

# Chapter 5

## TELLURICS DOWN THE AISLE

**Y**OU DON'T HAVE to be religious to feel outrage at a toupéed televangelist, and you don't have to start your every day with *Real Astrology* to feel cheapened by the hard sell of a Psychic Fair.

Marion's booth was E-14, halfway down a row of cubicles erected out of interlocking panels. The exhibitors had tried to make each space unique, but no amount of beaded hangings, spider plants or psychic iconography could hide the cube-farm uniformity.

"I'm lucky to have this spot," Marion opined breezily. "The woman selling crystals in the booth next door came over yesterday. She said she'd dangled carbuncles or some such over the floor plan and discovered tellurics running up and down the aisle."

"Oh, dear. Should we call housekeeping? Have them lift the carpet and lay down arsenic or something?"

Marion made a sour face.

"I didn't even know telluric was a noun."

"It's not. And will the friendly crystallographer be dropping by today?"

"I doubt it. The Sundays of these things are bedlam. A real zoo."

As if to underline, a female voice came over the PA: *Exhibitors, please note—doors will be opening in twenty minutes.*

"That should give us time for coffee," Marion said. "Why don't you scrounge some up?"

“Where?”

“Left at the end of this row, then right at the big aisle. Take another right past that silly eye-in-palm thing they’ve got hanging from the ceiling and follow the signs for the Food Court. There’s a coven of Wiccans just before you get to it, who, thank God, don’t look down their ash-staves at the humble java.”

“Wiccans? What are they doing here?”

“Olde English Magick Herbes.”

I followed her directions, checking out the food court afterwards. Hare Krishnas, a contingent from the Scientologists and some health food stores were selling smart drinks, herbal teas, and legume-heavy snacks. Not a stitch of meat in sight, leading me to wonder if the enzymes in a cow’s digestive system are believed to kill some psychic property of the grass they so deliciously convert to protein. The chanting, crunchy granola, and Test-Your-IQ sets seemed to sum up the Fair—show interest in anything alternative and you had to buy the whole shebang. Were this a Holistic Wellness Fair, no doubt it would be fortune-tellers steaming tofu dogs and frying soy burgers.

Heading back to Marion’s, I got accosted by a brunette carrying a stack of open boxes. The top one held what looked like cycling helmets sprouting wires. The lettering outside read *Interstate Industries Hemi-Sync*. For some reason, the girl mistook me for a Convention Centre employee and started complaining about an electrical problem. Apparently, theta-wave generators in the booth adjoining hers ...

I said I’d look into it.

Marion’s setup was simple—austere, even—compared to some of the other displays. She’d arranged a Tarot gallery from her flat on the dividers. Pin spots overhead lent highlights to the gilt Rococo frames and eighteenth-century Venetian cards. Two chrome and blue twill stacking chairs faced each other across an oblong table with its short edge up against the rear divider. A shaded lamp, a briefcase and a cash box rested on the tablecloth of plain maroon.

In the aisle she’d fanned out glossy leaflets on a pedestal. A

wooden easel held a slot board marked in twenty-minute segments. People were invited to sign up and choose a time. Cost per reading: forty dollars.

“Let’s dispense with this, shall we?” Marion said, hoisting the slot board off its easel. “You can chat up passers by and arrange for readings.”

“You want me scheduling appointments? What comes next? Dictation? Typing letters? Shopping for your wife? You’ve already got me fetching coffee.”

She ignored the crack.

“I don’t like this system anyway. Half the time, people don’t show up. And it has a kind of critical mass. The right number of names drums up business but too many just scares people off.”

“Do you want it out in the car?”

“Have your coffee first. The hordes won’t filter back here right away.”

She collapsed the easel, then popped her briefcase and took out a fraying copy of the astrological ephemeris.

I picked a leaflet off the pedestal. The colour photo was a few years out of date. The copy, without boasting, made Ms. Harper out to be sympatico and highly skilled. Change a few words here and there and it could have been a flier for piano lessons.

*Marion, the working psychic.*

I watched her smooth the tablecloth and check the bottoms of her framed Tarot for straightness.

“I hope those are insured,” I offered.

She eyed a Knight of Cups and made a small adjustment.

