

THIRTEEN

They'd been setting up at the racetrack all day. A crew had cut down the tall grass beyond the concrete pavilion where the swap meet was held and now they were finishing up work on two wooden platforms between what had been turns one and two. Others were attaching bright plastic streamers to some kind of maypole. From the Surfliner I watched them through a small telescope I'd libbed from a camera shop. There must have been nearly a thousand people there, more than I'd ever seen in one place, and it was hours yet before the vibe was supposed to start.

I grabbed a hydration pack and put a mirrored penny in my pocket and went out.

A group of five people was walking south on the overgrown railroad tracks toward the racetrack. One of them carried a guitar case and one had a long wooden tube painted with red and yellow designs. All wore daypacks. They'd been about to step onto the bridge but stopped when I got out of the Surfliner.

"Anything good left in there," the tallest one called out to me.

"I hope so. I live here."

"No shit."

They walked onto the bridge and we hugged and traded names. Taylor, a darkhaired girl with cracked black nail

polish, folded her arms and said, "That wasn't here before, was it."

"Nope. We moved it here about six months ago."

"We."

"Me and a friend."

"You and a friend. Moved that." The tall guy, Sean, was good at these question-and-observation lines.

I asked where they were from.

"Temecula," Sean said.

"Don't know it."

"About thirty miles northwest. Big valley, very nice."

"Long walk."

He shrugged. "Two days. It's not—"

The first throb hit us and we all turned toward the racetrack.

"Shit howdy," said Eric, the thin blond guy with the big stick thing. But he was grinning.

"They're still setting up," I said. "I guess they probably have some—" the second throb shook the nearer wall of the Surfliner—"adjusting to do."

"Omigod," said Trace, a thinner, shorter copy of Taylor down to the cracked nail polish. Little sister maybe.

Everyone laughed but it was goodnatured. "It's her first vibe," Taylor said.

I smiled at Trace. "Mine too."

She linked arms with me and stuck out her tongue at the others who laughed again.

"One of the guys spinning is a friend of mine," said Eric.

"Let's don't keep him waiting then." I fished the mirrored penny from my pocket and held it out to the Surfliner and said *grunion surfliner* and suddenly we were looking at our distorted reflections and the reflected grandstand and green hills in the mirrored surface of the sleeper car.

"Um, okay," said Eric.

I grinned and offered Trace my elbow again. "Shall we." This time she hesitated before slipping her cracklenailed fingers around my arm.

The sun was its own breadth above the water and everything looked buttered and basking as I led them off the bridge and down the berm. We stepped into our shadows as we made our way across the cracked and weedgrown lot. The grandstand pale golden tan. Darker patches where plaster had fallen. Bright green ivy nearly glowing in the fading light. I glanced back at the mirrored Surfliner gleaming unearthly on the bridge and thought about what had and had not changed since March.

I'd had to tell Dr. Ramchandani that his son had burned down Paypay's shop and that he'd left town for good. After his initial disbelief Dr. Ram just kind of collapsed in his clothes and started sobbing deep soundless sobs the way I had cried on the railroad tracks after escorting Yan out of town. I'd closed up shop for him and walked him home. I offered to go up with him while he told Parmita and Nan but he just held up a hand and shook his head. I wanted to help, to say something that would fill some of the plug I'd torn out of his heart. But I just watched as he staggered into the dim lobby of his apartment building, fallen in on himself and looking, for the first time in my recollection, old.

From there I went to Paypay's new shop. Either the same goddamn bell or one just like it was on the front door. Paypay looked up at me when it jingled.

"Paypay. Can I talk to you a minute."

Paypay never said a word about the fire or Yan or my extracurricular education. I was grateful for his silence. I knew I was on probation, but in his silence I also heard a slow forgiveness as well. I did the work he set me without complaint and I learned. Then I went home and worked on the castings I wanted to work on. Cautiously, patiently, without the urgency and ambition I'd felt when Yan had been pushing me.

The only thing unsatisfying about it was that I had no one to share what I was learning. At first I missed Yan terribly despite everything. When I found another use for a stasis bottle spell I'd look forward to telling him about it and then I'd remember. When I lay awake at night the Surfliner would seem too quiet and I'd remember. When I made coffee and ground enough beans for two people, when I walked to the beach to watch the sunset, then I'd remember.

I threw myself into my work, into working for Paypay and helping Dr. Ram.

One day Dr. Ram said, "Parmita would like to know why you have not been over for dinner, Fred. To tell you the truth I would like to know as well."

