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FLIGHT OF ANGELS

by R. W. Perkins

### Prologue

In the shade of the woods, Gabe's attention was evenly divided between the two sets of figures before him. The more distant pair was visible in the sunlight filtering through an opening in the forest canopy above. He could make out the muted murmur of their voices only when he concentrated on hearing them. Raphael, ever at his shoulder, was making this difficult with her usual incessant whispering. The nearer figures were speaking to each other in hushed tones but, like him, had most of their attention focused on the couple ahead. He was able to follow the nearer dialog without difficulty. Michael was doing most of the talking, as usual. Gabe had seen this particular lecture given countless times and could have repeated it verbatim. The interesting stuff never happened until much, much later.

“Are you truly resolved then David?”

“I am.”

“You understand what's at stake”

“I know what’s to be gained if I am true.”

“And what will you lose?”

“I won’t fail.”

Michael just looked at him.

“Don’t say it,” David put up a hand, “That wasn’t the question you asked. I know.” He thought for a moment, then looked away. “I lose nothing that won’t be restored at the end.”

“Will that be enough?”

“Michael, it must be done. I have the aptitude, the need is there, and I am willing. What more is there to discuss?”

“Before the end, you may regret your choice. You would not be the first.”

“I will be true.”

Michael’s gaze went back to the nearby couple. They had been speaking to each other. They stood a little straighter, shoulders squared, eyes directed forward. Not the disheartened and lost pair they had seemed to be just moments ago. Together, they turned to move towards the clearing’s exit, one before the other. The last looked up and nodded an affirmation. The onlookers relaxed slightly, one of the more pivotal moments having gone reasonably well. Raphael alone seemed mildly disappointed.

Michael turned back to David. “Very well”, he said. “If you are determined, I will not bar you. The time for deliberation is in any case past. Take your watch. Ward it well.”

To such words from the Steward, there could be no reply but obedience. David straightened perceptibly, Michael noticed, showing a new resolve not unlike the couple that was now walking away. Turning towards the departing figures, he followed them to the edge of the

clearing. They moved beyond Michael's view but he knew that David's eyes would now follow each step as they made their way down the nearby trail. It wound along a small running stream, following the bottom of a small valley to another trail, which would eventually lead them out of the wood. When they had passed beyond sight, David's gaze shifted forward and remained motionless. Michael's view of David, and the forest just around him, appeared to flex and warp momentarily, and then cleared. When it did, David was no longer visible. Michael gazed at the spot for a long moment, then turned and moved to join his other two companions.

On the other side of the clearing, Gabe sighed in relief as he watched the scene come to a close. The voice at his ear, sandalwood smooth, jarred him again. "Do you suppose he understands what's at stake here?" Raphael whispered, eyes never leaving Michael as he made his way toward them. Gabe knew, nonetheless, that the question was directed at David.

"They never do," replied Gabe simply.

"So what happens when he truly comprehends what he has given up?" Raphael pressed.

"That will be a long age from now," Gabrael turned to go.

"Yes, but *then*." She could be truly persistent when she chose.

Gabrael shrugged, "You know that as well as I. He makes a choice."

Raphael's eyes burned in the darkness. "Indeed." A hundred layers of meaning in just two syllables. She had ever been gifted in that regard. Michael had almost covered the distance to them. She stepped forward to Gabe's side as he approached, dutifully attendant. Shooting a last glance past him to where David had vanished, she whispered sideways, "How will *this* one choose, I wonder?"

## Chapter 1

All days were fine, Aaron thought, but heaven be blessed this one would be a joy. The sun had not yet made her appearance this morning, but he could already tell. He could always tell. For starters, the light was coming early, a sure sign of a rare cloudless day. He turned his back to the city, looked west over the water, and tasted the air. Fishy, as it always was outside the market, but otherwise without the usual wet, foggy taste. A bright and clear one to be sure, he thought, and no mistaking. He hopped down from the low wall where he typically took his morning victuals and headed out. His standard attire was cheap blue jeans, well-worn hikers, and long-sleeved T-shirts (“Live to Ride, Ride to Live” across the back of his current favorite), and today was no exception. The obligatory rain jacket was the final touch. In a town where umbrellas marked the tourists, Aaron was nothing if not scrupulously native. Not that it would have made the slightest difference in his case. No one ever really saw him.

