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The Fantastic Machine

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The Fantastic Machine

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

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Abstract

The Fantastic Machine - the story of a man who struggles to keep family & friends safe when evil visits 1905 Portland, Oregon.

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Chapter One

The Cloud looked the same today as it did yesterday, and the day before that, and every day for the last two years.

"There's an opening, Jefferson, right there," Isabelle said. She bunched a fistful of her purple bustle-wrap skirt into one wrinkled hand and hurried after Jefferson, her boots splashing on the granite walkway behind him. "Can't you go faster?"

"I see it, Ma."

Jefferson was a big, broad-shouldered man in a worn and scuffed chocolate frock coat that almost matched the color of his brigade-striped trousers. He held her free hand and kept walking along the terrace above the sunken garden, walking fast. He looked ahead to the spot on the railing where the ebb and flow of the crowd had created an opening, the perfect overlook spot.

"Hurry," she said, and squeezed his hand.

He looked over his shoulder but couldn't see her face below the broad rim of her purple hat until, aware of his gaze, she looked up. There were dark circles under her eyes. The blunt light from the gray sky above lit her skin with a pale translucence, the way old skin gets: green and blue veins, blotchy patches of red, burst capillaries.

"Go," she said.

It was ten-thirty in the morning. Dirigibles thrummed beneath the gray-black ceiling that dripped enough to warrant the oiled hats and coats. A man was speaking to the crowd through an amplifier, delivering the Exposition's inauguration speech, but Jefferson had been too busy navigating the crowd to listen.

The terrace around the sunken garden was thick with people. He pulled Isabelle past a knot of Beaver-lined coats reeking of cigar smoke, through a gap between two parasols that hardly kept their owners dry, and wedged himself into the not-quite-big-enough opening at the

terrace rail.

"Perfect," he said.

"I wouldn't go that far." Isabelle nudged Jefferson out of the way and clamped her small hands onto the white rail. "We're a bit far from the stage and there's hardly time enough to fetch a cup of tea, is there?"

"Just be glad you got a spot with a view."

"This damp weather chills me."

The weather was grim, no doubt, but that wasn't really what Isabelle was talking about.

"Are you going to get a cup," she said, "or not?"

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll stay here and you go get a cup." Jefferson dropped his hands into his coat pockets. "Better hurry, though, it looks like they're about to light it up."

The smile dropped from her face and he thought it was a small victory if she let it go at that. Isabelle had a legendary bad temper, but she cared for Jefferson in her own way. It was her way of protecting herself. She'd seen a lot of tragedy in her time. They both had. She turned her back to him, flexed her grip on the rail and stared out over the spectacle in the garden.

A small stage had been built at the south end, with red-white-and-blue bunting that sagged in the rain despite a broad and almost flat roof. The two rows of wood chairs on either side of the podium were occupied by old men with faces that looked confused or bored by the ceremony. The men on the left wore bright medals pinned to the chests of their blue or gray uniforms. Civil War veterans from both sides of the conflict, together they crisscrossed the Unified States visiting small country fairs and big international Expositions. On the other side of the podium sat two rows of men in black wool suits. Jefferson figured them for congressmen or tycoons or some such--each one had a way of looking down his nose at the crowd. At the garden's north end, overlooking Guild's Lake and reaching up maybe thirty meters above the crowd, stood the Fantastic Machine. It gave Jefferson an uneasy feeling as he watched its many parts spin and

whirl, hiss and click and pump.

He looked to the stage as the speaker invited Theodor Cabott to the podium. An older man, one of the suits dressed in black, tall and thin with long white hair and a short-trimmed white beard, approached the podium. He flicked the metal springs on the microphone and a sharp twang rang out from the gut-boxes set around the garden. He welcomed everyone to the 1905 Lewis & Clark Centennial Exposition and Pan Pacific Fair.

"I would especially like to thank those of you who traveled great distances to be here today in the great state of Oregon," Cabott said. His voice sounded stronger than he looked. "We haven't had a lot of visitors in the last two years."

Isabelle elbowed Jefferson. "He's talking about the Cloud," she said.

Jefferson took another look at the Fantastic Machine. "More talk," he said.

"What?" she said. "You don't want it gone?"

Jefferson's feelings for the Cloud were complicated. He hated the gray mass, the bad weather, the two-year stretch without so much as a nickle of blue sky, but in a strange way he'd come to rely on it. The Cloud allowed him to hide in his gloom, a visual reminder of his misery. If the rumors about the Fantastic Machine were true, then he'd have to say goodbye to the Cloud and learn to live a whole new kind of life.

"It's been twenty summers since the Atlanta Cloud first appeared," Cabott began. "So terrible was its arrival that it brought together our fractured nation and helped us end our two decades of Civil War."

The crowd applauded with wet, gloved hands, a sound more aggressive than supportive. The people were rapt, many had turned toward the podium but some were also gawking at the Fantastic Machine. Children splashed around its base and chased each other. Jefferson saw two men standing off to one side near a white pillar that supported nothing and dripped in the rain.

One of the men was shorter, a chubby little Chinese fellow with a slice of red vest visible

through his open, oiled coat. He wore a small bowler hat and stared straight ahead at the Fantastic Machine. The other fellow was much taller though he was hunched forward and appeared to be whispering into the shorter man's ear. He also wore an oiled coat and underneath it Jefferson saw a yellow suit. As he watched, the Whisperer turned his head slowly towards Jefferson. Polarized lenses in leather strapped goggles covered his eyes, but Jefferson felt as if the Whisperer could see right through him.

Theodor Cabott had been saying something. Jefferson had been lost in thought. He turned his attention to the podium and tried to ignore the nagging intuition that he'd just forgotten something.

"When the second Cloud poured forth from the hills above Heppner, Oregon, two years ago," Theodor Cabott said, "people the world over feared it was the beginning of the apocalypse." He paused and let the nervous laughter pass over the crowd.

Jefferson bit his lip. he knew first hand exactly how horrible the appearance of the Heppner Cloud had been. There hadn't been a day in two years that he didn't hear the crashing sound of flood waters thundering down Willow Creek.

"The Cloud collects in the lowlands," Cabott said. "It blocks out the sky over the Columbia and Willamette valleys. It crept as far as Astoria and stopped at the Pacific Ocean for reasons we still do not understand.

"There is a great deal we do not know about the Cloud," Cabott said, "but, as you are no doubt aware, I have picked up a few things along the way. Today we take the first step towards ending this scourge that has plagued our great nation. Today my Fantastic Machine will harness the energies of the earth itself to eradicate the Cloud."

The reciprocating gears on the Fantastic Machine hammered and clacked and the boiler tank at its base hissed under pressure. The children ran away from the noise. A great round and flat object armored in shiny brass slid up and down the length of rails fixed to the front of the

column. It looked to Jefferson like a giant scrambling beetle, its gears and springs visible through a porthole on its back.

Sticking up from the top of the Fantastic Machine Jefferson saw several spires. They were like long needles that flickered as tiny bolts of lightning danced between them. What began as one bolt, then another, rapidly became a constant crackling dance of lightning that arced out and upward from the top of the Fantastic Machine.

The crowd stepped even further away from the machine. Jefferson looked to the pillar where he'd seen the chubby little man and the tall gangly fellow. The Whisperer was gone. The Chinese fellow, though, he was still there, staring up at the Fantastic Machine with a calm disinterest so unlike the fascination expressed on the faces that surrounded him.

Jefferson could not be sure, not at this distance, but he thought the fellow's eyes looked clouded over and milky.

"Hey ma." Jefferson put a hand on Isabelle's shoulder and leaned forward. "I'm going to get you that cup of tea. Stay put, yeah?"

"What? Now?" Isabelle said.

Jefferson patted her shoulder and left her at the railing. He walked upstream toward the Fantastic Machine, slipping through the crowd on the terrace and down into the sunken garden to where the stout little man stood gazing up at the great contraption. He still had a few steps to go--the unruly children of a large family were blocking his path--when the lightning atop the Fantastic Machine snapped white light and blinked out.

He flinched and for a heartbeat nobody moved.

Lightning burst forth into the sky, the sound of seven thunders shook the air. Jefferson felt it echo in his guts as a dry wind passed over him making his flesh itch. The bolt of white light shot up into the Cloud like a cable and he thought of a fishing line sunk into the gray waters of a murky lake.

The Cloud split apart, spreading away from the crackling tangled ropes of electricity. For the first time in two years, Jefferson looked up and glimpsed blue sky.

He turned away. He felt exposed as if the lantern in the kitchen had been lit in the middle of the night and he'd been seen scurrying across the floor.

Someone small, a child, backed into him and grabbed his pant leg. He tried to shake the kid loose, but the child's father grabbed his son's hand and pulled him away.

The Chinese fellow was on the move, walking toward the Fantastic Machine.

Jefferson called to him but the crackling thunders drowned him out. He called again and started after him. The man continued without any sign he'd heard. He stepped over a low border of boxwood a few meters from the Fantastic Machine.

There were no guards standing around the machine's base. The general public instinctively backed away from the noise it was making, from the speed with which its gears turned and the piston rods pumped like Hephaestus himself was in there working the bellows. Jefferson followed the other man closer.

Theodor Cabott shouted something through the amplified gut-boxes but the noise of the machine stomped the message out. Jefferson's scalp itched and he saw sparks arcing from the machine to the ground. The air felt dry in his nose and had an almond taste to it. He stepped over the shrubs and grabbed the man's arm and spun him around. Jefferson stared into his milk-white eyes, the man's mouth hung open.

The great scarab-like mechanism that scrambled up and down the rails outside of the machine shot up to the top. Its gears spun and it slid back down the rails about halfway.

Jefferson pulled on the man's coat. Whatever was the matter with him, Jefferson felt sure the poor soul did not understand the danger he was putting himself in. "Stay away from that thing," Jefferson said.

The scarab clicked and whirred again and the man broke free of Jefferson's hold.

Jefferson stumbled back and tripped over the boxwood shrubs and fell into a cold puddle. Water soaked through his brigade-striped pants and the granite tile felt cold against his leg. The scarab slid down the rails to the bottom of the machine and the short round Chinese fellow ran to meet it.

He grabbed hold of it as it reached the bottom of the track and he held it tightly as it zoomed up towards the top of the machine. He pulled something that looked like a knife or a screwdriver out from a pocket and stabbed at the edge of polarized lens on the scarab's back, popped it free and sent it tumbling end over end to the ground where it shattered into thick plate-sized pieces on the lawn.

Without dropping the screwdriver--Jefferson was sure now that that's what it was--the man thrust his hand into the opening he had created. Clockwork springs and gears turning within the scarab bit hard on his hand, got hold of him and chewed him up. It pulled on his arm, and then it pulled on the rest of him.

By the time the scarab reached the top of the Fantastic Machine the gears had eaten the man's arm up to his shoulder. A chunky red mist shot through the other side of the scarab into the column of precision brass rods and switches, the engine-works of the Fantastic Machine. Jefferson was held spellbound by the horrific scene playing out in front of him. Standing this close to the machine Jefferson saw a piece within that he hadn't noticed before. He saw it briefly, as one reciprocating gear moved aside and the scarab slid past, but it looked unusual and stood out to him because it was not a piece of brass or iron. It was star shaped and made of green stone flecked with gray, like serpentine or a dirty jade.

With a lurch the scarab released its grip on the man and his lifeless body fell to the lawn with a bone-jarring thud. People were screaming. Jefferson wasn't sure for how long, it seemed as if all of a sudden his ears were filled with noise, screams from the people around him, rattling shouts from the gut-boxes that called for people to remain calm. He looked back to where he'd left Isabelle. He couldn't see through the crowd well enough to be sure she was there.

The Fantastic Machine ground out a terrible noise, a strained mechanical wrenching. Jefferson looked up to the sky as a bolt of lightning filled the hole in the Cloud, wriggled there, and vanished. A mighty thunder rumbled joined immediately by a hot wall of wind that knocked him back into the boxwoods.

He lay on his back at the foot of the Fantastic Machine and saw the hole in the sky turn to black. From the depths of that abyss hundreds of small shadowy objects shot forth. They came out all at once, bursting from the black hole in the Cloud and raining down on the people.

One landed near him. It was a hard little thing about the size of a coconut. Jefferson reached down to touch it. The shell appeared covered in wooden veins like a walnut shell. He touched it and flinched, drew back his hand and found a dot of blood already forming on his index finger. Fine hairs covered the shell. He kicked the ugly thing into the boxwoods.

The Fantastic Machine crackled again with lightning, the reciprocating gears turning as fast as ever. But the hole in the Cloud where he had for a moment seen blue sky, was now a dark-haloed ring, a gap. It was not part of the Cloud. It was a void and in it Jefferson saw stars.

Jefferson scrambled to his feet and turned and ran, pushing his way through the crowd. He saw people wrapping their coats around the coconuts and picking them up, treating them as if they were souvenirs from the Exposition's opening-day. The crowd seemed to recover quickly from having just seen a man chewed up and spit out again by a gigantic machine.

He returned to the spot where he'd left Isabelle but she wasn't there. He felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his guts. What if something happened to her? He needed to keep her safe. He'd failed in Heppner, he wouldn't fail again.

He spotted her in the crowd, not far from where they had been standing at the railing. She walked towards him. At her elbow, bent forward and whispering in her ear, was the lanky man in the yellow suit and polarized goggles.

"Get your hands off her," Jefferson said.

People moved aside. The Whisperer stopped walking and pushed Isabelle forward. Jefferson grabbed his mother's hands and looked into her eyes. They were hazel surrounded by bloodshot veins.

"Ma," Jefferson said. "Are you all right? What'd he do to you?"

Isabelle squeezed his hands. She mumbled something that sounded like "Clicky-lee" but with all the noise Jefferson couldn't quite catch what it was.

"What did you do?" Jefferson said. He tried to release Isabelle but she held his hands with a strength that surprised him. People were watching.

The Whisperer backed away. His eyes inscrutable, his lips moving.

The people nearby clogged the gap between Jefferson and the Whisperer, they looked at Jefferson as if it had been unreasonable of him to shout at the nice man in yellow.

Isabelle released Jefferson's hands. She looked up at him. "So where's that cup of tea?" she said.

Chapter Two

Jefferson Shannon stared through frosted glass at the backwards gold letters on the other side of his office door. He ran his hand over his face and tried to wrap his head around the concept one more time.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Can't this wait until Ginnie Mac gets here? She loves this kind of stuff, right?"

There was another fellow with him in the small office, a man with a hard stare and an age just on the other side of fifty. His name was Lee Martin and he was what passed for Jefferson Shannon's oldest friend.

"You're going to have to learn sometime," Martin said.

"Your daughter's a better teacher than you are."

"She is something." Martin smiled. "Listen, it's simple. You want to find this guy, here's how you do it. Request for terms like 'Yellow Suit,' 'Goggles,' and I don't know, 'Hypnotist,' perhaps. Maybe he knew that Chinese guy. Maybe you punch some of those words on the card, too. It's easy."

Jefferson felt like Martin was speaking gibberish. He scooted himself away from the terminal. "Why don't you just show me?"

Martin laughed but there wasn't any humor in it. "How have you lived in Portland for two years and not used the Public Computing Works?"

"Isabelle's got the tube," Jefferson said.

"You can't stay stuck in the past."

Martin looked at his shoes and Jefferson paid close attention to his hands. They let the silence hang between them for a moment.

"I'm not stuck there," Jefferson said. "The future's going to get here just fine without any

help from me."

"It's passing you by right now, kid."

Martin grabbed a punch-tape card and set it on the desk in front of Jefferson and started walking him through it.

It had been Lee Martin who had convinced the owner of the Portland Hotel to upgrade from the pneumatic tubeway to the Public Computing Works. With the Exposition coming to town the hotel owner had been willing to invest in it. But the real reason Martin lobbied for the new terminal was so that he could let his daughter play with it. He knew as well as anyone that a career in Public Computing could mean big things for any person who showed they had the talent, and Ginnie Mac had talent in spades.

Martin flipped open his pocket watch, exclaimed at the time and hurried to the door.

"Come in," he said. "You haven't been waiting long?"

Ginnie Mac had shoulder-length dark hair which she kept out of her face with a pair of welder's goggles pushed back over her head. Jefferson thought it made her look like a boy. Fifteen years was too old for her to dress up in coveralls and heavy workshop gloves, but Martin had always spoiled her.

"What are you working on?" Her satchel clanged when it hit the floor.

"Request for information," Jefferson said.

"Let him figure it out, baby," Martin said. "We need to get you to the Exposition."

Ginnie Mac grabbed the card out of Jefferson's hands. "That's your RFI?" she picked up a blank card from the stack and began filling it out. "Poppa likes to go through the police center, but their data mills are swamped since the craziness this morning. We'll hit the foundries. Much faster."