"Well I guess I thought you wouldn't want me over."

"Why would that be." He was studying his little notepad, I think so I couldn't see his eyes. "We all need all the family we can get, you know."

At one of those dinners my father had been a guest. He arrived after me and I'm ashamed to admit that as he pulled his scabbarded sword from his beltloop and set it politely by the front door my initial reaction was resentment at Dr. Ram's manipulation. At dinner my father had passed me the naan and said So how've you been, Fred. It wasn't until that moment that I remembered that Yan had told me that my father had written some kind of book. A lot had happened and I'd had a lot on my mind. Or maybe I'd been avoiding it. I don't know. But I realized that I missed him.

We kept it light, both of us circling around the thing between us that was too big to take on just yet. Still I was glad we'd made some initial effort however tentative.

One night I was reading a book by the light of a glow-spell above my little Surfliner bed, the sound of crashing waves accompanying the cool salt air through the opened ceiling vents, and I marked my place and told the light to go out and stared past the ceiling and listened to that timeless crashing and wondered at the emotion I was feeling until I realized that I hadn't recognized it because I hadn't felt it in a long time. I was happy.

Walking toward the grandstand with the group from Temecula I smiled suddenly, remembering that night, that feeling. "Hey, what is that thing."

Eric hefted the painted wooden tube. "Didgeridoo."

"Do what."

He grinned. "Do this." He set the large end on a chunk of asphalt and put his mouth against the waxed end, and — well, I don't know what he did to it. Blew into it or sang into it or talked through it. Maybe all three. Whatever he did the sound that came out was a deep organic thrum that felt strangely familiar to something primal in me. I hadn't heard much music. Mr. Guevera's guitar. Singing. Drum circles on the beach. Somehow this was outside all that. He played the thing for about a minute and then sounded a hornlike toot and took his mouth from it and grinned.

"Wow. That was..." I shook my head. "Wow."

He laughed. "Just wait."

Five guys played hackysack in a ring beside the old fountain in the little plaza before the main entrance to the

grandstand. Past them was the highgrassed oval promenade where horses used to be displayed before races. A lot of people milled around talking or smoking cloves or sage or weed or whatever and passing flasks or bottles. Others tethered horses in the little stable stalls. There was a lot of yelling as people recognized each other. I got the impression many of them had last seen each other at other vibes.

As we went from the promenade to the pathworn grassy entrance tunnel into the grandstand Trace and Taylor let go of me so we could all hug people. There was a great feeling in the air. A sense of wanting to touch and be touched, of contact just for its own sake. The tunnel was jammed and I was hugged and patted and passed along for a solid ten minutes before emerging onto the concrete walkway leading to the stands. Eric spilled out behind me looking happily dazed. We saw each other and started laughing. We hugged each other as a kind of coda. All the contact in that joyous gauntlet had polished my senses. My skin was vibrating. I realized how little I'd been touched these last months.

"This is gonna be so great," Eric said as our hug broke. "It already is."

The next throb washed over us. The grandstand shuddered and then rang after the throb had stopped. A tattered cheer from the diffuse crowd. Eric laughed and took my arm. "Come on. The others'll find us."

We followed the trickling crowd along the path through the highgrassed band that had been the track and onto the enormous oval infield. What had been a lake in the middle of the infield was now a tiny island of tall grass from which tall bare palms projected.

We walked past the sunbleached scoreboard scrawled with ivy, following the trampled path across the old front stretch toward the concrete pavilion. Beyond that were the platforms set up for the vibe. People ran yelling and laughing from the paths to stalk each other through the tall

grass. Groups spread blankets across the freshcut infield grass. Small groups lounged in the folding seats up in the grandstand. I couldn't get over all the new faces. Every swap meet there'd be a couple of people I'd never seen before come to trade from ten or twenty miles away or stopping by as they traveled along the coast. But here were a thousand new faces from places I had never heard of. Temecula. Fallbrook. Escondido. I remembered that widening feeling I had felt the day that Yan first led me to the Surfliner. The sudden vertigo of perspective. And now inhabitants of that real and larger place beyond Del Mar prevailed throughout this wasted icon of my childhood. More strangers in my field of vision than there were people in my town.

Many of the pavilion's walls were ivy-covered and many terracotta roof shingles were broken or missing. Otherwise it showed little sign of wear. My father had said it would outlast the pyramids. I'd seen pictures of pyramids and didn't know what the fuss was about. Office towers were a lot more impressive.

