

Chapter 24

FIELDS OF EMERALD SOD

To: sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca
From: david@ase.ca
Subject: Request for instructions

Josh --

You and Ms. MacKenzie appear to have been right about Cassandra Island.

John Wu Shen knows where Kirin and her daughter are. Safe, he assures me. No further information offered. Shen reveals what he wants when he wants. Probing's useless.

I'm back at the retreat but not for long. Shen's taking me to meet "some people". We're leaving today. He didn't say where, but we're going in my car--at his suggestion. I gather we'll be gone a while. He recommended I clear off my schedule.

Since my last communication, he's been putting me through tests. The goal appears to be determining the nature and extent of my "abilities". Apparently he's satisfied by the results. Enough at least to trust me with the information about Kirin.

I think we can assume the people I'm to meet have been using the retreat the way we talked about, viz planting spotters. The criteria for whom they choose to contact isn't clear. Presumably it's

more than psychic gifts, since Cassandra Island's guests all claim to have them.

I can't help wondering that Roy Calhoun was Kirin's perfect somatype and Shen's a person I was certain to warm up to. It's as if the two were chosen just for us. We may have been investigated. Certainly, Shen knows more about me than can explained any other way.

I'm no expert in these matters but I think the group that you and Ms. MacKenzie have been looking for is closer to a secret order than a cult. The distinction may not be important, but it's worth remembering that Shen is highly-educated, very smart and, as you indicated, rich. If his people are the same, it's possible they have connections--"in high places"--and your attempts to investigate Cassandra Island failed because of that.

How should I proceed? Our means of communication has already proven unreliable. I've taken the precautions you suggested but they're meaningless if wherever Shen is taking me is WiFi-less.

Please get back to me right away. I'm returning to Shen's cottage in a few hours.

--

DA

I sent the email but stayed logged on to ase.ca. I had no idea how Byron would react. Would he read between the lines? Sniff out my ambivalence?

When Mr. Shen had said *Your friend is safe*, I'd instantly and utterly believed him. No one, not even someone claiming he could camouflage the truth from real psychics, could have lied with such sincerity. It was as if he'd let me glimpse the truth, as moments earlier he'd let me see his lie.

The tests he'd had me do—he couldn't have been faking the results. There's only so much misdirection anyone can do. It's one thing to convince a mark that you can read his mind; it's something else to make him think he's reading yours.

No amount of research could have possibly unearthed what Mr. Shen appeared to know. He may have fudged up to a certain point, the kind of verbal trickery that Marion, and sometimes I, resorted to: making generalities specific and the common sound unique. But only Ferko and his colleague, Dr. Behr, knew about the pain around my missing years.

As for the other details—what I saw inside my head, the weakness in resisting group emotions, my paranoia about agencies, the *déjà-vu*—any one of them could, by itself, form part of anyone's experience, but taken all together fit me far too well to be dismissed.

And no matter how I tried, I couldn't reconcile bloated drowning victims like the ones in Ms. MacKenzie's photos with the enigmatic man who whipped up food I loved and wouldn't let me do the dishes afterwards alone. Someone may have pushed three psychics into suicide, someone may have snatched three others, but the self-effacing scholar I'd spent two days with could simply not have been involved.

I had no such feelings about Roy Calhoun. Both men were impossible to read, or, to use Mr. Shen's expression, knew how to camouflage themselves. I only had his word that such a thing was possible. But if it were, what lurked behind Roy's arrogantly masculine facade? I'd sensed a need to dominate that couldn't be ignored.

I hoped Byron wouldn't notice my equivocation. If he did, he'd probably demand I haul my ass back to Toronto lest I ruin what for him, and for his boss, was shaping up to be a coup, the kind careers are made of.

While I waited to see what he'd have to say, I packed my things and took them to the Jag, then paid a visit to reception.

"No problem," Debbie smiled. "Everyone's allowed to change their mind. We'll have to keep your deposit, though."