“They are.”

*Exhibitors, please note—doors will be opening in five minutes.*

I drained my coffee and hefted up the easel.

“Wait. You’ll need my keys.”

“Right.”

Head still cocked before the errant knight, she dug them from her skirt and passed them over.

The entrance to the Fair was dominated by a stage. It had been

empty when we first came in, but a squeal of feedback from the Klipschorns either side drew my attention as I headed out. Carpeted in undertaker red, the platform held a conference table draped in midnight blue, with throne-like chairs lined up behind. A microphone and jug of water sat in front of each of the five places. Against a spread of sequined drapes, a purple sign with symbols of the Zodiac around the border proclaimed in spangly letters *Jena's Psychic Nexus*. A minuscule, turbaned woman in outlandish lamé garb was dressing down a roadie near the speakers.

"Good company you keep," I said to Marion when I returned from playing gopher.

She looked pointedly around.

"Jena," I clarified. "Everybody's favourite late-night TV empress. You didn't tell me she'd be here."

"You should get your eyes checked. It's been plastered round the city for a month. She's our star attraction. Without her, the rest of us might just as well pack up our psychic shingles and go home."

"I hope that doesn't mean you think she's any good."

"Relax. She's a tawdry little bitch who's just this side of criminally cuckoo, but she draws 'em in. Now, help me with this table. I want to angle it so you can scoot in beside me without it looking like I'm blocking you against the wall."

"You want me sitting next to you? While you're giving readings?"

"You can stand discreetly elsewhere when I'm actually with someone."

"Discreetly?"

"Flash those eyes of yours into the aisle. It's bound to drum up business."

"I thought you didn't want a hunk."

*Exhibitors, please note—doors are now opening.*

The chirpy female voice became a routine interruption once the Fair kicked into gear. *Visitors, don't miss the demonstration of Kirilian self-photography taking place in booth D-7... For a short time only, Madawaallabu Press is offering free mandala posters...*

*Sign up for life readings at Madame Glinska's display beside the centre stage... Any moment, I expected: Shoppers, we direct you to the blue light special in lady's lingerie...*

"You have to pay for those announcements," Marion informed me. "Like everything else—the pin spots, this table, that chair you're sitting on..."

"I hope it's worth it."

"My fee for readings covers it. I'm never out of pocket at the end."

"And it nets you clients?"

"Half my regulars first showed up at one of these shindigs."

In between announcements, New-Age Muzak floated in the air, heavy on the Pan flutes, overlaid with ambiance provided by the sibilance of synthesized sea sounds.

It took fifteen minutes for the curious to find our tellurically-favoured aisle. Meantime, we had a good view of two other displays. One sold dream catchers, dangling from rails like so many fragile snowshoes. The other, draped in Virgin Mary blue, offered the services of Megan Starchild, chiromancer.

"Chiromancer?" I asked Marion.

"I'm not sure. Either she divines the future from the spines of fresh-killed poultry, or cracks your back and listens for the echoes of past lives."

Marion's first client started off by studying the dream catchers.

"Him," I said to Marion.

She inspected the trim, khakied buttocks and polished loafers.

"Why?"

"Why he wants a reading or why I know he's coming over?"

"Both if you're that good."

"He's faking interest in those dream catchers. Watch his head. It makes a circle every time he looks at one. Those things are round, small enough to scan with just your eyes, but if you felt observed and wanted to convince your watchers you were studying them closely, you'd exaggerate the movement of your eyes to the point your whole head got involved. He's putting on a show and we're the

audience.”

“Or he could just be killing time.”

“That nattily turned out, this early in the morning, in a backwater aisle at a psychic fair?”

And why the cock-proud shoulders screaming, *I got laid last night*, and the nearly visible electric tingle in his skin?

“Plus, he’s positioned himself in front of the mirror at the back of the display. The sight line’s over here.”

“So what’s he want?”

“You tell me. You’re supposed to be the fortune teller.”

“Humour me.”

