

Vampires are our kin. To live, they must drink the essence that quickens human blood. They are dying out. Their only hope lies in dangerous, enticing intimacy with their only prey, as they reach across the chasm at the confluence of body and spirit, life and death, fear and love.

SPIRIT HUNTERS

by John Mizelle

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SPIRIT HUNTERS



JOHN MIZELLE

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First Edition

ONE

*The greatest problem of life is this:
All human food consists entirely of souls.*

—Ivaluardjuk, Inuit shaman

The sun had fallen, and the horizon vanished as sea and sky merged into a seamless darkness. One hand resting lightly on the trunk of a lone cypress that clung to the edge of the cliff, Lilith leaned into the wind that lashed her face, her long black hair streaming behind her. She watched a pelican glide along the bluff, languidly dip a wing, and arc toward the sea. Wings tight against his body, neck stretched, he plunged, piercing the calm water like a spear. After a moment his head emerged from the froth and slowly, with long beats of his great wings, he planed against the offshore breeze and rose, searching the surf line for prey.

Beneath the sounds of the ocean on one side and music and laughter drifting from the other, Lilith detected a lone man walking toward her along the rim of trees that bordered the cliff. She released a long breath. *Yes, he has come.*

Closing her eyes, her body relaxed and alert, she scanned her surroundings. Down the cliff to the sea, deep into the groves of trees reaching back from the cliff face on either side of her, and across the acres of lawn toward the sound of the banquet just beginning, she located precisely every creature, every plant, every stone. The heartbeat of an owl, hidden fifty feet above her among the uppermost branches of the cypress, tapped excitedly as he dined on a squirrel. The squirrel was still alive.

Lilith gazed out to sea. Soon, a tall, lean, middle-aged man emerged from the grove to her right, paused to stretch his arms toward the sky, then made his way to a small boulder on the cliff edge. He looked past her to the south, where the foam of rollers could be dimly seen as they crashed against the rocks. From his gestures, his heartbeat, and his breathing, she knew that she had not been noticed.

Lightly, she touched the trunk of the tree and leaned out, then pulled back again. She repeated the movement several times in a slow undulation. Her pale face, wreathed by her black hair and clothing in the twilight, floated in the air above the cliff.

After a moment, the man's breath caught. Lilith watched the rhythm of the waves in the falling light and waited. The man's eyes moved over her silhouette, a subtle, insistent pressure tracing the sinews of her arms and hands, gliding up her black silk blouse over the curve of her breasts, lingering on the long line of her bare throat, the skin as smooth and white as bone, to rest finally at the thin, ironic curve of her lips, the large, hooded eyes.

He approached, his footfall tentative at first, then firmer, more confident. As he reached her shoulder she turned her face to him. He took a startled step back as she revealed eyes that glowed like emeralds lit from within. "Excuse me," he stammered, attempting a smile, "I don't mean to disturb you, but, are you all right? You're awfully close to the edge."

"Yes," she replied calmly, "I'm all right." She turned back to the sea, leaned into the breeze.

The man reached a hand toward her, hesitated, withdrew. He watched her for a moment, then extended his hand again, steady now, palm up. "Would you please step away from the cliff?"

Lilith smiled mischievously. "If it will make you feel better."

"It will." He smiled, stretched his hand toward her in a gesture of encouragement.

She did not take his hand, but stepped a pace toward him, her back to the tree. The man relaxed visibly, his hand fell to his side, and he stared at her intently. "Thank you. I didn't know you were here until I saw you leaning out from the cliff. It disturbed me to see you so close to the edge, as casual as though you were about to step through a doorway. I wondered..." He shook his head.

"...if I were about to kill myself," she interrupted mildly.

He hesitated a moment. "Accidentally or otherwise," he said at last.

"No," she continued, her voice low, "I shall never kill myself."

"Leaning out like that looks like an invitation to trouble."

Lilith shrugged. "I know my limits. There was no chance I would fall."

"Even so, the cliff could have given way beneath you."

"Everything worth doing requires risks," she said with a small smile, "but falling was not among them." She gestured toward the ocean, her voice a rich, musical sound that rose above the roar of the surf, the rustle of the wind. "Only on the edge are the truly important things close enough to touch. The heaving of the ocean as it breathes. The shining of the stars as the sun falls." She paused, face alight, and looked out over the water as the pelican wheeled for another pass over the waves. "The dance of the hunters and their prey."

The man's heart raced, but he smiled. "You have an interesting perspective on the world."

She stared at him, her green eyes shining. She assessed the huskiness of his voice, his slightly narrowed eyes, the subtle tension in his body as he leaned almost imperceptibly toward her, and decided that his emotions were at their proper pitch. "You think so? We shall see."

"Shall we?" he asked, his voice tightening. "How's that?"

"I often come to the sea," she continued slowly, "when I need to clear my mind. But tonight," she paused, letting him dream for an instant into the gap, "tonight I came to meet you."

The man stepped back, studied her through narrowed eyes. "To meet me," he said half under his breath. He shifted his weight to one hip, flexed his fingers, slowly relaxed them again. His voice became clear and firm. "Whoever you are, I don't appreciate being toyed with. I..."

Lilith cut him off with a wave of her hand. "This is no game, Dr. Pace. I am a scientist. A biologist, like yourself. A lover of mystery, like yourself."

Benjamin Pace glowered with annoyance and surprise, but under her steady gaze his face relaxed, his breathing eased. "What the hell... I should walk away from you right now," he muttered, but his voice was uncertain.

"Give me a moment," she said very softly, "to tell you why you shouldn't." She waited until his eyes steadied on hers, until she knew he could not ignore the tug she exerted on him. "Like you, I'm

interested in reproduction and life extension. Specifically, I'm trying to save an endangered species."

He scrutinized her face. "What species is that?" he said at last, his tone more puzzled than skeptical.

"My own."

A laugh broke from him. "Well, we certainly could use some saving." She said nothing, her eyes never leaving his. Soon he looked away, breathed deeply, cocked his head and appraised her sidelong. "Still, what's that got to do with me? None of the scientists *I* know find it necessary to attract the attention of their colleagues by doing gymnastics on cliffs. Just who the hell *are* you?"

"I am who I say I am," Lilith replied evenly. "And more. 'Scientist' is just one role among many. In any case, I chose the time for us to meet with care."

Ben scowled. "So, you planned this encounter? Why couldn't you simply approach me at the buffet table, or the bar? There's plenty of opportunity for schmoozing. Your approach does not inspire confidence. It seems a little nuts to me. Menacing, even."

"You may *think* I'm insane," she said with a laugh, "but already your body knows I'm anything but. As for menace...I mean you no harm." She swept her arm in a wide arc over the sea. "Besides, you're here, on the cliff edge, avoiding the 'schmoozing' you can barely say without a sneer. Five minutes of a party and you have to come here for inspiration and to empty yourself out, to make yourself ready for something new to appear." She lowered her arm, her hand open toward him. "Here it is."

His eyes widened with alarm and fascination, but he quickly composed himself. "No doubt," he remarked dryly, "Dr...."

"Sanger. I prefer to be called Lilith."

"I prefer Dr. Sanger." He crossed his arms over his chest. "How is it that you know my habits?"

Lilith shrugged. "It was no great feat to familiarize myself with your love of this wild coast, your predilection for contemplative solitude while most people play." She smiled deprecatingly. "You are less a creature of habit than most, but that still leaves much of your behavior predictable to anyone who pays attention. It was

predictable that you would soon choose the cliff edge over the banquet.”

Anger and a hint of embarrassment passed across his face, but his voice remained calm. “That may be. But I still fail to understand why anyone—why *you*—should flatter me with such attention.”

Lilith stared out to sea, her face composed. “My life, like everyone’s, is a dance of volition and adaptation. I set my intention and wait to see what appears. For the most part, the world brings me what I need, like an offering. I set out to find someone with whom I could collaborate, and you appeared as the obvious choice.” She paused and met his eyes. “The *only* choice,” she continued quietly, her eyes bright. “I’ve followed your work in the scientific literature for some time, your studies on cancer, cloning, cellular reproduction and gerontology. I know your work is at an impasse. I believe I can help you.” She paused, but pressed on as he started to interrupt. “I’m also aware that you’ve done work on the possibility of parthenogenesis in higher species, specifically mammals.”

“That work is not *in* the scientific literature,” Ben growled.

