

TWO

Yanamandra Ramchandani's family lived on the third floor of an old apartment building on a hill above a cliff with an incredible ocean view. It had withstood any number of quakes before and after the Change, including the big one nine years ago that had sagged the building south of them and sent the one north of them halfway down the slope. The buildings downslope had burned down years ago. How their own place had avoided going up like a tiki torch is anybody's guess. Wind direction I guess. My father had joked that Dr. Ram had burned them down because they'd obstructed his view. Apparently other people had done this. There wasn't a law against it—there wasn't a law against anything really—but it was generally frowned upon. People who'd done it had been politely asked to move on and then impolitely asked if they refused.

The Ramchandanis' building was only a mile from Paypay's and I bladed there before full dark. The lobby was pitchblack but I knew my way by heart. The stairwell door had been removed long ago.

The Ramchandanis' block of apartments was about the only livable place in the building. Long ago the pipes had burst a few floors up and it was only a matter of time before the rot worked its way down to them. Until then they were quite at home. Dr. and Mrs. Ramchandani's apartment

served as a sort of common area for the family. Yan had a small apartment across from theirs and his sister Nan's apartment was down the hall. Between Yan and Nan's was a nursery where Parmita grew shade spices and on the roof a small greenhouse where she grew even more. She used them for cooking and Dr. Ram used them for medicines or trading with the wiccans. What they didn't use they traded at the swap meet. Half of the spices in Mrs. Halobagian's breads came from Mrs. Ramchandani's apartment garden.

I was jealous of the Ramchandanis' setup. My father and I shared a small inland house with a tiny yard that always needed cutting with a huge scythe that I just knew was going to kill me someday. We did have nice fruit trees in back though. Orange and plum and peach. They'd gotten us through our share of lean months.

In the dim hall I knocked on Yan's door. The door across the hall opened and Yan's mom grinned at me. "Fred. We knew it was you. Come in" She opened the door wide.

"Hi, Parmita. How'd you know it was me."

"Because," a voice called out from inside, "no one else has your instinct for other people's dinnertimes."

Parmita led me into the dining room and slapped the back of Yan's head and then mussed his hair.

"Oh, are you eating. I'll come back later."

"When we're having dessert," Yan agreed.

"Which tonight is gulab jamun," said Nan, across from him at the table. "So sit down, Frederick."

Nandita was incredibly beautiful and unfairly intelligent and inhumanly graceful, and she had a voice like an underwater bell. Or what I think an underwater would sound like. Or should. Or—look, I didn't think too straight around her, which I guess is pretty clear. Her eyes in the diningroom candlelight didn't help. She always called me Frederick, pronouncing all three syllables, even though I was just plain Fred. Yan still sometimes called me Freddum long after everyone else realized I had outgrown it.

Dr. Ramchandani handed me a plate of garlic naan as I sat down beside Nandita. "I really don't come over to mooch," I told him as I took two pieces and passed the plate to Nan who set it down without taking anything.

"Of course not," said Dr. Ram. "You come over after Mr. Papadopoulos closes for the day. Which he does every day at dinnertime. Eat."

"How'd it go today, Fred," Yan asked. "Did you erect any floating castles, summon any demons, curse any evildoers?"

"Two unicorns, one healed vase, one study charm, one glamour that I talked the customer out of, and a dog."

"You made a dog?" Parmita looked impressed.

"Not even a fake one. He had a hurt leg. We sent him to you, Dr. Ram."

"Oh yes, Mr. Akbash's dog. Infected cuts. They really should not let that dog out at night. Next time he may not be so fortunate." He wrote a note in a pad he always kept in his shirt front pocket. He was the only man I ever saw who wore buttonup shirts, with a collar and everything. Any time of year however hot. The Ramchandanis kept their place open and nicely aired and they burned nag champa incense, a smell I would always associate with them and with Yan. There weren't a lot of windows but there was a sliding glass door opening onto a tiny balcony with a glorious ocean view. Still the room had a boxy stuffiness that made it feel small. In the old days people must have believed outside air was bad for you. Or maybe before the Change it had been.

Dr. Ram returned the notepad to his pocket. "I keep forgetting to bring up the raccoon foragings at the town meeting."

Yan raised his eyebrows. "There are raccoons foraging at the town meetings?"

"Yan," Parmita said.

But Dr. Ram replied as if Yan had spoken seriously. "The raccoons are becoming very bold. I am concerned

about rabies.”

