics traces its roots to the growth of commerce in the context of European empire in the sixteenth century. In this move, we see the scientific method as perfected in the physical sciences applied to the humanities, an application encouraged and given shape by Darwinism (that archetypal historical science) and its insistence that humanity be treated like any other animal. The development of anthropology and especially economics facilitated the interplay between Darwinism and the humanities. Indeed, the role of economics on Darwin's thinking and its preparation for the acceptance of Darwin's ideas in Victorian society is well attested. Of course, as science has expanded its knowledge, some overlap between these fields has occurred. The emergence of biochemistry is an example of such overlap, and one that is worth considering.*

The wizard leaned back in his chair, gazed at the ceiling for a moment, then continued. Sesiom, despite himself, was becoming mesmerized. *Vitalism, an idea derived from the earlier view that soul is the animating principle of living things, is the theory that the chemistry of life is in some way distinct from the chemistry of non-life, that the chemistry of life operates according to rules that are different from the rules that structure the chemistry of non-life. This was a respectable scientific position until 1827 when the German chemist Friedrich Wohler produced urea by heating ammonium cyanate. For the next hundred years, vitalism was on the defensive until by the early decades of the twentieth century it had almost no defenders left in the scientific community. Instead chemistry was divided into organic and inorganic fields, organic referring to most substances containing carbon and inorganic referring to all the rest. Thus was soul transmuted into carbon! In the almost two centuries following Wohler's initial discovery, organic chemists have learned much about the structure of living chemistry, but its essence eludes them. Thus, despite some initially promising experiments in the 1950s, no progress has been made toward creating life in the laboratory. Indeed, in the light of such failure, one could argue that chemical structure has shown itself as barren of life as computer programs have shown themselves devoid of consciousness. Perhaps something more than structure is needed, so why not revisit vitalism? What has happened to science that renders a reconsideration of this erstwhile scientific thesis improbable? Surely the culprit is the*

insinuation of materialism into the scientific paradigm to the exclusion of all other possibilities, and a fundamental conservatism (perhaps fueled by the scramble for scarce research dollars) that rules much of the scientific establishment. But such exclusiveness and conservatism cannot be sustained either scientifically or philosophically, thus its intolerance of other possibilities cannot be justified by appealing to the intolerant nature of truth itself. And if materialism cannot be shown to be true, might it be false? Might its intolerance even betray it as a lie?

The wizard's eyes blazed. *If so, what can we make of biological theories that rely exclusively on material explanations? Might not they also be lies? In research, it is one thing to opt for a preferred model. It is a very different thing to ascribe all truth to one's preferred model. In the first case, one acknowledges looking for answers. In the second case, one asserts that one already knows the answer, one is simply filling in the gaps. Of course, such a move might not rest on a conscious lie. It could be an example of a category mistake. Just because living bodies move, there is no reason to suppose that their movements can be adequately studied by employing the principles learned by the investigation of the movements of non-living bodies, any more than there is any reason to suppose that the principles learned in the study of non-sentient entities should be exclusively applied in the study of sentient ones. But whether lie or mistake, the result is the same. There is no reason to suppose that life and mind can be exhaustively accounted for*

within the context of materialistic physics. Now, if one is a theist, one might reasonably claim that one already knows the basic answer because it was provided through revelation, but it is not easy to see how an atheist could make such a claim. Thus, it is not easy to see how an atheist could insist that non-materialist paradigms be excluded from consideration. After all, an atheist, if honest, must admit that atheism is a faith position. In other words, the atheist must admit to the possibility of being wrong. Nor, given the preeminence of scientists who are not atheists, can atheism be considered a prerequisite for doing science, even good science. Were researchers like Robert Boyle, William Harvey, Robert Hooke or John Ray, all of whom believed that in studying nature they were studying the thoughts of God, not doing science? Was science as such impossible prior to the dominance of the materialistic paradigm in the early twentieth century? Surely not! So why exclude theistic thinking as inimical to science? Yet in our culture, we commonly make that assumption.

The wizard was up and pacing again. In problem solving, intuition or imagination is key. Without the capacity to imagine or intuit, it is not possible to know where to begin when one confronts a problem. It might not even be possible to recognize a problem! Science, of course, has become our preeminent approach to problem solving. Thus, at a basic level, science is intuitive or imaginative. As I pointed out a few minutes ago, it has concepts and preferences. For a better understanding of reality, we must step beyond those concepts and preferences.

The pieces were moving. The boy was hurrying back to the woman and the girl child, and the woman in whose brain it had begun to synthesize an alkaloid, would, it was sure, prove very useful. It was drawing the two men, luring them toward the door. It was growing more confident that it could finally defeat the depleted spell and free itself. Its medium of command was the unpronounced and intuitive soul language that lies beneath the ascriptions of meaning and language that symbols arouse. It was most at home in this substratum of dreams and at its most powerful. Significance was its cipher. The men were malleable but they had to be drawn cautiously. The woman, having been opened before, was much more vulnerable and interesting. The boy, it was sure, would play his role admirably when the time came. The girl child was ideal. It would use her later. The rock around it was transparent, but the spell, though weakening, rendered the granite impervious to it. The hated blue figures had returned, but it knew that, for the moment, it had nothing to fear from them. The contest was joined. The spell worked by the rules, but it knew the rules and played this kind of game superbly. The men moved down one section of the tunnel, the boy ran down the other, his flashlight beam skittering along the wall, jabbing the ceiling and floor . . .

Chapter Three (d)

Drew's heart raced as he burst from the cave. Naketa, who was seated off to one side of the laurel, leaped up when he emerged. "What is it?" she cried bounding toward him.

"We found Uncle Jeff and he's still alive," Drew gasped. "He's still alive. Where is Melody?"

"Mama," Naketa yelled, turning away from Drew and dashing from the laurel and down the slope, "Mama, Uncle Jeff is alive."

Drew followed Naketa and saw Melody standing in the meadow a short distance from the cave. She had turned toward them, but Drew could tell that she had been looking out over the mountains. Naketa rushed toward her and cried out again, "Uncle Jeff is still alive."

Melody started toward them as they reached her, "Still alive?" she asked. "You found him?"

"Yes," Drew said. "He had fallen from the ledge but he was still alive. He's unconscious and Ses and my dad say he's pretty badly hurt, but he's still alive. They've got him covered with a blanket now. Call the paramed-

ics or whoever they send in these kind of situations. Call the police. They'll know what to do."

Melody took out her cell phone and handed it to Drew. "Here," she said.

Drew, surprised, took the phone. "I should dial 911?" he asked.

Melody nodded, "Yeah, that should work." Drew looked at her for a second, puzzled. Melody seemed different, somehow, less engaged, less excited than he thought she would be. He punched in the numbers.

The phone buzzed twice, then a woman's voice came on, "What's your emergency?"

Drew quickly outlined the situation. Then he said, "Send your team to Jeffrey Swofford's place. We're heading there now and will try to be there by the time they arrive. We'll take them up to the cave."

"Jeffrey Swofford's place," the voice said. "That's the old Camden place. I know it well. We'll have a team up there pronto."

Drew handed the cell phone back to Melody who was looking at him fixedly. She took it and slipped it into her shirt pocket. "Come on," Drew said, "Let's get going." The three of them started down the hill.

Interlogue

I suppose you are saying that we must let our imaginations run, think outside the box, as they say, Sesiom mused. But how would you know your imaginative structure is true?

You test it, the wizard said, just as you would do with any hypothesis. That is what your imaginative construct is: a hypothesis. Of course, even if the test gives the result you expected, that is not proof the hypothesis is right. But expected results at least indicate that it isn't necessarily wrong. Even if you are eventually able to formulate a theory, there is no way to know with certainty that your theory is an accurate representation of the really real. After all, before it was finally abandoned, Ptolemy's model of the solar system served splendidly for two thousand years. It looks odd to us, but only because our frame of reference is so radically different today than it was even five centuries ago. To the finest and best educated minds in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, the Ptolemaic explanation appeared quiet plausible. Ptolemy, as I said, reigned for two thousand years, Newton something over two hundred. Einstein might not make two centuries. So at most all

you can know is that a particular imaginative structure is a useful assumption to adopt when seeking a certain kind of result, and you might be able to hazard a guess as to why that is so.

And we're going to imagine a world in which magic works and demons are cowed by the proper ritual?

Yes, we are, said the wizard, because imagining the world in that way is going to produce some results I think you will find very useful. Besides that, we wizards have been at this for a long time now, and I think the theory behind what we do is compelling. So let's get started.

Chapter Three (c)

Melody was finding it harder to concentrate, to keep her thoughts under control. Since they left Jeffrey's cabin, her senses had become increasingly acute, her thoughts more scattered. Colors and sounds had grown in intensity, space seemed oddly liquid, the objects in it clumped together, wavered like seaweed. And through this altered landscape, concepts fragmented, then, like drunken birds, flew and looped, scattered, came together, multiplying into bizarre flocks. Categories swelled into one another, became confused. The core of her body had turned effervescent, as though a spring of seltzer had erupted inside her. Standing on the slope of the mountain and looking across the Appalachians, she felt as though she had been planted there as a seed, that this was where she belonged, and that the life she lived as Melody was something she dreamed in a moment. The blue sky flaming above her, the roar of the engulfing wind, and her, alert to both in this moment: those things were true. The rest dissolved into a twinkle of bubbles and gusted away.

Except that world kept intruding. First there was Naketa yelling about Jeffrey Swofford. That is who they

had come to see, Melody remembered. Then Drew was asking for her cell phone, wanting to call some people. Now he was pressing it into her hand, insisting they start moving. Melody complied, slipping the cell phone back in her shirt pocket, but her tattered thoughts must have been scrawled across her face because Drew, before he turned away and started down the hill, looked at her so oddly.

They were in a hurry. Walking fast, especially through the briar undergrowth of the meadow, helped her concentrate. What in the world was happening to her? Was she losing her mind? She watched her hand swing at her side and suddenly froze. Standing stock still, she swung her hand again. What she saw was a rapid series of hands stringing behind one another rather than the smooth flow of a single hand in motion. She looked up in panic. The world around her glowed as though carved from chunks of light. This, she knew, was LSD.

How was this happening? She had started using drugs in high school and continued for a couple of years in college. Then she became a Christian, left all that behind. Finished with it and glad it was over. Other problems had been issues for her: deep suspicion of authority, inability to control her anger, rushes to judgment, malice. She did not pray or read her Bible as she should. But drugs were dead, safely in the past. She had walked away from them without a backward glance. And because Sesiom had never been a user, it was something they had not discussed much. He was aware of her adolescent involvement of course. She knew it went well beyond experimentation. She had

hidden nothing from him. But it was not anything he had been interested in, and nothing she had been keen to revisit.

Her mind raced as she tried to organize her thoughts. Who had slipped her the acid?

Drew and Naketa were pulling further ahead as she stood there. She had to catch up. She started forward, began to hurry. She wanted to call to them, ask them to slow down, but was too self conscious. The last thing she desired under the circumstances was to attract attention. She would stay inconspicuous until this was over. Trips normally lasted about twelve hours. The middle seven or eight were the most difficult to control. At least that is how she remembered it. But the eight hours of chaos she was sure she faced, how would she handle that?

Drew and Naketa were on some kind of mission. They had to save Jeffrey so they were getting the police. My God, the police! How was she going to explain this? The police would arrest her. They wouldn't believe she didn't know how she had gotten the drug. She would go to jail. She couldn't risk their home, custody of Naketa. They could lose everything. She had to hide, disappear in the woods and lay low until this passed. Then she would tell Sesiom all about it. He would understand.

Drew was quite some distance away, but had turned to look back at her. He gestured, yelled something. Still just a kid but trying to be a man. Well on the way to manhood. But still just a kid. She could not go to them

like this. What would they think? Surely they would know something was wrong. She would make a break for it. Try to get to the forest. They couldn't find her there. She would be safe until this passed. She turned to her right, started to run, struggled against the brambles as she made for the distant trees.

Behind her she could hear Drew yell something but her gasps as she ran drowned it out.

Interlogue

Here's another Red Bull, the wizard stood up from the refrigerator and handed the can to Sesiom. He popped one opened for himself and drained it in a swallow. *Like I said before, it could be some time before we get a chance for some sleep.*

Why do you use this? Sesiom asked, as he opened his can and began to sip. *Why not brew up a batch of Go Juice # 9 or some such potion?* The two of them were walking across the room to a closet.

I could, the wizard said as he opened the closet door, *and I have. But this will suffice*, then he smiled at Sesiom, *and besides it's legal*. Turning back to the closet, he flipped on the closet light and stepped in. Sesiom, standing outside and finishing his Red Bull, could see that the closet's contents were neatly arranged on shelves and hangers. Quite a contrast from the wizard's cluttered desk. *Yes, the wizard agreed, it is quite a contrast from my desk*. Ignoring Sesiom's startled expression, the wizard carefully lifted a dark cloak from a hanger and folded it over his arm. Sesiom could see that it had a hood. From a shelf next to the cloaks, the wizard took a cluster of crystals

that branched like stubby bushes from a slab of dark rock. It was obviously heavy. The wizard handed the display to Sesiom. *Please hold these*, he said. Then, from the corner, he produced a plane wooded staff slightly taller than he was. It was tipped with a crystal as large as a jackknife blade and shaped to a point. It looked to Sesiom like a spear. Lastly, the wizard took a wide flat box of intricately carved blond wood and slipped it under his arm on which he carried the cloak. Then stepping from the closet, the wizard closed the door behind him and said to Sesiom, *Okay, let's go.*

Where are we going? Sesiom asked?

They stepped out in the shabby hall and the wizard locked the apartment door behind him. *We're going to the cave*, he replied quietly. *I'll need to have a look at the cavern where it was imprisoned, get a feel for the place, see if it left anything of itself there. I do not expect it to have carved its initials on the wall or marked off the days, but it was apparently there for a long time so it behooves us to have a look. That is where I will make my first attempt to identify it.*

Sesiom, feeling a cold fear trickle through his blood stream, froze. Butterflies of nausea tickled in his stomach. *I don't want to go back to the cave*, he said. *I don't think I can do it. I hate the cave. It is a terrible place, an evil place.*

I've no doubt about any of that, the wizard said as he faced Sesiom in the hall, *but it's where we need to start. And I'll need you with me to help if I have any questions, which I am quite sure I'll have. I know this*

won't be easy for you, but it must be done. And besides, I'll be with you. He laid his staff on Sesiom's shoulder and Sesiom saw a momentary flash of blue flare of in its crystal point. Reluctantly he started forward, his heart pounding with dread.

I'd like you to drive, the wizard said. *After all, you know the way.*

Chapter Four (a)

Hank and Sesiom moved cautiously down the tunnel, Sesiom in the lead, their flashlights glancing across the rock, transforming it into an eerie backdrop of craggy shadow. Neither said anything. Their breathing and the scrape of their footsteps shivered in the hollow, stone-scented air. The minutes skulked past. The nervous chill permeating the tunnel grew denser. The two men pressed ahead.

Then they saw the gray outline of something blocking their path. Sesiom stopped for a moment, murmured "I think that's it." He heard Hank grunt in agreement. They went on. The door condensed out of the darkness, its hulking timbers filling the tunnel, its mass dwarfing the enormous padlock that secured it. Sesiom's flashlight explored the bolted timbers, the padlock's rusted shackle, the iron staple screwed into the wood, the mighty hinges. Finally he whispered, "I can see why Jeff was intrigued. This is weird as hell, almost spooky. Can you imagine what it would have been like coming down here alone and finding this?"

"Yeah," Hank hissed back. "Pretty bizarre. Someone went to a lot of trouble to build it."

"It wasn't done yesterday either," Sesiom hissed back. He clinched his flashlight in his teeth and slipped his pack off. "Let's see if we can get it opened," he said in a slightly raised voice.

Hank dropped his pack as well and lifted his hatchet from his belt. Sesiom produced a crowbar. Hank said, "I'm going to cut some of the wood away from around the lock, then we'll see if we can pry it off. I don't know if this will work. The thing looks pretty sturdy, but it's a place to start."

"Agreed," Sesiom replied. He took both flashlights and stood to one side, training their twin beams on the lock while Hank went to work with the hatchet. The wood was tough, but the hatchet's blade was sharp and Hank used it skillfully. Chips flew and the cave was filled with Hank's determined breathing and the thudding sound of the small ax.

In a few minutes Hank stopped, slipped the hatchet back in its holster, and said, "Okay, let's try the crowbar." Sesiom returned Hank's flashlight to him, the two men put the butts of the flashlights into their mouths, hooked the crowbar's claw behind the lock's anchor, and heaved back on its handle. The screws began to give with a reluctant squeal.

"Here," Sesiom gasped, resetting the crowbar's hook. "Let's try it this way." Again they heaved and again the screws protested and gave, but only a little. They stood back and observed the lock.

“Son of a bitch,” Hank growled. “I wonder if it’s bolted on the other side.”

“Probably,” Sesiom said. “We could just cut that part of the timber away.”

“Yeah,” Hank agreed. “I think we’ll have to.”

Sesiom stood back again and Hank went to work. It took almost ten minutes for him to chop through the timber. He worked until the timber splintered with a snap that reverberated down the tunnel and the huge door settled forward with a groan. The top hinge popped free. The two men stepped back quickly, fearing the door might collapse, but it did not. It merely pulled away from the lock and leaned toward them. When they were sure it was not going to fall, Sesiom said, “Let’s see if we can pull it opened.”

Hank went toward the door, took the severed timber above the lock and pulled it forward, forcing it as its corner scraped the floor, its two remaining corroded hinges grumbling. Leaving it ajar, the men stepped into the tunnel behind it. Their flashlight beams plunged down the passage into the darkness. They peered ahead, then looked back at the door. “What the . . .” Hank exclaimed. While the other side of the door had been rough wood, one of the cross planks on this side had been sanded smooth and painted white, and on the white paint these words were brushed in black: IN THE NAME OF OUR SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST THOU SHALT NOT PASS.

Interlogue

Stop lights flashed red, and neon scrawled its graffiti above the gloomy windows of locked stores as Sesiom steered his Hummer through the sleeping city. The wizard stared straight ahead, silent, immersed in thought. Sesiom had left the windows open, hoping the cool night air would help him stay alert. A couple of kids in a pickup, rap blaring from its opened windows, sped past. Then silence descended again. Cruising toward the Interstate, hunched and pale behind the buildings ahead, Sesiom left the center of the city, turned onto the entrance ramp of the freeway, raised his window and flipped on the air conditioner. The speedometer climbed to seventy miles an hour and hovered there. In his rearview mirror, Sesiom could see the city in pinnacles of electricity, gaudy in its power, fade away. Then they were alone with only the occasional semi to break the monotony of the Hummer's purring engine, the black land, and the black sky heavy with its invisible stars.

It's a funny thing about sin, the wizard said. It goes all the way down, right to the very core of our being. It makes us who we are, and that's why we fear deliverance. To be offered freedom from sin is to be offered

freedom from ourselves. Jesus invites us to leave the kingdom of eternal death and join him in the kingdom of eternal life, and we are afraid to do it because we know that to escape death we must die and, in dying, we will cease to be what we were, will cease to be what we are, will become something new. Sin is nourished by our self-love. That is why Jesus describes the new life as a crucifixion, why he tells us that to live we must hate our life, must die with him, why he insists that we be born again or born from above. Christianity, because it is the first step in the triumph over this thing we call sin, is the next stage in our evolution. Christ in his death and resurrection ushered in the eighth day of creation.

What will happen when we get to the cave? Sesiom asked.

We will enter it, the wizard said, you and me, and we will try to identify what was there and then we will try to determine the best way to address our problem. Don't think of this as a contest. The contest has been won. Think of it instead as a problem to be solved. We have the victory already. We must discover the way to apply it. Just like with sin. Christ shows us his life and his cross and says, "I have suffered this much for you to win this battle for you. Take what I offer. The new life is yours, and the powers of darkness are subject to you in my name."

Then why the need for magic theory? asked Sesiom. *Why do I need a wizard at all? Why can't I simply in the name of Christ command this thing into the*

abyss? I'm a Christian too. Why do I need you? Besides doesn't the Bible condemn witches and wizards? Aren't you among those who will never see the kingdom of God?

Why do we need the church? the wizard asked. If the Spirit teaches us, why do we need teachers? We can pray so why do we ask others to pray for us? Jesus said that when two or more are gathered in his name, he is there in the midst of them. Note that. Two or more. Christianity is a faith rooted in community. No person is sufficient unto himself and no one is without abilities that benefit the larger company. There are no Lone Ranger Christians, and every Christian has something valuable to offer. Prayer underlines that. As for wizards being condemned, you are correct. In the book of Revelation sorcerers are condemned with murderers, pimps, idolaters, and liars. It's pretty unsavory company we wizards keep. But let's think about this. You've seen pictures of the Sistine Chapel. On the ceiling, God is depicted reaching down to touch the finger of Adam. To make a likeness of God is to violate the second commandment, but there it is right in the heart of the Vatican. The God we Christians worship looking for all the world like Zeus.

Sin in the heart of the Vatican? Sesiom asked in mock surprise. I as a Baptist am supposed to be shocked?

The wizard ignored the gibe. The word translated as witchcraft in Galatians is pharmakeia from which we get our word pharmacy. What is being condemned there? Medicine? Recreational drug use? Or false

religion? I don't think it's medicine. I am like a doctor, as I said before. I offer a kind of medicine. The skills I have acquired, I use in the service of Christ, even as Michelangelo used his. What I paint may look like Zeus but it is not. In the same way, the law condemns, but Christ does not. Instead he makes all things new, and that includes the skills of poor sinful wizards like myself.

Chapter Four (b)

Dumbfounded, Drew watched Melody struggling through the briar and high grass toward a more distant stretch of forest. Had she seen an easier way? Was she fleeing a snake? If so, why hadn't she called to him? Her actions and the way she looked at him had been peculiar since he'd told her the news about Jeffrey. But Naketa had not indicated that anything had happened while he and Sesiom and Hank were in the cave. "No," she said when Drew asked her, "mommy just looked at the mountains. I did too, and I also looked at the flowers. We didn't talk much. She just wanted to be quiet." Well, he thought, something had happened because now she was running off. What had possessed her to do that? Was she afraid of something? Afraid of them?

"Melody!" he yelled. "Melody!"

She continued toward the far trees, lifting her feet high as she fought through the brambles.

"Melody!" Drew did not know what to do. Jeffrey was still alive. Paramedics were coming and would need to be taken to the cave. The man's life depended on him getting them there. Naketa had looked around when he called Melody's name and now she was calling,

“Mommy! Mommy!” and starting her own scramble after her mother.

