

Cover titles by **Kevin Candela**





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Any resemblance to persons, places living or dead is purely coincidental.

This is a work of fiction.

*The Ghost Phone series is dedicated to those who study the paranormal...*

*...those who believe...*

*...and those who want to believe.*

*With my gratitude to my NSP comrades Roma Gray, Essel Pratt and Dona Fox*

*...and Jackie, as always*

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Ghost Phone

Episode 3: Occam’s Shaving Kit

**1**

The landscape in which Banderly Manor stood atop a low island-like hill looked like the ideal place to run into a fearsome giant hound with glowing red eyes. The boggy terrain was all but hostile to a post-dinner walk, rather being something a satisfied guest would want to appreciate from a nice lofty vantage point, like one of the second floor’s balconies, for several reasons. Strangely colorful a few weeks of spring and fall, the browns and greens and yellows featured little bursts of magenta and purple here and there during those brief seasons...as though the land was struggling to defy its own forsaken dullness.

Mathis Delane was the only guest who really found it appealing.

“The colors are easy on the eye,” she said. “Plus you don’t have to worry about annoying neighbors.”

She lagged a bit behind as the rest moved on toward the drawbridge.

“Can’t wait to see what the moat looks like,” Dabney Crawford said, his puckering visage a virtual cringe, the rest of his lean, immaculate form stiff as he sniffed at the unmistakable flavor of organic decay and took in the stagnant water patches to either side of the road. “All that wealth and he chooses to live in a...*swamp*.”

“Yeah, just like Yoda,” Doyle Bromwell, one of two other Americans besides Mathis, said brightly.

“Yoda wasn’t rich,” Adelaide native Barret Sonner said.

“Are you kidding?” Billie McHale said. “Franchise royalties alone ...”

Cash Lidak, the third American to have won a spot in the game-based but still random contest, doubled his pace to catch up with Amalee Destine, one of only two present not hailing from Great Britain or the United States. Amalee had an aloof yet pleasant presence that made people feel like they were missing out on something if they weren’t close by. She really didn’t say all that much, but somehow it didn’t matter. Especially with Lidak, whose job involved monologues anyway.

“So I can’t help but notice you look almost exactly like that French actress from *Chartreuse Sun*.”

Amalee turned to look at him and saw the wry smile.

“So you’ve actually seen it?” she said. “This is impressive: I’m meeting fully one fourth of my American audience all at once.”

Cash chuckled.

“Look at it this way,” he said. “I’m a cheesy comic and I know who you are. So just think of all the literate, non-cheesy people out there who probably see an art film once in a while too.”

“You’re too kind,” Amalee said.

“What, because I said more sophisticated Americans than I probably know who you are?”

“No,” Amalee said, cracking a faint smile with her eyes forward again, “for calling them art films.”

The dozen contest winners filed onward in a segmented line, bound for the weathered but still sturdy-looking oaken doors of the lonesome mansion.

The thirteenth and fourteenth in the party, escorts to the rest, noticed Mathis lagging ever farther behind. Wordlessly, the young woman nodded at the man—they hadn’t even introduced themselves yet, they’d effectively just been chauffeurs to that point—and he in turn went back to corral the straggler.

“Excuse me, Ms. Delane,” he said gently. “We *are* expected.”

“Oh! Sorry,” Mathis said, sounding earnest. “Are we late?”

“In a way, ma’am,” the man said in a voice that was low yet somehow not all that discreet. “The housekeepers are waiting for us before they can be dismissed.”

Mathis apologized again and hastened to catch up with the others, leaving the male chauffeur-escort to shake his head, turn slowly and follow.

“That’s one hell of a monument to seasoned wood,” Cash said of the front doors and their ponderous siege mentality frame. “I guess since there’s no moat or courtyard siege walls, you need a pair of doors that say ‘Hey, back off—if I wanted a lawn care service the property wouldn’t look like this.’”

The contest winners were gathering. The young woman who’d escorted them there stood up by the doors, watching them come together and form her audience.

She just smiled pleasantly at the crowd until it was fully assembled and waiting for her.

“Good morning!” she said loudly enough to make sure she got everyone’s attention. “I’m Mirya LeGuerre, your hostess, and your driver and my assistant is Edmundson Wattis. Congratulations on both completing all of Mr. Crickett’s puzzles as well as being fortunate enough to have been chosen by random drawing from the rest who managed that feat.

“Yes, it’s unfortunate that there can’t be a hundred thirty-seven contestants here, but even mansions can become crowded. This weekend’s event will be much...cozier...with only the twelve of you here to solve the final puzzle and find the treasure.”

“We’re actually finding a treasure?” Ned Reary said, taking Mirya’s brief pause as a chance to ask even though she had more to say.

“Well, that’s the goal,” Mirya said, holding her gently tolerant smile as she glanced his way before letting her gaze sweep the crowd again as it had been doing before. “Yes, there is a physical treasure to be found here. Mr. Crickett had a game as a child, one in which a trek through a little mansion eventually led to a prize. Being in possession of this estate, he has been able to scale up to enable that vintage game’s plastic tokens to be set aside in favor of the players themselves. I’ll explain more of this once we’re all inside, but before we go in I’d like you all to look around at this most unusual location—in part because there are genuine hazards here, particularly this weekend.”

She explained that the estate sat on the only spot that wouldn’t be flooded with seawater the following evening. Banderly Manor’s bleak yet compelling surroundings were a natural basin, quite shallow, that was a fen most of the time—and a five to seven foot deep lake once every few months when the moon pulled the tides just right. The phenomenon wasn’t breathtaking, she said, because the water didn’t sweep in like a tidal surge but rather bubbled up from dozens of spots when the risen seawater’s relentless breakers crashed in and inundated nearby coastal fissures. And for about two days the low hill upon which the mansion had been built would be an island, Mirya said, adding that the place had two canoes and a john boat with an outboard in case of emergencies.

“So that’s why I’m seeing saltwater fen vegetation,” Roana Cheswick said.

“Exactly, Ms...Cheswick, is it? You’re very observant.”

That’s when Mirya hit them with the twist.

“I’m not staying, and neither is Mr. Wattis.” She saw the expected looks of surprise and elaborated. “This contest is not a competition. It’s teamwork-based—either you all find the treasure or no one does. You’ll be left here for the weekend on your own, although we will maintain contact with you via your chosen liaison.”

A response from the fully assembled guest contingent was slow in coming.

“This treasure,” Ned Reary said, speaking up from where he stood at the rear of the contestant cluster. “There’s been no mention of its actual value.”

Mirya smiled.

“Rest assured, Mr. Reary, a sponsor who can afford to bring you all here from around the world in first class style would not have you strive to end up with a paltry few thousand in either pounds or dollars. The...wealth...involved here is nothing short of, well, let’s call it ‘an enabling sum.’ That’s in the sense that if you succeed, you won’t have to worry about a steady income anymore for the rest of your lives. In fact, as I recall you work for Morrison Port of Port Global. As wealthy as Mr. Port is, you’d be on the same golf courses.”

“He’d never allow it,” Reary said in a deadpan tone, getting a few chuckles.

“So we don’t know what we’re looking for,” Doyle Bromwell said. “Just a ‘treasure’...?”

“To start,” Mirya said, flashing a playful-looking little smirk. “That’s something you’ll discover as you go along.”

Dabney Crawford’s pressurized face suggested he had something in particular on his mind. Turned out he did—he wanted to know who the liaison would be and how they would communicate with Mirya...or whoever it was they’d be conferring with regarding the game and everything else.

“I would suggest a vote,” Mirya said. “But anything not harmful or forceful that decides a liaison is fine by Mr. Crickett.”

Cash Lidak was biting his lip and stifling a snicker. The joke was old already—“Can we just call him Jiminy?”—and he was fighting to avoid repeating it again every time a sentence ended with their sponsor’s surname.

“I think I’ll excuse myself from consideration,” he said instead, putting his hand up. “The whole running gag name thing would sink me quick.”

“Hell, I’m game,” Bromwell said. “I’ve been running our squad a long time.”

Cash’s sardonic chuckle started out as a guffaw but he got hold of it.

“So wait, what’s that amount to—‘Aim for the basket, Bob’?” he said.

Despite the faintly amused-looking smile he was managing, it was fairly obvious that Bromwell wasn’t too pleased.

“I study every new course, dissect it, figure out the winds and ground condition and obstacles,” he said. “Pass it onto my team. And I make the accommodations at the places we stay and do the books and stuff, so—”

Cash deliberately echoed him, cutting him off.

“‘Do the books,’” he said, “because you’re raking it in playing professional disc golf.”

Bromwell shrugged modestly.

“Maybe not raking yet,” he said in a confessional-but-not tone, “but I’ve found you can trowel in enough to avoid scraping by.”

Cash realized as the rest all looked on that (A) all eyes were on them and (B) his snarky quips had just crashed into a wall.

“Shit,” he said, offering a shoulder toss of his own. “Really?” Cash looked Bromwell up and down. “Whoa,” he said when the hardly imposing-looking Bromwell’s lack of a response and sober expression convinced him of the latter’s sincerity. “That’s...pretty crazy. Sorry, man.”

“No harm,” Bromwell said. “Besides, you may have just gotten me a couple of votes.”

Mirya had allowed the somewhat off-topic chat to go on, politely smiling the whole time, but it was obvious she wanted everyone to listen to her again when she did a hardly subtle throat-clearing in the next moment.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but we need to move inside. Very annoying bog flies will soon be out to pester us to distraction. I just wanted to start the little tour here so that you could get a decent look at the grounds and get a feel for the size of the manor itself.”

“To call this swampland the manor grounds is a bit on the generous side,” Ned Reary said, his round face scrunched up as he looked around at what Reary’s boss, Morrison Port, would consider useless wasteland. “Is this the cheapest manor in England?”

His snipe didn’t thrill anyone.

“I love the setting,” Mathis Delane said. “I’d live here.”

“Feel like I already *do*,” Reary said in a strained, unhappy tone. “Let’s go inside as our kind host suggests.”

They headed in through the giant doors, the one on the right swiveling open on electrical motors that hummed above and below.

“So much for the authentic castle sell,” Cash said, making a point of staring at the base of the door hinge as he passed by.

“A necessity, Mr. Lidak,” Mirya said over her shoulder as she continued leading the guests. “Without electrical power even your combined strengths might not be able to open those doors.”

After a couple of seconds, Amalee Destine spoke up—and, since she was very voluptuous and rarely said a thing, she instantly had everyone’s attention.

“So those doors are the only way in or out?” she said.

“Exactly, Ms. Destine,” Mirya said. “I suppose that, while no one wants to be trapped in their own fortress of sorts, most will accept that risk rather than trying to constantly guard two entrances at once.”

“A mansion with only one door?” Doyle Bromwell said.

“Yeah,” Cash said, chuckling. “Doesn’t seem right.”

“All will be explained soon enough,” Mirya said with that customer service rep perkiness unflagging. “Or perhaps more accurately, with luck all should be *figured out* soon enough. We won’t be giving you any clues beyond those few needed to begin. Your liaison will not receive answers to questions about the game itself. The purpose of that representative will be to let us know if any physical help is required and/or emergencies arise.”

“That’s all the rep does?” Bromwell said. “I thought they were like team leader or something. Forget it then...that doesn’t sound like fun at all.”

Mirya reiterated that she and the other employees of Mr. Crickett, including those who’d been there over the past couple of days setting up the game and the guest accommodations, needed to leave soon and added that, as such, the liaison selection process needed to be delayed until the contestants were alone. She added that the hosting staff’s presence during the decision making might influence it, at which point she turned and led them across the spacious expanse of the greeting hall, past the grand staircases on either side, and brought the entourage to a collective halt in front of a small closet door in the short connecting corridor beyond. Unlocking the door with a metal key, she opened it to reveal a dark olive rotary phone mounted on the dingy, chipped rear wall of the shallow closet.

“A land line?” Roana Cheswick said with an amused smile. “Really mixing the eras up here nicely with the décor.”

Top notch Bremen chef Klyne Hochsman, silent to that point since they’d arrived, was staring intently at the phone.

“The line is underground,” Hochsman said, his gruff voice exuding unspoken sarcasm. “You buried utility lines in a swamp?”

“Just the telephone, Mr. Hochsman,” Mirya said. “The power here comes from a pair of generators that are fully fueled and self-monitoring. But I assure you that the admittedly anachronistic device you see before you works just fine; in fact, feel free to pick up the handset.”

“*Handset*...” Mike Sato said in a teasing little echo, grinning. “These props are so stiff. Time travel should always be about going to the future, not the past. It’s a lot more likely anyway.”

Hochsman looked at the phone again. He turned, saw Mirya nod indulgently and decided to take her up on her offer. Stepping up, he lifted the handset from the time-darkened wall phone and held it up to the side of his face.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Hochsman, how are you?” the voice said, coming through loudly enough that all present could hear the old school electronic buzz of the words. “Laclede Crickett here, a pleasure.”

“Mr...Crickett?”

“Yes, thought I’d do this to get the whole show started with a bit of a kick. A surprise cameo, I think they call it in the entertainment business. Mind you I will not be your contact at this end. I just wanted to have my little walk-on here, I suppose you’d say, and to that end I would very sincerely like to thank you, your curiosity and your skepticism for making this moment come off as I’ve been hoping it would all along.”

“You’re...uh...welcome?”

“You’re too kind. Now, if I may trouble you to move the handset perhaps a foot or so from your ear so that I may address all the participants?”

Hochsman slowly complied, although in fact he ended up handing the phone back over to Mirya rather than acting as a mike stand for it.

“Good morning all,” Crickett said. “You are all here, aren’t you?”

Only one game participant responded with anything more than a simple acknowledgment.

“I’m still on the fence about showing up,” Kelvin O’Neill said, sporting a wry grin. “If all this weekend was a motor I’d say there’s some odd noises to it.”

“Odd noises? Since you mention autos, I’m guessing you must be the mechanic from Cork—Mr. O’Neill, is that right? A pleasure, sir. And please do tell me—us, I suppose—about the little pings you think you shouldn’t be hearing. We’re striving for a flawless gaming adventure.”

“It’s never that easy,” O’Neill said, still smiling, arms folded, thumbs bent up in his elbows. “Double that when it comes to electrical systems issues.”

“Oh, certainly it can be, can’t it?” Crickett said. “After all, many swear by Occam’s razor.”

“I use an electric,” O’Neill said. “And I’m not much for adages that arise from sheer laziness and simplemindedness. It’s like wishful thinking if you ask me. Or just flat-out ignorance and apathy.”

“Oh, who knows and who the hell cares?”

All eyes went to the grinning Cash Lidak.

“Sorry,” he said. “I guess I *did* promise I wouldn’t try to reheat old stale chestnuts.”

“Occam’s razor is for the lazy, like he said.” That was Mathis Delane, who nodded at O’Neill as she elaborated. “It works on occasion, and you can always try to see if the thing’s not working because it’s not plugged in. But usually it’s not working because of myriad complexities that have led to a failure somewhere you can’t see and it’ll take a long time and a lot of thought to solve it. There should be a counterpoint adage like ‘It’s always gonna be harder than you think.’” She saw the sober looks she was getting and smiled faintly. “Sorry...physics can be frustrating at times ...”

“Well,” Crickett said on the antique phone, breaking up the short but strangely heavy silence that ensued, “this has already been quite entertaining and enlightening. I can tell you’re a very bright team that will unravel our little mystery and reach the prize in your allotted weekend. With that I bid you good day, good weekend and good luck, and leave you in the capable hands of my employees.”

Sounded like he hung up, and a dial tone ensued.

Mirya too hung up the phone and she gently closed the closet door. She gave the key to Hochsman and instructed him to in turn give it to the elected liaison. Then she also bade the contestants good fortune and she, her sidekick and the prep staff quite politely made a group exit.

Once the contestants were alone, the bottle forcefully uncorked and most of them set about either telling or asking the others what the hell they thought the whole weekend was all about.

After all, they hadn’t even been given a clue about the game itself...

**2**

One thing the whole setup had done was provide the guests with plenty to talk about. In fact so much gab ensued that they almost forgot to decide who would be the liaison.

“They didn’t even tell us where to start!” Cash said. “We supposed to guess?”

When nobody came back with a better idea, that one got everybody involved. Soon they were spreading out, looking around for anything that seemed like it could lead to a treasure.

The search didn’t go on long because the dining hall featured one pretty strange painting that surely seemed to be some kind of bizarre clue.

“Death riding a merry-go-round with a baby on its lap,” Cash said. “That’s so good I don’t have a punchline.”

“That’s gotta be a comment about reincarnation,” Mathis Delane said.