Eric and I approached the two platforms erected between turns one and two. Ten feet square and three feet high and fifty feet apart. Each with pentagrams carefully drawn and westaligned and nicely edged. Between them something shimmered in the air.

In the center of the lefthand pentagram a skinny guy wearing a checked overshirt knelt before a saucepan on a folding campstove. Tattoos vined his neck to spread at his bald head. He made a pass and put a black feather in the saucepan and said something. The shimmer gave a shudder and the next throb nearly knocked me down. Not a musical note. You felt it. Everything for a mile had to have felt it.

One of the Safe Circle crew stacking scrapwood for a bonfire well back from the platforms grinned at the caster working in his pentagram. The caster shrugged back like it was no big deal but then grinned.

“That’s Wedo.”

“Your friend who’s spinning.”

Eric nodded.

“What’s the other platform for.”

“That’s right, you’re a virgin.” Before I could thank him hugely for yelling it out he said, “That’s so cool. You’re gonna have the time of your life, I swear. Your first vibe’s always the best. Do you know how all this works.” I shook my head and he nodded, excited. “You’re a caster, right. You’ll like this.” He indicated the caster on the platform. “Wedo’s doing a spell that makes a sort of energy ball in the air.”

“A force cage.”

“He spins the energy ball and makes it vibrate really fast and it starts pushing the air around it in all directions. He spins the ball and then, he says this is the tricky part, he contracts and expands it in rhythm. Boom, big masses of air spread out. Boom, big low notes go all over the place.”

“With you so far.”

“Okay. Here’s where it gets very cool. Another spinner does the same thing on the other platform. So now you’ve got two big spinning balls of energy vibrating like fuckall. The spinners tune them in and synch them up and then they start playing with them. Different speeds, different rhythms, different harmonics. The vibrations start to get complex, like—” he nudged his didgeridoo with a foot “—like this, but huge. Epic.”

“Vibe,” I realized.

He folded his arms and smiled. “There ya go.”

I shook my head. “I thought it called was a vibe because of the whole together-as-one thing. You know, the vibe. Duhh.”

But Eric’s smile broadened to show teeth. “Oh but it is.”

I looked around. For some reason I couldn’t have named tears stung my eyes. Eric set a hand on my shoulder. “Welcome to the tribe, Fred.”

Eric raised his didge and Wedo saw him and waved us over. Eric introduced me and Wedo grinned. He had an infectious grin. "Like that last one?"

"I think people in San Diego probably liked that last one."

He laughed. "Bringing the sounds to the people." He jutted his sharp chin at Eric's didge. "We gonna try that thing?"

"Hellyeah. Sam here yet?"

"Somewhere. She better be here soon, I'm about ready to roll."

"We'll get out of your way then."

Wedo clapped his shoulder and they touched foreheads. "Come back when we've been going a couple hours, okay? We'll do the thing." He saw my expression and grinned. "Secret. Big surprise."

"If it works," said Eric.

"If it works," said Wedo, "that's the surprise."

Eric joined some drummers and I listened to them for a while. People danced. I just swayed and watched. Somehow Eric played his didgeridoo for fifteen minutes without stopping to breathe. Or somehow he breathed and blew into it at the same time. However he did it the drone never stopped. What he played was complex. Rhythm and counterpoint and syncopation, harmonics and harmonies, toots and growls. He made that hollow log do five things at once. It sounded great with the drums.

A blue-eyed girl with beaded cornrows pulled me deep into the dancers. Someone passed a flask. I took a swig and took another one. Some kind of tequila? After a while I hugged the girl I was dancing with and hugged another girl

I realized we had been dancing with and waved to Eric and wandered off.

The grandstand was a blacker wedge against the indigo sky. I looked for people I knew from town but it was getting too dark to recognize anyone. I sat in a stadium chair near the front just as the bonfire lit. A cheer went up. I put my feet on the seatback in front of me and watched the shadow-play of dancers before the fire. Synchronized hands of redlit drummers. Wedo casting in his pentagram beyond. A scene as old as people.

The next throb made the bonfire flinch. My arm hair flattened. By the bonfire light I dimly made out people scattered about in the seats. Resting watching smoking drinking. On an upper level a girl was calling Andy? Aaaaan-deeee?

