

Chapter 28

GRINNING MASTER PO

KIRIN BEGGED OFF supper in the kitchen on the grounds she'd promised Carlin pizza earlier.

"Besides," she added, "you still have issues with Roy. I'm pretty sure you don't want to have to deal with that right now."

Too bad. I could have used her company; Luke wasn't present, nor was Dr. Colton, nor was Mr. Shen.

"Dr. C normally takes meals in his study," Cook informed me when I asked about the absences, "so you wouldn't see him anyway. But tonight it just so happens all three of them are off on farm business. They won't be back till late."

Supper was like lunch the day before. Conversation swung from Blue Jays baseball to provincial politics. Good with names—perfect, in fact—I had to memorize this group. Franklin. Jay. Tasha. Dom. Jameela.

Dom—short for Dominique, a Québécoise in her late fifties—became the second person I got introduced to with the words, *You won't remember, but...* She sat at the far end of the table.

Afterwards I lugged Blavatsky to the library and picked out something zippier—*Stranger In a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein—from the shelf of science fiction paperbacks. My name was neatly pencilled on the inside cover. The escapades of Valentine Michael Smith, human raised by Martians, kept me occupied until I

fell asleep near ten.

Early to bed, early to rise...

Byron had replied when I checked my email in the morning.

To: david@ase.ca
From: sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca
Subject: Re: Shen's people

David --

The Cassandra Island file has been re-activated. Subira's in good odour with our higher ups. Trust me--that's the way you want it. Don't piss her off again.

I've gone over what you sent and don't like the way it's adding up. Re-ordering a bit:

> He [Shen] knows about my working for Canadian
> Intelligence...
> Kirin has admitted her disappearance was
> contrived...
> I've been taken to a farm...
> Shen let me drive partway <snip> then slipped
> something in my coffee...
> I was out for eighteen hours...
> Now I'm here, I'm free to leave.

Don't believe it for a second. They haven't engineered this just so you can walk away. Three members of this "Caucus" drowned, remember? Three others disappeared. They know you're working for us. They know you've passed us names: Shen and Roy Calhoun. Their nonchalance suggests they have the means to vanish, covering their tracks, as suddenly as they've appeared. No need to spell out what that means for you and Kirin.

> His "people" call themselves The Caucus. From what
> little I've been told, it sounds as if they formed
> back in the sixties.

And haven't hit our radar? That implies connections and resources CSIS needs to know about.

Hell--a weekly social club for psychics would have crossed our desks by now.

I'm uneasy with this situation. I doubt you're physically in danger. Too much went into grabbing you. But we came to you for help in luring someone from this group out of the woodwork and now you've gone from bait to plant--a role that properly requires an officer with training.

> The farm used to be a commune. With cabins and an added dorm, I'd say it once held twenty-five to thirty.

The Caucus's Achilles' heel appears to be the farm, hence both the effort to prevent communication with the outside world and the knockout drug Shen gave you. Do everything you can to find out where you are. And send as many details as you can about the farm itself.

> Four arrived by king-cab yesterday

Licence plate?

> There's a router somewhere on the premises.

Get the IP address. Finding you may be as simple as demanding records from an ISP. We'll need the time of day you get it, too, in case the address is dynamically assigned.

> What now?

Stay put. Play along.

--

JB

I deleted Byron's message and logged out. It read like something from another universe. The Caucus wasn't trying to hide their whereabouts—I was.

From my laptop's browser, I checked Google's IP lookup widget for the router's address and the geographical location of the ISP assigning it. Los Angeles it turned out, which meant the farm was

using an anonymizer service. That, in turn, meant I could send the information without telling CSIS anything. As for the truck, I'd have to get the plate and do a lookup on the owner. On the Internet, anyone can be a spy.

The bathroom was adjacent to my room, with the formal landing separating it from Dr. Colton's study. I showered quietly, then crept downstairs and used the front door to go out.

The air was chilly in a way that feels more, not less, like summer. Across the road the mist was gold chiffon, just like the day before.

"David. I thought you might be up."

I'd been looking right, toward the drive, and hadn't noticed Mr. Shen. He was leaning on the railing in a pair of white pyjamas. Straightening, he gestured me to follow him around the L of the veranda.

So much for deking round the house to get the licence plate.

He'd laid out two mats facing east. Wordlessly he peeled off his pyjama top and prepared to make a Sun Salute. It was like the dock at Cassandra Island all over again only this time we performed the movements double-time. Mr. Shen's skin glowed like burnished teak when we were done.

He bunched up the pyjama shirt and mopped his brow.

"Will you be joining me for breakfast?" he enquired. "Cook's fixing sausages and I feel I have apologies to make."