"I must be starting to look like one of those flighty millionaires they love so much in TV shows."

"I'm afraid Don Metairie has already beaten you to that title. You remember Don? The oil diviner?"

"The lech?"

“That’s the one.” She put a legal form on the counter facing me. “We need your signature to sign off on the deposit. At the bottom here, and here.”

She busied herself at her computer while I signed.

“Mr. Sheffield will be sorry that he didn’t get to see you,” she said, scooping up the form. “But you will be back, won’t you? And wherever you’re going with Mr. Shen, don’t keep him too long.”

“I’ll do my best. Say hi to Tom for me.”

Byron’s reply was waiting when I went back to the cabin to collect my laptop.

To: david@ase.ca
From: sleemans@csis-scrs.gc.ca
Subject: Re: Request for instructions

David --

> You and Ms. MacKenzie appear to have been right
> about Cassandra Island.

Good work.

> John Wu Shen knows where Kirin and her daughter
> are. Safe, he assures me. No further information
> offered. Shen reveals what he wants when he wants.

Or may not know, or isn’t telling the truth.
Consider K at risk until you have confirmation
otherwise.

> I’m back at the retreat but not for long. Shen’s
> taking me to meet “some people”. We’re leaving
> today. He didn’t say where, but we’re going in my
> car

Can you stall? Long enough to have your car
outfitted with a beacon? I could be at or near the
Island by this afternoon.

> Since my last communication, he’s been putting me
> through tests. The goal appears to be determining

> the nature and extent of my "abilities."

See comments further down.

Re: Calhoun and Shen

> We may have been investigated. Certainly, Shen
> knows more about me than can be explained any other
> way.

Disturbing. Your cover may be fooling no one.

> I'm no expert in these matters but I think the
> group that you and Ms. MacKenzie have been looking
> for is closer to a secret order than a cult. The
> distinction may not be important.

From the point of view of national security, no, the distinction isn't important. Both pose similar threats. However tests like you say Shen performed are often used to screen postulants for secret orders.

> How should I proceed? Our means of communication
> has already proven unreliable. I've taken the
> precautions you suggested but they're meaningless
> if wherever Shen is taking me is WiFi-less.

What you're doing remains unofficial. Subira put in a request to re-open the Cassandra Island file but was refused. Her stock's still down after the last reports you sent. If you continue, you're entirely on your own unless you find a way to stay in contact via computer.

Subira's angling for you to go along with Shen. Any intelligence you gathered would be invaluable. But since we know nothing about Shen's group, you'd be entering a potentially dangerous situation with virtually no support.

If it weren't for Kirin, personally I'd advise getting the hell out of there. You've done your part, providing us a lead that, with a bit more time, has to convince our superiors to re-activate Cassandra Island. However, as I said, there is

your friend.

It's your call. From our meetings, you strike me as a man more prone to gestures than good sense. But remember--if you go with Shen and are unable to maintain contact, you'll be up the creek without a paddle.

--

JB

Apparently I wasn't the only one with ambivalent feelings. I composed a brief reply—*Leaving from Shen's cottage. No way to contact him from C-I. Stalling not possible*—and logged off.

My open-ended stay at Cassandra Island hadn't lasted very long.



Mr. Shen had packed lightly, just an overnight case and a satchel of books. He spotted my laptop while I was helping him load them in the car.

"Would you mind bringing that inside?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "What for?"

I guess he didn't hear me.

"Just set it on the desk," he directed in the kitchen, rooting through a drawer.

"Should I boot up?"

"No need."

He stood up with a multidriver and apology writ large upon his face.

"I'm afraid I'll have to do a little surgery or ask you not to bring the laptop. The people we'll be meeting need to keep their whereabouts unknown. You'll understand once we arrive."

"The same way Kirin 'understood'?"

His expression sombered.

"Your friend is there by choice, David. Don't for a moment imagine otherwise. Besides," a sly smile replaced the serious look,

“she isn’t working for Canadian Intelligence.”