Another throb went out from between the platforms. Just as powerful but the tone had changed. I looked toward the firelit platforms and saw someone in the righthand pentagram now. Wooden barricades had been set around the shimmering energy cages. A ball of air between the platforms glittered firelight. It brightened and rushed toward a common center and then rushed away. The throb hit. Glitter contract expand: the second tone hit.

Then both cages pulsed and both tones sounded.

I was on my feet and yelling before I knew what I was doing. I couldn't hear my own voice. The tones continued, rich in harmonics and enveloping me and enclosing everything. I could lean against that sound. The tones ended and I heard myself yelling and I realized everyone around me was yelling too. Around the bonfire primal shadows raised their spectral arms. People streamed from the grandstand. Drawn to the fire, drawn to that sound. I was one of them laughing and stumbling in the tall grass, holding on and being held. When I was halfway there the massive throbbing opened up again and pulsed a steady beat. By the time I reached the bright bonfire a second,

syncopating beat wound round the huge relentless pull of godlike fundamental throb.

Spinners sheltered in their circles, crowd around me lost in rhythm, ring of motion round the fire, tribal movement unifying. Fire's heat against my face. Bodies surging all around me. Weight and press and warmth and life, massive sound from throbbing cages pressing on my sensile skin, pulsing air that flapped my clothes. Swimming in the lake of sound we laughed we yelled we touched. We danced around the bonfire with our thousand other selves surrendered to the overwhelming rhythm that made moths of our connected souls.

Refilling my hydration pack from a big dispenser set up near the front stretch. It was hours later, or not. Someone threw a cup into a trashcan and patted my sweatsoaked shoulder and walked back toward the fire. I tried to place the figure and the long tube he carried. Caught up to him and touched his shoulder and said his name. He turned. The light in his eyes was odd and even frightening but I knew I had it in my own because it was in everybody else's. He grinned and pointed toward the righthand platform and I nodded and he led me through the pullulating crowd.

I staggered into someone and apologized and realized I was really drunk. I laughed and closed my eyes. Opened them and realized I was kissing someone. Leaned away. She smiled and set crackled black fingernails against my mouth. I pointed to Eric standing at the edge of the pentagram and Taylor nodded and we held hands and went to stand beside him. From behind I put my hands around her waist and tried to tell her that the smell of her hair could bring me from my sleep to stand before her door however far away her door might be. But she wouldn't have heard me and I wasn't making much sense anyway.

Eric waited for the spinner to see him as she knelt above her own small campstove fire. She and Wedo faced each other and watched each other's distorting figures through the shimmering air and played off each other's gestures as they worked the very air around them. A footwide miniature of her energy cage floated in the air outside her pentagram. This was what she was controlling and its motions were amplified into the energy cage beyond. Very clever: slave the larger to the smaller and manipulate the smaller. Less work, less risk, more control.

I liked watching them, liked the power funneling from them to the energy cages and then out to the crowd which gave it back. And their responses entered the tonic rhythms that washed across the crowd. It was a kind of looping collaboration. It looked hard and dangerous and fun.

The spinner, Sam I guess, saw Eric waving and nodded. Eric grinned at me.

A few minutes later the two spinners brought the rhythm to a head and then brought it down again until what remained was only Wedo's initial steady throb, slow insistent chthonic creature straining at its leash. Sam broke the pentagram at the cardinal points with a piece of rebar and motioned to Eric who jumped onto the platform and stepped cautiously across the painted border as if stepping across a crevasse which in a way he was. Sam hugged him and asked some questions and then looked at me and showed no recognition. Maybe I was backlit by the bonfire.

Eric left the pentagram and headed for the shimmering space between the platforms that still pulsed in time with Wedo's gestures. He rested the bell of his didgeridoo on a rickety folding tray before that massive array of energies. He nodded at Sam and she rejoined her pentagram and tied back her red hair and touched her toes and shook her legs before resuming her position. When she re-formed her energy cage what she conjured this time wasn't a ball but a ring. Its vibration threw back shards of firelight.

Close before me Taylor twisted round. "Have you seen this."

I shook my head. "Virgin."

She ruffled my hair and laughed. "We'll be gentle."

Eric put his mouth to the didgeridoo and then lifted his mouth and shook his head and spun a finger at Sam. The vibration increased. Eric drew a huge breath and put his mouth to the instrument and blew again and the dancers nearest him fell down. Something pushed my left side and I staggered holding Taylor as the bonfire flames blew back and the grandstand groaned and rang.