He ran over the day’s agenda again in his head with perfect attention to detail. Nine contacts to be made for today: four this morning, two in the afternoon, two evening, and one

“swing shift” as he liked to call them. His face broke into a sunny grin as he revisited the morning schedule. Kenneth Parker and Kate Jeffries, both UW professors, one on the bus, one coming off the Bainbridge Island ferry. *Easy day*, he thought. *Too bad they ain't payin' me for this*. Next would be Ben Franklin (poor kid, what were his folks thinking?). Somewhat more complicated, Ben would be waiting an hour in the terminal for the outbound ferry to Bremerton. Plenty of time to work on *that* one. And finally, the real treat for the morning, a call on Beth Delaney.

As he made his way down the steps, his cheerful smile darkened somewhat. He was a little bothered. Most of the time he had his game plan finalized well in advance. It was simply a matter of discerning the decisions that needed to be influenced and getting a sense of short and long-term consequences. To those among whom he walked unseen it would seem uncanny, miraculous even, how he was able to unravel the complicated web of human events and behavior. Hardly that, Aaron knew, just the advantage of ridiculously long observation, coupled with infallible memory and the predictable tendency of humans to act, well, human. Aaron had prodigious experience and memory to draw from, and equally powerful facility with intuition, deduction, and anticipation of consequences. Careful use of his special talents usually ensured a careful and correct prompting. *Most of the time*, Aaron thought grimly. History was littered with pivotal moments moving in unintended directions after a prompt wasn't figured out in time or was delivered clumsily. Nor was that the only danger. Sometimes no matter how well you understood the issues, how meticulously you crafted the prompt and how flawlessly you delivered it, well, sometimes they just didn't listen.

Not Beth, he thought, however. No way. Beth was the perfect ward. In the twenty-four years he had watched over her, she had never once hesitated, never stumbled at his guidance. His confidence, and his grin along with it, sprang up at the thought. 24 years of near perfect redirection. Not that she needed much anymore. She was nearly on cruise control at this point and was well along the path of becoming a strong, capable, and determined human being. Even better, she was beginning to crave the rewards of goodness for its own sake. No, taking good advice was not a weak area for young Miss Delaney, so he would just have to make sure he had some when they met. She would hit 1<sup>st</sup> and University at about 11:30 and he would have it figured out by then. He always did.

He made his way out of the park, across the street, and headed south past the sleepy markets on Pike Place. The fish market chatter was in full swing and the other vendors were busy setting up for another day. A few curious early birds were wandering along with him, idly sizing up handicrafts and produce as it was being wheeled out the back of trucks and into the market. None of them appeared to be in much of a hurry, though that would change as the shopping began in earnest a couple hours from now. He overtook two elderly ladies carrying woven shopping bags with “Bahamas” embroidered on the outside of each one. These would be the cruisers, in town a day or two early for their coastal tour of Alaska. Hoping for an early bargain, they were peering over shoulders and into boxes and generally getting in the way.

He closed his eyes briefly as he walked past them, focusing on the part of his awareness that was constantly tuned into the white noise of human thought. He could hear the collective murmuring speech of their souls when he chose. Specific details were only apparent at the times and in the places where he was meant to guide them. Otherwise, he was almost as oblivious to

the content of their thoughts as they were to each other's. It was just as well, he thought. Only the Steward endured constant access to the whole of humanity's inner dialog and he was welcome to it. The flesh had done its work well on some and the thoughts of these humans were miserable to bear. He was content with the glimpses he needed to do his own work. When a clear voice rose above the murmur of this semi-conscious background, Aaron knew that its mortal source was in need of his intervention. He heard no such voice nearby this morning.

He hadn't really expected anything from the blue-haired shoppers, nor was he disappointed. He generally knew well in advance the folks he needed to work with on any given day. There was, however, always a measure of uncertainty. No matter how they saying went, free will was the only sure thing in life. Each human's choices rippled into other humans with other choices. Mortal existence was a river of interwoven action and consequence where earthly events swirled and eddied, ebbed and flowed, and things could change pretty fast when pivotal humans made pivotal choices. Sometimes he would get a brief glimmer from a mortal in passing, suggesting that this part of the river was sweeping near to his domain. Such mortals would often figure prominently on his agenda a few days later. Sometimes he would never see them again. So far, it looked as if his original schedule was holding and these two delightful ladies would not be entering into his plans anytime soon.

The day was becoming everything it had promised and coats were coming off all up and down the street. Not one to be left out of a local trend, Aaron shed a layer himself. He was nearing the bus stop where Ken was shortly to arrive and mentally reached out for him. He was soon rewarded with Ken's distinctive patchwork pattern of verbal-visual-abstractive thought. He fell into step behind Ken as the young, recently tenured history professor came off the bus and



headed toward the ferry terminal. The thread of his thoughts became clearer as he approached, not unlike driving a car out of a tunnel and getting your radio reception back.