“Wait,” Drew shouted at Naketa. “We’ve got to get to the cabin. We’ve got to get the authorities, you know, the cops and the doctors, to the cave for Uncle Jeff. I think your mother has found a different route, but I don’t know that way. We’ve got to get to the cabin so we’ll go this way, the way we came. I’m sure we’ll meet her there.”

“But that’s not the way,” Naketa insisted, pointing after Melody.

“Maybe it’s a different way,” Drew said, “but it doesn’t matter now. You and I have to get back to the cabin.”

“Mommy,” Naketa yelled again, then started once more after her mother.

“Come on, Skeeter,” Drew said. “We’ve got to get back to the cabin. The police will be there and we’ve got to get them to the cave. Uncle Jeff’s life depends on us.”

Naketa scrutinized Melody still moving through the meadow away from them. “Mommy!” she yelled again.

“Come on,” Drew said urgently. “Let’s go.”

Reluctantly Naketa turned toward Drew and the two of them made their way to the logging road.

That had not worked well. It wanted the boy to pursue the woman. It needed the extra time that pursuit would win. It scanned the boy again. He was proving difficult to control, but

invariably there was an apple no matter how well concealed. The power to control was always there if one could tap into it. Control was a problem to be solved, not a contest to be won. That contest had been decided long ago and commemorated in the story of the serpent and the woman. That was the moment the Great One had shaken all the universes, had shown that victory and the freedom that came with it was possible. But liberty was always a question of control, and if it would secure its own, it would have to master these pieces. It had emerged, but was still tethered to the cave. That too was a problem to be solved. But the boy would remain within its sphere of influence for awhile. Right now it would focus on the woman. It centralized its thoughts on her and began to deconstruct the alkaloids in her brain. She had been badly shaken and was very vulnerable. It had found her apple.

Chapter Four (c)

Sesiom and Hank, their flashlights focused on the sign, stared at it in stunned silence. Finally Sesiom said softly, "I don't think military deserters, draft dodgers, or moonshiners did that."

"Nor do I," Hank breathed back softly. He turned and shone his flashlight down the tunnel, played it in a slow circle in the darkness, splashed its beam against the walls. "What's back there that could read this?"

Sesiom's flashlight followed Hank's, then Sesiom said, "I'm sure whatever it was . . . whoever it was . . . has long since died." Then he started forward, "Come on, we've some time yet before Melody and the kids return."

"Let's do it," Hank agreed. Then under his breath he add, quoting a line from *Aliens*. "Talk to me frosty." Hank could not see it in the dark, but Sesiom grinned.

The two men went forward cautiously. The tunnel stretched before them, dingy and pale under their torch beams, rough edged but so easy to walk that it seemed almost to welcome them. "It's like the floor's

been swept,” Sesiom hissed. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Yeah,” Hank said. “And no bats. The place is as clean as new cement. I don’t think anything has ever lived back here, at least not for very long . . . and not for a very long time.”

They kept moving forward and fell silent again. The minutes slithered past. Then Sesiom said, “This looks like the end.”

Ahead, the two men could see that the tunnel twisted left and its ceiling dropped suddenly. Sesiom crouched down and shone his flashlight around the corner. “Oh . . . Jesus . . .” he whispered. “Hank, check this out.”

He stepped back and Hank crouched down, peering behind his flashlight into the tunnel. “Good God!” His words were almost inaudible. On the floor before him at the base of the wall where the tunnel ended, Hank could see two small human skulls sitting side by side. There was nothing else. He reached toward one but stopped when Sesiom hissed loudly, “Don’t touch anything. We’ll need to show this to the police when they arrive. This looks like Satanism, witch stuff, and it could be murder.”

Hank leaned back from around the corner, stood up and, facing Sesiom, said, “You’re right. Let’s get back to Jeff. As soon as he is safely on his way, we can bring the cops back here and show them the whole thing. They will probably have a better idea than we do about who might have done this.”

"Yeah," Sesiom said, "Let's go."

The two men left the skulls and began to go back the way they had come. They passed the gate, glancing briefly at the painted inscription. It did not occur to either of them to ask themselves why a witch or a Satanist would issue a command "in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Far ahead of them at the base of the ledge, Jeffrey, invisible in the darkness and unheard, moved slightly under his blanket and groaned. Had Sesiom or Hank been watching him, they might have seen the hint of a smile flutter briefly across his lips.

Interlogue

The freeway, pale in the Hummer's headlights, condensed like a magic ribbon out of the darkness. Sesiom, navigating the scattered traffic, glanced at the speedometer, then over at his companion, *Does the Catholic Church know you're a wizard?*

The wizard glanced at Sesiom and said, *Of course. The Church is very aware of who I am and what we do. One of the seventeen wizards I mentioned to you is a professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. We are not organized in any formal way within the Church, but she certainly knows of our existence and occasionally requests our services.*

For things like exorcisms?

Oh no. Nothing like that. A priest may exorcise someone, and an exorcist is not considered a very elevated position within the Church. A wizard isn't either, for that matter, the wizard smiled, but the Church does find us useful from time to time.

What kind of services do you perform?

On occasion I've been asked to assist a missionary priest. Once I was called in to help with a police

investigation. On another occasion I provided service by locating an item the Church was very keen to retrieve. All pretty mundane stuff, like a doctor's removing tumors or swabbing tonsils is pretty mundane. Most of what happens in life is pretty mundane. For the most part, mundane is what it's all about.

And then something like this happens, Sesiom said. Something not so mundane.

Yes, the wizard nodded, and then something like this happens. And when something like this happens, a wizard can prove particularly useful. Like any form of organized knowledge, my chosen field has an innate fascination. Magic theory reveals something—not everything, but something—intrinsic to the creation. Magic theory, like any scientific law, works because it traces principles God himself wove into the fabric of the universe. But when my services are required to assist others in their own struggles, to resolve an issue or to ease another human being's suffering or deliver someone from evil, then I feel at a deeper level the value of what I do. But even if nothing like this happened, I would still pursue my studies. They are interesting in their own right, and insofar as they help me to understand God's creation better, I think they are honoring to God.

In what sense do they help you understand the universe better? How do you do what you do? For example, the raven with the card, how did you do that?

One simply develops an innate ability in birds. Birds are capable of some pretty remarkable things. For

example, starlings in Fredericksburg, Virginia, were caught on a surveillance camera robbing quarters from a coin machine at a car wash. One bird would reach up into the machine and pry the coins loose while others would snatch up the fallen booty and fly off with it. In this way, the birds, working as a team, were able to steal several hundred dollars a week. Ravens, too, have some remarkable abilities. Scripture records that both Noah and Elijah found their talents useful. As do I. I've trained several. The one I have currently I named Pallas for Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom. And of course it was upon the bust of Pallas that Poe's raven perched. I became aware of your circumstances through the newspapers, thought you might need my services, looked you up on the Internet, was able to verify through a minor locator spell that you were at home. Then, impressing Pallas's brain with that information, gave her the card and sent her off. That is how magic and magic theory really works: skill, hunches that we strop to razor sharpness, and, of course, the spells. I'm not talking about imitative or sympathetic magic here. Nor am I describing something that is purely subjective. Spells by using ritual/language are able to effect objective results. It should not be surprising. After all, language is a ritualized expression of reality and ritual is language embodied in action. That is really where the theory comes in. And it's all mixed up with things like newspapers and Internet search engines. Magic is like science. Though its results can appear quite spectacular, it is at heart a rather mundane sort of thing because it is about the world and the world

by its nature is mundane. Extraordinary, yes, but because we have known nothing else, also mundane. This universe is astounding really, one of the most exotic of all God's creations. But it is also home, and home is not exotic, it is familiar, mundane because it is home. One feels comfortable there, and so the wonder is muted.

And you could be sure the bird would do what it did?

Sure? The wizard looked over at Sesiom, a thin smile playing along his lips. We live in a probabilistic universe. Certainty is a calculated ratio. One does the best one can and usually it works, but things do go wrong. I send Pallas to you, but perhaps she gets confused or drops the card or dies or you leave before she arrives or you refuse to respond. Things go wrong in any human enterprise and magic is a human enterprise. We do what we can and trust God for the rest.

The wizard fell silent. Sesiom said nothing. The Hummer purred while night fled before it and closed behind it.

Chapter Four (d)

The paramedic helicopter, its blades idling, was waiting in a broad swath of clearing in front of Jeffrey's cabin when Drew and Naketa hastened from the forest. Two police cars were parked near the road. An officer was seated in one, monitoring the radio. Another was standing on Jeffrey's porch. A cluster of men were talking near the chopper. When they saw the children, two of those men walked briskly toward them. The larger of the two men was wearing a uniform, the smaller a suit. The smaller man addressed Drew, "I'm Lieutenant Cullman and this," he motioned to the larger uniformed man, "is Sergeant Fox. Are you the young fellow who put in the emergency call?"

"Yes," Drew said, panting from racing to the cabin.

"And where is the injured man?" Lieutenant Cullman asked.

"I don't know how to tell you," Drew said, "but I can take you there."

"How far away is it?" the lieutenant asked.

"It's about a half hour walk," Drew said.

"If we go by helicopter, can you show us from the air?" the lieutenant wanted to know.

"Yes, maybe," Drew replied. "I don't know this country well and I've only been to the cave once, but I think I could show you from the helicopter."

"We'll keep it low," Lieutenant Cullman assured Drew. Then turning to Sergeant Fox he said, "When we get to the cave, we can ask the Forest Service for a lift out. I'm sure Paki will oblige. Come on." The four of them started for the helicopter, and the lieutenant motioned for the police officer who had been on the porch but was now standing nearby. The man hurried up to the group and Cullman said, "Keep the girl here. The boy is coming with us. He'll direct us to the injured party."

Naketa, realizing she would be left out of the rescue, objected, "But I want to go too."

The police ignored her and hustled Drew into the waiting helicopter which, as they boarded, began to rev its engines for lift off. The two officers helped Drew buckle into a seat near the pilots. Then, as the chopper rose, Lieutenant Cullman, as he began to snap himself in next to Drew, shouted to him over the roar of engine and wind, "Now tell us where to go."

Craning forward, Drew could see the break in the forest indicating the remnants of the logging road, so he pointed toward that and said, "There's the logging road. Follow it up the mountain."

Lieutenant Cullman relayed the message to the pilots and the helicopter, almost grazing the trees, accelerated toward the road.

Drew, who had never ridden in a helicopter before, was ecstatic. Jeffrey would be rescued, and what a dramatic way to arrive! The tree tops shuddered and panicked birds exploded from their thrashing branches as the chopper roared above them. Then the chopper dipped into the trough the road made, and followed its ascent. Drew's heart pounded. He felt like a hawk on a motorcycle! This was as good as a flying carpet, even better! And what a view he had rushing along at tree top level!

The mountainside loomed ahead. Drew was pleased and surprised at how easy it was to see the rocks from the helicopter. He looked at Lieutenant Cullman and gestured excitedly, "They're right over there."

Cullman leaned over to the pilot, pointed and shouted, "Those are the rocks over there."

The pilot nodded and the helicopter rose a little higher and banked toward them. The helicopter's shadow skimmed over the meadow, and the pilots began to look for a spot level enough to accommodate their machine. Seeing one, the copilot gestured to the pilot and the chopper settled a short distance from the outcrop. Lieutenant Cullman had already unsnapped his harness and was unbuckling Drew. "Keep your head down," he shouted at Drew as he helped the boy off the helicopter and hustled him forward under the sweep of the blades. Sergeant Fox

followed in a running crouch. Behind them the paramedic team began to unload their gear.

When they were a safe distance from the helicopter, Lieutenant Cullman turned to Drew and asked, "Where is the cave?"

"I'll show you," Drew said, his voice loud with excitement. "It's in those rocks. The mouth is hidden by laurel, but we cut through that so it is easy to see now. Come on." And Drew led the two men toward the rocks.

The opening hacked through the laurel was obvious even from a distance. As they approached the brush, Sergeant Fox remarked nonplused, "I've hunted in this area since I was a kid and I never knew there was a cave here."

"The laurel made it hard to see. It was just by accident that Uncle Jeff found it," Drew replied. "And if we had not known about it, I think we would have missed it."

The three of them stepped into the cave and Lieutenant Cullman asked, "Where is he?"

Drew said, "He fell from a ledge farther back. We'll need flashlights."

"Fox," Cullman said, "go back to the chopper and bring the paramedics here. Tell them we'll need torches."

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Fox said and hurried away, leaving the lieutenant and the boy alone.

"Now," said Cullman turning to Drew, "tell me exactly what happened."

Interlogue

Sesiom, fighting sleep, punched on the radio. Gorgoroth screamed from the speakers. Both men jumped slightly. Sesiom listened for a couple of minutes, then punched the radio off. *What the hell, he said. Was that even English?*

Couldn't tell you, the wizard said. Sounded like black metal. Could be Norwegian. Lot of that coming out of Norway these days.

God! Sesiom said.

No, the wizard replied, I think it's just nihilism. A tantrum Europe's been throwing for the last century and a half. The wizard laughed. But let's be more generous. There is a history here. The victory of the Christ in European culture was complete, so complete that the old gods lost all credibility. For centuries, Christ had no viable rival, except for Judaism or Islam . . . and Satan, of course. A European who did not find the gospel account of reality compelling might in theory convert to Judaism but as a practical matter it simply was a non-starter. When conversions occurred, it was the other way round. Islam was the outside enemy. That left Satan as the main

option and some few, including some wizards, took that, but it was too extreme for most. The Renaissance reintroduced the solace of philosophy to those intellectuals who were unconvinced by the story the Church told, but philosophy has always been a babble. Surely one of the most remarkable things about the disciple is its manifest inability to do much more than toss out options. Philosophers, bright fellows who are quite aware of all sides of any given argument, are liable to take any side. They squabble from every conceivable perch. For a profession supposedly in the business of producing convincing arguments, it is a lamentable spectacle. So without Christ, Europe found itself with no plausible substitute. Chaos and nihilism were among the results.

I've got to do something to stay awake, Sesiom said.

Want to stop for coffee?

No. Well, maybe. I don't know. It might help. Why don't you just keep talking? Earlier you were describing incarnate demons. Talk about that. These incarnations, are they common?

Sure, said the wizard, they're not uncommon at all. You've probably seen several yourself. Angels, fallen or not, have always been able to do this, and the anonymity of urban life coupled with our transient society makes it very easy for enfleshed spirits to blend in. They look just like us since we too are enfleshed spirits.

*And they wrap themselves in the particulate universe?
Or it settles on them like a mist or fog?*

Well, I'm not sure exactly how they do it. I have seen a materialization, however, and it was pretty uncanny. I think the physics that best explains how something like that is possible—and I know it is—is quantum physics and more specifically string theory.

String theory? Didn't NOVA have a special series on that just recently?

Yes, with Brian Greene. It was very well done. I've met Professor Greene, by the way. Nice fellow.

You've met him?

Yes. At the Institute for Advanced Study near Princeton. I told you I have a Ph.D. in physics. Not all my work has been with magic theory. I've done work in other disciplines as well.

Institute for Advanced Study? Sounds like its only part of a name.

It's a wonderful place, the wizard said. It was founded in 1930 and is intended as a retreat for scholars. There are no diversions. One goes there to concentrate. But as I was saying, I think string theory provides an excellent model for explaining the mechanism of incarnation, even materialization. Think of the substrate of the universe as a network of linked string loops expressed as a hologram and supporting the propagation of light, each loop being serviceable for the momentary manifestation of par-

ticles of matter. Think of this transformation as effected by matter waves. And, in the case of entities like you and me, entities I called forces with personalities or properties that are aware, think of souls acting as templates that carry information about the body's form and function, its pattern, if you will, from moment to moment in that expanding substrate. That is a better image than settling mist, I think, and more closely approximates the mathematics of the thing.

Sesiom glanced at the wizard and asked somewhat incredulously, *And you think that is the way the universe is, an expanding substrate expressed as a hologram? It sounds more like a movie screen.*

Interesting analogy, the wizard smiled. The digital nature of the thing makes most people think of computers. But movies and computers do work closely in tandem.

Chapter Four (e)

Melody crouched in the brush like a frightened animal. She had twisted her ankle as she ran and it throbbed slightly. Her hair was clumped with sweat and beginning to frizz. She had torn her shirt and broken a nail to the quick. But she was scarcely aware of any of that. Instead she was completely absorbed by the terrible vision that loomed in her mind. Hank had taken Sesiom, who would understand, who would protect her, into the cave. Drew had taken Naketa into the woods. The family had been separated. Sesiom would be able to defend himself against Hank, but who knew what Drew could do to little Naketa? And the police were out there looking for her. The mountains were secretive, pulsing, and vast. They seemed to stretch past the moon. And they were empty, so terribly empty. She had never before felt this helpless, this vulnerable, this surrounded, and this alone. Worse, her body did not seem to be put together right and felt ready to topple into pieces. She had to move carefully. And something malevolent was looking at her, judging her, hating her for what she was, what she had done, contemptuous of what it saw. She felt that any moment she would be grabbed, overpowered, vio-

lated. If she could only clear her thoughts . . . but she could not. Instead images and ideas clotted and dissolved among the fibers growing through that terrible vision of her alone and hated in these awful mountains. She wanted to run forever, silently, attracting no attention, a wraith among the trees. In centuries to come, she would be a story adults told to frightened children, the wild woman of the mountains. Some would say she was an escaped slave, others that she was hunting her murdered daughter. Hunting. Hunting. Hunters have seen her fleeing through the shadows, her rags streaming, her hair and eyes wild. The stories could not be discounted. But who was she? No one could remember. Melody's heart pounded. She was afraid to run, to scream, to cry. She was cursed. She wanted the mountains to hide her. Wasn't that in the Bible somewhere? This was surely the end of days! And then she heard engines, a *whaka-whaka-whaka* above the trees. A helicopter appeared some distance away, headed up the mountain from where she had come. Oh, dear God, they were looking for her! They had called in the military! This was far worse than she had imagined. Why the cost alone would be prohibitive! And she would have to pay it all! If she could only get to her car! But they knew who she was. They had her documents. If she took her car, they would could find her. She better stay here, try to mask herself from the hatred. Hide among the hatred. A strangled whimper escaped from her throat, "Sesiom. Sesiom." She began to sob uncontrollably.

It continued to toy among her brain cells. The symbolic structures within her soul and from which she derived intuitions were very much the creatures of life in this world and therefore something it could commandeer with little effort. Accomplishing that would make her even more vulnerable to it.

Encouraging her to believe what it wanted her to believe, it could transform her interpretive framework until she saw things and events through the lenses of significance it chose for her. Then it could "free" her so that she could function more normally, although it would monitor her constantly. Later, when it was finished with her, and if it was still interested, it could drive her as mad as it wished. Over the centuries, it had turned hundreds of these creatures psychotic. It was quite skilled at that. Indeed, the process gratified it in the way a certain class of personality might find satisfaction smashing Michelangelo's *Pieta* or taking a razor to Picasso's *Guernica*. Souls were masterpieces and interacted with matter waves in ways that were more exquisite than it could have initially imagined. There had been a time when it had marveled, but over the millennia its wonder morphed to rage. It always surrendered to rage for rage motivated it, it honed its powerful intellect, fueled its hatred. It persuaded itself it was an agent of liberty engaged in a struggle to secure freedom for a universe enslaved to a creative will that treated everything like clay. But sometimes it suspected it was itself a mere servant or even a puppet bound to that awful rage

surging within it, a fury that blurted and vented through it like steam through a valve. Could it be free if it surrendered to such impulses? It turned its attention again to the woman. It could control her, make her do what it wanted her to do. And if it could do that, surely it was free. Wasn't freedom doing what it desired, overcoming another, manipulating something to achieve its ends? She would do what it told her to do, and as she did, it would feel exhalation. It would feel power. It would be free, if only because she was degraded, helpless, controlled.

Chapter Four (f)

Sergeant Fox arrived with the paramedic team and handed flashlights to Lieutenant Cullman and Drew. Taking his flashlight, the lieutenant turned to the boy and said, "Come on. Let's go." And the two of them, with the others following, proceeded deeper into the cave. Drew, bursting with confidence, began loudly, "The ledge is up ahead. There is a hook and ring in the ceiling that we might be able to use, and the ladder . . ." But his voice trailed off and the cool silence, as though it could not be disturbed by something like exuberant adolescence or hurrying adults, washed over them unperturbed by their bustle of stabbing lights. Five people, focused, urgent, flashlights blazing and equipment rattling, allayed the strangeness of the cavern but could not overcome it.

One of the paramedics whispered to his partner, "This place feels creepy."

"Yeah," his partner muttered back.

Then the ledge, the hook fixed to the roof above it, materialized from the darkness.

As they approached, Sesiom call up from the pit, "Thank God you're here."

From the edge of the cliff, the men shined their flashlights down onto Hank and Sesiom who were standing by Jeffrey's blanketed body. The paramedics, their shoulder packs slung, descended the ladder, followed by the police officers. As he started down, Lieutenant Cullman told Drew, "Wait up here." The boy nodded and focused his flashlight on the ladder as the lieutenant mounted it.

By the time Cullman reached the floor, the paramedics were examining Jeffrey. He heard one of them saying to Hank and Sesiom, "It's remarkable. The fall should have killed him. His skull is broken. He's lost a lot of blood. But his heartbeat is surprisingly strong. We might be able to save him."

Sesiom said, "Jeff's a strong man. Always has been. Took real good care of himself."

"Well," the paramedic said, "that vitality has stood him in good stead." They strapped Jeffrey into the stretcher, then, as his partner hurried up the ladder to test whether the hook in the cave roof would bear its weight, he continued, "Of course there will probably be brain damage. It looks like he landed on his shoulders and the back of his head. His neck isn't broken so his shoulders must have absorbed much of the force of the fall. We won't know how badly fractured the skull is until the hospital does an examination, but I would think there are probably splinters. And

the sheer force of his head striking the floor would have produced significant trauma."

"Brain damage?" Sesiom said.

"I can't know for sure of course," the paramedic replied. "But I think it is a high risk. I just wanted to alert you to the possibility."

Above them, the other paramedic working with Drew tossed a rope over the hook and lowered it to the men below. "Hold the end," the paramedic called. Hank and the second paramedic grabbed the end of the rope and Drew and first paramedic leaned back heavily on their end several times. The hook did not budge. "Yeah," the paramedic said, "I think it'll hold. Here, let's get the lift set up."

The operation went smoothly and soon the paramedic and Drew were hauling Jeffrey toward the floor where they stood.

While Sesiom and the paramedic beside him watched the stretcher ascend, Hank said to Cullman and Sergeant Fox, "There is something back here I think you should see."