"Nice to know somebody feels that way."

Cook rushed over from the stove to hug me but recoiled when my stomach growled.

"Has Luke been in?" I asked.

I'd been aiming for offhand, but like a drunk who sticks too closely to the speed limit, I did too well and gave myself away.

Cook's face melted.

"No, dear. He goes through phases. He's getting his own breakfast these days."

These days? As in, since I arrived?

"I'm so pleased Dr. Colton let you meet," she chattered on while

Mr. Shen and I sat down. "I hoped he'd do it quickly. It's been fifteen years and not a day goes by I haven't felt he's half not here. Good or bad, some things should stay together."

She shot a glance at Mr. Shen, studiously pouring apple juice, then set about with spatula and tongs and ferried platters to the table.

"I confess to feeling some relief as well," said Mr. Shen, lifting pancakes from a stack and spearing sausages. "So much will be easier now you're reconnected."

"So much what?"

"Teaching, I suppose. It's hard to know the right word. I'd say re-education, but that sounds so Communist. I'm not sure the English language has ever faced a situation quite like yours. What would be the word for 're-acquiring for the first time knowledge you already have'?"

He doused his plate with maple syrup.

"Satori?" I suggested.

"Perhaps. Except there'll be no moment of enlightenment. And satori isn't something you get back. Once found, it's never lost. Nothing I'll be telling you will add to who you are or what you have become. At best I'll be supplying words to help you understand. Zen in reverse, if you want to look at it that way."

He paused, tickled by the paradox, then dug into his breakfast.

"You're to be my guru."

"Adviser," he corrected through a mouthful of pancake.

"So Dr. Colton lectures me on history and you're in charge of practice, is that it?"

"You're quick this morning."

"I hope that doesn't mean you think the choreography is subtle."

"Not at all."

"And where does Luke fit in?"

He stopped mid-bite.

"Why, he's your brother." *Why would you ask?*

"Is guru—adviser, whatever—what you were to us before? Like

Marion was our tutor?”

“She had you afternoons. I got you in the morning.”

“Which explains the Sun Salute.”

“Getting fractious boys to pay attention is more work than you imagine. *Pranayama*—breathing—and the *asanas* of yoga helped. Believe me, it was more for me than you.”

“Are psychism and yoga linked somehow?”

He shook his head.

“Psychism’s innate. No amount of discipline can bring it forth when it’s not there.”

“And if it is?”

“Grass grows wild in the field, little Grasshopper. It’s the plough that makes it wheat.”

A grinning Master Po went back to links and flapjacks. I tackled my own plate—slicing sausages, inserting little rounds of meat between the layers of pancakes. A Niagara of syrup overtop. Cook looked on approvingly.

“You said you had apologies to make?”

Mr. Shen sat back and touched a napkin to his lips.

“Indeed. Slipping drugs into your coffee. Quazepam, in case you’re interested—used to treat insomnia. You now know why I did, but wrong is wrong. I hope you can forgive me.”

“A small sin, all things considered.”

“And I’m sorry for misleading you. Pretending that I didn’t know exactly who you were. Luring you with partial truths.”

I waved my fork around the kitchen. “You tried to to tell me about all this. In the library at Cassandra Island. Remember? We talked about a hexagram.”

“*Hsao Kuo*. I recall.”

“You were trying to tell me who I was. To let me know you knew.”

“I couldn’t let the opportunity slip by. Not after fifteen years.”

“Why not?”

He gazed up at the ceiling.

“Who knows? The imp in me? The challenge of it?” He looked

down again. “No. That’s not it. The truth is, I proved not as strong as Marion, who held her tongue when you became her neighbour. Mind you, she knew she had the luxury of time to get to know you.”

“You were warning me as well.”

“I was.”

“Not to go poking into things I shouldn’t. To accept things as they are.”

“As they *were*.”

“Yet here I am. What changed?”

“There is a judgment in the *I Ching*, David. ‘At the first oracle I inform him. If he asks two or three times, it is importunity. If he importunes, I give him no information.’”

“In other words, you’re not going to tell me.”

“On the contrary. We have this and other mornings.”

“Mornings like before? When this was home?”

He rose.

“Finish up your breakfast, then come out front and join me. Like we used to.” He patted my shoulder. “Before.”



Cook gave me two Thermoses to take to the veranda, one for me with coffee, one for Mr. Shen with tea.

The sun was casting morning shadows on a lawn as green as newly misted produce at an upscale grocery store. The only summer I remembered so determinedly perfect was my first year in Toronto. Every moment then of every day had been imagination’s version of the way things ought to be. Pathetic fallacy’s supposed to be a literary gimmick, but here the weather was again, mirroring the new with all of optimism’s trappings.