*...can never seem to get out of there without a smart comment. Losing my little girl. She's really good, nothing to worry about. Not crazy about Nose-Ring Friend. Could she be....? I should, no, Dana should talk to her... The other one seems nice, lovely girl. I really need to get their names down. Quit worrying about being cool. That whole crowd so...mature, I mean well-developed, no. Ick...this is creepy, worse than my students. Let's not go down that road. Feeling old? Not time for that yet. Please I hope not.*

Aaron smiled to himself. Ken always did worry too much. He had a great family and he was a good father. His daughter was pushing the limits of her 16-year-old boundaries, but she loved her parents and, in her heart, wanted to please them. More importantly, she was also very bright and had seen most of the pitfalls of adolescence sooner than her parents had thought to talk to her about them. Ken himself was a decent, devoted father who was very uncomfortable with the transition of his daughter and her friends into young womanhood. The fact that their maturing appearance made him so uncomfortable was simply proof of his good upbringing and sense of boundaries. The trouble started when you stopped letting it bother you. Nothing out of the ordinary so far and Aaron simply waited for Ken to get around to today's business.

*...but Dana has even less time than I do these days. God, I wish I could find some extra time...New grant application is killing me...have to get draft revision back to Laura at lunch,*

*over lunch? Crap, was that today? It was, is, isn't it. Have to clear my schedule, no wait, no office hours on Thursday, so that's alright. <song with similar lyrics starts ambling through here>Never had lunch with the department head before. Laura's new though, probably just getting to know folks. Funny, was going to mention the date, appointment rather, to Dana. Guess we never got to it...*

There it was, Aaron thought. Ken actually was past due for this particular challenge. He had quit thinking of himself as an attractive male prospect long ago and clearly didn't see this one coming. Laura Bentley was in her early thirties, an extraordinarily talented historian whose work ethic and analytical abilities were only exceeded by her gift for prose. This was a winning combination in their line of work and he had actually admired her, professionally, from afar for a number of years now. Her selection for the History Department Head position was a pleasant surprise to him after Dr. Davis, her predecessor, retired unexpectedly a few months ago. The grant application was the lead-in to what would likely become several months of close collaboration between them. She was single, obviously attracted to him, and was clearly interested in testing the waters.

*Piece of cake*, Aaron thought. All he needed to do was wait until Ken was thinking about the meeting arrangements, and prompt him to go with a more formal setting. Folks always acted so surprised when situations like this got out of hand. They rarely appreciated the trail of breadcrumbs leading back to the early choices that had set themselves up for failure. A gal like Laura had her pick of any number of eligible men, did not need to hold a torch for a married father of three, and would be smart enough to get the message sent by changing the meeting to

her office. Aaron found the opening in Ken's thoughts and, with perfect timing, spoke behind him in a conversational tone that, as always, no one would hear.

*-You would probably feel better meeting with her at work-*

And the funny thing was, Ken found that thinking of this really did make him feel better. He would call her this morning and suggest that they meet with Jeff Taylor, one of his post-docs, and hold the meeting at her office instead. Jeff really needed to be in on this, anyway. He had done a ton of work on the proposal and would be a key player in carrying out the project. Part of him really had looked forward to meeting with Laura. She found his work interesting, seemed to find *him* interesting, and that was something that happened less and less often at home these days. *Gotta watch out for that*, he thought. *Trouble there and no mistake. Working closely on a project with an attractive, smart colleague? That is such a pathetic cliché, but probably so because that's how it happens. Which really means what I should be doing is carving out some time for Dana, maybe pick her up at lunch for once.* Aaron peeled off as Ken's thoughts drifted back into the blurry noise. No more to see here, folks. Move along.

## Chapter 2

The ferry terminal was right around the corner and Aaron spotted Kate quickly. She was angry with a good friend and needed to consider for a moment that it wouldn't kill her to let it go. Not the most sophisticated suggestion he'd ever made, but that was how relationships endured. It was amazing how people loved having something over each other, even good friends, and often strained at letting small slights go by the wayside. Kate tended to be a bit dramatic and the “unjustly wronged” was all too familiar a role for her. Aaron hoped that she would roll with the nudge. It was usually about fifty-fifty with her.