Lilith smiled. “Most secrets are open to someone who has sufficient energy and motivation.” She paused, but he said nothing more. “Parthenogenesis,” she continued at last, “is at the core of my own interests, and I have evidence that this method of reproduction is possible.”

“Interesting,” he said coldly. “You know a great deal about me and have gone to great pains to meet me here to tell me so. Why? Did you think I would relish being accosted like this? That I enjoy being stalked?”

Lilith shook her head slowly. “This hardly rises to the level of stalking, doctor.” She shrugged. “I thought you would find the experience intriguing.”

“Well, I don’t.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you?”

He shifted his feet uneasily and glared at her. “Frankly, ‘alarming’ might be a better word. And I still don’t understand why here, why now. We share some interests, maybe, but that hardly justifies all this.”

Lilith narrowed her eyes, her voice low and smooth. "More than 'interests', Dr. Pace. Passions." She laughed suddenly. "If you believed for a moment that I could unlock even one of your puzzles, you would explode with excitement!" She watched him until, at last, the tightness in his face softened and he nodded. "I believe I can. But I need *you*. Your experience, your curiosity, your courage. And you need me."

Ben studied her a long time before replying. "I need *someone*," he admitted, "that's true." He smiled ironically. "As you no doubt know, my lab has been searching for a consultant with enough...*something* to help us through these impasses." He rocked back on his heels. "Why should I think it could be you?"

"Your research is stuck," she answered immediately, "your company is in financial difficulty. You need visible signs of progress. I can provide them." She stepped closer to him, her greater height adding weight to her words. "I have experience, skill, and vision. So do you. It is imperative that we work together."

Ben shook his head. "Not good enough. You still haven't answered my questions. Why did you come to me this way? What on earth did you hope to accomplish? Why not just send me your *vita*, like a normal person?"

"I am not a normal person, Dr. Pace," Lilith said matter-of-factly. "Besides," she added with a bitter smile, "my *vita* has languished in your personnel office for a month. Like those of several other highly qualified scientists with the distinguishing characteristic that they are women." She scoffed at his look of surprise. "Don't be naive, Dr. Pace. It doesn't become you. Besides, even if my *vita* had been brought to your attention, would you have noticed? Would you have believed that I could do anything to help you? I have the impression that you've lost hope these past few months. After all, you've collaborated with the best scientists in the world. On top of that, you've also been hounded by eccentrics who think they're on to something of great importance."

"This isn't eccentric?"

Her eyes held his relentlessly. "I assure you, I am eccentric in the extreme. And, therefore, willing to investigate mysteries that most scientists cannot even conceive." She leaned toward him until

their faces nearly touched. He stood utterly still, not even breathing. "You are no fool, Dr. Pace. Look closely and you will see that neither am I." She pulled back, eased the pressure of her gaze as her words did their work. "I invite you to explore mysteries of which even you have not dreamed."

"There are easier ways to ask," he said without conviction, his body relaxing.

"I needed to make an extraordinary impression. I chose an extraordinary gesture."

The wind gusted and Lilith's hair flowed like a mane around her stark and beautiful face. Ben frowned uncertainly as the movement led his eyes across the smooth, taut skin of her cheek, the slightly parted lips, the dark oval at their center. Abruptly, he looked away. "This is absurd, you know as well as I. Nevertheless, against all good reason, I'll review your *vita* when I get back to my office. If you're everything you claim to be, I'll consider arranging an interview."

Lilith smiled. "Excellent."

He looked directly at her, and she noted with satisfaction how he marshaled his excitement and apprehension into a tone of calm self-control. "I'm not promising anything," he said. "I want that to be perfectly clear. Except I *do* promise that if you pull any more absurd stunts it will be the end of our brief association."

At that moment a full moon cleared the ridge top to the east, bringing shimmering light to the turbulent ocean, soft outlines to light and shadow. Beyond the surf line the pelican dove, striking his quarry before it knew it was in danger.

Lilith ran long fingers through the black thicket of her hair and smiled. "Thank you, Dr. Pace. That's all I ask."

"Well, then," he said with a small smile, "I suppose my moment of 'contemplative solitude' will have to wait." He glanced toward the party behind him, and his voice tightened, at once hopeful and wary. "May I accompany you?"

Lilith shrugged. "No, thanks. I'm not ready to mingle just yet."

Ben inclined his head in a slight, stiff bow. "Until we meet again."

Lilith smiled and faced the ocean. "I look forward to your call."

He turned abruptly and strode directly across the broad expanse of lawn toward the mansion. Lilith waited a moment, scanned her surroundings once again. The ocean throbbed beneath the whisper of the wind. Deer had gathered nearby, alert and very, very still. In the cypress above her, the owl had paused in its feasting. The squirrel was dead.

Lilith walked quietly along the cliff until she reached a small cypress grove. On the mansion's patio and in the banquet room beyond, couples danced to a fifteen-piece band. Knots of people surrounded the two tended bars, politely jostling for position. On several acres of floodlit lawn, people gathered in pairs and small groups, a few walking alone among large bronze and granite statuary.

At some distance from the house and the main activity, near the rim of trees, stood a large bronze statue, a woman arched backward, her body elongated and thinned so as to be almost two dimensional, a giant bronze bracelet with a human face, the mouth stretched open in a gesture that suggested a shout, or a song, or a scream. Lilith watched the moon shadow stretch away from the figure, felt the cold, smooth curve of the metal as though she touched it with her fingers. Her senses drank in the scene, meticulously monitoring the tone of the party's atmosphere, the intensity of the lights, the location and depth of the shadows, the rising volume of voices as alcohol coated the senses of the revelers, the pulse of the music as it danced with three hundred human hearts. Against this background of impressions, she noted especially the movement of the couples and solitary walkers, and waited.

The vibration of the band's bass rippled out through the skin of the earth and up through her legs, as sensitive as the tines of a tuning fork. She sorted and mapped the data as it poured in, the scents of perfume, champagne and sweat, snatches of conversation, glittering reflections off jeweled wrists and throats. In particular she studied the dynamics of the group itself, the way the clusters moved together and apart, the way the strolling couples appeared like the tendrils of a larger organism. She allowed the pattern of her attention to shift, the couples and individuals now appearing to stand out in relief against a pulsating background, then disappearing

as the group as a whole came into focus. Soon, someone would be presented. Logically, neither the time nor the place seemed right, the risk appeared to be too great. But she had made a perfunctory appearance already, the trees afforded her sufficient secrecy, and her reading of the flow of the event told her the moment was ripe. Already her blood burned with hunger. It must be now.

Near the center of the lawn, a small cluster of people paused in their leisurely stroll. Lilith's attention was drawn to them, something about their movement suggesting that they had, in some energetic way, detached from the main body of the group. A man and woman stepped apart from the others, deep in conversation. The woman glared at her companion. "You can be such a complete asshole! Leave me alone." Turning sharply, she marched across the lawn toward the trees. The man called to her, started after her, but she spun on her heel and raised a hand. "Please, Gerry, not now! I'll catch a ride home with someone. We'll talk tomorrow." She forced a smile, waved to the others, then turned again and walked slowly toward the cliff. The man watched after her uncertainly, a bit drunk. He shrugged and rejoined the group, which moved off toward the bright lights of the house.

Lilith followed the woman with her eyes, measured her, noted mild alcohol intoxication, but found only traces of more potent toxins. She was as clean as could be found in a modern American city. The heat in Lilith's blood flared. She melted deeper into the shadows past the first trees. Her black dress and hair, her liquid movements made her nearly invisible, even if there had been someone able to see beyond the illuminated lawn. Lilith knew without having to think that no one there could do so. She knew she had not been observed, and this woman was offered to her, like ripened fruit dropping softly from the tree.

Lilith moved swiftly through the grove, utterly silent, pausing once to confirm the path of her quarry, who had turned in an arc toward her, heading for a gap in the trees from which the ocean could be seen clearly. Lilith chose a spot just beyond where the beams of two floodlights intersected, a delta of darkness reaching toward the mansion from the woods. There she waited, no more visible to human eyes than a shadow in a cave. She calmed the

sudden acceleration of her heart, suppressed the clawing heat that centered in her belly as the young woman entered the dark patch, her body swallowed as though she walked into the sea. As she became totally immersed in shadow, the woman passed within a few feet of where Lilith stood, silent and still. In a single circular sweep, her movements a mere ripple in the dark, Lilith wrapped herself about the woman, pinned her quarry's arms to her sides with one arm. As the woman's mouth began to open, the prelude to a scream, Lilith slid a finger of her free hand inside the curling upper lip, piercing the skin with a long, steel-hard fingernail, and released a drop of potent nerve toxin into the flesh from the tiny reservoir at the base of the nail. Instantly the woman froze, still standing but unable to move of her own volition. Without a pause, Lilith grasped her shoulders and raised her off her feet, so that there would be only one set of footprints to mark their path. Choosing her route with care, she wove their way silently among the trees and creepers and dropped over the edge of the cliff into the brush.