“I’d think the hyenas and wildcats would take care of the raccoons,” I said.

No one said anything, no one registered anything, but I swear even the candlelight changed. I stared at my garlic naan and felt like a fool.

Nan handed me a plate of peas in some kind of rich yellow curry sauce. “It’s very good tonight,” she said.

My face felt very hot. “It’s good every night.”

“Especially tonight.” Her slight knowing smile meant just for me.

I gave my plate my full attention.

“Well I did not heal so much as a vase today,” said Dr. Ram. “Though I gave two excellent haircuts.” He shook his head and gave his own small private smile. “What was interesting at Mrs. Cowardan’s today, Nan.”

“We learned about the Internet. I think half the students didn’t believe any of it.”

“Which half are you in,” Yan asked.

“I take her word for it but I don’t quite understand it. So I want to say I’m in the believer half but I’m not comfortable believing in something I don’t understand.”

“She is your daughter all right,” Parmita said.

Dr. Ram crossed his knife and fork over his plate. “Mrs. Cowardan is an excellent teacher but I do not understand why she dwells on these irrelevancies. Perhaps I should talk with her.”

“It’s history,” Yan said with a confidence I envied. “You’re all always going on about us having no history. Now you don’t want us to learn it?”

“There is history and there is nostalgia. I see no use in teaching nostalgia.”

Yan waved his knife at the apartment, somehow indicating as well the great decaying expanse beyond. “We live in what’s left of a world that’s only twentyseven years away and most of us have no idea what most of it was for. Do

you, Fred.”

“I see it so much that I don’t really see it.” This argument between Yan and his father was worn pretty thin and I didn’t want to weigh in. Dr. Ram was one of the few people older people who thought the Change had been a good thing for the human race in the long run. Yan was one of the few people my age who was obsessed by that lost world and its accomplishments. I fell somewhere between them: impressive accomplishments that had little to do with me or the world I lived in.

“We could learn a lot from then that would make our lives better,” Yan said.

“Digging around in graveyards will not teach you how to live.”

“It was Lucinda Welter who wanted the glamour,” said Nan. “Wasn’t it.”

“It wouldn’t be right for me to say.”

“Lucinda Welter. She has a crush on Dylan Rondonaki.”

“You can do that, Fred?” Parmita asked.

“Sure. Glamour charms are easy. But you can’t aim them at a specific person. I put a glamour on Lu—on a customer, and everyone will want to hang out with her. Or, um, him.” I colored and everyone laughed and I breathed a private sigh of relief.

Yan, man, I am so sorry.”

In the hallway outside his apartment he made the passes that unlocked his door and I nodded approval at his improvement. He’d spent a few nights on his parents’ couch because he couldn’t remember how to unlock his door. “Sorry about what.”

“About mentioning ... you know. How dangerous it can be at night. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Oh, the hyenas.” He shrugged as the door opened. “No

one thinks you meant anything, I'm sure."

"You don't have to mean it to step into a big pile."

He looked at me. "It's been three years."

"He was your brother."

He shrugged. "Sudama was mean to me. Come on, we have stuff to do."

The first thing you saw when you walked into Yan's apartment was a tacked-up poster of a sneaker print in gray dirt. Yan claimed it was a picture of a bootprint on the moon. And maybe it was, but pre-Changers were always whining so much about it—We went to the moon and now look at us!—that it was hard to be impressed.

Yan slept in the small livingroom. The bedroom was a workroom full of things I couldn't quite imagine working. Models of wasplike metal airplanes that made war on people and cities and other planes. Containers the size of gumsticks that had supposedly held libraries of books and weeks of music. Cellphones with tiny gray glass squares that had contained moving pictures. Shiny rainbow mobiles of compact disks. A picture of a treelike cloud above a desert that Yan claimed was an entire city or something blowing up. A structure the size of a building erupting in flame at the bottom. Square machines on steel wheels scraping at red dirt. Enormous ships that held more warplanes. Tiny cylinders that had shone light bright enough to see for miles that supposedly could cut through metal. And even more stuff whose purpose was unimaginable to me. Pre-Changers had liked things really big and really small.

Yan's workroom stank of potions gone wrong. The carpet had got so freckled with burn marks and spill stains that Yan and I tore it out and refinished the wood beneath, good oak that by now had acquired its own share of burnmarks, stains, and pentagram traces. The desk and bookcase were piled with catalogs from department stores and electronics sellers.