“Well, maybe,” Ned Reary said. “But if this is a quest for a free reincarnation ticket, I think I’ll just quit now.”

“It’s not a clue, it’s a decoration,” Dabney Crawford said with clear disdain. “It’s just a remarkably repugnant one.”

“I kinda like it,” Bromwell said...possibly just to disagree with the stuffy Crawford.

“I think the clue will be hidden,” Billie McHale said. “Finding it is part of the game.”

“So you’re saying what, search the closets and cupboards” Crawford was still sneering. “That’s absurd.”

“Not for twelve people,” Bromwell said. “Couple of rooms apiece, three or four tops.”

“I think you’re underestimating,” Crawford said.

“Well, if Occam’s razor is the key here, it’s that goofy painting,” Kelvin O’Neill said. “Even I have enough sophistication to see how much it stands out.”

“Then what’s it tell us?”

“Nothing...yet.”

“It’s telling me that Jiminy has pretty bizarre decorating taste,” Roana Cheswick said.

“Oh thank god somebody said it,” Cash said, exploding a suddenly pent-up breath in exaggerated relief.”

“Said what?” Roana said.

“Jiminy,” Cash said. “It was like standing at the plate in tee ball and being told not to swing. Thank you.”

“You’re...welcome.”

“So the clue is the painting?” Ned Reary said, looking annoyed.

“No, that’s the mystery,” Billie McHale said. “Why would anyone put that on their wall? Get the right answer, solve the mystery, win the prize; is there by any chance an abnormal psychology expert among us?”

“Close,” Cash said, grinning. “Comes with the job.”

He looked up at the huge oil work—it seemed like the real thing, not a reproduction—and couldn’t help but focus on the face of the Grim Reaper-like “death” figure, which looked like it was having a good time riding an eerie-looking carousel horse with a chubby, awed-looking baby bouncing on its cloak-covered knee.

“But I’ve really got nothing for this yet,” he said, fascinated, slowly shaking his head. “Then again, there are plenty of Picassos and Dalis that I can’t start to explain either.”

“I’m not sure artists of that level should be mentioned in front of this...work...” Dabney Crawford said. “In fact I’m of a mind to go looking for a spare tablecloth to drape over that ghastly monument to poor taste.”

“Hey, that’s good brushwork though,” Cash said with a smirk.

Crawford moved away from the others, looking around the room in something akin to a search sweep.

“Don’t get too far away from everybody else, eh?” Barret Sonner said loudly enough for Crawford to realize he was the target of the rhetorical question.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” Crawford said with a hard chuckle after turning and seeing several concerned looks, “did I accidentally end up in the isolated castle scenario where they kill all the guests off one by one? I was supposed to be in the one where they’re all trying to solve a puzzle.”

Cash showed an appreciative smile.

“Nice,” he said.

He looked around and his smile faded. Roana saw his concern.

“What is it?” she said.

“Who the hell is making our dinner?”

That effectively brought a break to the searching and conjecture and sent them on to the kitchen, where they found their first actual clue—not to the puzzle, which had yet to be defined, but regarding meals.

Notes sent them to the walk-in refrigerator, which was stocked nicely top to bottom with...premade dinners. To be fair these were no grocery store cheapies, though, but elegant meals of over two dozen different compositions that had been prepared at the manor over the previous couple of days by the staff that had just departed. The instructions were specific to individual meal combos, and both Bromwell and Delane were pleased to see that there were six vegan meals. In addition to the full meals, the place was stocked with all kinds of snacks and drinks...including alcohol, and not the cheap stuff.

“Party time!” Cash said, looking at an unopened bottle of single malt scotch.

“Yeah, twelve drunken people will solve a puzzle fast,” Ned Reary said.

“We won’t get drunk,” Roana said. “Just the right level of relaxed to perform at our best.”

“I go strongly relaxed,” Cash said, working the cap off the bottle. “I’ll try to avoid straight from the bottle, but how often do you get single malt?”

“Never,” Billie McHale said. “I only drink mescal.”

“There’s some of that here too,” Cash said. “You need a shot glass too or just the bottle?”

Billie and a couple of others laughed.

“Neither at the moment, but we’ll see how it goes,” she said.

At that point, looking through all the food and drink had made several of them ready to indulge in the serve yourself scenario. But others were too curious about the rest of the place to eat first, so in the end the group split nearly down the middle between people reheating meals and those checking out Banderly Manor.

Cash, Amalee Destine and Kelvin O’Neill went off one way to look around while Bromwell, Delane, Sato and Hochsman headed the opposite, leaving behind four working to prepare the dinners of their choice while Dabney Crawford unabashedly displayed his OCD cleanliness habits for the soon-to-be diners—that is to say, buzzing around opening and inspecting every single cabinet and closet door in the kitchen and adjacent dining hall...with the exception of a couple of locked china cases, which had glass display doors anyway.

Ned Reary, Barret Sonner and Billie McHale didn’t really pay that much attention or say anything about Crawford’s fast-paced tour, but Roana Cheswick kept fighting back the urge until she could hold it no longer.

“You *are* checking for secret passages too, aren’t you?” she said, standing behind him, Manhattan in hand, as he stood leaning into a broom closet.

He straightened and turned around.

“Actually I wanted to see if I trusted the kitchen staff’s hygiene standards before I sampled their...*cuisine*,” he said, the faint curl of part of his upper lip clearly conveying his next words before they came. “At the moment I suppose I’m still on the cusp about it.”

“The place looks well-kept to me,” Roana said, yet her petite nose was doing its own version of that iffy lip of Crawford’s as she glanced around. “I might go brighter with the colors in such a drab landscape, but I think I might just choose a brighter landscape instead.”

“Well, from the sound of it,” Barret Sonner said between quick forkfuls of a potato dish, “if we figure out this little game you may just get to do that.”

“What, you think we’ll get an estate each or something?” Reary said, likewise eating but with considerable less haste. “Granted Crickett is rich, but I doubt he’d call this home if he had enough to buy a dozen more in better climates.”

“Some people like this sort of gothic setting, I suppose,” Roana said. “I say let them enjoy it. I’ll be in Bermuda.”

“With a new manor, love?” Barret said, grinning at her.

“Precisely.”

“I think we’re all getting a little too large with our daydreams here,” Crawford said. Using not his hands but the polished tip of one black shoe partially through the handle, he had rolled a modern shop vacuum out on its four little canister wheels and was looking it over. “Nice that they provided us with this considering the mess we’re likely to make.”

“I think you assume too much,” Roana Cheswick said. “There’s no reason to think like that simply because we don’t have hosts here to clean up for—aw, misery!”

She’d been doing a little hand gesturing while staying clear of Crawford’s doings but was still hovering behind him, and with her focus on him she hadn’t seen that she’d been backing up toward the cabinets.

The wine glass had hit the floor and shattered.

The room fell dead still.

Ned Reary broke it with a hearty guffaw.

“As you were saying?” he said. “Wonderful...just wonderful!”

“You have to appreciate irony,” Billie said, “although you’re not obliged to like it.”

Instinct had quickly taken over and Crawford was already plugging the cord into a nearby outlet. This required a crouch, and as he came out of it with the vacuum hose in hand he switched it on.

Dust blasted out, instantly filling the space around the startled pair. The rapidly expanding grit bank immediately compelled the other three to pull emergency evacuation maneuvers, shielding their meals and withdrawing from the gray fog even as it quickly spread to consume a third of the broad length of the kitchen, and as the confused Crawford sought to fight through his choking and see through his watery, grit-filled eyes to...

“Turn it off!”

Ned Reary’s pointless shout, even louder than it needed to be to be heard over the vacuum motor, echoed off the walls as Crawford mercifully found the switch.

He looked around as the motor whine descended the scale and faded away, obviously both shocked and appalled by the mess he’d just made.

“Someone must have put it away in haste,” Billie McHale said, having shielded her remaining dinner and gotten clear in time but still hanging well away from the cloud at the other end of the room. “They stuck the hose on the wrong port.”

“Yes, with a full load in the bin,” Barret said, “judging by this lovely cloud.”

Crawford wasn’t apologetic—he was too disgusted. His eyes grew wide and he looked to the others.

“I certainly hope the electricity isn’t hooked up to the water supply or anything,” he said.

“No, that’s the Three Stooges and this is more like Abbott and Costello so far,” Sonner said.

The dust slowly settled while the three who’d been dining worked on finishing their meals at the far end of the room and Roana Cheswick got herself a new cocktail glass and set about filling it with a martini.

Crawford excused himself and went off to the lavatory they’d passed on the way to the kitchen.

“Poor fella,” Sonner said when the professional housekeeper was out of earshot. “Just shows you can only be so neat and organized before nature itself takes offense.”

“You’re a plumber, aren’t you Mr. Sonner?”

“It’s Bear to my friends, and you’re my friend until you aren’t,” Sonner said. “And no, not as in koala or teddy bear. Ask my exes.”

“You sound like you have a problem with neatness and organization,” Reary said. “Empires are built on it.”

“Not if they have government contracts,” Sonner said with a grin. “And yeah—funny thing is, you work with water long enough you learn to *respect* it. Water doesn’t like order. Sure, it accepts it...it accepts just about anything for a time. But when you confine it, well, it spends every single moment trying to get to whatever’s past the limits you put on it. And that’s something you don’t want fighting against you every step of the way.”

Reary looked like he wanted to come back with something but didn’t have said something.

“So why do you—uh—plumb?” Billie McHale said to Sonner.

“Had I known how formidable my chosen vocation really was, sure, in hindsight I might have found a lesser challenge. But I’m good at fixing things in general and water’s pretty important in Australia these days. Plumbing’s steadier work than fixing bike motors...but I do that too if you pay a living wage. Side stuff, y’know?"

Crunch.

An already faintly tipsy Roana had stepped right through the debris of her dropped glass.

“Oh dear,” she said, spinning about and splashing a bit from the new one she was holding in its place. “That was a bit embarrassing.”

“I suggest we take this out of the kitchen,” Reary said. “My dinner’s been soiled but I can do without subjecting my lungs to the same degradation.”

He dumped his mostly intact plate into the trash bin under the sink and headed out into the dining room, which they’d left untouched because the kitchen table had been so much nearer the microwave ovens. The others followed, with Sonner trailing the group and taking the time to shove the vacuum back into the closet and close the door.

He didn’t bother with the glass fragments, spilled liquor or settling dust. Lingering back, Billie McHale met his gaze.

“Don’t you think we should clean that up?” she said.

Sonner smiled and shrugged.

“I figure as soon as our friend Crawford gets himself looking neat and tidy again, he’ll make a beeline right back here and take care of it.”

“So why put the vacuum away?”

“Well, I’m no neat freak...Ms. McHale, is it? I just don’t like to run into open closet doors and fall over vacuum cleaners while I’m on a round for a midnight snack.”

**3**

The three who’d gone off had made it through the “modestly sprawling” first floor before the other little self-guided tour group, so they’d taken one of the entrance hall’s sweeping staircases up to the second floor to check out what was, as expected, mostly bedrooms and baths. Cash Lidak, Amalee Destine and Kelvin O’Neill were a study in contrasts but were doing just fine getting along as they entered what felt like about the fortieth room so far—although in fact they’d only toured about half that many.

“I like this one,” Cash said. “Bed by the window.”

“Enjoy,” Amalee said. “There’s not much view and you’ll be so...exposed.”

“To who, Heathcliff the peeping tom?” Cash laughed. “Big deal. Nothing to hide.”

“Not sure we can pick our bedrooms just because we’re the first up here,” Kelvin said.

“Why not?” Cash said. “It’s gotta happen sooner or later, and if we take twelve people unfamiliar to one another and spend the time to decide every single thing democratically, we won’t get to bed tonight until tomorrow morning.”

Kelvin admitted he had a point. Amalee said nothing, but that wasn’t surprising.

“All right,” Kelvin said, “if that’s how it is I’m fine with picking out my own too while I’m up here. Although if this beauteous lass is game, I will consider sharing a room.”

Her look didn’t suggest she was at all game.

Kelvin shrugged.

“Can’t win the lotto if you don’t buy a ticket,” he said with a little smile.

They continued on. The central hall was broad and over a dozen doors lined the walls. Behind most of these were variations of the same basic furnishings in rooms of differing sizes but generally rectangular configurations. Most of the differences were in color and wall, ceiling and floor décor. Only a couple didn’t have walk-out balconies.

“I was figuring there’d be a really big master bedroom somewhere,” Cash said.

“Then you should have held out for it,” Kelvin said. “My guess is it’s the one behind the door at the end of the hall.”

He was right.

And an impressively large chamber it was, with six tall windows looking out at...well...the bleak coastal mire. Yet the view wasn’t abysmal at all, because there was something undeniably evocative out there in that patchy and hazardous terrain.

“Sunset view,” Amalee said softly. “That fits.”

“You want it?” Kelvin said, but she didn’t answer.

“I’d feel strange about sleeping in the master bedroom’s bed,” Cash said. “That’s a bit...personal.”

Amalee nodded.

“Hey, if they didn’t want us using it, they’d have locked the door,” Kelvin said. “You just talked me into taking it.”

They ran into the other “manor tour” on the way back down the hall.

“That one’s mine,” Cash said, seeing Doyle Bromwell peering into the room that Cash had “called.”

Bromwell just gave him a quizzical look, said nothing and went on into the bedroom.

“Dammit,” Cash said. “I shoulda left something of mine in there to claim it.”

The others who’d just come up were close enough to have heard, and that brought up the sleeping arrangements and “dibs factor” as Cash went on to call it in the ensuing discussion, which didn’t last long because the overwhelming consensus was that—as there were no rules and the guests had to make their own—nobody could “call” a room until everyone had seen them all.

Cash was grumbling a bit as he, Amalee and Kelvin headed down the stairs to prepare their dinners in the kitchen.

“So you actually want that same room the standup comic wants?” Mike Sato said to Bromwell, who’d been the most vocal about Cash’s attempt at filing preemptive bedroom claims.

“Probably not,” Bromwell said with a shrug. “It’s the principle of the thing.”

“Yeah, that was a little on the pushy side,” Sato said. “He’s in showbiz—I guess they’re used to speaking up for what they want.”

“Yeah, and getting it,” Bromwell said.

“It’s not a date with the Vixen Twins,” Mathis Delane said. “From these first few rooms it looks to me more like it’s just ‘Do you want your bed near the window or not?’ And in my case it’s ‘not’ because I have astraphobia.”

“You’re afraid of the stars?” Sato said.

“No,” Delane said, “it means fear of storms. Lightning. Thunder. Wind. I grew up on the Atlantic coast of Florida.”

“That’ll do it, all right,” Bromwell said. “Me, I don’t mind a window, especially if there’s a storm. Something to watch. Notice there are no computers or TVs in these rooms?”

“I noticed it the first one we hit,” an offended-looking Sato said. “Primitives ...”

“We had to check our phones too,” Delane said. “I think the idea is that we have to solve whatever’s here without sheer dependence on the internet.”

“Or maybe,” Bromwell said, “it’s so whoever plans to kill us off one by one can make sure their weekend of old school whodunit fun doesn’t get interrupted by the pesky authorities.”

Sato’s laugh was sharp, kind of a little snort.

“Who, the Lottery Killer?” he said. “That’s what they’d have to call them, right? We won one, for one thing, and for another we’re totally random and unconnected with each other.”

“You know that for sure?” Delane said.

“Yeah,” Bromwell said to Sato, “considering we barely know names so far, I don’t think I’d be making that firm a declaration yet.” He turned to Delane and smiled warmly. “Hi,” he said, extending his hand. “A pleasure to actually meet you. Doyle Bromwell, call me Brom.”

“Mathis,” Delane said, shaking his hand after but a moment’s hesitation.

They both looked over at Sato.

“It’s Mike,” he said. “But wait, show of hands.” He slowly raised one. “Who thinks we’ve been brought here to be knocked off one by one, and why?”

They all chuckled, although the mirth wasn’t exactly hearty.

They moved on, finished the upstairs circuit quickly—because a couple of them were getting hungry—and headed back down to the kitchen, but the party had moved to the dining room for several reasons.

“You can’t vacuum up dust with a shop vacuum,” Dabney Crawford was saying as they arrived. “They don’t have adequate filters—you’ll be putting it right back up in the air again.”

“Okay, then we’ll just avoid the dust and eating at the kitchen table and only use the microwaves to heat up meals...that we bring in here to eat,” Billie McHale said, one of the few seeking compromise. “We’re only talking a weekend.”

“No, it needs to be cleaned up because it will contaminate everything we prepare in there. It needs cleaning...*but* the right kind.”