Taylor laughed and broke away and pulled me stumbling toward the surge of dancers. Some of them still picking themselves up startled but unhurt. Eric ghostly through the pulsing lens of coruscating air. He blew again. A long deep growling heartfelt purr. All around me people laughed or smiled or kissed, moving touching laughing. We danced.

In the grandstand drinking water and trying to catch my breath. Three or four A.M. Soaking wet and cold. Around me people resting drinking smoking fucking sleeping. Overhang reverberating with the massive infield rhythm. Mist encroaching on the infield. I shut my eyes and grinned. I could sleep. Did I want to sleep. What would I miss if I slept. This was the first time I'd stopped moving since the sun went down. I laughed and opened my eyes and stood uncertainly and knocked the folding seatback up behind my legs and wavered a bit. Oopsy. "I'm not as drunk as I look," I told the chairback.

"Well I hope not."

I turned. "I'm just clumsy. It works out about the same but doesn't hurt as bad next day. Hi Sam."

She leaned from shadow with a joint brightening as she inhaled. Her hi came out all smoke and without recognition.

"I work at the casting shop. You and your friend were handing out flyers for the vibe."

"The unicorn guy. The charmer."

"Um, that day, yeah. Usually, though, I—"

"What are you, Eddie, sixteen?"

"Fred. Eighteen."

"Fifteen."

I folded my arms. "Seventeen and that's my final offer."

"Sold." She tossed the roach and crabstepped into the aisle. Halfway down the steps she looked back. "Going once, going twice."

I nearly fell over getting out of the row. Clumsy, drunk. It works out about the same.

A narrow path led through the infield overgrowth to the taller grass island where the center lake had been. Sam seemed to know her way through it as she led me deeper in. I couldn't decide if her familiarity toward me and with the path we took intimidated or excited me. Maybe both.

In the center island the dry grass and shrubs were higher than my head and rustled with the pulsing bass as if some monstrous creature beat the bushes flushing quarry. Ahead of me Sam turned a corner. I hurried to catch up and turned the corner and then stopped. No Sam. Dry grass shivered rhythm but no wind blew or body passed amid the overgrowth. There was no moon and I could barely see the path before me.

"Sam." I felt foolish. Dry grass whispered hisses.

"Sam."

From the grandstand someone called out Annn-dee.

I held my hands before me and walked slowly, dragged my feet to feel the narrow path. Thrumming through my

shoes. Overhead the high grass drooped to form a canopy of black. Three hundred yards away a thousand people danced to music moving dry brush all around me yet I might as well have been alone out in the woods.

The sound around me broadened and I realized I had come into a clearing. Kneehigh dew-wet grass. Low and drifting overcast faint orange in the bonfire light. Deep abiding rhythm, dry grass rustling reply. I tried to find the grandstand but could only see the top outlined against the mist. I was in a slight depression, the bed of the vanished lake. Dew had wet my pantlegs and my legs were cold. The rhythm seemed stronger. I thought about calling Sam again and decided hell with it. I was drunk and it was late and I was tired and it was dark and I was cold and this was weird.

I turned to find the path and make my way back to the warming fire and dancers' heat. Motionless before me Sam stood alabaster in the diffuse light, bundled clothes held draped before her.

"Aren't you cold," I said. Like an idiot.

She dropped her bundle and stepped toward me. I couldn't see her face. Beyond the bonfire deep undinal throbbing thickened. Right then I really needed to see her face. See if it was serious or mocking or filled with heat or condescending or just plain stoned and nothing more. The rhythm came from all around us now. As if generated by our meeting in this clearing.

Behind her bushes parted and a unicorn emerged. Ghostly silent huge and blackeyed. Gossamer mane and silver hooves and spiral horn. Muscular. Almost luminous in the clearing's dark. It saw us and stopped.

Unaware of it Sam took another step toward me. "What kind of magic can you make with this." And brushed back her red hair.

I could see she thought the look of pure stunned wonder on my face was because of her. Then she realized I was

looking past her and her selfassurance faltered. She said What and turned to see what I was looking at.

I can't say how long we stood there in our strange tableau with that deep rhythm shaking everything around us. Sam naked beautiful and cold in flesh and heart and staring in that timeless stillness. Me damp with sweat and dew and shivering cold and staring at the heartbreaking beauty of the unicorn stately at the clearing's edge. I did not move. Sam did not move. As if motion would dispel it like a mist.

The surrounding rhythm grew louder and discordant. Hissing grass a random susurrantion. A breeze blew Sam's hair and fluffed the unicorn's gossamer mane. I think the sudden wind made Sam aware of being naked. I think the knowledge made her feel ashamed. In any case she bent and got her clothes.