The ghost of a wink crinkled one eye. He watched me hunt around for words.

“How long have you known?”

“Since your first visit.”

“How?”

He wagged a finger.

“That would be telling. Let’s just say we’re aware of CSIS’ interest in the Island and the reasons for it. It doesn’t trouble us. However where we’re going is a different matter. I’m sorry for the mystery. Really I am. I don’t like to be so unforthcoming.”

“Not so’s I’d noticed. What’s to stop me from disclosing the location when I leave this place you’re taking me?”

“You won’t.”

“Won’t say where I was? Or won’t be leaving?”

His reply was long in coming.

“Certainly the first,” he answered cautiously. “Quite possibly the second. In either case the decision will be yours. You’re in no danger. On the contrary, we’re the ones at risk.”

I waited for an explanation. None came.

“If I walk out right now, what happens?”

“Nothing.”

“Even if I brief CSIS on everything you’ve told me?”

“I imagine you already have.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“It’s a price we have to pay.”

It’s your call. First Byron, now Mr. Shen. Both giving me the option to back out. Both sure I wouldn’t.

“Go ahead,” I said, “butcher away. I’d like to keep the laptop with me.”

I quashed the urge to make up reasons why. With Mr. Shen, simple statements seemed the safer way to go.

He sat down, removed the laptop’s keyboard and made scratching motions on the inside with his screwdriver. *Backups*, my geek-for-hire whispered in my head, *you can never have enough.*

“You’ll have to take this to the shop to get the wireless repaired. Meantime, no other damage done.”

“You know your way around computers?”

“Let’s hope so.” He deftly reassembled it. “Now, your cellphone. If you don’t mind I need it, too.”

I pulled it from my belt, where I’d clipped it to be visible. He flipped it over, popped the battery and slid it in his pocket.

“Well, then, that’s that. Give me a minute to lock up then we’ll be off.”

Right—let’s take a little Sunday jaunt into the perilous unknown, shall we?

Outside I offered him the keys. He waved them off.

“That’s all right. You can drive.”

Why get paranoid about a laptop and a cellphone then sit back and give directions? Shouldn’t I be blindfolded? Drugged? Something so I wouldn’t know where we were going?

We bumped and scraped through trees until we hit the road that hugged Dawe’s Lake. Mr. Shen instructed me to make my way to Paxton, then over to the highway down to Kaladar. Afterwards he settled in his seat and watched the countryside roll by. His only further comments were to compliment the Jaguar’s quiet ride and fine suspension.

At Kaladar, we hung a right, mirroring the route I’d followed coming up.

“At 37,” he instructed, “take a left. It’s the shortest way to 401. Plus we’ll pass through Tweed. There’s a restaurant that does terrific liver if you want to stop. Lots of bacon, tons of onions.”

“How come you know my tastes in food? I thought you said I was—what was the word you used?—opaque.”

“You are.” He waited half a beat. “Almost.”

“Don’t you ever tire of being cryptic?”

“It’s a strain.”

“But there are Very Good Reasons.”

“Indeed. You.”

“Should I feel honoured?”

“In your place, I think irritated might be more appropriate.”

“To be honest I think I’m suffering what Ferko calls a flattening of affect. Not feeling much of anything.”

“Ferko?”

“The psychiatrist I mentioned.”

“Ah.”

His mind was elsewhere. He turned toward the window. There wasn’t much to look at, only rock-strewn hills and birch-and-cedar forest.

“I should be scared shitless,” I essayed a kilometre later.

“Flattening of affect is common among empaths. Without it you’d be terrified of letting go.”

“Letting go of what?”

“Of you. Your ego boundaries. When you read another person, it’s not at all objective. Part of you becomes that other person. The problem is, the ego’s like a jealous watchdog. It sets up quite a racket when it senses an invasion. The only way to silence it is not to care. To lose yourself.”

“Sounds like a one-way ticket to psychopathy.”

“Genius looks like madness, too.”