“He’s the perfect son of a perfectly rich father, decent, not spoiled, practical, and with a good head for business. He’s not prone to questioning, and so far, life’s surprises have been small. But recently he met a girl so spellbinding he’s paralysed with wonder. He thinks it’s Destiny, but like the clever little suit he is when not decked out in Gap, he wants some guarantees. What better place to get them than a fortune teller? He’s so besotted with this girl he’s convinced himself that seeking psychic help is normal. Required, even. The Psychic Fair just now, just here, a few blocks from his million-dollar condo, tell him something strange and magical is taking place.”

Marion rolled her eyes.

“How romantic. Or was that the wolf of cynicism dressed in Hallmark sheepskin?”

“Find out for yourself when he comes over. Which, if I read the itch in his Florsheim’s aright, he’s about to do.”

“Some shtick you’ve got, spotting athlete’s foot at twenty paces.”

“It’s a gift. What can I say?”

I stood and eased myself past Marion’s chair just as Mr. Dream Catcher turned around. Retro Clark Kent glasses topped a boyish snub nose.

“Her name is Marcy, by the way,” I said to Marion. “Or Mary, or Macy. Something like that. And charge him extra. He won’t become a regular.”



“How do you do that?”

Marion was gathering up cards from a reading with a woman with concerns about some business choices.

“Practise.”

“I didn’t ask how to get to Carnegie Hall,” she retorted. “You knew that woman was in publishing, *and* that her little press was going down the tubes. How?”

“Would you believe I chatted her up? While you were busy with that ageing hippy.”

Her nose wrinkled. The ponytailed scarecrow had smelled as if he hadn’t bathed in years.

“What about that funny little man you knew was in the mob? *In olive oil?* Give me a break.”

“We live in Little Italy, remember? Some of those types at Gato Nero are for real.”

“You *know* him?”

Before I could answer, a broad-beamed, sensible-looking woman entered Marion’s booth. Few would have guessed she was beside herself with worry over the emotional health of her Great Dane.

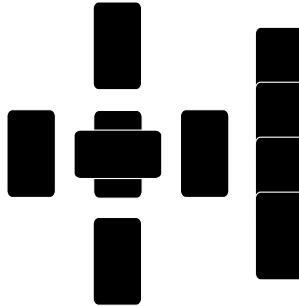
“I’m not asking you to part with secrets,” Marion persisted twenty minutes later, having given reassurances that Telmah—Hamlet backwards—would pull out of his depression, while planting doubts that Louise, the woman’s Corgi, might be headed for a sickly spell, “but I wouldn’t mind the skinny on a couple of your tricks.”

“I notice things.”

“And I don’t? I’ve been telling fortunes since before you sprouted pimples, but you take the cake. How do you do it? I’d really like to know.”

*I’d really like to know.* It had the same ring as when earlier that week she’d said *I’m worried about you.* Something was up with Marion. The map of her I carried in my head remained unchanged, but the hues were growing warmer like a colour-tinted black and white.

“There’s no special trick. I read people like you read Tarot. I know enough about the cards to recognize you use the Celtic Cross—two cards superposed at right angles with four cards placed above, below, left and right to form the rough shape of a cross. Beside you lay out four cards in a column.



“The cross, read up from the bottom, represents the id, the ego and the superego. From left to right it represents the past, the present and the future. The two crossed cards themselves—the ego and the present—form the heart of an enquiry. The four cards on the right give added insight into character.

“Each card has a range of attributes whose meaning in a spread can only be decided by its placement in the whole. It’s way too much for logic, so fortune tellers make up stories based on information weaselled from their clients. If they’re good at it, their stories make a tenable prediction.”

“There’s more to it than Colonel Mustard in the kitchen with a candlestick, you know. I thought you didn’t use cards or paraphernalia.”

“I don’t. Sorry—have I trod on professional toes?”

“You could wear your learning a little more lightly.”

We broke off for a lovebird couple on the cusp of nuptials. Both were hugely overweight and thought they’d found true bliss when all they’d done was settle for a shared unhappiness. I listened in with half an ear while Marion convinced them Fate, not common sense, was urging them to think before they lumbered down the aisle.

“The point I want to make,” I said when there was room to



move again, “is the ‘how I do it’ is the same as you, except instead of cards my spread is everything I note about a person. A woman’s brooch could be the Nine of Wands. Her perfume the Tower Reversed. The way she asks a question the Eight of Pentacles. Her choice of Clairol like the Page of Cups. I form a mental image, a sort of map, then figure out a story that explains the separate parts.”