He now took the pedestrian bridge over to the terminal proper and headed for the bench where young Ben normally hung out. Ben had graduated from high school last year and was working in one of the city's numerous waterfront restaurants. Most of his close friends had left for college but he had wanted to travel, take a break from school for a while, and was working to save up. Since work did not usually begin for him until late afternoon, he sometimes took the ferry back to his old neighborhood and had lunch with a couple of friends who had been a year behind him. Today, however, he was nowhere to be seen.

Aaron frowned. It was very rare for him to get a miss on his schedule. Most of his wards had been under near constant “surveillance” their whole lives. Work schedules, special appointments, favorite diversions and the timing with which they generally were indulged were all held fast in his indelible memory. He had their routines down pat. In fact, he knew them so well that his predictions of what would normally be considered unexpected behavior would have gotten him kicked out of any casino in Vegas. What little he did not know from his own experiences could be obtained from others of his kind using theirs. Their natural language was broad, robust, highly nuanced, and very efficient. Much could be communicated in very short exchanges, and they were all very social when they had opportunity.

A truly unexpected break could mean only a few things, none of them good. Aaron began looking around the terminal with more careful vision. This time he looked at everyone present everywhere at once, simultaneously taking in the minute behavior of each person, as well as the collective movement of the whole group. Squirms, grimaces, nervous tapping, restlessness, a subtle stressed tone where there had been calm before. These individual disturbances blended together and wove through the room in collective whirls and eddies, each person contributing their own piece to a wave that was not quite random. In a moment, he had it. No mortal could have discerned this purposeful disturbance as it wandered its way nonchalantly through the crowd. Aaron saw it as clearly as the wake of one of the merchant vessels that steamed from the nearby shipyard. The influence that he exerted on human behavior had different telltales, but would have left a similar trail to those with sufficient vision. Of course, he would never have gone to these lengths to conceal himself, nor would any of his kind. Deceit

was as foreign to them as malice. Yet he sensed both here, and the presence of an influence trail when none of his own were about could mean only one thing.

His guard now fully raised, Aaron leapt silently up and through the roof to get a better view. The wake continued back out the way he had come in, and wove through the pedestrians along the sidewalk. A blue sedan made a quirky right turn at the corner, but it was like a strobe light in his vision. Aaron caught a shadowy blur fall back through the rear window and streak across into the crowd. *Cheater*, Aaron thought grimly, *and I bet our both being here this morning is no accident*. There were more formal, more ancient names for these creatures, but to Aaron they had always simply been cheaters, the selfish and forsworn.

Now fully appreciating this complication, Aaron closed his eyes and drifted sideways between worlds a bit. The human presence on the street below blurred, their voices temporarily silenced, and the form of his adversary gained coherence. Clearly visible now, and moving every bit as deftly through the hazy crowd as Aaron could, was a slender, tallish woman with red hair to her shoulders and a milky, freckled complexion. The moment he drifted, her eyes shot to his from the street below. A playful smile danced across her face, captured momentarily in emerald green eyes. Without shifting her gaze, she whispered in the ear of what seemed likely to be a business traveler, one perfectly smooth hand in sharp relief against his hazy shoulder. The man hesitated, then stepped into the store that had been the object of his nervous window shopping. She winked up at Aaron, laughing at him, then whisked away further down the street.

Aaron was not fooled. Prompting the traveler was a bit of opportunistic mischief that might bear fruit for his enemy later, but was not likely her true objective. Aaron decided that it was time to get a good handle on what had become of Ben. He shifted back (this took a little

more effort) and began to search for him in earnest, but not before he noted two flanking shadows that rushed to join the first. He needed to get moving. The hum of thought voices had returned, along with clear vision of the mortal world, and he sought desperately now for Ben's particular pattern. At first he had thought to follow in the direction the cheaters had fled, still suspicious they were here to interfere with his schedule. Just before he headed after them, though, Ben's "voice" rose above the crowd the next block over. It was as unmistakable as hearing one's own name in a nearby conversation.

He was talking with a well-groomed, fortyish man in an expensive suit, wearing shoes that were probably worth a month of Ben's restaurant pay, tips included. His long, blond hair was tied back with a black braided-leather loop and he was gesturing expansively with one hand and gently guiding Ben at the shoulder with the other. Aaron knew this character as well, nor was he surprised at the blurry smudge of a shade that trailed them. Vincent James was a dealer in expensive art and had sister galleries here and in New York. While his reputation was impeccable, it was nonetheless a sham. He was engaged in a multitude of illegal dealings that began with the means by which he acquired many of his more exclusive pieces and spiraled down from there. Powerful, to be sure, and extraordinarily well connected. Certainly not above enticing local youth to aid his enterprise with promises of what was often desperately needed cash. What was surprising was that he had a cheater tailing him. Men like Vincent generated enough misery and mayhem on their own and required little intervention. Aaron did not like the look of this at all.