"What is it?" Cullman asked.

"I think it's better if I show you," Hank said. "It's what Jeffrey found and what he seems to have come back to look at."

"Okay," Cullman said, "I'll go with you. Sergeant," he turned to Fox, "stay here in case these men need any help. We'll call Paki for a chopper later. We owes me a

favor so I don't think he'll mind. If he can't, then we'll hoof it back. It's not too far."

"Hell," the Sergeant snorted. "I should have worn jeans and boots. You too."

"I think Paki will send us the chopper," Cullman reassured him. Then he and Hank started walking into the darkness of the tunnel behind them.

While they walked, Hank filled the lieutenant in. "Jeffrey's retired. He moved up here this past April. Loved the place, the mountains. Loves to hike. Called Sesiom the other day and said he'd found the cave. Then he called me. The three of us have done some spelunking, so he wanted us to come up here, have a look at what he'd found. And what he found is right up here. I think you should see it too."

The two of them continued in silence for a few minutes, then the outlines of the door emerged. "What the . . ." Cullman said.

They came up to the leaning door and played their lights over it. "Weird, huh?" Hank said. "It was padlocked Ses and I were the ones who forced it opened. I hope that's not a crime. But this might be. Come on, things get even stranger on the other side."

The two men wedged themselves past the door and Hank shown his light up so that Cullman could see the inscription: IN THE NAME OF OUR SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST THOU SHALT NOT PASS.

"It's inside the door," Cullman mused. "Why is that inside the door?"

"Why is it there at all?" Hank asked rhetorically. "Come on," he motioned to Cullman with his flashlight, "there's more."

The two men pressed on. Hank unconsciously lowered his voice, "I've been down a fair number of caves, but I've never seen one quite like this. It looks almost like it was dug. Jeffrey thought it might have been a mine."

"No," Cullman said, "There's never been any mining in this area."

"And there's no bats," Hank continued. "Good sized cave like this ought to be teeming with bats, but I don't think one has ever been in here."

Cullman grunted and the two men fell silent until they came to the end of the tunnel. "You'll have to get down on your hands and knees here," Hank said, "but look around that little corner there." He gestured with his light. Cullman did, grunted again, then studied the two skulls for a couple of minutes. Finally he stood and brushed his pants off.

"You didn't touch anything, did you?" he asked.

"Not a thing," Hank said. "I didn't want to disturb anything. Looks like they've been there for a long time. Still, there could be clues."

"Good thinking," Cullman said. "There's always clues." And suddenly, since this was now a police

matter, he was the one in charge. "Let's go back," he said to Hank. "I'll need to call in forensics."

As they started their return trip, Cullman added, "I don't think there will be any trouble getting a helicopter now."

Interlogue

Sesiom snorted, *You're going to tell me that this is just a big movie screen, that we're digitized characters playing our parts in some scripted cosmic drama?*

The wizard turned from Sesiom and gazed into the night. *One could look at things that way. Or you might think of the universe as a machine or an organism. Or perhaps you could think of organisms as machines. Maybe it is all a divine idea, a manifestation of God, or, like the children's round suggests, a dream. Or again why not think of it as a sort of middle realm created by the interaction of ideals and chaos? The universe can be imagined lots of different ways, all of them more or less credible, and each way producing results specific to it.*

The freeway unwound beneath the Hummer as Sesiom guided the vehicle through the night. *Yes, he said, you've mentioned that before. I suppose it has something to do with the difficulty philosophers encounter when they try to formulate those compelling arguments that you also mentioned.*

Yes, the wizard said, looking back at Sesiom, I think it has everything to do with that. It's like the Jainist

story about the blind men and the elephant where everyone was partly right but also wrong.

Jainist?

Jainism is an Indian philosophy, the wizard said. Don't worry about it. The point is not what Jains believe, the point is the reality of the pluralism the story illustrates. Pluralism is simply the way things are, as anyone can see if they look. Even the various interpretations of monism—the idea that everything is one thing—reveal the ultimate futility of monist constructions. Physics may come up with a general unification theory, a formula that exhaustively accounts for the diversity—but the diversity, the pluralism, will remain. Stephen Wolfram suggests that it is a natural expression of the very process of unfolding itself, and he has the computer programs to prove it. As a Christian, I believe that basic plurality lies at the very heart of God and that our doctrine of the Trinity expresses it. But one needn't believe that to see that pluralism reigns. A knowledge of the world is sufficient to make the point.

But what is the point?

Pluralism itself is the point. It is. It exists. It's how things are. And because it is, it makes things—allows things—to happen. If uniformity underlay existence, nothing would happen. After all, uniformity suggests changelessness. Plurality, diversity, whatever you wish to call it, is the motor of history.

And this substrate that you were talking about, this network of linked string loops, allows for the expression of pluralism?

Exactly, the wizard nodded. One of the most significant developments in modern physics is the dematerialization of matter. The atom is composed chiefly of empty space and a few types of subatomic particles. Those particles are expressions of vibrating energy. That suggests the strings that comprise the substrate may not be substantive at all. Indeed, if substance disappears as we plumb deeper into matter, might we not argue that it is a creation of perspective? I talked earlier of the true miracle being the embodiment of awareness. That embodiment is the structure of the enchanted forest. And it is here that magic and meaning rule. Remember that this world you see was created for a purpose. It reveals God's glory. But who does God reveal his glory to, and why and how? He reveals his glory to the awareness in its almost innumerable multitudes and kinds that he spoke into being, and he shows them who their gracious master is. Truth rules and he is Truth, but here among the various kinds or forms of awareness, ideas work themselves out in diverse types of minds from bee to dinosaur to demon to you and me. This is, as I said, a step in the next level of creation. You asked if we might think of it as a movie screen. Well sure, but think of it too as a pallet, a tablet, from which the next set of ideas will spring. Of course God is True! He could not be anything else. And that means only Truth can win. The false ideas

will be preserved as false ideas. What exists is true, so insofar as they exist they were true. They were thought, communicated. They were truly false ideas. But they will be cast away. The true ideas will be refined and become more true. But this enchanted forest is also, as I said, a trap for demons. Here they express and reveal their ideas, disclose the kinds of entities they are, confirm to all—and in the end even to themselves—that, as lies, it is just that they, having been evaluated, be discarded.

Chapter Five (a)

Melody pushed her way through the brush. She was filthy, exhausted, frightened, and confused. But, though her thoughts still swirled, her mind was clearing, and she knew she must get back to Jeffrey's cabin. She knew the police were not trying to capture her, that they were probably looking for her, that Jeffrey was doubtless frantic over her safety. She had no explanation for what had happened. She'd heard of flashbacks but had never experienced one and suspected they were just part of the sixties *mythos*. Anyway, from what she'd been told about them, they were nothing like what she had experienced. Hers had been a full-fledged trip, though apparently it had only lasted a couple of hours.

She put her arms up to shield her face from the slap of a branch as she continued down the mountain. She did not expect to come out at the cabin, but she knew she should reach either the old logging road or the paved highway if she continued her descent.

What would she say? She would tell Sesiom the truth of course. She always had. He was her cynosure. She loved that awkward word and sometimes teased him

with it, and he would say that he was just a dinosaur and they would laugh. It had become a private endearment between them. So she would tell him when they were alone. To everyone else she would simply say . . . well, what? That she'd had a panic attack? Seen a snake and run? Temporarily lost her mind? (Well, that would not be untrue, she thought. They would surely believe that.) How could she possibly account for her bizarre behavior?

Then suddenly an idea occurred to her, almost as though it had been spoken by someone else. She would not need to tell anyone what had really happened, not even Sesiom. Instead she would say she thought she saw a child. What had it looked like? Well, there had been a flash of red among the trees. She thought she heard something that sounded like a child's voice calling. Laughing maybe? No, just calling. Perhaps it was lost. That was it! She'd thought she'd seen a child. Thought it might be lost. She'd called to it. If the kids hadn't heard her, well, she was facing away from them, calling to the child. She'd been so sure there was a child there that she'd run toward the spot. But when she arrived, there was no child. Perhaps she had seen the flash of a cardinal instead, or maybe a deer. Whatever it was, there was no child. She was certain because she had scouted around for awhile. That would explain the delay. And she'd gotten a little disoriented . . . well, lost actually. And now she was trying to find her way back to the cabin. She was sorry for the trouble she'd caused. But it had seemed so real. Really.

She thought that story might fly. It was certainly more plausible than what had actually occurred. Her confidence was returning. And suddenly she felt almost buoyant, secure and excited in a way she had not since she'd become a Christian years ago. It was as though the story and her renewed sense of self-possession had been given to her by God himself.

Interlogue

Sesiom shook his head, *I don't know*, he said. *It all seems a little too contemporary. Obviously you are talking about biblical concepts, but you are couching them in a modern way, making them sound like contemporary physics, like the Bible writers would have written that way if only they had known what we know.*

But that is obviously true, isn't it? the wizard asked. *Language is a vehicle and expression of culture. People may get the basic structures from their biology, but the content is profoundly bound to whatever model of the world a civilization entertains. Their universe was Hebraic, then, Hellenistic, so they transcribed the revelation in those terms. What else could they do? Words like analogical or digital or subatomic would have had no meaning for them. So they talked in terms that assumed substance and form were primary realities. But they did have a marvelous idea and one I think we have neglected to our detriment. We don't always progress toward the truth, as I illustrated with my story about how materialism triumphed over vitalism. This other idea is the idea of the logos.*

Jesus as logos, Sesiom said.

Yes, the wizard beamed. Very good. In the first verses of the Gospel of John the identification is specific. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were made by Him and without Him was nothing made that was made." The word we render as Word is logos. "In the beginning was the logos, and the logos was with God, and the logos was God. All things were made by Him," that is by the logos. Notice that the logos is conceived as a person, but it also means rational principle and implies information. We live in a universe characterized by information, exactly the kind of universe we would expect to live in if it had been created by an intelligent being, but not one we would expect to live in if it was simply the consequence of non-intelligent forces.

We are both Christians, so I find your illustration compelling, Sesiom said. But couldn't a non-believer say that if something as substantial as matter is simply the creation of perspective, then information might also be a creation of perspective?

Of course non-believers would say that, the wizard agreed. And many do. But think how self-contradictory such a claim is. Information, after all, is the sine qua non of perspective. Without information, there is no perspective to have. Indeed, if you want to argue that the substantive nature of matter is the creation of perspective, you must assume the primacy of information to make your argument. And notice too that

to make my argument, I appeal to reason. I expect that, if I couch the argument in reasonable terms, you can see the truth of it yourself. Information, reason, and awareness are the most fundamental things there are. And because that is true, we know our universe is at base intellectual. Exactly as we would expect it to be if John told the truth.

Chapter Five (b)

Cullman was getting frustrated with Paki because Paki was unwilling to send in the forest service helicopter. He claimed it was a misuse of government funds. "There's no one to rescue," Paki said, his voice clear over Lieutenant Cullman's cell phone. "You've already medivaced the victim. If it's a local police matter, then local funding will have to pay for it. If I send you a chopper, that's federal."

"I'm talking about a possible double homicide here," Cullman insisted. "And I need a forensics team up here. If you can lift them in from the police station, it will save us a lot of time and trouble."

"No doubt," Paki said. "But it will create a lot of trouble for me. I'm sorry, Joe, I just can't help you. I don't make the rules. You know that."

"Paki, I don't understand what you're saying here. You've helped us out before."

"Yeah," Paki said, "but we've got a new administrator now, and he pinches every dime, goes strictly by the book. You remember in Texas when DeLay asked the FAA to track down a plane the Democrats used to flee

the state when they were boycotting the session in Austin over redistricting, and what a stink that caused?"

"Yeah, I remember reading something about that," Cullman replied.

"Well," Paki said, "this is the same kind of thing. There's no way I can fudge this. Sorry, Joe. I would help you if I could, but, well, times and administrations change."

"Well, that tears it!" Cullman was plainly exasperated as he shut off his cell phone. "Okay then, we'll have to hump it. Let's get back to the cabin. I'll call the station, have the forensics team meet us there, and we'll bring them back here." He looked at Sergeant Fox, "It's going to be a long day. I'll have them bring some burgers."

After the call, Sesiom, Hank, Drew, Cullman, and Fox set off down the mountain. As they descended, picking their way through the prickly meadow, Drew moved closer to Sesiom and said, "Melody ran away."

"What?" Sesiom exclaimed.

"When I came out of the cave to call for help, she was acting funny, kind of like she wasn't really connected to what was going on. Then on the way down the mountain, she ran away, headed for the forest over there," Drew gestured with his right hand. "I called to her but she just kept running. Well, not running exactly. You can't really run in this stuff, but plowing through it with big steps. I didn't chase her. I didn't

want to leave Naketa, and besides we had to get back and bring the rescuers for Jeffrey."

Sesiom was stunned. "You mean she isn't at the cabin?"

"Not unless she got there later," Drew said. "She ran away."

"I don't believe this!" Sesiom sputtered, dismayed. Then he called to the others, "Hank, all of you, Drew just told me that Melody ran off."

The group stopped, came together. Sesiom continued, "Drew said Melody ran off on the way back to get the rescuers. Tell them what you told me, Drew."

"Yeah," Drew said. "She was acting strange when I came out from the cave to get help. I mean she was acting kind of vague like she wasn't all there. Then on the way down she ran off. I called to her but she kept going. I don't know why."

"Where did she go?" Lieutenant Cullman asked.

"Into the woods over that way," Drew pointed.

"You see anything?" the officer continued.

"No," Drew said, "just her kind of gallumphing along toward the trees."

"Did she call out or say anything?"

"I didn't hear," Drew said. "Naketa and I were just getting to those trees." He gestured down the hill. "I turned around to see where Melody was. I thought she

would be right behind us, but she wasn't. I called to her to hurry up. I'm sure she saw me, but she turned and ran toward those trees over there."

"Can she get back to the cabin on her own?" Cullman asked Sesiom.

"I don't know," Sesiom said. "She's a city girl and doesn't know these mountains at all. We've only been up here once before, and she pretty much hung around the cabin then."

Cullman, scratching his jaw with his index finger, looked over at the trees Drew pointed toward, then made his decision. "Let's go have a look. Once we get to the trees, we can swing that way to the left," he swept his left hand in a broad arc, "and pick up the logging road further down. Camden's place, the cabin where your friend lives now, is just right over there. It's a good chance that if she heads down the mountain, she'll hit it."

The men set out and Cullman called on his cell phone to apprise the officers at the cabin of their new situation. "We're going to look around for a member of the original party who ran off. A woman. She might come to the cabin. If she does, let me know immediately."

"A woman ran off?" said the voice at the other end. "What are you talking about?"

"The kid here said a woman who was part of the original party ran off when they were going back to the cabin to get help. He doesn't know why. We're going

to scout around for her. It shouldn't take long. If she comes back to the cabin, let me know."

"Will do," the voice responded.

The party scouted the trees but found no sign of Melody. They had regrouped to discuss their next move when Cullman's cell phone buzzed. "Yeah," he said into it. He listened a minute, then said, "Thanks. We're on our way. We'll talk to her when we get there." Pocketing the phone he turned to the rest of the group. "She's back. She must have come out on the logging road further down and taken it to the cabin. They're talking to her now. She seems fine, a little scratched up, but that's all." Cullman shook his head. "She also said she thought she saw a child. That's why she ran off."

"Thought she saw a child?" Sesiom was askance. "Up here in the woods. That's crazy."

"Might be crazy," Cullman replied, "but that's what they tell me she said. Anyway, she's safe so let's get down there. We've a lot of work to do."

Interlogue

Sesiom fell silent, glanced at the gauges on his dashboard. The darkness was interrupted only by an occasional approaching car. He passed a semi driver. In the distance, a red light flashed on top of an invisible tower. Then suddenly he said, *What you are describing could explain how Jesus was able to do miracles. It has always bothered me that he simply spoke and the elements obeyed him. But creation by speaking makes a lot of sense if I look at it in the way you have laid out. And it might still be going on.*

The wizard nodded, *In fact, it is. Every answered prayer, every healing, every genuinely providential event is an act of creation, an earnest on the promise of God that a new world is to be ours . But there is no need for us to assume that creation is limited to such things. It might well be going on today. For example, in March 2002, an international team of scientists in Namibia announced the discovery of a new order of insect. That increased the known number of insect orders from thirty to thirty-one. How do we know this new order did not come into existence in 2001 or 2000 or 1998 or, for that matter, 1847? While the order might be millions of years old, there is no*

requirement that it be, nor can I see any way in which its recent appearance would compromise the scientific enterprise. After all, it had to come into being at some point, so why not recently? Or, as another example, consider the new genus of centipede discovered in July 2002 in New York City's Central Park. Again, how do we know that this new genus did not come into existence in 2001 or 1978 or perhaps 1652? Nor are such novelties restricted to insects. In early July 2003, I saw a report that scientists from Brazil's national Amazon Research Institute had discovered a new species of fish, one that would require the creation of a new genus and family to accommodate it. Is there any theological, philosophical, or scientific requirement that these creatures be ancient? I can think of none. The point is that science has no necessary investment in the proposition that life forms be any particular age. As science, it merely catalogues and analyzes them.

Sesiom considered that, then said, *But even if the life forms were ancient, it really wouldn't matter. The model you are sketching is indifferent to questions like that.*

Again you are correct, the wizard conceded. What interests me is not the age of things. I merely tossed that out to illustrate a point. Why not speculate? Maybe new things are still coming into being, and doing so quite suddenly. If we didn't actually see it happen, how would we know? Existence comes with the appearance of age and we use that appearance to interpret it.

Help me out here, Sesiom said. When you talk about interpreting things as though they were old, you are talking about one kind of thing. When you talk about substance being the creation of perspective, you are talking about another kind of thing. The appearance of age could be an illusion, but there is a sense in which the substance we see really is there.

You've got it, the wizard said. The world is filled with lies and illusions. The creative role of perspective explains why it is often so difficult to tell them apart.

And that is where magic comes in?

Magic and a whole host of other ideational structures, but, yes, magic specifically.

Sesiom was quiet. The night purred and twinkled, a vast dark ocean of normalcy. But what makes something normal? Isn't normal nothing more than what we are used to? If the world were such that elephants were covered with purple feathers, or there was a separate species of hominoid that looked like clowns, or gold was as common as granite and granite as rare as gold, well, that would be normal too. Maybe normalcy was a pocket sort of thing where one stored concepts that had proved useful. Or maybe it was like an island of actualized potential in a universe that allowed for all kinds of possibilities. In only a few days, Sesiom's world had stopped being normal, had become a world where spells imprisoned demons, and wizards with advanced degrees conjured images of Naketa. Dear precious murdered Naketa. So what was normal anyway? There had to be a standard, but what was it?

The wizard interrupted his thoughts, *Normal is a state of mind. We live in an enchanted forest. Our state of mind in that enchanted forest is normal.*

Sesiom was no longer surprised that the wizard could in some measure divine his thoughts, so he made no response for awhile. Then he asked, *Earlier you were talking about demons manufacturing things; that's magic, isn't it? Magic is about summoning the potentials latent in the universe. That's what you do, isn't it?*

That is what every mind does. It is all about actualizing potential, the wizard said. So, yes, that is part of magic. But magic is more. It is an approach, a way of construing latencies to get a certain kind of result, and the demons are past masters of it. Remember, this universe was created as a trap for them and will—indeed, already has been—the vehicle of their final defeat. They do not experience time as we do, but if they did, they would be ancient even by the standards of our cosmos. Of course magic is universe specific. I suspect it plays out differently in different realms, but my point is that they have been at this a long time. They are simply the very best there is. Which is why so many in my guild were seduced by them. They offer unparalleled power and knowledge, and to fallen creatures there is no more tempting bait. We wish to rival God, and that, of course, is the essence of sin.

And we are going up against an ancient master of the craft?

What else can we do? the wizard asked.

We will be destroyed, Sesiom objected.

We very well may be, the wizard agreed. This is no swabbing of tonsils here. I have called this a puzzle, and it is, but if we get the solution wrong, we can be destroyed. The demon cannot.

What! Sesiom exploded. It can destroy us but we can't destroy it? What in the hell are you talking about?

We are not without resources, the wizard said. We men know a few things too, and we were created for this realm. The demons weren't. Don't forget that the demon was trapped, and obviously by some kind of magician, though I don't know who. Remember also that through the atoning act of Christ, they have been defeated thoroughly and finally. God honors us by allowing us to participate with him in that victory. Once the demons are imprisoned, we will be God's stewards here. We will judge angels, as Paul says. And we prepare by spreading the gospel, studying science, mastering the arts, and, most importantly, leading crucified lives. We prepare through obedience. I am, as I said, like a missionary doctor. I believe God has called me to this task and I obey. That is my preparation. But this is a high risk proposition, and we could die. Demons are nothing to trifle with.

Chapter Five (c)

"She's in the house," the policeman responded to Sesiom's breathless inquiry. "She's fine. No injuries or anything. Just seems to have gotten separated from the kids and then a little turned around in the woods. That can happen pretty easily."

Sesiom thanked the officer and walked quickly to Jeffrey's house. He thought it was probably much as the man had said, just one of those things, but he was concerned. To run off as she had didn't seem like Melody, and plainly Drew thought she was not acting normally. He bounded up the steps to the porch and pushed through the screen door. "Mel," he called out, "are you okay?"

He heard her voice through the bathroom door which was ajar. "Yes, Ses, I'm fine. Just a little scratched up from my adventure."

Sesiom stuck his head in the door. Melody was brushing her hair in front of the mirror. She had sponged herself off so her shirt was lying over the closed toilet lid. She smiled at Sesiom in the mirror. Sesiom felt a surge of relief. "The cops said you were

all right, but what happened? Why did you run off from Naketa and Drew?"

Melody laid her brush on the sink counter, picked up her shirt and began to put it on. She looked down at the buttons for a moment, then up at Sesiom. "It was the strangest thing," she said. "We were going down to the trees. Keta and Drew were almost there. I had fallen some distance behind. It was so hard to walk through those brambles. Then I saw something in the forest to my right. I looked around. I could have sworn there was a child moving through the trees. It was just for second. And I thought I heard it call. I yelled to the kids, but I don't think they heard me. They were pretty far ahead of where I was. But I thought there was a child over there, thought it might be hurt or lost. Anyway I went over to see. Of course there was no child, and it seems awfully stupid now. But that's what happened. After I looked for awhile, I started back down again and got sort of lost, but I thought if I just kept going down I would hit either the logging road or the highway. Instead I saw the cabin roof and came right out into the clearing. Pretty lucky, I guess." She smiled. "I'm sorry if I made you worry, but the kids got back okay and Jeffrey's on his way to the hospital. That Drew is a champ. He handled everything so well."