While she filled out the punch-tape she instructed Jefferson to wind the mainspring through the keyhole until he felt it click. Then she adjusted the switches and spun the

potentiometers to the correct settings. She pulled the lever that engaged the feed slot and dropped the new card into the reader. It was all a shell game to Jefferson.

"Done." She smiled at Jefferson. He liked her smile. There were no accusations in it, just hope and a lot of confidence. It upset Jefferson to think that she might lose some of that confidence over time, that any of her dreams might not come true, and it upset him that he couldn't just enjoy this smile.

"You should get an return before your shift's over," she said.

"That fast?" Martin said.

"Trade secret, pop." Ginnie Mac winked at her father.

"Thanks," Jefferson said. "And hey, good luck with the competition. You're still going through with it? Even after everything that happened with Cabott's machine this morning?" He didn't like the idea but he also didn't want to step on Martin's toes or tell him how to parent his daughter.

"We're still going through with it," Martin said. "It's in the Engineering Hall. And besides, this is too good an opportunity to pass up."

"Poppa," Ginnie Mac said. "There are going to be kids there from all over the world. What if my terminal's not really all that great? What if something goes wrong with the Fantastic Machine again?"

"Aren't you the one who told me Theodor Cabott's a smart man?" Martin said. "He says it's fixed, so it must be fixed."

"I guess," Ginnie Mac said.

Martin put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay to be afraid. It's even okay to fail. But to say you're not even going to try, well, that's unacceptable." He patted her shoulder. "Now don't worry. As long as you try you're going to make me proud."

Ginnie Mac picked up her bag off the floor and slung it over one shoulder. "Okay, Poppa.

Let's show them what we've got."

#

The hardest part of a house dick's job is paying attention. It's not that it requires patience, exactly. It requires attention. You've got to have a sharp eye and an actively thinking mind all the time; constantly registering people's faces, constantly listening to conversations in the lobby, watching to see who sneaks in off the street and into the stairwell or the lift-cages or an empty ballroom. Constantly paying attention is like constantly holding your arms straight out: no matter how good you are, eventually your arms are coming down.

Jefferson made it through to about eleven-thirty at night before any real trouble popped up. He had already walked his rounds, eaten half a sandwich, and checked the Public Computing Works terminal a dozen times. He was loitering in the hotel lobby when he heard the crowd outside. It began with one or two barks of menace that sounded like the start of a fight. Guests standing around in the hotel lobby looked cautiously towards the entrance.

The Portland Hotel is a U-shaped building with its main entrance at the inside-bottom of the U. A crowd had gathered in the courtyard. Half a dozen men circled around a smaller fellow. He recognized the little guy, black hair, thin mustache, almond eyes. He was a hotel guest staying in the Cabott's suite, a doctor, a Chinese guy from Hawaii, or something like that. Doctor Sun Yat-sen.

Jefferson pushed his way into the crowd. "You've had your fun. Now go play somewhere else."

"Butt out, pal." A man in a green felt hat and a scar on his chin poked at him with a fat finger.

Jefferson grabbed the man's finger and bent it back. He didn't like to see a gang of men surround one guy. He bent the finger back a little further until the man cried uncle. Then he released him and dusted off his hands.

"Gentlemen, please," the doctor said. "I can assure you there is no conspiracy."

The man in the green hat flexed his injured hand and looked around at the friends he'd brought with him. Jefferson thought a few of them were having their doubts about roughing anyone up at the Portland Hotel. But the man in the green hat wasn't about to let it go.

"You hear that?" he said. "This Chinaman is a revolutionary in his own country. He expects us to believe he's not cooking up trouble here? He's a wanted man!"

"What happened this morning was unfortunate," Sun said. "But it was the result of one man acting alone."

"Then why are there a bunch of Chinamen supposed to be missing in Chinatown?" The man in the green hat was building his mate's confidence back up. "They're nowhere to be found until it's time to take our jobs and send that money back to China. There's white folk can't even get good work because of you." The man's buddies cheered him on.

Jefferson didn't want this getting even more out of hand. "You want to have a political debate? Fine," he said. "Take it across the street to the steps of the courthouse and say your piece. You can go anywhere you want, but you can't stay here."

Jefferson put himself between Sun and the others. The man in the green hat stepped forward wagging his fat finger. Jefferson grabbed it and this time he bent the man's finger back until he felt the joint pop.

"I warned you." Jefferson pushed him back into his friends who were already backing away out of the courtyard.

"That was not necessary," Sun said.

"Sure it was, doc." Jefferson watched the men run away. "Now let's get you inside."

#

Jefferson Shannon left the Portland Hotel at a little after one o'clock in the morning. The printed list of results from his RFI had come through an hour earlier, just as Ginnie Mac said it

would. One result stood out to him, it was an article from the Oregonian a few days ago and it was written by a fellow Jefferson knew.

It was a nice night, by Portland's standards, which meant it was only raining a little. He stayed dry, for a couple blocks at least, by walking up Morrison Street underneath the Glass Ceilings. They were supposed to shelter Portlanders from the rain, from the Cloud. A glass dome built three to five stories above some of the streets in the downtown business and shopping districts. Through the glass ceiling's grimy lens he saw the lights of blimps and dirigibles navigating the night sky, each airship emblazoned with decorations that identified its country of origin or the corporation or family crest of its benefactor.

He ducked into Brubaker's on 9th at a quarter past one o'clock in the morning. Sawdust and peanut shells covered the wood floor. Gaslights flickered in wall sconces down the length of the bar and glinted off steak knives in the pink hands of the gentlemen sitting in booths.

A wooden ice-bucket took up space on the corner of the bar. As Jefferson walked past it he saw that it held one of those ugly coconut things that had spewed out of the Fantastic Machine's strange halo that morning. Men were hoisting it with their bare hands and drinking toasts to its hideousness, only a few men had sense enough to stand back from it, to not get too close to it.

Jefferson hung his coat and hat on the wall and took a seat next to the nervous-looking man at the end of the bar.

His name was Earnest and he wrote gossip for the Oregonian. Sometimes he paid Jefferson for information about hotel guests. Sometimes he just bought a round.

Earnest had his back to the door, one elbow on the bar and his head propped up on one hand. He was scribbling something, tomorrow's gossip probably. A highball glass of whiskey sat next to two empty glasses.

Jefferson squeezed onto the empty bar stool and flagged the bartender. He ordered a glass

of Brubaker's pilsner. Earnest sat up at the sound of his voice.

"Shannon." Earnest rotated to make room. "You bastard. Sure I can't buy you something nicer?"

"You can buy me this beer," Jefferson said.

"So you got something, huh?" Earnest said. "What news?"

"You heard about that thing at the Expo this morning?"

Earnest said he had and Jefferson told him he'd been there, saw it all first-hand.

"Yeah, you and forty thousand other yokels," Earnest seemed disappointed.

"Well I got up close and personal with the guy right before he died, tried to stop him even. I'm lucky I didn't get his blood on my coat I was so close."

"You're kidding me?" Earnest got his pen to paper and started asking questions and taking notes. After another beer Jefferson had told him everything.

"Now I've got a question for you," Jefferson said. "This guy in yellow, the Whisperer, you think he could be tied up in this business going on in the North End? The folks missing from Chinatown?"

"The preacher?" Earnest realized he hadn't touched his drink while he interviewed Jefferson. He finished it and ordered another.

"Yeah, he sounds a lot like that guy you wrote about last week. How many guys in yellow suits hanging around in Chinatown these days anyway? Your article suggested there might be a connection."

"I never saw the guy, and frankly nobody much wanted to talk about it. Not to me anyway. They're operating out of an old carriage house that's right across from that merchant's shop, the dead guy. I talked with him, you know. Bow Li Wei. Good guy, a little stiff. Community man, but he didn't want to put anything on record. Said the cops weren't interested."

Jefferson nodded. "Typical. Chinese know the cops won't help so why bother, right?"

“True. But I'm glad I ran into you. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry I've spoken to today tells a different story about what happened this morning. Most folks told me this Chinese guy put those seed things into the machine, or even that Cabott himself caused it to rain seeds as some sort of a promotional stunt. I was still trying to decide what angle I was going to take for the story when you came along to save my bacon.”

Earnest stopped talking and made a face. Jefferson smelled it, too, something rotten like meat gone bad. Someone bumped into Jefferson.

"What's the big idea?" Jefferson said.

The other fellow ignored him. He was too busy trying to get away from something. The crowd at the corner of the bar started shouting, they were the ones who had been playing with the ugly coconut. A crack had appeared in the coconut's shell and the others were giving a hard time to the man holding it, saying he'd broken the thing.

Jefferson started to ignore the drunks when he saw the coconut shell wiggle in the man's hands.

From the crack in the shell sprang two, then two more, then a dozen fronds or thick succulent leaves like those of an aloe plant. They popped up and spread the shell apart. The bar got quiet. The man holding it sensed that he was now the center of attention and he laughed and held it higher for everyone to see.

It was uncanny how the leaves moved as if searching. They wrapped around the shell and reached down to the man's hands. As if blown by a breeze that wasn't there, the fronds were slapping against the man's forearms. He laughed, at first. But then a look of worry came over his face. Red welts were showing up on his arms where the leaves had slapped him. He tossed the thing back into the ice-bucket at the corner of the bar and announced to the room that Theodor Cabott had a bad sense of humor.

That broke the silence and people murmured and the volume began to climb.

The fronds of the ugly coconut plant reached out and softly bounced against the lip of the ice-bucket. The thing gave Jefferson the creeps.

He thanked Earnest for the information, grabbed his coat and left.

Chapter Three

Jefferson climbed into the back of a coal-fired banger parked outside of Brubaker's.

"East side," he said. "The hub."

The driver nodded and pushed the belly-stick until it was upright. The boiler behind Jefferson's seat rattled as the pressure grew and the pipes filled with steam. The driver pulled the valve-stick back and locked it in at the half-way spot and Jefferson felt the vibrations of the power pistons speed up.

He sank into the seat. The vibrations relaxed him. He hoped the driver wasn't talkative. Usually if you sit in back and stare out the front window then the driver will want to strike up a conversation with you. To play it safe, Jefferson stared out the side window at the wet city streets.

A pair of rivers washed down the little canals alongside the streetcar tracks and twinkled flecks of gold in the gas-light. The rain had picked up. Maybe Jefferson would skip the east side streetcar hub and take the cab all the way home. It was tempting.

"How much to Foster?" he said.

"Nickle-plus," the cabbie said.

He could afford it, and after the day he'd had, he could imagine someone like Martin telling him he'd earned it. He saw the cabbie look at him in the mirror, asking with his eyes.

"The hub's good enough," he said.

He was staring out the window but he was thinking about Bow, the Chinese merchant who'd climbed the Fantastic Machine that morning. Jefferson had tried to ignore it as the day wore on but now, in the dark, he could see it all playing out as if in a waking dream. It had been disturbing then and it was no less so now. The sound of the clockwork gears chewing up Bow's arm, the faint hiss as it sprayed his blood into the column of the machine. Jefferson opened the side window to let in the sounds of driving in the rain.

There were enough people waiting around at the east side streetcar hub at the bottom of Belmont Street that Jefferson almost regretted not taking the cab all the way home. He felt like being alone. He looked up at the Cloud. It blocked out the stars overhead and hung up there like a great big reminder that if he ever thought to complain--about the rain, about anything--then he just needed to look up and remember that there were an awful lot of dead people out there who'd kill to have his problems.

Beneath the hub's sodium lights a group of people had gathered together. There were maybe twenty of them. They didn't seem to be affiliated, just some boys over here and a family or two over there, but all of them were having a look at something.

Jefferson walked by them on the way to his platform, and even before he saw it he knew what it was they were looking at. He heard the wooden clicking of its hard-tipped leaves against the walkway. It was one of those seeds and it had hatched, or sprouted, just like the one at Brubaker's.

One or two hundred of those things had flown out from that dark halo over the Fantastic Machine that morning. It had looked to him as if most of them had been taken by the people who were otherwise running for their lives. If these two had sprouted, how many others were doing the same?

The Rooster Red streetcar pulled into the platform. It dumped out its end-of-the-line passengers and loaded up its new ones. The conductor saw the plant wriggling on the walkway and made a disgusted face.

#

Jefferson cut through the apple orchard between Foster Blvd and his mother's house on Bismark St. He left his wet and muddy clothes on the deep front porch, slipped his feet into house shoes, and went inside. The first floor was dark, so he turned on the wall sconce by the front door. He felt a chill. Probably just cold from the night air, he thought, and turned the furnace up a few

degrees.

He had not been looking forward to coming home, because he was worried about Isabelle. She had seemed fine when they left the Exposition, except she'd been short with him when he had asked her what the Whisperer had said.

"Leave it alone," Isabelle had told him. "You left me there. Everyone went wild when that beautiful hole opened up and I had the devil of a time just standing on my own two feet. That man comes along and walks me back to the railing and you act like a perfect monster. You made a fool of me and you were a complete embarrassment."

They hadn't spoken about it again and after he got her home he left for work almost immediately. Since then Jefferson had spent a lot of time replaying things in his mind, watching Bow Li Wei shove his arm into those gears.

Isabelle's bedroom was at the back of the house on the second floor. Jefferson opened the door softly so as not to disturb her. The hall was dark but the bedroom was darker.

"It's just me, Ma." Jefferson felt cold air escape the bedroom, wash over his feet. She had left the window open. He went to it and closed it quietly. It overlooked the backyard and from here Jefferson saw his mother's barren garden, a dark patch in a dark yard that had produced nothing but disappointment for the last two years. As he left the room he went to the foot of her bed. It was a shadowy landscape of puffy mountain ranges.

"I'm sorry I left you at the railing, Ma." Jefferson patted the blankets gently, searching for his mother's foot. "I guess maybe I'm sorry about a lot of things. I don't want to see you get hurt, though, and I know I don't say it enough, and you sure don't make it easy, but--"

He dragged his hand over the foot of the bed as he spoke. The sheets were cold. The comforter should have been warm. He tugged on it, just a little, and it gave no resistance.

"Ma?" he said. He shook the bed, walked around to the night table and lit the lantern.

"Ma?"

The bed was empty.

The chair beside her closet held pillows but not Isabelle. She wasn't in the room.

Jefferson went out into the hall. The bathroom door was open and he looked in there and saw that it was empty. He went quickly down the stairs and looked again in the parlor thinking maybe she had been asleep on the couch and he'd simply overlooked her. She was not on the couch, not in the parlor. He felt as if the floor had fallen out from beneath him. He heard the rain drumming against the windows and the sound reminded him of the waters rushing down Willow Creek and he ran from the parlor to the dining room, the bathroom, his own room, and then the kitchen.

"Mom?" Jefferson said. He twisted the flint nob and turned on the lantern over the kitchen table. Wooden tulips rattled with a hollow sound in the glass vase on the table. Isabelle sat in the open doorway to the backyard. She wore her night dress, white cotton, not nearly enough to keep her warm on a night like this.

"Isabelle?" Jefferson walked closer. "Are you all right?"

Through the thin cotton night dress Jefferson saw her shivering. As he drew near he thought he heard her mumbling, softly repeating some short refrain over and over like a private prayer. Her pitch rising at the end and falling back down with each new beginning.

"Clicky-lee. Clicky-lee. Clicky-lee."

Jefferson touched her shoulder.

Isabelle jerked away from his touch. She turned towards him, teeth bared, her eyes hidden by wild locks of white hair.

"Don't touch me," Isabelle said. "Keep away from me you rotten boy. Why couldn't you have died with her?"

Jefferson stumbled back, frightened by Isabelle's quick movement and wounded by her sharp tongue. Isabelle could be mean, sure, but this was extreme even for her.

"I called your name," he said. "You didn't hear me?"

He couldn't believe this was her fault. It had to be the influence of that whispering man. Jefferson reached forward and moved the hair out of his mother's eyes. Isabelle slapped at his hand, and stared at him with white hot rage.

"I said don't touch me," she said.

Her eyes were normal: hazel and bloodshot.

"Get inside, Ma," Jefferson said. "You're going to get sick sitting in the cold like that."

She slammed the door shut behind her and stayed just inside the kitchen, feet bare, hands at her sides, watching him.

"I'm going to make a sandwich." Jefferson went to the icebox and pulled open the door.

"And some tea. What kind of tea would you like, Ma?"

He shut the icebox door and was surprised to find Isabelle standing right next to him. Her face was relaxed, no longer angry, but she was muttering again, "Clicky-lee," and her hazel eyes were covered with a film of milky-white.

"Ma, what--"

Light glinted off the knife in her hand. She swiped at him and Jefferson felt a hot pain in his left wrist as the knife sliced through the his skin.

He pulled his left hand back and with his right he instinctively smacked her face like she was an bad dog.

"Snap out of it, Ma."

She jabbed the knife forward and Jefferson caught her wrist, twisted it and shook the knife out of her hand. She was small but had a feral strength that scared him. He pushed her back against the kitchen table.