Abruptly she stopped, scanning for danger. The pungent scent of fir needles, the scat of squirrel and coyote filled her nostrils. The distant voices of the people at the party came to her, along with the scurrying of small insects, the rustle of the trees, accompaniment to the slow, soft beating of the woman's heart.

Lilith studied the faint traces of the trail they had made moving down the cliff. Satisfied, she turned her full attention to the woman she held in her arms, to feel the heat of the human body against hers, to smell the light perfume, the oils of the skin. She ran her fingers lightly over the flesh of the woman's throat, down the length of her naked arm to the wrist. Holding the woman's hand lightly in her own, caressing the cool fingers, she turned the wrist over, palm up, and raised it to her lips, searching with her mouth, feeling for the pulse, the deep heat of flowing blood. Extending her upper canines to their full length, she bit down slowly, felt the skin resist, then yield under the pressure, the sharp, hollow points of the teeth sinking deeper, past the sinew and muscle, until they found the stream of life. There, she began to drink.

She closed her eyes, drew the eager gush of blood up through her fangs, savored the hot, salty spillage against her tongue, rapt in

the flood of sensations that inflamed her hunger even as she sought to quench it: the taste, the smell of the woman's sweat and flesh, the sounds of her organs as they gasped for the draining blood, the desperate throb of her straining heart. Lilith gave herself to the life she consumed, felt the force of the woman's vitality as it strained against the prison of her paralyzed body, fear and anger and wonder blending in the pressure of her blood, the vibrant electricity of her nerves. Slowly, the woman's body calmed, her pulse eased, but she remained alert. *Ah! This is a special one, who goes to her fate with equanimity.* The woman's cells spasmed suddenly, the mark of imminent death, the last resistance of her body before complete surrender. Lilith stemmed the flood. *The final choice point. Beyond this moment she cannot live.* Lilith's entire body burned, urgent, demanding. No, it had already been too long. She needed not only the blood; she must have the life. Even if that were not the case, to leave this woman alive would be too dangerous. There would surely be questions, suspicions perhaps not easily allayed. Mercy was a luxury Lilith could not afford.

She took a long breath and fed slowly, gave herself to the torrent of sensations, images, and sounds entering her with increasing intensity. The elixir poured into Lilith, all musk and spice, building with a sweet fury. At last the woman surrendered her life. This was the pinnacle, to be extinguished in the pulse of the universe itself, a wave in the flux; the unspeakable moment, beyond description, beyond sensation, when the woman's soul rushed through the open gates of her body and poured into Lilith, nourishing her, replenishing her strength as only the vital force could do, one being dissolved in another. Touch but no substance, sound but no instrument, light but no flame, roared through her, burned her, and she was ecstatic to be the torch. For a moment, Lilith's solitary being was gone.

Then it was done. Lilith heard her own breath, a singing like wind in the highest mountains, and her awareness of the world flowed back like a quickly rising tide. She shrugged off the delicious exhaustion, picked up a broken branch and, with a single carefully placed blow, broke the woman's neck. She gazed into the waxy face, ran her finger down the cool cheek, into the parenthesis that curled

at the edge of the mouth. “Thank you,” she said softly, and rose. She measured the slope of the cliff above her, found the observation point at the top and the cluster of boulders near the bottom directly below it. She hurled the body down toward the boulders, head first. It struck the cliff face ten feet above them and rolled down, coming to rest against the rocks. It would be sufficiently convincing. Lilith moved in the opposite direction, circling low on the cliff until she came to a sheer rock face too steep for a human to climb and on which she would leave no mark, and ascended rapidly.

She paused among the trees at the edge of the lawn and arranged her clothing, brushing off the twigs and leaves, and worked her way through the shadows back toward the house. The revelers were mostly awash in music and alcohol, and she soon found a gap in the group through which to enter unnoticed. In a moment she reached the broad marble portico that bordered the mansion and crossed it casually, lifting a glass of iced water from the tray of one of the liveried servants as she passed. Inside the ballroom, she stopped in front of a large, chaotic oil painting, something by Paul Klee, and sipped the water. A swizzle stick gave it just the right appearance.

As she glanced around the ornately decorated room, she detected the CEO of Ben’s company, Robert Radburn, approaching from behind her left shoulder. As though to signal to her that he was trying to pass, his hand touched the small of her back, but the fingers spread as they made contact, sliding along the notch of her spine, at once tentative and intimate. If she turned toward the pressure, she would be in his arms. Lilith took a step forward, quickly but smoothly disengaging from the hand, and turned simultaneously to face his smile.

“Excuse me, and hello,” Radburn said. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure...”

Lilith extended her hand. “Lilith Sanger.”

Robert took her hand, clicked his heels in mock salute. “Robert Radburn. Welcome to my home.”

Lilith opened her eyes wide in a show of surprise. “Dr. Radburn. How nice to meet you.” Lilith’s voice was friendly but cool. “Your home is exquisite.”

Robert smiled. "Thank you. I appreciate great beauty." He paused, leaned toward her, a hint of a bow. "Oh, and my name is Robert. May I call you Lilith?"

"Of course," she replied pleasantly. "This is California, after all."

Robert laughed, and glanced at her glass where she held it in front of her chest. His gaze lingered there a moment, then glided casually up to meet her eyes. He reached out to take her by the elbow. "Your drink needs refreshing. What can I get you?" He gestured toward the bar.

Lilith turned ahead of him, moving just quickly enough that his hand was unable to close on her arm. "Nothing more for me, thanks. In fact, if you'll excuse me, I think it's time for me to say good night."

Radburn nodded. "With the greatest reluctance, you're excused." He raised his glass in salute.

With a nod, Lilith turned and walked away. A moment later, the science journalist whose acquaintance Lilith had cultivated in order to obtain an invitation to this exclusive gathering emerged from a cluster of laughing people. Lilith felt an unexpected discomfort as she approached. As the woman reached her, Lilith turned slightly and gave her a small smile. "Hello, Aurora. Vacuuming up tidbits of information, are you?"

Aurora chuckled. "I was hoping to see you here. I'd just given up, and suddenly you appear." She flashed a radiant smile, the dark sheen of her face enhanced by the tiny gold balls tied at the ends of her delicate cornrows.

"I've been here," Lilith replied. "There's just so much to see, for an art *aficionado* like myself, that I've spent most of the time just wandering around. Besides, social mixing is not my favorite activity."

"I've noticed that," Aurora responded, looking at her appraisingly. At Lilith's silence, she went on. "I understand about the art." She nodded. "Much of it is magnificent. And the place itself is fascinating in its own way, although 'magnificent' isn't the first word that comes to mind."

"No," Lilith mused. "'Extravagant' is a possibility. Or, 'garish'."

"Yes, a neo-Greco-Roman-gothic-capitalist palace, if I remember my art history." They both laughed softly. "Even so," Aurora continued, her eyes on Lilith's, "you needn't spend your time

in such a bizarre place, on such a magical, marvelous evening, entirely alone.”

Lilith masked the small shock of excitement she felt as she looked into Aurora’s eyes. *If only she knew just how alone I am. If the world were not as it is, I might be tempted to take her up on her offer. But the world is exactly what it is.* “If that’s an invitation,” she replied at last, “I’ll have to take a rain check. Magical, marvelous...yes, this evening certainly is that. Unfortunately, these are precisely the times when I *must* be alone.”

“And why, exactly, is that?” Aurora smiled, but a sharpness crept into her voice. “I intend to find out.” At Lilith’s neutral expression, she shook her head. Her voice softened. “I realize that you are allergic to human beings, but, really, I think you’ll find me non-toxic, if you take the chance.”

Lilith told herself that engaging with Aurora was pointless at best, dangerous at worst. But the attraction was strong. Lilith returned Aurora’s smile. “You are closer than you may think. It *is* something like an allergy. Being too close to people is not good for my health. And, like with an allergy, the more stimulated I become, the worse it is.” She stood very straight and eyed Aurora coolly. “Besides, most people only diminish the magic around them. I haven’t time for them.”