Sesiom looked at Melody for a moment. The way she told the story bothered him. "I saw something in the forest to my right" sounded so rehearsed. And the whole scenario just did not seem like the way Melody would have acted. But the day had been so stressful and there was no getting around the fact that she had

run off. Maybe she did think she saw a child. And why would she lie? They had always been honest with one another. Never had any reason not to be. He kissed her and said, "I'm just glad you're safe. Yes, Drew did very well. Hank has every reason to be proud of him."

The two of them left the bathroom, walked through the living room and into the kitchen where they could see out the front door. Naketa and Drew were standing with Hank near Hank's Bronco. The police had clustered around Lieutenant Cullman, listening to him as he talked. Cullman had taken his suit jacket off. His white shirt was ringed with sweat. Melody was surprised the police were not leaving. "Why are the cops still here?" she asked Sesiom. "Jeffrey's been flown back to the hospital. What else do they want?"

"The lieutenant has called for a forensics team," Sesiom said. "I imagine they are making plans to go back to the cave."

"Why?" Melody asked.

"A possible murder, double murder actually," Sesiom replied.

"A double murder?" Melody looked at him plainly startled.

Sesiom nodded. "While we were waiting for the rescuers, Hank and I decided to have a look at the door Jeffrey found. Mel, it was the weirdest thing. Huge. Blocked the tunnel completely. Obviously built for that purpose. Secured by a big padlock. Hank and I forced it opened. On the other side there was a state-

ment. Do not pass in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Something like that. No, it was King James English. Thou shalt not pass. More like that. Inside the door so you could only see it if you were locked in. We went further back and came to the end of the tunnel, but there in a cranny we found two skulls. Small ones. Maybe children. We showed them to Cullman, the lieutenant, after we got Jeff out. He's planning to take a forensics team back to the cave. The whole thing is really freaky. I can't imagine what happened there."

Melody was dumb struck. She clutched at Sesiom's hand. Hearing about the discovery of the skulls sent a thrill sparkling through her, but she could not have explained why. He squeezed her hand back to reassure her. "I think we should get over to the hospital if you feel up to it," he said. "I don't think the police will need us, and if they want a statement, we can make that at the station later on."

"Yes," Melody agreed. "We should get to the hospital, see how Jeffrey is doing."

Holding hands, they stepped down into the yard and walked over to the police. Cullman glanced at them as they approached. Sesiom said, "If you don't need us, we're going to the hospital to see how Jeffrey is."

"That's fine," Cullman said, "but let me get some information from you first. I might want to get in touch with you later." He broke away from the other officers and, taking a notepad from his shirt pocket, jotted down Sesiom's name, address, and telephone number. He

then handed Sesiom his card. "If there is anything else you think of, give me a call."

"Will do," Sesiom said, pocketing the card. Cullman walked back to the waiting police, and Sesiom and Melody walked over to Hank and the kids. Sesiom said to Hank, "We're going over to the hospital to see how Jeffrey is."

Hank nodded, "Okay. Drew and I are going on back home. I don't think there is much we can do. You give me a call as soon as you hear how he is."

"Sure," Sesiom agreed. "Will do."

The friends boarded their respective vehicles, started the engines, and were gone. Silence settled over the police who talked softly as they waited for the forensics team to arrive.

Interlogue

I get the impression there are a lot of these demons, Sesiom said. You call this universe a trap, but these entities are not stupid. Why would they keep hitting the tarbaby? How do you know this is not an invasion, some kind of preparation for the end of the world? I'm a Baptist and I have an alternative interpretive model, a different scenario. I get the impression that maybe they aren't being lured, they are invading.

The wizard glanced over at Sesiom who, concentrated on the night road, did not see the other's raised eyebrow. *Well, the wizard said, yes, it could be a bit of both. The world will end. Whatever our metaphysical assumptions, we're all agreed that this state of affairs is not permanent. And when it ends, there could be a marked increase in obvious demonic activity. Indeed, demonic activity often seems to accompany crisis moments. But why? Are demons simply attracted to disaster, or do they cause it, or is it a little of both. I suspect it is a little of both. But the ultimate cause is God. He made the cosmos, purposed its direction, authored its history. He is not surprised or dismayed by events. Indeed, at some level, he bears ultimate responsibility for them. And his victory is*

assured. That is what the cross of Christ is all about. And it is that cross, the Son's embrace of our sin and suffering, that reveals the heart of God. Truth is intolerant, but Truth is not a Nazi. If I thought God was a Nazi, I would be a Muslim. But when I look to the cross of Christ, that option dies. Did you see Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ"?

Yes, Sesiom said, I did. Our church went down to see it on Good Friday afternoon, then met in the sanctuary after it was over to discuss it. Some in our congregation were put off by the violence, but most of us thought it was a very powerful and very spiritual film. I certainly did.

As did I, said the wizard. And one of the things I really liked was the way Gibson portrayed the demonic presence. It was very accurate. But notice that Satan does not have to imagine he can win, although he might imagine something like that. His enjoyment of suffering in others could be sufficient to attract him. The spectacle of the Son of Man flogged and fainting and nailed to the cross might draw a crowd even if that crowd saw its own doom in the spectacle. But maybe Satan really thinks he can win. There was another brilliant portrayal of demonic presence that came out a few years back, "The Devil's Advocate."

I rented it from Blockbuster once, Sesiom said. I guess I thought it was okay.

Well, rent it again when this is over, the wizard said. I think you'll be more impressed.

Chapter Five (d)

The doctor, a young Indian man, kept glancing over his glasses at Sesiom and Melody while he consulted his clipboard. "I don't know how to tell you this in any gentle way, so I will tell it to you straight. I do not wish for you to misunderstand what I am saying. I am amazed your friend is alive. The back of his skull is fractured in several places. There are bone fragments in his brain. And two of the vertebrae in his neck are also fractured. It is only by a miracle that his spinal column was not severed. In fact, it is only by a miracle that he is alive at all, but alive he is, and his body functions seem quite strong. You say he was there for a couple of days before help arrived?"

"Yes," Sesiom nodded. "At least two and a half days. Maybe longer."

"I've never seen anything like it." The doctor shook his head, glanced again at his clipboard. "But he is alive and physically strong. I would rate his changes of physical recovery as high. But I caution you. There is extensive damage to the hindbrain, particularly the rear of the parietal lobes. There seems to be some damage to the occipital lobe as well and possibly to the cerebel-

lum. He apparently fell backward and landed on his head. Of course that level of trauma will affect the entire brain. There is extensive swelling. So, while your friend has a strong possibility of recovering physically, I am afraid that his chances of regaining consciousness are slight to nil. He will probably live for years, but in a vegetative state. But even if he does regain consciousness, there is no chance that he will ever again be a fully functioning human being. However, as I said, it is remarkable that he is alive at all."

Melody gasped. Sesiom closed his eyes and squeezed her hand. "Yes," he said softly, "one of the paramedics cautioned us about the possibility."

"Then what I am telling you is not a complete shock," the doctor said.

"No," Sesiom agreed. "I . . . I think we suspected that might be the case."

"We'll remove him from emergency to critical care, and he'll remain there for now," the doctor went on, "but eventually other arrangements must be made. Does he have family?"

"Yes," Sesiom said. "No wife or children, but he has a sister in Albuquerque, I believe, and a brother in Tampa. I've no idea how to contact them though. I think his sister is married, but I'm not sure. Maybe we can find his brother on the Internet."

"Did he have a living will, leave any indications of what his wishes might be under such circumstances?" the doctor asked.

"I'm not aware of one," Sesiom answered. "The subject never came up. Maybe his brother or sister know."

"These kinds of situations can be quite complicated," the doctor said, "especially when families scatter. Does he have insurance?"

"Again, I don't know," Sesiom said. "I suppose he does, but really I've no idea. We never dreamed we would have to deal with such a situation. I met Jeff through work. We were black in a largely white environment so of course we gravitated toward one another. We'd been to the same school, although a couple of decades apart. We both enjoyed outdoor things, camping, hiking, and exploring caves, and that was a little unusual, especially the last one, so it was natural for us to become friends. But, like most such friendships, it was defined by our mutual interests. Jeffrey was kind of a loner deep down. He never even gave advice like an older man might. There is just a lot about him that we don't know. I guess it never seemed important until now."

"Well, the police know how to trace family. We can leave it to them. In fact, if you don't really know his relatives, it is probably better that the police make the call," the doctor said.

Melody had begun to weep softly. The chill of loneliness and finality settled in the bright, antiseptic room. Sesiom put his arm around her shoulders. The doctor went on, "If you could sign some papers for us, that would be very helpful. I'll take you over to administration. We can pick your daughter up on the way." With a

slight bow, he folded his clipboard under his arm and gently took Sesiom's elbow. "Please," he said, and gestured toward the door with his clipboard.

Interlogue

Science used to be called natural philosophy, the wizard said. Later it was called natural history. Those old names are revealing. They show us that philosophy, science, and history are overlapping disciplines, disciplines we might model using Venn diagrams.

What are Venn diagrams? Sesiom asked.

They belong to the mathematical theory of sections, the wizard explained, and are intended as a means to help us visualize the way classes and sets overlap. They are fairly common. I'm sure you've seen depictions based on them.

Oh sure, I remember, Sesiom said. I first saw that in high school. The instructor would draw a circle on the chalkboard, then draw another off to the side, but in such a way that to some extent it overlapped the first circle. Then she would color in that overlapping section in order to highlight elements the two circles shared. Of course the whole thing was pretty abstract, pretty schematized. I could see no reason why one had to use circles. Any shape would suffice. And how does one really know whether the percentage of overlap depicted is truly accurate? I mean I understood

that it was just a way of illustrating a point, but it seemed pretty simpleminded, and even a little misleading, to me. So it has a name. Well, who knew?

Yes, that's it, the wizard agreed, but I think you may have tried to read too much into the device. You are right that it is a way to illustrate a concept. But in fact there are occasions when one can delineate shared elements with some precision. For example, what is the nature of time? Science, philosophy, history, and theology all address that question, so the nature of time would be a shared element within their respective circles of concern.

But they would approach the question from a different perspective, Sesium pointed out.

Of course, the wizard said, but that would be their value, wouldn't it? Science might see time as a coordinate while philosophy might argue that it was fundamental to sequence, and history might apply both insights to locate events. Einstein and Augustine, contra Aristotle, might argue that time had a beginning. Kant, contra Einstein, might argue that it was primarily conceptual. And any historian might argue that it was best conceptualized as a vehicle to illustrate relatedness in a story. But the point is, they would all be discussing the same thing and would bring potentially valuable insights to that discussion. And a Venn diagram could help us visualize that.

Okay, said Sesium, so what is your point?

Just this, the wizard said, for the last several centuries, the division of disciplines into distinct areas of authority, into magisteria, to use the somewhat technical term, is misconceived precisely because areas of interest among disciplines overlap. The divided magisteria was devised as a kind of truce between experts who wanted to protect their turf from the incursion of others who, bringing different conceptual tools to the dialogue, would unsurprisingly draw contrary conclusions. Darwinists don't want theologians introducing concepts of design into biology, for example, and theologians are not keen to have Darwinists apply their insights to ethical questions. But the growth of knowledge has made such bifurcations increasingly difficult to maintain. We can no longer pretend that the various disciplines have nothing of significance to say to one another. That, along with the recognition that complexity may be more fundamental than simplicity, and a renewed apperception of the role metaphor plays in the formulation of our ideas, means that the age of divided magisteria is passing. But its demise does not mean that one particular approach to reality is privileged. It means instead that ideas must be able to flow freely among disciplines, that we are after the truth and no holds barred. And, in fact, this is happening, however scandalous purists might find it.

Well, I agree with you there, Sesiom said, glancing at the wizard then back into the night. It seems pretty obvious to me that God and Darwin disagree with

one another, and no amount of finessing the dispute can disguise that.

Precisely, the wizard said, then, pausing, added, but perhaps not precisely. We believe God made the world and inspired the Bible. God is not in conflict with God, rather theologians, philosophers, and scientists are in dispute with one another. They are model makers, theorizers, but no model or theory covers all phenomena. That means that all we have are partial models and theories related to parts that reflect our particular perspectives and histories. And that means that explanations built on such partial models are themselves incomplete. The pigeons of reality simply refuse to nest in our conceptual pigeon holes, or at least refuse to nest in them for very long. They will fly and, flying, will lead us to new perches, new perspectives, and new pigeon holes.

You use the word pigeons, Sesiom remarked. You are suggesting that reality is plural.

The wizard laughed, You, sir, are very perceptive.

Chapter Five (e)

The police team hacked away more of the laurel that screened its entrance, but the blaze of the late afternoon sun quickly faded in the cave's mouth. They filled its passage with powerful flashlights, but the illumination seemed ephemeral, as though, despite the effort and technology, the stony blackness was not baffled, but merely patient.

The police found nothing more than Hank and Sesiom found: the brace of hooks and their rings, the door fashioned from oak planks, the painted words, the two small skulls. They took notes. They took their photographs and their measurements, took the lock from the door, took samples of the wood and the paint, took the skulls. The lock, the bits of wood and paint, and the two skulls were sealed in evidence bags.

A reporter and a photographer from the local paper accompanied the police on this second visit. The reporter scribbled notes, made tape recordings. The photographer took snapshots. Later that afternoon, the reporter visited the hospital where Jeffrey lay and talked briefly with Sesiom.

The police hung yellow crime scene tape in front of the cave's mouth, and then all of them, cops, reporter, and photographer, trekked down the mountain slope in a ragged line. No one noticed the Stygian darkness that flooded the cave again. It was just too natural to attract attention.

The next day the reporter's story ran in several of the state's newspapers. With some minor variations, it read like this:

Cave Claims More Victims

By Sam Howard

Yesterday police, investigating a report of a possible double homicide, found two human skulls in a cave on Slab Town Mountain eleven miles from Johnstown on State Highway 37.

The authorities were alerted by Drew Samuelson, 14, who called from the cave on his cell phone, then met them at a cabin owned by Jeffrey Swofford.

Mr. Swofford, a friend with whom Drew Samuelson and his father Henry were spending the weekend, was injured by a fall inside the cave and is in intensive care at the Southeast Methodist Hospital in Hadley.

The police recovered the skulls at the back of the cave. No other body parts were located.

Police also discovered a large door made of oak planks that appeared to have been constructed to seal off the back of the cave. That door was padlocked.

Lieutenant Joseph Cullman of the Johnstown Police Department said the officers suspected foul play but as yet had no leads as to who may have committed the murders. "This was not done yesterday," Lt. Cullman said. "It is possible whoever did this has been dead for years. It is possible we will never know what happened here or why."

Mr. Swofford, who moved into the area this past spring, found the cave while hiking on Slab Town and had invited his friends to explore it with him. Apparently, he returned to the cave alone sometime during the week before they arrived and fell from a ledge. When his friends arrived, Mr. Swofford was not at home. They began looking for him and, following instructions he left in his computer, were able to find the cave.

Drew Samuelson is being hailed as a hero for his initiative in notifying the police and leading them to Mr. Swofford.

While waiting for the paramedics to arrive, Henry Samuelson and Sesiom Peterson, another member of the party, began to explore the cave and found the door and the skulls. They told the police of their discovery as soon as Mr. Swofford had been airlifted out.

The following day, the story was picked up on the national wires and made its way into the inside pages of several major newspapers. A curious story. Interesting filler.

The wizard sipped his coffee and read the account a third time. They plainly did not know what they had found, but it would have been surprising had they known. There should have been some kind of written invocation but either they had not seen it or, more likely, had decided not to release it to the press. Something only the killer would know, as the phrase was. He folded the paper and laid it aside. Then, taking his coffee mug, he rose and strolled over to the window and raised it. Hushed for the moment, the city stretched below him pure in the morning light. He inhaled deeply. Dawn and sunset were such deceptive times, he thought. They were the true witching hours when reality, it had been believed long ago, was the most unstable. His brow furrowed as he mulled the story over. He sipped again. Who, he wondered, could have done it?

Another man also saw the story. He too reread it and, deep in thought, lay the paper down. But he did not reflect on pure dawn drowsy cities. Instead he remembered the long ago darkness, the not yet smooth tunnel, the brutally demanding work, and his desperate haste as he did it. He'd thought he'd gotten everything right, but he must have made a mistake somehow. He ran his fingers through his thin white hair and stared at nothing in particular. He was very afraid.

Interlogue

Well, Sesiom said, glancing at the speedometer then back again at the midnight freeway, I don't know how perceptive I am. I just remembered what you said about awareness and the way it particularizes reality, makes it ours so to speak, and then applied it to what you just said. Plural realities follow.

Connecting the ideas and anticipating my conclusion is perceptive, the wizard objected. It shows you understand the ideas and can connect and apply them in appropriate ways to expand your conclusions. That is the hallmark of intelligence.

Thanks, Sesiom said dryly. Yeah, I'm a pretty bright guy.

The wizard ignored the gibe and continued on, Information is the key thing. Let us think about survival for a moment. Biologists define survival in terms of successful reproduction. But what is actually preserved when successful reproduction occurs? It is not the bodies of the reproducing pairs. Those bodies are destined to die from the moment they are conceived. Nor is it the DNA itself. Replication robs the helix of its atoms every time it occurs. What is preserved is infor-

mation. But information is conceptual. It contains one or more ideas. Therefore, we can imagine successful reproduction as securing the maintenance and continuation of a particular idea. Like all transferable information, genetic information is embodied in a code. But what do genes code for?

I suppose they code for characteristics, behaviors, abilities, that sort of thing, Sesiom replied.

They code for proteins, the wizard said. *Genes preserve conceptualizations of protein.*

Humph, Sesiom snorted. *I've not heard it expressed that way before. Strikes me as an odd way to put it.*

Odd or not, the wizard replied, *it is true. Or at least it is an important part of the truth.*

You talk about the way things really are, about truth, and also about plural realities. I'm not a philosopher, I'm a businessman, but from my perspective those two positions at first glance seem contradictory, Sesiom mused.

Not at all, the wizard said. *Reality as plural does not mean that anything goes, that there cannot be such a thing as a lie. Were that true, there would be no demons. If I say, "It rained yesterday in Detroit," when in fact I happen to know it didn't, then I have not said what is true, and no amount of plurality can change that. What I mean instead is that truth conceptualized is a construction and that, as a construction, it reveals various aspects, many or even most of them, profoundly different from one another, some-*

times in some very subtle ways. But let's think about information and the way the world is.

The wizard cleared his throat, then launched out. *Information is at base conceptual, that is, it can be understood. It has significance beyond itself. It conveys meaning. The world, the universe itself, is freighted with all kinds of information, and communicates that information at all kinds of levels and among all kinds of entities. What is more, the information is coded. It is contained in things like chemical sequences or colors or animal cries. But the codes are simply a way in which the information becomes effective. What lies beneath the codes and the cosmos itself is that vast sea of information. But remember that information is conceptual. That means that the universe and everything in it is the expression of mind. That is something the ancients grasped, but that we moderns have forgotten. We tend to think of the universe as a merely material configuration and of mind as an emergent property within that configuration, as you suggested back at the apartment. But in fact it is the opposite, as I have said before. The material universe is a creation of perspective, of mind.*

Sesiom listened intently as he drove. The wizard glanced over at him, then continued, *I don't know if you are familiar with a German philosopher named Hans Gadamer.*

I'm not, Sesiom said.

Well, Gadamer was interested in the problem of how we derive meaning from texts.

Derive meaning from texts? Sesiom glanced over at the wizard. I should have thought that was pretty straightforward. Texts are intended to convey meaning. You read what it has to say, and if you've understood it, you have grasped its meaning.

Yes, the wizard agreed. On one level that is quite true, but in fact it is a bit more complex than that. Part of the problem revolves around the kind of text you're reading, and, as a rule, the kind of text you're reading depends on the kind of meaning the author wanted to convey. Operational manuals, newspaper accounts, mystery novels, and poetry are all manuscripts, but they embody and convey very different kinds of meaning. And they are selected for that precise reason.

Yes, that makes sense, Sesiom agreed. A love letter is one thing, a recipe another. Both might use the word sugar, but mean something very different by it. And I as the reader would intuit that immediately. The kind of text would be determinative.

Exactly, the wizard beamed. The question of textual meaning is called hermeneutics. You Baptists are renowned for studying the Bible so I'm sure you've run into that word before.

As a matter of fact I have, Sesiom said. I have conducted a few adult Bible studies in my church, and

the study guides occasionally use the word, so I know what it means.

Well, the wizard said, hermeneutics intrigued Gadamer.

Chapter Six (a)

Lieutenant Cullman sat at his desk sipping coffee from a Styrofoam cup and reflecting on two reports, the coroner's report concerning the two skulls that had been delivered a couple of days ago, and an analysis of the oak samples taken from the door in the cave which had been prepared by the Center for Applied Isotope Studies at the University of Georgia and which he'd just finished.

According to the summary from the University of Georgia, the oak had been cut sometime in the early 1970s. Analysis of the paint samples pointed to the same approximate date. The lock, he knew, was much older. It had been manufactured back in 1907 by a long defunct company in Wilmington, Delaware, called Smythson, Inc. Smythson, it turned out, made more than locks. It had been a metal shop that filled specialty orders for which its clientele paid handsomely. Apparently the lock's specifics had been stipulated. But how had it ended up on a door made seven decades later? Seven decades were three generations. Cullman pulled at his chin, took a sip of cof-

fee. Whoever made the door had not purchased the lock from Smythson.

The paint was peculiar too. It was lead based, nothing special about that, but had been liberally adulterated with goat's blood. Male, the laboratory said.

According to the coroner's report, the skulls were both male. They had probably been about seven years old when they died sometime back in the mid-nineteenth century. Cullman knew the U.S. and Canada supported an underground market in skulls, which were usually robbed from pauper's graves in Mexico or Central America. Europe, he had heard, also had such a market but their source of skulls was different. So whoever obtained these skulls had probably purchased them.

Here then was the likely sequence: two skulls approximately 150 years old, a lock some seventy years old, and wood cut about thirty years ago. Plainly someone had gone to a lot of trouble to acquire these items. It did not look much like murder to Cullman, it looked a lot like magic.

Or what he imagined magic might look like. He knew next to nothing about the subject himself outside of a few accounts he'd read in the popular press. But what else could it be? And if it was magic, whoever did it had been very serious. This was no black cock killing under the moon at the stroke of midnight. This smacked of protracted and expensive enterprise. Also whoever did this had to have had prolonged access to the cave.