"You should really just think of yourself as a sort of freelance courier," Vincent was explaining. His voice had an odd, echoing quality to it as Aaron heard his voice directly as well

as the words that were heard in Ben's own thoughts. "That's it exactly," he continued. "In fact, I would normally use just such an agency for this sort of thing, but they are getting more expensive by the day. They will have a union before you know it and will be wanting disability and health insurance and I'm on thin enough margins as it is."

Ben nodded, as if he had the first idea what margins were.

"Anyways all I need, since my associates tell me you make the trip often enough, is to pick up from clients on occasion, and make deliveries for me here in town. I assure you the compensation will be more than adequate for your trouble."

Ben shrugged his shoulders, "Seems okay I guess. How much does it pay?"

Vincent beamed. "Well, each job is a little different, some longer, some shorter. I would, of course compensate you depending on the distance and difficulty. You would be amazed how careless some people can be with expensive items, so I may need you to assist with packaging them correctly. Also, it is very important that you follow your delivery instructions to the letter. The regular carriers are so difficult with my custom needs at times. That is why I am willing to spend a little more for the reliability I find in more, shall we say, personal relationships."

*Time to jump in here, Aaron thought, although this did not seem too challenging. Maybe just a cautionary prompt, set the old brain alarm off. You had to be careful. Press that core of self-determination a little too hard and people shut you out. The idea was to suggest alternatives while scrupulously avoiding attempts to impose on their will, which often just forced a reflexive, snap decision. Few things were harder to move, once made, than a human decision. They hated leaving things uncertain.*

*-This is just a bit too good to be true.-*



Ben hesitated. "Look, man, it sounds like a sweet deal. I could certainly use a little extra. It's just that, well, I got some things going, you know? I can make the time, I mean, it's just that, well, how often do you think you would need me." Ben was fumbling for a logical reason for the suspicion he suddenly felt, but there was really no reason for it that he could see. He threw out the best thing he could think of. "I don't want to commit to something if I can't be as reliable as you need."

"Perfectly understandable," Vincent replied, the soul of understanding. "I would be reluctant to do business with you if you had any hesitation about your availability. That you mention it at all simply confirms you have exactly the kind of character I am looking for."

The cheater following along now drifted in a lazy circle around Ben and settled back. Ben's face was a perfect mixture of discomfort and need. "Damn, I could really use this boost," he said. "What did you have in mind for a first job?"

"Well, typically we would start you on a simple pick-up," Vincent explained cheerfully. My purchasers will have made all the arrangements in advance. You will get an address and time to collect the piece, and instructions for its delivery. Starting commissions for such a simple job are, of course, somewhat modest. No more than five hundred dollars, I should think." Ben's eyes nearly popped out.

"You can't be serious?" Ben gasped.

"I am. Quite. These are not photocopied legal documents or sales receipts we are talking about, my friend. Many of the items I deal in, while not necessarily notable in size, are nevertheless utterly unique. Nothing like that would be involved on a first job, of course." Vince looked

down at his watch. “Look, I need to be moving along with my day here and I can tell that you need a little time to think this over.”

Ben jumped at that, “That is exactly what I was thinking. When do you need an answer?”

Vince seemed to mull it over a bit. “I suppose that I could have you call me tomorrow. I didn't get where I am by putting all my eggs in the same basket, so we are of course considering other candidates. It would be unfair of me to string them along, but I really hoped you and I could work something out.” The cheater took another pass at Ben. Aaron was ready for this one and did not need to see the anxiety in Ben's face to know the ploy. His counter was already on its way. Aaron purposefully used words that echoed some advice Ben's father, now three years passed, had given him in the month before the plaque in his heart had finally ruptured. It had barely registered with him at the time, just another of his dad's random bits of wisdom.

*-There is no such thing as a deal you can't afford to pass up-*

For some reason Ben started feeling better about saying his goodbyes and letting this one go. Vincent reached in his lapel and brought out a gold-filigreed case that revealed business cards printed on expensive paper.

### Chapter 3

*I could not have chosen otherwise. I will not regret.* David's eyes were blank, staring. The thought had ceased to have any meaning for him. It was a repetitious litany that no longer comforted, but he could not bear to abandon it. He raised a glass to his lips and stopped, catching his reflection in a mirror just behind the bar. Eating out was a necessity for the moment and the high-ceilinged restaurant in this semi-converted train station was becoming his favorite. Immaculately restored Thirties art deco, it suited his newly emerging tastes perfectly.