Blood dripped out of the cut on his left wrist. He grabbed a towel from the counter, wrapped it around his wrist and squeezed it with his right hand. He turned around in time to see

Isabelle coming at him with the glass vase of wooden tulips from the kitchen table.

Jefferson grabbed her arms. He put one hand on the vase and pushed back against it. It slipped free of her grip and before he could think about it, Jefferson crashed it down on top of his mother's head.

Isabelle collapsed to the floor like a marionette with her strings cut. Jefferson rushed to her side and felt her pulse. His panic was immediately lessened when he felt her pulse strong under his touch. He needed to do something before she woke up and lashed out again. She was clearly out of control.

He ran downstairs to the basement and returned to the kitchen a moment later with enough rope to bind her. He picked Isabelle up off the kitchen floor and set her on the couch in the parlor where he bound her hands and feet. Her forehead was bleeding from where the vase had smashed into her. Jefferson examined the wound and set a towel across her forehead and went to the kitchen to clean the cut on his left wrist.

When he returned to the parlor a few minutes later Isabelle was still knocked out. He went to the writing desk and thumbed through a slim leather-bound directory. He found the address for the sanatorium at the top of Hawthorne Blvd, drafted a quick note, put that in a capsule and dropped the capsule into the pneumatic tube where it vanished with a sucking swoosh. He took a deep breath.

"Help is on the way, Ma," Jefferson said. "Don't you worry."

#

Jefferson followed the two nurses who carried Isabelle Shannon into the asylum through the side-entrance. At the door a young woman in a white paper hat assured him his mother would be well looked after and asked if he would please sign a few papers. The clock on the wall read three-thirty. By ten-till four he'd had his left wrist cleaned, stitched, and bandaged.

He stood at the reception desk and signed where the young woman told him to sign. She

asked him to wait while she finished the paperwork.

Another woman came around the corner talking with two men, they were all dressed in the long white coats doctors wore. Jefferson recognized her right away--Penelope Cabott.

#

1885 had been a big year for Penelope Cordelia Dye. As the American Civil War lumbered into its twentieth cruel year, the youngest daughter of an Oregon sheep rancher celebrated her twenty-third birthday with a wedding to Theodor Cabott and a new home in Portland, Oregon.

Theodor Cabott built the Edwardian style home at the edge of his East Portland property, acreage that surrounded and included the dormant volcano Mount Tabor. This was the first Cabott House.

Penelope Cabott, who had never lived with servants before and employed them as little as possible, found herself alone in the house for months at a stretch while Theodor helped with the war effort back east. But she was not idle. Her life as a sheep rancher had trained her in both business and medicine--when you live a two day's ride to the nearest town you learn how to do things on your own. Penelope volunteered at local Portland hospitals where she also studied and earned her medical degree. In 1889, upon the completion of the second Cabott House--a Craftsman style home at the very top of Mount Tabor--Penelope transformed their first home into a sanatorium. The following year the Cloud appeared and brought an end to the American Civil War.

#

Penelope was talking and the men were taking notes. They passed Jefferson without a glance and would have kept walking past the reception desk except that the young nurse caught Penelope Cabott's attention.

"The gentleman I told you about is here," the nurse said.

Penelope Cabott thanked the nurse and sent the men off to complete their rounds without her. She glanced once at Jefferson and then stood at the reception desk for a minute reading the papers in the file the nurse handed her.

"Mister Shannon," Penelope Cabott said. "You wouldn't happen to be the Jefferson Shannon from Heppner, would you?"

"I'm impressed that you remember," Jefferson said.

Tears welled in Penelope Cabott's eyes, she blinked them dry.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I had no idea you were in Portland. You didn't register with the organization."

"No offense intended," Jefferson said. "I wasn't looking for a handout."

"Of course," Penelope Cabott said. "But the Heppner Emergency Relief Organization exists to help you with just this sort of thing. I want you to know I will personally oversee your mother's care here. I know you've suffered enough already."

Jefferson didn't know what to say to that. He felt relieved to hand Isabelle off to the asylum, but also concerned for why she was acting this way. He couldn't stop thinking that this had something to do with the Whisperer from the Exposition.

"Misses Cabott," Jefferson said. "My mother wasn't acting like herself."

"Of course not. And it's Doctor. Doctor Cabott," Penelope said.

"No, I don't think you understand." Jefferson wasn't sure if he understood it either. He didn't want to sound crazy in front of her and he thought that if he brought up the hypnotist angle that's just how he'd sound.

"Doc," he said. "Her eyes, they had a kind of film over them, cloudy looking. They're normal now, but do you know what might cause something like that?"

Doctor Penelope Cabott stiffened. "Cloudy?" she said. "When did you first notice this?"

Jefferson felt uncomfortable, self-conscious. "I don't know," he said. "Just when she went

crazy, I guess."

He wasn't sure why he didn't tell Penelope about Bow Li Wei's eyes, but something about Penelope Cabott's interest made Jefferson want to get out of there. He stood up and Dr. Cabott followed suit.

They shook hands. Her hand was soft. Her black hair was pulled back and streaked with gray. It looked good on her.

Jefferson was almost out the door when Penelope said, "I'm sorry."

He stopped, looked at her. "What's that?"

"Your wife. The flood. Heppner." She looked at him with sad eyes.

Jefferson let it hang. Nuts if he was going to dive back into that nightmare.

"It's just," Penelope said. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Jefferson's throat burned and he found he couldn't speak. He wasn't going to have this conversation. He pursed his lips, swallowed the knot in his throat, and walked out the door.

Chapter Four

Jefferson Shannon traveled all the way to the police station at the corner of Second and Stark downtown. He wanted to get what he had into the hands of the police. He wanted them to take care of this for him.

He could not get comfortable sitting in the wooden chair beside detective Rogers' desk. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, getting annoyed that Rogers' wasn't listening.

"We already know about the Chinaman," Rogers said. He wore a pinched expression on his face like a man expecting bad news. "Merchant up in the north end. Upset with the West. Put a bunch of those coconuts into the big machine and now we're up to our eyeballs in smelly plants and people who look like they got the measles."

"What, what? That's not what happened."

"Oh, really? Listen, pal, we appreciate you coming down but like I said--"

Jefferson stood up and looked around the police station. It was a lot busier than he'd expected for half-past four in the morning.

"There's a man in Chinatown," Jefferson said. "Some guy who's tied up with the disappearances up there. I saw this guy talking to Bow at the Expo right before all that. This guy has something to do with it, with all of it."

"Wow. Okay. Let me ask you something," Rogers said. He pronounced it ax. "You say you were there, right? This morning? Did you see anybody put a gun to this Chinaman's head? Because the report I read says he killed himself all on his own."

"I saw that preacher whispering into Bow's ear moments before Bow killed himself." Jefferson put both his hands on Rogers' desk. "There's a connection there. It's got to mean something."

Rogers looked up from Jefferson's hands. "And you want us to go have a look at this guy,

is that it?"

"Solving crime's your job," Jefferson said. "Isn't it?"

"That it is," Rogers said. "That it is. And like I said before, we've got all the crime we can handle right now. Rogers held up his index finger and ticked off some points, "A Chinaman kills himself. A traveling preacher tries to talk him out of it. A noble effort but come on, let's face it, he was naive to try. The guy kills himself, takes out the big machine while he's at it, ruining our chance to get rid of that damned cloud, and scares the living bejzus out of everybody there. Rogers shook his head. "No, Mister Shannon. This don't hardly rank on my list today."

Chapter Five

Jefferson Shannon put his hands on the cold iron handle and pulled the heavy door to one side. The rollers, locked up from rain and rust and lack of use, screeched in their tracks.

The carriage house had been easy enough to find. When he left the police station he walked north through Chinatown until he found Bow Li Wei's mercantile in the North End. Boards had been nailed over the shop's smashed windows. Across the street from the shop Jefferson found the derelict building mentioned in Earnest's article, the one Ginnie Mac had helped him find. The carriage house looked like an abandoned barn. A sheet of tin roofing hung off one side of the building and threatened to fall into the alley. The rough hewn wood siding had swollen after two years of rain. The sign over the door had been painted over with black paint and nothing more had been written.

Inside the building the air felt warm, humid, like a greenhouse. Shadows danced on the opposite wall cast there by a rack of guttering candles set up like an altar. And then there was the smell, that sour meat smell that had turned Jefferson's stomach when he came across the disgusting plants at Brubaker's and again at the streetcar hub.

Jefferson wanted someone to bring the Whisperer in for questioning, to find out what was going on. Waiting until detective Rogers began to show an interest was not really an option, but he was starting to think about coming back after sunrise.

Keeping close to the low wall of the abandoned stables, he crouched and crept towards the light. The building seemed empty, or at least it did not seem crowded. Now might be the best time, he figured, to catch the Whisperer alone.

Something moved fast underneath him, ran over his foot--a rat. Naked pink tails slithered across mottled black fur. There were dozens of them. They crawled over one another in the old straw, nesting. Rats. He hated rats.

At the end of the stables he stopped and pinched his nose shut against the smell. He drew a slow breath through his mouth. From around the corner he heard a voice, more than one, chanting.

Jefferson leaned against the rough wood beam and listened. He recognized the sound. It had the same rising and falling sound he had heard Isabelle whispering when he had found her in the kitchen. He held his breath, poked his head around the corner just long enough to get a quick look.

Silhouettes. Five people, men and a woman, seated on the floorboards, holding hands and sitting in a semi-circle. In front of them, one of those plants. Its tentacles outstretched, wrapped around the heads of the two people on either end of the man in the middle, whom Jefferson was almost certain was the Whisperer.

He leaned against the wood beam for support and peeked around the corner again. The Whisperer turned his head slowly, his lips moving soundlessly. He wasn't wearing the goggles. Candlelight gleamed off the black orbs that were his eyes. Looking into those eyes was like staring into perfect darkness. Jefferson stood up. He balled his hands into fists and stepped out from behind the wood beam. The men and the woman sitting around the Whisperer continued their soft repetitive chant. Fear and anger were heating up inside Jefferson when the back of his head exploded in pain.

He stumbled to one side. He put his hand to his head and felt an egg growing on his skull, his fingers tacky with blood. When he turned around Jefferson was looking up into milky-white eyes of the biggest man he'd ever seen.

The giant man had bronze skin, a prominent nose, straight black hair pulled into a braid that ran down his back. He had the muscles of an ox and the vacant stare Jefferson had seen on Isabelle and Bow.

The giant hit Jefferson with a right hook that knocked him clear across the stables.

Jefferson struggled to shake his head clear. The giant grabbed him by the collar and belt and as Jefferson was yanked into the air his hand passed over and clutched a stray horseshoe. He hammered the giant's head with it and the big man pitched forward.

Jefferson fell and landed on his left hand and felt something break. He screamed. His left hand was useless. In his right hand he held the horseshoe.

The giant fell to his knees, stunned. Jefferson came up beside him and brought the horseshoe down on the man's skull. But the giant was fast. His arm shot up and caught Jefferson's wrist. Jefferson pulled but the man's grip was complete. He lifted his eyes and stared at Jefferson with brown pupils that showed great sorrow.

"Stop." The man spoke with great effort. He released Jefferson who immediately stepped back.

The Whisperer watched them coolly, without any change in his expression or his silent chanting. His black eyes bore into Jefferson's mind. He felt the anger growing inside him again.

"Look away," the giant said. He staggered to his feet and grabbed Jefferson by the shoulders and shoved him towards the entrance. Blood flowed fast from the side of the man's head where Jefferson had cracked it open with the horseshoe.

The rage he'd been feeling evened out and Jefferson confused. "What are you doing?" he said. "What the hell's going on?"

The big man didn't answer. He stumbled into the nearest stable, the one Jefferson had been hiding behind when he spied on the Whisperer. There was a black canvas bag in there. From it, the big man removed a stick of dynamite and flicked open his brass lighter.

"Whoa," Jefferson said. "There are people in there with him."

The big man looked at Jefferson as if for the first time. "They have stopped being people," he said. He struck the flint on his lighter and the small flame leaped up to the dynamite wick.

"Wait," Jefferson said. "How did he control you? What did he do? Do you remember?"

The wick sizzled and sparkled to life and the man snapped his lighter shut.

"I remember," he said. "I remember everything."

"Don't do this." Jefferson backed away towards the door. "You're not the only one," he said. He couldn't take his eyes off the sparkling wick. It grew shorter, the sparkling detonation sped its way towards the dynamite.

The big man looked at Jefferson. "Run," he said.

Jefferson had nearly reached the door when the wall behind the big man cracked and splintered.

The Whisperer reached through the wall. His shirtless upper body strangely shapeless and slack. He wrapped two doughy hands around the big man's throat.

White light and blinded Jefferson as the concussive force of the explosion hit him like a ten-tonne baseball bat. He caught his breath laying on his back in the middle of the street. Even this close the heat was painfully intense. He crawled away over wet cobbled stones as the carriage house spat fireballs into the sky.

Chapter Six

Water pooled and rippled in the cracks between the cobbled stones. In the light from the roaring fire Jefferson watched as his own blood dripped from his head down to the stones, into the water where it spread out into the tiny canals. The stones, so cool against his body, were a relief from the heat clawing at his back. He rolled over--it wasn't easy, he had to push with his right hand and favor his left, so tender, so broken. The stones soothed his back. They were lumpy and hard, but they were cool. The rain dripped into his eyes so he shut them.

#

"They are everywhere." It was a man's voice. He pronounced each word as if he had given it special consideration. He had an accent.

Jefferson opened his eyes. He saw a cabinet that covered an entire wall with small drawers and miniature brass handles. A dozen round tins rolled around on the floor and somebody crawled beside him on his hands and knees. He shut his eyes and knew he had not died.

"We should just cut it off." The careful speaker.

"We could clean it." A nice voice, woman's voice. She sounded small.

"No." A rough voice. Mad.

#

Heavy footsteps splashed and echoed in hollow space. Jefferson smelled damp earth, old dusty dirt and stale air. His left forearm pulsed like an exposed nerve in a broken tooth. He screamed.

"Check his eyes. Show me his eyes." The rough voice, a man's, distant but sharp, like gravel in a tin can underwater.

Cold fingers with rough callouses pried open his eyes. Jefferson couldn't focus. The face was round, black hair, fingernails pressed too hard against his eyebrow and cheek.

"Normal." The woman's voice. Jefferson liked her voice. She sounded pretty. But her fingers were so rough.

"Normal?" It was the careful speaker. "Why he goes in there he so normal?"

"Wake him," Gravel said.

"He's awake," Fingers said. She pulled her hand away from his face and his eyelid dropped shut. He groaned, squeezed his eyes closed.

"Get the kit," Gravel said.

Fingers took two steps. A door opened and closed.

Jefferson opened his eyes. He lay on a cot beside a wall. An oil lamp on the floor beside the man farther away cast light into the small room. That man cleaned his fingernails with the tip of a pocket knife.

A brick and mortar wall, a wood ceiling, he was in the tunnels. For all Jefferson knew, these folks could be tong, refugees, or the local chamber of commerce. The men watched him.

The door opened again and Fingers entered the room. Her round face was a mask to Jefferson. She gave the black valise to the man closest to Jefferson's cot, Gravel-voice.

"What were you doing?" Gravel said. He set the bag on the ground.

"What's that?" Jefferson said. The small room suddenly felt a lot smaller.

"Answer my question," Gravel said. "Why did you go into the carriage house?"

"Everybody just relax," Jefferson said. He rolled to one side and seeing that nobody tried to stop him, he brought his legs over the edge and sat up. "It's going to sound strange," Jefferson said.

"Talk," Gravel said.

Fingers went and stood beside the careful speaker, who continued cleaning his fingernails with his knife.

"I saw what happened at the Exposition," Jefferson said. "I was right there. That man was

whispering in Bow Li Wei's ear. It was strange. I don't believe Bow was in control of his own behavior."

"How can you not believe it?" Gravel said. "The police say that's exactly what happened. What makes you think any different?"

"What are you going to do with me?"

"That depends on what you tell us," Gravel said.

"Stop it," Fingers said. "Did you see anyone in there? Before the explosion?"

Jefferson looked at her. Her expression was rock steady. "Matter of fact, I did. Big guy, real big. And more." Jefferson told them everything exactly as it had happened.

The careful speaker folded his knife shut. Gravel reached into his bag and pulled out a brown glass bottle of rubbing alcohol. "You need to see a doctor. Your arm is broken and you have a big bump on your head. We can clean and bandage your wrist, it'll help."

"Wait, hold on," Jefferson said. "Do you know that man? Do you guys know what's going on?"

Fingers, Xuan Mei, told Jefferson about the giant man. His name was David Pit and he was a Chinook Indian. David married a Chinese girl he'd met at a gold mining camp, Mei's cousin, Yin. They came to Portland to visit Yin's family and to see the Exposition. When Mei's aunt went missing, Yin and David looked into it. Then Yin went missing and David and Mei's uncle and a few other men went crazy trying to find them. And then David went missing and Mei's uncle, Bow Li Wei, killed himself at the Exposition.