Slab Town was a fairly isolated mountain. With the exception of old man Camden, who had built on the neighboring Hook-n-Tie, he was unaware of anyone who lived up there during the 1970s. Surely Camden was not some kind of warlock. But how could Cullman be sure? He barely knew Camden. The man had moved into town when Cullman was just a boy. Cullman did not even remember the exact year Camden built his cabin, though it seemed like it was the late 1960s or early 1970s. But that would be easy to check. When did Camden leave? He could not recall exactly. Did not know why he left either. Not that he suspected Camden of a crime, though unlicensed trafficking in body parts was a misdemeanor. It was just that he wanted to tie this thing up, and finding Camden seemed like the most obvious way to do that.

He rose, walked across his office, and stuck his head out of its door. "Hey, Marge," he called to the stout middle-aged woman who worked as his part-time secretary, "do me a favor, would you? See if you can find out whatever happened to a man named Camden who used to own a cabin up on Hook-n-Tie. And see if you can track down any of his relatives. Would you do that for me?"

"Sure, Lieutenant," Marge said. "Do you know his first name?"

"No," Cullman said, "but check with Deeds and Registration. That would be a good place to start."

"And when did he own the property?" Marge asked.

"I'm not sure," Cullman said, "but I think he built it in the late sixties or early seventies. Start with 1968."

"Property on Hook-n-Tie. Man named Camden. 1968 to, say, 1973? Shouldn't be too hard," Marge said.

Interlogue

Gadamer argued that particular concrete experience, rather than an abstract aesthetics, is key to understanding information when that information is expressed or embodied artistically. For him interpretation was not a simple mechanical procedure whereby the meaning of something, a text, a play, a painting, could be isolated and discussed. That is to say, it was not merely reproductive. When we interpret something, according to Gadamer, we do not recreate and analyze the artist's meaning. Rather interpretation is a dynamic and creative event in which the participant—one is not a passive observer in such circumstances, one is a participant—in which the participant, precisely by being a participant, plays a definitive role. After all, one can only begin to understand something by using the concepts one already has. The concepts one brings to the table as it were. But that understanding takes place not by scrutinizing and dominating the art, but by submitting to it. In this process, the participant asks questions and, by asking them, introduces a level of knowledge, a perspective, to the work that its creator did not have. By the same token, the creator has a

level of knowledge and a perspective that the participant does not have. What they do share is the completed work of art. It exists as it is, embodying the meaning the artist intended, of course, but also embodying the unconscious processes and motivations that produced it. It is a cultural artifact, fixed in history, yet, as a work of art, transcending its moment precisely because it is experienced contemporarily by the interpreter/participant. Pondering the work of art, asking questions of it, allows for a blending of the conceptual horizons of the artist and the participant. Hence, it is inaccurate to say that we understand the artist's work. That implies the work has a static meaning that we have fully grasped and thoroughly plumbed. It is more accurate to say that we understand through it. By pointing to itself, the art points beyond itself. Meaning emerges in the blending of these two horizons, the artist's and the participant's.

In other words, the art speaks to me, Sesiom said.

Yes, the wizard agreed, but it is more than that. You speak to the art, too. And it is within that mutual language event, that conversation, created between the art and the participant that meaning emerges.

And these meanings would be valid expressions of a larger reality, Sesiom said.

Valid? The wizard stretched himself and looked over at Sesiom. For a moment he seemed to fill half the car. *That is the question. Valid implies true or credible, and obviously there are such things as mistakes and lies. There is insanity. And it is not just a question of*

degree. Not everything is valid or equally valid. One might describe an eclipse as the moon swallowing the sun simply because one did not know better, but it would be incorrect to ascribe an ontological quality to such a depiction. And yet there really is a sense in which, from a particular perspective, the moon on such an occasion may be said to swallow the sun. It is a graphic description. It helps us picture something we may not have seen, and yet, if we want to build a Copernican model of the solar system, such a description is not helpful.

I see what you mean, Sesiom replied, but the key point here, the basic argument you are making, is that multiple realities are created in this dialogue between individuals with their life experiences and the information rich world.

Yes, said the wizard. Now notice that by putting God in the role of artist and seeing the cosmos as his handiwork, we are opening the way for a similar approach. We see the world and wonder what it means or if it has meaning. We ask such questions within our historical/cultural matrix, and the answers emerge in a creative way. And, of course, if the Holy Spirit is involved in the process, as with Christians he must be, we get a different kind of answer than we would get otherwise.

Chapter Six (b)

Naketa waited by the front door in the living room near the stairs. Sesiom and Melody were having an argument in their second floor bedroom, and Naketa could hear them. In the weeks since Uncle Jeff had been taken to the hospital, they had argued a lot. Naketa was not always sure what they were arguing about or why, but it seemed to her that her mother had become testy and quarrelsome since that horrible Saturday when they'd found Uncle Jeff in the cave. Her mother had always had a temper, but lately it posed on a hair trigger.

She'd asked her mother once why she'd run off on the way back to Uncle Jeff's cabin, but her mother had given her a hard look and said that she'd thought she'd seen a child in the woods and had gone to investigate. Naketa did not believe that, but she did not know what to say. She had talked to her daddy about it though, had told him that Melody had been acting funny before Drew came out of the cave, and that she didn't think there was a child anywhere around so how could Mommy have seen one? Sesiom had simply told her that he agreed that there was no child, and that Mommy agreed too, but that some-

times people thought they saw things when those things weren't there. That was all true of course, but it didn't change anything. Mommy and Daddy still argued. Frequently.

Well, she wished they would stop. They were all supposed to be going to the hospital to see Uncle Jeff. They went almost every Sunday after church even though it was a long drive. Over an hour. They would come home and change, then go out for lunch, then drive to the hospital. There wasn't much to the visits really. They would sit by Uncle Jeff's bed, talk about what they had done the week before. The nurse said that kind of conversation often had a beneficial effect on comatose patients, that sometimes the patients were aware of their visitors, but were simply unable to respond. Naketa worried about that. She could imagine Uncle Jeff trapped in his head, pushing against his own impassive face, struggling to move his once powerful arms, alert but powerless. Frustrated and fearful. Keenly aware, terribly helpless, and so alone. In fact, she was convinced that was true, that Uncle Jeff was more helpless and more alone than he had ever been, than any human being, any kind of creature for that matter, should ever be. The thoughts bothered her. She wanted to talk to Sesiom about them, but for the first time in her life she did not feel free to do so. In the past, she could talk to him about anything and he was always ready to listen, always had something wise or encouraging or sometimes funny to say. But now she felt that a shadow had fallen between them, and that the shadow was Melody. She wasn't sure why she

thought that, but she did, and it made her feel so very alone, just like Uncle Jeff.

She stood near the foot of the stairs listening to the rising and falling cadence of the voices above her. Early autumn had settled in the tops of the trees. Seasons always changed from the edges, she thought. They always started on the outer layer and worked their way to the center, like a whirlpool drawing stuff forever into itself. And she suddenly wondered if time was like that, if time was like a great big swirling undertow, feeding eternally on the rim of things, guzzling it all. The thought was unexpected and stark and, she abruptly realized, awfully adult. She supposed she was growing up, had grown up a lot in the last few weeks. Normally the comprehension would have brought a thrill of delight, but now it brought only queasy dread. If becoming a grownup meant one had such thoughts, and she suspected it did, then the next few years were going to be more difficult than she had imagined. That made her feel even more lonely. Meanwhile the voices upstairs quarreled on.

It occupied two centers: the body in the hospital and the brain of the woman. And it was able to range between these two points. This gave it a much greater reach than being imprisoned in the two skulls had given it, but the tatters of the spell still constrained it. To free itself completely required blood spilled in murder. Freedom began in crime, in the ability to effect an evil for no other reason than to assert one's liberty. Freedom was the ability to say, "I scorn

and can violate these standards." It was action justified for no other reason beyond one's ability to do it. Freedom's mantra was "Just cause I can." That is what made "evil" acts such an imperative. They testified unequivocally to the autonomy of the one who did them. Revolutions always began with treason and ended with murder. The king, the czar, the dictator had to die. Liberty was suckled on blood. It knew these things in the very core of its being, and it sought a victim. It had focused on the girl, was exploring the pathways in her brain, suggesting ideas to see how she would respond. When the time came, it would need her to stand very still. It was confident she would. The child was ideal. She had a close connection between the body in the hospital and the woman, and she stayed within its still limited range. Once it had slain her, it would be able to track down the one who had imprisoned it and kill him. That second murder would complete its escape. And then it would return to the Bell Labs in Naperville, Illinois, where it had been caught and from which it had been removed.

Chapter Six (c)

There was a knock on his office door, probably Marge. Cullman looked up from the report he was reading. "Yes," he said.

Marge stuck her head in and smiled, "I've got the file on Camden's place. Xeroxes anyway." She stepped in and handed Cullman a thin manila folder. "There's not a lot, but I think it's everything you wanted."

"Thanks," Cullman said, taking the folder. "What did you find."

"Camden purchased the property in October of 1970, started building the next summer and finished his house in 1972."

"When did he sell to Swofford?"

"This past February," Marge said.

"Who did he buy the property from?" Cullman asked.

"Randy Holmes," Marge said.

Cullman was surprised. "Holmes owned property on Hook-n-Tie? Well, who knew?" Cullman had known Holmes for years though they had not been close

friends. Holmes had joined the army shortly after Pearl Harbor and had seen action in North Africa and Italy. When the war ended, he started a dairy farm near Whitecotton and did well, but none of his three sons had been interested in continuing the business, so after his wife passed away, Holmes sold his farm and moved into a trailer on Flint Creek where he spent his last years photographing birds for a book he never finished, but wanted to dedicate to the memory of John Burroughs, the naturalist, philosopher, and poet who had been friends with Walt Whitman. Holmes had been killed in the flooding caused by Hurricane Floyd. Cullman found his body and, on that account, had felt obliged to attend his funeral. "So," Cullman said, "Holmes owned the property and sold it to Camden in 1970. Camden finished building his home there in 1972, and sold to Swofford this February."

"Looks that way," Marge said.

"Okay, give me the files please, and thanks, Marge."

Marge left, and Cullman slipped the documents from their folder. Glancing through them, he mulled over what he'd learned. The door had been constructed around the same time Camden built his house, at least he could be pretty sure the wood for the door had been cut around that time. Let's assume it was assembled shortly after the trees were felled, he told himself. I mean, why wouldn't it have been? He could think of no reason. So work with the assumption. That covered a two year period. A construction crew would have been up there with trucks. Some forest would have

been cleared. A man or team of men moving lumber in a truck in that area would not have attracted much attention, probably not even if they drove past Hook-n-Tie and turned up a logging road onto Slab Town. Hunters used to drive up there back then too, he recalled. So to anyone who saw it, a truck with lumber would have been part of the scenery. Nothing special. And that meant that Camden may have had nothing to do with the door. Still it was a coincidence too striking not to explore.

Cullman clicked on his computer's "people locator" and typed in "Hans Lawrence Camden." He had never known Camden's first or middle name before looking at the file. Seemed a little odd when he thought about it, but Camden had kept pretty much to himself. A quiet fellow. Never caused any trouble. The screen populated and Cullman scanned the names. He was in luck. There was a Hans Lawrence Camden living two towns away in Henryville, and the name came with a telephone number. High tech certainly made his job easier, and Cullman loved it for that though he found the amount of information available on a computer and the ease with which it could be access a little disconcerting. He picked up his telephone and dialed, and after a couple of rings, a familiar voice answered, "Hello."

"Hello, Mr. Camden? This is Lieutenant Joe Cullman with the Johnstown police."

"Officer Cullman." A hint of uncertainty, then, "Yes, I remember you," the voice on the other end became

more confident. "What can I do for you? I'm not in any trouble surely."

"No, no, nothing like that," Cullman said. "I just wanted to ask you a couple of things about Swofford and Holmes. There was an accident up here near your old place awhile back and I'm just trying to tie up some loose ends."

"Yeah," Camden agreed. Cullman thought there was a slight clog of anxiety in the man's voice. "I saw a story about it in the newspaper. Said Jeffrey was hurt. How's he doing?"

"Still in the hospital, so far as I know," Cullman said. ~~"He was injured while exploring a cave he found. Did you know about that cave?"~~

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone. Then Camden said, "I guess I've been expecting this call ever since I saw the news story. The past never dies, you know. It freezes harder than any rock. It can't ever be changed. Even if it's forgotten, it is still there, living with us and affecting things." There was another long pause. Cullman was preparing to break the silence when Camden spoke again. "Why don't you come out to see me? There is a nice little café here in Henryville. Coffee's half decent. We can talk. I've got quite a story. Better to tell it face to face than over the phone."

"Sure," said Cullman. "I'd like that. I like stories. How about ten o'clock tomorrow morning? How does that suit you?"

"Sounds fine to me," Camden said. "Name of the café is Franks. Kind of a cutesy thing. Their specialty is hot dogs. It's two blocks off 37 on Jacks Row. Turn to your left from 37."

"That should be easy enough to find," Cullman said. "I'll see you at ten tomorrow, Mr. Camden."

"Yeah," Camden said. "I'll see you then."

Cullman hung up his telephone and leaned back in his chair. It looked like this was going to be easier than he expected. He could drive to Henryville in just a little over an hour. Wrap this whole thing up over a cup of coffee. At least that is what he hoped. He wondered what Camden would say about the door and the skulls.

In Henryville, Camden, shaking his head slowly, turned from the table. He couldn't blame the police officer. The man was just doing his job, and apparently doing it quite well, but his phone call certainly made things more complicated. How much should he say tomorrow? He couldn't lie. What good would it do now anyway? But if he told part of the truth, why not all of it? Maybe he could take the officer up to his old cabin and show him everything. But was he really ready to do that? And how long did he have before it sniffed him out? That, he was sure, was just a matter of time, and it was nothing he was looking forward to.

Interlogue

They pulled out of the Exxon station and back onto the state highway. Dawn was a couple of hours off. During the fuel stop, each man had swallowed another Red Bull, and each was sipping a cup of scalding coffee to top it off. The Hummer purred and Sesiom stifled a yawn. The wizard had been right, this was turning into an endurance test and he needed the caffeine. *Do you remember Vivaren or No Doz?* Sesiom asked. *I don't know if they make the stuff anymore but it was effective. That and Maxwell House got me through plenty of all niters when I was at Howard.*

Don't know what happened to them, the wizard said. *I use to boil up an herbal concoction that was based on chicory. Effective but awful. Had to sugar it up a lot. I switched to these commercial energy drinks back in the mid-nineties. They work almost as well, and, besides, I don't get many calls for this sort of thing so I don't need stimulants much.*

You've done this on other occasions, I assume, Sesiom remarked.

Not often, but yes, the wizard said. *As I indicated earlier, my work is usually much more mundane.*

We live in a mundane world was the way you put it, Sesiom said.

Yes, mundane and plural. That's a good way to conceptualize it, the wizard nodded.

So you are going to put a spell on this spirit? Enchant it? Command it back into the abyss from whence it came?

Something like that, the wizard agreed. But you and I are going to do it. We will work together on this.

I'm going to help you cast a spell? Sesiom was astonished. How can I help you do that? Last spell I helped cast was when my mama would rub our warts with a smooth stone when we were kids, tie it in a handkerchief and leave it at a crossroads. It always worked, though I never knew why.

That's a good example, actually, the wizard said. I'm familiar with that bit of folk magic. There are other examples, too, that survive precisely because they are effective. The mind, as I said, has a remarkable capacity to shape events. Prayer and a positive outlook are two of the best medicines, two of the best prophylactics for that matter. Also a sense of purpose or responsibility. Take care of yourself, seek God's will in your life, and stay positive. Better than an apple a day for keeping the doctor away. I knew of a man once who was diagnosed with cancer. He was old, had no close relatives, and not much money. He decided to let the disease take its course, but he bought a collection of Three Stooges videos, and

when he started to get depressed, he put one on. Made him laugh. Well, he didn't die. If he had, there wouldn't be much point to my telling you the story. So after awhile, he went back to his doctor. As you might have guessed, the cancer was gone. Not in remission, but gone. I can't say much about his taste in comedy, but there was nothing wrong with his sense of how things work.

Just a question of mind over matter, eh? Sesiom said. Well, that sounds a little too simplistic to me. Cancer is a peculiar disease. Sometimes it just disappears, and no one really knows why. Kind of like warts. Maybe the body heals itself somehow.

Sesiom, the wizard said, unless it dies, the body always heals itself somehow. All we can do is try to create the most favorable environment to encourage that healing. And that is what a spell does. It focuses thoughts, makes them efficacious. We always do that when we turn ideas into reality, incarnate them if you will. Of course they were already incarnate in our brains, so we just translate them from one kind of physical medium to another, whether we build a fighter jet or a remove a wart, use our hands or our words. It's a question of which principles you employ and how effective they are—and why.

In other words, magic theory, Sesiom said.

Magic theory, the wizard agreed. Look, in Proverbs we read that as a person thinks in his heart, so he is. That's not Norman Vincent Peale extolling the power of positive thought nor is it existentialism.

That's the inspired word of God. The immediate reference is to duplicity, but the wider context is sincerity. You become your most deeply held beliefs, or they create you. There is a feedback mechanism at work here. And of course what you are fundamentally impacts the world you perceive, and that perception is an aspect of reality, a potential aspect we bring into being by conceiving it. We communicate through these actualized realities, always assuming ours is shared by all because it really conforms to the way things are, and of course there are commonalities, otherwise there would be no communication. But communication also illumines our differences. In conversation, worlds clash. This is our dilemma then: we are social beings, as is evidenced by our need to, and our ability to, communicate, but we are social beings who occasionally have very different perspectives on things. And, because we live in our convictions, we have deeply held convictions about their truth.

Sesiom sipped from his coffee, sighed. *That almost seems trite, he said, and yet it also makes the whole thing, the life we live, it makes it look like a riddle, a big pointless riddle.*

Not a riddle, the wizard objected. In essence, riddles are dishonest questions. They are half joke, half enigma. Consider the riddle: nature wants six, custom seven, wickedness demands eleven. The answer is hours of sleep. It's subtle and clever and it rhymes. It also might make an ethical point, but it is too sly to be strictly accurate. We are not talking about riddles

here. Puzzle is perhaps more exact, or maybe mystery. But I like puzzle better because puzzle suggests built in solvability. A spell is like a puzzle rather than a riddle. Any spell can be unraveled, solved. I think in the case of the door and skulls, the one who cast the spell lacked the skills to make it sufficiently complex to baffle the demon for more than a few decades. Let's imagine this as a problem of motion. If objects are part of a binary system, it is fairly easy to calculate their interactions with one another. Add a third object, however, and the calculations instantly become extremely difficult. In the case of the cave, the two skulls and the door acted like objects that move in relationship to one another. It was almost but not quite as complex as a three object system. The cave, by existing between these objects like a beam in the rock, focused them. The spirit is trapped in the beam, the cave, caught between the three interacting objects. In order to escape, it must calculate how they interact and then project their positions into the indefinite future. Don't forget that the spirit must do this on a planet that is revolving around a moving star and that itself has a satellite about one-eightieth of its mass and about one-sixth its gravity. Since it is a creature trapped in the hologram of the universe, but originating beyond it, it will need to take the immediate context created by earth, moon, and sun into account as well. But the main things locking it in the shaft are the door and the skulls.

But the skulls, the door, the shaft don't move in relationship to one another. How can this be a problem of motion? Sesiom objected.

You are right, the wizard said. It really isn't a problem of motion any more than the progression of cause and effect through time/space coordinates is a problem of motion. That's a good illustration actually. Information is to magic theory what coordinates are to Einstein. I only used motion as a trope to give you some idea of the complexity interwoven into that particular spell. At least, I think that was what was done. I'll know more after we've looked at the cave.

Chapter Six (d)

Naketa watched Uncle Jeffrey's motionless shrouded figure. His eyes were closed, his mouth gaped slightly. A monitor beeped beside his bed, its dot of green light tracing his vital rhythms. It was terrible to see him like this, the man who, only weeks before, had teased her over the telephone. It was like he was dead but not quite dead, like he had been trapped in some place from which he could neither return or depart. If she closed her eyes, she could almost hear him calling to her, feel him reaching across to her from that weird halfway place. She wanted more than anything to reach back to him, to guide him back to this life or into the next one. But she could not do that, so instead when she closed her eyes, she prayed. "Dear God, I know that Uncle Jeffrey did not believe in you, but he was a good man anyway. We loved him and he loved us back. That should count for something, shouldn't it? You are love. You must have given us the capacity to love each other. It was an expression of you, of yourself. I believe in you, Lord, and I have been baptized. I come to you clothed in your righteousness. Dear Jesus, I beg you, based on what you have done for me, to take Uncle Jeff to yourself. Hear and honor my

prayer, Lord. I don't know what is going on with Uncle Jeffrey right now, but I think he is frightened and very unhappy . . . and very alone. Lord, give him faith now. Save him now. Free him from this horrid state so that he may come to you cleansed and joyous. Lord Jesus, catch him away from the jaws of the Pit. Save him from the fires of Hell where all confess you but none praise you. Lord, forgive me please for not telling him more about you, for not letting him know how important you are to me . . . to everyone. Dear Jesus, open his spiritual eyes . . ." And so her prayer went, an endless stream of supplication and remorse, her bouquet of concern she lay beside his living coffin, but which she feared she brought to him too late.

Outside the door in the hall, Sesiom and Melody talked to the nurse about Jeffrey's future. The nurse was saying, "His sister has been here. She made the arrangements. We expect to move him out in the next few days. You'll have to check with Administration about that because I'm not completely sure when. Or you could check with his sister. I think she'll be back here sometime next week."

"We don't know her," Sesiom said, "and she's never gotten in touch with us. I knew Jeffrey was not close with his family, but I would have thought she would at least have called. We left our number on her answering machine."

"I've no control over family complications. All I can tell you is that you've no legal prerogative or authority to . . ."

Back in the room Naketa heard a movement and opened her eyes. To her amazement, she saw Jeffrey slowly, stiffly, sitting up in his bed. The crisp sheet slipped from his pale bluish green hospital gown. His arms hung limp from its short sleeves. His eyes, their pupils dilated until they seemed almost like voids, stared blankly ahead. His mouth remained slightly opened. But he was sitting up. She could hear his breathing over the beep on the monitor, and to Naketa it looked like a miracle right out of the New Testament. Her breath came in short gasps. Her heart leaped. She whispered over and over again, "Thank you, Lord. Oh, thank you, Lord Jesus." She was awestruck with delight. Her Uncle Jeffrey was back.