“True enough,” Aurora replied quietly. “Nor do I. But some of us appreciate magic and mystery, even seek them.”

You are an exception. But, how much mystery can you tolerate or comprehend? From the corner of her eye, Lilith saw Radburn and Ben deep in conversation against the bar. “Listen, I must make my escape.”

“Yes, escape,” Aurora murmured gravely. “Escape while you can.”

Lilith paused, and granted Aurora the faintest of smiles. With a nod, she left. Aurora watched as she gracefully wove her way among the swirling dancers and disappeared through the doorway beyond.

TWO

The only problem is that you think you have time.

—Gautama, the Buddha

Deep in his cells, the hunter knew he was being watched. He paused on the narrow ledge trail midway between the glacier-carved valley and the stark Himalayan peaks, betraying nothing of his wariness, his movements smooth and unhurried, his breathing slow and steady as he searched for the watcher. Instantaneously, he scanned a large sphere, the creatures around him as close to his senses as if he held them in his hands, so that he felt inside them to their trembling hearts. A hawk circled calmly below him, rodents scurried in the brush, a dung beetle labored steadily as it scrabbled up the rock. And, behind and above his right shoulder, at about fifty meters, as clear and bright as a torch in the night, there was a man. The hunter turned slowly toward the steep, bare slope where a small figure stood in plain view, dressed in heavy brown wool robes, his face partly hidden by a hood. *A monk. But I know of no monastery in this area, or anywhere at this altitude.*

The man raised a hand and pushed the hood back from his head, revealing an aged, smiling face and shaved skull. He turned his palm outward in a gesture of salute but was otherwise perfectly still, a gnarled tree silhouetted against the clouds. The wind whipped his robes against his legs.

How had he come so close? The hunter knew he should have detected the old man's presence, especially since he exuded an unusually vibrant, serene energy. And there was something else: despite his vitality, this monk was very, very old.

The hunter drew a deep breath and approached. Bowing his head slightly, he greeted the old man. "Namaste." He considered the meaning of the word: "The light in me salutes the light in you." *My darkness salutes your light.*

The monk smiled broadly, his eyes bright, and bowed from the waist, his hands in front of his face, palms together. "Namaste."

The hunter continued in Tibetan, which he had mastered long ago. "I did not expect to meet anyone at this altitude."

The monk shrugged. "I'm not anyone. I'm merely Chungpa."

To his annoyance, the hunter could not place the monk's tone precisely, but it lay somewhere between amusement and mockery. He let it pass. "I am Jared. You took me by surprise."

"What a pleasure!" Chungpa exclaimed delightedly. "A feat not easily accomplished. Tell me, what brings you to such a remote place? If it was not me you were expecting, then what?" The old monk smiled again, warmly, his body revealing only a calm, amused curiosity that showed itself in the crinkles around his eyes and mouth.

The absence of fear disturbed Jared, accustomed as he was to the subtle tension almost all humans displayed at his presence, a fear so subliminal, and so absurd in their ordinary frame of reference, that they utterly failed to notice it, let alone consider its wisdom. But Jared noticed it in them, as clearly as he smelled garlic on a man's breath, or a woman's menses. He was convinced that this was an Old One, an unexpected gift, someone who might teach him something.

"I came seeking solitude," Jared answered. "Why else would one come here?" He gestured down toward a landslide far below. "The trail is hard and dangerous."

"Yes, more than a match for most," Chungpa replied mildly, his eyes steady on Jared's face. "You must be very tired, and your need for solitude great, indeed." He smiled impishly. "I have disturbed you."

"No, no disturbance," Jared said carefully, "only surprise. Of necessity, I live mostly in large cities. By nature, I prefer to pass my time alone, in the most remote places."

"There is no such thing as 'alone,'" Chungpa said with a shake of his head, "only isolated and afraid."

"I am neither of those," Jared replied with a tight smile. "However, I see that being alone is not as simple as I had expected. And what of yourself? I know of no monastery in this region."

"Did you think to know everything before you arrived?" Chungpa cocked his head to the side. "Like you," he continued, not

waiting for an answer, "my small group prefers the high, remote mountains. The elements join so clearly here."

Jared nodded emphatically. "Yes, wind, rock, water, and sun. Mind and body, as well."

"They are the same," Chungpa retorted, his eyes sparkling.

"So they are," Jared replied neutrally, declining the challenge in Chungpa's tone. "I come to the mountains from time to time, when I am in need of renewal."

"Renewal is not an event, my friend," Chungpa chided. "It is a process that requires constant attention. Unless, of course, you believe in the charming European concept of the vacation?"

"We have just met," Jared remarked mildly, "and already you instruct me. Perhaps you might benefit by descending from mountain now and then." He waited, but Chungpa merely continued to smile. "Even so, what you say is true. There is no vacation from my life. Still, I have been too long in the cities." He paused a moment, considering. "If it would not be a burden on you or fellows, might I pass the night at your monastery?"

Chungpa bowed. "Our doors are always open to the rare traveler whom the elements permit to reach us." He gestured upward toward the distant pass. "Please, let us begin. We have far to go."

Turning, he led the way up a narrow spine of rock, his stubby legs setting a rapid, steady pace. Surprised at the old man's speed, Jared fell in behind him, content to follow, to focus inward as they hiked in silence over increasingly difficult terrain.

At last they reached the apex of the pass. The wind gusted fiercely, whipping Jared's long black hair, and sang a howling song through the cleft in the mountains, a chant, or the call of a wolf. Jared smiled at this, hearing in it a welcome. Facing into the force of the wind, he howled in reply, all caution, all thought abandoned, until he no longer knew or cared which was wind and which his own voice.

Chungpa watched him with unabashed curiosity. He smiled, bowed, and turned again to climb, the old man's sandaled feet and bare, muscular calves flexing as he worked his way up the mountain, his breathing deep and even, his gait rhythmical but not mechanical. Jared began to like this odd monk, and wrapped himself in caution.

The sun cast shifting patches of light and shadow across the sharp peaks and down the steep, water-carved canyons that flowed like sinuous veins among the jagged bones of giants. Sunlight shimmered off Jared's skin, white as the perennial snowfields that blanketed the upper slopes, and heat suffused the frigid air, warming his face like a sudden flush. From the village in the valley far below, wisps of smoke rose from the fires in a dozen huts, wafting faint aromas of spices, vegetables, and the dried dung that the villagers used as fuel, pungent counterpoint to the crisp, evanescent breath of coming rain.

They came at last to a hollow just below the permanent snow line, carved out by the rushing water of countless spring melts. At the far side a rapid stream sparkled in the late afternoon sun, tumbled over the lip of the hollow and cast itself out over bare gray rock to burst into foam hundreds of feet below. In the foreground stood a small cluster of buildings, simply yet sturdily built of stone, mud, and wood. Smoke curled from the top of one, scattering quickly in the gusting wind.

Chungpa glanced over his shoulder. "This is the monastery of Alpunar. Here you may rest. The evening meal is being prepared. Won't you please join us? Our food is simple, but delicious." He looked directly into Jared's eyes. "Even if you choose not to share the food, please do join us. We do not have many guests."

Jared returned Chungpa's gaze impassively. After a journey such as this, any traveler would be famished. And for either party to refuse to share the meal would be an insult. "It would be an honor," he said. "You have guessed, I see, that I am fasting. If it is not too much to ask, please give me only the hot water with which you prepare your tea. That will satisfy my needs."

"Very well." Chungpa nodded. "Perhaps," he added lightly, "we can address your needs more exactly this evening. For now, I have duties to perform. Will you rest?"

"I prefer to watch the waterfall. That will be sufficient rest for now."

"As you wish. The gong will summon you to dinner." Chungpa swept his hand over the monastery, the hollow, the mountains.

“Please feel welcome.” With a bow, he moved off toward the buildings.

Jared looked after him for a moment, then walked slowly to the edge of the stream and stood quietly on the stone lip of the waterfall. The water rushed over the precipice, a single continuous filament sparkling with light as it dove into the air and broke into a cataract of jewels. He focused his attention on a wave in the stream, followed it to the edge and over, where it separated from the flow and danced out into the air. He repeated this over and over again, considering the fate of the individual drops. Most of them fell, becoming part of the thunder at the foot of the falls. A few rose, floating off to vanish in the wind. He knew suddenly that this was why he had come here: to stand at the edge of the world.