“You like the genius analogy. You used it yesterday, down by the lake.”

“The similarities are hard to miss. To start with, psychism’s extremely rare. One in many million, at a guess. Statistics are a little hard to gather.”

He went back to staring out the window. We glided up behind a tractor-trailer loaded down with timber. Inching left, I saw the road was clear and pushed the pedal to the floor. Responsive but not vulgar, the Jag slipped into overdrive and ferried us around.

The display of British engineering savvy animated Mr. Shen. He shifted in his seat and, for the first time since we’d left, seemed fully there.

“We have a ways to go,” he said, “which doesn’t mean we have to spend the hours in silence. There are things it cannot hurt for you to know, even if for now you don’t believe them. May I talk a

while?”

“Feel free.”

He made himself more comfortable, sinking deep into the Jaguar’s padded leather.

“True psychism,” he began, “is an innate condition. You’re either born with it or not. It manifests in just four ways: empathy, imprinting, precognition and telepathy. Those other so-called gifts—channelling, remote viewing, telekinesis, what have you—can charitably be summed up as wishful thinking.

“Of the four, empathy and imprinting are the most significant, the yin and yang of psychism. The two are mutually exclusive. No psychic ever has both gifts.

“Empathy, as I explained yesterday, means that you can read emotions, mental images and pre-cognitive volition, as well as seeing what we call the wholeness of a person, up to and including memories.”

“Reading minds, in other words,” I interrupted, trying not to show the trouble I was having buying it. Getting into people’s heads—admittedly something I was good at—was a turn of phrase, not a literal statement.

“Not precisely,” Mr. Shen replied. “Empaths cannot know another person’s thoughts, only sense the mental fields that give rise to them. In *The Hollow Men*, T.S. Eliot wrote: ‘Between the desire and the spasm falls the Shadow.’ In the same way, there’s a gulf between conditions pointing to a thought, and the actual thinking of it. That’s what empaths read—the gulf, the Shadow.

“Imprinting is the opposite of empathy. Those who have the skill are called transmitters. They imprint—transmit—from their own minds the same things that an empath reads—emotions, images, the wholeness of themselves. They cannot imprint thought *per se*, nor bend a person to their will, though it sounds as if they could. They’re more like artists—painters, for example, whose canvases communicate their thought—except transmitters have no need of oil and brushes.”

“Empaths and transmitters experience cognitive, conceptual,

affective and memory functions in a manner largely foreign to the non-psychic mind. They ‘map’ these functions onto mental models, which they then perceive like sculptures visible from all sides simultaneously. Empaths map the things they read from other people’s minds; transmitters map their own minds and imprint selected content.

“The map, or model, can be played with, granting empaths the ability to show a false, or partial, image of themselves to other empaths. For transmitters, it means they can imprint, say, feelings that they aren’t in fact experiencing.”

“In other words,” I interrupted, “empaths can lie to other empaths and transmitters can fake their feelings. Pardon me for saying that hardly sounds earth-shattering enough to warrant muzzling my laptop.”

He carried on unperturbed.

“Do you recall I said psychism *looks* like an extension of faculties everyone possesses, but that it’s more? Here’s an example. It’s one thing to tell lies effectively. It’s quite another to fool a human polygraph. Equally, it’s one thing to manipulate a person’s feelings with a word or gesture; quite another to arouse emotions without any stimulus at all.”

“I can see where that might come in handy. Like getting the cops to wave you past R.I.D.E. checks on New Year’s Eve.”

He laughed. “Your quips are quite a treat, even if they’re prompted by anxiety. Oh, here—your turn is coming up.”

The landscape changed on Hwy. 37 with surprising speed from wilderness to undulating fields and generous old homesteads. Road signs pointed toward little towns with odd, mineral-sounding names like Sulphide and Actinolite.

“You mentioned telepathy,” I said when we grew tired of bucolia. “That sounds a hell of a lot more significant than this empathy-imprinting thing.”