"David found Yin," Mei said. "That's what he was doing in the carriage house. I'm sure of it. But that monster, he controlled David. Kept him."

"He said he remembered everything," Jefferson said. "I lost the woman I loved two years ago in the Heppner Flood. There were times I didn't think I could drag myself through another day. I guess I can understand why David did what he did."

The gravelly voiced man, Cheung, and the careful speaker, Keung, worked together to clean and bandage Jefferson. Cheung gave him some a small injection of opium to ease the pain. His body still ached but he didn't seem to mind it so much after that.

"We'll take you to the river and help you get across," Mei said. "You can find a doctor, right?"

"Why don't we just go topside?" Jefferson said.

"The carriage house is still burning," Mei said. "You can hear the water running through the pipes, that's from the fire pumps. Someone might have seen you, all of us. We don't want to get involved with the Police, Jefferson. That would not be good."

That was fine with him. He followed Mei, Cheung, and Keung through a corridor lined with pneumatic tubes and thick copper pipes stamped with the brand of the Public Computing Works. Eventually they came to a small floating dock. An old man in a dinghy nodded when he saw them arrive. They were underneath one of the innumerable docks that lined the Willamette's west side.

"If you find yourself in trouble," Mei said. "Go to my uncle's store. Someone will always be there."

Jefferson thanked her and the boys and climbed into the little rowboat with the old man. The Willamette River danced with a million tiny raindrops.

#

The coal-fired banger dropped Jefferson off at the side entrance to the sanatorium, the same door he'd walked through several hours earlier when he brought his mother here. As he made his way through the entrance on wobbly legs he nearly tripped on another one of those rotten plants. It seemed to reach out towards him as he side-stepped, almost falling over in the process. Jefferson kicked at the fronds before he headed inside to find the doctor.

"I won't lie to you, doc." Jefferson followed Penelope Cabott down the hall to a clean

room where she could have a look at his hand. "I'm in a lot of pain," he said, "but I'm just not that upset about it."

"That's the laudanum talking."

"No, well maybe," Jefferson said. "I'm just in a good mood and it's not the drugs. I took care of something. I feel like it's been a while since I took care of anything."

"What happened?" Penelope said. "Do you know?"

"I'm still trying to figure that out." Jefferson chuckled softly.

"Well you'll be glad to hear that your mother seems to be on the mend. She's got a little bump on the head from your scuffle, but she seems as lucid as ever, though she's in a bear of a mood" Penelope turned his wrist to have a look at his hand.

Jefferson winced. "Thank goodness she's back to her normal self. I don't know what I'd do if she weren't around to give me a hard time." Jefferson joked, but a huge feeling of relief swept over him. She was the last of his family, and he'd been more worried than he realized.

Penelope Cabott spent the better part of the next hour resetting Jefferson's left hand and arm and wrapping it in a splint. He kept his mind off his hand by telling her about the Whisperer. He told her about seeing him at the Exposition speaking to Bow Li Wei and then to Isabelle. He told her about the police and that he looked into it on his own. When he told her about the carriage house, Jefferson spared no details. It felt good to get it all off his chest, to share this secret with someone. When he was done they sat there for a moment, neither of them speaking.

"Pretty crazy, huh?" Jefferson said.

"If what you're telling me is true," Penelope said, "then I should alert the police and the Lovejoy morgue. They should know what to look for." She had a far away look in her eyes.

Jefferson was surprised that she believed him, and relieved. He felt a connection to Penelope Cabott, a closeness he hadn't felt in a long time. Maybe it was the drugs he had taken to numb the pain, or maybe he was feeling like a hero, but whatever the reason, Jefferson leaned

forward and kissed Penelope Cabott on the mouth. For a moment, she kissed him back.

"What are you doing?" She pulled away and touched her lips with the tips of her fingers.

"That is entirely inappropriate."

"Of course," Jefferson said. "I apologize. I got carried away. I'm sorry."

"Well you've had a big day," Penelope said. "No hard feelings."

He was suddenly aware of how tired he was. He told Penelope that he'd be by tomorrow to pick up his mother, if she checked out. She said that'd be fine and they made small talk while she walked him out.

"Get some rest," Penelope said.

"Sure," he said. "Tomorrow is a brand new day."

Chapter Seven

Jefferson Shannon cradled his bandaged hand and hurried across Morrison Street to the corner of the Portland Hotel. It was the evening of the World Exposition's second day. The streets--and the skies--seemed more crowded with people--and airships--than the day before. The Cloud had not let up. The sidewalks were crowded and not just with people avoiding the rain.

The courthouse across the street from the Portland Hotel had set up an exchange program, a bounty, to collect the plants, to get them off the streets.

As Jefferson crossed the street he rubbed shoulders with an African man out for a walk with his family; he overheard someone speaking a language he thought might be Russian; and he received a nice smile from a woman in a plaid skirt who walked arm in arm with a man in a matching plaid kilt. There was so much to look at that Jefferson had trouble remembering to look in the direction he was walking.

"Eyes front, pal." The warning came too late as Jefferson walked right into someone, someone solid.

"Officer Rogers," Jefferson said. "Protecting and serving, I see."

"You should be more careful with that busted hand of yours," Rogers said. "You didn't have that this morning. What happened?"

"Scratched an itch," Jefferson said.

"I see," Rogers said. "I'm here on business."

Jefferson gestured to a nearby bench in the Portland Hotel's rose garden where he and Rogers could sit and talk without clogging up the sidewalk traffic.

"You don't want to ask me nothing?" Rogers said. "You don't want to know maybe if I found anything about that man you told me about in Chinatown?"

"Right," Jefferson said. "How's that going?"

"You tell me," Rogers said. "You can start with how you busted up that hand of yours. And Shannon, if I think you're holding out on me then you might find yourself with two busted hands."

"What's going on?" Jefferson said.

"Got a report says some ugly son of a bitch left the carriage house by way of explosive force. I can put you at the scene. Last chance, knucklehead."

"I might have heard about some good samaritans," Jefferson said. "Yeah, they were watching each others backs because they had the strange notion that the police weren't going to help them out any."

"Cut the melodrama," Rogers said. He stood up. "Let's go. I'm taking you in."

"Okay, wait," Jefferson said. "Why do you all of a sudden care?"

"Maybe it's a joke to you, but I got body parts I can't even recognize. If I don't put names on little pieces of paper then the coroner's going to bury toes with blank tags on them."

"All right," Jefferson said. "Tell you what, I might know someone who might know something, but I can't do anything about it right now. I can't find them until later tonight. I can maybe get you names for some of those tags."

"You've got until sunrise, turkey," Rogers said. He stood up, brushed off the front of his slacks and looked around with a sour expression on his face. "This place stinks."

"Across the street," Jefferson said. "The plants."

"Whatever. Sunrise," he said, and turned and left.

#

The hotel lobby was jumping with action. Jefferson almost missed the two Japanese men in the corner. They had a shifty way, kept straining to see every person who passed through. Jefferson made a mental note of them. He'd keep an eye on them, but first he had to check in with Martin.

"What did you do to yourself this time?" Martin said.

"Actually," Jefferson said, "I had a productive evening."

Jefferson filled him in on everything he'd missed. He then listened patiently as Martin told him all about Ginnie Mac's triumph at the Exposition science fair.

"The awards ceremony is tonight," Martin said. "Come on, lets watch those shifty fellows you mentioned."

They found a spot where they could watch the two shifty men and still keep an eye on the rest of the lobby. "What's Ginnie Mac doing if you're working late?" Martin told him that Ginnie Mac went to the Exposition for the awards ceremony, but that it wasn't supposed to happen until seven o'clock, three hours hence.

"I've got time," Martin said.

The two men looked Japanese. They spoke conspiratorially to one another and paid careful attention to the grand staircase. Jefferson figured they were waiting for someone.

The Portland Hotel was the standard of Queen Anne style architecture. A single line of columns stretched across the center of the room and reached up to the high arched ceilings. Three great chandeliers hung down. They had been wired for electric light, though the result was not as nice as anyone had hoped and so they'd been quickly converted back to gaslight just days before the Exposition's grand inauguration. The effect of the gaslight was softer than the electric light, better ambiance.

"The stairs," Martin said.

Jefferson looked to the grand staircase that came down into the center of the lobby. There were quite a few people climbing up and down but Jefferson knew immediately who Martin meant.

"Sun Yat-sen," Jefferson said.

Martin followed the edge of the lobby to get up near the two shifty fellows, while

Jefferson went straight for Sun Yat-sen.

"Good evening, Doctor," Jefferson said.

"Mister Shannon," Sun Yat-sen said. He wore a black suit with a narrow silk bow-tie. His black hair glistened in the flickering gaslight. He stopped on the last step above the lobby floor and stared plainly at Jefferson's left hand. "What happened? I hope you have not had more trouble."

"Just so, Doc," Jefferson said. "As a matter of fact, I think you've got a little more trouble coming your way, too."

"Oh, I do apologize," Sun said. "I believe I know these men. We have an appointment."

"Well, by all means." Jefferson tilted his head in the direction of the two Japanese men standing over by the potted plant. They looked like they were trying so hard to go unnoticed that he almost felt bad for them. Martin had gotten himself into position behind a column right next to them.

"They look like trouble," Jefferson said.

Sun smiled. "In my business, you never know who your next greatest ally will be."

Jefferson tried to stay in front of Doctor Sun, but the agile politician refused to stay hidden.

"After you," Jefferson said.

Sun Yat-sen stopped and turned to face Jefferson. "I say, you don't plan to shadow me while I meet with these gentlemen, do you?"

"Doc," Jefferson said. He crossed his arms and looked down into Sun Yat-sen's eyes.

"There will be no trouble in my hotel. Until I'm satisfied of that, I'll stick my nose in everybody's business. No offense."

"Yes, well. None taken, I suppose." Sun looked at the Japanese men. "I certainly understand the need for caution. I do seem to attract attention. It's just that, if you don't mind, try

not to scare them away, hm?"

Sun bowed before the Japanese men. "Kon ban wa," he said.

"Of course," the one on the left said. "Good evening to you, as well, Doctor Sun Yat-sen?"

"I am," Sun said.

The men looked passively upon Jefferson.

"This man is in charge of hotel security." Sun indicated Jefferson, who nodded at the men, their expressions inscrutable.

Martin leaned against a pillar a few feet away and appeared bored with the newspaper article he was pretending to read.

The Japanese fellow who had spoken once, spoke again. His English was slow, deliberate, precise. "It is a very great honor to make your acquaintance, Doctor. I am Kazuo. This is my brother, Keisuke." Kazuo glanced at Jefferson, then back at Sun. He seemed uncomfortable speaking in front of the white guy. "Our mutual friend, Toten Miyazaki, has charged us to speak with you."

Comprehension dawned for Sun Yat-sen and he bowed again, slowly, much lower than he had the first time. Kazuo and Keisuke followed suit and stayed low until Sun straightened. Something passed between them, a recognition. Sun told Jefferson these men could be trusted and that there was nothing to worry about.

"These men are my new bodyguards."

#

Jefferson completed his walk-through of the Portland Hotel while Martin kept watch over Sun Yat-sen and his meeting with the Japanese brothers. He returned to the lobby at around five o'clock. He walked up to Martin.

"All right, boss," Jefferson said. "I think I can take it from here. Why don't you get along

and rescue my god-daughter from whatever trouble she's gotten herself into at the Expo."

Martin folded the worn out copy of the Oregonian and handed it to Jefferson. "I don't like what I'm seeing with these plants, you know? Don't tell me, I'll tell you. Plants don't grow that fast. Or that ugly. And who ever heard of a plant that stank like bad meat?"

Jefferson agreed.

"That smell is starting to make its way in here." Martin patted Jefferson on the shoulder and started back towards the house dick's office. He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder at Sun Yat-sen and the Japanese brothers. "They're no danger to each other," Martin said. "Keep an eye out, all right?."

Jefferson took up a position beside the grand staircase where he could oversee Sun and his new friends as well as the rest of the lobby. He snapped open the newspaper and began reading the top story on page one. Theodor Cabott was paying good money in exchange for the opening-day plants. He collected a few on the first day, but it seemed like people were holding on to them. Probably think they'll make great souvenirs. Jefferson agreed with Martin, though. Those were some ugly plants.

A small wave of people washed into the lobby carrying wet coats and umbrellas and somebody complained about the rain. Jefferson looked up to the windows high above the hotel lobby and saw the snaking translucence of water running over the glass. It was raining.

The crowd that had just come in was laughing hard at something. Probably they were drunk. They were nodding as they laughed a little too loud, a tightly knotted group. A young man walked in front of the others, he was pale, short, and stocky, with thick legs and meaty, short-fingered hands. He stopped and threw his stubby arms wide and said something magnanimous to his friends. The stocky man wore a gray suit. He grabbed the shoulder of another young man, this one's suit was dark green, almost olive. Jefferson watched them celebrate, and hoped they would move along to their rooms or the Rathskeller. The stocky man was trouble.

His square meaty hand squeezed his buddy's shoulder and for just a second his eyes met Jefferson's. There was a challenge in Trouble's eyes. They carried no trace of laughter. And something Jefferson had not noticed until now. Trouble had a scar on his chin, he was the man who attacked Sun Yat-sen in the rose garden the night before.

Jefferson closed his newspaper.

Trouble stopped walking. His pals did the same.

Jefferson was about to say something when the Portland Hotel creaked and the high windows exploded into the lobby as a crushing shock-wave rolled over the hotel

Chapter Eight

A piece of glass the size of a dinner plate tumbled end over end until it embedded itself into the chest of a man standing near Sun Yat-sen and his Japanese bodyguards. It was a perfect hit. Jefferson flinched as glass from more than a dozen windows shattered on the floor of the Portland Hotel.

"Everybody out," Jefferson said. He waved his hands in a pantomime of pushing everybody in the hotel lobby towards the front entrance. Not everyone could hear him over the panicked cries, but they didn't need to be told to get out of there. The set of doors at the main entrance were almost immediately congested with people trying to escape. Jefferson could hear screams coming from outside, too. This was a mess.

Martin came out of the office. Jefferson knew they'd have to make sure everyone got outside safely, but they'd also have to make sure looters didn't take advantage of the panic and use the opportunity to ransack abandoned hotel rooms.

A light glinted out of the corner of Jefferson's eye. Thinking it was more falling glass, he flinched, and raised his bandaged left hand to cover his face. Instead of glass, he caught a glancing blow from Trouble's blade.

"You're going to be sorry you ever got in my way," Trouble said.

Jefferson took a step back. The knife had sliced bandages, but his splint saved him from the cut. As he stumbled back, he felt a pair of hands steady him. It was Martin.

"Enough," Martin said.

"Enough of you, you and your Chinamen. You need to be taught a lesson about who's side you're on," Trouble said. His friends took up positions in a widening arc around Jefferson and Martin. Trouble had come back with friends to settle his petty score, and he wasn't going to let something like unexplained shock-waves and panicked mobs stop his crusade. He laughed and

bared his yellow teeth and sliced the air in front of Jefferson.

Panicked hotel guests kept at a distance as they ran towards the door. The screams outside were getting worse. Jefferson wondered if maybe a piece of the hotel had fallen on the people outside.

"Let's do this another time," Jefferson said. "Can't you hear the screams? Make yourself useful and lend a hand."

"I got your hand right here," Trouble said. He sliced the air again. "Don't try no fancy moves. We got you outnumbered."

The man to Jefferson's left made a sound like a small cough, like he had something caught in his throat. Jefferson looked and saw the man double over and collapsed to the floor, his hands holding his throat. Kazuo stood beside him. To the right another one of Trouble's goons cried out and collapsed and Jefferson saw Keisuke standing there.

Sun Yat-sen took up a position behind Jefferson and Martin. Jefferson turned and grinned at him.

"Walk away," Sun told Trouble. "The odds are not in your favor."

"I don't take orders from the likes of you," Trouble said. He sliced the air once and then lunged at Jefferson and Sun.

Jefferson had turned away for just a second and Trouble had taken advantage of that. He felt something heavy knock into him from the side and for a moment he thought it was one of Trouble's goons. When Kazuo caught him, Jefferson realized he'd been knocked down by Martin.

He looked up and saw Trouble's fist wrapped around his knife handle and pressed all the way up against Martin's chest. Trouble jerked his arm twice and pulled the blade free after the second try.

Jefferson sprang to Martin's side. He somehow managed to catch Martin as he crumbled to the carpeted floor.

No, he thought. This can't be happening.

Sun, Kazuo, and Keisuke grappled with Trouble's goons while Jefferson held Martin and looked into his old friend's wide eyes.