The unicorn flashed across the clearing and into the brush without a sound and gone.

Sam straightened and turned to me with clothes pressed tight against her. I could see her face just fine now. "You fucking asshole."

"You're the one who moved. I didn't make it go anywhere."

"You're just the one who made it, period."

"What?"

"What. What." She started putting on her clothes. "Charm boy. What the fuck was I thinking." She put on her jacket and zipped it up with unmistakable finality and said fuck you and left me standing there.

"I wasn't laughing at you," I told the space she'd occupied.

Still I did not move. I felt privileged and diminished. Finally I wiped my sleeves against my eyes and thought about how to find my way out of the overgrowth. I skirted the clearing's edge and found the path again but hesitated.

Something was wrong with the music. The dry grass was no longer beating in rhythm. The pulsing metronome had

been broken. Like the sound was hitting a distant wall and weird echoes had started returning out of synch. It had taken on an oddly threatening edge.

I felt an overwhelming urge to run.

Screw the path. It's just grass. I crashed through the overgrowth and waved my arms as if swatting bees and knocked stalks aside and pushed through the dried and brittle brush.

I came out facing the grandstand. The enormous structure shuddered with the broken rhythms. I remembered reading that soldiers once were ordered to break stride when they marched across wooden bridges because if enough of them walked at a certain pace it could start a resonance that could wreck the bridge. Sympathetic vibration it was called.

I ran toward the pentagrams.

The painful sound was screwing up my equilibrium. It was hard to run in a straight line, like I was being slugged with pillows. The dancing had stopped and people were holding onto each other or pressing their palms to their ears, which helped relieve the piercing dissonance but not the body blows of sound. The concrete and iron grandstand was protesting. People stumbled down the steps beneath the trembling overhang and struggled toward the exit as if fighting a gale. It didn't help that most of them were wasted. Many of them ran into the tunnel and then ran back out. It probably felt like the whole thing was about to come down on them. Maybe it was.

I went around turn two and came up behind the platform where Wedo had been spinning. He had yielded his spot some time ago and from what I could tell the new spinner was trying to shut down the energy cage and it was having none of it.

If you're fighting something that you're casting either your pentagram was poorly made or something wants in real bad. Either way I couldn't help him without knowing what spells he was using and breaching the integrity of a pentagram while a casting is underway is pure suicide.

I looked around. No sign of Wedo or Eric. Even Sam would have been a welcome sight right now. I wondered if I could figure out the casting from the ingredients around the campstove in the empty pentagram at turn one.

I fell once as I ran to it. The pentagram was still broken at its cardinal points. The length of rebar lay nearby. I stepped in and quickly rejoined it and then knelt before the campstove and looked for matches to relight it. A woman yelled and I looked up to see Sam outside the circle looking scared and angry and definitely wanting in. I broke the circle again and she hurried in. She said something and I pointed to my ears and shook my head and she put her lips against my ear. "Get. The fuck. Out. Of my. Circle."

I pointed at the other spinner struggling for control inside his pentagram and shook my head and yelled into her ear. "What. Spell. Is it."

She didn't want to tell me and I didn't want to argue. A deep grinding filled the air and I looked past the north end of the track just as the roof collapsed on the far side of the grandstand.

I grabbed Sam's shoulder. "Spell."

The massive roof rippled like a flag and she relented and yelled "Bolus."

Even in the midst of all that chaos I could only gape in disbelief. The bolus is one of the first spells anyone learns. Casting 101. A little ball of energy you conjure up to prove you can. But at some point someone had realized you could slave a bolus to a really big bolus and fluctuate it to push air around and make rhythms.

Buffeted by sound I lit the stove and threw in a crow-feather and sulphur and the rest of the ingredients. Sam

spoke the incantation and the air began to shimmer again beside the pulsing ball the other spinner fought. Sam got it going and I indicated that I wanted to take over. Clearly she didn't want me to. Just as clearly she had no better idea herself. I put my hands over her hands and she slid aside and I took her place. It felt like I was trying to hold a floating ball of water. You had to handle it a certain way. There was surprising resistance because I wasn't manipulating the bolus but the larger energy cage beyond the platform. Tiny movements yielded big results. My first few gestures made a sonic horror that was worse than what I was trying to fight.

I glanced at the other spinner in his pentagram and something wrenched the bolus from my control. My hands flew from a common center as if I'd tried to grab a spinning wheel.