Mr. Shen was in a wicker chair, flipping through a slender document.

“Dr. Colton showed you the original of this,” he said, closing the black covers. “It’s the outline for an essay on psychism you did

years ago for Marion. With emendations, it's required reading for new Caucus members.

A label on the front identified it as *The Psychic Rules*.

"The title is a misnomer. They're observations more than rules. The Caucus's vocabulary developed out of usage, not precision. Take 'empaths' and 'transmitters'. Empath was a simple choice, but no one liked imprinter as its complement. We took to saying transmitter and it stuck. Same thing for *The Rules*. Between now and when we meet again, I want you to go over them."

I took a seat and handed Mr. Shen his tea.

"You seem to like an outdoor classroom," I observed. "First your cottage deck, now this."

"Actually, David, the preference is yours. At least, it was. Yours and Luke's. Winter or summer, you hated being cooped up." He unscrewed his Thermos, poured steaming liquid in the lid and blew on it. "Lessons go much better when you listen to a pupil's needs."

"So what's the lesson plan today?"

"You're sounding awfully chipper for a man whose world's gone topsy turvy."

"And you're sounding more and more like Marion."

He blew on his tea again. "She does have quite the arsenal of obsolete locutions, doesn't she?" He took a sip. "Today's a day for questions. Questions with straight answers. Some things will have to wait of course, but I'll answer what I can without equivocation. I ask only that you not enquire about your separation from your brother."

"The right hand giveth and the left hand taketh away, is that it? You answer every question but the one that matters? Is the price of psychic empathy an absence of compassion?"

Behind the wire spectacles, his black eyes softened.

"I said 'about your separation', not 'about your brother.'"

Was the sympathy an act? If only I could read beyond the maddeningly smooth grey surface of his mind. What really lurked there? A kindly mentor whom I used to love? A Svengali? Something worse?

Play along...

Okay, then—twenty questions.

“Is Luke the same as me?”

“If you mean psychic, yes.”

“Which kind is he? An empath or transmitter?”

“A transmitter.”

“So we’re opposites.”

“Psychically speaking.”

“Driving here, I’m sure I heard you say that twins are never empaths or transmitters. Or was that the Quazepam?”

“No, you heard me right. However, I was speaking of identicals. You two are fraternal.”

“Can he imprint me?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Luke’s abilities have been... disabled.”

“Disabled?”

He’d made the hesitation obvious; he wanted me to ask.

“We discovered years ago that antipsychotic tranquilizers—specifically, the so-called typical neuroleptics developed in the fifties—render psychism inactive.”

Anti-psychotics? Our mother had been committed. I felt the blood drain from my face.

“You’re not saying—”

“—that Luke is like your mother? No. The drug he’s on, Chlorpromazine, serves only as a tool to still his gifts.”

“But why?”

His gaze, directed at the willow in the middle of the lawn, was seeing something other than the screen of sun-bright leaves.

“The answer to that question will emerge. For now, I imagine what you’re wondering is: could you get your memories back by having Luke imprint them?”

“Could I?”

“Trying will set off your wall of pain. Working through it could prove fatal. The tripwire—another word we simply took to using—

has to be disabled first.”

“Fatal? As in ‘kill me?’”

“That’s the generally accepted meaning of the word.”

“Let me guess—I can’t read his memories either?”

“I’m afraid not. For the same reason.”

“When will this tripwire be removed?”

“When Dr. Colton says.”

Not “*when Dr. Colton deems you’re ready*” or “*when Dr. Colton feels it’s safe*.” Just, “*When Dr. Colton says*.”

“If my memories came back right now, how would that affect your plans?”

“Plans?”

“Oh, come on, John. You brought me here for something. After fifteen years it isn’t just to make amends.”

“Some of us have always had misgivings.”

“Like Cook?”

“Like Cook.”

“Dr. Colton said I did it to myself.”

“In the strictest sense, you did. We merely helped.”

“We?”

“Myself, Dr. Colton, and one other. A member who’s passed on.”

One of the suicides?

“Were you involved?”

He nodded.

“How involved?”

“I said I had apologies to make,” he answered, more as if he feared how I’d react than honestly remorseful, like a kid who knows that what he’s done is wrong but can’t help wistfully remembering his misdemeanour’s cleverness.

He poured more tea and settled back.

“We call it ‘psychic surgery’—another term we’ve sanctified through usage. Outside the Caucus it means something else: performing medical procedures *with*, not *on*, the psyche.”

“Medical procedure’s a bit generic for wholesale amputation,

don't you think?"