“By all means, clean away,” Ned Reary said. “I’ll be looking for our puzzle. I would think the sooner we find it, the longer we have to work on it and the better our chances of success.”

“What,” Cash said, coughing out a laugh, “you don’t think the symbol of death riding a merry-go-round with a baby on his lap is the puzzle?”

“A puzzle asks a question,” Reary said. “It says you need to figure something out. That painting merely suggests that existence is cyclical and death’s always riding along. There’s no deeper question being put forth—or if there is, it’s beyond me.”

“By now we’ve basically seen the whole place,” Brom said, stuffing down his mis-heated food because he was so keyed up that it didn’t matter if some of it was too hot and some was still a little cold. He looked up from his meal and saw he had everyone’s attention. “Did anybody find a puzzle or challenge?”

“We merely skimmed the rooms,” Amalee Destine said. “Perhaps when we choose them from the night and look them over more thoroughly, we’ll find exactly that.”

“Then I say we go search them now,” Mike Sato said. “Pick rooms and go search yours. I know that’s just the bedrooms, but where else would our host expect us to end up tonight? I mean besides here in what’s obviously meant to be the war room.”

“Huh?”

Billie McHale looked puzzled.

“A war room in a live action show is the place where everybody gets together to talk strategy,” Mike said.

“Oh good,” McHale said. “For a minute there I thought you’d found some secret instruction that told you we had to fight to the death or something.”

She got a few laughs.

They decided to let Mike’s suggestion prevail and everyone sought out a room. In the end, Bromwell conceded with a grin and let Cash have the room with the bed right up against the huge multi-paneled window. And continuing on, the crowd steadily dwindled as each guest found an acceptable room.

Mike came into Mathis’ room through the open door. He approached her slowly as she sorted through the contents of her pair of travel cases atop the overly frilly four-poster bed. A squeaking floorboard betrayed him.

Mathis rose and spun around.

“I’m so sorry,” Mike said, seeing the surprise and uncertainty in her wide eyes. “I should have knocked, but you were so focused I figured that would make you...well...jump even higher.”

He explained that he had come over to share room searches to make the task less lonely for both of them, and as his room was right next to hers, it did seem to make sense to partner up. The offer came off as innocently as was possible considering both of them were young and single, although there did already seem to be a little bit of something that came off like competition going on between Mike and Brom.

If Mathis was flattered or even aware she wasn’t showing it. They set about looking the room and its contents over, with Mathis taking time out to hang her clothes in the ornately carved titan of a wardrobe that filled almost a third of the space along one wall.

“This place is really pretty clean, considering how big it is,” Mathis said.

“The kitchen’s a mess though,” Mike said, cracking her up. “Poor crazy Crawford.”

Mathis hushed him in a sharp, low hiss, working to hold back a grin but failing. She ended up chuckling too.

“Hey,” she said in a sobering tone after a moment, “it’s really not funny. I do feel sorry for him.”

“Seems like the type to walk out of paradise because the grass doesn’t get cut.”

“Stop it. You don’t know what kind of freaky people raised him.”

Mike saw it was actually bugging Mathis and curbed his mirth, apologizing.

“It’s all right,” she said. “But that actually was kind of funny. Too bad it turned half the kitchen into an environmental nightmare.”

“You think we should go help him find mops and buckets and clean it up, don’t you ...”

Mathis admitted that was on her mind. Mike saw the look in her eyes and conceded to joining her in doing just that.

“This is, for the record, my good deed for the weekend,” he said. “I’m not spending the whole thing scrubbing up after craz...I mean cleaning up weirdo-whoopsies.”

**4**

“So we go to bed utterly clueless, I guess,” Cash said, lifting his fourth cocktail up in a little toast to the others who still hadn’t called it a night by the hour of eleven. “Too bad. I really hoped for a lively gaming session tonight, but I guess the point was to get to know each other. Jiminy and his crew are certainly avoiding the conventional so far.”

Dabney Crawford had gotten a little stiff; he hadn’t expected Mike and Mathis to jump in and clean up the dust, and though he wasn’t thoroughly impressed with the quality of the work, he was quite appreciative of the volunteers. And so he’d gotten more comfortable and decided to indulge some brandy...and then a bit more.

“Who?” he said almost dazedly, having forgotten all about their host’s surname and the fun had with it earlier in the evening.

“Crickett,” Cash said. “Chirpity-chirp, y’know? Like I hear all the time onstage when I’m in New Jersey.”

“So why do you go to New Jersey?” Kelvin O’Neill said with a broad grin.

“That’s where I live,” Cash said, and he got some genuine laughs. “But shit, as the redundant proctologist said, I am truly bummed that we have not figured out our task tonight.”

“We could stay up all night,” Brom said. “I’m sure not sleepy.”

“You haven’t been drinking,” Billie McHale said.

“I usually don’t,” Brom said. “Affects my aim.”

“What are you throwing?” McHale said.

“Plastic discs at little metal chains and baskets,” Bromwell said. “Disc golf.”

Ned Reary looked pained.

“Good lord, you make money throwing a...Frisbee?” he said.

“Not even enough to buy a mansion in a swamp. Lucky for me, I don’t want one.”

Talk turned to professions, as it seemed the seven still present other than Bromwell had steady paycheck type incomes. McHale was an archeologist, so she made enough to get by on and not much more, though she said her name was in the ring for a spot at the London Museum of Natural History.

“I’m just not counting on it,” she said, smiling ruefully. “I have a better shot here by far.”

A career florist, Roana Cheswick’s calling had been on display with every third comment and observation all evening, but that didn’t keep her from a “quick overview” lasting every bit of ten minutes and featuring a lot of flourish because she’d been pleasantly to overly inebriated and back all evening. When at last she was done, winded, and laughing at herself for “going on so,” she turned to Ned Reary so as to transfer all the attention she’d been getting over to him.

“I forgot what we were doing,” he said in a low growl that sounded funny and quippish, but within which a faint yet distinct actual resentment couldn’t help but be detected by those still sober enough to do such things. “Oh yes—our vocations. That’s right. Well, I...I work at a desk. Been doing it for a long time. Documents and such. They come in, I do things with them, they go: It’s all part of the big machine that is Morrison Port.”

Broml looked puzzled.

“I thought Morrison Port was the fat cat who owned the whole thing?” he said.

“He is,” Roana Cheswick said before Reary could respond. “He’s notoriously reclusive, but if you’re in big money circles you know his name...and influence.”

“But...he named his company *his own name*?”

“No, you simpleton,” Reary said, looking quite annoyed. “It’s Morrison Port Industries—but nobody bothers with the ‘Industries’ part...”

“Hey, no insult intended to your big boss man,” Brom said, throwing his hands up beside his shoulders to flash a feigned surrender. “Do you ever see the guy himself?”

“Quite often,” Reary said. “He can’t afford to be a complete recluse—I’m one of several necessary connections to the outside world.”

“Such an odd way to be, so alone,” Roana said.

“He seems to enjoy it considerably,” Reary said.

“What’s he like?” Mathis said. She’d already explained her gig—experimental physics with a focus on vibrational matrices—in such a way that it had somehow seemed both mesmerizing and boring at the same time. Sensing that she might have come off nosy, she backed off. “I mean nothing personal, I was just wondering why he’s never wanted to be around...people. Working in a high security facility, I like to let off some steam at a nice crowded night spot on a regular basis.”

“I don’t get the idea that Mr. Port needs to let off steam,” Reary said. “He is quite focused and driven.”

“To make more money,” Brom said, grinning sheepishly until Reary glared him down.

“Exactly, Mr. Bromwell,” Roana Cheswick said. “That is, after all, the game.”

“Right, and it’s also the game here this weekend, is it not? Too bad we don’t have a clue yet what is in fact the game, but at least we all know what’s in our dressers and closets. Oh, and while we’re at it, just call me Brom.”

“Then it’s Roana...*Brom*.”

Despite their age difference, there was a definite come-on in that tone.

Nobody said a thing for a long, oddly uncertain moment.

Finally, mercifully...

“I think I’m heading off for bed,” Reary said. “This has been a long day.”

Billie McHale and Dabney Crawford also decided to call it an evening, and within a minute or so and after some quick goodnights it was down to KelvinO’Neill, who’d made his whole background recap quite simply “I fix cars...if I can find the parts” earlier, along with Roana, Cash and Mathis.

“I’m used to long evenings,” Cash said. “Comics work second shift.”

Indeed, he seemed the least fatigued of the four. Roana had sobered up and was drinking water, but her lids were occasionally drooping.

“You know,” Kelvin said, showing a wry smile as he met Cash’s gaze, “where I live, guys sayin’ smartass stuff all night in a pub do it for free.”

“Obviously your economy is broken,” Cash, who lived by the quick comeback, said.

“Isn’t everybody’s?” Kelvin said.

Mathis was amused by the banter. Her smile and little chuckle drew them to look her way.

“So you’re a vibe scientist then?” Kelvin said. “Reckon we’ve got a bit in common—nine times out of ten my jobs come down to something makin’ a rattle it’s not supposed to be makin’.”

“I may have you take a look at my head this weekend,” Cash said.

“No need,” Kelvin said. “I can see it’s off a bit from here.”

That generated a little mirth, but that late and after such a long day it didn’t last long.

Instead, the conversation got oddly serious and deep.

“You scientists say there’s no such thing as matter anymore, right?” Kelvin said, seeing Mathis looking at him. “It’s just, what, energy all clustered up here and there so that’s there’s places where there’s...uh...what do you call it, ‘apparent stuff’?”

“That’s as right as you’re likely to get using common words,” Mathis said, nodding. “Vibrational physics models consider space like a video screen. You look at a phone or a computer monitor and see pixels on that. Those are just energy nodes in the right spots at the right times to allow your mind to understand what you’re perceiving. And none of that bothers people. They read a message and it’s just pixels, there one moment and gone the next, and those pixels in turn are just intangible light sources momentarily sending concepts to your mind in the form of...well...vibrations. But not one bit of that is solid. And back at the lab they say the same applies to the phone—and your body and mind too, for that matter.”

“Isn’t that kinda just the holographic universe theory?” Kelvin smiled at the surprise evident in Mathis’ face. “What,” he said, “you were sittin’ there thinking my spare time was all spent watching football?”

“Well, *I* *was*,” Cash said with perfect timing and deadpan timbre.

That got a few little smiles and laughs, but Roana was rising from her chair.

“Going to bed?” Mathis said to her.

“No,” Roana said, displaying a little smirk, “just switching back to liquor so I can handle this ‘what is reality’ stuff.”

“Sorry about that,” Kelvin said. “I started it. Can’t help but wonder what a beauteous lass such as this does for eight hours a day in a dark laboratory with nothing but particles for company.”

“Particles that don’t actually exist ...” Cash said, grinning impishly.

“No, it’s all right, please do go on,” Roana said. She wasn’t bothering with the cocktail at this point, instead bringing the bottle of Grand Marnier over along with three shot glasses. “Considering we could be talking any number of pointless and mundane subjects right now, or fretting over the big puzzle we have yet to even find, I’ll take overwhelming cosmic concepts of the universe.”

“No way,” Mathis said, eyeing the shot glass cluster as Roana filled them one after another. “I’m not hitting the hard stuff this late.”

“Who asked you?” Roana said. She finished the pours, set the bottle down, hoisted up one of the shot glasses and smiled at Mathis. “Cheers.”

She lifted it to her lips, downed it, set the glass down, smiled and went for another.

An odd thing happened as she was lifting the third shot glass a moment later. The manor shuddered.

“Okay, maybe we’d better change the subject after all,” Roana said as the ominous rumble, which had risen slowly over about thirty seconds to a foot-vibrating climax, was finally fading.

“Was that thunder?” Kelvin said. “Sky was clear last time I looked.”

“I don’t think this part of England gets many quakes,” Roana said.

“Maybe it has to do with that tidal surge thing our perky hostess mentioned,” Cash said. “Water coming in through fissures, getting ready to turn our lovely surroundings into the worst swimming pool ever. I bet it smells quite...interesting...here after the water’s ebbed again.”

“That’s probably why none of the windows open,” Kelvin said.

That caught the others by surprise. He explained that he’d tested a few and hadn’t found any yet that could actually be opened without the unscrewing of screws and removal of the stops they held against the frame grooves.

Cash grinned.

“So in case of fire,” he said, “break glass.”

**5**

They didn’t have a clue when they awakened the following morning. Nor did they have a mystery or puzzle to which any might apply, although the weird painting with the Reaper circling a merry-go-round on a freaky-faced carousel horse with a far too cheery baby bouncing on Death’s knee was still pretty much a topic of discussion.

The earliest risers, not surprisingly, were those who’d turned in first the previous evening. Bypassing frozen meals, Barret “Bear” Sonner had fixed a bunch of decent French toast, enough for the half dozen who were up because he’d used a whole loaf of bread.

Only Klyne Hochsman and Mike Sato took him up on the fresh meal.

“So, Mr. Hochsman,” Bear said, “what’s the verdict?”

Oddly enough, the head chef of a renowned and bustling five star hotel almost looked surprised to be asked.

“The game’s quite unexciting so far...” he said at first, but after considering a response for a moment, he added “...oh, and you seem to be an able maker of bread-based breakfast dishes.”

“Gee, *thaaanks*,” Bear said, rolling his eyes.

“I think it’s great,” Mike Sato said. “Thanks Mr. Sonner.”

“Just Bear, like I’ve said a couple of times. You got it...Mike. Back in town my toast is considered worth walking a couple of miles for, but hey, not everybody is willing to walk that far for it. For many though, truly the toast of the town, guess you’d say.”

“I’m gonna have some more,” Mike said. “You folks are missing out, but your loss my gain, y’know?”

Sure enough, he got up, went over and put some more on his plate though he still had some of his first heaping plateful left. There was no syrup but it didn’t matter because Bear had mixed butter and brown sugar to make something at least as sweet and rich. Sitting back down at the kitchen table, which was clean at last courtesy of Dabney Crawford’s go-overs the previous night before turning in, he dug in once again.

“Nothing quite like a three thousand calorie breakfast to get your wheels off the ground and leave you dragging your belly on the runway,” slim Billie McHale said.

Mike just shrugged.

“It’s gonna be a long day, he’ll need the energy,” Bear said. “If the puzzle or whatever doesn’t turn up soon we may end up spending all of it prying the tapestries and paintings off the walls to see if there’s something somewhere to tell us what we’re supposed to be doing.”

In the end, they didn’t *quite* get to the point of ripping down the artwork.

“All right, who’s the wise guy?” Cash Lidak said, strolling into the dining room at five past nine toting a bulky photo album.

“Isn’t it technically *you*?” Kelvin O’Neill said.

“By god...” Cash said, staggering back a step, eyes widening as though he’d been hit with a revelation “...I think you’re right!”

“What is it?” Billie McHale said, eyeing the heavy tome covered in nearly black leather.

“The Field Book of Cricketts,” Cash said, and he stepped up to the dining room table and set it down for the four others in the room to see. “Looks to me like it’s a memento scrapbook and grand history tour of our host’s hardly high profile ancestors.”

“Where was it?” Brom said, turning its pages slowly as Billie stood beside him perusing what was on each the best she could in the short time he was allowing.

“By the time I found it,” Cash said, “it was lying on the ground behind my feet—right where I’d tripped over it in the hallway, which was right in front of the doorway to my room.”

He explained that someone must have set it there during the night, and because it was still not all that light in the hallway and he wasn’t completely awake, and as he’d had other things on his mind as well, he had stumbled over the dusty family archive and wound up sprawled on the hall floor. He looked around at the others.

“I don’t suppose anybody is gonna ’fess up to putting it there,” Cash said. “But who if not one of us? It didn’t glide silently down the halls on its own.”

“Prove it,” Kelvin said, grinning broadly.

Cash hadn’t really looked it over much, so he was as surprised as the others when they soon came upon the right pages and it struck them that yes—there did appear to be a mystery after all.

“So the ancestral Crickett was what we call a major loon,” Billie said, shaking her head in disbelief as she tried to comprehend what Laclede Crickett’s great-great-grandfather had done. “And here we are at his kid’s gala party in the middle of nowhere with the tide coming in tonight to make it Nowhere Island.”

“Just because Marion Crickett was some kind of high class nineteenth century illegal art collector doesn’t make any of this part of some dark plot,” Kelvin said. “Mind you, I’m not sayin’ it isn’t, jury’s still out on that; what I do say is that...well...if Junior’s puttin’ Great Granddad’s confession right there for all of us to see, I don’t exactly picture him carryin’ on the same ways...do you?”

“Well, at least we know our host has the funds to cover this whole publicity stunt,” Cash said. “Which means we can get back to daydreaming about castles on tropical beaches.”