Yan lit a lamp off an incense stick he'd brought from his parents' and yellow light reflected from dozens of shapes scattered around the room like eyes in a storybook forest. Yan turned the lamp up and the room glittered with familiar shapes made strange by being mirrored. Baby dolls, Barbie dolls, buttons, boxes, frogs, all reflecting themselves and us in recursive distortions that made you feel funny if you stared at them long enough.

The frogs creeped me out the most. Goggle-eyed and veiny, perfect down to the smallest wart. Their eyes reflected everything and held nothing. And they would do so forever. Yan called them sacrifices in the name of the New Science. I was so uncomfortable with the idea that I had threatened to walk out on our research if we used any more live subjects, and Yan had finally relented.

Yan opened the windows and the ocean got louder and cool salt air blew in. We sat on swiveling office chairs near the window. Silvered frogs of several sizes glinted moonlight on the sill. I picked one up. It was the size of my fist. African toads, my father had said; they'd been dying out before the Change. Maybe so but they'd recovered to a fault. Nighttime was deafening because of the big ugly bastards. Them and everything else that hooted, howled, croaked, chirped, barked, roared, bugled, or screamed.

My head reflected flat across the big frog's wide mouth, tiny in its bulging eyes. "Poor Froggum," I told it. "All alone in the dark."

"Fred," Yan said, "it isn't in the dark."

"Light won't get in there. That means it's dark."

"Time won't get in there either. So even if frogs could have a clue that one never will. If we figure out how to cancel the stasis tomorrow or when we're eightyseven, no time at all will have gone by for him."

"If it's tomorrow at least his friends will still be the same age."

"Fred. It's a frog."

“What about gravity. What if he’s all weightless in there.”

He shook his head and smiled indulgently. “Same thing. There’s no time, so if he’s weightless it’ll never affect him. He won’t experience anything because he’s cut off from any kind of experience we can measure.”

“How about ones we can’t.”

The smile became a smirk. “You don’t know it Freddum but that question was quite a big deal in the old physics. They could only observe by interfering, which wasn’t really observing at all. It made them nuts.”

“From what your dad says they interfered with everything and they already were nuts. I don’t know why you’re so in love with them.”

“They figured out a lot more about their world than we’ve bothered to learn about ours.”

“They had a lot more time than we have.”

“True. But that’s why we’re doing all this, isn’t it. To figure out how it all works now. To be the new scientists.”

I nodded. Magic wasn’t science yet. That was why it was so hard to learn, why spells were so hard to duplicate, why so many people made so many tragic and comical mistakes. Casting in the dark. No one was making any kind of organized investigation of it. How it worked. Why it worked. Most casters just learned by rote and taught the same way. They didn’t question, didn’t innovate, didn’t like to share their secrets or the ways they’d learned them. The only reason Paypay’d taken me on at all was because Casey Yu, his first apprentice, had run off to Los Angeles with the Harper’s oldest girl, Aymee.

Yan had set us on the path to understanding the how and why of casting. He wanted to apply those newfound principles and sell tons of products and live like a king. Or like kings were supposed to have lived. If we did I was all for it, but if we didn’t I was fine with just knowing.

Stasis spells were our first big project. Our goal was

simple: figure out how to open one. Once we did we'd get all kinds of attention and make a name for ourselves and acquire fundamental knowledge no one else had. Our ingenious scheme had only one major obstacle: since the beginning of time no one had ever undone a stasis spell.

Things in stasis are mirrored because they reflect absolutely everything. Light, sound, heat, gravity, time, inertia, magic—nothing can get through. The object is cut off from the universe. So any casting meant to undo a stasis spell just comes whizzing back at you or goes into the neighbor's roses or heads for Jupiter or into the nearest coyote.

Yan was certain we would figure out a way around this. He believed the solution would prove as simple as the stasis spell itself. So far his certainty was all we had to go on. The whole point of putting a stasis spell on something was to make sure that nothing, no force in the universe, including your own magic, could get to it from then on. The casting itself was simple but rarely performed because it was unchangeable and irreversible and fundamentally useless except maybe as a very labor-intensive weapon. Casters weren't organized but they did have some consensual taboos. Don't mess with the power found in death and dying. Don't summon anything you can't banish. Don't screw around with stasis spells.