"But David, nothing's been removed."

"Could have fooled me."

"Then we succeeded. You're by far the most receptive empath that we know about. Combined with your intelligence, you seem to have a mind that has no friction points. Everything is oiled and moves smoothly. What others have to struggle at for you is water off a duck's back."

"You're telling me my memory gap results from being good at something that, if I were any less adept, would have left me whole and happy?"

"In a nutshell, yes."

A car door slammed behind the house. The king-cab rolled in view and made a right. I couldn't see the driver but I got the plate at last.

"Memory's a funny word," said Mr. Shen, watching as it dwindled down the road. "We say it in the singular but there are different kinds. It's a bit like love. The ancient Greeks had four words for it; we, in English, have but one.

"Consider, for example, our memory for experience and facts. Psychologists call it declarative memory because we can discuss it—relate it, as it were, the way you've heard about yourself these past few days. Episodic memory—the recollection of events bound up with time and place—and semantic memory, which is knowledge about facts that don't rely on time and place, are both declarative. Both kinds are consolidated in the hippocampi of the temporal lobes.

"Affective memory, on the other hand—recalling an emotion—and general autobiographical memories, like what it feels like to have someone scratch your back, use a different section of the brain, the amygdalae.

"Two separate processes occurring in disjunct regions of the brain, and yet we call the whole thing memory.

"Ironically," he continued, "advances made in understanding memory come mostly from the study of its absence, namely

amnesia.

“Broadly speaking, amnesia comes in two flavours: retrograde and anteretrograde. Retrograde prevents the recollection of events that took place prior to the onset of amnesia—forgetting one’s past, or parts thereof. Sometimes even who one is. *Ante*-retrograde is not so much forgetting—losing—as the failure to retain new data and experience.

“Did you ever see a movie called *Memento*? The main character can’t remember anything that happens to him longer than a few hours. That’s anteretrograde amnesia—obviously quite a different kettle of fish from losing whole portions of one’s past.”

What I remembered of the film was that, impossibly, it told its story in reverse, starting at the end and working backwards to the opening, all the while building up an atmosphere of nail-biting tension.

“The psychic mind has the ability to ‘see,’ and thus manipulate, its memories. Not just the details of a recollection, but the whole of memory itself. All of us perceive it differently. Most of us describe it using paradigms of sight, even though the percepts have no shape, *per se*, or colour.”

Maps and sculptures... mirror-grey...

“I see colour sometimes, too,” I interjected. “Not all the time, not with everyone, just... sometimes.”

He nodded to himself.

“Synaesthesia. A few of us, Dr. Colton being one, encounter it when reading strong emotions, particularly the collective feelings of a group. It’s unique to empaths. I always wondered if you had it. It hadn’t shown up while you lived here. Or perhaps you opted not to mention it.”

I heard a barb in the last sentence, as if keeping things from Mr. Shen, or maybe Dr. Colton, had been a regular occurrence.

“At any rate, colour synaesthesia doesn’t give an edge to those who have it. It’s like icing on the cake. There are, however, some—again, Dr. Colton’s one—who feel a psychic’s ‘maps’ are nothing more than special instances of synaesthesia. If you’re interested, the

library has monographs, though none address the psychic issue. Third shelf, north wall, if I recall.

“But getting back to memory, your psychic surgery induced two forms of retrograde amnesia, lacunar and source. Lacunar is the inability to call to mind specific epochs of your past. Source means that you can’t remember where or when or how you garnered data, or the knowledge to perform a task. Like the Sun Salute. You must have wondered how you knew it.”

He fell silent for a while, drained his tea, and stood.

“So much talk. I’m getting thirsty. I need something more. Cook usually has lemonade. Can I get you some?”

I held my Thermos up. “This is fine.”

While he went inside I took my coffee to the railing. Cook’s brew was every bit as good as what I got from Gato Nero.

Gato Nero... Little Italy... Toronto... It seemed a million miles away. How was Ferko doing? What was Raymond up to?

Not just a million miles—a century as well.

The dew had burned completely off the lawn but the floor of the veranda, still in shade, was damp and cool. I stuck my big toe in a gap between two planks. It felt familiar, somehow. Comforting. I looked down to see if anything was visible between the boards. Only black showed through.

Mr. Shen returned to find me staring off. He joined me at the railing, holding up his lemonade and studying the light refracting through it.

“I’m not unfamiliar with advances in the field of memory,” I told him.

“Of course not. A man in your position wouldn’t be. Or was that a nice way of saying I’m being pedantic?”

“A tad.”

“Better safe than sorry. Do you want to move down on the lawn? It’s a shame to waste the morning in the shade.”