Jared’s body shifted subtly and he found himself pleasantly light-headed, swaying out over the rocks hundreds of feet below. He studied the moment soberly, feeling at its core a great weariness and the ache of despair. *What if I were to relax my vigilance for just a moment? Would I fall, or soar away, like the hawks that nest in unreachable crevices?* He smiled. *Would the fall kill me?*

Experimentally, he leaned outward again, rode the sensations as he imagined his spirit dancing free of his body. In his belly, one force tugged him relentlessly downward, like gravity itself pulling on his cells, toward surrender and relief, while a countermanding impulse flexed his muscles taut, held him fast on the edge of the abyss, and set his blood pounding with defiance. *Is this hunger for life, this reflex that refuses to allow me to lean just that extra millimeter, or merely fear of death?*

Jared followed the coursing of his blood from organ to organ, tissue to tissue, alert to the internal movement of each cell as it whirled upon itself, a bubble spinning in a storm. He felt both the permeability and the solidity that gave each cell shape and integrity. In his mind appeared a Chinese ideogram: two trees, base to base, their roots intertwined. A bittersweet smile crossed his face. *Two trees: the paradox of the lungs. Where the spirit meets the flesh, that is the center of the mystery.* He sighed. It seemed strange that when his spirit ached and he saw that a simple twist of his body, a small shift of his mind would end his torment, the ache became

somehow sweet even as it intensified. Perhaps the sweetness was just the realization that, when the ache truly became too much, there was always the abyss.

From the monastery came the deep, rich tone of a gong. Jared bowed, thanking the waterfall and its spirits, and turned toward the sound. The setting sun cast a reddish hue over the buildings and the mountains behind them. Jared breathed deeply, savoring the light and the cool evening breeze. The gong called again. "I come," Jared answered.

Inside the monastery's main building, the afternoon meditation had been completed. The stone floor had been swept and the straw mats that covered it shaken, to demarcate the transition from one sacred space to another, from meditation hall to dining hall. The sweetness of incense mixed with the faint tang of burning dung. The room was dimly lit by a fire at one end and by candles placed strategically around the walls. Meditation cushions now surrounded a large, low, rectangular wooden table in the center of the room.

Even before the vibrations of the dinner gong died away, monks began filing in. Standing in the shadows outside the window, Jared watched Chungpa, seated at one end of the table, greet each with a bow and a smile. The younger ones appeared first, followed by their elders, and last of all, the Most Ancient One, Ransho, a tiny woman whose face was the color and wrinkled texture of a dried apple. Her hair was pure white, cropped close to her head, and, despite her obvious age, her eyes sparkled as she made her way slowly, gracefully erect, to her seat at Chungpa's right hand. His eyes sidelong on the waiting monks, Chungpa leaned toward her, his hand cupped in front of his mouth in a theatrically conspiratorial gesture. "These monks," he grumbled, "Are as predictable as ticks on a yak. Sister, please help me remember that habit is a better servant than a master."

Ransho's eyes widened dramatically and she let out a great sigh. "Oh, Wise One, would that you had said this a hundred years ago!"

Chungpa regarded her gravely. "I did." They stared at one another for a moment, then burst out laughing.

"The only way to change *my* place in line," Ransho said, acknowledging the others with a gesture of her head, "Would be to match me with beetles instead of these goats. Or," she mused, "cremate me."

Jared ducked to clear the low header and stood quietly inside the door, waiting. At his appearance, the monks, without exception, turned to look at him, faces bright with friendly curiosity.

"Ah!" Ransho said quietly to Chungpa, "perhaps this will disturb our devotion to routine. You should have told me!"

Chungpa smiled. "A small surprise for one who has renounced the encroachments of Far Sight." Looking up, he gestured toward the seat at his left hand. "Welcome, traveler. Please join us." To the assembled monks he said, "This is Jared, a lover of mountain solitude who lives in the lowland cities. In his search for silence, he howls with the spirits in the high pass. He has just completed a three-day climb, yet, keeping pace with him, I felt old for the first time."

Jared bowed to the monks as a group, even more deeply to his host Chungpa, whose eyebrows rose as Jared turned to Ransho, bowed again, and, with his eyes cast downward, said softly, "It is rare in a lifetime to encounter even one of the Old Ones. Two is beyond blessing."

The room became silent. Ransho appraised him for a long time, then returned his bow. "So. A traveler with open eyes."

"Until now, I thought you to be only tales designed to stir the ambition of young monks," Jared replied. "But when I saw you, I knew the tales were true."

"Perhaps you will amuse us with those tales some time," Ransho answered. "As for myself, age has given me the wisdom to understand something of the world, but it has left my bones too brittle and hollow to do anything about it."

"Would you do something if you could?" Jared asked. "The more I learn, the more I search for ways to have less of an impact in the world."

"Excellent!" Chungpa exclaimed. "You will have the opportunity to learn the superiority of our way." He giggled.

Jared stared at him, and slowly smiled. "I look forward to it." He studied the subtle movements of Ransho's body. *Nearly perfect control, which she uses to mask great physical pain.* He lowered himself gracefully to the cushion. Even seated cross-legged facing Ransho, he towered over them all. "Bones such as yours are the perfect instrument through which the mountain winds can play," he said to her.

A monk set a bowl of hot water in front of Jared, then placed upon the table large serving bowls of steamed rice and vegetables. The monks bowed their heads as Chungpa said the invocation: "We thank the illusory Bodhisattva for the illusory food; the illusory food for being so solidly and delectably deluded; the spirits who bring us such an intriguing, though illusory, visitor."

Jared smiled, grimly amused. "Illusory," he mused. "A very convincing illusion, when the entire world simmers in blood, and all creatures tremble."

"No," Ransho answered, watching him steadily, "not all creatures. Not us. Not you."

"True," Chungpa chirped, "we are done with trembling, and you have not even begun."

Jared regarded him without expression. "Who knows what the *tao* may bring you, Old One?" He paused. "As for me, I doubt there is any sensation still unknown to me, so fear is in its proper place."

"No doubt," Chungpa agreed, "every sensation, every thought is yours, yet you linger on the lip of the falls."

Jared's belly tensed, but he gave no sign. "There are always choices to be considered," he replied.

"One must follow one's nature," Ransho said softly, her eyes on Jared's steaming bowl of water. "The choice is to resist it blindly and be consumed by it, or to follow it like a hawk arcing downward just behind the eyes of its prey."

Jared hesitated, intrigued but cautious. "As enlivening as this discussion is," he said, adopting a tone of fatigue, "it is too rarefied for my exhausted mind. Perhaps we can continue it another time."

Chungpa shrugged. "It's only a matter of life and death," he said cheerfully. "There's no need for haste."

Jared regarded Chungpa mildly. "I've been living in Bangkok for some time. I've come here in part to find temporary relief from that particular matter."

"Many come here to find such relief," Ransho said, her eyes bright and smiling. "But, once broached, it is not so easy to find relief from the question of life and death, nor from oneself." Jared returned her gaze impassively.

"But, Ransho," Chungpa said, his eyes wide with mock bewilderment, "you always taught us there is no such thing as a 'self'."

"Yes," she replied lightly, "a truth of which your empty-headed prattle is ample proof."

Chungpa's face went suddenly slack; his eyes crossed and rolled up into his head. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "I am awakened!" He wobbled drunkenly on his cushion, then, his body totally rigid, fell over backward. The room exploded with laughter. Chungpa's hand appeared on the tabletop, scurried across it, crab-like, seized his spoon, and began flipping chunks of vegetables high in the air. One by one they disappeared over precisely the same spot by the edge of the table, from which an obscene gurgling sound rose as each piece vanished, followed by snarls, purrs and gnashing of teeth. At last, in a single, effortless motion, Chungpa righted himself and, with a look of the utmost composure, bent his head and sipped his tea. Chortling, the monks began to eat.

Jared scanned the monks with a mixture of amusement and wariness, wondering at their willingness to reveal their powers in the presence of a stranger. Lifting his bowl of water, he took a long sip, peering through the steam at his hosts, his senses straining to glean more information. But Chungpa and Ransho were the most opaque humans he had ever met. He could not even determine their ages. Jared decided that he would know their secret before he departed.

Ransho watched him with an openly appraising look. "Good," she said. "We have your attention." Jared returned her gaze, his head cocked slightly to the side, and smiled.

After a moment, Jared turned to find Chungpa watching him. He dropped his eyes, automatically veiling his expression as though the old man could read his thoughts, irritated that he could be so

disturbed by a human, so easily made to feel defensive. For a moment, a disorienting nausea set his insides churning. He suppressed the outward signs of his discomfort and struggled to regain the attunement that gave him mastery even over his autonomic nervous system. In a moment, he felt the calming rush of his breath as it penetrated his cells. Jared raised his eyes.