Amalee Destine and Ned Reary came in side by side, although not by any means elbow to elbow. Both were curious as to why they were hearing excited tones, so Brom and Billie showed them the handwritten confession. As others were coming back from elsewhere, McHale ended up reading it aloud for the benefit of the entire guest contingent.

One day they will recognize my affliction. One day they will understand my urge to seek what I have sought, all the while knowing it was not truly mine to possess. In fact I’m not certain it even belongs in the museum for which it was officially bound, for surely someone there would eventually succumb to the...draw...as I have.

Mind you I would not have been tempted had the opportunity not insinuated—no, insisted—its way into my life...had it not then crawled insidiously up into the forefront of my thoughts and desires and thereupon set up camp.

That camp grew into a great, all-consuming metropolis.

I am staring at the Wealth of Atakai for the final time. This glimmering hermite, this lustrous orichalcum, these soul-piercing gems—they are not meant to be possessed by one individual, for in truth the owner is the possessed. Minds like ours should not find such great powers so readily accessible.

Had I not ordered the pirating of my own shipping vessel to gain these wonders...these terrors...then I might be of sound mind and body...and as such, up to the task of destroying them and the fury that would be released by such dire actions.

As it is I must safely store them where they will not be found. There is a place here at Banderly Manor that will guard them until the very structure collapses. And on that fateful day, may our kind have the great good fortune that the falling rubble does what I cannot. Safe from fire; safe from the winds; and safely above all water lines: Here the Wealth will remain, along with my eternal repentance for my crimes unpunished.

Lord Marion Crickett

June 6, 1876

“We’re looking for cursed treasure?” Cash said. “Nice twist.”

“This just went from a game to something else,” Mathis said.

“What do you mean?” Mike said.

“Well,” Mathis said, “if I’m reading that right, Laclede Crickett doesn’t know where our prize awaits. He’s counting on us to find it for him.”

“What is it?” Ned Reary said. “I’ve never heard of the wealth of Tiki-Tiki or whatever.”

The rest exchanged searching glances...except one.

“The Wealth of Atakai went missing in 1876,” Billie said, and all eyes went to her. “Found in the Mediterranean off the coast of Formentera, believed to be Atlantean. They were shipping it to England when—well—I guess Marion Crickett’s little ‘problem’ got the best of him and he had his own cargo hijacked so he could—”

“...sit around the manor playing with his jewels?” Brom said, getting a few nervous chuckles—and a mock look of uncertainty from Cash.

“Hey, any more of that and we’ll need to talk union dues,” the latter said in jest.

“It’s a century and a half later and this is an embarrassed descendant’s cry for help to exonerate him from a crime he didn’t commit.” Billie McHale was shaking her head slowly, staring at the note. “He knows we’re good at figuring things out, so we’re all here because a dozen puzzle solvers working together are better than one. Interesting, though, that I’m the only one who knows a thing about what we’re looking for.”

“So what exactly is the treasure,” Reary said, and he saw McHale turn and meet his gaze. “We talking gold doubloons, missing crown jewels? Because some of that is worth a lot more for its historical value than just the carat with a c and karat with a k counts.”

“The items were found on the sea floor, as I said.” McHale was looking around at the others. “It wasn’t treasure as such to Atlantean culture, just metals and crystals that many theorized were needed as they are today—in technological devices. In fact it’s believed that there may have been some items in the Wealth of Atakai that could do things...things we can’t do today even with our own technological wonders.”

“You mean like magic?” Brom said.

“I’m not about to get into semantics with magic, science and perspectives,” McHale said. “Let’s just say the records suggest that those who got that one and only first shot at looking at it before the haul was shipped off to oblivion were leaning toward the ‘treasure’ actually being scientific instruments.”

“What’s ‘orichalcum’?” Bear said. “Sounds like a throat wash.”

“It’s an alloy of copper, zinc and some trace metals,” Billie said. “Hermite—the Greek word translation—is described as an alloy with a gleaming whitish sheen that never fades or erodes. The prevailing theories are that it’s platinum, nickel, silver and maybe even cobalt but there’s none to test. It’s never been found, at least not officially. Its use is mentioned in higher alchemical processes. The thing is, with Atlantean culture, there’s not enough left to figure out much more than that. But it was still worth a master’s thesis. And to think Dr. Korok felt I was wasting my time on such an iffy historical report and almost didn’t give me the credit.”

“This is absurd,” Dabney Crawford said. “We’re expected to find something that’s been hidden here for a century and a half...because the owner is frightened of it.”

“Well, that is some pretty heavy stuff about fury and regrets and punishment in Super-Great Gramp’s note,” Brom said. “Mind you I’m all for modern science—onward and upward, you know?—but I’m not sure I just want to dismiss that level of fear like, ‘Oh, they were such deity-fearing primitives back then, what’s the big deal? There’s no such thing as cursed treasure.’ People who say stuff like that, they ignore the warning and the next thing you know, they’re growing a gorilla arm out of the middle of their back and they don’t know why—no, they don’t have a clue ...”

“Nonsense,” Crawford said, scowling. “I for one am willing to weather the curse of great financial fortune.” He looked around, taking in the rest one by one as he spoke. “I suppose those who aren’t may want to simply sit this one out, because if those of us who aren’t concerned about the Revenge of the Jackpot end up doing all the work, you can imagine we won’t be sharing our earned ‘burden’ with you.”

“Same here,” Klyne Hochsman said. “The superstitious among us are free to withdraw from the game.”

He never seemed to sit down long, tending to be the one off to the side, often to the point of aloofness—but with a wariness that made it look to the couple of his fellow guests who’d noticed like he was constantly on the quiet alert watching for some kind of surprise.

Ned Reary was smiling broadly and all noticed that.

“The only thing I’m superstitious about,” he said, “is not answering when opportunity knocks.”

“If opportunity knocks at my house, he’s gonna get an earful,” Bear Sonner said. “First off, the sodding bugger’s way late. And on top of that, if he’s too wrapped up in his own nonstop party to see the doorbell button and use it like civilized folk, he’s gonna hear all about it.”

**6**

The quest was there before them all, and true to Hochsman’s prediction, nobody decided that the strange and unexpected terms were too much to accept to continue. They had the mission, the trick being that it was both an “uncontrolled experiment” in hiring ambitious puzzle-solving pros and pretty vague—oh, and possibly dangerous, if the likely deathbed confession of Lord Marion Crickett was taken as truth and reality in its entirety.

Cursed treasure indeed. At least, as Ned Reary made a crusade of putting into the conversation, that would not be theirs to keep. Laclede Crickett would end up with the Wealth of Atakai and the people who found it for him would be compensated in plain, non-cursed money.

Most of them, obviously, were not taking the warnings of extreme regret associated with the Wealth of Atakai as anything worth...well...keeping them from wanting to find it.

Sure, the situation was strange. And that note and the album in which it had been stashed had appeared out of thin air...unless somebody was lying. And then there was the timing of the game.

“Have you guys seen this?”

Brom was over at the windows, which sat up just high enough that from most of the dining room they mainly showed the distant seaward hills and not the miles of fen between. He was close enough to see what the rest soon came over to collectively regard with at least respect, if not in fact stronger emotions.

The land was almost half inundated.

What had been mostly solid and semisolid footing had lost a good deal of its acreage to puddles, ponds and lagoons that were still growing—although not so rapidly that such could be seen. Fed by the tides, the fissures had forwarded all that surging seawater into the basin around Banderly Manor, and as a result the water-land layout was a bit like highly porous Swiss cheese.

“I sure hope we don’t have to go muckin’ about out there,” Kelvin said. “It’s one thing to fail to solve some weird puzzle and another to drown in quicksand while you’re at it.”

“The confession said something about what we’re looking for being above all waterlines,” Dabney Crawford said. “I’d say that makes it unlikely we’ll have to go out there at all.”

“So we’re looking for a former sunken treasure that, somehow, the owner can’t find despite his probably having enough money to just have the place stripped down and rebuilt top to bottom.” Bear was slowly shaking his head where he sat with a mug of stout in hand. “There’s something in there somewhere that smells a lot like that bog out there to me.”

“It’s a fen,” Roana Cheswick said. “Bogs don’t have water exchange. They get almost all their water from rain and snow.”

“It won’t be a fen in a few hours,” Ned Reary said. “It’ll be a lake.”

“So what?” Cash Lidak said. “It’s just a game gimmick—a push to get us after the prize. The water comes in, surrounds us, then we wait a day or so and it goes back out.”

“So you think the timing is just for what, set decoration?” Roana said. “Sorry but I don’t buy that. Admittedly I don’t know that much about Laclede Crickett, and certainly his tone during that call did give the impression of a showman of sorts, but I can’t help thinking that none of this is what the movie gangsters call ‘on the level.’”

“Maybe stripping the manor down isn’t an option for some reason,” Mathis said. “And there may be no guarantee it would uncover what might even be hidden behind the stones of the manor walls themselves.”

“Right. So a bunch of puzzle solving winners drawn at random will be able to figure it out in one night?” Bear said. “Anyone up for a side bet? I wanna come out ahead this weekend.”

“We have two nights, Mr. Sonner,” Reary said.

“Yeah,” Cash said, “and one lame little confession riddle about fire, water and air to go on.”

That prompted a re-reading of the critical “clue” such as it was.

“Safe from fire, safe from the winds, safely above all water lines,” Billie McHale said.

“See?” Mathis said. “It could be we just need to look around at the walls until we find one stone that isn’t mortared in like all the others—one that can be pulled out. Anything behind it would be safe from both fire and wind.”

Several of them looked around at the dining room walls.

“I don’t know if two days and nights is long enough to cover every block in every wall,” Cheswick said. “Some of the higher ones will need a ladder.”

“What about the waterlines thing?” Brom said.

“Assuming the incoming seawater doesn’t actually reach the base of the manor walls,” Dabney Crawford said, “that bit won’t reduce our search in the least.”

“Wait a minute,” Billie said. She was still looking at Marion Crickett’s confession. “‘Water lines’ is two words.”

“So?” Reary said.

“But it’s one word in modern English: waterlines.”

“So it’s probably just become a merged word,” Roana said. “That’s happened with a lot of common two-word phrases. Waterways was probably water ways back in the days of the crooked Crickett.”

“Maybe,” Bear said. “Maybe not. In my line of work we put in water lines, not waterlines.”

Kelvin O’Neill’s eyes lit up.

“You’re saying the clue is telling us that we should be looking above the level of the plumbing on the second floor?” he said.

Bear had to think about it a moment.

“I guess I am,” he said at last.

More discussion followed, but the thought persisted and within half an hour everyone was upstairs, divided into twos and threes and searching the individual chamber walls at roughly eye level and up.

The bathrooms on that second floor—there were three—featured no evidence of plumbing higher than that needed to feed the baths, commodes and sinks therein. So that was agreed upon as the starting point for thorough “and up” scrutiny.

But the search wasn’t getting them anywhere because the walls of the bedrooms had been plastered over such that the blocks behind them were covered in a thick layer that simply thwarted the whole concept. Pounding on the walls and listening for echoes proved pointless for the few who bothered to try. By noon most of them were tiring, both from their fruitless efforts as well as the frustrating mental challenge of coming up with a way of doing a valid search, and they’d wound up with most of them convened in the spacious master bedroom at the end of the long corridor.

“So it’s looking like a waste of time,” Cash said to no one in particular. “And you gotta assume that, by this point, somebody has already figured out the water lines versus waterlines thing and done what we just blew a few hours doing.”

Nobody had an immediate response, but one eventually came as those present mulled over their apparent predicament.

“Did anybody happen to notice a trapdoor in any of the ceilings?” Mike Sato said, looking around at the rest.

No one had, it seemed.

“This isn’t a flat-roofed structure,” Mike said. “There’s attic space up there—there’s gotta be.”

Nobody was arguing because they’d all seen the outside of the manor for at least long enough the previous day to recall it in their minds’ eyes and realize he was right. He suggested the access door had to be in a closet ceiling, and since the master bedroom’s spacious ones were at hand they were quickly checked.

“Okay, Mike’s just earned his share,” Kelvin O’Neill said appreciatively, looking up at the rectangular panel in the rear of the six foot deep by twelve foot wide storage space that was behind the closet door nearest the master bed. He batted at a few of the dozens of empty clothes hangers that hung from the closet bar and they rattled. “I guess old Crickett took all his clothes with him—nice of him, makes it easier to get up there.”

“Yeah,” Bear said, edging past him and scoping out the trap door. “Question is how?”

He had a good point. There was no hanging cord, no nearby button or switch or lever that might trigger unseen motors to open the trapdoor and lower a ladder up to that otherwise difficult to reach twelve foot ceiling.

“Ms. Billie McHale here’s just a feather,” Kelvin said. “Reckon a couple of us can let her stand up there on our palms and—”

“You’re misjudgin’ it, mate,” Bear said. “That’s gotta be four meters—we’d have to rig up a human pyramid.”

“Let’s see if we can find a less hazardous way first,” Mathis said from where she stood looking in at the pair from the closet door.

Mike was standing at her side. He turned to her.

“Like what?” he said.

“What would the Three Stooges do?” Brom said with a grin. “Push buttons!”

In fact that was effectively what they proceeded to do—flipping every wall switch in the room. Optimism waned a little more with each successive switch activation merely turning on a chandelier’s lights or a table lamp, and it was all but gone as the last one in sight failed to produce the results they needed. But in fact the idea hadn’t been without merit, because it ended up inspiring a move that *did* prove out.

The trapdoor had an activation button after all, and it turned out to be located almost exactly where Amalee Destine decided to search. Perhaps it was her nature and part of her profession that made her surprise a little less obvious than that of the rest, but even she looked as though she’d somehow pulled off a stunning magic trick without understanding how she’d done it.

The whole moment was a little surreal. The French celebrity floated over to the master bed and, to the surprise of all, set herself down upon it, drew her legs up so that she was fully abed and pushed over to the center.

“Cool,” Cash said with a big grin, “a free photo shoot.”

Indeed it seemed that way, although the cameras were quite conspicuous in their absence; that, and the look on her semi-famous face didn’t fit...and neither did her fidgeting about as her arms reached back, hands feeling, fingertips searching, seeming to study the contours of the ornately carved oaken headboard.

Everyone was looking at her.

“My dear,” Dabney Crawford said, looking more displeased than most, “with all due respect, what *are* you doing?”

A mechanical click and the subsequent whirring of unseen rotary electromagnetic machines effectively supplied the response.

“Hey!”

Bear had been trying to figure out the best way to work up to the trapdoor when Amalee’s push of the button that was hidden in the contours of the headboard had sent the trapdoor sliding back into the ceiling—even as a ladder came thrusting down through the gap so rapidly that he had to spring back to get clear. Appearing to the others as he backpedaled into view at the closet doors, he turned their way and gave them a wide-eyed stare that eventually settled on Amalee.

“Did you do that?” he said. “Might have given me a heads up there.”

“I’m sorry,” Amalee said.

“How did you know...?” Billie McHale said.

“This kind of room isn’t all that unfamiliar to me,” Amalee said as all stood staring at her. She pushed herself up and slid over to the edge of the bed. Pivoting and dropping her legs over the side such that her nylon-clad feet could find the glossy black heels she’d doffed to get up there, she sought them out and worked them back onto her feet. She rose, glancing around. “When is a lone person most vulnerable?” she said. “When they’re in bed, of course, and even more so when they’re asleep. If my guess is right, there’s a reinforced safety room up there.”

“A panic room?” Cash said, grinning. “Wouldn’t it be great if Crickett built it and accidentally walled off his own hidden treasure?”

“Yeah, that’d be hilarious,” Ned Reary said, but he was definitely not agreeing.

The first to ascend the clever self-extending ladder, whose aged sections smelled of machine oil and furniture polish and were so covered in dust that the rungs were slippery, was Doyle Bromwell.

“Careful, Brom,” Mathis said from just beneath his shoes, for she was set to be next up. “Can you see anything?”

“Dust,” Brom said. “Man, our host ain’t ever used his safe room from the looks of it.”

“There’s one up there?”

“Yeah, and room for another dozen. Damn ...”

“What,” Mathis said, for Brom had paused and was playing one of the flashlights they’d been gifted by Myria on the ride there around to take in the unused space. “What is it?”

“No, just ‘damn’ as in ‘damn, this is one big-ass attic.”

She soon saw for herself that he was right.

The panic room, a gray-walled box, occupied only one corner of the labyrinth, whose mostly sloping ceilings rose and fell here and there as the single open space likewise varied.