I got the bolus under control and held it spinning steadily. The huge energy cage slaved to it hummed with its velocity but sent out no more throbbing notes. Sam yelled something but I ignored her. The dissonance was increasing. The bonfire flinched in the gale of sound. Across from us the other spinner was losing his wrestling match with his energy cage.

I closed my eyes and felt the rhythm with my hands and not my ears and what I felt was someone else's casting trying to take over. What I felt felt familiar.

I opened my eyes and twitched my fingers and the bolus contracted and expanded. Fighting it would probably cause more damage than letting it take over. I needed to do to the unseen caster what he was trying to do to me and use my own bolus to control his. Work it into his broken rhythm and then start messing with it.

Paypay's visualization exercises paid off now. I imagined my bolus was a marble and the energy cage was a beachball. I imagined a wide rubber band stretched around the marble and the beachball so that if I turned the marble back

and forth the beach ball turned as well but its motion was amplified. Now here comes another caster with his own marble and he stretches his own rubber band around my beachball and starts turning his marble and taking control of the beachball himself. I imagined my senses extending through my hands into the bolus and through the energy cage and out along the lines of power into the unseen caster's bolus. I tried to glean a pattern and anticipate the next movement. The hardest part was not fighting it.

The spinner on the other platform caught on to what I was doing and struggled with his own bolus until its pattern matched mine. He probably thought bringing it in line would negate the influence of the interloper. I couldn't blame him but I wanted him to stop, now and fast, but I couldn't stop what I was doing without making things worse. He got his pattern aligned with mine and instead of occasional violent peaks from our battle with the interloper we got a savage thrum torn from the core of the world as the two giant balls of energy began to resonate. Soldiers must break stride.

Glass blew from the grandstand skyboxes and rained shards down on the infield. Girders in the center began to bend.

Something wrenched my hands off of the bolus. I yelled and wrung burned palms. Okay, he knows I'm here.

The energy cage spun faster outside the pentagram. Somehow the interloper was feeding energy into it. The spinning ball now glowed a dull red as the air around it heated.

It was getting hot inside the pentagram too.

I leaned close to Sam and yelled that I was going to open the pentagram so she could get the hell out of here. I picked up the rebar and Sam punched me in the jaw and tried to take it. I couldn't really blame her. She thought I was going to kill us both by opening our pentagram and subjecting us to the forces outside it. Well maybe I was. But if the

unknown caster kept feeding power to the energy cage it would soon overcome the spell that constrained it and blow apart and the bolus inside our pentagram would probably go nova too. So I put a foot behind Sam and tripped her and before she got back up I used the iron bar to break the pentagram at the four cardinal points. And was nearly knocked down as the sound pressure wave washed across me like a tide. My bones rang with it. My brain concussed against my skull. The deep thrum pulsed so quickly now that it was a constant pressure, the pushing spell Yan and I had wished for when we'd moved the railcar.

Yan. Oh son of a bitch.

The contracting energy cage had flared from red to orange and was humming like a tenfoot hive of angry bees. The containing spell couldn't hold much longer. Just outside the breached pentagram the small bolus paled to yellow. I shoved Sam from the pentagram and pointed toward the exit to the promenade. She hesitated and then ran.

Outside the pentagram was bedlam. The grandstand roof was buckling in the center, taking the skyboxes with it in a broad V down to the mezzanine. Glass had blown everywhere. Bonfire sparks had set the dry grass burning. I saw a few people running and a few on the ground but it looked like most had made it out.

The other spinner breached his own pentagram made a break for it and he yelled at me as he ran by. I guess he thought I was crazy. I'm not sure he was wrong. I sealed my pentagram again.

Magic flows along a path like water in a pipe. Yan said electricity had worked like that and that a pentagram was like a Faraday cage. All I knew was that pentagrams aren't for casting so much as they're for protecting casters from the castings they make by keeping the energy outside the circle. Two things will quickly turn a casting graveyard bad. The pentagram gets breached from outside and all the

casting's energy blows out the breach at once. Or the pentagram gets breached incorrectly from inside and the casting's energy eventually overcomes the pentagram and it tears apart at its weakest point. Either way the pentagram itself is where the energy gets channeled.

I could let the spinning ball of energy go critical and stay in my pentagram and hope it held while the discharge blew the shit out of everything else for miles around.

I could incorrectly breach both pentagrams knowing that the casting's energy would discharge out the flaws and hope that I could aim the discharge somewhere harmless.