“It does, doesn’t it? The stuff of psychic thrillers. The problem, though, if I may call it such, is that telepathy’s unlike the other forms of psychism. To begin with, it’s unique to twins. Even then,

it's extremely rare. Statistics show that twins account for point-zero-four percent of the world's population. Telepathy between them shows up at an even lower rate, somewhere around one in several tens of thousand sets.

"Furthermore telepathy appears to be restricted to monozygotic—identical—twins. With a single known exception, biovulars, or dizygotics—what most people call fraternal—never develop the ability.

"Primary psychism—empathy and imprinting—demands that subjects be nearby. Not so telepathy, which operates without regard to distance. Up close, telepathic twins communicate with great precision. As distances increase, their telepathy is more like what an empath reads, but the non-proximate psychism still remains anomalous.

"Even more peculiar, telepathic identical twins are never empathic, transmissive or prevoyant, which suggests telepathy is unrelated to psychism in its other forms. It's a puzzle, one we're not likely to solve any time soon."

"We? That would be the people we're going to meet?"

"Primarily. There are others. The Boundary Institute in California, the Engineering Anomalies Research lab at Princeton. And, of course, the granddaddy of them all, the Society for Psychical Research in London. Plus some organizations rather more interested in application than research."

Mr. Shen was back to being slippery. He lapsed into reflective silence. I got the feeling something that he'd said made him uneasy. His description of "true" psychism didn't correspond with anything I'd read, yet he'd spoken as if quoting from a textbook—in itself, not that unusual. By his own admission he enjoyed the act of teaching. But it had me wondering again about the people he was taking me to see. As I'd hinted to Josh Byron, clearly they weren't lacking brains.

The town of Tweed was very much like Paxton: not big enough to sprawl, not small enough to wither. The wide main street housed video stores, Tim Hortons, and the usual fast food franchises.

Nestled in between were shops proclaiming they'd been around since horse and buggy days.

The restaurant that Mr. Shen had spoken of was done in varnished pine with tables big enough for family lunches Sundays after church. Weathered men in baseball caps swilled coffee while the hefty boys across from them dug into plates of fries. It was as if we'd stumbled on a father-son convention.

We ate beside the lettered plate-glass window giving onto main street. Bracketed by Rams and Silverados, the Jaguar, parked out front, looked small and low and out of place.

"A fine car," Mr. Shen observed, polishing off liver every bit as good as what he'd promised. "Lovely ride."

"Do you want to try it out?"

"You must be psychic," he replied, deadpan.

"Very funny. You've been angling for it since we started."

"Am I so transparent?"

"Again, very funny. But since you do know where we're going ..."

"You're sure you don't mind?"

I dug in my pocket and handed him the keys.

He left with take-out coffees while I paid the bill. When I joined him he was in the driver's seat self-consciously adjusting mirrors. Leaving Tweed, he held the wheel like a driving student, but past town on the highway he relaxed and drove one-handed, sipping what turned out to be a weak but bitter brew. Evidently tastes in Java around Tweed were left over from the days of horse and buggy, too.

Despite the caffeine hit, the heavy lunch had made me drowsy. The sun had scooted west and was pooling on my legs. I could feel the engine purring through the floor. Road sound hummed a bourdon in my ears. Mr. Shen, taken with the Jaguar's handling, wasn't saying much. I felt my head sink forward.

"John," I said, jerking upright, "these empaths and transmitters—which are you?"

"I thought that would be obvious. I'm like you."

“So you’re not somehow making me feel—,” I sought for words, couldn’t find them, “—somehow making me *not* feel...”

“No one’s both transmissive and empathic, David.”

“Then how...?”

I lost the thread of what I meant to say. There seemed to be a disconnect between my brain and tongue. I shook my head and I tried again.

“How can I... how can I be doing this?”

Mr. Shen glanced over. “Doing what?”

“Driving. With you. As if nothing’s going on. I should be feeling something... different. I mean, I *am* feeling something different. I know it. I have to be. It’s just that...”