"Hang in there," Jefferson said. "We're going to get you out of here."

Martin opened and closed his mouth.

"Save your strength," Jefferson said.

"Genevieve," Martin said. "Promise."

Sun Yat-sen knelt beside them and starting unbuttoning Martin's shirt. "Lie still," he said.

Jefferson felt Martin grow heavy and slump in his arms. "Martin," he said. Tears welled up in his eyes and he blinked them away. They fell on Martin's forehead, rolled into one of his open eyes as it stared unseeing.

"I'm sorry," Sun Yat-sen said.

Jefferson slid out from underneath Martin and lay him gently on the thick Persian rug. He looked around at Kazuo and Keisuke fighting to protect him. He saw Trouble running for the door.

Panic had consumed the lobby. There was a rush of people trying to escape through the same doors Trouble wanted, but there were some people screaming and trying to get back inside the hotel. Jefferson hoped for their own sake that they didn't get between him and Trouble.

Trouble was almost out the door when he saw Jefferson coming after him. He pointed the knife at him, blood dripping from his hand. "Stay away," he shouted.

Someone saw the knife and screamed.

Jefferson pushed a woman out of the way and ran at Trouble and the crowd stuck in the doorway. It was a crush of people. The man in front of Trouble turned his head skyward and screamed. Trouble shook the man by the shoulders, yelled for him to get out of the way. The man, Jefferson saw him clearly now, was sweating profusely and panting like he couldn't catch his

breath. Light gleamed off his full wet lips and his eyes seemed hidden in dark shadow. He looked at Trouble with open hatred and Jefferson thought there was no way Trouble couldn't take offense to a look like that.

Trouble didn't have much time to react. The man bent forward and put his face on Trouble's neck. Trouble stiffened, unable to flee in the crush of bodies. Blood geysered an arc that landed at Jefferson's feet. As the man pulled away, he tore off a mouthful of Trouble's neck.

Jefferson backed away, but there was a crowd of people trying to push their way to the front door.

"What's happening?" Sun Yat-sen asked. Kazuo and Keisuke held Martin between them.

"Turn around," Jefferson said. "We can't go this way. There's a ballroom back that way."

"That man needs help," Sun said, referring to the now bleeding and screeching Trouble.

Jefferson grabbed Sun by the front of his shirt. "We're all going to need help in a second, doc. Something's wrong here. Something is very wrong."

"Mister Shannon is correct," Kazuo said. He and Keisuke led them way from the front entrance, carrying Martin's body with them.

Across the lobby they found the door to the Scott Ballroom open. Jefferson toggled the lights but nothing happened.

"There must be a break in the gas line," he said. "Listen, there is a door at the far end of this room. Just go straight and follow the wall."

"What are you saying?" Sun said. "You're not coming with us?"

"I don't know what's going on," Jefferson said. He pointed at Martin's body. "But his little girl is at the Exposition fair grounds right now, all by herself, and I have to go find her."

Sun exchanged a look with Kazuo and Keisuke, and said, "We'll go together. You and Lee Martin have always been honorable men to me, and Martin died trying to help me. Besides, you can use the help," Sun motioned towards Jefferson's bandaged arm.

"I appreciate it," Jefferson said. "But we can't all go." He gestured again at Martin's body.

"I mean, we can't carry him around like this, and we can't leave him to this mob."

"The hotel has a kitchen, correct?" Kazuo said.

"Of course," Sun said.

Jefferson shook his head. "Why?"

"The Portland Hotel must have a cold storage room," Sun said. "We can hold Martin's body there and come back for him later."

Jefferson looked down at his friend. He deserved better than this, but right now his priority needed to be Ginnie Mac. He nodded his agreement.

Jefferson directed the Japanese brothers towards a doorway nearby. It would lead them to the house corridors used by staff.

Kazuo and Keisuke carried Martin through the doorway, Jefferson and Sun were about to follow when a deep rumbling thunder shook the air. For the second time that evening the Portland Hotel groaned under an unseen weight. It groaned and then it cracked.

Jefferson and Sun leaped back away from the doorway as it collapsed. They were cut off from Kazuo and Keisuke. As the dust settled they shouted for the Japanese brothers.

"We are okay," Kazuo said.

A crowd of people from the lobby were making their way slowly towards Jefferson and Sun.

"Shannon," Sun said. "I don't like the look of that."

At the front of the group, walking with a halting jerking motion, Jefferson recognized the man who had bit Trouble's neck. Blood dripped from his chin down over the tight flesh of his swollen neck.

"Look at his neck," Jefferson said.

From beyond the rubble, Kazuo shouted. "Are you okay?"

"We're fine. Make your way outside and head to the fairgrounds. If we can't find each other there, meet at Bow's Mercantile in Chinatown, I have friends there." Jefferson said.

Kazuo shouted something else but neither Jefferson nor Sun heard what it was. The sick were approaching.

Sun cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted back. "Watch out for the people up here, I think they're sick."

"Come on," Sun said. "Let's go."

"This way," Jefferson said.

He led Sun Yat-sen back towards the Scott ballroom. They shut the door behind them and cast themselves into complete darkness.

"Follow my voice," Jefferson said. "Sun?"

"Right here," Sun said.

In the darkness the sounds of the hotel were loud and frightening. Another roll of thunder erupted outside and the hotel quivered and creaked. And then he heard something that sounded like sand pouring out onto the ballroom floor behind them.

"What is that?" Sun said.

Jefferson didn't know, but he didn't like it.

"Let's find that door," he said.

The ceiling creaked and popped, metal beams twanged overhead and Jefferson walked faster, unable to see so much as his own hand in front of his face.

Sun crashed into something. "Found the wall," he said.

Jefferson reached out and touched the scratchy wallpaper. "This way," he said. He moved a little to his right, running his fingertips over the dry bumpy paper until he found the door.

Chapter Nine

Smoke spewed black columns that connected the city to the Cloud above. Periodically lightning arced across the sky casting an eerie light over the unearthly scene. Dirigibles and airships fell from the sky in great hydrogen-fueled fireballs. It felt like the whole world was burning. The Cloud flickered orange and red. Flames reached out from the windows of buildings and flashes of white light rippled from the direction of the Exposition fairgrounds.

Lighting struck a smaller airship overhead. Jefferson saw the small craft burst into flames. It nose-dived into one corner of the Portland Hotel. Crashing through the gabled roof it caused the top floor windows to shatter and rain glass down onto the street below.

Jefferson and Sun Yat-sen ran across the street to escape the debris.

"The whole city has gone mad," Sun said.

He wasn't wrong as far as Jefferson could tell. He saw a man across the street who showed the same symptoms of the sick people inside the Portland Hotel. "Lookout," he said.

"There's more of them."

"It must be an infection of some kind," Sun Yat-sen said.

They ran up Morrison Street towards China Gulch. Along the way they saw more sick people. Some of them were walking along slowly in groups, some of them were just standing in place, staring at the ground. The farmers at China Gulch were using shovels and tools to fight off the sick, ghoulishly infected people. Every block or two it seemed they ran across another couple of infected people.

Jefferson led Sun around to the Vaughn Street ballpark instead of the main entrance to the Exposition fairgrounds. He couldn't be sure where to find Ginnie Mac, or even if she'd still be there, but the awards ceremony was a science thing, and the Fantastic Machine was the Exposition's centerpiece of science, so he decided to try there first.

#

Deep shadows spread across the terrace that surrounded the sunken garden. Jefferson and Sun Yat-sen crept up from behind a rhododendron to the white wood railing, staying low. The Exposition fairgrounds were empty of people--healthy people; the infected ones dotted the fairgrounds like automatons that had been switched off. But from the sunken garden they heard voices, chanting, some kind of sound that might have been badly distorted music.

Jefferson and Sun put their backs against the railing that overlooked the sunken garden and surveyed their surroundings.

"Do you remember at the hotel," Sun Yat-sen said, "when you noticed the swollen neck on that first one? It's the thyroid gland. I'm sure of it."

"What's wrong with it?" Jefferson said.

"If only I could perform a proper examination perhaps I could discover the cause," Sun said.

Lurking their way through the fairgrounds, Jefferson and Sun had kept a close watch for the ghouls, the people who were infected. There were a few tell-tale signs that gave them away, one of which was an enlarged neck. Their glands swelled up and their necks became tight bags of purple and green flesh, often bulging out beyond an infected person's jaw. Their breathing was a labored effort, guttural sounding, with the head tipped back and the mouth open.

Every block from the Portland Hotel to the Exposition fairgrounds, Jefferson and Sun Yat-sen had found ghouls wandering, searching, rending the flesh from fresh kills. But here the ghouls behaved different. Here, within sight of the great dark haloed hole in the sky that glowed above the Fantastic Machine the ghouls came to rest.

Jefferson moved slowly, wanting to remain unnoticed, and carefully looked down into the sunken garden.

The Whisperer stood before a bonfire directly in front of the Fantastic Machine. Jefferson

was sure that's who it was, even though he appeared blackened and misshapen from the explosion at the carriage house. His legs bent at odd angles and each came to the ground in a hoof-like stump. He might have been naked, the silhouette of the Whisperer was a shadow among shadows, a darkness that reflected no light. He stood within the circle of low shrubs, the boxwoods Jefferson had stumbled over the other morning. There were ghouls down there, too, but they were acting strange, well-behaved.

As Jefferson watched one of the ghouls carried a bundle of something into the grassy circle where the Whisperer stood. At first he thought it was a blanket or an awkward bundle of wood. The Whisperer reached out with one shadowy arm to the bundle and raised the other arm skyward to the dark haloed hole in the Cloud above the Fantastic Machine.

The Whisperer moved with a fluid swiftness that made Jefferson think of a snake and all at once he knew that was no bundle of wood in the ghoul's arms. It was a child. The Whisperer whipped his arm down into the child's chest. The ghoul wobbled with the effort of holding the child. Silhouetted drops of black blood dripped off the Whisperer's hand as he held the child's heart up in the air before him. The ghoul tossed the small body onto the bonfire. The Whisperer brought the heart to his mouth and ate from it.

"What is it?" Sun Yat-sen said when Jefferson stopped looking and put his back against the railing. "What did you see?"

"There's a man down there," Jefferson began. "No, I don't know what he is but he's no man. I think he's eating children."

He put his head in his hands and tried to keep his stomach from rebelling against him.

White light bathed the terrace followed quickly by the crack of thunder. Jefferson heard the high pitched scream of a little girl.

"Ginnie Mac," he said. Without thinking Jefferson stood up and started moving towards the Fantastic Machine, towards the sound of the girl's voice. Sun Yat-sen practically stepped on

Jefferson's feet he followed so closely.

A bolt of lightning shot from the dark halo above and bonded to the Whisperer like a living writhing electric thread. Wrapped in the snapping tether of light the Whisperer was in thrall. Jefferson broke into a run.

Ghouls stood in a circle near the pillar where, the other morning, Jefferson had seen the Whisperer give his infernal commands to Bow Li Wei. He didn't stop to examine the ghouls. He sensed the need to hurry, to get this done before the crackling bolt released the Whisperer. He charged the nearest ghoul, a man in a white coat, and kidney-punched him.

The ghouls did not resist. They ignored Jefferson and collapsed when he knocked them over. Sun Yat-sen helped him knock the ghouls aside. Jefferson looked down and saw her, crouching beside the pillar, her arms outstretched to protect her from an attack, Ginnie Mac.

"You came for me." Ginnie Mac leaped up into Jefferson's arms. He caught her and didn't let go, turning back the way he'd come.

"Of course I did, sweetheart," Jefferson said. "I've got you."

The white bolt evaporated into blackness. The Whisperer turned his head at once to gaze upon Jefferson, Ginnie Mac, and Sun Yat-sen, escaping from the sunken garden. The ghouls came at them from every direction. Jefferson carried Ginnie Mac to the terrace and put her on her feet.

"Can you run?" he said.

She nodded her head vigorously.

"Don't stop," Sun said. "It's coming."

The Whisperer, or rather the charred gelatinous oil-slick of a man that he had become, came at them with a lurching awkward movement, placing each step on the ground with care before lifting the other leg.

"We're surrounded," Sun said.

Jefferson looked around at the ghouls and saw an opening to his left. He said: "Follow

close."

He charged through two ghouls with Ginnie Mac and Sun Yat-sen right behind him. The Whisperer came up from the sunken garden to the top of the steps.

"There," Ginnie Mac said. She pointed to the nearest building. "The Engineering and Transportation Hall. Go in there."

There was no time to argue, surrounded by ghouls and with the lumbering form of the Whisperer pursuing them. Jefferson ran towards the E. T. Hall, an enormous building, big enough to house several Concord Class airships. He looked over his shoulder as they ran and saw that the ghouls and the Whisperer were still in pursuit, but they were not nearly as fast as Jefferson, Ginnie Mac, and Sun.

The glass doors to the E. T. Hall were closed, but the glass had been broken. Jefferson charged right through but after a few steps he came to a stop.

"What now?" he said.

Ginnie Mac and Sun Yat-sen came up behind him. Countless gigantic engineering marvels filled the E. T. Hall, which had great big windows built high into the wall, windows which had all been shattered.

"Where's my dad?" Ginnie Mac said.

Jefferson looked at her with a dumb expression on his face. Now wasn't the time to break the news to her, he thought. He looked to Sun for help, but Sun was busy watching the Whisperer and the ghouls.

"Did he come with you?" Ginnie Mac said. "Where is he?"

"He's not here," Jefferson said. "He's--"

"We have to move," Sun said. "We cannot stay here."

"Go to the back." Ginnie Mac gestured toward the back of the E. T. Hall but stayed behind Jefferson.

He started jogging toward the back of the hall, keeping an eye on the shadows, watching for any ghouls that might be lurking. There were lots of hiding places in among the equipment. Some of the exhibits were complete mysteries to him: great engines supported by iron frames built to showcase the engine's beauty. Some of the things he saw he recognized: data processors like the terminal at the Portland Hotel; a model of a pneumatic tubeway much smaller than what ran underneath the city; an entire section of steam-engine cars.

Jefferson slowed down in front of the cars. The wall near here had been filled so completely with glass that when all of them had shattered and blown out they had left holes in the wall big enough to drive through.

Ginnie Mac said it first. "We could drive out of here."

"And go where?" Jefferson said. He was just thinking out loud, but he spoke sharply and with anger. He looked at Ginnie Mac. "Sorry, kid. It's a good idea, but those streets are thick with these fat-necked bastards."

"We should go to wherever my dad is," Ginnie Mac said. "He'll know what to do."

Jefferson put a hand on her shoulder. "Darling," he said. "I've got to tell you something and there ain't no easy way to say it." He paused for a second to make sure she was listening. It was a mistake because he thought he might lose his nerve. He took a deep breath and let it out. "Your father died at the Portland Hotel. Genevieve, I'm so, so sorry."

She searched his face, tears welling up in her eyes and spilling out onto her cheeks. "He ain't one of them, is he? Tell me he didn't get sick like them."

"Definitely not," Jefferson said. "That ain't what happened."

"Your father died protecting us. Lee Martin is an honorable man." Sun spoke in a calming tone.

Ginnie Mac's shoulders collapsed and her eyes became distant. Jefferson felt an agonizing pity for her. He knew how it felt to live this moment, the moment where you learn your

family has been lost forever. And he still didn't know what Ginnie Mac had already been through before he and Sun arrived at the fairgrounds.

"I can hear them," Sun said. "Can you hear them? They're dragging their feet on the waxed floor."

Jefferson listened for a moment. He heard them, all right. Squeak-drag-squeak, with a groan thrown in for good measure.

The ghouls rounded a corner not far away.

"We need a way out of here," Sun said.

Jefferson shook his head. "We'll have to try to fight our way out through the ghouls, I just don't know how else we can get out of here," he said. "Which direction has the fewest of them?"

Ginnie Mac shot up straight again. "The Blue Bird," she said.

Jefferson looked around the exhibit hall. "I don't see it," he said.

"No. It's not a bird." Ginnie Mac pointed to a high ledge not far away. A rounded capsule-shaped object perched there, lit faintly by the nighttime lights of a burning Portland coming in through the emptied window frames.

"But that's an airship," Jefferson said. "I don't know how to pilot that thing. Sun? Do you?"

"I have never piloted," Sun said. "But I'm willing to try."

"No, you dolts," Ginnie Mac said. "I'll fly it. Come on."

Ginnie Mac led them to a narrow iron staircase that ran up the side wall to the Blue Bird's platform. Jefferson held the railing as he climbed and tried to look out at the city through the empty window frames--looking down made him dizzy. Fat raindrops slanted in through the empty places where the windows were missing. The weather had gotten worse.

Jefferson had thought that the platform was decorative, that it only came out into the E. T. Hall. But he saw now that it extended even farther outside the hall than in. The wall here had

been two large sliding glass doors, the glass was now spread out across the platform like a million tiny diamonds. He opened the empty doors, pushing the back until they were open all the way. On the balcony outside, ropes tied-down to moorings kept the Blue Bird's hydrogen sack from floating away.