*Immaculately restored,* he thought grimly but not entirely humorlessly. *Describes me fairly well.* He raised his glass to the figure before him, who responded in kind. The reflection did little at first to distinguish him from the many business travelers that came here. But, as with so many other things in his new life, first glances rarely distinguished anything. The nondescript charcoal suit was of excellent make and masterfully tailored. Shoes, shirt, and tie were similarly well chosen in burgundy and gold. He was a breath shy of six feet tall, sandy haired (another

exceptional bit of grooming) and of a trim, yet fit build that was becoming ever more rare in a man of his apparent age. Not quite what you might call fashion model or movie caliber looks, but he hadn't missed it by leagues either. Only his eyes seemed to have made the grade in that regard, a striking blue-green that had the servers here checking on him more often than one might consider strictly necessary.

*But I do. Heaven help me, my broken cup is overflowing with it.* Deliberately, he set the glass down and dropped his gaze to the bar. The grief flowed quietly over and poured through him again. It surged against his will, strained and threatened at it, then receded fitfully. The slightest breath escaped him.

“Care for another, sir? Your table should be ready shortly.” It was Ethan, of course, who had long ago mastered that fine bartender's art of intruding while being unobtrusive. He had close-cropped gray hair (not much more than a monk's halo these days), a thin but stylish mustache and beard, and he moved with noticeable ease for his seventy-odd years. In keeping with Bertrand's upscale aspirations, he was turned out in a tailored dress shirt and bow tie, black slacks with patent leather shoes, and a dark vest on which the paisley pattern could just be seen in the subdued lighting. The smell of expensive pipe tobacco ebbed and flowed as he moved about the bar, alternately clearing off, wiping down, mixing, delivering, and refilling. Not a hint of tremor in his aging hands and for that Ethan was grateful each day. He still remembered the names of most people who came in more than a few times. It was not uncommon for customers passing on the bar to hail him as they moved along to the dining room.

“This is fine Ethan, thank you.” David raised his eyes and mustered a smile.

“Very good, sir,” Ethan nodded. “If you don’t mind my saying so, you’re becoming something of a regular at the Maiden.

David stared at his glass, suppressing a laugh. Other than himself, Ethan was very likely the only person at Bertrand’s who was old enough to know something of the restaurant’s history. It had started out in life in 1934 as Chez Mademoiselle, an exclusive club that was created by and catered to fortunes made during and after both World Wars. The club occupied a substantial corner in one of the country's more grandiose railway stations, built over the bones of smaller ones hailing from the classic Midwestern frontier days. For as long as the railways provided luxury travel between coasts, Chez Mademoiselle played hostess to new money as well as old. A veritable oasis during the long transcontinental crossing, she offered every indulgence imaginable (and a few unimaginable) to the wealthy in transit. Power in many forms was bartered within her marbled walls, across her elegant cherry wood dining tables, behind velvet draperies, and of course at this, the original teak, marble, and brass bar. Faceless bronze statues guarded the high corners of the larger rooms. They had been mute witnesses to decades of flamboyant excess, secret indulgence, flagrant depravity, and greedy oppression. Yet as passenger rail declined in favor of aviation, the centers of power realigned and drifted away from the station-cathedrals. Whole towns had dried up and died when railways were born and routed around them. In much the same way, Chez Mademoiselle had died when transcontinental travel took to the skies.

The years of calculated and extravagant vice had, however, left indelible residues in the very wood and stone. Bereft of the money, power, and influence of her previous clients, Chez Mademoiselle simply carried out a cheaper, baser version of the business she had done for

decades. Renamed several times by a succession of sordid owners looking to turn a quick profit, “The Wanton Maiden” enjoyed special notoriety in the Sixties, boasting as much variety in psychedelic experiences as in female companionship for hire. The name stuck among the locals, even after she was shut down in the early eighties and replaced by a coffee house. In the mid-nineties, the Maiden (now a Tex-Mex bar and grill) was closed yet again while the entire station was renovated. During those years, two restaurateurs from California bought out the lease, spent over one million dollars restoring all the original Thirties decor, and the newly christened Bertrand’s was introduced quietly at the station’s re-opening. David supposed the current owners would not appreciate Ethan’s use of its disreputable former name, but he doubted it would have put the aging bartender’s job in any real jeopardy. Ethan had been retained even when most of the previous employees had been let go. The new owners discovered early on that Ethan’s customers, mixed blood or blue, were some of their most loyal.