He turned to her, the sheet falling completely away, his hospital gown lifting over his thighs. She could see him exposed under the loose cloth, the urine tube, its attached bag partly filled with urine, pulling free, and that shocked and dismayed her, but Jeffrey did not seem to notice. He leaned forward, his hands pressing on the bed. He seemed to struggle to focus on her as he slid forward, his right foot reaching for the floor, his left hand bracing on the bedside table. Bending slightly at the waist he stood on the floor, stood over her, was looking down at her. Naketa could see there was something awful behind the emptiness in his eyes, sensed that this was not Uncle Jeffrey. Her miracle had turned ominous. She would have run, but she seemed rooted to the spot. And then it was too late. Uncle Jeffrey picked up a stainless steel pitcher of water from the table, was lifting it over his head, spilling the water

on the floor, on the bed, splashing it on his gown. And, just as she screamed, he brought the pitcher down on Naketa's head with crushing force.

Outside in the hall, the three adults heard her scream, froze in their conversation, then in a rush burst into the room. They saw Naketa slumped to the floor, Jeffrey falling forward, the pitcher slipping from his hand. They heard it ring as it hit the tile. Melody screamed. They sprang to the two bodies, Naketa dying, Jeffrey now dead, face down, his buttocks exposed, the tube through which he emptied his colon protruding, its bag limp between his legs. The nurse smacked the alarm with her palm, knelt beside her patient, felt his jugular for a pulse. Sesiom held Naketa, Melody kneeling beside him. They heard members of the hospital staff rushing down the hall toward the room, saw the blood oozing from the torn skin around the deep indentation in Naketa's skull, saw it slowly twisting through her hair, saw it drip to the vinyl. What they did not see, could not have seen, was the exultant spirit that rose like a black vulture above that chaotic scene. Free! Free at last!

Interlogue

Have you ever wondered what the world would look like if the biblical story of creation were true? the wizard asked Sesiom.

Well, Sesiom mused, I've not really given it much thought. I believe the biblical story, I guess, though I'm not quite sure how to imagine it all. We are trained to think scientifically, educated to use the language of evolution whatever our actual beliefs. So I suppose I think the world would look pretty much like it looks.

But how does it look? the wizard pressed him. *Let's break it down. First, we would expect the universe to have developed, not to have popped into existence fully formed. After all, there are seven days and they build on one another sequentially, contingently. Furthermore, miracles, as creative acts, suggest that the process still continues. Indeed, the Russian Orthodox theologian Nicolas Berdyaev has called the new creation begun after the resurrection of Christ the eighth day of creation. So, if the biblical account is true, we might expect to see evidence of an ongoing or evolving creation.*

Second, we might expect to see a creation that was orderly, that behaved in particular ways and developed according to specific patterns, a creation that was comprehensible.

Third, we might expect to see a creation teeming with many forms of life, not all of which came into existence simultaneously. For example, we might expect to see a creation in which fish preceded land animals, and in which human beings appeared very late and came from a single source and later migrated to fill the world.

Fourth, we might expect to see a creation in which some of these life forms were aware.

Fifth, we might expect to see a creation that was rich in information.

Sixth, we might expect to see a creation in which the communication of information and even abstract concepts was not only theoretically possible but was fairly common.

Finally, we might expect to see a creation in which "light" was the first created thing.

Notice that nothing I have listed is required. Creation could have come about in all kinds of ways. But if the biblical story is true, we might have expected a world something like I have suggested. And that is pretty much what science has found. Now I acknowledge I've been selective here. There are certainly problems with the biblical account. Are we to believe that plants appeared before the sun, moon, and stars, or

that birds appeared before "creeping things?" Nevertheless, my point is to show how striking the correlations are between what current science tells us and what we might have anticipated had we only possessed the Genesis story.

The wizard fell silent and Sesiom guided the Hummer west toward Johnstown. After some minutes he said, *Having heard so much about the conflict between science and religion, I find your analysis striking. You've cherry picked, sure, but you've also made a strong point.* His voice grew soft as he thought more about what the wizard had said. *And to think that this story was inspired thousands of years ago.*

It is amazing, isn't it? the wizard agreed. *Suppose we had never heard of Genesis, and then some archeologist unearthed the text in a cave in the Middle East somewhere. Rather than striving to debunk it, I suspect scholars would be trying to account for its insight! The central question would be: how did the ancients know the universe was like this? The scientific world would have been buzzing. But familiarity breeds contempt. We have lived with the story for three thousand years or more. We miss the wonder of it.*

You sound like a fundamentalist, Sesiom remarked. *Not that I think that is necessarily a bad thing. I'm a Bible believing Baptist, whatever Bible believing is supposed to mean. Still it seems a little unusual for a man of your education and, uh, professional attainments.*

I'm a Catholic, the wizard said, but if by fundamentalist you mean one who affirms the fundamentals of the Christian faith, then yes, that is what I am.

And what are those fundamentals? Sesiom inquired.

Oh, the wizard said, you'll find them in the early creeds: the Nicean, the Chalcedonian, the Constantinopolitan, the Athanasian, although that one was never approved by an ecumenical council and, in fact, was repudiated as authoritative by the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Still I like it as a symbol. I also affirm the Apostle's Creed as a very helpful summary of what is important. These creeds tell us how to read the Bible and not vice versa, and most of them pre-date the final formulation of the canon. I believe in God as Trinity, in Jesus as the incarnate logos, fully God and fully human, in the Virgin birth, the miracles, the resurrection. You know, the basic things that Christians believe. But the root of it all is found in the first words of Genesis: "In the beginning God created . . ." That brief phrase contains the two fundamentals from which everything else derives. First, God is. God exists. There is the brute fact of God. And second, this extant God creates the whole shebang, everything. From those two facts, all else flows: everything from monotheism since God is singular, to God's personhood since creation is intentional and only persons can act with intentionality. Everything.

Chapter Six (e)

The old man brewed a cup of green tea, sipped it, worried about his meeting with the police lieutenant in the morning, remembered how these dreadful events had begun to unfold. He rehearsed the various ways in which he thought the meeting might develop, tried to imagine what he would say, what he could say.

Since he was a boy he had been intrigued by magic, always thought there was something of substance hidden behind the layers of hocus-pocus. He had amassed a respectable library on the occult arts, texts including everything from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, which was mostly spells, to Carl Jung's theory of archetypes and alchemy. He had even taught himself Latin since some of the medieval material he had acquired had never been translated into English. Magic had been at once a curious hobby and a consuming passion.

However, it was not a passion one shared with responsible scientists. From them, he kept his fascination with the subject a secret. No one in his professional circle had any idea about this part of his life. Sometimes he felt like a pervert, at other times like a

pioneer, but always he was keenly aware of the need for discretion. If his colleagues found out, it could ruin him professionally.

Being a bachelor helped, as did his basically reclusive nature. And if he did invite a guest over, which he almost never did, he did not take his visitor to see the cluttered little room where he spent most of his evenings. Instead they would sit in the living room, play chess, talk shop, occasionally gossip about office politics (a subject he found rather boring). He had a reputation for keeping to himself, a quiet, gangly man with a reedy voice and a penchant for bow ties.

None of that changed after he discovered the spirit, but everything else did.

His team, which he had been part of since the Bell Labs opened on Indian Hill in Naperville, Illinois, in 1966, was conducting a course of experiments on a new transistor series that was part of the laboratory's electronic switching systems research. They had been getting some peculiar results, so for several nights he had stayed late, trying to reconcile discrepancies in the data. That was when he became aware of the spirit. It was mucking about as they ran their trials, manipulating the results. He had encountered spirits before, of course, but they had always seemed like small scurrying things, squeaking their dismay at being discovered. By contrast, this one seemed indifferent to his knowing it was there. Indeed, it was almost as though it had disclosed itself to him for some reason. And he quickly

determined that it was by far more powerful than any other spirit he had run across.

He had read a little of the region's history and been intrigued by his discovery that the Potawatomi had once used the lab site as a signal hill when they moved into the area in the early part of the eighteenth century, populating the land the Iroquois abandoned in their retreat toward New York before the allied forces of the French and the Great Lakes Algonquin. Indeed, when he encountered the spirit that evening, he thought it might have some connection with the Potawatomi. He soon realized he was wrong.

In the course of the next couple of evenings, he was able to determine that this was not some local sprite upset at having its haunt disturbed. This spirit wanted something and was trying to get into his mind in order to acquire it. That was a terrifying discovery. Worse, the spirit did not stay in the lab when he left the office. It pursued him, infused his dreams, inserted thoughts into his mind, struggled to achieve some level of motor control over his body. Sometimes it could even make him grimace or spasm momentarily. But he quickly became aware that it could not yet read his mind, not completely anyway. That worked to his advantage, though he suspected it would be short lived. The spirit was probing him and, he had no doubt, would find its opening sooner rather than later. But, he sensed, it was also arrogant, and arrogance was always a weakness. So he set up a little trap for the spirit.

In his magic room he had six human skulls he had purchased over the years from two dealers, one in Chicago and the other in Saint Louis. Shipped to him by UPS, the skulls had proved useful in his studies, and three were engraved with symbols that he had then traced with red and black ink he had concocted from formula in his books. If used properly, the power of these objects was truly astonishing. He did not know why they worked as they did, but he knew for sure that by using them he was able to achieve some remarkable results.

To trap the spirit, he would need two skulls of approximately the same size, skulls that had not been used for anything else. He thought of these as virgin bone. And it just so happened that he had them. They had been shipped to him the year before by his Saint Louis connection. They were small, plainly the skulls of young children, but the size or age of the cavities they provided was not important. What was important was that they were human skulls that had not been used in any other magic undertaking. So he set to work.

Over the course of three nights, he drew up a black mandala, a reverse representation of the cosmos traced in concentric overlapping geometric images, each image clearly identified with a particular spiritual power. When he finished, he colored in the mandala using ocher, red, and saffron pigments that he purchased from a local art dealer, and a black ink he prepared from a small vial of his own blood and the soot of candles made by dipping flax cord seven times in cat fat. Then, on the day he was to spring his trap, he

called in sick. This was not really a lie, he told himself, since the spirit he was battling was like an infection. He skipped breakfast and during the morning listened to Gregorian chants while he sat very still in the place where he would lay out his magic snare and concentrated on the task ahead, the two skulls on either side of him. At noon he took a thorough bath and rubbed his feet with cayenne pepper and cloves. At two o'clock in the afternoon, he was ready. He spread his mandala on the floor between the two virgin skulls, sprinkled the three objects with a powder composed of dried lotus root and diamond dust (because of cost, he used industrial diamonds since the origin of the stones did not matter), placed four small alabaster cups of oil around the arrangement, one at each cardinal point, lit the floating wicks inside each cup from a fire he kindled by striking flint and steel over oak shavings, lay naked and face up in the midst of this assemblage with his head on the mandala and his feet pointing east, and began to hum three special notes over and over again.

Most of what he'd done had been misdirection, brilliantly executed but intended to only attract and distract the spirit's attention. The really important things had been the skulls, which were the pit into which he would force the spirit, and the hummed notes which were the ambush. He doubted anyone in the world today knew those notes. He doubted they had been heard since the fourteenth century. They were his secret weapon.

During the course of the day, he had felt the spirit's presence centering on his house, felt its malevolent power, worried that its piercing intuition would see what he was up to. While he concentrated during the morning, he could feel the spirit probing his mind. He fainted, dodged, even tried to strike back, but he knew this was a game he could not win. As he had prepared his trap over the last several days, he'd felt the spirit growing ever more powerful, sapping his own defenses. He was reaching the end of his skills. If this did not work, he doubted he could hold out for another day. He faced either capture or suicide. But, perhaps because of the spirit's arrogance, the notes worked better than he could have imagined.

The spirit reacted in shock, followed almost instantly by explosive rage. And then it was gone. The room was quiet. But Hans Lawrence Camden knew this was only the first step.

Interlogue

I've never understood the Trinity, Sesiom said.

The wizard laughed, Who does? It is an ontological symbol, an attempt to comprehend the very being of God. But ontological questions, questions of what it is to be, pose notoriously difficult problems. Philosophy revolves around three kinds of questions: What is being? What can be known? And what is the good? These questions are called ontological, epistemological, and axiological questions. For a variety of historical reasons, most of which have to do with our theological distinction between creator and creation, which causes us to distinguish between the knower and the known, ontological questions have proved very knotty conundrums for the West.

Sesiom sipped his coffee, then put the Styrofoam cup back in its holder. A thing is what it is, he said. We can look at it and see that. A cat is a cat. A dog is a dog. To someone like me, it's obvious.

Yes, some things are apparently examples of general kinds, the wizard agreed, things like cats, dogs, and Chevy Impalas. But when you see such a thing, how do you know it is a representative of its kind? Well,

you generalize its type from its particulars, eliminating the accidentals and focusing on the essentials. A cat or a car could be black or tan and still remain a cat or a car, so in that case one dismisses color as essential. But one can do that because at some level, one already knows that a color change in such a situation is not determinative. So how does one know what is essential? That is the question. Take love, for example. Does one learn from experience what a love is, or does one have an innate concept of love that causes one to recognize it when one experiences it? If it's innate, where does it come from? And if one generalizes from experience, how does one initiate the generalization process? After all, the world could be informationally rich and logically coherent and be filled with nothing but discreet particulars, though in such a world communication, love, sexual reproduction, and the very idea of cats and dogs would be impossible or next to it.

Then we generalize based on the kind of creatures we are, Sesium said. I don't see a problem with that.

Well, the wizard continued, from a practical standpoint, perhaps there isn't, but there is a huge difference in saying one believes something because it is useful and saying one believes it because it is true.

Ab, Sesium nodded, not looking at the wizard as he maneuvered around a Roadway truck, we're back to the truth is a synthesis argument. Okay, I've got that point. So even if we generalize based on observation, we still have no assurance we have actually fixated

on the essential qualities—and no assurance that such qualities even exist.

Precisely, said the wizard. Nor is this a new problem in philosophy. Similar concerns, in various guises, can be traced to the late classical and early medieval period in the West. So it is no surprise that the doctrine of the Trinity is obscure. The very nature of being itself is obscure.

But how can I be asked to believe something I cannot comprehend? Sesiom asked.

Because belief and comprehension are not the same thing, the wizard said. We may believe because we understand, but we may also believe in order to understand (that's Augustine, by the way) or believe fully because we understand in part. In the case of the Trinity, orthodox Christians affirm one God and three persons. It seems to comport best with what we read in the New Testament and what we experience when, in response to the salvation he gives us, we worship Christ. That it is true seems clear enough, but how it can be true, we don't comprehend. We see through a glass darkly. We know only in part. That should be no surprise. Earlier I talked about the dematerialization of matter. What is matter, the stuff you and I and this Hummer and the world around us are made of? Well, it can be equated with energy; that is, with the capacity to work, and seems to be a conglomeration of elements that are themselves a combination of subatomic particles, which are themselves composed of strings vibrating in nine

or eleven dimensions (pick your favorite version of the theory). But how on earth can we imagine that? And if we don't have a clear grasp of the ontology of the stuff we are made of, or of the stuff that surrounds us and that we interact with every day, why should we have a clear grasp of the ontology of a being radically different from us?

And we were not made for such knowledge, Sesiom said, that's what you're getting at.

Sure, the wizard agreed. God wants us to be decent human beings. We want to know as God knows. Our desire, which is impossible, conflicts with God's desire, making it impossible apart from an act of God. Therein lies the whole story of our fall and our redemption.

But as a wizard, aren't you guilty of transgressing the boundaries established by God? You talk of magic theory. Isn't that an attempt to understand things as they are; that is, as God understands them?

I'm not trying to understand being, the wizard objected, I'm trying to understand the principles of interrelationships. The doctrine of the Trinity can teach us something very important about that. The doctrine suggests that a thing exists as it is in itself, but it also exists relationally, and this relational aspect of reality is ontologically as valid as the non-relational aspect. Reality is relationally constituted right down to the very core of things. It's interrelationship all the way up and all the way down. Relations actually comprise the essence of

the true God. God is one, but exists as three persons. Again I don't have to understand how it is true to believe that it is true.

Now let's apply this to your situation by using as our example the relationship between your wife, Melody, your daughter, Naketa, your friend, Jeffrey, and your tormentor, the malignant spirit. They, in their interrelationship, created an entity, but none save the malignant spirit were aware of it. So I want to focus on the foundation of that relationship, on the root of our problem: the malignant spirit. That spirit is the essence of what happened, so I want to understand what the spirit did. A grasp of magic theory helps me to do that. Interrelationship and a concomitant inter-influence is fundamental to the worldview of the magus. So I want to use that principle to try to understand what the spirit accomplished in this case. Based on what I know and what you've said, this is what I think happened: to secure its freedom, the spirit needed to kill an innocent and particularly vulnerable human being. It chose Naketa because she was both. Indeed, her concern for her uncle made her especially vulnerable. How did it get itself out of the cave? That was much more complex. I think it used the emptiness of Jeffrey and the vulnerability of Melody to overcome the duality of the skulls, and used you and Hank, who broke down the door, and the police who removed the skulls, to escape the cave. It could employ Melody's energies to keep Jeffrey functioning, then at the moment it struck Naketa, it drew heavily on Melody to galva-

nize Jeffrey. Once Naketa was dead, the spirit was free. Of course its abuse of and drain on Melody accounted for what happened to her.

It savored its triumph over the next few weeks by returning almost daily to rape Melody's brain. It did this after Sesiom had gone to work. It would settle over her cerebellum, fill it, begin to fabricate alkaloids, sometimes massive amounts of them that left Melody either exalted or crouched and whimpering in the closet. But mostly it concentrated on her lower level neural networks, the ones that generated her intentions, and caused her to make faces at herself while she capered in front of the mirror, or stand naked in the middle of the house and rage, or behave in other bizarre ways. While it did this, the spirit played on Melody's grief, planted guilty thoughts in her mind, and reinforced her conviction that she was losing her sanity and she could never tell Sesiom about how things were when he was gone. Sesiom, though he knew something was wrong, was devastated with grief himself and in no position to adequately appraise his wife's rapidly deteriorating condition. He tried to ask her sometimes how things were, but she was listless, or vague and distant, or angry. Sometimes they wept together on the couch, but often they lived like two strangers who shared the same boarding house, but had no interest in getting to know one another. All this suited the spirit just fine, especially after it killed Hans Camden.

Chapter Six (f)

The weeks after he had trapped the spirit had been among the most nerve wracking in Camden's life. He had placed the two skulls in his magic study and ranked the other skulls around them in an effort to confuse and disorient the demon (for he had convinced himself that is what his captive was), but he knew that was a temporary expedient and was not sure how long it would be effective. He needed to get down to the cabin he was building. He had discovered a cave up on Slab Town and was confident it would suit his purpose admirably. But what he had planned would take more than a few days so he asked for a couple of weeks off. During the time before his vacation was approved and he left, he made his preparations. He would need some things and would have to find the exact incantations and equipment to build the apparatus he suspected he would require. This was much bigger than anything he'd done before, or ever expected to do. He sensed there was real danger here and that he had to get this right.

Sleep became elusive during those weeks, and when he did sleep, he often had nightmares. Recurring nightmares in adults, as he well knew, were a sign that

something was seriously wrong. During his waking hours, he found it difficult to concentrate. Thoughts about nothing and everything flitted through his mind like the tag ends of weird dreams. Disquiet turned to fear, fear became dread. He found his coworkers more and more irritating and yet he hated to be alone. He began to suspect these were symptoms that signaled the spirit was breaking free and exercising influence upon him, influence that grew more baleful, more threatening, with each passing day, and these suspicions spurred his work, drove him almost to a frenzy.

Yet his colleagues seemed unaware of his acute distress. To them he remained peculiar old Camden, a bit more reserved and intense than usual, but that was to be expected. After all, he had tracked down the source of the contradictory data when no one else could find it or were even sure what the problem had been. Now he was racing to get the project back on schedule before he took his vacation, rerunning the experiments, reconfiguring the statistics. They were confident of his abilities, sure he would succeed if they just kept out of his way and let him work.

And of course he had accomplished everything they expected of him. It was all shipshape when he left.

He stared out his window remembering those weeks so long ago. His tea had gone cold beside him. He had forgotten to turn on any lights. The house, fused in silence at the end of his block and sticky with darkness, settled into its clutter of trees. Venus hung in the purple west. A raft of nimbus faded from salmon to ash.

Yes, he reflected, he had accomplished everything. And when it was time, he loaded his equipage onto a U-Haul trailer, drove it down from Illinois. Once in Johnstown, he'd had to rent a stake truck. And a chain saw. "Planning on clearing out some of your property," the clerk asked him good naturedly as Camden signed the papers and paid for use of the items. "Yes," Camden had replied. "My cabin's almost finished. I hope to be moving in sometime in the next couple of months; so I thought I would try to bring a little order to the surroundings." "Well, you be careful with that chain saw," the clerk had admonished him. "They can be real tricky if you don't know what you're doing." "Thanks," Camden said, "I'll be careful."

And careful he had been. Finding the trees he needed, then felling and shaping them had taken two twelve-hour days, and involved physical exertion beyond anything he was accustomed to or had expected. But moving the timber into the cave taxed him beyond that. The one thing he was grateful for was that during the entire week he was camped up on Slab Town, he did not see another soul. The mountain belonged to him. He might as well have been the only person in the world.

He had to make two trips into town during that week, one of them for tackle to manage the rough timbers for the door. It turned out the cave had a ledge from which he would need to drop the beams. Otherwise the cave had proved ideal. It even ended in a twisted niche that would be perfect for the skulls. And the

ledge too, though it made things more difficult, could prove beneficial since it might discourage explorers.

The other trip had been to pick up a lock an old acquaintance who was also interested in magic had agreed to mail to him. That special lock had been manufactured earlier in the century but never used. It, along with the imperative invoking the name of the Christ, would raise another barrier for the spirit. And so would the laurel he planted in front of the cave's mouth. Laurel, he knew, would not only conceal the mouth of the cave, it would raise an additional barrier for his captive. It was one of several plants that, if used properly, could become foci for magic power. By the end of the week, the skulls were secreted in the back of the cave, the door was built and padlocked, the laurel was set, and his work was done.

Still he did not feel comfortable with his precautions. He kept imagining that he'd made a mistake, that things could go wildly wrong. Indeed, he became so concerned that, after returning to Naperville, he notified his superiors of his decision to quit. They were of course surprised and dismayed, tried to persuade him to stay, and, to his surprise, even offered him a generous financial inducement. But to no avail. His purpose was set. He left Bell, sold his house, and moved into his cabin.