I couldn’t get it out. My mouth felt funny—slack, like it wasn’t quite connected to my face.

“Stimulus, response,” Mr. Shen said.

“Response?” I echoed.

“To what you read from me. In turn, based on—tailored to—what I know from you.”

“But you can’t read me. Or almost can’t. Or something. Didn’t you say...”

I couldn’t find the energy to finish. Something was seriously wrong. My eyes would not stay open. My arms were leaden on the armrests.

“How are you feeling, David?”

His voice came from a distance. A thrill of fear pinged in my stomach, rose, spread and died as if it didn’t matter. My head fell back. My mouth dropped open. I didn’t have the strength to close it.

“Wha’—?” I managed to get out.

“... *sedative, David... understand... tomorrow...*”

Nothing.



I woke up on my back. Sheets were tickling my chin. I could have

pulled them down but my arm was too damn comfy where it was. I stretched instead, a long, deep, shuddering stretch as satisfying as a two-hour massage.

My foot struck something solid. That was odd—my bed didn't have a footboard.

Hold on—I wasn't in my bed. I was at Mr. Shen's cottage.

No, I'd gone back to the retreat.

In the past I'd woken lots of times not knowing where I was. The confusion always went away after a few seconds.

I pushed against the footboard.

No bed I'd slept in recently had had a footboard.

Right—I'd been driving with Mr. Shen...

My eyes flew open.

It was daytime though the light inside the room was dim. To my left, flowered drapes glowed orange at the edges like a hand over a flashlight. Above me in a circle of worked plaster was a chandelier with five bronze arms and frosted tulip shades. The walls were sagey green and wainscotted in white. The door was white as well and fitted with a tarnished knob and fingerplate. Beside it was a dresser with a mirror in a swivel frame, a pitcher and a washbasin. A rocking chair and reading lamp were tucked into one corner. My laptop lay beside them. In the corner parallel, a pine armoire.

I turned my head. The pillow, obviously feather, molded to my face. I stared at the armoire until the pine knots went all blurry.

The air smelled baked and dusty with a strangely pleasant undertone of cow manure. I wondered what would happen if I tried to stand. The lead weight in my limbs felt like the aftermath of sleep, not the side-effect of something likely to cause dizziness. I nearly closed my eyes and dozed again.

Finally I pushed the bedsheet down and swung my legs over the edge. My bare feet landed on a braided rug. Someone had removed my shoes and socks but that was all. My suitcase, open by the dresser, had been emptied.

I tilted my head back and lowered it slowly. Things didn't start to spin so I stood and padded to the door. The knob turned but it

wouldn't open. I pulled a little harder. It didn't budge. It crossed my mind to bang and shout. Neither made it into action. Whatever Mr. Shen had slipped me was still dampening the panic reflex.

I went over to the window and pulled back the flowered drapes. Daylight flooded in and struck the dresser mirror. I glanced away to let my eyes adjust, then squinted out.

Dew was glinting on the lawn outside. Grass still rimed with silver formed a circle in the shade beneath a weeping willow. Through the trailing branches I could see a narrow road. Purple teasels spiked above the pampas grass and cattails in the ditch. Post and wire fences marked off fields of emerald sod. The cloudless sky was pale, as if filtered through a haze of motes kicked up by farmers' ploughs.

I knew this countryside. I knew it from my dreams. I knew it from my memories. I knew it from my journeys to a church across the highway from an empty, weed-choked lot.

Footsteps reached me from the hall outside. Someone fumbled at the door. Any less enchanted I'd have turned to face my keeper. Instead I kept on staring. The fumbling continued, followed by the crack of wood detaching from a swollen frame.

"Ah, so you *are* up," said a voice behind me. "They thought you would be. Lovely morning, isn't it? Did you try the door? Damn thing always sticks this time of year."

I turned around.

"*Marion?*"

My next door neighbour, drinking pal and sparring partner for the past two years was standing in the threshold with a breakfast tray.

"David—welcome home."