“It’s the service, of course, Ethan. And the food is almost passable.” Ethan smiled. They both knew it was excellent, though neither were eager to spread the word and ruin Bertrand’s comfortable anonymity.

“Of course, sir. Kind of you to mention it.” Ethan made a show of arranging glasses and tidying up. David wasn’t fooled though. The barman’s curiosity, expertly disguised though it was, couldn’t escape the notice of a man with David’s particular skills. It was a fairly simple bit of sociability, though Ethan’s years of practice let him apply it with somewhat more finesse than most. Noticing and commenting on David’s repeat business, he had made an opening for increased, though still professional, familiarity. David, in turn, had responded courteously while

adding some inviting humor. This allowed Ethan's next question to be gently more intrusive.

He did not disappoint.

“Meeting someone tonight, sir? I could have one of the more private tables prepared.”

Once again, the smile was hard to suppress. *His timing and inflection are marvelous*, David thought. *Would have done well in my line of work, I'm sure.*

“Thank you, Ethan. It's just me tonight. I don't...” He paused, but the thought completed itself.

*I don't have anyone.*

At once his grief wailed and howled within him again. David reassured himself that no one (no human that is) should have noticed his minuscule pause, nor sensed the colossal effort to shore up his heart's defenses. Ethan, however, had also paused briefly as he reached overhead to replace a glass. Again, not something anyone else in the room would have picked up on, but was like waving a flag to someone of David's perceptual gifts. His eyes narrowed. Surely Ethan could not be *that* good. Considering this, he had to admit the overwhelming feelings had taken him by surprise and Ethan, however unconsciously, seemed to have read it. This was going to take some getting used to. Hands clasped together, David summoned a genuinely thankful expression. “I am dining alone tonight, thank you.”

“Of course, sir.” Ethan reached for David's empty glass. David's hand stopped him.

“On second thought, maybe I could manage another.”

*Ah, here it comes.* It was not in David's nature to be self-deceptive. On the contrary, candidness and verity were as reflexive for him as breathing. With perfect clarity, he understood the reality contained in that simple request. He was in pain and he needed to share it. Rising

within him was the drive to participate in a most human healing ritual. Share your burden with the tribe and that shared pain is lessened. More practically, he mused, another drink or two would happily relieve him of the damnable selflessness that had brought him to this pass. He stopped short, taken aback by the surprisingly bitter thought.

*The tribe has at last come to claim me.* He understood the process intimately from ages of observation, but was now experiencing the emotional duality in ways he had never imagined. David's emerging humanity was reflexively crying out, his instincts unerringly identifying Ethan as a listener, his *shaman* or shepherd, or at least as close to one as this age seemed able to muster. Still, he could not bring himself to speak. The truth was unbelievable. Even in its smallest part, its most simplified form, the truth would not remotely make sense to this kind man who would, at any moment, ask the question that he desperately desired to answer.

“Is there anything I can do for you, sir?”

*I am undone.* He knew before he even looked up. David's hands were trembling as he became aware of Ethan's intent gaze. Raising his eyes, he saw his own sorrow echoed in Ethan's face and again belatedly realized his lapse. For a moment, he tried to recover, to reassert dominion over this body that had momentarily betrayed him. Mournful despair surged through him again, battering away his resolve. He no longer cared, no longer desired the strength to hold back this overwhelming need. He simply desired solace, a release from the weight of his loss, a sharing in which he might possibly be understood. Yet even in this extreme need, there was no escaping the core of David's self-possession. Humanity, though gaining force and strength, was only recently laid upon him. His monstrous failure notwithstanding, he had been a creature of deliberate purpose, crafted so in ages past. He summoned strength enough to allow only a



conditional surrender. The trembling ceased, his breathing steadied, and he straightened his shoulders perceptibly. His expression, however, he made no effort to conceal. Ethan had clearly noticed, had read the grief there during that brief, unguarded moment. It was not in David's nature to deceive.

Chapter 4

I am.