“We’re gonna need more than flashlights up here,” Mathis said to Brom and Billie McHale, both of whom were moving slowly along the heavy wooden planks of the floor as all three left deep, stark impressions in the thick dust. She glanced back at the trapdoor opening and saw Klyne Hochsman looking back at her.

“Can somebody find us a couple of non-electric lamps down there?” Mathis said to him. “We’ll look for electrical outlets while you’re doing that, and if we find them we’ll let you know so you can bring plug-in lamps instead.”

Hochsman relayed the request down to the others and several of them set about doing just that. One who didn’t join in the search was Dabney Crawford, who was diligently working to smooth out the “mess” that Amalee’s “incidentally sexy” crawl had made of the master bed. Cash Lidak was too amused to even hear the search begin because he was too fascinated by Crawford’s compulsive fetish.

“The universe is not a big fan of order,” Cash finally said when Crawford realized the former’s eyes had been on him the whole time. “I figure it looks at it like hardening of the cosmic arteries, y’know? Something that the longer it goes on, the worse it’s gonna be to rearrange.”

Crawford’s only response was a fairly long and silent glare.

So Cash caved with a shrug.

“On the other hand,” he said, “I suppose it’s an unpredictable universe to little monkey minds like ours, so maybe I’m wrong. And if you’re right, then I figure a diamond offends the powers that be a lot more than messy bedsheets...there’s always a little tiny flaw in all that perfection.”

**7**

As it turned out, electricity had been run to the attic. A handful of electric lamps illuminated the greater part of the relatively uncluttered space. But there was no evidence of plumbing and it couldn’t have been hidden along those block walls.

The panic room was electronically locked, but at least they’d found its wiring and that had led them to the plug-in spots they were using. All but one present and accounted for up there, they were doing their best not to move around too much so as to avoid kicking up the thick, choking dust. Drinks not in bottles were instantly contaminated when brought up there, so the only people with a drink in hand were holding bottles of water, soft drinks and beer—and taking care to keep their thumbs over the bottle necks.

“This can’t be healthy,” Mathis said. “We should have masks.”

“It’s not that bad,” Bear said.

“You *would* say that,” Kelvin said, nudging Bear’s arm with an elbow. “This is a nice job for you as they go, hey?”

“I’ve had worse.”

“At least we can see the mortar between the wall stones up here,” Billie McHale said.

“So our next move is to go over every inch of these cobwebby old mold-covered walls until we find a stone that isn’t cemented in place?” Brom shook his head. “That will be *fun*, kids.”

“I don’t see what else we can do,” Ned Reary said.

“That confession’s been in Crickett’s hands for a while,” Cash said. “You think he doesn’t know about the trap door in the ceiling of what is by all logic his own bedroom, or about the button for the door and ladder on the headboard of the bed he sleeps in every night?”

“You’re saying that Laclede Crickett would have already had people do what we’re talking about doing up here?” Roana Cheswick said.

“Not recently, going by the dust,” Mathis said. “Since that panic room was put in, it looks like nobody’s been up here at all—and that’s obviously been a while.”

“I suppose it’s conceivable that Crickett never bothered to consider the attic,” Billie said. “And that he never found the button on that bed, because even the assumption that this is his actual bedroom is just that—an almost baseless guess. We don’t know that he even lives here, or has ever lived here. We were greeted by his people at the airport, brought up here, saw more of his employees on hand taking care of things and setting up our accommodations; but not one bit of that suggests that Laclede Crickett is living here and that he just cleared out for a weekend to let his contestants play his little game.”

“So you don’t think he’s been here enough to even know about the trap door,” Mike Sato said. “And you figure because there’s no tracks up here besides ours that he’s never bothered to hire people to scope out the place for ceiling trapdoors and such?”

“I think we’re the hired help,” Billie McHale said. “Because we’re good at puzzle solving and that’s not something you can go looking for at the unemployment offices.”

“So Crickett thinks we can find his treasure cheaper and easier than anybody else he could hire,” Cash said.

“Yeah, and I’m fine with that,” Brom said cheerily, “as long as I get my little pile out of the big pile.”

He didn’t really get any arguments about that.

Kelvin and Mathis were looking over the panic room exterior.

“How do you think they even got it in here?” she said.

“Probably cut a hole in the roof,” he said. “It’d be easier—that’s just wood.”

“Must have been a while ago,” Mathis said.

“Yeah,” Kelvin said, running his fingers along a reinforcing flange. “This looks like it’s post-bomb shelter era by a bit. There were some movies about panic rooms a couple of decades ago.”

“At least they installed it out in the middle of the attic space. The only way it’s a problem for us is if the treasure’s under the floorboards right here.”

“The floor’s wood,” Kelvin said. “That’s not exactly safe from fire.”

Mathis caught the reference to Marion Crickett’s note wording, conceded that Kelvin was right and looked around.

“So it’s behind the wall somewhere up here,” she said.

“Not necessarily,” Kelvin said. “But I guess it’s the way to bet for now.”

Flashlights were required for the ensuing survey of the masonry work mortaring, and the task was hardly enjoyable. Each guest was working a section of wall as defined by Mathis’ best guess as to roughly even search zones.

But only eleven were up there searching, for Dabney Crawford was steadfastly refusing to “soil himself” in those dusty confines. Remaining below since a highly distressing (and reluctant) initial excursion up the ladder, he was actually debating leaving even as the afternoon came on and the waters continued to rise. Last to be inundated, Mirya had explained, would be the stone and gravel road leading to the manor—and the opportunity for taking that relatively surefooted exit would quite soon be gone. After that there’d be the emergency canoes, but Crawford had even mentioned that he was unfamiliar with such transportation, and what’s more added that he had a dire fear of dark and murky water regardless of depth. So terrified was he of being immersed in such, he claimed, that he could very well be subject to drowning from sheer panic and irrational hysteria even in water that wasn’t over his head.

Not only that, but there were biting and pestering insects to consider. And miles to walk to the nearest town. No, he’d overcommitted. This was all a mistake, but he was stuck with it.

Or so he thought.

By about four-thirty everyone was tired, frustrated and ready to come down and take a break—a long one, including dinners for all because they had worked up powerful hungers finding...well...nothing.

“Dumbest game ever,” Brom said. “A couple of shitty lines about fire and water and ice, how’s that enough to point us to where the old psycho stuck it?”

“Remember, he wanted to destroy it,” Billie McHale said. “He only hid it because he couldn’t. So those clues, if they are clues, aren’t meant to pay off without a lot of thought.”

“I’ve been giving it that thought,” Mathis said. “I’d like to say it’s gotten me somewhere.”

“He wanted the person or persons who found it to be capable of and intent on destroying the treasure.” McHale looked around at the rest. “Here we are looking to find it and hand it over to our benefactor, who plans to do who knows what with it?”

“I think we’re jumping to conclusions,” Roana said. “That note, Marion Crickett’s fears—we have no idea as to his mental state in general, much less his mentality when he composed that note all those years ago. The way it’s worded makes him sound like he knew he was out of his mind, at least to some degree. And quite possibly he had just had bad luck, or made poor decisions, or both, and he needed to blame it on a bunch of inanimate gold and gems.”

“Exactly,” Ned Reary said. “Our host, descendant and heir to the writer of that note, wants the whole thing off his hands. He’s not responsible for the sins of the father, so to speak, but rather than just go public with it I bet he’s hoping we can find it and he can ship it off someplace else that can be blamed for its long absence.”

“That’s some rather dire thinking,” Roana said. “Ship it off to Siberia and say it was Russian pirates?”

“Why not? Send Moscow an anonymous tip and let them figure out what to do with it.”

“I rather think there’s a lot of tiptoeing out on limbs here,” Roana said.

“Yeah,” Brom said. “We’d better not assume too much of anything. Won’t matter anyway unless we find it.”

They agreed that with the clock running, the search was far more important than anything else. The problem was that they’d searched the zone of the manor to which the note was apparently pointing, and it hadn’t been a mere once-over, so at that point they were out of places to look.

Or were they?

“The chimney?” Cash said with a harsh cough of laughter at hearing Mathis’ suggestion. “So the place the smoke and flames go through is safe from fire?”

“Actually it is,” Mathis said. “There’s structural brick on the outside, but the inside is lined with what’s called firebrick. And that far up, there’s not much heat left anyway—it’s been absorbed by the chimney walls themselves. Just dirty smoke.”

“Maybe,” Roana said. “But some heat still goes through it, right? Otherwise a fireplace’s stones wouldn’t feel warm to the touch.”

“Not enough to damage jewels and precious metals,” Mathis said. “Especially up here near the top.”

Since it was at least something to do, four of them set about performing a mortar check, one to a side. Because the centrally located chimney served two fireplaces on each level, its sides were long and the inspection thus took a few minutes. The rest headed downstairs as Brom, Mike Sato, Billie and Mathis looked over those flagstone surfaces.

Frustration and disappointment reigned when they were done, but only momentarily.

“There’s more chimney up on the roof,” Mike said.

“I knew you were gonna mention that,” Mathis said. “I’m scared of heights.”

“You don’t have to go,” Mike said.

“He’s right,” Brom said. “There’s probably not room up there for all of us anyway.”

In the end it was Billie McHale and Mike who went up through the roof service door. The prospect of searching the chimney with steeply sloping roofs basing it on two sides was a bit daunting, but McHale reasoned that Marion Crickett would have had the same physical limitations trying to hide the treasure and suggested that they only really needed to check the two more safely accessible sides. But even that was a trick as the chimney extended a good ten feet up.

The afternoon light, taking on a yellowish-orange tint, wasn’t all that much help.

“I’ m starting to think we’ve wasted the whole day,” Mike said about halfway through searching the mortar lines on his side. “These blocks have to be mortared in or the rain and snow would get inside and destroy the chimney.”

McHale realized he was right and ceased her block-to-block scrutiny.

“Wait a minute,” she said. Her eyes having no specific point of focus, she’d let her gaze wander and it had found the top of the chimney. “Have you seen any firewood here?”

She saw Mike peek around the corner.

“What?”

“Firewood. This place has heating and not once has anybody even said a word about making a fire because it’s not cold...and because ...”

“There’s no firewood.” Mike realized she was right. “So this chimney never gets used.”

“Meaning it’s probably capped off to keep out the rain and snow too.” As quickly as McHale’s epiphany had elevated both their hopes, however, that optimism fell quickly in the next moment. “But how long ago would that have been done? They’d have been using those fireplaces until they had electricity out here. And you can figure that was probably around the middle of the twentieth century.”

“So you’re saying that Great Grandaddy Crickett wouldn’t have capped off the chimney because it’d still be needed forever as far as he knew.”

“Well, yes,” McHale said, “assuming he wasn’t the sole resident of the place. He obviously had kids, and if the place had been empty after Crickett’s demise I would think there’d be more evidence of rework than paint and decorations.”

“In which case we’re at the end of the line.”

They finished the seemingly pointless brick to brick scrutiny with the depressing lack of results that both fully expected by then and headed back down to join the rest, a three story trip because it was pretty much dinnertime for everyone who hadn’t already eaten.

Despite the fact that some were finished, some in the middle of their meals and some only starting, they pretty much all hung around the dining room to be in on the mostly gloomy but not quite hopeless chat.

The view through the dining room’s wall of glass panes became mesmerizing as the sunlight gradually gave way and the full moon took over, turning the half-inundated fen into a miniature ocean dotted with countless tiny islands.

Mathis had been staring at it so long her feet were sore, she realized when she finally drew away from it. She hadn’t been mindlessly watching the shrubs go under out there, however.

“I think we’re overlooking something we wrote off as a dead end,” she said.

“I agree,” Kelvin said. “Though I have no clue which of the many that would be.”

“We have another day,” Amalee said. “We can go over it all again if need be.”

“With all due respect,” Bear said, catching her eye, “I for one am hoping need *not* be. There’s an old saying about repeating the exact same actions and hoping for different results.”

**8**

By midnight the alcohol, frustration and slowly rising waters—which kind of made the manor feel like it was sinking—had combined and synergized to produce a level of simmering volatility that several sensed. And wishing to avoid anything ugly, these more observant individuals excused themselves and retired for the night.

That turned out to be like pulling the cooling rods out of a reactor core.

Gone and presumably abed were Amalee, a thoroughly disgusted Dabney Crawford, Kelvin and Bear; and though Klyne Hochsman was still up, he was just staring out at the temporary lake as the others debated where they could possibly have gone wrong in their painstaking seam by seam search of the place where, Marion Crickett’s note swore, the Wealth of Atakai would be found.

“We’ve covered the chimney and the walls,” Mathis said, “and nothing else other than Laclede Crickett’s panic room box up there is guaranteed safe from wind, water and fire.”

“Maybe water lines just meant waterline and he messed it up in the note,” Roana said. “Just one more reason that it’s always good to have a proofreader.”

“If you mean we have to search all the mortar on this level too, including the chimney stones, I think I’m going to have to pass,” Ned Reary said.

“It’d be pointless, they’re all behind paint and plaster too,” Brom said. “This is looking like an impossible task. I really thought it was gonna be an escape room sort of thing, where they set it up and it’s just about whether you can do it or not. This...I wasn’t expecting this.”

“I don’t think anyone was,” Roana said. “Yet here we are, halfway through this little weekend of frustrating fun, with no more clue as to where our pirated loot is than we had before we knew it existed.”

“We know where it’s not,” Brom said. “Process of elimination.”

“Not when everything’s been eliminated,” Reary said. “That’s called a dead end.”

“Welcome to the dead end then,” Cash said, raising the bottle he’d been working on since dinner. “No turnabout either. We’re at the end of a one-way dead end street.”

“So we get out and walk,” Mathis said, her jaw set as the others looked her way. “Look, the treasure’s here and we still have more than a full day to find it. I say we call it a night so we can get an early start tomorrow.”

“Buzzkill,” Cash said with a lurid smirk. “I was hoping this long, stressful day would culminate in a cozy little orgy featuring Ms. McHale, yours truly...and of course yourself.”

Neither of the women showed much of a reaction, but Mike was obviously surprised.

“Whoa, did not expect that,” he said.

“From a drunken standup comic?” Roana said. Her grin was sharper than Cash’s. “I figured it was coming at some point; in fact, this is actually a little later than I’d expected.”

“You’re just jealous because I didn’t include you,” Cash said, firing right back at her as his smile tightened. “I’m sorry. Just not sure I could do three at once. And the last thing you want at that kind of event is to come up...uh...short.” Seeing he’d come up well shy of impressing anyone with that, he gave a concessional shrug. “All right, I’m sorry. You’re invited too. But I get final say about anything you tell the public about it.”

“Not that it would ever happen, Mr. Lidak,” Roana said, “but if by some drunken and/or drugged happenstance it did, rest assured the public would never hear a word of it...at least not from me.”

“Ouch,” Brom said. “Is there a word past ‘burn’...should be...how about ‘nova’? Nova, man. Incinerated.”

Cash grinned at him.

“I’ve had worse,” he said. “But now that the buzzkill has continued, I think I may in fact bid all a fine evening. And ladies...my door will be unlocked all night.”

“There aren’t any locks on the doors,” Mathis said.

Cash thrust his index finger out, jabbing at her in a sort of “bingo” shout-out.

“Exactly,” he said. “Goodnight, all.”

“Think we can get him back for an encore?” Brom said when his footfalls became inaudible. “That was fun.”

“That open door thing may not have worked tonight,” Mike said. “But I bet it has before.”

“I’m sure the life of the standup comic has its pros and cons,” Roana said. “But I think our friend just proved he’s no pro at conning.”

“Ooh! Nice.” Mike tipped his wine glass her way and she nodded, smiling faintly. “Does this mean the wit is returning to our discussion?”

“Oh, by no means,” Roana said. “I think I’ve had enough. I’ve talked myself nearly hoarse between this evening and last. I think I’ll take some Grand for the throat soothing and retire to my room as well.”

Once she’d departed, they ended up back on the main topic of the weekend.

“I still think it’s in the chimney—there’s plenty of space,” Mathis said. “We need to find other ways to check it out.”

The collective gazes of those remaining drifted over to the electric fireplace that had been installed in the dining room’s great hearth what looked to be a number of years earlier. The insert didn’t take up all that much of the sizeable burning area, but reflective heat mirror panels had been installed all around it, including a large overhead panel that was mostly covering the flue.

Mathis was leaning over, trying to look up past that top panel. Without even getting down on all fours for a better look she was able to see there weren’t even gaps around its edges—it simply met the side panels and turned the whole space into a large oven. There were some small gas ventilation slots, but they weren’t in the right spot to even allow what would probably have been a virtually useless “slit view” anyway.