Chungpa and Ransho were staring at him with unrestrained delight, their eyes wide and glowing. “Marvelous!” Chungpa cried, “magnificent!” Ransho nodded excitedly. The other monks stared at their leaders, perplexity on their faces.

Again Jared was thrown off balance, but he smoothed his frown even before it appeared. “Of what marvel do you speak?” he asked, perfectly composed. “You observe something that is beyond my sight.”

“Indeed,” Ransho replied, smiling. “The marvel we observe is you.”

The hall again became totally silent. Suddenly awash with shame, anger, and a confused longing, Jared wanted to run or to tear out the throats of the entire assembly for looking at him, but his calm gaze never wavered from the Old Ones. “You do me too great an honor...”

Chungpa laughed happily. “Oh, being you is no great honor. A marvel and a miracle, to be sure, but an honor...” he shook his head. “I don’t think so.” He glanced at Ransho. “Nevertheless, it is we who shall be honored if you will join us for tea before we retire.”

Jared searched the faces of the Old Ones, his own expression blank. He found no mockery or malice in their eyes. “It would be my pleasure,” he said formally. The Old Ones rose and bowed deeply to the watching monks, who returned their bows, murmuring courtesies. Jared stood, a giant among them, and bowed his head. “Thank you for opening your doors to me.”

Chungpa led Jared and Ransho outside, where he paused, breathing deeply. At an altitude of ten thousand feet, hundreds of miles from any sizable city, and swept of clouds by a gentle wind, the night sky blazed with stars strewn across the luminous mist of the Milky Way.

At last, Ransho spoke. “This night is too great a gift to waste. Perhaps we should forgo our tea, and chat by the waterfall.”

“I would like that,” replied Jared.

“Yes,” Chungpa said eagerly, “we can build a fire. There are goat turds in plenty there already, and I...” his eyes crinkled mischievously “...I have a spark to light them.” He reached into the folds of his robe and removed, with a great show of importance, a book of matches. “A gift of light and heat from the West.”

As they walked three abreast to the waterfall, Chungpa broke off from the others, strode to the edge, kicked off his sandals and curled his toes over the lip of rock. He raised his arms in a “V” above his head, like a diver preparing to plunge, coiled his legs and leaped. He rose more than six feet, did a double somersault in mid-air, twisted so that he faced his companions, and landed gracefully, arms extended at his sides, the balls of his feet precisely on the spot from which he had leaped. “On a night like this,” he said, looking directly at Jared, “anything seems possible, yes?”

Jared scrutinized him in return, unperturbed. He now expected the extraordinary from these two. “Almost anything, perhaps,” he replied. He took a step forward and turned so that he could see both of them at once. “That was a remarkable performance, finer even than your comedy in the dining hall. But if you will forgive my boldness, it is my understanding that Buddhist monks do not make a display of their powers. As a stranger, a foreigner, not even a Buddhist, I am surprised—and, of course, flattered—by your attention to me. To what do I owe this honor? Surely not every trekker from Bangkok receives such treatment.”

Chungpa nodded gravely. “Trekkers from Bangkok, or from anywhere else, rarely reach this particular mountain. Here the elements conspire to preserve our isolation. The great distances from population centers, even from trekking routes, the altitude, the inclement weather...” He shrugged and smiled. “It seems that every time people even consider making the climb to these peaks, the winds rise up to drive them back down again.” He pursed his lips quizzically. “It is as though they don’t want people here. With the weather being so discouraging, very few travelers reach us. So you must appreciate what a delight it was for me to find you above the

village.” He nodded emphatically. “For you to come here was necessary. The elements agree.”

Ransho stepped to Jared’s side and spoke softly. “You see, visitors here are rare, and they are rare kinds of visitors. A visitor such as *yourself*,” she added with a peculiar emphasis, “we have not seen for almost two hundred years.”

Jared felt a tingling at the nape of his neck. What was Ransho hinting at? “Two hundred years. I had heard that there were Old Ones who had achieved such longevity, but never did I hope to meet one.” He paused a moment, considering. “Or, perhaps, by ‘we’ you were referring to your lineage?”

“You waste precious moments with such games,” Chungpa replied sharply. “You know, or at least suspect, that we are much older than that. So old, in fact, that we remember a time in which encounters with your kind were not quite so rare.” He paused at the almost imperceptible catch in Jared’s intake of breath, and nodded at Ransho. “She is the eldest, and the longest-lived of any of our line, save the Founder.”

“Yes,” added Ransho, “oldest and longest and now, slowest and nearest to death. Nearly five hundred years about to be collapsed into that single moment.” A frown flickered across her face, and she smiled impishly. “But then, I have been practicing.”

Jared shook his head in astonishment. “I had no idea a human being could live so long.” He focused on Ransho. “But tell me, since time is of such urgency, what exactly do you know about my ‘kind’? You speak with great certainty.”

“Greater, unfortunately, than we actually possess,” Ransho began.

Jared cut her off. “I shall warn you only once not to play with me. If you know something, say it. If you want something, ask it. I have no patience for manipulation.”

Ransho shrugged. “If we play, it is for its own sake, not to harm you. But, so that you need not continue to guess, I shall enumerate the major points of what little we know. We hope you will enlighten us as to the errors and gaps in our knowledge.” She paused, her eyebrows arched in expectation. Jared said nothing. “We know,” Ransho continued, watching him closely, “that you require human

blood to live.” Jared kept his heartbeat under strict control. “We imagine that, even to us, you are very old. We know that your kind has always been rare, and that now it is more so.” She paused again, and her voice softened. “You are one of very few still alive.”

Jared’s face and body remained as still and impassive as stone, but his mind whirled. So, they knew him, and believed there were others. Jared longed to share that belief—that he was not the last—but his instincts urged caution. He considered his options. Within two days he had to feed, or begin to suffer the relentless pain of unbearable hunger. No human would be safe once the hunger madness gripped him, no discipline he had ever known would enable him to delay even a few hours longer. Once in the grip of that pain, he would drink the soul of anyone who crossed his path. He fixed his eyes on Ransho, refused to let them drift to Chungpa. He did not want to kill these people. These Old Ones were a special breed, and if the monks who followed them did not arouse the same respect in him, still he would not offend his hosts by killing one. He knew he must go before the madness came. He would find relief in the village below.

Jared’s mind froze for an instant. *The village.* He had planned to find his prey in one of the cities, as usual. There he could be more discriminating in his selection, more careful to avoid those he judged to have some special quality. Jared smiled bitterly. *I am a hunter who lets the beautiful ones go free. Does this make me superior to one who chooses his targets for their beauty and hangs their heads on his wall?* In his mind’s eye he saw a vision of how his own trophy room would appear.

“I do not wish to disturb your thoughts,” Ransho said softly. She waited until Jared breathed. “We know your species has great physical powers,” Ransho continued at last, “of perception, movement, rejuvenation, destruction, to name a few. We know you are highly intelligent.” She searched Jared’s eyes. “About you personally, we also know that you are on a quest; that you are lonely; that your life is a great burden to you, as well as a joy.” She hesitated. “Perhaps all this is not truly personal to you. The others came to us in the same condition.”

“Who were these ‘others’?” Jared demanded coldly, to hide the hope that flared suddenly within him.

“The Founder met several, but only two have come in my lifetime. One called himself Han. Very, very old, that one. The other refused to tell us her name.”

Han! The name burned like the stroke of a lash in Jared’s mind. *To hear your name again, after all these years...* “Tell me,” he said evenly, “what became of them?”

Ransho glanced at Chungpa, then looked back to Jared, her eyes suddenly soft. “We don’t really know,” she replied quietly. “Han told me that he no longer wished to live. He left us, saying that he was going to Indonesia, for reasons only he knew. About the time Mount Tambora erupted, we lost contact with him. The woman...”

“What do you mean,” Jared broke in, “you ‘lost contact’? You said he left. Are you claiming to be telepaths?”

“Not exactly,” Ransho replied. “We are able to make a certain almost visceral contact with beings of a high level of development. Once contact is established, we are able to maintain it regardless of distance. Someone with sufficient skill can block or sever the connection.” She hesitated for the briefest moment. “Of course, death also breaks the connection.”

Jared pressed on. “Mount Tambora...a volcano in Indonesia.”