I could incorrectly breach my pentagram and aim the flaw at the other pentagram and then haulass into that one and seal it before the breached one discharged into it, and hope the one I sealed would stand up to the blast. If it worked it would absorb the energy and I'd be safe and Del Mar would still be part of the coastline. If it didn't work — well it wouldn't be any worse than my other two options would it. Which meant there really was no other option.

I looked down at the length of rebar. You sure about this, Fred?

The energy cage was whitehot now and hissing as it burned air.

Fuck it. I scraped away the yard of my pentagram closest to the other platform and then ran out. The spinning ball of air was now a little sun a few yards wide, blinding white and keening. I winced against its heat and my armhair singed as I ran like hell around it to the other platform.

Brush burned all across the infield now and false dawn grayed the eastern sky. Metal girders screamed above the grating keen of spinning orb. The remainder of the buckled grandstand roof rippled and collapsed. Pieces flew and dark dust billowed.

I jumped onto the turn two platform and into the pentagram. The spinner had tossed out his potion and shut off the campstove before he'd run like hell. Got to admire good

work habits. I grabbed his squeezebag of blessed blood and paint — a nozzled confectioner's bag, very clever — and hurriedly rejoined the cardinal points and spoke the standard invocation that would seal the pentagram as hand dexter traced the fivepointed star in the air and then hand sinister traced the circle round it. If I had done a shitty job sealing the pentagram I'd be less than toast when the energy cage

discharged.

A dome around me lit up white before the shockwave knocked me to my hands and knees. The pentagram was protected but the ground beneath it shook as rolling thunder filled the world. I lay prone and shut my eyes and held onto the surging platform and rode out the inferno, held on until the light dimmed and the platform stilled.

I opened my eyes. Starklit palmtrees bent back as if craning to look up at a geyser of white light that rose above the infield fires. A ring of blackened grass leaned away from it. The force of the explosion had blown out most of the infield fire.

I watched my shadow fade as preternatural daylight gave way to genuine dawn. Then I got up and turned in a complete circle and felt a hard click in my throat when I swallowed.

The platform was charred black and smoking except for a perfect circle of unmarred pine within the pentagram. The platform at turn one was gone.

I found the rebar and breached the pentagram. Correctly.

From the grandstand's tunnel entrance I saw people picking themselves up on the promenade. The structure groaned and shook around me. Ahead of me my shadow wavered from the burning infield light behind. I knew I shouldn't be standing here waiting for a thousand tons of

building to fall on me. I wasn't indifferent, I was numb. I had no room for more.

The back side of the grandstand had survived but shards of glass and terracotta had rained everywhere. Across the oval courtyard people had sought shelter in the tiny bare stalls where horses were tethered. Across from me a large-eyed girl stared up at the lightening sky. Tall gangly wild-haired and swallowed by a U.S. Marines coat. She brushed herself off absently and turned around as if looking for someone. I thought her hair was dyed in dark streaks until I saw the streaks grow longer and saw her hand gleam as it lowered from brushing back her hair. She seemed oblivious and kept dusting herself off as if cleaning her dirty jacket were the most important thing.

I glanced up at a lengthy sound of creaking. Swaying on a huge-linked chain an enormous chandelier winked orange infield fire. I walked out of the tunnel and onto the grassy promenade. Nothing crashed behind me.

The bleeding girl stood looking at the dawn sky as if puzzled by it. I went to help her. She gave no sign she saw me as she put her hands to her mouth and took a deep breath, and even before she yelled it out I knew the name she'd call.

People said it was a miracle no one was killed. I couldn't disagree. Dozens had been hurt. Cuts, scrapes, concussions from falling tiles. Most had hearing problems for weeks afterward. My ears rang for days.

The town held a meeting and decided that any future events held at the track other than the swap meet required town approval. I didn't tell anyone my suspicion about Yan. It would have required revealing that Yan had burned down Paypay's shop, though I think most people suspected that anyhow with Yan suddenly absent from Del Mar, and

I tried to convince myself it didn't matter because Yan was gone and what had happened at the vibe was just his little parting gift. Even though the parting itself had occurred three months ago.

Be seeing you.

I don't think so.

That's because you haven't thought this through.

Dread reunions, wands on the hill at dawn. Thunder and lightning, scorched earth. Thou nemesis my ancient. The whole pointy hatted ball of wax.

I was going to have to learn more defensive casting.