Straightening and turning to the rest, she suggested that they could check all the other fireplaces as well. But nobody else felt like continuing the quest as the hour neared one a.m.

“When you got up and looked down into the chimney, what did you see?” she said to Mike and Billie. “Did all the flues converge down below so that there’s only one up top, or do they all come up separately as smaller shafts?”

Mike and Billie turned to each other, then as one looked back to Mathis.

“We didn’t go up there,” Mike said.

“Once we realized that the fireplace had still been used after Marion Crickett’s passing, we didn’t even bother looking,” Billie said. “He couldn’t have blocked the chimney or the smoke wouldn’t have gone out that way—it would have backed up into the rooms. Back then it was burn wood or freeze in places like this.”

A spark ignited in Mathis’ faintly bloodshot eyes as they widened with a thought.

“First thing in the morning, we go up and look down in there,” she said. “And by ‘we’ I mean anyone and everyone besides me because that’s not happening. I survived the flight here, and will hopefully survive the one back to the states—in the meantime, I’m going to limit my pointless altitude-related risks when there are more qualified around.”

“I’ll do it,” Billie said. “I hang glide.”

“I’ll go up with you again,” Mike said. “But we’ll need somebody besides us to even put one of us up on the chimney top itself.”

“My toes are tingling just thinking about you guys up there,” Mathis said. “Be careful.”

“No problem,” Mike said, offering a grin that was obviously meant to be more reassuring than it actually came off. “We’ll rig ropes, whatever it takes. We’ll make a ladder if we have to, since there sure don’t seem to be any around here.”

They talked a while longer, discussing how they’d need to do it and trying to figure out where they’d get any rigging materials they’d have to have to help them land someone—it was looking like Billie—up there to get a peek down into the chimney.

But when the hour hit two, they jointly decided they were already wasting the next morning’s precious hours—or curbing their own rest, which wasn’t a good idea either.

They all went to bed. But two of them didn’t stay there.

Billie was awakened by the touch of something cold and metal just behind and beneath her ear.

“Don’t make a sound.”

She knew that voice, but it didn’t make sense.

The metallic object drew back.

“Get up.”

She did...slowly...and with like caution, she turned to see...

“Mr. Hochsman?”

His gun glimmered in the faint yellowish illumination of the digital time readout. The hour was well past four.

“We’re going up to the roof,” he said. “I know you’re not afraid. I’m going to put you up there and you’re going to see what’s down inside the chimney.”

Hochsman was nearly three times her size, and for the first time Billie realized as he loomed over her that he was exuding a physical menace that she hadn’t remotely noticed before—possibly because it had previously remained hidden under a couple of layers of expensive-looking and far from tight-fitting clothes.

“But that’s what we’re going to do in a few hours anyway,” Billie said. “And what’s with the gun?”

“Just shut up. If that stuff’s up there, you and I will be bringing it down.”

“If it’s not?” Billie said, refusing to completely suppress her indignation.

“Then you just vanish and the search goes on,” Hochsman said. “Don’t worry, it’ll be quick. I’m a professional, not a fetishist.”

She decided to concede and do as he said; after all, he was wisely and alertly holding the gun well out of her reach.

On the way up to the attic, as they climbed the closet ladder, Billie asked him what was really going on.

“I’m making a living,” Hochsman said. “Not everyone sits in an office at a computer screen. Some of us have to do the dirty work.”

“So you’re a hired hand?”

They’d reached the attic.

“Basically,” he said. “The guy I’m supposed to be I don’t even look like, but who knows the faces of chefs?” He motioned with the automatic for her to keep moving. “I’m sold on the idea that there’s something up there in that chimney, but I can’t get to it alone.”

“Something? I thought it was supposed to be an entire treasure.”

“It’s whatever the people who hired me have you looking for. I guess we’ll see when we find it.”

The wind had picked up, causing several disorienting and destabilizing effects for the two of them as they emerged and got to their feet on the modest square of uninclined roof. The buffeting breeze appeared to be in advance of the first cloud cover they’d seen all weekend. High over and miles out beyond the coastal hills, dark-bellied stratocumulus clouds sailed along on wind strong enough to have already pulled them out to long, narrow strands. Rising and falling unpredictably, the crosswind challenged the pair to lean at the right times and not at the wrong ones. And since the tidal surge, drawn by the radiant full moon that would soon be obscured by those inbound clouds, had swelled to become a broad lake around the manor hill, the wind was also turning it into a dizzying panorama of silver-edged waves.

Billie was staring out at it when she caught a firm hand on her shoulder...and realized that it had kept her from falling off the roof.

“Come on,” Hochsman said, letting go as she spun around. “Get your shoes off.”

“Why?”

“I’ll have a better grip on your feet than I’d have on your shoes.”

She got the logic of that and took her shoes off without any more question, kneeling as the gusts kept pushing at her.

If he had been but a foot or two nearer she could have possibly made a quick move and taken out one or both of his knees, but he obviously knew what he was doing by staying clear.

When she arose she saw that he didn’t have the gun in hand anymore. But he was still too intimidating to disobey, so she did as he instructed, going over and up against the side of the chimney with hands flat and palms pressed against the stones as though in police frisking position. He came up behind her and slowly knelt down. She felt his fingertips pushing to go under the outer edges of her arches and, quite reluctantly, lifted each leg in turn so that he could get his hands around her feet.

“All right,” he said when his tight grip was sending little jabs of pain through her insteps, “keep your hands on the stones and just climb up as I lift you.”

The mercenary had impressive strength. Billie was a daredevil from childhood, but even she gasped as he rose lifting her by the feet and she was compelled to pad up the chimney’s side on her palms so quickly that she ran out of surface almost immediately.

“Can you see?” she heard her abductor say.

“Not really,” Billie said truthfully.

With his arms fully extended up over his head and her feet perched on his hands, she was still barely high enough to see the chimney’s broad upper surface.

“Can you climb up there?”

“No, I’m not up far enough.”

For a long moment neither spoke. Then...

“All right, stay loose and get ready,” the mercenary said. “I’m gonna get you up high enough to climb on.”

“Wha—NO!”

She’d felt herself coming down a little bit—because the man who wasn’t Klyne Hochsman was bending at the knees.

He basically tossed her up into the air in the next moment.

Billie’s survival instincts took over as she came down with the edge of the chimney about at her navel. Clawing hard, scraping her fingertips on the weathered stones, she wriggled and fought until at last she felt enough of her weight atop the chimney to cease her fierce struggle.

She looked around once she was clear of the edge, gasping, but between the wind and the unfamiliar new footing she wasn’t willing to do more than crawl around up there.

“Look down in the chimney,” she heard the mercenary holler.

She crawled over to it, took the flashlight out of her pocket and trained its beam down into the chimney flue.

Five startled chimney swifts nearly sent an even more surprised Billie right off the roof as they spurted up out of the shaft and chittered off into the night.

“What is it?” the mercenary said, calling up to her though he could no longer see her.

“N...nothing...” Billie said “...I’m all right.”

“Can you see into the chimney?”

Billie had nearly lost the flashlight as well. And she almost pushed it off the top of the chimney as her fingers thrust out for it. Getting hold of it and gathering her wits, she inched back over to the chimney shaft and gave it the beam again.

She had no clue what she was seeing, because it didn’t appear to be either treasure or...well, anything else that belonged in the top of a chimney.

She could reach the blackened object, which looked like it had been cut from a thick slab of cast iron into a shape that, oddly enough, wasn’t completely unfamiliar to Billie—though she had no real idea why it was striking her so. Of course she wasn’t in the most rational state of mind all things considered anyway, and she knew that.

She reached down into the chimney flue.

Her fingertips found the thing, which had been mounted flat across the three foot width of the chimney flue. The mounts were also black iron from the looks of it and they protruded from between the flagstones in a ring around that whatever-it-was that Billie was touching.

But there were too many of those mounts and most of them weren’t even supporting the object.

“What are you seeing?”

She knew she had to answer him.

“I don’t know, but it’s not treasure,” she said loudly enough for him to hear her. “Just something that looks like a big crossbow—and it’s not rare metal, it’s iron.”

“I want to see it,” the mercenary said. “Get it up out of there and bring it over.”

The object moved when she pushed against it. The thing wasn’t firmly mounted after all; rather it was just sitting on a handful of those little rods that encircled it, and she realized as she kept pushing and it tilted and nearly went off the rods and fell that it had been set there in place of the gridded chimney grate that had once sat atop all those rods.

That’s what Marion Crickett had done, she knew in that instant: He’d figured out that the object and the grate together might block too much of the chimney and obstruct the exit of fireplace smoke, so he’d gotten rid of the grate and just left the thing there.

Which, incredibly, made it the Wealth of Atakai.

A soot-coated crossbow?

A faint glint of something that wasn’t blackened surface caught her eye as it reflected the flashlight beam. By then Billie had touched the thing in several spots, and in that one place she’d knocked off all the accumulated smoke deposits to reveal shiny metal.

With a distinct sense of awe, and forgetting for a moment her perilous-in-several-ways predicament, she got a firm hold on the edge of the thing and lifted.

Whatever it was, it wasn’t a crossbow. In fact it was merely one flat, moderately heavy plate with nicely beveled edges and symmetrical cutout areas running up and down its length. There was plenty of heft to it, but she knew iron would not shine like that place where she’d rubbed off all the soot.

There were some little knob-like spots along and to each side of the central axis, about cabinet doorknob sized and therefore wide enough to extend out beyond the thing’s otherwise approximately three quarters of an inch thickness. Three dangerously sharp looking points bookended the object’s length ,with one on the central axis and the other two opposite it at the ends of two gently curving “prongs” that made the thing look like Poseidon’s trident with the middle prong missing.

“You got it?”

“Yeah,” Billie said absently. “Just a minute, I’m coming.”

She crawled along with it, contemplating dropping it single point first and doing her best to aim it just right, but she knew she wasn’t ready to kill.

The mercenary saw the object coming into view over the edge of the chimney.

“Is that it?” he said.

Billie’s face appeared beside it.

“It has to be,” she said.

“Then lower it down here.”

She had to drop it but he caught it. A thought hit her as she watched him looking it over and she glanced around. She’d seen a couple of eroded-through spots where a manageable fragment of stone might be pried loose and make for a weapon that wouldn’t necessarily kill her abductor but more likely just incapacitate him. But there were none in easy reach, and he wasn’t distracted long enough for it to matter anyway.

“What about me?” she said.

“What about you? Jump back down off there. Your job isn’t done yet.”

**9**

In her wildest imaginings, Billie probably couldn’t have come up with the truth of the whole scenario—not that she had more than a mere fragment of it anyway even by that point. But when the other guest-contestants awakened a few hours later she wasn’t around to chat about it with them.

“Where the hell is she?” Brom said. “She can’t just be gone.”

“The canoes are still here,” Cash said. “And I doubt they have automatic homing devices.”

“We’ve gotta call in about this,” Mathis said. “Who has the closet key?”

As the subject hadn’t really come up to that point, it was then they all realized they’d never appointed that liaison. “Klyne Hochsman” still had the key.

“I see no reason to panic,” he said. “This is a big place and we haven’t searched anything but the kitchen, dining room, and the halls. In fact we haven’t even checked the attic.”

He didn’t give the argument that they’d been calling out for her down the halls time to develop any momentum. Instead he said they needed to search the bedrooms one by one in case she’d slipped and knocked herself out, and it was hard to argue against that distinct possibility. He suggested dividing everyone up into twos and threes to make the search go more quickly, saying he’d call in with the closet phone only if and when it was certain that Billie McHale was truly missing.

“It’s not up to you,” Brom said to him, unflinching as Hochsman glared back at him. “You’re not the liaison, you’re the guy who’s supposed to hand the liaison the key.”

“Indeed,” Hochsman said, firing right back, “and while we’re doing due democratic process our missing person could be stuck somewhere in desperate need of our help.”

His clever logic-based bluff allowed him to seize the moment and effectively gain control of them all.

“Look,” he said, “we’ll do this top to bottom and if she’s still not accounted for, I’ll call. In fact, I’ll give Mr. Bromwell the damn key and let him do it. But let’s get about this: We need three to search the rest of this floor, a couple for the grounds, another three for the bedroom level—and then I guess there’s the attic, like I said. I’ll take that with Ms. Delane and Mr. Sato because they’re both pretty fit and we can get up and down quickly...no offense to anybody else.”

His hurricane bluff worked.

“Billie McHale, you up here?” Mike said, hollering out at the darkness of the attic minutes later as his flashlight sought out the lamps that had apparently been turned off the previous night. He shifted atop the trapdoor’s ladder. “Billie? Just make a noise if you can’t do anything else.”

“She could have knocked herself unconscious on a rafter,” Hochsman said from down on the floor of the closet as Mathis, sandwiched between them, looked back at him. “We need to go up there and check it end to end. The roof too.”

Mike kept going. Mathis followed him and Hochsman came up after them. Both Mike and Mathis called out for Billie, swinging their flashlights around, but at the sound of a metallic click they both turned about to see the man who was not Klyne Hochsman standing firm-footed and looking right at them.

They both saw the automatic in his hand.

“What...?” was all Mike could get out.

Mathis just stared.

The pseudo-Hochsman smiled thinly. He put his free left hand into his jacket pocket and something that sounded like a metallic latch clicked somewhere not far off behind his surprised captives’ backs—softly, though in the silence quite distinct—making them both glance back that way.

The panic room’s heavily reinforced door was swinging silently open.

“Go on in,” he said. “The party’s been waiting for its other guest of honor.”

There wasn’t much choice, both Mike and Mathis realized—he had them both dead to rights and, correctly assuming he was behind Billie’s disappearance as well, they came to the same virtually immediate and quite possibly lifesaving conclusion...

There was no guessing what else the man might do.

So they conceded and let him lead them into the panic room pod, the hatch door of which he then proceeded to reclose, sealing them inside—with a tightly bound and gagged Billie McHale staring helplessly back at them from a chair at the far end of the pod’s living area.

Down below, the searching was already all but done and the rest would soon reconvene and then, after a few minutes, head up to the master bedroom to see why it was taking Mathis, Mike and “not Hochsman” so long.

The rest, that is, minus one...

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“What the hell’s that, an alien sarcophagus?” Mike said, staring at the centerpiece of the panic room, which was not in fact a panic room at all, at least not anymore if indeed it had ever been used as such. “Creepy, man.”

“It’s the support shell for an in-process humanu, as in ‘human manufactured.’” The mercenary who’d masqueraded as the chef shrugged. “I don’t know a lot past that. My job’s almost done.”

“So there IS a body in there? What kind of crazy shit is going on here?”

The door latch had just clicked—softly again, it was almost inaudible behind Mike’s somewhat freaked-out exclamation. The door opened.

Amalee Destine stepped into the pod.

“The rest still downstairs?” the man who wasn’t Klyne Hochsman said.

“Not much longer,” Amalee said. She saw the shocked, accusatory looks she was getting from all three abductees, seemed to grow uncomfortable right away and continued on in as the hatch closed behind her.

“Wait, you’re with him?” Mike said. “The actress and the chef?”

“I’m not a chef,” the man with the gun said. “I’m your new host.”

“So you’re both in on some weird scam you’re trying to pull on us all?” Mathis said. “And it must be important enough for Ms. Destine to risk her career.”

“Do you still have a career?” their new host said to Amalee, and he grinned wryly.

“It’s important enough,” Amalee said, but she didn’t seem inclined to elaborate.

Mike couldn’t keep his eyes off the techno-sarcophagus, which was shiny and black like some distinctly un-aerodynamic alien craft.

“So there’s really a flesh body in there?” he said.

“A synthetic one,” Amalee said. “For my sister.”

“Your sister?” Mathis said.

“Tish,” Amalee Destine said. “Her spirit is here.”

She walked over to a tabletop that jutted from a wall and the three captives’ attentions were drawn to her objective there—something that looked like a cylindrical lava lamp, other than there being no off-color blobs of heavier density moving around in the slowly swirling blue-white glow within the cylinder’s transparent walls.

“Spirit...” Mathis said “...there’s a ghost in there?”

“That’s not really the right word,” Amalee said. “My sister was never born, but she’s been with me my whole life.”

“Okay, now I’m lost,” Mike said. “And are you gonna take the gag out of that poor lady’s mouth at some point? I mean you’ve got us all, the place is closed up—she can’t do you much harm now.”

Amalee nodded at Hochsman, who went over and removed the gag from the chair-bound Billie McHale...who in turned thanked Mike.

“Do you know what that is now?” Amalee said to Billie.

“It’s an orikythion,” Billie said. “And this is insanity.”

“What the heck’s an oral kytion?” Mike said. “And why does any of this involve me—or Mathis, for that matter?”