“Yes,” Chungpa nodded, “at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it produced one of the largest eruptions in recorded history.”

Jared looked away, out over the waterfall. *Han is dead.* His voice grew cold. “Tell me about the woman.”

“She was even more self-contained than you, her shell even more opaque,” Ransho replied. “She had an astonishing acuity and singularity of mind. We had great hopes of learning from her and did manage to spark her interest, but she was intent on some secret purpose and would not be distracted. She was with us only very briefly and refused to say where she was going. Like Han, either she died or deliberately broke our link, somewhere on the western coast of Spain.”

Jared suppressed his excitement. “Tell me more about your ‘link’.”

Chungpa stepped back and leaned against a boulder on the edge of the stream, peering at Jared through narrowed eyes. “There is not any more to say, in ordinary language. With time, we could train you to understand it.”

“I’m not interested in your training,” Jared replied coldly, “and I have no time.”

Chungpa smiled. “*You are* interested, and you have more time than anyone. But that decision will take care of itself. In any case, we know the link can be established with you. In fact, we’ve already done it. Soon, trained or not, you’ll begin to feel it.”

Jared scanned himself, searching for the connection, the hook that would link these audacious monks to him. At last, to his surprise, he found it. Even without using his deep sense, he could feel their presence, like electricity in his nerves. “You may not hold me, even with your minds,” he growled. “I am no beast you can tame or control.”

“We are well aware of that. There will be no need for conflict,” Ransho said placidly. “As we’ve already said, someone like yourself can choose to break the link. We have no wish to impose it on you against your will.”

“Then why did you establish it without my knowledge or consent?”

“Consider it a gift,” she replied.

“I don’t.”

“And a test,” Chungpa interjected cheerfully. “We thought you would notice instantly.”

Jared said nothing, and bored with his eyes into the two old monks. “Your stories are intriguing. But before I spend any more time on them, you must answer a few questions.”

A trace of sadness clouded Ransho’s face, like a whisper deep in her eyes. “If we knew more about your friend,” she said softly, “we would tell you.”

“Who are you calling my friend?” Jared demanded.

Without taking her eyes off his, Ransho continued in the same gentle voice. “Your emotions are not completely invisible to us. We noticed your reaction. And Han once mentioned a friend much like you. The rest was deduction.”

Jared shook his head, irritated, lest the sheer weight of their knowledge, and their extraordinary perceptiveness, overwhelm him. Even so, he was convinced that their insights were as much guesswork as observation. “I still have my questions.”

Ransho nodded.

“Very well. If there were such creatures, and they had come here, why are you still alive? Would it be the habit of my *kind*,”—he spat the word—“to leave witnesses?”

“They believed, correctly,” Chungpa replied, “that we would not betray them. You must know, as they did, that from time to time, such risks are necessary. Uncertainty is the price of making the horror of your existence bearable.”

“You will stop telling me what makes my life bearable.”

Chungpa shook his head. “I shall not stop. This, finally, is why you won’t kill us, as you almost certainly could, despite our leathery toughness. Because we shall not betray you, nor stop telling you the truth.”

Jared studied the monks minutely, searching their bodies for some sign that they lied or sought to manipulate him. But he found nothing. They had no fear, only an abundance of boldness. That alone might have been enough to keep them alive, but they also had information he craved. “Why should I believe you, or trust you? I am a student of esoteric religions and I know that the powers you hint at, even the meager ones you display so gleefully, are forbidden to those seeking enlightenment on all Buddhist paths. If you violate even these vows, why should I expect any better of you?”

The old monks looked at one another and chuckled. “First, a fire,” Chungpa said. Reaching into a neat pile of dried goat droppings alongside the rocks, he quickly made a small pyramid out of several chips, extracted the matches from the folds of his robe, struck one, and held it against the dung, fanning the flame with his breath. In a moment, light from the small blaze danced across their faces.

“Ah, that’s better.” Chungpa tossed a few more chips onto the fire, turned to face Jared again. “As a student of religions, you must know this story. Allow me to tell it anyway.” Without waiting for a reply, he began.

“There once was a devoted and wise Zen monk who lived in a large walled city, a hub of one of the richest trade routes. One day, the story goes, a great army laid siege to the city, intending to subdue the people and dominate the trade. After many months of siege, the people were exhausted, starving and weak. The monk, deep in contemplation all this time, could no longer bear the suffering of the people, nor block out the visions of the horrible fate that awaited them outside the gates.

“Alone and in much anguish over his decision, he devised a plan to save the city. One morning, just as the rays of the sun struck the tents of the besieging army, he rose from deep meditation and climbed the battlements. With a mighty cry, he flung himself outward and flew over the encampment, swooping over the soldiers, startling their horses and terrorizing the entire army with this impossible feat. They were so shaken that they fled, leaving their tents, their weapons, and their wounded behind.

“Naturally, the people of the city were ecstatic and greeted the monk as a hero. However, devoted monk that he was, he bowed his head and returned on foot to the monastery. On the entrance steps stood the master, a look of deep sorrow on his face. The master said, ‘You have broken your most sacred vows. You may never again enter this or any other monastery. You are banished from this city and this order forever.’ Without a word, the monk turned and walked out through the gates, to disappear into the mountains.”

“Yes,” Jared said impatiently, “I know the story. It is famous, and rich with implications. So?”

Ransho broke in. “Yes, it is a fine teaching story. Even more important is that it is also true. That monk vanished into the mountains—into *these* mountains—where he founded this monastery and this order.”

“Ridiculous,” Jared scoffed. “No one has mastered the power of flight. It is a human fantasy doomed to remain unfulfilled.”

“An accurate, if pedantic, statement,” Chungpa replied lightly. “No human body flies. But there are powers more awesome than flight.”

“Such as?”

Ransho sighed. "Perhaps our assessment of you was incorrect. You seem determined to miss the point. Our founder devoted the rest of his life to the understanding and development of the extraordinary powers of nature—both human and otherwise. The risks—physical, psychological and spiritual—were enormous, and many would count him misguided and a fool. If so, all of us here are fools as well."

"A certainty," Chungpa chimed in. "But as the Americans would say, he was my kind of fool."

There was a long silence, all three staring into the fire. Jared assessed his position, concluding that Chungpa and Ransho had sufficient knowledge about his people to make further pretense about his identity pointless. Still, he thought it equally clear that they knew little about the true dimensions of hunter power and nature. He would not be lured into revealing too much, tempting as it was to be in the presence of beings of intelligence who knew him for what he was—even in their limited way—and responded with neither fear, revulsion, nor hatred. Tempting, too, to talk about his journey with someone who just might have a glimmer of understanding. He knew full well that such sentimentality could be dangerous, even fatal. But his curiosity was aroused. If absolutely necessary, he could kill them. In the meantime, he would explore this opportunity.

"So," Jared said, "I have stumbled upon a band of renegade monks, hiding among the most remote peaks of the Himalayas, protected by 'conspiring elements', and cultivating as a discipline the powers forbidden by every Buddhist tradition."

"Exactly," beamed Chungpa.

"What, then, am I to you? A model for the development of even greater powers? An opponent against which to test your strength? Or merely an oddity, a freak to examine until your curiosity is satisfied?"

Chungpa shook his head. "No, none of those, although they all contain elements of truth. We do hope to learn from you, and not just your power, but also your spirit. You are certainly a curiosity of the highest magnitude. And you are also a test, a test of our beliefs." He took a step toward Jared, his voice whisper soft. "You see, renegades though we are, we are still devoted to the respect of all

sentient beings. Knowing what you are, and how you live, presents the most profound challenge to that precept.”

“Let us sharpen that challenge, shall we?” Jared answered harshly. “Soon, I must feed. I have intended to leave here before then, to obey some ill-formed ethic that requires that I not slaughter my hosts or those I believe to be far along the path of spiritual development. But the truth is that I do not always obey that injunction. What if I were to take one of your apprentices? Or one of you?”

“We have, of course, considered this possibility,” Ransho answered calmly. “We desire your extinction no more than that of the snow leopard who stalks these mountain valleys. We want the leopard to live.”

“The snow leopard does not prey on humans,” Jared replied flatly.