“Guesswork, in other words. Like the rest of us.”

“*Informed* guesswork. I’ll admit my powers of observation are a little above average. Something I acquired in a former life.”

“Oh?”

A troupe of seniors dressed in sweatshirts reading “Woolwich Golden Age Centre” was shuffling in the aisle, egging each other on like schoolkids on a dare.

“You handle this,” I said. “They’re here on a lark—as if that isn’t obvious. Is it okay if I beg off for a while? It’s nearly noon.” I rubbed my stomach. “Gotta feed the beast.”

“Take your time. I don’t need lunch. And I know you’re dying to check out the other booths.”

She grinned nastily.

“Pity you’re not telepathic,” I responded. “That blue-rinse flock out there prevents my uttering the epithet that springs to mind.”

I got out of my chair for the hundredth time.

“Maybe you can catch the show,” she added, squaring off her cards. “From what I heard yesterday, it’s a hoot.”

Behind the seniors, still debating who’d be first to have the small remainder of their futures read, I bumped shoulders—arms, actually—with a short, hugely-muscled man whose biceps would be thighs on any normal human being. Probably a Woolwich Centre orderly. My *Sorry* got a look at first annoyed, then curious. I felt him staring as I walked away.

I wandered over to the food court and ordered dahl, biryani and raita from the Hare Krishnas. It wasn’t half bad, though I’d have preferred a hamburger and fries. I slipped a twenty in their poor box. An orange-robed acolyte took notice and blessed me in the name of Lord Krishna.

Marion had said I should take my time getting back and, truth was, the Fair did have a certain road-accident fascination. It was easy to see why it needed the fluorescent hell of the Convention Centre to contain it. Aisle after aisle of astrologers, channellers, palmists, spiritualists, life readers, graphologists, aura healers and medicine women—none of whom looked even vaguely aboriginal.

Unlike Marion, most didn't charge, but money could be spent, and was, on hand-drawn Tarot decks, posters of the Zodiac, charts for palmistry and iridology, varnished yarrow stalks and bronze coins (Real Authentic Reproductions!) for consulting the *I Ching*, herb-filled pillows, sage and cedar smudges, and crystals, crystals, crystals.

Slickest were the high-tech booths promoting user-friendly mantic software, gizmos to enhance a person's psychic energy, and gadgets to induce a state of lucid dreaming—the wired cycling helmets I'd seen earlier.

Seminars were scattered around the perimeter, curtained off in makeshift auditoria. I looked in on one: *Psychism in the New Age*. The audience was mostly camouflage fatigues and shaven heads. When the speaker mentioned Hyperboreans—Nietschze's supermen, the mythic basis of the Aryan obsession—I caught on why.

I found the Wiccans once again and sipped their brew outside a nearby booth whose glitzy poster and brochures belonged inside a travel agency. Cassandra Island, I discovered, flipping through the slickly typeset pages, offered psychics a professional retreat in the mystic wilds of northern Ontario "...for learning, growth, and healing." The scenery looked gorgeous—if you like rocks and trees, rocks and trees—and the cedar cottages quaint in a flawless, Disney sort of way. Big money backed the operation—proof, if it were needed, that the psychic biz was booming.

It's not often I get startled, but someone's fingers touched my elbow and I jerked, sloshing coffee down my jeans.

"Oh, jeez. David. I'm so sorry. I thought you knew I was behind you."

*Now how would I know that?* I thought crossly as Kirin

Neemes rooted in her shoulder bag and handed me a wad of Kleenex.

“No harm done,” I said, daubing the results of having someone think you’re psychic from my legs.

“God, I feel like such an idiot. I was so sure it had to be you.” She interrupted herself to deposit soggy Kleenex in a garbage pail at the back of the Cassandra Island booth. “It’s just that I’ve had this feeling all day someone was watching me. No, that sounds funny. Kinda paranoid. What I mean is, someone was, you know, *aware* of me. When I saw you there . . . ”

Dressed as she was in hip-huggers and a pale blue pullover, every heterosexual male in the place would have been aware of her.

“. . . you thought it must be me.”