I manhandled two chairs down the steps and placed them underneath the willow tree toward the sun. The branches made a gauzy curtain, softening the light.

“Consider everything I’ve talked about,” Mr. Shen began, once he’d gotten settled, “as groundwork for what otherwise might sound impossible or contradictory.

“When you undertook the process I’ve called psychic surgery, you buried—re-mapped, actually—all episodic and semantic memory of this farm. Everyone you met, every experience, the location of the Farm itself, the Caucus. At the same time, we showed you how to keep the skills you’d learned.

“Skills I learned from you on days like this?”

“Not just you. Luke, too.” He smiled; the memory was a happy one. “The result was you retained your training without knowing where it came from. You needed it, reflexively, to guard yourself.”

From what? Whom?

The answer to that question will emerge...

“The most sophisticated part of what you did,” Mr. Shen went on—quickly so I wouldn’t ask, or so it seemed, “was the remapping of your memories of Luke. Full retrograde amnesia would have robbed you of your soul, leaving you with nothing to hold on to while you dealt with the confusion of your waking in Toronto. We couldn’t have you seeking help to find out who you were.

“The problem was, there was no way to keep your memories of growing up without your brother being in them. The two of you did everything together. Your attachment formed a huge part of the young men you’d become. We couldn’t have you totally forgetting.”

He paused to polish off his lemonade.

“The genius of psychism is in its skill at isolating mental constructs, mapping them to new locations, switching fore- and background, altering their context. Empaths and transmitters both possess the gift. The major difference between them’s really only in the action of their psychism relative to others.

“With our help, you re-mapped all the *physical* components of your memories of Luke, while retaining both the episodic and affective recollections. We weren’t sure how your mind would process the anomaly—memories of kinship without someone to attach them to. It might have shown up as a dream persona. It might have made

you to feel as if you had a ‘familiar’. Or—and this was my and Dr. Colton’s guess—as an imaginary friend.”

Billed cap... work shirt... field-stained Kodiaks... An image of the brother that I hadn’t known I had superposed itself upon the teasing-urging-daring presence *there* and *not-there* in my memory. What had he looked like back when we were kids? What had he sounded like when real words were coming from his mouth?

I must have zoned out for a second. “... psychic mind ‘sees’ mental space,” Mr. Shen was saying, “differently from how the eyes see real space.

“Imagine for a moment that you’re looking at a ball suspended in the air. The ball grows smaller while you watch. There could be several explanations for the shrinkage. It could be losing mass. It could be imploding. Or it could be travelling away from you.

“Now imagine you can see the ball from every side at once. You know it isn’t losing mass. You know it’s not imploding. Thus it must be travelling away from you. But how, if from every angle it grows uniformly smaller?

“That’s an easy one,” I answered. “It’s travelling through some dimension outside length-breadth-height.”

“Excellent.” He beamed. “Your love of science fiction served a purpose after all.

“The point is, even though the situation I’ve described could never be perceived by ordinary senses, in the psychic mind it *is* perceptible, and subject to manipulation.

“Therefore if instead of ‘ball’ I say ‘the mental artefact of Luke-as-person’, perhaps you’ll grasp how what you did was possible. You re-mapped all your memories of Luke. Buried them inside the inside of the inside, if you follow me. Places always distant—equidistant—from wherever you approached them.”

In reverse he was describing what my mind’s eye saw whenever I assembled someone’s image in my head. Could I really take the bits and pieces of myself, as me, and *dis*-assemble them the way he was suggesting?

A flash of windshield down the road drew near: the king-cab

with a complement of passengers it hadn't had before.

"Summing up," said Mr. Shen as it pulled in, "when the process of the surgery was over—you can well imagine that it wasn't just a one-shot deal—you could no longer access memories of Luke or of the Farm, nor where you learned the skills acquired while you were here.

"To complement the burying, elements got added to your personality. The way you feel about authorities and agencies. Your adamant refusal to acknowledge anything unusual about your gift. Your reluctance to drive east of Highway 6."

"And I did all this myself? *To myself? By myself?*"

"Not entirely. Some hypnosis and imprinting were involved. Your knowledge of Toronto, for example. A man who lived there all his life imprinted you with that.

"The most significant addition, the one most problematic now, was the psychological injunction that prevents you from the voluntary or unconscious reassembling of your memories. The debilitating pain that leads to loss of consciousness."

"And you want me to believe I went along with that? Just agreed without a peep?"

Suddenly, I couldn't help myself. Rule of the Farm or not—and why should I be bound by it?—I tried to read him. Surely if his story were a lie...

Nothing. Nothing at all.