We thought undoing a stasis was a worthy project. Which was why Yan's workroom was littered with spotless mirrored Barbie dolls and toy soldiers and pencils and coffee cups and infinitely patient African frogs all reflecting each other in infinite reduction.

Yan had libbed a portable wipeboard from some real estate office and set it up opposite the big french windows in his workroom. He used it to work out castings, a trick he'd learned from the science books he devoured. For a couple of hours we wrote stasis-spell variations on the board and took them apart and put them back together. Like unicorn charms by now I could write stasis spells in

my sleep.

We broke once for coffee and went at it a while longer, until moonset made me realize how late it had gotten and I told Yan I had to go. My father was going to be so pissed.

I picked up Froggum again and tapped his head. "I'm afraid you're gonna be a reflecty frog a while longer, bud."

"We'll break it," Yan said.

I held the frog away from him. "You wouldn't dare."

"The spell, Fred. We'll break the spell."

"Sure."

Yan walked me downstairs and through the nightblackened lobby. The marine layer had moved onshore and the night was chill. We listened to the great frog congregation around us. "You can stay," Yan said.

"I've gone home this late plenty of times. I'm more worried about my father than anything else."

He started to say something but seemed to change his mind. I didn't press. My father was something of an issue for just about everybody.

We kissed goodnight and I started away and then felt something in my hoodie pouch. "Forgot to give this to you," I called to Yan and underhanded it to him.

He caught it and frowned and turned the foil wrapper in his hand and suddenly grinned.

"Save a bite for Nan," I said and went my homeward way.

The frogs were holding a vibe of their own in the hills. I was cold but didn't put my hood up because I wanted to listen unobstructed. The marine layer now was thick and general and the cold night grayed and damp. Everything changes when the sun goes down and the air grows thick and moves like specters round you turning all the decomposing cars to crouching waiting shapes containing who

knew what within the subtle eddies. It didn't help that some of them could be crouching shapes waiting. The tricks imagination plays are nothing next to those the world performs.

The booming surf receded as I walked uphill from Yan's and crossed the old Pacific Coast Highway with rollerblades across one shoulder banging time with my walk. I knew that road like it had been tattooed on my eyes but there was no way I was blading home in this soup.

Farther on I decided to bypass the Interstate 5 onramp and get onto the freeway by walking up the embankment. My shins got soaked from trampling the waist-high grass. The night sounds faded as the fog grew thicker until all I heard was the strange ringing night mist seems to bring with it, a distant tinkling not quite heard but somehow sensed.

I stepped over the concrete retainer wall and onto the freeway.

Home was only a mile inland but distances get longer in the dark. Large shapes thickened from the mist as I advanced. Cars and trucks and SUVs. I could always sleep in one if I really felt caught out. My father would be worried though. Or angry. They showed up about the same in him.

Not that he didn't have good reason to be either. Wayward Son had stayed out far later than was sensible and was moving between the ordered cars stopped inexplicably and forever in their crumbling treegrown lanes, hoping nothing would rob him or eat him or take his parts home to the family. Right now Wayward Son was cold and trying to breathe quietly and tell himself that what he heard behind him and to the right wasn't footsteps.

Wayward Son's unwayward father lived by his sword, ate by his sword, slept by his sword, and would probably die by it. It was a pre-Changer thing. Wayward Son himself felt there was a better way to go through the world than by wearing your fear in a scabbard for all the diminished

world to see, so Wayward Son didn't carry weapons. He spent his days making unicorn charms and healing vases. Maybe if a hyena attacked him he could send it to Dr. Ramchandani.

At the foggy moment Wayward Son was coming up on a van with peeling vinyl decals. Like nearly every other car in the world it was covered in birdshit and its tires were dryrotted and its windows and lights were busted out. For all that Wayward Son knew he himself had busted them out years ago. Like nearly every other boy in the world. Wayward Son walked casually till he passed the van then stepped in front of it and squatted. His ears would have gone flat to his head if they'd been able to.

Crouched before the cockeyed van I listened for footsteps, breathing, growls, skate wheels, hooves, claws, whatever. After a few minutes I decided I'd been hearing things or that if I really had heard something it wasn't anything threatening. Cockroaches probably sound loud on foggy nights.

I stood and stepped away from the van and nearly ran into the dark shape of a man who stood there waiting for me. I said gaah and jumped back. He didn't move at all. Moonlight glimmered on curved metal in front of him. There came a small cough I knew quite well and my father resolved from the fog. "Thought it was you," he said, and sheathed his sword.