*Huddled in an uneasy slumber, the man in the cave shudders, clutches the fur skins close around him, and opens his eyes. All around is darkness, but it hardly registers. Other senses clamor for his attention. He is both terrified and enthralled with the sound of water dripping, echoing throughout the cave. He smells the water as well, and the vaguely familiar essences of earth and old stone. He listens, hardly breathing, to what he is sure are voices beckoning him and terror grips him. He jams his eyes shut against the images rising like shadows in his mind. He is overwhelmed by the seductive desire to sleep again, sleep and forget everything he has seen. Yet what that exactly is eludes him. He feels the burden of age old experiences, yet his thoughts and conscious memory are the tabula rasa of a newborn child. He has dreamt of life vividly, yet is suspended in that waking stupor where dreams are blown and tattered beyond recognition or memory.*

*All he grasps now is a haunting fear, the remains of a dream in which he has committed some dreadful wrong. He hovers in that state, desperately hoping it to be no more than a fitful illusion, but not yet wakeful enough to be sure. Suddenly desperate to orient himself, his hands shamble around, searching. One stumbles over a low stone shelf nearby, grasps at a piece of cloth carefully draped over it. Still unable to see in the subterranean gloom, it is nonetheless immediately familiar to his hands, though he cannot remember why that should be so.*

*Purposefully, his fingers whisper over the textured surface of the cloth. It is softly irregular, reminding him of the skin of serpents he used to tease out of their lairs as a young boy.*

*Unbidden, the intricate pattern of a great tree passes before his inner sight and he is suddenly sure that the same design is woven into the memento he holds. He sees it with the clarity of one who spent countless hours weaving it with his own hands. Every bead, every knot, every stone had been meticulously prepared. The tree was magnificent in its entirety, but he could not look at any part of it without seeing each tiny element and the purposeful act that placing each had been, every particle included as a deliberate means to a thoughtful end. He knew beyond a doubt that this had been the work of his own hands, but could not remember having set them to it.*

*This had been a treasured keepsake, of that he was certain, but he did not feel that it had been his treasure. He held the cloth to his face, eyes closed, memory searching. Panic threatened him again, as if he feared his search for memories was disturbing some restless predator and he froze, eyes silently searching in the dark. His eyes, however, now found detail in their surroundings. No longer simply the echoes of familiar memory, he truly saw a glimmer of stone walls and earthen floor. He looked at his hands and, true to his memory, the image of*

*the great tree, painstakingly embroidered in grass, wood, rock, and bone, seemed to materialize before him. It had been carefully sewn onto a soft leather backing and the image details resolved and multiplied with the gathering light. He looked up from his hands towards the opening of the cave, which he instinctively knew to be still somewhat distant. As he did so, he saw a woman before him, eyes and hair dark as his own, who smiled briefly and vanished. Memory came crashing upon him in an icy deluge and he collapsed to the floor, scrambling back against the wall as if to escape. Ages of experience passed before his eyes and he knew his time with her had been short, so very short. He could not remember, not even her name, the darkness had been so long. Loneliness gathered around him, grief and despair, terror for the feelings and images he was experiencing, yet had no memory of to be sure they were even his.*

*He huddled in the furs and skins that were his makeshift bed, burying himself in them in an effort to return to the blind forgetfulness his sleep had been. A hand from the darkness caressed his brow, his jaw. He stiffened, afraid to open his eyes and see, afraid of what all those memories might mean, afraid to lose something he could not remember having. The hand left his face, lips brushed his eyes one by one, then his mouth. The fear and, more importantly, the veil over his thoughts vanished like the hillside mists would when the sun came over the tops of the mountains. He opened his eyes to the empty cave that had been their home, buried his face in his arms, and surrendered to the visions.*

*I am. Not a statement, though, but a question. He knew this was important, perhaps vital. Nothing in what he was seeing seemed to help clarify this most fundamental of questions. He searched for himself, the essence of who and what he was, in the endless parade of memory and vision. Countless people spoke in numberless languages and still he had nothing to confirm*

*that sense of self. Characters walking in and out of life, not his own he was growing sure of now, names, histories, and experiences all his to observe and catalog. One came across his view, the image of wretched hate and frustration, yet later transformed and filled with purpose and joy. He could not tell if this was a memory of a person or the recollection of a symbolic tale, but it would do for now.*

*I am Paul. The very thought seemed to rouse a menacing presence in the cave. The sense of disturbing some sleeping predator had returned. He looked anxiously around, caught between the desire to return to the safety of his previous slumber and the need to...to do what? He still held the woven image of the tree in his hands and his gaze found it again. He remembered the countless hours spent in its preparation, the gratification as his will had taken formless elements and created meaning, the tender appreciation as it was given freely in thanksgiving and promise. It had been for her, of course, and she was here today to remind him of it. He knew now, in his heart of hearts, that her time had long past, but she was still beckoning him forward into life, but to what end? Again, the crafted gift held the answer. To act, and not be acted upon. To bring to the world, through choice and will, some small joy and beauty. He stood, turned away from his bed, and began to walk towards the sunlight streaming in from the world.*

*I will be Paul, he thought. That would have pleased her.*