"How are you going to fly this thing?" Jefferson said. He had a stitch in his side after running up the stairs trying to keep pace with Ginnie Mac.

"They aren't as tough as they look." Ginnie Mac ran to the back of the Blue Bird and put her hand on the boiler. She groaned. "Not hot enough," she said. She grabbed a crank from the tool chest and slid it over a nipple and gave it two good cranks. The burners inside the boiler-set ignited and she returned the crank to the tool chest.

"How long before you're ready?" Sun said. He was standing at the edge of the platform watching the ghouls approach. The Whisperer was still among the ghouls. He seemed somehow to be directing them towards the Engineering and Transportation Hall.

Ginnie Mac reached inside the cockpit where Jefferson saw a panel full of gauges. She tapped her finger to one gauge after the other as she studied them.

"All right, gentlemen," she said. "Let's push."

Chapter Ten

"And you're sure about this?" Jefferson said. He stood on the balcony outside the Engineering and Transportation exhibit hall and hesitated before climbing into the small backseat of the Blue Bird.

He and Sun had pushed the blue capsule, or control cage as Ginnie Mac preferred to call it, out onto the balcony so they could attach it to the hydrogen sack. With all the ropes secured and everything in place, Ginnie Mac had ordered Jefferson into the back seat so Sun Yat-sen could sit on his lap while she piloted them off the balcony.

And all the while, ghouls ascended the iron staircase led by the hideous oil-slick form of the Whisperer.

"You guys have to sit back there," Ginnie Mac said. "And you don't exactly fit on Sun's lap.

"You're fifteen years old," Jefferson said. "You've never flown before, have you?"

"I know what I'm doing," Ginnie Mac said. She put her hands on her hips, elbows out, and cocked her head. "Everything's ready and that thing is almost to the top of the stairs."

Jefferson wracked his brain trying to think of another way out of the hall, remembering the flaming airships falling from the sky on their trek from the Portland Hotel. He came up blank. "Fine," Jefferson said, as he climbed into the backseat.

Sun Yat-sen climbed in, too, and he tried to sit beside Jefferson, but they couldn't both fit on the narrow bench. It might have fit two children or one adult. Sun resigned to sit on Jefferson's leg, folded over between Jefferson and Ginnie Mac.

Ginnie Mac climbed in and latched shut the control cage. The Blue Bird's control cage, which was a black cage frame of hollow metal tubes, was attached to the bottom of a royal blue dirigible that had been laced with black steel-cable webbing. A tail and ailerons were already

attached to the rear of the hydrogen sack. Balanced on either side of the blimp were a pair of steam-engines, five-piston turbines that spun the propeller blades. Ginnie Mac had assured him the blades would not rip apart the blimp. Still, it looked to Jefferson anything but safe.

Ginnie Mac adjusted a knob on the control panel and the engines made a funny sound, thwpt, and then they sprang to full speed and the Blue Bird jerked forward.

She adjusted the controls again and Jefferson saw the back-end of the propeller engines come down as they were being aimed at the sky. The Blue Bird skidded forward on the balcony, which now seemed all too small to Jefferson. She lifted and then bounced back down onto the balcony.

Ginnie Mac cranked a wheel all the way to one side and the engines roared and the Blue Bird floated up and away from the balcony. She gripped the bars of the control cage, her small white hands straining against the black metal bars.

Jefferson looked back in time to see the Whisperer clamoring towards them with that stilted awkward gait. He stopped as he came just outside the building and watched the Blue Bird float away.

He felt the earth fall away beneath him. His heart dropped into his stomach as the Blue Bird gained elevation. It was a terrible feeling, hanging there in space, held up by nothing but a bag of highly-flammable gas.

But they were up and they were flying.

"It worked," Sun said. "Ginnie Mac, you did it!"

She laughed breathlessly and released the black bars of the control cage. "It worked," she said. "We did it. We--"

Ginnie Mac stopped speaking when she looked out at the view of Portland in flames. "The whole city is burning," she said.

"I didn't want to mention this before," Sun said. "But now that we are airborne, has

anyone given any thought to our destination?"

They were hundreds of feet in the air, already leaving the Vaughn street stadium behind. Jefferson felt like they would fall out of the sky any second and he realized he'd been tense and holding his breath since they'd taken flight. With an effort he managed a measured inhale and exhale.

"Chinatown," he said. "Straight ahead. Let's see if there's anywhere near Bow's shop where we can land this thing. You can land this thing, can't you?"

"Sure," Ginnie Mac said. "I think."

She flew a little lower and steered the Blue Bird over Chinatown. They could see the ghouls roaming the streets, nearly every building was either collapsed or on fire. She gained some altitude.

"What are you doing?" Jefferson said.

"We have to stay away from those flames," Ginnie Mac said. "If we get too close, then this old bird will turn into a fireball."

"We can't land in Chinatown," Sun said. "But I have another idea. What about Mount Tabor?"

"The Cabott's?" Jefferson said. "Why them?"

"I've had some dealings with them," Sun said. "If I know Theodor Cabott, he'll be working on a solution to this problem as we speak."

"The sanatorium is right there, too," Jefferson said. "My mother's there."

"We can get her," Ginnie Mac said.

"All right," Jefferson said. "It's a plan. Is this as fast as this thing can fly?"

"The engines are running at full-pressure," Ginnie Mac said. "This is as fast as I know how to do." She looked over her shoulder at Jefferson and Sun. "What happened to my dad?"

Jefferson stared out the window. They were crossing over the Willamette River now and

Ginnie Mac turned the Blue Bird a little towards the south. It gave them a better view of downtown. He found the flaming husk of the Portland Hotel and hoped Kazuo and Keisuke had been able to escape, with or without Martin's body.

"He saved my life," Jefferson said. He laid it out for her, told her everything that had happened leading up to her father's death. When he finished they were nearly over the sanatorium.

"What about you?" Jefferson asked. "Can you tell us what happened there?"

Ginnie Mac shook her head and adjusted the controls on the panel in front of her. She took a deep breath as if readying herself to speak, but she didn't get the chance. Just then the sky lit up with a pure white light blindingly bright.

Jefferson closed his eyes and saw the afterimage of a Mount Tabor bathed in colorless light. The Blue Bird shook. Its engines sputtered, quivered, and died.

"Not good," Jefferson said. "That's not good."

"Panicking isn't going to help anyone," Ginnie Mac said.

"Look to the horizon," Sun said.

Through the darkness of night ahead of them Jefferson saw Cabott House resting atop Mount Tabor, lights glowing in the windows like some fairytale lodge. But as the nose of the Blue Bird sank, Cabott House moved out of sight. He found himself looking out at the fast-approaching neighborhood between Hawthorne Blvd and Division St.

The Blue Bird listed to the left, rolling onto the side of its one remaining engine.

"Did you say earlier that we're filled with hydrogen?" Jefferson said.

"Kind of busy," Ginnie Mac said. She pushed controls, spun wheels and turned nobs.

"Try to relax," Sun said.

"Hold on to the bars," Ginnie Mac said. She pulled a lever and Jefferson heard the twang of cables releasing the control cage from the blimp. "This is gonna hurt."

The cage dropped like a stone, spinning in the air on its way to the ground. The spinning stopped when they were thrown backwards into their seats. The cage tumbled and rolled and in one of the revolutions Jefferson saw a fireball in the night sky, the exploding remains of the Blue Bird's hydrogen sack.

Chapter Eleven

One of the two front doors was missing and the other door hung askew like a broken tooth. From out front Jefferson couldn't see any lights inside.

"Are you sure she's in there?" Ginnie Mac said.

"Maybe you and Sun should wait out here," Jefferson said. "It shouldn't take me long to find her and bring her out."

"There might be people hurt in there," Sun said. "I'm going with you. We should stick together."

Jefferson had twisted his right ankle in the crash but had otherwise walked away from it feeling beaten up but not broken. Sun Yat-sen had pulled a muscle in his back but was making do. Ginnie Mac had a nasty cut on one cheek, but Sun had wrapped it up and it was hardly bleeding anymore.

"All right," Jefferson said. "Then we stick together."

"What happens if we see more of the really sick people in there?" Ginnie Mac said.

"The ghouls?" Jefferson said. "We run. Together."

"They seemed pretty harmless at the exposition," Ginnie Mac said. "Strong, though."

"Trust me," Jefferson said. "They're deadly."

Jefferson went in first. The sanatorium was dark but not silent. The ceiling creaked and he could hear slow shuffling footsteps coming from the second floor. Ginnie Mac followed him and even though she said she wasn't scared she stayed very close. Sun Yat-sen picked up the rear.

"There should be emergency supplies at the nurses' station," Sun said. He went to the reception desk and rooted around. He found a single lantern, turned the flint and adjusted the light. The registration book sat open on the desk. "She's on this floor," he said. He handed the lantern to Jefferson who held it out before him in his good hand.

Jefferson wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. He did not allow himself to hope that he would find his mother healthy and whole. If the Whisperer's madness didn't consume her, then the chances were good those ghouls might have.

He swung the lantern in front of him for a better view down the hall. Thank goodness Isabelle's room wasn't upstairs.

"Did you hear that?" Ginnie Mac said. "There."

Faint, muffled, someone inside this big dark house was stomping. The stomping grew louder and soon it was joined by a sound they knew too well, the groaning and moaning and heavy breathing of the ghouls.

"It's coming from upstairs," Ginnie Mac said.

A set of double doors a short distance ahead of them blocked the stairwell entrance to the hallway. A broken piece of wood had been jammed through the pair of door handles to keep the doors locked. Through the thin slice of window in each door Jefferson saw that the stairs were empty.

"Let's go," he said. "I want to get out of here."

The ruckus upstairs grew. Fast, staccato footsteps ran across the second floor.

"That is a person," Sun said.

A sound like furniture being dragged across the room followed the fast steps across the second floor to the stairwell. Something crashed against the double doors.

"Help me! I'm in here!" It was a woman's voice.

Sun Yat-sen shouted, "Hold on. We're coming."

He ran back down the hall followed by Jefferson and Ginnie Mac. The pounding on the door beat a desperate rhythm.

"Hurry," the woman shouted. "They're coming."

Sun pulled the broken wood out of the door handles and the doors burst open. Penelope

Cabott stumbled out into the hall and fell to the floor.

"Shut it," she said. "Shut it now."

Sun and Jefferson slammed the doors shut. Sun pushed the broken piece of wood through the door handles just as the ghoulish horde reached the doors. They pressed against the doors but the wood held them closed.

"That won't hold them for long," Penelope said.

"Doctor Cabott." Sun picked her up off the floor. "What are you doing here?"

"Sun?" Penelope said. She hugged him. "I've been trapped upstairs for hours. There was some kind of earthquake. The patients were reading, playing cards, and then someone came upstairs and he ... they mutilated one another. I was trapped up there. I saw you walking up the front steps and I thought this might be my only chance to escape." She sobbed and squeezed her eyes shut. "They were screaming and begging for mercy. No one survived on the second floor."

"Miss Cabott," Jefferson said. "Is Isabelle Shannon one of the patients upstairs?"

"Shannon?" Penelope wiped her eyes. "Jefferson. My god. Um, I don't think so, no. She should be in her room. I locked her in there before this happened. She was being uncooperative."

"Are there any other survivors?" Sun said.

"This old house has a lot of places to hide," Penelope said. She noticed Ginnie Mac standing behind Jefferson. "Hello young lady. What's your name?"

"Genevieve," she said.

The ghouls clawed at the door behind them, moaning and scratching.

"This way, Genevieve," Penelope said.

She led them down the hall to Isabelle's door. Through the window in the door Jefferson saw Isabelle kneeling at the edge of her bed and praying. Penelope let him in and at the sound of the door opening, Isabelle turned and looked up at her son with eyes that were wide and full of fear, but that changed suddenly to relief.

"Thank you, Jesus," she said. "Thank you, Lord."

Jefferson helped her to her feet. "How you feeling, ma?"

"The Lord has answered my prayers," she said.

The doorway at the end of the hall strained under the weight of the ghouls pressed against it.

"We have to go," Sun said. "We have to go now."

Jefferson grabbed Isabelle by the elbow and helped her out into the hall.

"They're coming," Ginnie Mac said.

"What's happening?" Isabelle said "You're injured."

"I'm fine, ma," Jefferson said.

"Less talk. More run," Ginnie Mac said.

Penelope held the lantern and led them away from the ghouls. She shoved through a door and stopped out into a courtyard beneath the dripping black Cloud.

Ginnie Mac reached Penelope first but instead of charging through the door to the courtyard she stopped.

Jefferson ran past her. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I--" Ginnie Mac said. Isabelle and Sun Yat-sen caught up and the group gathered around Penelope.

"Over there." Penelope pointed across the yard to an ivy shrouded clump hidden deep beneath the edge of Douglas fir trees.

"You want us to hide in the bushes?" Jefferson said.

He looked around. The back of the sanatorium ran straight off on either side about twenty meters. Two wings of the house ran straight back towards the forested slope of Mount Tabor. They were boxed in and he said so.

"Do you see that clump of shadow beneath the trees?" Penelope said. She looked into

Ginnie Mac's eyes as she spoke, though everyone was listening. "Do not stop running until you get there. I can protect you once we get there, but you've got to hurry. The monsters are right behind us."

The yard was a hundred meters of dead, muddy lawn, starved of sunlight by two years living under the Cloud. A gravel path crisscrossed the yard.

"Stay on the path," Penelope said. "It's faster."

Ginnie Mac suddenly found her voice. "Wait! We have to go back and make sure there aren't any survivors we are leaving behind." Her voice was shrill in the dark night.

"No way. We are getting you away from those ghouls and into some protection" Jefferson was doubtful the dark bushes would give them much protection, but he was certain he needed to get Ginnie Mac and his mother away from the shuffling sounds of the ghouls inside.

"You heard what she said, there are plenty of places to hide in there, we can't leave anyone behind to die. We can't!" Ginnie Mac was nearing panic.

"I know for certain no one survived upstairs," Penelope said. "However, Genevieve is right that there may be others on the lower level. Jefferson, come with me and we can check the rooms and gather any survivors. Sun can stay with Isabelle and Genevieve."

"Fine, but we have to hurry." Jefferson agreed reluctantly, and the two of them turned back.

Penelope and Jefferson swept through the bottom level as quickly as they could from room to room. The only people they came across were not survivors. They heard the straining stairwell doors burst just as they were checking the last few rooms, and the shuffling feet and strange utterances began to get louder. Penelope and Jefferson scrambled back outside to meet up with the group.

Jefferson was relieved to find the three of them still huddled together in the courtyard. Ginnie Mac looked at him expectantly and he shook his head. He could feel her disappointment.

"Come on, we need to get moving," he said solemnly.

They were almost halfway to the Douglas fir trees when the ghouls came stumbling out the door. They limped and loped and grabbed at the air with their slimy arms, pock-marked and bruised. They were moving faster, too, about as fast as Isabelle could run. Their necks were still swollen and they were close enough that Jefferson could hear their labored breathing.

Sun Yat-sen brought up the rear, herding Jefferson and Isabelle. "You're almost there," he said. "Hurry, now."

Penelope arrived at the shadowed clump of ivy. Jefferson saw a concrete awning barely visible beneath the growth. Penelope pushed the vines to one side and revealed a large iron gate. She pulled a key on a necklace out from beneath her blouse and struggled with shaking hands to open the lock.

"Come on," Jefferson said.

"Ten seconds," Sun said. He watched the approaching ghouls, his back pressed up against a fir tree just steps from the door. "Nine."

"You can do it," Ginnie Mac said.

Isabelle muttered a prayer.

"Eight," Sun said.

"Got it," Penelope said. She held the door open and shouted for the others to hurry.

Ginnie Mac held Isabelle's arm and helped Jefferson lead her past Penelope into the dank wet darkness.

Sun Yat-sen was the last to enter. "Shut it," he said.

Penelope slammed the iron gate closed and locked it from the inside just as the ghouls left the soggy grass and passed underneath the Douglas fir. She backed away from the gate and hoped it would hold.

Chapter Twelve

They went through another door after Penelope shut the gate on those drooling fat-necked abominations. The blackness in the cavern was complete. Penelope felt her way along the wall. Jefferson heard something click and then the cavern became visible in a dim orange light.

An electric light fixed to the ceiling of the cavern revealed a large brick-lined hallway. The arched ceiling reached perhaps ten feet high at the center. The walls were nearly eight feet apart. The same unevenly-cut black basalt stones lined the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. The stone seemed almost light-absorbing. The cement that had been used to grout the stones together seemed extra bright. The electric lights, connected by thick ropes of insulated copper, disappeared up the curving stairs.

"We've got a long climb ahead of us," Penelope said.