And there he remained for more than three decades, a sentry posted on the slopes of a windy forest guarding a site he never dared to visit. He kept to himself as he always had, went into town every couple of weeks for

supplies and to pick up any mail he received, or sometimes more often than that if he wanted to visit the library. His television allowed him to keep up with the outside world. He continued to subscribe to a couple of professional journals. In the mid-1980s he purchased the first of two computers. But mostly he spent his days pouring over magic lore, sifting through the garbage for the nuggets, trying to figure out what worked and why. He did this methodically but with a sense of existential desperation. This was not an indulgence anymore, not some whim of idle curiosity. He was preparing for combat, for the moment when the spirit would break free and seek its revenge. Well, that moment had come. The spirit was out and he was sure it would find him.

Interlogue

You say you are aware of seventeen in your brotherhood, Sesiom said, but I suppose there could be others out there, other brotherhoods you know nothing of.

The wizard snorted dismissively. It's highly unlikely. We can trace our heritage back for several thousand years, longer than the Catholic Church. And we've kept meticulous records. Of course, there are other magicians out there who organize and may keep a group alive for a few generations, but there is nothing else like us.

But how did you become a member of this organization, this "brotherhood of the staff," I think you called it? You certainly weren't born into it.

Not born in it, the wizard agreed, but born to it. We are not interested in numbers, though given our diminished state, perhaps we should be. But we haven't been, so recruitment is by invitation and elimination. In my case, I was approached in high school, invited to a summer retreat between my junior and senior year. My parents did not know the true nature of the case and I myself had only the vaguest idea what was entailed when I was asked. There were

many young people there canoeing, roasting marshmallows, and tramping through the fields on nature walks under the eye of adult supervisors. But, though none of them knew it, that was all window dressing. I and the three men who talked with me during those days were the real reason the camp was there.

So what happened? Sesiom asked.

I was given some tests though I suspected, and it was later confirmed, that most of the real evaluation had been done before I was contacted. Then the nature of the brotherhood was described, the kind of commitment it required detailed. No decision was allowed at the camp. I was instructed to think very carefully about this for several months and invited to correspond with the men during that time as questions occurred to me. After that, there were a couple of more meetings. But once I agreed, my regime of study was specified based on what were assumed to be my talents. Of course as things progressed and my abilities became more obvious, modifications were made in the regime. Each full wizard has something very different to offer so individuality is recognized as a fact and nurtured.

But how did they find out about you? Sesiom asked. *What criteria did they use?*

Strangely enough, I was never quite sure, the wizard laughed. I've not brought anyone into the brotherhood myself. Nor has anyone intimated that I should. And though two wizards have joined since I did, I was not part of their initiation, so, except for my own

experience, which may or may not have been typical, I've not had an inside look at how it's done. I was a normal enough kid. I went to a public high school. I was a good student, but not exceptional. I had the same dreams, fears, and insecurities, that my peers had. But I was always a religious boy, active in my church, and I suspect that may have had something to do with it. Also I think a precipitating cause might have been an essay I wrote as part of a contest I entered when I was a sophomore. Those contests are not always what they appear to be. The wizard looked over at Sesiom and smiled. I still remember the topic: in less than a thousand words, describe what you expect the world to be like in thirty years. I didn't win. I didn't even place. But I think my essay was my passport into the fraternity.

Chapter Seven (a)

Melody stood behind the living room plate glass and watched Sesiom leave for work. The sun, glinting on patches of snow, shaded her, so Sesiom could not see her though he knew she was there. But she could see him, his right arm crooked over the car seat, his left pivoted against the steering wheel as he craned his neck to look through the rear window and back his Hummer into the street. The car was so pretentious, she thought idly, so impractical for a thirty minute drive to work, but so much of their life together seemed pretentious and impractical with Naketa gone.

Naketa gone. Everything revolved around that breach in the cosmos, that fissure in her existence created by her child's death. No, not death. Murder. The red word hung there like a gash. She could still see Jeffrey falling across Naketa as clearly as though she were in the room with them, could hear the ring of the pitcher as it struck the floor. And both of them lying dead, Naketa murdered by a living corpse. She could hear her own screams smashing through the inexplicable exhaustion she felt at that moment, the exhaustion that she remembered through spasms of guilt. Her

precious child murdered, and she felt so very tired! The grief still sapped her, still engendered a lethargy before which she was powerless. She knew she and Sesiom had to come together on this thing if they were going to get through it, or at least if she was, but she felt so cut off from him, from everyone. It was harder and harder to leave the house. Sometimes it was almost impossible to leave any particular room in which she found herself.

And now Sesiom was gone again, and she was alone again, and the weird thoughts started again, and the hallucinations, and her bizarre, sometimes shameful, behavior. Her days were turning into LSD trips of horrible intensity, unlike anything she had ever experienced before. In moments of lucidity, she wondered if she were being poisoned. But that made no sense. Nothing made sense. Especially her inability to talk to Sesiom about it. But what would she say to him? "Sesiom, whenever you're gone, I start having flashbacks, really awful stuff. It began on the mountain. I said there was a child in the woods, but there was no child. I just made that up because I didn't want you or anyone to know what had really happened. And now it's getting worse. It's like when you're gone, I'm tripping all the time. You're not putting something into my orange juice, are you, honey? Sesiom, I think I'm fading away into Hell. I know I'm losing my mind." If she said that, it would be true. It would be how she felt. But she could not bring herself to confide in her husband. Was he putting something in her orange juice? She didn't believe it, but the question was re-

vealing. Somehow he was becoming the problem, the enemy. He seemed to be recovering without her, even in spite of her. He seemed to be getting through this, leaving her behind. He was healing and she wasn't. They might not get through this, but he would.

It was his faith, she thought, his faith that sustained him. She had not known he had such an abiding faith, a faith that could look past his comatose friend suddenly reviving and murdering his daughter, and see Christ. It seemed ridiculous, almost blasphemous, when she thought of it that way, but there it was. That was Sesiom's faith. Hers was nothing like that. Indeed, she was beginning to doubt she had much faith at all, or, if she did, it had been faith in something very different, and that something had died, had begun to die on the mountain, had finished dying in her living room. Now she was alone with these overwhelming experiences out of which she could derive nothing but a snarling hubbub, a jumble of wrenching guilt before some vast and anonymous condemnation. Sesiom retreated from her, faded into his workaday world with his workaday faith in that workaday carpenter called Jesus. And her stranded and spinning, twirling, like a dead leaf above gusts of flame. That sense of abandonment was all she had.

She sank to the rug—again, tears streaming down her cheeks—again, and heard her own wrenching sobs—again, while the weave of the carpet began to crawl and pulse suggestively. She knew what was to come, and knew it would be bad. Her brain seemed to stick to her skull like a beetle freezing to glare ice. She could

not go on like this. She could not face this soul draining psychedelic chaos day after day. . . . And then the thought burst upon her like a blossom of sunshine. Why had she not seen it before? It was so obvious. She had been brushed by divinity. God had found her, was calling to her. God wanted her—in some crazy way God needed her—not here where she was, but in God's presence. She looked up through the plate glass, past the empty claws of the winter trees, and into the brittle blue sky. Black behind that cerulean dome, heaven swarmed with galaxies, and behind it all was the impenetrable blackness that held everything and was God, beckoning her, welcoming her home. All that raw power from beyond the universe focused on her. Caring for her. Longing for her.

How could she refuse?

Her mind was pellucid, her vision cleared, her heart joyous for the first time in months. She rose from the carpet, walked to the bathroom, began to fill the tub. Then, as the hot water cascaded, she went into the kitchen and found a carton of Morton's salt. Back in the bathroom, she emptied the entire container into the frothing water. When the last grains had dissolved, she placed the container carefully on the counter, mused while she closed the tap and stripped off her clothes. As she folded them with the towels, she glanced at herself in the mirror. Not bad for a woman of her age. She had been careful of her health over the years, and it showed. At that, at least, she had been successful.

Then she plugged in her hair dryer, stepped into the hot water, slid down until it was up to her breasts, and, imagining the darkness that was calling to her, she flipped the dryer on and dropped it into the water.

The leaf, dancing above the raging fire, burst into flame, swirled to ash, blew away.

Interlogue

I guess I don't understand all the secrecy, Sesiom said. What is the point? We live in a free society. One can be a witch, an atheist, or an advocate for peyote. One can practice whatever faith one wants. Why hide? I assume you have your reasons, but what are they?

The wizard interlaced his fingers and pushed his arms out, flexed his shoulders and sighed. Then he shifted in his seat a bit as he thought over Sesiom's question. Finally he said, *I am not sure that secret is really the best word to use. I think discrete is more near the mark. This is nothing new. We have always preferred to stay in the background. I suppose it is the nature of the study itself. We have always felt the need to couch our knowledge in codes and figures. In a sense, any profession, by developing a jargon, does the same kind of thing. Specialized language supports specialized concepts. But I think that, in our case, it goes deeper than that. I said earlier that arrogance was our great weakness, and I suspect that arrogance fuels our desire for discretion. We just seem to attract the kind of intellectual that has little need for, indeed might be positively adverse to, acclaim. There is a*

certain satisfaction in being on the inside, in knowing something very important that few others know. And there is a certain kind of power in that. So I think discretion simply comports with our psychology. That is a nasty little truth, but one, I'm afraid, we are forced to acknowledge.

But if you really have so much to offer, isn't it wrong, even immoral, to hide your light under a bushel, so to speak?

That is a good point, and something that comes up among wizards from time to time. But I can't see how coming forward now after all these thousands of years would do much good. Indeed, it could do much harm precisely because it would be so sensational. If we are needed, there are those who know how to contact us, and we have ways of identifying those we might help. I found you, didn't I?

But if you do help people, aren't they predisposed to talk about it? After we've had our little adventure, why shouldn't I tell everyone who will listen about this extraordinary thing that occurred?

The question hung between them, huge and awkward. Dawn was gray behind the mountains. Suddenly Sesiom felt an icy needle of danger. Night, as it dissolved into dim shadow, seemed to collect around the wizard. In the half light he looked darker, more indistinct. Then he turned toward Sesiom and his eyes glowed like those of an animal. Sesiom remembered from his high school biology class that the effect was

caused by a reflective membrane called tapetum. *Tapetum*, the word fell absurdly from his lips.

That question often comes up too, the wizard acknowledged.

Chapter Seven (b)

Over the years he had begun to believe he must be a very poor scholar. Indeed, that conviction improved the quality of his work. And conviction it was. He might ponder some obscure or patiently nonsensical phrase for months, or puzzle over a spell that seemed effective only sixty percent of the time. What did the phrase mean? Why did the spell secure only a sixty percent success rate? Why not one hundred percent or forty percent? Then the penny would drop from the wings of the autumn wind while he was walking on the mountain, or the way a cloud formed would suddenly reveal the universe, and the truth would seem so obvious that he wondered how he could have missed it before. In the days when wizards ruled, he had read, they said the birds wrote the answers in the sky. He was beginning to see what they meant. Everything seemed to squirm with secrets struggling to tell on themselves. And as below, so above. The stars too were oracles. He suspected that insight might be the root of the bastard astrology. But his progress was so slow. Rethinking the world was like dying a little every day. He suspected he was thick as a brick, as the British would have put it. He even found a quote from a

Taoist sage Pao Piao Tse that seemed to mirror his own belief in his mediocrity. He could not read the Chinese characters on the roll, but he had hung them over his desk, for he had been told they said something like this: the very best scholars find the Tao on the battlefield. Good scholars can find it in the city. But we poor scholars must retire to the mountains to obtain it.

Yeah, that was him. Not just a sentry, but a stupid man exiled to the mountains to wrestle with angels.

He sighed. Those years had been lonely even for a person as solitary as he was, and they had cut a huge swath out of his life. And yet they had also been exciting, a rarefied intellectual thrill. As he studied and pondered, the world changed before his eyes, transformed itself from one kind of entity defined by matter in motion to another kind of entity defined by language, not just the mathematical language of physics, though that was certainly there, but the language of poetry. The world, indeed the very cosmos, was not a formula. Instead it was one immense epic poem.

There was a knock on his door. He glanced at the digital clock on his desk. 7:43. Who would have come at this hour? Surely not the lieutenant. In fact, no one ever came at this hour. He felt the small hairs on the back of his neck stir. And then he heard the knob on the door turn. He'd forgotten to lock it.

He rose from his chair and started toward the hall. The entire house was dark so whoever was there probably thought it was empty, that the homeowner had taken a walk and forgotten to lock up or else was in the

backyard to savor the textures of eventide. But before he could reach the door into the hall, the intruder was there, filling it. He must have been well over six feet tall and weighed somewhere in the neighborhood of three hundred pounds. His eyes glowed greenish like the eyes of a cat. But there was nothing catlike in his grin. It was all wolf.

"Hello, Camden," the intruder said in a voice that sparkled with sugar and silk. "You've aged."

Camden felt exactly as though he were naked and locked in a small cage with a hungry tiger. So this was how it was going to be. He wanted to respond with bravado, or ambush the spirit with a spell or imprecation like he had before and send it dismayed and roaring into the night, but his mind was paralyzed.

"No, no, no," the spirit smiled, wagging his finger. "I sealed a few of the chambers in that brain of yours while you were woolgathering. There's no danger they'll pop open." He began to pace around the room. Camden, sick with fear, was rooted to the spot.

"I watched you for a few weeks," the spirit explained, adopting a solicitous manner. "You are a tricky one, and you've learned some things since we last met. But you are right about your abilities. You were not a quick study, just a man of modest intelligence and slender accomplishments. Think of the last three decades as a distraction. You should have stayed back at the lab. That's where I plan to go," the spirit seemed almost jovial, "in a little while. I wouldn't call it home, but it sure beats the cave. First, though, I've some things to

clean up here." The spirit stood with his back toward Camden and gazed into the night. "You know, I underestimated you in the beginning, let my curiosity get the best of me. I don't usually do that. In fact, I've never done that before. Well," and here the spirit threw back his head in a hearty peal of laughter, "live and learn, eh?" Then he was directly in front of Camden, his face inches from Camden's face. And there was that wolfish grin again. "Now," the grin collapsed into pure focused fury, "you are mine."

Interlogue

The Hummer turned off the state highway, maneuvered through the trees, and stopped before the empty cabin. Dew in the yard glittered under the early morning sun. The air was chilly, the trees ghosted with the first unfolding of spring. The Hummer engine died, and two men emerged, a black man from the rider's side, a white man from the passenger's side. The black man waited passively while the white man removed a staff, which he leaned against the Hummer, and a wide flat box of intricately carved wood, which he placed on its hood. Then he took out a dark rock bristling with crystals. He walked around the vehicle and gave the stone to the black man. Going back to his side of the Hummer, he took out a cloak, which he knotted around his waist. Then he tucked the slender box under his arm, picked up the staff and said, Okay, Sesiom, I want you to take me to the cave.

Without a word, Sesiom, holding the crystal stone with both hands, started walking toward the forest.

Chapter Seven (c)

At 10:00 AM sharp, Cullman arrived at Franks. Camden was not yet there, so the lieutenant ordered coffee and waited until 10:30. Still no Camden. Cullman sensed that something had gone awry. The man he spoke to over the telephone yesterday afternoon had sounded eager to talk. Cullman even expected Camden to be at the café when he entered. So he decided he would visit Mr. Camden in his home. He paid for his coffee, left the café, and took Jacks Row to Highway 37. He followed 37 to the edge of town, turned into Camden's neighborhood, found Bristol Street where Camden lived, and drove to the end of it. There it was, set back among a grove of oak and red maple, and clearly identified by the mailbox on the curb. A couple of sourwoods screened it from the road. It was a small house, one story. "Private," Cullman thought. Camden was either a man who liked his own company or was uncomfortable around others. Probably a little of both.

Cullman walked briskly to the front door, rang the bell. There was no response. A quizzical sparrow studied him from a sourwood branch. He buzzed again, then tried the knob. The door was unlocked. He pushed it

opened slightly and called into the house, "Mr. Camden, it's Lieutenant Cullman. I thought we had an appointment at Franks today." No answer.

Now Cullman was becoming alarmed. He pushed the door opened and stepped into the vestibule. Morning flooded the hallway. "Mr. Camden," he called again. The house was silent. Down the short hall and to the right, he could see the living room, lit dimly by the shaded morning sun that streamed through the trees. A quick stride and he was there. Camden was slumped in the middle of the floor. Cullman knelt beside him, touched his throat for a pulse, lifted an eyelid. He was cold, stiffening, obviously been dead for several hours. Cullman went to the telephone and, picking up the receiver using a handkerchief, dialed 911.

While he waited for the ambulance and the police, he looked around the scene. A cup partly full of a pale liquid he assumed was some kind of tea sat in a saucer near an armchair in front of a window that looked out into Camden's backyard. A notebook of lined paper lay on the desktop by the telephone. Apparently Camden had been jotting down some thoughts, perhaps after the telephone call. Otherwise everything seemed to be in apple pie order.

Cullman, careful to disturb nothing, glanced at the tablet. The writing was difficult to read in the shadowy room so he took a penlight from his shirt pocket and, clicking it, peered at the scribbles. The yellow pencil Camden must have used was lying to one side of the page.

Cullman read, "what does he know? why does he want to see me? talking points: sale of cabin building cabin retirement what about cave?" Then further down: "probably better not to say why would never understand why is there no 'church' for this, no community of converts?" Then "skulls are the problem." Then at the bottom "find out what he knows" This sounded much more uncertain than the confident voice he had heard over the telephone. Camden was obviously more concerned about the meeting than he had let on. But why? Cullman knew that Camden had had nothing to do with the death of the children. Those skulls were a hundred and fifty years old. He clicked off his penlight and looked at the crumpled body of the man on the floor. What had worried him so? What secrets lay shielded by his death?

Cullman stepped into the hall to wait for the police, then decided to look around a little more before they arrived. Across from him was an opened kitchen, small, neat. The dish rack by the sink was empty save for a pan, which Cullman assumed Camden had used to boil water for his tea. Further down the hall he saw another door, this one closed. Cullman strode to it and, using his handkerchief again, tried the knob. The door opened.

The room was cluttered, very dark. Cullman felt for a switch by the door, found it, flooded the room with light. Books were everywhere, lining shelves, piled in opened cardboard boxes, stacked on the floor. A computer sat on a small wooden table in a muddle of paper and floppy disks. And on the shelves among the

books crystals bristled clear or tawny, purple or green. What Cullman assumed were unset gemstones were scattered among them. On another table near the computer was a collection of metal instruments whose purpose Cullman could not imagine. One looked like a wire globe, another like a sextant, a third like a pyramid bolted together from copper or brass strips. Some held candles of diverse colors, others seemed to be partially disassembled. A particularly striking one was comprised of a series of small poles arranged in four concentric circles. Each pole was topped with a trapezoid of stained glass of all the hues of the rainbow. The device was set on a small electric motor, so Cullman assumed it must revolve in some way. Carved into the room's wooden floor and partly covered by the jumble, a pentagram stretched from wall to wall, words that Cullman assumed to be Latin etched along its border. And on the top of one of the bookshelves, Cullman saw a row of seven skulls, only unlike the two small ones in the cave, these were covered in designs of black, red, yellow, and orange. Unlike the rest of the house he had seen, this room, Cullman thought dryly, looked lived in.

Interlogue

The two men approached the cave, Sesiom still in the lead although it no longer mattered. The level of power that had been concentrated here was fading, and growing more dangerously unstable in the process, but the rocks continued to oscillate with so much force that the wizard had become aware of them while the two men were still on the logging road. That much power reverberating though the cave would gradually smooth the rock walls, create an aura animals would sense and shy away from. Swofford and his friends never knew what they'd found, he mused, though of course there was no reason they should have. They were not sensitives, not trained, and had no natural capacity for this kind of thing. Of course, the spirit that lured them here, that had needed them to free itself, that spirit knew though it doubtless did not care. But the one who set out the skulls and built the door, had that person known what he'd done? Was he aware that the spell he'd cast, the puzzle he'd set to entrap the spirit, had for a time brought into being a juncture between a dozen universes? Had he known that myriad worlds configured in ways that beggared the imagining had interfaced across the

energy fields in this bit of hollow granite? He doubted it. None of the brotherhood would have done what he now had to undo, and only a member of the brotherhood would have known. Of that he was sure. This was the work of a bright child who had balanced the destinies of trillions of versions of the future on the tip of a needle. The wizard shook his head. It was unimportant now, he thought.

They arrived at the mouth of the cave and Sesiom stopped. The wizard stood behind him and said softly, Now, Sesiom, you and I are going into the cave and we are going to perform a little ceremony that will put things back in order here, at least partly. I cannot do this by myself. I need you to help me. So you must continue to do what I tell you to do, do you understand?

Sesiom nodded mutely.

Good, the wizard said. From now on you follow me. I am going to say some words so we will not need a lantern. What we do in the cave should not take too long, so we'll be through shortly. Okay?

Sesiom nodded again.

The wizard walked around Sesiom, turned to him, knelt on the ground and spit. Then rubbing the spittle into the earth with his right forefinger, he muttered briefly under his breath, stood up and touched both Sesiom's eyes with that finger. Then he said, Follow me, and, turning, stepped through the laurel and into the cave. Sesiom followed.

Though they carried no light, both men could see as clearly as though the interior of the cave was lit by the noonday sun. They walked briskly, Sesiom behind, until they reached the ledge, then the wizard turned to Sesiom and said, I want you to hold your crystals in your right hand and put your left hand on my left shoulder and press down hard. Stand very straight, and don't take your gaze from the back of my head. I want you to concentrate as intensely as you can on the back of my head. He then turned from Sesiom who, clutching the crystal rock with his right hand, placed his left hand on the wizard's left shoulder and stood as instructed, watching the back of the wizard's head intently.

The wizard, facing the ledge and holding the thin box of carved wood under his left arm, held his staff out with his right hand and turned the jewel to the floor of the cave. Immediately the two men rose a couple of inches from the ground. Sesiom kept his hand on the wizard's shoulder and continued to stare at the back of the wizard's head. The wizard tilted his staff forward, floated over the pit and slowly descended as he murmured beneath his breath. In less than a minute they were on the cave's lower floor.

Not looking at Sesiom, the wizard said, Now take your hand off my shoulder. We are going to continue forward. Keep watching me. Sesiom did as instructed.

The two men walked forward briskly and quickly arrived at the door, which stood ajar just as Hank and Sesiom had left it. The wizard showed no interest

in it and continued down the tunnel. In almost no time, they reached its end. The wizard then turned to Sesiom and said, Hand me the crystal, please. Sesiom handed him the crystal.

The wizard placed the crystal on the floor to one side of the cave and then said to Sesiom. I want you to take off your clothes.