“Well, yes.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

We had an awkward moment. The psychic game demands a master/supplicant relationship that falls apart outside a psychic’s carefully controlled environment. I should have realized I might run into someone at the Fair and had gambits at the ready for the start and rapid close of any conversation.

“Are you here with someone?” Kirin asked, falling on convention.

“I’m helping out a friend. My next door neighbour, in fact. Marion Harper. She’s in E-14.”

“Your next-door neighbour? What does she do?”

“The usual. Cards, palms, birth charts. She’s very good at it,” I added, defending Marion from my own faint praise.

“And she lives next door? Did you arrange that?”

“Coincidence.”

Overhead, the New-Age Muzak cut out.

*In five minutes, we have the pleasure of presenting the star of this year’s Fair, renowned TV personality, Jena, and her Psychic Nexus. If you have questions about love, money, health . . .*

“Have you ever seen her?” Kirin asked.

“Only on TV, when I’m having trouble sleeping.”

“What do you think? Is she for real?”

“Marion suggested I might enjoy the show,” I hedged.

Kirin made a face.

“It’s okay. I think she’s awful, too. But I want to have a look. Will you come with me?” Sensing I was waffling she added: “Don’t be a scaredy-cat. It’s not a come-on. You told me you were gay. I’m a model. Believe me, I know what that means. Please?”



Kirin studied a Cassandra Island leaflet while we waited for the show to start. I took in the set up. A microphone and cordons were arranged ground level centre-stage. A camera pointed at them while another targeted the audience. A third was aimed toward the stage. Bigscreen monitors on either side displayed the purple Jena logo.

I looked around for Jena’s aides—her eavesdroppers and pick-pockets—but couldn’t make them out. Crowds bring on a kind of sensory overload, the way the brightly coloured boxes in a supermarket blind me to the one I really want.

A throb of kettledrums began to issue from the Klipschorns, followed by a fanfare that moved quickly into Jena’s chorus-of-angelic-voices theme. The music faded and a disembodied carney-barker’s voice spied the crowd into applause.

Five women filed on stage and took their places at the table: Jena in the middle, dark and swathed in gold; her Nexus—blond, white-robed and hatchet-faced—on either side.

Kirin nudged me.

“Do you think she’ll have one of her fits today?”

“We should be so lucky.”

“I saw it happen once. It was horrible. I couldn’t watch.”

“Really? A woman chewing Alka-Seltzer, rolling back her eyes and gargling like Regan in *The Exorcist*? Great stuff, if you ask me.”

“God, you’re such a cynic.”

“No, cynical is having *grand mal* seizures on demand.”

Jena settled quickly into patter she'd honed nightly at the outer limits of the thousand-channel universe.

"*Hel-lo*, Toronto. I'm feeling energy up here. *Goo-ood* energy. This city be an awesome place. The cards are cracklin'. Omru's here, burstin' with the love. He wants to talk. He's strong today. *So-oo* strong. You feel it, girls?"

Not one of her white-robed assistants could be called a girl—not by a long shot—but they nodded anyway with varying degrees of mystery, sagacity and smugness. Jena carried on in her bizarre accent—bad Jamaican with a touch of Cockney pasted onto flat, New Jersey vowels.

"Omru is me spirit guide. You heard about Omru? You watch my show? You know he's good. He talks to me because he loves you. He talks to me through the cards. In the place where Omru lives, there is no past. There is no future. There are no secrets. All is one. If you got trouble in your heart, you got problems, you got questions—ask. The answer's in the cards. The answer rests with Omru."

The floor mike near the stage had already grown an eager queue, marshaled by a redhead with a buzz-cut and a fussy chinstrap beard. A purple sweatshirt bearing Jena's logo hung from broad, clothes-horse shoulders.

*Actor-singer-dancer-model fag*, I thought unkindly. *Show-biz wannabe*.

"Hi, hon—what's your name?" Jena asked the first rube he let through the cordons. The big screens showed an average guy who almost certainly drank beer, played eighteen holes on Saturdays and had a union job. "No, let me see if I can get it." She put a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. "Mike? Is that it?"

"It's Mark."

Jena beamed.