“It’s probably best if I explain all this.”

The voice was familiar—Laclede Crickett, sounding just like he had on the phone.

“You see, there’s a bit of an onion to peel here,” Crickett said. “First of all, we have two contestants who didn’t qualify for the drawing because they already had guaranteed spots. Mr. Hochsman is actually Sophus Voor—oh, don’t worry, Mr. Voor, they won’t be namedropping. He has been there to make sure that nothing went wrong and that the orikythion was found. Quite frankly no one ever considered that rather unique hiding spot, so well done and much appreciated.

“Ms. Destine is herself, of course, but then again she’s been using an alias for years. Vivian Templemyre just doesn’t have the broad appeal, I suppose. And Vivian, I mean dear Amalee, is here to see this all through as well. She’s been of fine benefit in several ways, in fact, including her name giving validity to this entire endeavor. You all know that name, so when you learned she was among the finalists you most certainly believed that this was all a legitimate publicity stunt. But the truth is, we only wanted and needed this device—and the three of you.”

“You want us to help you use the orikythion to put the spirit of her sister into the body you’ve made for it?”

That was Billie, who was looking around addressing the walls because there was no specific source to that voice.

“That’s remarkably close to exactly right,” the voice of Laclede Crickett said. “But as I said, this is an onion. Mr. Voor, if you please.”

He was a precise shot.

Amalee fell, a bullet between her eyes, and was instantly (and mercifully) motionless, her lifeless eyes frozen in surprise. Both Mike and Mathis had hollered with shock and surprise, and they stared wide-eyed as dark fluid spread to form a strangely halo-esque pool around that not quite world famous visage.

“What the shit, man?” Mike said, glaring at Voor, who simply shrugged.

“She and her sister are together, as we promised her,” Crickett said. “Another layer peeled and discarded. But fear not, her final act was a great one—and it will be remembered much longer than the ones she recorded for public viewing.”

“You’re probably next,” Mathis said to Voor. “Let us go. This guy’s nuts.”

That didn’t get them anywhere.

“Why am I here?” Mike said. “What about Mathis?”

Mathis had figured it out.

“That thing,” she said, looking at Billie, “does making it work involve vibration?”

“Of course it does,” Crickett said. “And yes, that’s why you’re involved. The material is an alloy that...well, I suppose the expert can explain it better. Ms. McHale, if you please?”

All eyes focused on the still mostly soot-covered device, which had been set down on a larger table that was integrally mounted to the floor a few feet from the scientific sarcophagus.

“Like orichalcum, it’s an Atlantean metallic alloy,” Billie said, “but this one is made with gold, silver, platinum, nickel and iridium. And under that crust, those knobby spots are actually very large gemstones hewn to precise shapes and mounted in a very specific array.”

She looked over at Mike and Mathis, meeting their gazes.

“Gems?” Mike said.

Billie nodded and looked back at the orikythion again.

“A diamond at one end,” she said, the object of her grad paper’s initial and “frivolous” focus seeping piecemeal back into her mind’s eye after a couple of decades. “Three gems at the other, their largest facets lined up. I think it goes amethyst, topaz and then emerald. And the middle is four gems—a sapphire and three rubies—set in opposition.” She glanced over at the other two prisoners again. “Find the right frequencies in the right mediums and the Atlantean lore says the device will act like a tuning fork, bridging the realms of the living and dead and allowing passage through. But the shape of the orikythion goes beyond just positioning the gems and the resonance of their frame, because it is constructed to focus the doorway into a replica of the chakra ladder. The Atlanteans created it to do exactly what Mr. Crickett wants us to do—ensoul a physical body.”

The master of ceremonies chuckled softly through the hidden speakers.

“Again, almost exactly right. Except I’m not actually Laclede Crickett. And herein we remove another layer, although I will save the remainder of the best unveiling for last. Suffice it to say you have likely heard my name. In fact I am best known as the greater part of an adjective.”

“So what, you’re a ghost too and you want to be put into that body?” Mike said.

“And you want Billie to help me figure out how to do it?” Mathis said.

Their captor’s response didn’t come quickly.

“Well, you just peeled off two layers at once,” he said after a few seconds that seemed a bit longer than they were. “I was hoping to savor each.”

“I don’t know how much of that onion is left,” Mike said, “but I think you oughta quit peeling and just shove that ...”

He trailed off because Voor had lifted the gun and was aiming it not at Mike’s face or chest but at his groin, and that had prompted Mike to glance back over and see the precision of that hole in Amalee’s already white-gray face...and stifle the rest of his insult.

But he did look up angrily at the ceiling.

“So why am I here,” he said. “I don’t have anything to do with that thing or making it work.”

“Mr. Voor was tasked with observing the gathered individuals and determining which of the rest of you became closest with the two we brought here on purpose. Consider yourself our insurance, because while Ms. Delane and Ms. McHale might suffer abuse and pain and even death to deny us our goal, neither is likely to watch you suffer it on their account.”

“Oh, that’s so wrong,” Mathis said.

“That’s such an ambiguous word, Ms. Mathis,” their captor said. “So inconvenient. In a realm with no undeniable limits beyond those one is simply willing to accept without resistance, is it ‘right’ to impose one’s own often quite arbitrary ones? For that’s what most mortals do. But it doesn’t have to be that way forever. I return bringing a new perspective, a new enlightenment.”

“And now I feel like we’re being asked to open the door to Hell and hand the keys to our world over to the dark master of evil,” Mathis said. “It’s not happening.”

“Mr. Voor, I believe our Ms. Delane is left-handed, so let’s make it the upper right and try to miss the bone, please.”

Mathis screamed as the gun went off, but she was so shocked that she barely registered the impact. The other two captives had shouted as well.

“There we go,” the taunting voice of Voor’s boss said. “I’m supposing this is the first time you’ve ever been shot, my dear, so you might give the pain a moment to sink in before considering any more declarations of poorly considered rebellion.”

Mike had wanted to go to her side, but Voor’s gun was back on his privates so he held up.

“Now let’s finish peeling the onion so that you two can get to business,” their captor said as Mathis held her searing hot wound and blood seeped through her fingers and dripped on the bare gray floor. “Yes, this has been about bringing problem solvers here and finding the orikythion. But as much as that it’s about making it work, and to that end getting two people qualified to do so together under false pretenses. The great fortune that convinced me this could all be done was that both of you are puzzle aficionados. When my friends Arburt and Darius Rowhley informed me that you’d both submitted puzzle solutions to the contest Mr. Crickett in fact did devise and sponsor, and which they devised—and which I’ve usurped—well, I couldn’t miss the opportunity. I understand only one of your submissions even qualified, but as the point was to bring you both here the less successful got a sort of...bye, as it were.

“As for the rest here, they truly are randomly drawn. The scenario required a full cast be present so as to avoid any sort of suspicion. But they’re not without purpose even now, because if the cooperation issue proves troublesome we may need a replacement for Mr. Sato.”

“You piece of—” forced its way past Mathis’ lips before she could help herself. “No! I’m sorry.”

“Mr. Voor ...”

The bullet went through the flesh of Mike’s right calf, dropping him instantly.

“I said I was sorry!” Mathis said, tears streaking down her cheeks. “I’ll do it—we’ll do it.”

Billie was biting her lip, saying nothing. Mike was putting pressure on his leg.

“It’s kinda pulsing out here in little squirts,” he said. “Probably needs stitches or something.”

“Mr. Voor, you seem to have done your work less than cleanly.”

“Sorry,” Voor said. “Veins aren’t always in the exact same spot, y’know. Doesn’t look too bad to me.”

“At least let me look at it,” Billie said. “Maybe I can help.”

Before Voor or his unseen employer could respond they all heard thudding noises.

“Ah, they’ve tracked down the gunshots, have they?” the voice of the man who wasn’t and had presumably killed Laclede Crickett said. “I knew they would eventually. But don’t worry, they won’t be able to get in and bother us. Now, let’s get started, shall we?”

**10**

“Look, how do we even know they’re in there?” Ned Reary said. “For crying out loud, we can’t even call Crickett on the panic phone.”

“Sure we can,” Bear said. “I can go down there, pry that door open and there it is.”

“Yeah, but meanwhile who knows what’s going on inside there?” Brom said.

“Who knows what’s going on period?” Cash Lidak said. “This is beyond nuts.”

“That door down there is a lot easier to get through than this one here,” Brom said. “I like Bear’s idea.”

“Well, let’s you and me go do just that,” Bear said, slapping him on the shoulder and showing a determined smile. “Leave these people to their folly.” As they were heading back over to the trapdoor leading down from the attic, he turned and looked back at the others. “But good luck with said folly.”

They rejoined Dabney Crawford below—he was still refusing to go up to the attic—and he went with them to take on the telephone closet door.

Kelvin, Roana, Reary and Cash exchanged somber looks in the light of the lamps they’d brought up to the attic the previous day.

“We might not be able to get through that door,” Kelvin said. “But maybe we can mess with whoever’s in there anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Roana said.

“I mean there’s power on in there,” Kelvin said. “We could knock it out. That might provoke an early door opening when they run out of air or the claustrophobia gets to them.”

“We can’t act blindly,” Roana said. “I think Sonner’s right—the phone just has to be picked up to work.”

“No, if we black it out in there we ruin whatever they’re up to, whoever they are.”

“You’re assuming someone’s grabbed everyone and forced them in there?” Cash said. “I’m not saying that’s not what happened, it’s just...confusing.”

“Nearly half of us are missing and can’t be anywhere else unless there are secret doors and chambers, and there’s no hint of that,” Kelvin said. “They’ve gotta be in there, and there might even be other people.”

“Right, their abductors,” Roana said, “who will probably get pretty upset if we cut the power, and who just might decide to take it out on their captives.”

“So there were others up here all along?” Reary said. “Inside that thing.”

He shook his head in disbelief. Roana shuddered.

“Well, we assumed it wasn’t in use and hadn’t been for a long time because of the layer of dust all over everything,” Kelvin said. “But then we realized that the dust had been sprayed on everything up here by that ass-backwards vacuum cleaner that old Crawford used to turn the kitchen into a hazardous waste site. The fresh dust looked old and covered all evidence that anyone might be inside this thing.”

“That sure does make it seem like there were other people here the whole time,” Cash said, and he got a chill at least as visible as Roana’s had been. “Unreal.”

They’d been hearing a humming sound of medium pitch for a minute or so, but it was so low they were only then beginning to register it.

“Sounds like a very large old school television,” Roana said. “Is it coming from the panic room?”

“I think so,” Cash said, instinctively drawing back from the pod-like structure and eyeing it warily, as he’d only been about two feet from its nearest wall at the moment he picked up on the noise. “That’s sure not a sound I want something that looks like that to make. I’m expecting robotic legs and arms to telescope out like it’s a Transformer or something.”

“Don’t ask me,” Reary said, eyes wide. “All my thoughts are on canoes right now.”

Inside the containment vessel, meanwhile, Mike stood watching helplessly as Mathis and Billie worked to make sure the pod’s built in light and sound equipment was properly adjusted and focused with respect to the orikythion...from which all the built-up chimney soot had immediately fallen upon bombardment with infrared light. Resting atop a table mounted like a robotic palm at the end of a mechanical arm that hung down from the ceiling, the device gleamed with a golden sheen, the enormous cut gems staggering in their beauty and varying cuts and colors.

The armature brought the cleaned relic over to the modern sarcophagus, the lid of which withdrew on both sides to reveal a human-shaped recess with the form of a handsome adult male figure lying within. Cold fog rolled out of the recess and off the chilled body.

“The lore says nothing about cryogenic preservation or the warming of host bodies,” Billie said, speaking mainly to their captor. “Heat will be generated when the incoming waves are amplified, and that may well bring the body up to the right temperature in a more gradual and organic way. It’s just a guess, really, either way.”

“If it fails, we’ll try again,” their captor said.

“Or not at all.”

Mathis had managed to edge over close to the table with the transparent cylinder sitting atop it while focus had been on Billie. With a lunge and a swipe, she had the cylinder flying off the table and smashing against a wall.

The goo, thick and viscous and still aglow, oozed slowly down the wall.

“Luminescent paint in a gelatinous suspension,” the voice said. “She’s done her part, Voor. But she’s done it well, so limit it to two shots please.”

But Mathis, figuring ahead, had ducked behind the sarcophagus.

“We’re not going to do this, are we?” Voor said tiredly. “Just come on out and get it over with or I’ll start picking pieces off little Mikey here.”

She was just giving in and rising when the lights went out.

They came right back on a moment later, but by then both Billie and Mike were taking the mercenary Voor down—or, at least, climbing all over him trying to do so. He threw them both off in seconds, but Mike managed to strip the gun away as he went flying and it bounced across the floor as he did likewise. Mike and Voor went for the gun simultaneously, but Voor changed tacks as they converged on it and clocked Mike with a solid right that produced a distinct cracking sound and rendered the latter instantly prone and motionless.

Alone with the gun, Voor grabbed it up and spun around. But Mathis threw her arms around him from behind—he hadn’t even noticed her circling back around the sarcophagus because he’d seen Billie getting up and coming on and was intent on swinging back around to take her down.

He fired but it just hit the wall and pinged around.

Voor fought to throw off Mathis, who wasn’t nearly large enough or sufficiently skilled in physical combat to hold her own, but was at least a tougher “annoyance” for the mercenary than Billie would have been.

She managed to force him to spin around to get a grip on her even as Mathis raked her nails across his face. He got hold of her by the arms well enough to give her a forceful shove that sent her into that mobile table at the end of the ceiling-mounted mechanical arm. Mathis’ grasping fingers caught in one of the orikythion’s cutouts and she pulled the sharp-ended device down as she fell awkwardly to the floor. The relic’s singular pointed end speared her shoulder mere inches above the gunshot wound, but there was no time for the searing pain.

Face burning, involuntary tears blurring his vision, Voor couldn’t take his usual deadly aim; besides, he’d heard a distinct click at his back and his attention was torn as he fired.

The bullet hit the orikythion and caromed off with a strangely dull noise for such metal-on-metal impact. Had the relic not been where it was, Mathis would have had a bullet through her heart. As the bullet was pinging around, rather than fire again immediately Voor was compelled to draw down into a half-crouch to try to avoid the caroms.

Billie had taken cover on the other side of the sarcophagus, so as Voor spun about to deal with that click he heard she wasn’t there to be killed as he’d hoped. Mike was as still as when he’d fallen.

But none of that mattered, because the pod’s main door was wide open and Kelvin and Bear had raced through it and were right on top of the mercenary Voor. Kelvin caught a bullet through his side a few inches above his hip, but the pair took Voor down hard in the ensuing moment, throwing him into the wall a few feet behind his back so forcefully that Voor’s head thudded almost sickeningly. He was out cold...at the very least...before coming down in a sitting slump at the wall’s base.

“Bollocks, I’m hit,” Kelvin said, rising and looking down at the dark-centered red hole in his blue shirt. “Knew I should have gone in on the right.”

Bear had the gun. He gave Voor a hard kick in the ribs that produced no response.

“Thanks,” Kelvin said, seeing him do so. “He needed that.”

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The sorting out of the events that had taken place that weekend at Banderly Manor proved to be that onion the taunting, cruel and driven mystery man who’d pretended to be Laclede Crickett had made a point of peeling for Billie, Mike and Mathis—only it was more like a giant Bermuda onion.

By canoe and foot, Cash, Brom and Bear made their way to the nearest town, where—courtesy of public phone no less—the bleary-eyed quartet managed to send ambulances and, by default, investigators.

But a game changer had gone down while they were away.

Most of the others were downstairs by the time Cash and the others beached their canoes on the shore of the temporary tidal lake, busy tending to Mike’s apparent concussion and swollen face and his gunshot wound, Kelvin’s in-and-out bullet holes and Mathis’ shooting and stabbing wounds as well. Roana Cheswick and Dabney Crawford were doing most of the work. That left Ned Reary a bit detached and decidedly sullen because he was stuck watching the bound and anchored down Sophus Voor up in the attic pod, and the mercenary had been out cold for hours, rendering Reary both bored and frustrated.

He eventually found himself drawn to the orikythion, which had been set back atop that robotic arm table.

His fingertips lightly came down atop the uniquely not-quite-golden metal. His eyes appraised those gems.

“At least there really was a treasure,” he said softly.

Indeed there was—a treasure that would soon be taken away by authorities.

That is, if it was still there...

Reary knew he couldn’t simply make it vanish because he would be the only suspect. And that just made him even more resentful.

“What does a rich man crave?”

He jumped, startled, and spun around. He hadn’t heard the voice of the man who wasn’t Leland Crickett, so as it spoke to him through the pod’s sound system his eyes were darting around like pinballs.