"Where does this go?" Jefferson said. He worried about his mother's ability to climb stairs.

"I'm taking you all to my house," Penelope said. "You should be safe there."

"You know," Sun said to Penelope as they trudged up the stairs ahead of the others. "I have been thinking about those plants and the infected souls."

Jefferson had almost gotten used to walking with a twisted ankle. The grass in the sanatorium's courtyard had been somewhat nice--cool and soft. And even in the tunnel he'd developed a sort of hobbling rhythm that had allowed him to keep moving. He'd been slow but Isabelle hadn't been able to go fast either. Penelope and Sun led the way, exchanging theories and trying to figure out what was happening. Ginnie Mac hung back. Jefferson thought the poor girl must have been having a really hard time dealing with all the craziness.

Jefferson felt like he should make conversation with her. Maybe keep her busy, get her talking. Isabelle had stopped talking to herself and he found the quiet a little awkward.

"Oh, great," he said. "More stairs."

"Listen to them," Ginnie Mac said. "Talking about it like it's something happening a hundred miles away from here, like they haven't just seen people walking around like some kind of walking dead. Real people are out there dying. Families are dying."

"You know they're just trying to figure this out," Jefferson said. "Sometimes folks try to distance themselves from the thing they're trying to figure out."

"You mean they bury their head in the sand," Ginnie Mac said.

"Yeah," Jefferson said.

Ginnie Mac stopped on the landing, her eyes far away again. Jefferson and Isabelle stopped, too, but Sun and Penelope continued on ahead. There was a side corridor here, and Jefferson strained, listening for any strange sounds coming from the darkness. Hearing nothing but the sounds of Penelope and Sun up ahead, Jefferson gingerly stretched his ankle while Isabelle caught her breath.

Suddenly Ginnie Mac started sobbing and clutched on to Jefferson. She flailed her fists on his chest and he tried to hold her, to comfort her. As quickly as the outburst began, Ginnie Mac turned and ran into the darkened side corridor. It happened so fast. Jefferson called for her to stop, come back, but he heard no reply.

"Go," Isabelle said. "She needs you."

"Right, ma. Christ. Keep going, okay? Just one step at a time. I'll be right behind you," Jefferson said.

Isabelle started up the stairs. "One step at a time."

Jefferson went after Ginnie Mac. He kept his left hand on the wall as he walked further into the black. Like the stairwell this hall curved gently and soon Jefferson lost sight of the landing with its electric light. He called out to Ginnie Mac but got no answer. She could be two feet away from him or a hundred.

"Ginnie Mac, I'm sorry," he said. No response. He kept walking. "Sugar, are you in here?"

A little further ahead he noticed a glow coming down the hall, the bricks lining the corridor gave jagged hints at light and shadow. He pressed on. The light grew brighter. He heard a noise, a steady noise like machinery, quiet, distant, muffled. He quickened his pace and came around the corner to see an orange light, as if coming from a furnace, glowing through the silhouetted archway at the end of the corridor.

Jefferson ran to the light, or rather, he hobbled more quickly now that he could see better.

He entered a glowing chamber of the same stone that lined everything else down here. To his right he saw the source of the light: a steel cylinder came up through the floor and continued up through the ceiling. It echoed like a drum. A round porthole like the kind you'd see on a steamship glowed with an orange light. Jefferson got the impression that there was fire somewhere deep down in that column.

Ginnie Mac was near the column, leaning with her back against the far wall. There didn't seem to be any other way out, otherwise he figured she probably would have kept running. She was crying, quietly, her arms crossed and her shoulders bouncing. She looked like she was staring down at the shadows that danced across the floor.

"Nice room," Jefferson said.

"Why him?" she said. "He just wanted to live and help me live and eat a good breakfast and he didn't deserve to die."

"You're right," he said. "He got dealt a real bad hand."

She slammed her palms against the wall. It made a pitifully soft sound. "He should be here," she said. She was crying aloud now, tears streaming down her face. Her eyes glassy stars in the dim light. "He died saving you and saving Sun. He's dead. He'll never eat breakfast again. But you, you're still here. You're still here."

Jefferson leaned on the wall at the entrance to the room. He wanted to block the exit in case she tried to rabbit.

"You're right about that," he said. "It's not fair and honest to God, Ginnie Mac, I wish he were here right now instead of me. He deserves it and so do you."

He didn't know what to say or do, so he let that hang there for a moment. Ginnie Mac's sobs made a kind of rhythm with the thumping sound of machinery coming from the cylinder.

"Kiddo," Jefferson said. He moved closer to her one small step at a time. "I wish I could tell you it was going to get better. But the truth is you're always going to miss him and it's going to hurt for a long time. This is what it feels like to grow up. I wish it didn't have to be like this."

"It's just too much," She covered her face with her hands. "That monster came into the hall where the kids were all hanging out before the awards ceremony. He was so awful and no one could stop him, we could only watch. It was like our brains were stuck in mud." She was calmer now, remembering. "He killed them. Right there, by the machine. That's what caused the earthquake and broke all the glass. Its like he got stronger with every one he killed. It was terrible, and I couldn't do anything to help them. They were just little kids!"

He put his arm around her. Ginnie Mac folded into him and wept a muffled cry into his chest. He held her and she let his arm stay on her shoulder as they left the warm glow of the cylinder room. The walk back down the long dark corridor didn't seem as long as it had been the first time. They caught up to Isabelle on the stairs. The three of them walked up the long march to the top of the stairs together.

When they reached the top, they found Sun Yat-sen and Penelope waiting for them outside a small gated lift cage.

"All aboard," Penelope said. "Next stop, my house."

Chapter Thirteen

The lift rose up along tracks that were bolted into the stone wall. Electric lights strung up across the black chasm gave Jefferson a disorienting feeling. The shaft was perhaps forty feet across and he could not see the bottom.

Ginnie Mac interrupted Penelope and Sun's conversation, and said, "How come you made this hole so big?"

"That's a good question," Penelope said. "This hole was here long before any of us were. Do you know what that means?"

"Does that mean it's a volcano?" Ginnie Mac said.

"Very good." Penelope was clearly fond of Ginnie Mac.

"Mount Tabor is no longer an active volcano," Penelope said. "This shaft is called a volcanic neck. The top of it collapsed in on itself many millennia ago. This elevator gets us close to the surface, but doesn't go all the way." As she spoke, Penelope looked upwards through the caged ceiling of the elevator. "The topsoil up there is pretty secure, but we didn't want to mess with its structure, so this lift stops below the surface. But it sure beats walking, doesn't it?"

The lift took four minutes to climb the empty shaft, time enough for Jefferson's injuries to get his attention. They deboarded onto a ledge cut right out of the volcanic stone.

"More stairs," Jefferson said.

"Only a little," Penelope said.

"Where does that way go?" Ginnie Mac pointed towards a fork in the corridor.

"You can get to the surface that way," Penelope said. "There is a tunnel entrance in the garage, but this way is faster. This way leads to Mister Cabott's laboratories beneath the house. We'll need to see him right away."

They were a motley crew. Penelope and Sun in the lead; Ginnie Mac, Isabelle, and

Jefferson bringing up the rear.

They climbed a short distance to another corridor which finally led them to a door.

Penelope worked her key into the lock.

"Welcome to Cabott House," she said.

Jefferson followed the others into the weird world of Theodor Cabott's scientific sanctum.

Squeaky mechanical devices spun and repeated noises like soft chatter in a busy restaurant. The air smelled bad, like too much body odor mixed with oil and kerosene.

At the far end of the room, Theodor Cabott bent over a contraption that reminded Jefferson of the Fantastic Machine, only smaller. Penelope called out to him but he didn't answer. Not surprising, what with all the contraptions jittering and creaking about their business.

Jefferson watched Penelope approach her husband. She called out to him loudly from several feet away, apparently not wanting to surprise him. Theodor paused, looked to his left and then his right, then he stood up straight and turned to see his wife.

"What is it?" Theodor said. He turned his attention back to tinkering with the machine.

"What? I--" Penelope paused for a moment. "I've just returned," she said. They had to shout to one another to be heard over the racket.

"Returned from where?" Theodor said. He stopped tinkering for a moment, looked at her. "I told you not to go out there."

"I went to the old house." She pushed her shoulders back defiantly as she spoke. "I needed to know if they were all right."

Theodor grunted. "That was reckless, Penelope." He bent over to return to his tinkering. "I need your help."

Penelope coughed. "Theodor," she said. "I've brought some people with me. I'd like to introduce them to you. They helped me get back home."

Theodor Cabott stood up slowly. He was an old man, a man who looked like he'd been

chewed up from the inside. He didn't look like a man you'd be intimidated by, but Jefferson felt a kind of shameful guilt when he saw those eyes turn on him and Isabelle, Ginnie Mac, and Sun Yat-sen.

Theodor took one long look at them and launched into a smoldering rage. "What have you done? You can't bring strangers here. You know that. I can't have people showing up in my lab. I can't have it, Penelope. You know why. You've put them all in danger."

"But you're doing so much better." Penelope put her hands on Theodor's shoulders. "They saved my life. And if you think about it, they might be able to help you."

Theodor dropped the calipers he'd been holding and drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly under a great strain. His shoulders shook. His breathing strained.

Sun Yat-sen stepped forward but Jefferson held his arm.

"She's a doc, too, doc," Jefferson said.

Theodor spoke to Penelope through gritted teeth, his anger growing. "It's not like it was before," Theodor said. "It is awake now. Ever since the halo opened, it has been trying to get out." He wasn't making any sense to Jefferson, but Penelope continued to console her husband. She kept her back to the others and shushed Theodor, told him everything would be all right. Theodor shrugged away from her touch. "You left against my orders and you bring strangers back with you?"

Penelope spoke sweetly to him. He looked like he was in growing pain but whatever it was, Theodor Cabott was not backing down from it. He gnashed his teeth and wrung his hands and made a sound once or twice as though he were whimpering. Then he did something Jefferson had never seen a person do before. Theodor Cabott opened his mouth wide the way you do when you yawn, he opened his mouth and he growled.

Sun Yat-sen ran to help them, but Jefferson thought he'd rather keep Isabelle and Ginnie Mac at a safe distance from whatever Theodor Cabott was going through.

Ginnie Mac looked around the room. "I don't see any of those plants," she said. "Is this what happens when those people get infected?"

"If his neck starts getting fat," Jefferson said. "We're running right back out the way we came."

Theodor Cabott doubled over in agony. He screamed and held his head in his hands. Jefferson could not quite see what was happening. He heard the quick rip of fabric. Penelope shouted. And Theodor stood straight up, arched his back, threw his arms out to each side and growled at the ceiling.

Before Jefferson's eyes, Theodor Cabott was changing, growing taller, wider in his chest and shoulders, and his head seemed distorted somehow. Hair poured forth from his head and arms. He still resembled Theodor Cabott, but he was fast changing into something like a man-bear. This abomination stood several feet taller than Theodor Cabott had, but it was wearing his clothes, or the shredded bits of them.

Penelope shouted and punched her husband's chest, which she had to stretch upwards to reach. "Theodor," she said. "You can stop this. Theodor Cabott I love you."

Theodor stumbled to one side, righted himself against a workbench. His mighty hands, hairy and with long thick fingernails, crushed the edge of the table as if it were made of balsa wood. He bent forward and his back heaved with mighty breaths. Theodor Cabott was waging some kind of war with himself and Jefferson hoped the right side won.

Theodor got his breathing under control and as he calmed down he began to reduce in size until soon he was the same old scrawny scientist he'd been a moment earlier. Penelope and Sun Yat-sen caught Theodor when he tipped backwards, limp and unconscious.

Penelope and Sun brought Theodor over to the great chair at the center of the room-- Isabelle generously removed herself from it as they approached. Theodor moaned as he regained consciousness.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry you all had to see that. I've been under an enormous strain lately. It won't happen again." He looked at each of them in turn. "I assure you, you are safe."

Jefferson wasn't so sure. After all he'd seen these past few days, this was just too much. His head swam and he felt suddenly cold. He reached out to a countertop to steady himself and noticed his hands were trembling.

Sun Yat-sen could not contain himself. "What is this? Does this mean you have a cure for those people out there?"

"It's not the same thing," Penelope said. "Please, you mustn't burden him with questions right now. He needs his rest."

"We need to know what the hell just happened," Jefferson said. "What are you? I need to know if we are safe with you here."

Theodor Cabott pulled a blanket around his shoulders and shivered slightly beneath it. "I see," he said. "And I suppose you deserve to know the truth, for all you have done and all you may yet do."

"I will tell you what little I can. This will help you understand what's happening now. And after you hear what I have to say, then we can talk about how we're going to fix this."

#

Theodor Cabott arrived in Atlanta, Georgia, a man of thirty-three years and a reputation as America's greatest inventor. It was the year 188- and the War Between The States had dragged on for twenty horrible years.

The South was bankrupt. Her people were suffering and her leaders, such as they were, were looking for a way to end the war. These desperate leaders were given just such a proposal by an eccentric recluse from somewhere East of the European Alps. This man, Mal Kriech, promised a weapon that would cripple the North. He could provide it for them at a very inexpensive cost, but what he wanted more than money was the opportunity to build it and test it somewhere, and

where better than in the tumultuous untamed badlands of America?

Fools being what they are, the South went ahead with this plan. Word of this secret plan eventually made its way to Theodor Cabott, who at that time was working for the Northern army. Theodor Cabott was given a small team and the singular objective of stopping this attack.

Theodor and his team finally caught up with the mad inventor in Atlanta. They found him in a warehouse outside of town where the dirigibles were housed in great hangars. The mad inventor was desperate to see his creation work and knowing that he was about to be captured he turned the machine on.

What it did remained difficult for Theodor to describe. The bulk of the equipment provided power to a small green stone that looked like a starfish about the size of a dinner plate. When charged, the stone generated a frequency that reached through gaps in the membrane of our reality, into another dimension. But more difficult to imagine even than that, was the fact that in this other dimension there were terrible forces at war with each other. One of those forces was so great and so abhorrent that all creatures in that dimension had warred against it for aeons. The mad inventor had calculated a way to pry open those gaps, to create a huge opening between two dimensions in order to free that horrendous power, known as the Eternal Ancient One, to come into to our world.

It worked, partially. A gigantic opening appeared, haloed with purple light, beyond it a field of stars and colors like none ever before seen by human eyes.

And then the mad scientist inadvertently fed souls into that void. He captured and killed two of Theodor's team and Theodor watched as ghostly apparitions wrenched from their corporeal forms drifted into the halo as inexorably as a leaf on a swift river.

Theodor struggled with the vile villain and managed to flip a few switches and turn some knobs on the equipment. He wanted to close the portal and thought he had enough of an understanding from watching the mad inventor use it.

However, instead of closing the portal Theodor Cabott somehow threw a lifeline into it. He drew forth from the aether the one creature imprisoned there that was strong enough to escape. The creature's spirit escaped the halo and embedded itself within Theodor Cabott.

The combination of two souls drove Theodor mad. The other took over and when it did, Theodor accessed its mind, its memories, its history and pain and rage.

It was a Mai Gow, an ancient race from beyond our dimension of space. Their war with the Eternal Ancient One is everlasting. They have come to our world numerous times over the centuries, searching for means to destroy the evil in their dimension, never meaning harm to creatures in this world.

Mai Gow are ten-foot tall hairy bipeds. They have been seen in the Himalaya's where they are called Yeti. The North American Lakota Indians call them Chiye-tanka, which means hairy uncle. Most folks just call them Big Foot.

Theodor transformed physically and mentally into the Mai Gow. He lost all control to the rage of the beast, though he witnessed everything as if standing behind a thick window.

The Mai Gow destroyed everything. It destroyed the machine and the nearby hydrogen tanks that fueled the dirigibles for their journey across the North American plains. It ran wild destroying anything that caught its attention. It was confused and did not know where it was, but that might not have mattered.

Eventually, Theodor Cabott woke up naked in a canyon a thousand miles west. With him he had the green stone.

#

"Hold on a minute," Jefferson said. "Maybe I'm just a small-time hotel detective, but if you knew what this green stone did to Atlanta, then why the hell are you using it in the Fantastic Machine?"

"Hubris," Theodor said. "I thought I could control it. I did control it, in the prototype. But

the Fantastic Machine is so much more powerful."

"So it works great," Jefferson said, "until someone dies on or near it."

"Just so," Theodor said.

Ginnie Mac spoke up, "But what happened this time? Who is the Whisperer and what is turning our citizens into ghouls?"

"There are too many things we just don't understand," Theodor said. "The Whisperer must serve the Eternal Ancient One. He is drawn to the green stone's power. He brought those foul plants here and caused the sickness of the ghouls."

Theodor appeared calmer now, much more like a tired old man.

"So how are you going to fix this?" Jefferson said.