"Was I close?" she asked her cohorts. "Tell me, was I close? I'm tellin' you, this place is good. Can you feel it? Can you feel the power?"

Murmurs of wise-woman agreement from either side of her.

“So, hon, what’s troublin’ you? ’Cause I can see you got a problem. A girl, right? You got love trouble written on your forehead.”

Mark—an apposite name—made to speak but was pre-empted from the stage.

“No. You know what? I change’ my mind. You don’t tell me nothin’. Not a word. I’m gonna crack these cards and deal you a spread. You just listen what I say an’ tell these good folks here if I *know* what’s goin’ on. Can you do that for me, hon?”

As if he had a choice—on camera, before a crowd, bullied from the stage. The big screens cut to Jena deftly dealing out a Tarot spread.

In person, she was good, the way Madonna used to be: not much of an artist but one hell of a performer. Her cold-reading skills were rudimentary—transparent even to the credulous—but through hectoring she managed to inveigle confirmation of her Gift from every mike-bound sucker. If someone balked or didn’t cry *But that’s amazing!* fast enough, she turned toward her Nexus—a toadying Greek chorus wearing wigged-out, Sphinx-like smiles—for approval and accord.

To her credit, she played the information from her aides down in the audience effectively, always reading slightly wide of centre. *Mike* instead of *Mark*. Terribly convincing.

“Tell me about this one, sweetie,” she demanded of a wide-hipped woman wearing tight red Spandex. “This one here.” She pointed to a card. “I’m seeing a man, a big man. Older. Lots of grey hair. And a beard—no, a moustache. I big thick ole moustache. And a mole. No, not a mole. *Somethin’* wrong with the side of his nose. You got some grief with this one. Somethin’s troublin’ you.”

The woman’s jaw dropped.

“Oh my god, it’s my father. Here, look.” She dug inside her shoulder bag and produced a wallet big enough to count as carry-on luggage. Photographs in plastic sleeves cascaded out when she un-snapped it. She held them to the camera. “See? It’s my dad. He has this tumour on his nose. Here—can you see it? The doctors don’t

know if it's malignant or not. He's in the hospital right now. Can you tell me if he's going to be all right?"

The audience had taken to applauding every one of Jena's hits.

"How does she do that?" Kirin asked above the clapping. Her voice sounded odd, as if she'd started half-believing in the sham.

"She's wired under her turban, with plants throughout the audience. Ever hear of Peter Popoff? A faith healer, back in the eighties. Used the same trick. Omru, like God, probably communicates on a frequency of 39.17 megahertz."

She flicked her head as if my answer were irrelevant.

"You're not thinking of going up there, are you?"

Her eyes peered forward with their hard-stare gaze. Her knuckles whitened on her shoulder bag.

"She's going to do it," she murmured to herself. "She's going to do it."

Mid-sentence, Jena faltered. The oiled motor of her patter seized. Her arms went rigid and her fingers splayed across the cards. Her eyes rolled back. Froth leaked from the corners of her mouth. The crowd let out a gasp of titillation. The camera zoomed in tight. Her Nexus, of a body, rose and started uttering encouragement as if she were in labour, not suffering a seizure—which by all accounts she wasn't or their lack of action would be criminally negligent.

Sounds began to issue from her mouth, and it was true what I'd said earlier: she could imitate the Mercedes McCambridge trick of speaking over a half-swallowed raw egg, a strategy the venerable actress used to voice Pazuzu, the Devil in *The Exorcist*.

"*Hear... strong... too... strong... see... hear... too... strong...*"

The gargling continued, raising echoes in my head. The audience around me shimmered, fading to a far off place. For a moment, all there was was Jena's "*strong... too... strong...*" reverberating like a siren song, disgusting or contrived or not.

The charade began to make me sick. A door slammed shut inside me. The audience grew solid. The reverb remained, but coming through the speakers. Jena's nonsense segued into invocations to her

spirit guide, Omru. No doubt about it, though; she'd had me, even if her act belonged with double-headed calves in jars and poultry-eating geeks.

Kirin grabbed my arm. "David..."

I turned to find out what she wanted.

Turned to see her white as linen.

Turned to see her eyelids flutter.

Turned to catch her as she crumpled to the floor.