Ransho took a step forward, her face almost touching the cloth on Jared’s chest, and looked up into his face. “We know how you must live,” she said quietly. “We do not ask you to change your nature.” Her eyes narrowed and she smiled thinly. “What is your nature to us,” she asked, her voice rising, “more than a vehicle for the inevitable? Although we do not fear death as most people do, neither are we eager for it. Our apprentices, as you call them, are also our friends. We feel their absence when they pass. As for us,” she nodded at Chungpa, “we are both within hailing distance of the veil already. I can almost reach out and touch it.” Her eyes became opaque, as though she were in a trance, then abruptly regained their sharpness. “We hope you will not kill any of us. We have, in fact, a proposition for you.”

Jared crossed his arms on his broad chest and stared down at her. “What proposition?”

“First,” Ransho replied, looking at the fire, “we need more information. Han and the woman stayed only briefly, and did not take any of our lives. They would not tell us much, understandably, but we concluded that it is not absolutely necessary that you kill when you feed.”

Jared suddenly realized that he had forgotten Chungpa for a moment, so still was he on the stone. The old monk was studying

him with a curious gravity—as if waiting to discover something. Jared smiled. “Clever, Old Ones, but you will learn only what I want you to learn.”

Ransho met his eyes, and shook her head. “No, friend. You are very powerful, and very well controlled. Probably you can kill us. But you cannot prevent us from learning.” She looked away again. “We also concluded that, when you feed, you somehow contact not only the body, but also the mind and spirit of your prey. If you could confirm these observations, it would be of great use to us and, we hope, to you.”

Jared felt a hollowness in his chest, an ache that urged him to tell Ransho the truth. He dismissed it as foolishness. Telling them would only increase the chance that he would have to kill them in the end. But the urge was strong. His loneliness, and their openness, tempted him to candor. Yet outwardly, he remained unbending. “I fail to see how this exchange would benefit either of us. It would satisfy some of your curiosity, briefly, but ultimately would merely whet it. I see no advantage at all for myself. I assure you, I would not intentionally impart to you any knowledge that might give you power over me, and if I suspected that I had, I would kill you immediately, no matter how interesting or leathery I find you. You are better off not knowing the answers to your speculations.”

“I understand your hesitation,” Ransho said, her voice weighted with both assurance and urgency. “Nevertheless, I must know if you can feed without killing.”

Jared looked at her stonily, even as the hunger stirred deep in his body. Ransho’s request violated the unspoken law never to reveal hunter secrets to a human. But if his kind were on the edge of extinction, he was truly alone; he was law, and lawbreaker, and judge. He lowered his arms to his sides. “The moment of contact with a human spirit is beyond description. If only you could know it.”

Ransho glanced at Chungpa and smiled. “We do,” she said.

Jared sighed. “It is not always necessary for me to kill when I feed.”

Ransho held his eyes with her own. “Thank you.”

Chungpa stepped toward them, gliding silently over the rocks until he stood next to Ransho, inches from Jared’s chest. “We want

you to stay with us for a time. We have much to learn from you, and much to teach. And we believe that together we may create an opportunity for something truly miraculous to occur."

"Impossible!" Jared exclaimed, making no attempt to hide his shock. "In two days I must feed. Already I can feel the hunger. Would you have me go on hunts in the village below, then come and discuss philosophy and spirituality with you?"

Chungpa's face was grave. "If there were no other way, we would accept even that. But, no. We shall feed you. Ransho and I, and as many of our monks as are required. We shall be your banquet."

Jared stared at him, awestruck.

Chungpa raised his arms, his eyes fixed on Jared's, his face looming impossibly close. The loose sleeves of his robe fell away, his slender brown forearms lay exposed. Their heat, their strong, slow pulse, the salt, sweat, and sinew, at once acrid and sweet, assaulted Jared's tingling senses. "This cannot be," he murmured.

Jared's eyes fluttered closed but he forced them open wide and searched Chungpa's face. The old man's mouth was soft, his eyes clear, luminous, and boundlessly deep. He raised his left arm higher, stroking Jared's cheek with the soft flesh of his inner wrist. Jared stood frozen as he fought to remain calm, to seize a moment to think, to stave off his sense that there was something dangerous, something terrible and deadly at work here. Jared felt naked and weak, his will fought against this insult to his self-control. But here was Chungpa's face, so close, and his wrist, the skin a diaphanous membrane through which his pulse hammered on Jared's jawbone like a drum, slow and urgent, a pulse like none Jared had ever felt. His whole body resounded in reply. The strange light in the old monk's eyes set Jared's emotions whirling, and he was suffused with a softness, a sense of welcome such as he not experienced since Han's disappearance. He felt ravenous hunger, and he felt afraid.

His eyes never leaving Jared's, Chungpa continued his gentle, insistent stroking. Closing his eyes, Jared surrendered to Chungpa's caress, felt the smooth flesh like silk against his face. He bowed his head, slid his lips up the length of the forearm and down again to the wrist. The heat broke over him, waves driven by the steady, relentless pulse. Slowly, he parted his lips and nestled his mouth in

the hollow at the base of Chungpa's hand. With a low moan, he unsheathed his fangs, locked himself to Chungpa, and began to drink.

The blood burst into Jared's mouth, setting his senses on fire, alive with light and heat and strange tones, like a cacophony of bells. All thought was swept away, all awareness of his surroundings obliterated by the intensity of the life pouring through him. He absorbed it hungrily, the pace of his feasting guided by the unremitting pulse.

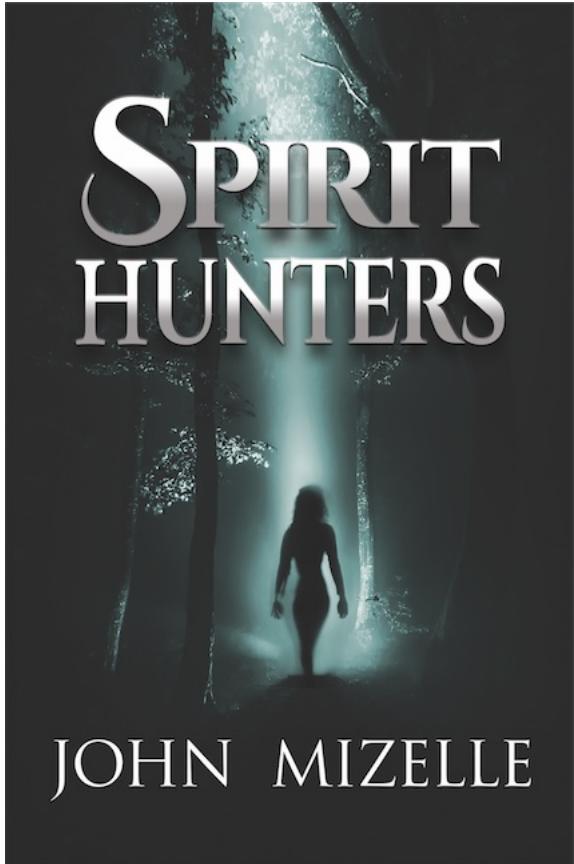
After a time he could not measure Jared regained himself, his consciousness rising out of the flood as though from a powerful drug or an insistent dream. Woozy, alarmed, he tore his mouth from Chungpa's wrist, lifted the old man off his feet and held him at arm's length. Chungpa returned his stare steadily, his eyes smiling.

Jared set the Old One down and scanned himself, gathering his thoughts, studying the effects of this extraordinary blood on his body. Still in shock, it took him a moment to understand what it was that was so remarkable. The experience of being joined to the life force of a human, though intense, was not new. It was, in fact, the *sine qua non* of his existence, the unbearable, ineluctable consummation of his need to feed, the reason that, at times, he *must* kill, for only at the moment of his victim's death did that soul-tearing vitality, the rush of untethered consciousness, fill him to bursting.

Until now.

He looked from Chungpa to Ransho, who stood just behind Chungpa's shoulder like a shadow or a spirit. Slowly, Jared dabbed a drop of blood from his lip with a finger, held it before his eyes as it seeped over his fingertip, darkening as it dried. *Awake! These beings are awake down to the cells of their blood!* Even as he looked into Chungpa's smiling eyes, Jared felt the old man's soul coursing inside him. Jared stared again at his finger and saw, for the first time in memory, that his hand trembled.

Chungpa stepped closer to him, placed one hand on Jared's shoulder, the other lightly over Jared's still-outstretched hand. "Come," he said quietly, "you must take a little more. You will need your strength."



Vampires are our kin. To live, they must drink the essence that quickens human blood. They are dying out. Their only hope lies in dangerous, enticing intimacy with their only prey, as they reach across the chasm at the confluence of body and spirit, life and death, fear and love.

SPIRIT HUNTERS

by John Mizelle

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