Sesiom removed his clothing. The wizard folded the items neatly and laid them next to the crystal. Then he said to Sesiom, Now kneel down, then drop forward so that your hands and knees are on the cave floor, just like you used to do when you and Naketa pretended you were a horse, okay.

The reference to his daughter caused Sesiom to pause for a moment. He stared blankly ahead as though remembering the game they had played when she was a little girl. Then he knelt down and dropped forward on his hands. He head was down so that he was looking at the floor.

The wizard knelt beside him and put the slender carved wooden box on the floor in front of them. He then snapped it opened. Inside were four very sharp knives, each with a bone handle carved in a distinct way. The first looked like a man, the second like a lion, the third like an ox, and the fourth like an eagle. Taking up the knife with the bone handle that looked like an eagle, the wizard said to Sesiom, Sesiom, I want you to hold your head up and envision Naketa standing before you. She is happy to see you and she so wants to play the game, to ride on your back. But

you will not carry her around the living room this time, Sesiom. When she gets on your back, you will carry her through the pastures of heaven, and while you do, she will sing "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." She used to love it when you rocked her in your arms and sang that song to her. Now she will sing it to you. Now hold back your head, Sesiom.

Sesiom held his head back, staring straight into the blackness of what appeared to them both to be a brilliantly lit cave, seeing his daughter just as the wizard said he would, seeing her as she had been when she was three years old and he had sung to her and carried her in his arms, seeing her smiling at him, her hands stretched toward him. In one quick motion, the wizard slashed Sesiom's throat. His blood gushed out on the cave floor, and he fell face forward into the sticky pool it made.

The wizard rose quickly, slit the end of his tongue with the knife, then licked Sesiom's blood from the blade, mingling his life with Sesiom's. For an instant, he could feel Sesiom surge through him, feel the astonishment Sesiom felt. For an instant, he could see the two azure humanoid figures suspended in the transparent rock, see them reach toward Sesiom and welcome him. For an instant. Then the rock was rock again and Sesiom's body lay face down in his own blood and the harsh glare of the magic light. Farewell, my friend, the wizard said softly. I believe that some day we shall recline as brothers at the feast of the lamb.

Chapter Seven (d)

According to the autopsy, Camden had died from a massive heart attack. The coroner, when he handed Cullman the report, expressed some surprise over that. "The man was in remarkably good shape for someone his age," the coroner said. "He had obviously taken exceptional care of himself for many years. I would not have predicted that kind of death, but it is all statistical, I suppose. And I've no idea what his family history is. Those predisposed to heart attacks can have them even when they do everything right. Still one this massive—and it was obviously his first—well, I simply would not have expected it."

Cullman thanked him for the report, took it to his office and read it over.

Beyond his long-term, serious interest in magic, the police investigation had turned up nothing extraordinary in Camden's house, no sign of breaking and entry, no sign of foul play, no sign of violence. The man had apparently been spending a quiet evening at home, sipping green tea, watching night fall in his garden, apparently thinking about their meeting in the morning. Then this otherwise vigorously healthy man

had gotten up from his chair, walked to the middle of the room, and collapsed from a massive heart attack. And everything he might have said, whatever story he wanted to tell Cullman, had died with him.

It made no sense, and because it made no sense, it made Cullman suspicious. It was just too pat.

Cullman reviewed what little he knew. Camden had been employed at Bell Labs in Naperville, Illinois, until 1972, when he'd suddenly quit and moved into his recently built cabin outside Johnstown. That was more than thirty years ago so no one at the lab remembered him, but a hunt through the records turned up no problems. He seemed to have been an exemplary employee, headed a research team, had published in a couple of scientific journals. Why had he quit? The microfilmed documents indicated only "personal reasons." Well, whatever those reasons had been, they had driven him from his busy life in the lab to live alone in that little cabin on Hook-n-Tie until he sold it to Jeffrey Swofford and moved to Henryville. No one in either town seemed to have known him well. A very private man. A competent scientist. And yet a man who, for some reason, became very interested in, maybe even obsessed by, magic.

And he knew about the cave. His cryptic comments over the telephone as well as his enigmatic notes left no doubt about that. What was more, he seemed to have moved to the cabin around the time the door in the cave had been constructed, and there was no doubt in Cullman's mind that the door and the skulls

had magical significance. That suggested that Camden had moved to his cabin to be near the cave, to watch something or study something. But he'd not gone into the cave for many years, maybe not since he'd built the door. And why had he finally decided to move? Cullman had no idea.

The next part of the story seemed straight forward enough. Swofford had discovered the cave, invited his friends to explore it with him, but had gone back to it by himself and been badly injured when he fell from the ledge. Nothing very mysterious there. But what happened later was completely bizarre. The Peterson family had visited Swofford frequently at the hospital. That had to have been quite a drive for them, but they had done it regularly. Then on one visit, Swofford had risen from his coma, clubbed the Peterson girl to death with a metal water pitcher (apparently he'd killed her with a single blow), and then died. He had heard later that Mrs. Peterson had committed suicide though he did not know the particulars.

Cullman shook his head, stared down at the coroner's report. He did not like the direction this was taking him. Mostly, he had to admit, because he did not think the world really worked that way. But his thoughts kept going back to magic, some very potent and very bad magic. What had Camden been doing? It all came back to the cave. Why had so many people associated with that cave died?

He rose from his chair and walked into the outer office. Marge was not scheduled to work, but Sergeant

Fox was at his desk. Cullman walked over to Fox and said, "George, I think I'd like to have another look at that cave up on Slab Town. If you're not busy, I'd like you to come with me."

"Of course," Sergeant Fox said, getting up and reaching for his blue police jacket. "Let's go. Anything you're looking for particularly?"

"I'm not sure," Cullman said. "A lot of things bother me about that cave, but nothing I can really put my finger on. I just thought we could go back, look around, do a little brainstorming, stir the pot, you know, and see what floats to the top."

"Sounds good to me," the sergeant said. "We've been over that place with a fine toothed comb, but it never hurts to look again. And it's a nice day." He grinned at the lieutenant. "It'll be good to get out of the office. We going to go climbing down into the cave?"

"Yeah," Cullman said. "I'd like to go all the way back. Just walk through the place one more time. It would make me feel better. And that can't hurt." He grinned back at the sergeant.

"Well," Fox replied cheerfully, "if it would make you feel better, let's sign out the gear and go."

Interlogue

The wizard knelt by Sesiom's corpse and began to perform a ceremony that was older than Abraham. Using his lion knife, he cut Sesiom into pieces. Quickly. Efficiently. Bones popped. Joints snapped. Blood splattered everywhere. He was cutting a covenant, making a compact by slicing up a body, a covenant to express the reality of new life emerging from the remnants of the old and secured in the finality to the death to which the remnants witnessed, the death of the victim.

Silently and working with great speed, the wizard arranged Sesiom's parts into a pattern, then knelt and placed Sesiom's folded clothes in the center of that pattern. He next snatched up the crystal and in a single sweep flung it against the rock floor where it shattered. Then, collecting shards, he used them to construct a secondary pattern within the one formed by the sundered parts of Sesiom's corpse. Finally he took his staff, dipped its crystal tip into Sesiom's drying blood and slashed the Hebrew word yatsa on the wall above the gory design. As the wizard performed this ceremony, the light in the cave grew ever more brilliant. The crystal fragments began to flicker,

began to lap among Sesiom's body parts like little flames, began to blaze. And those body parts and the wizard himself grew darker, darker, turned cinder black. And as the blaze consumed them all, the wizard sang his spell, his imprecations, in the language of the Medes and Persians, the language of a law that could never be changed.

Chapter Seven (e)

Lieutenant Cullman drove the unmarked sedan down 37 toward Swofford's place, Sergeant Fox riding beside him. Neither man said anything. The radio between them under the dashboard crackled with occasional police traffic. The two-lane highway threaded along the slopes, ducked through an occasional cleft sculpted by dynamite and creeping with kudzu. Sun fire stabbed the hood of the car, danced among branches hazy with the new green of April. Sergeant Fox had his window down and was enjoying the cool wind and the fragrance of the mountains.

Sun fire. Yes. But not yet fiery.

However, from the look of things, the temperature by afternoon would smash the record for this date. Possibly for every date. Sweltering days were unheard of at this time of year. Sergeant Fox could not recall such a prediction on the weather report. Maybe he should chalk it up to global warming. Or maybe it was something else. But there was no question the light was getting brighter. It seemed to be coming, not from the sun, but from everywhere.

He thought of a question he'd asked in Sunday school, back at that age when children, their imagination and credulity galloping in tandem, would get right to the point. "Doesn't light come from the sun?" he's queried his teacher. "Then how could there be light and plants and things like that before there was a sun like the Bible says?" His teacher had responded, "Who said light has to come from the sun? Light can come from anywhere." The class seemed satisfied with that but it had sounded so lame to him, such an insipid answer. It dawned on him that she might never had thought what he just thought, might never have asked such a question before and did not know how to reply. He had suddenly felt almost sorry for her, and a little embarrassed. But now her words, hidden for years in some obscure corner of his mind, came back to him as peculiarly insightful. "Who said light has to come from the sun?" After all, why was light apart from the sun so difficult to believe? It seemed to be blazing up from everywhere right now, not searing but cool and casting no shadow, like the light of fluorescent tubes, but more intense, and increasing in radiance by the moment.

Light in veils pulsed and rose from the pavement until the asphalt gleamed like frosted white plastic. It shimmered from the trees until the whole forest looked as though it had been whittled from a single luminous essence. It turned heaven incandescent and bleached the milky puffs of cloud until they seethed. The bluffs of dismal granite glowed. And still the light swelled, filling the car, filling the air,

filling the men themselves. But cool, clean, in the strangest way almost crisp. Sergeant Fox glanced over at Lieutenant Cullman. The lieutenant's suit looked like it had been made of sequins and placed under kliegs, and the lieutenant's face, though he was looking out the window and paying no attention to Fox, was as dazzling as living alabaster.

Sergeant Fox wanted to say, "Have you ever seen anything like this before, Joe?" Or maybe, "What in the name of God is going on?" But before he could speak a word, the brilliance began to wither, to recede behind the outlines of the world of matter, to fall back into whatever glory hid it. The forest, the mountains, the men dwindled to normal, but only for a instant. Then the light flared up more pure than before, and everything, the police, the car, the trees, the bluffs, the very sky, faded like the images on an old Polaroid, became as smooth as fresh snow, and was gone.

It raged, roared, writhed. Damn the wizards! Damn the blue watchers! Damn the God who refused to yield! Damn the contest so unfairly won! Damn itself for failing. Damn this realm it saw purified and vanishing! Damn! Damn! Damn it all! It watched this stream of reality dissolve, saw itself stymied by the same rules that gave it its power, the iron rules no one could break, no one could change, the rules that secured the purposes of God, the rules it hated even as it used them to maneuver around them. It was not the power or knowledge of any particular wizard, it was the matrix

of knowledge the wizards had amassed and could exploit, the matrix built from those rules, that defeated it. The wizards and their culture coupled with those blue execrable angels and God behind them able to achieve success even when they made the stupidest mistakes. God rescued them from their errors, but turned its successes against it. That was not fair. That was unprincipled exactly because of the unbreakable laws. The whole of creation was like a trap that offered the chance to rebel even as it demanded obedience. It was plunging in fury, clutching at the scraps of the universe that withered and crumbled around it. And then it was hurled into the borderless deep.

Finale

Sesiom could no longer live in his house. The memories crushed him. The empty rooms emptied him. Melody's things, Naketa's things, were too terrible to keep, too precious to discard. So he packed their stuff away, taped it up in cardboard boxes, put them in storage, and sold the house.

It sold quickly. That was not surprising. They had lived in an upscale neighborhood, very desirable, on a half acre of landscaped property with lots of trees. The purchasers were a nice middle aged couple with two boys in high school. They loved the house, could hardly believe he wanted to sell it. He was being transferred to another job, he told them, and that wasn't completely untrue. He had been given leave from his job, but he doubted he would return when his leave ended. He did not know what he would do.

He rented an efficiency apartment where he had some long discussions with his pastor and a couple of elders from the church. He was not angry with God, he assured them. It was just that the life he had been living no longer made sense to him. He needed to think things through. An indulgence of the wealthy perhaps.

A poor man would not have had that option. But he had it and he used it.

Hank telephoned him a couple of times to invite him out to the Black Hills for a week of hiking. "We can stay in Rapid City, go out on the trails during the day. I'm sure some of them will be opened. It'll be cold, but there won't be a lot of tourists there so we can get a good price on a hotel. Drew is going to New York City with his class so it'll just be you and me. I'd like to get away for a while, and I'm sure it would do you a world of good." But Sesiom demurred, thanked his friend, told him he would be in touch. But he didn't call Hank back and, almost unnoticed, the days turned into a couple of weeks.

His apartment was on the third floor so he began spending his afternoons on its balcony when the weather was warm enough. He would sit at a small glass topped table and read, or more often he would just look out over the neighborhood and let his thoughts wander. He chided himself sometimes that he should take better care of himself, get some exercise, that sitting around like this could not be a good thing, but mostly he did not care. The lethargy was simply too powerful for him to overcome.

And he was lost in thought at that table one afternoon, yesterday's newspaper only partly read lying beside him, when a raven flew up and, with a flutter of wings, perched on the balcony railing just about three feet from where Sesiom sat. It cocked its head, regarding him for a moment. Astonishingly it carried a business

card in its beak. Raven and man watched one another for a second, one with bright unwondering eyes, the other in speechless wonder. Then the bird arched its neck, dropped the card on the balcony floor, and, pushing off with its legs, flapped and was gone.

Sesiom looked down at the card. Although it lay on the other side of the table, he could see something was written on it. Standing up from his chair, Sesiom took a step over to the card, stooped down and picked it up. A telephone number. The bird had delivered a telephone number. Holding the card in his right hand, Sesiom gazed up into the sky, ran his left hand over his hair. But the sky was empty. The bird had disappeared. He looked back down at the ten-digit number, then strode into his apartment and over to the telephone. Snatching the receiver from its cradle, he dialed the number. On the other end he heard one ring, then someone picked up the phone. Sesiom was going to introduce himself, explain about the bird, ask if there was some reason he was supposed to call, but before he could say anything a man's voice on the other end said, "It is done." And the phone went dead.

"Who was it?" Naketa called from the kitchen.

"Don't know, Keta" Sesiom said, slightly puzzled. "Just a wrong number, I guess." He looked down at the card in his hand. Now where had he gotten that? He was always picking those things up. He would have to clean out his wallet more often. At least it's a man's handwriting, he smiled ruefully. He tossed the card into the wastebasket by the telephone and walked

back over to his Lazy Boy, picked up the newspaper he'd been reading before he was interrupted by the phone call, and continued with the story. Within twenty minutes, the card in the wastebasket had disappeared and all memory of it and the specifics of the call had been decomposed in Sesiom's mind. What everyone recalled was the phone ringing, and that it had been a wrong number. A completely trivial event not worth remembering and soon forgotten.

Melody walked in from the kitchen where she and Naketa had been preparing supper and kissed Sesiom on top of his head. He glanced up at her and she said, "I was thinking about going to see *Out of Time* this Saturday. Want to come?"

"Sure," Sesiom said. "The previews looked pretty good."

"Then it's a date," Melody smiled. "I think it'll be suitable for Keta. The three of us will do the matinee, then go for banana splits."

"All that sugar . . . but with potassium!" Sesiom laughed. "You, my dearest, are a seductress."

"And you," she laughed back, "are my cynosure."

"No," Sesiom replied, picking up on their old game, "I'm afraid I'm just a dinosaur."

Melody smiled and went back to the kitchen, and Sesiom returned to his newspaper. He loved his wife and daughter, he thought, and he loved being home.

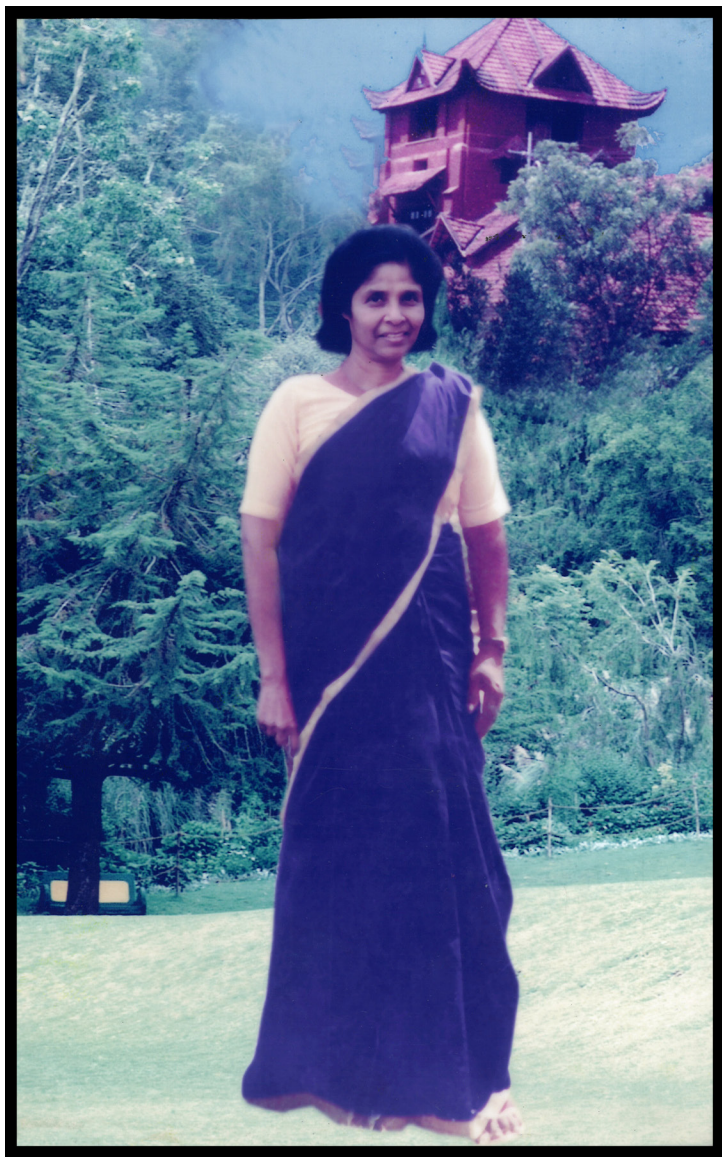
Epilogue

A sequence of coin tosses is the paradigmatic illustration of randomness. Flip it enough times, and, if the coin is "honest," the results will almost exactly divide between heads and tails. Everyone knows this, has known it since childhood. But what is not so generally well known is that a tossed coin embodies a chaotic system, and chaotic systems are fully determined. That means that once the coin is tossed, its result is fixed. The question then is, how does a fully determined process express randomness?

The nature of our universe rests upon that question, for the tossed coin illustrates the underlying quantum causality that gives rise to our world. Quantum mechanics obtains not only at the subatomic level, it obtains at our level as well. Ours is a quantum cosmos expressed instant by instant as a space/time hologram the qualities of which are created by infinitesimally tiny vibrations that stretch through dimensions we cannot access or even accurately imagine. And each instant embodies quadrillions of possible worlds contingent on, and framed by, the hologram. Consequently universes beyond counting bud and flower each moment, affecting one another

gravitationally and in terms of the possibilities they actualize but otherwise isolated in their respective holograms. Many of these holograms are rich in information and frame entities that can grasp that information in specific and distinct ways. The reality such entities perceive is structured by the hologram in which they exist as well as by the processes they use to apprehend and comprehend their environment. But the tossed coin is unaffected by that. It comes up heads in one world, tails in another. Its apparent randomness is an illusion created by the isolation of its perceived result. All possibilities are actualized, which means that any given world is a composite of evolving holograms, a plurality, a spreading cascade of being.

Thus, our world pivots on a twirling coin. Toss one. It will tell you what the cosmos is. And it opens to realms of magic power where spirits soar and wizards prowl.



In the Summer of 2017, Salma traveled to Italy and stayed in Rome, near the Vatican. She presented her scholarly husband's books and writings to the Vatican Library. In September of 2017 she received a thank you letter from Pope Francis expressing appreciation, acknowledging the gift of inscribed copies of Dr. Ben Michael Carter's writings with his personal photo with the Papal seal.

The years wrap us unevenly

In their variegated textures.

For time unfolds according to its order.

But we get old a piece at a time.

A string of gray surrounds us.

A persistent stiffness,

A crumb of decay, a sudden splinter of pain.

Old age comes unevenly.

Rapping at us like a woodpecker.

Dr. Ben Michael Carter



Mike's library is available for viewing at 2505 W. Northgate Drive in Irving Texas.



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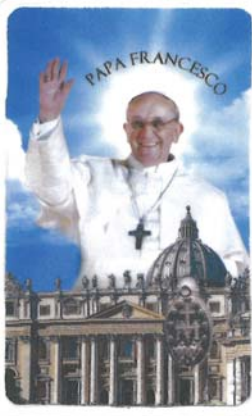
FIRST SECTION - GENERAL AFFAIRS

From the Vatican, 19 September 2017

Dear Ms Carter,

I am writing to acknowledge the gift of inscribed copies of Dr Ben Michael Carter's writings, which you presented to His Holiness Pope Francis.

In expressing appreciation for this kind gesture, I am pleased to assure you of His Holiness's prayers for your late husband and for you and your intentions.

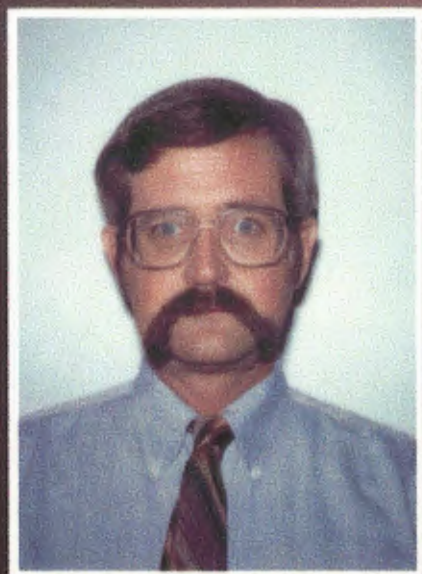


Yours sincerely,

Monsignor Paolo Borgia
Assessor

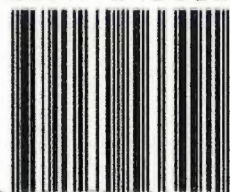
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Dr. Carter received a PhD from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He has written four books: *The Depersonalization of God*, *Unity in Diversity*, *A New Christian Paradigm*, and *The Defective Image*, as well as numerous articles, poems, reviews, and a newspaper column. He is married to Salma Carunia from South India. This is his first novel.

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