“What...who are you?” he said.

There hadn’t been time to talk much about what had gone down up there with all the injured and the need to seek help, so neither Billie nor Mathis had really said anything about the voice of the whole scheme’s apparent mastermind—the shrewd and cunning ghost whose name by his own admission, or perhaps his boast, was most commonly known in the modern world of the living as an adjective.

“I’ll tell you my true name if you admit yours...Mr. Port.”

“What...how ...?”

“We can’t exist in your world, Mr. Port, but it is still quite possible to look in on it. You are Morrison Port, here in place of your subordinate, Mr. Reary, whose invitation you usurped...because you could.”

Rather than admitting the voice was exactly right, and even more so because he was overwhelmed by the disembodied stranger’s nailing of Port’s seemingly unknowable secret, the clandestine billionaire decided to withdraw from the suddenly intimidating pod interior and head downstairs to tell the others.

“Now, now—no need to panic, Mr. Port,” the voice said before he got three steps, slowing him immediately. “You came seeking a treasure, did you not? Things haven’t gone as I’d hoped there, obviously, but if you are still interested in adding to your already considerable wealth in a significant way...well, perhaps you’d entertain a proposal, a gentleman’s agreement.”

“What can *I* do?” was Morrison Port’s eventual response. “I have no way out of here.”

“That’s not exactly true now, is it? In fact your personal helicopter could be to where you are now in about half an hour.”

“But I can’t contact them,” Port said. “They took everything away for the game—I mean *you* did, apparently.”

“I can contact them for you,” the voice said. “But I will still need your cooperation.”

Port got the gist of that.

“You want me to take that relic and slip off with it so that you can...what, have me hand it back over to you elsewhere so you can keep trying to do whatever it was you failed to pull off here?”

“Yes, I’m just that predictable, I suppose. I should tell you that if you turn me down, it would be a bad move at this point. I have another operative. I’m just holding off in hopes of coming to an arrangement with you. Help me here and I will reward you with the orikythion’s weight in platinum—surely that will suffice as a reward for this weekend’s efforts.”

About forty minutes later, the dining room’s spacious expanse came oddly alive with dull thudding sounds, soft *whumpf-whumpf-whumpf* noises at a steady rhythm.

“Is that a helicopter?” Kelvin said, moving and annoying Roana because she was still working on patching his wounds tightly enough to stop the last stubborn trickles of blood.

Nothing could be seen from the windows, but then again they were all facing but one direction. As the staccato thumping went on it grew louder until all could distinctly hear it—at which point it leveled off volumetrically.

“It’s right up over the manor,” Roana said. “It *has* to be.”

“Help is here,” a relieved-looking Dabney Crawford said. “Thank heavens!”

A manor-shaking boom in the next moment effectively dispelled that optimism all around.

“What was that?” Roana said. “Did it explode?”

The chopper’s thrum was still audible, so that was obviously not what had happened.

Being the only person present who was uninjured—and who also didn’t have a nearly crippling hygiene fetish—Roana was the obvious choice to go up and see what was happening. But she wasn’t even to the second floor landing yet when she heard the thudding blade sounds pick up pace and, in the next moment, sounds of breaking and falling objects, as though the entire roof was being destroyed.

So the authorities arrived to more mysteries than had greeted the guests themselves two nights earlier. Port’s chopper had indeed blown a big hole in the attic roof, although that was just so that they could see the top of the pod and find the hoist points there. And the area the pod itself tore out as the chopper drew it up out of the attic on high test steel cables was considerably larger, so in the end the local police found themselves with a crazy, confusing tale...and one big hole in the top of Banderly Manor.

The very next day, the Monday the real game was to have ended, Laclede Crickett’s body was found in one of his own closets, sealed in an airtight bag. The stunned and embarrassed staff at his Bavarian estate were stuck with having to admit that though the unpredictable and often quite self-secluding billionaire was subsequently determined to have been dead for over a week—killed by a single bullet precisely through the forehead—they’d been waiting on him the entire time anyway. Because of his acquired eccentricities and obsessions, Crickett had all but automated his own personal service such that he could stay in his master’s suite for days on end...thus not dealing with a reality that displeased him more than outsiders ever knew.

Amalee Destine’s body was found in the attic, minus considerable blood that couldn’t be accounted for, but “Ned Reary” and “Klyne Hochsman” were as gone as the panic-room-that-wasn’t. The real Ned Reary went missing within hours of the extraction, because at that point he’d become a major threat to Morrison Port’s “I never left Baltimore” alibi. Reary’s body would not be found, and as the divorcee lived alone and had workaholic tendencies, the only thread that might connect the magnate to Banderly Manor was all but completely cut.

With a few simple manipulations, the ghost who was to have inhabited that synthetic body—and who yet intended to accomplish the feat—simply had the whole event “washed over” in the global news churn. News media virtually avoided the incident other than being obliged to say that a “misfortune” had claimed the life of European film star Amalee Destine “and two others” as they wrote the whole thing off to a roof collapse.

The survivors found themselves with a lot of questions and a hush order from those investigating the crimes. Mathis, Billie and Mike had witnessed more than the others, but even they were compelled to guess about all that had happened when Reary had been left up there alone in the aftermath...and those guesses weren’t very good, for obvious reasons. Doyle Bromwell, Barret Sonner, Roana Cheswick, Cash Lidak and Kelvin O’Neill were considered incidental to the scheme that the trio described, and in fact the only two who merited more than treatment, release and transportation back to their homes were Mathis and Billie.

“You came close to making it work?”

That was the question they were asked by the person at the end of the line of authorities that took the pair more or less straight to none other than New Scotland Yard.

“We were just faking it, trying to buy time,” Mathis said to the woman with the dark, identification-free outfit as the latter stared back at her across a shiny black desk. “We could tell that, whoever was calling the shots, we couldn’t let him get what he wanted. Of course since he got away with the body and the device, he can still get what he wanted.”

“Without your expertise and that of Ms. McHale?”

“He can find others like us,” Billie said. “They may not be quite as gullible, though.”

Mathis asked the woman, who still hadn’t identified herself after fifteen minutes of back and forth, if they knew who the “adjective guy” was.

“That’s not much to go on,” their interrogator said. “Euclidean geometry...Shakespearean tragedy...Ruthian home run power...”

“Might want to narrow the search to the famous names whose owners were more likely to kill living people to get themselves back into the physical world.”

That pointed suggestion ended up setting the official back in her seat. After scrutinizing the two women for a few seconds, she pushed a button on her desk and the door that she’d left ajar after the case’s key witnesses had been directed in through it slid the rest of the way and closed off the conversation from hallway traffic.

She leaned forward.

“You realize we’re talking about disembodied spirits here,” she said softly. “Ghosts.”

“With all due respect, ma’am,” Mathis said, adjusting her arm sling and wincing as the wound throbbed in response, “we didn’t choose the subject matter.”

“And we’re just telling you what we saw and heard,” Billie said.

“Besides, in my work the concept of spirit energies functioning as distinct entities without corporeal form isn’t all that ludicrous,” Mathis said. “Most of my peers spare their best mirth for ideas like limits to our physical existence.”

“Oh yes, I’m sure you’ve got some knockout ‘So what’s past that?’ jokes,” the woman in the suit said. She sat back again, studying her guests’ faces. She turned her focus to Billie. “Is that the archeologists’ approach as well?”

Billie shook her head.

“For most of my peers,” she said, “if it’s intangible it doesn’t exist. Some of them might not even believe in air itself if it wasn’t for the wind hitting their faces. But if I limited my thinking that way, well—for one thing, I suppose I’d never have been so fascinated by the orikythion that I’d learned all there was of its lore and operation. But I don’t understand: The Wealth of Atakai was supposed to be a sort of horde of treasure, not just that device. For that matter, there’s no account of it being among what was salvaged from the Mediterranean floor in the first place.”

“Well, either way we’ve verified that what you describe finding does match the ori-whatever as it was depicted in tablets found in the Sphinx Vault. And it’s apparently made to do this ‘ensoulment’ of a body as you claim.”

“Meaning what,” Mathis said. “We’re free to go?”

“You have been all along, although we truly appreciate your cooperation. We have nothing to hold you on—in fact you’re only the last two to leave because you are at the highest risk of becoming involved again.”

“We told you there are others out there who can do anything we can,” Mathis said. “Which wasn’t much because we were bluffing. And my head wasn’t clear because I’d been shot...and the blood that fuels it was running down my arm.”

Billie nodded her concurrence with all of that.

There was little doubt that their interrogator didn’t like the situation at hand—the tight smile on that middle-aged face said it quite clearly.

“So you think if we just send you back home and leave you to your own you’ll be fine,” she said after a half minute or so of just staring at them. “This mysterious Adjective Man won’t come and grab you right back up.”

In the end, the woman granted their release as they requested.

A few days later both Billie and Mathis were abducted.

**Epilogue for Episodes 1 - 3**

“That was far too much of a mess,” the grand schemer said to his fellow specter, his mistress of sorts and his bound servant in all ways.

“You can’t allow a lone failed step to end a journey of many true ones,” Mirya LeGuerre said, but the gentle reassurance wasn’t enough so she made sure he saw her smile. “We’ve already reacquired all that we need to make sure it works.”

The schemer saw her hopeful look and, despite himself, his momentary gloom and disappointment ebbed.

“You are making them comfortable?” he said, and his face—which appeared solid in their alternate reality—showed a wicked little turn.

“I am expecting far more success with this approach than Voor’s savagery,” Mirya said.

“Voor is in the Mid-Realm,” the schemer said. “He should at least enjoy the peace while he can before he’s moved on.”

“What of Vivian?” Mirya said.

The answer was delayed in coming.

“She’ll need to be found,” the schemer said.

Mirya’s eyes widened.

“It would be difficult for me to both oversee the endeavor and search for her at the same time,” she said. “I didn’t know she had the power ...”

“Nor did I, and that...*concerns* me.”

Despite the appearance, nothing in their surroundings was solid. Gravity pretended to work, keeping their malleable surroundings from being dizzying. But as the schemer reached up to put a hand on his disciple and servant’s shoulder, there could be no contact, so the implied reassurance was all there really was to connect them—well, that and his darkly burning orbs, which pinned her much lighter and less fierce ones and seared into them.

“You have been, you are and you will always be my finest servant, Myria Deneva,” the schemer said. “But yes, we have this great problem, as there is no one else I can trust to do either task...and the completion of both as quickly and effectively as possible has become utterly essential.” His commanding gaze eased off just a little. “You understand what I’m asking?”

He couldn’t help but see the abysmal terror in her eyes, but there was something even stronger in there and seeing it pleased him supremely.

“Ye...yes...” Myria said. She stepped back and bowed. “I serve at your request.”

“This is for both of us, dear one,” the schemer said. He moved up to her, took her gently by the arms, pulled her in and kissed her forehead—albeit all in mime, for there could be no contact. “I can only lift you up to the mountaintop if I’m already on it.”

She’d known all along that the time would come eventually...and it had.

As she drew back once again, the look in her eyes got to even his corrupt core.

“Though there will be pain, and separation, in the end there will be neither,” he said after a moment, making no more advancing moves. “And we will leave this mirage of convenience to become immortals and rule over the physical realm.”

“Will I still have my memories?” Myria said, trying to hide her trembling as she saw him move back to properly position himself with respect to her. “Will I still be me?”

“I assure you,” the schemer said, his smirk stretching to a grin, “you *both* will.”

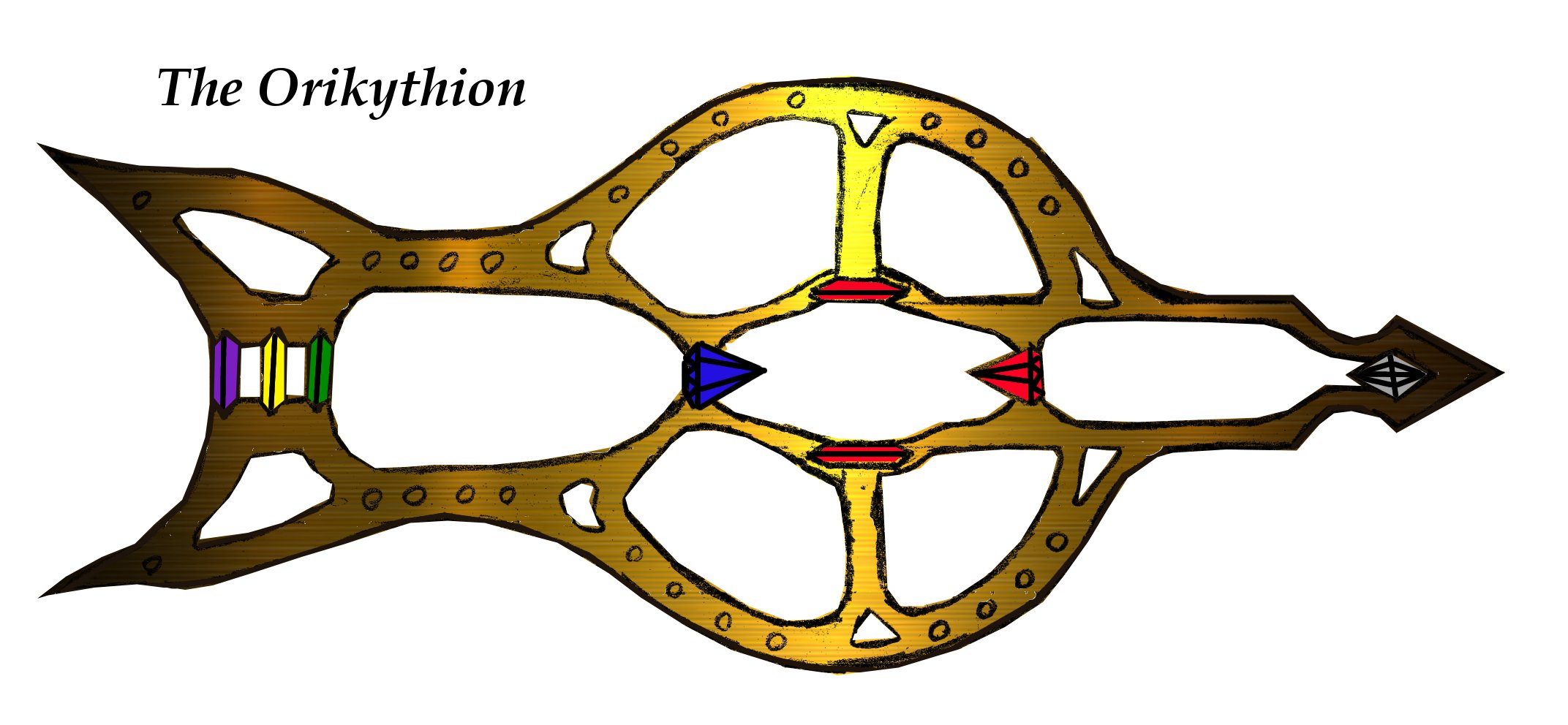
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The Ghost Phone saga will continue with

**Episode 4:**

**The Anachronia Incident**

(NOTE: The writer expresses his sincere and heartfelt thanks to Roma Gray for the opportunity to publish the first three episodes of the Ghost Phone saga as part of the Night Sky Presents “wheel series”—it’s been a pleasure to be associated with the works of Essel Pratt, Dona Fox and Ms. Gray in this project.)



**About Kevin Candela**



Merging many genres in the Ghost Phone series, Kevin Candela is working to create a “universe” in which the doings of those who are no longer tangible have a profound impact on those who still are. Some of the stories will be lighter, some heavier, some suitable for all audiences and some...not. Some will be upbeat, some kinda scary instead. Nothing is guaranteed except, hopefully, continuity and an overlying main story arc wherein Einstein bridged the spirit world with the material one to save the planet—because he had to—and as a result, far less nobly intentioned spirits are having their fun with the gateway he opened.

The series, of no specifically designed length at this point, will gradually bring together various characters from previous stories—but that’s not the focus quite so much here as it was in the “karmic loom” series *The Piper Gods*. The Ghost Phone stories aren’t assembling a fixed cast, although a couple of the characters already featured in these first three stories may end up more or less permanent in the ongoing narrative.

Candela’s published works now number over sixty, including about twenty full length novels and three collections, and he has just released his fortieth audio book. In addition, his stories have appeared in thirty-two independent anthologies, four of which he edited and assembled. Check out his Amazon author page, his Facebook page entitled Fire Dragon Central: The Kevin Candela Library and News Source. And check out his “mostly up to date but it’s tough because he’s prolific” website at <https://www.kevincandelabooks.com>

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