"Fight fire with fire," Theodor said. "I've got a lot of power below Cabott House. Mount Tabor is an old volcano. I've tapped into that heat deep below the earth and I've been using it to charge a smaller chunk of the green star. I believe I can disrupt the portal, interfere with the signal. I think I can shut it down from here. But it would only be temporary. I need to get to the Fantastic Machine and destroy that green stone."

"So why don't you fly over the Exposition and drop a bomb on it?" Ginnie Mac said.

"They'd never make it," Jefferson said. "When the Whisperer hijacked the Fantastic Machine it caused all that strange lightning. No airship lasts in the sky while that machine is being fed by him and shooting out all that power into the sky."

"That's why we went down?" she said. She looked relieved.

"He's right," Sun said. He told the Cabotts they had seen airships crashing into buildings downtown when the event happened and that they themselves were knocked out of the sky before they made it all the way to the sanatorium.

"Just as well," Theodor said. "A bomb wouldn't work. The green stone is too strong for that. But who is this Whisperer you mentioned?"

Jefferson, Sun, and Ginnie Mac all exchanged looks. Isabelle sat on a bench nearby and watched them with a polite look on her face, as if she could not imagine who or what they were talking about.

Jefferson told the Cabotts everything that had happened since the disaster at the inaugural event when Bow Li Wei died under the Whisperer's influence. When he got to the part where he and Sun rescued Ginnie Mac, he gave her a chance to describe what she'd seen, but she picked up where he'd left off.

When she got to the part where she crashed the Blue Bird, she said, "I thought I'd done something that caused the Blue Bird's engine to explode," Ginnie Mac said. "But I'm kind of relieved to know that it wasn't my piloting that caused it."

"Does anyone need to visit the washroom?" Penelope said. She stood with Isabelle at the edge of the little group. "We'll be back in a moment."

Sun Yat-sen cleared his throat. "Excuse me, Theodor, but this green stone, you say it is difficult to destroy?"

"High temperatures and concussive force won't scratch it," Theodor said.

"Yet you've also found smaller pieces, the pieces you say you're using in your prototype. Where did you find those?"

Theodor Cabott considered the question. "This is very difficult for me to say, but my first attempt to use the Fantastic Machine was a near apocalyptic disaster." He shivered and pulled the blanket tighter across his shoulders. "Like I said, I was brimming with hubris, arrogance, and fear. Fear of the thing that had been inside me since that terrible night in Atlanta. I designed the Fantastic Machine so that I could exorcise the thing from my soul."

Jefferson felt chills. "That's not what happened, though. Is it?"

"You know what happened," Theodor said. "In Heppner. The flood waters were churning down through Willow Creek canyon."

"Stop," Jefferson said. "No. That was a dream. That wasn't real."

"What's wrong?" Ginnie Mac said. "What are you talking about?"

"I plucked him from the flood waters," Theodor said.

"Not you," Jefferson said. He got a faraway look in his eyes. "That's not what happened. I ... I woke up on the bank. That thing, the Chiye-tanka, it wasn't real. I dreamed it."

"It was real," Theodor said. "It was me."

Penelope came back with Isabelle from the washroom. She looked worried. "What are you talking about?"

"Is it true?" Jefferson said. He stared at Penelope, tears forming in his eyes.

She looked at her husband. Theodor nodded. Penelope gasped and brought her hand to her mouth, her eyes were wide with fear.

"I had to tell him," Theodor said. "He has to know. I had control over the Mai Gow but I could not expel it. And I could not save the town I'd doomed."

"You made the Cloud happen?" Ginnie Mac said.

"All this time I've worked to fix my mistake," he said. "I never meant to hurt anyone. I assembled the prototype far away from Heppner, but not far enough."

Jefferson's blood turned cold, he had reached his limit. The flood, the horrible cloud, all those deaths two years ago. It had all been caused by Theodor Cabott? And Penelope, all her tearful sympathy was really just guilt? And now they've done it again at the fairgrounds, and they have yet another one here in their house? Jefferson had to get away from these machines, get Ginnie Mac and Isabelle to safety, to higher ground. The Cabotts clearly could not be trusted.

Jefferson turned to Ginnie Mac, and said, "We're going. Mom?"

"Of course," Isabelle said, and joined her son.

"Jefferson, please," Penelope said. "We need your help."

"Not another word," Jefferson said.

"Where will you go?" Penelope said. "It's dangerous out there."

"We'll take our chances." Jefferson looked at Sun Yat-sen. "Want to get out of here?"

"I'm going to stay," Sun said. "Whatever else has happened, Jefferson, of course it's important and we will discuss it, but my priority is finding a way to destroy that infernal machine. Will you help me?"

"Don't ask me that," Jefferson said, waving the question away with his bandaged hand.

"And where will you go?" Sun said. "Where do you think you'll be safe from this danger?"

"Give him a car," Theodor said. "Let them go."

"What?" Penelope said. "No, we can't send them out there."

"He's right," Theodor said. "And he's got to make his own choices. It's just another reason for us to succeed."

Penelope stared into her husband's eyes. "Wait for me," she said.

She led Jefferson, Ginnie Mac, and Isabelle back out the way they'd come in.

Chapter Fourteen

The fastest way to the garage building was back through the tunnels, but Penelope Cabott insisted they go upstairs to Cabott House and let her drive them down to the garage. She was concerned about Jefferson's ankle and didn't want him or any of them to walk more than they had to. So also wanted to use the time to try and convince him to stay.

"You'll be much safer here," Penelope said. "Who knows how many infected people there are out there?"

"Thanks," Jefferson said. "But no thanks."

"What about you, Isabelle?" Penelope said.

Isabelle apologized. "These two would be lost with out me."

Penelope turned to Ginnie Mac. "When was the last time you had something to eat, child? You must be positively famished."

Ginnie Mac looked like she was considering it.

"We've got to go," Jefferson said.

"Let me at least send you away with a sandwich," Penelope said.

Jefferson grabbed Penelope's arm and stopped her in the hallway. "I know you feel safe here in your big house on the hill. And maybe it doesn't seem all that important to you that my house might be burning, or that Ginnie Mac's father died tonight and that everything she's ever going to remember him by is sitting in her house right now, maybe getting stolen or burned in all this chaos. Maybe you think that's not important, but I'll tell you something: just because I'm not afraid to go out there doesn't mean that I'm reckless. I'm going to be as careful as it is possible to be, you can bet on that. But the bottom line is, we're going. We need to get to safety, and right now by my reasoning, safety means far away from the two of you and those machines."

Penelope kept a straight face as he spoke, looked him in the eyes the whole time, listened

to everything he said.

"Very well, then," Penelope said. "You know where to find me if you need me, or us, rather. If you need to come back, that is, then do so, please."

They walked the rest of the way to the foyer without another word. She led them outside and the moment the fresh night air poured over him Jefferson felt on guard. It was dark out and there was no telling what lurked in yon shadows. He checked the car before ushering Ginnie Mac and Isabelle inside. Penelope got behind the wheel. She primed the motor and then made Jefferson turn the crank. The motor made a funny little percolating sound which rapidly became a single long series of funny little pops. The noise made him nervous.

The garage was set apart from the main house. To reach it Penelope had to drive Jefferson, Ginnie Mac, and Isabelle down the side of Mount Tabor. It was dark and drizzling. The road was wet and the lantern light seemed to get absorbed by the night.

Jefferson sat in silence as Penelope drove them down the hill to the garage. It was dark out, not yet sunrise. He hadn't slept in almost twenty-four hours.

Penelope pulled the wagon up to the front of the garage. "Wait here." She hopped out and opened the garage's bay door and climbed back into the wagon and drove it into the garage. There were six vehicles in the garage, plus several motorized bicycles and bits of mechanical odds and ends that Jefferson could not identify. Penelope led them to a vehicle in the middle of the garage.

The whole goodbye-thing was awkward and filled with mixed signals. Jefferson wanted to say something to exonerate himself, he felt defensive about leaving, but at the same time he just wanted to get the hell away from there. Penelope Cabott led him to a vehicle branded the Mark Four. The front seat was a little crowded for Jefferson but fit Ginnie Mac perfectly.

"You're in no condition to drive," Penelope said. "And besides, she's the one with all the talent."

Ginnie Mac thanked Penelope. She lit up at the prospect of driving an automobile.

Penelope gave her a few pointers--the pedals on the floor control the pressure valves and the breaks, the lever on the shift-rod was a clutch. She made Ginnie Mac and Isabelle wear gloves, caps and goggles which she provided, and apologized to Jefferson that she had nothing in his size.

They put Isabelle in the backseat, Jefferson climbed in beside Ginnie Mac, and they waved goodbye to Penelope.

"Wait," Penelope said. "One last thing." She walked up to Jefferson's side of the Mark Four and pulled out the leather necklace which held the key she'd used earlier to let them into the tunnels. "Take this," she told him. "You'll need it to unlock the gate at the bottom of the hill to get out, and if you should come to your damn senses and decide to return, then use it to let yourselves back in." She pressed the key into his good hand and stood on her toes and pulled his face to hers. Her soft lips pressed against his mouth. She parted her lips and brushed her tongue against his lips. He pulled back. She looked at Ginnie Mac and said, "You're in charge, Genevieve. You keep him from doing anything stupid, all right?"

Ginnie Mac agreed and drove them out into the night.

She drove with big gestures and it made Jefferson nervous.

"You sure you got that okay?" he said.

"It's a twisty road," Ginnie Mac said.

As they turned corners Jefferson caught glimpses of the city through the tall fir trees and vine maples. The bright light over the Fantastic Machine glowed purple in the Cloud like a hole in the ceiling above the city. And then as they turned another corner, the light was simply gone.

"I think Theodor must have just turned on his prototype machine," he said. "The light at the Exposition has gone out."

"What should we do?" Ginnie Mac said. She kept driving but the fact that she'd asked meant to him that she still had her doubts, too.

"Keep going," he said. "My house is not far."

Ginnie Mac drove them to the gate at the bottom of the hill and Jefferson got out, let them through, shut it and got back in the car. They sat in the car, Isabelle in the backseat. The glow from the Fantastic Machine conspicuously absent in the dark sky. The Cloud obscured the early morning bluing of the sky that happened in the wee hours just before sunrise.

"What are you waiting for?" he said.

"I'm not really sure which way to go," Ginnie Mac said. "I've never been to your mother's house."

Jefferson knew the area well enough. East Portland was conveniently laid out in a grid pattern so he knew that if they just wiggled their way in the right general direction they'd get where they were going.

"Go left," he said. "We'll avoid the streetcar routes."

She looked at him and a smile crept into her face. "You're a dirty dog," she said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You should beg pardon, but not from me. You kissed Missus Cabott."

Could she see him blush? No, he thought. It was too dark for that. "I think maybe that's not something we're going to talk about."

"Why did you do it?" Ginnie Mac said. "Or did she do it first? I guess she kissed you first." She made a face like she'd just bitten into a sour lemon. "What are you going to do if Mister Cabott finds out?"

"This really isn't appropriate," Jefferson said.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Ginnie Mac said.

"Drive," he said.

"Isabelle," Ginnie Mac said. "What do you think?"

"I think he should be ashamed," Isabelle said. She sat in the back seat with her arms crossed, scowling straight ahead. "It reflects poorly on me when he does anything wrong. I truly

thought I'd raised him better than this."

Ginnie Mac's face slackened. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to upset her."

Jefferson pointed off to the left. "Don't worry about it," he said. "Go that way."

"How do I turn on the windshield wipers?" Ginnie Mac asked.

"You're the boss," Jefferson said. He knew he was being difficult but he couldn't help it. It was taking all his effort to avoid thinking about that night in Willow Creek and the blue skin of his wife after he'd found her drowned in the Heppner Flood.

Ginnie Mac groped around at the knobs on the dashboard in front of her. "I think it's this one," she said. She turned it and the headlamps went dark. "Nope."

"Come on," Jefferson said.

Jefferson crossed his arms and watched her as she turned the knob back and the headlamps were bright again. She smirked and shot him a look out of the corner of her eyes but didn't turn to face him. Instead she brought her attention to the road ahead, and then she tensed, squeezed the steering wheel, and screamed.

Jefferson looked ahead just in time to see a torso and two arms flop onto the hood, crash into the window, and bounce off his side of the Mark Four.

Ginnie Mac stepped on the accelerator and jerked the wheel. They turned hard to the left. She over-corrected and they turned too hard to the right. They'd been going too fast down a slick downhill road with their lights off, just for a moment and they had hit someone. The Mark Four was top-heavy and Jefferson felt it wanting to roll.

It all happened in an instant, of course, but he felt as if the world had slowed almost to a stop.

The grease and motor oil from the Mark Four combined into a thick smell inside the cab of the car, a smell that he could taste in his mouth and that reminded him of alcohol. His window was half-open and the cool air had made his right ear cold. The smell of wet mud and dead plants.

There was a sickly odor, too, hot and stale and sweet like a whiff of diseased meat. That was the smell of the poor fat-necked bastard Ginnie Mac had hit. Slime, blood, and mucus were smeared across Jefferson's half of the windshield, distorting his view.

He heard the air forced out of the bastard's lungs when it folded over the hood and smacked its head against the undented steel hood. He heard the tires screech and Ginnie Mac saying, "Bad-bad," over and over again as she swerved.

The floorboards, bare metal, grooved and painted brick red, vibrated with the strain of the sharp turn. The dashboard felt cool beneath his hot palm when he shot his hand out and pressed against it for support.

Isabelle was thrown across the backseat into the side door behind Jefferson. Her window crunched once. He didn't hear the glass land in the street because they were over the side of the road--he heard the gravel spitting free under the back tire. When Ginnie Mac over-corrected Isabelle slammed against the door behind Ginnie Mac. Out of the corner of his eye, Jefferson saw her hurled across the backseat. Limp, she crumpled into the glass but it didn't break. The force of the turn held her there.

"Too much," he said. It wasn't something he thought about before saying it. He just heard himself say it to Ginnie Mac as she pulled the wheel too far to the right.

The force of the turn pulled him over to the driver's side of the car. The car skidded sideways in the middle of the street. The tires gripped and momentum carried the top of the car over. There was a moment when they had crossed the balancing point, when the car no longer resisted the pull. At that moment, Jefferson felt weightless.

The next moment Jefferson saw macadam, night, Cloud, hair, Ginnie Mac's thin arm, the windshield covered in muck, all of it accompanied by screams and tearing, grinding metal.

Everything stopped. He looked to his left. He lay on his side. The car had ended upside-down in the ditch off the side of the road. Water trickled. He thought that there must be a stream

nearby.

He wiggled his fingers and toes and remembered that his left hand was smashed and his right ankle was still sore. The pain hit him and he sucked in a quick breath.

He called out for Isabelle and Ginnie Mac, repeating their names. Each time he spoke he heard a bad echo in his skull and it took a minute to get his bearings right.

"That was bad," Ginnie Mac said. Her voice was weak and sounded far away.

Jefferson rolled over, careful not to crush the person on the seat next to him. He knew by the hair that it was Isabelle. He brushed her hair aside and slid his hand onto her neck to feel for a pulse. There wasn't one.

No. This can't be. He needed to get them to safety. How could he have failed? Jefferson's mind raced. He called out for Ginnie Mac, asked her where she was, and was surprised that she wasn't in the car. For a moment all reason left him and he thought she was a ghost.

"I'm here," she said.

"I'm coming," Jefferson said. "Girl, listen to me. Can you see the car?" He crawled out through the opening where the front windshield was supposed to be. The walls of the ditch showed scars where the car had slid down from the road. The embankment couldn't have been more than a two foot drop, three at the most, but looking up at it from the bottom it seemed like a mountain range. He clawed and pulled at the soft earth until he reached the gravel shoulder.

"I see you," Ginnie Mac said. She sounded giddy and that scared Jefferson.

He looked around, searching the road. His head echoed with every sound and every motion, wave upon wave of dizzying pain crashed into his skull.

"You don't look so good," Ginnie Mac said. She sounded amused. She must be in shock.

Up, he thought. She's up the hill, on the road. Just move real slow and look at her. He looked up and there she was, sitting in the middle of the road with her legs out in front of her.

"Are you hurt?" he asked. The blood pounded so loud in his head he missed the first part

of her response, but got the gist of it. He looked up at her again. Farther up the road Jefferson saw the corpse of the infected man she had hit with the car. "Stay right there," he said. "I'm coming."

The macadam felt soft and cool, refreshing to his hand and forgiving to his knees. He pushed himself up, got his feet under him, and with a fair amount of wobbling, stood. Ginnie Mac played with a few pebbles in the road. She looked like a child, like the little girl she was. It broke his heart to think about how much pain she already had queued up for her. She was destined for a grief she could never overcome and he wanted to protect her from it any way he could.

He stopped walking. Something moved farther up the road. Had he seen movement? For just a moment his head cleared and he realized there might be more of those poor bastards roaming around out here. There was just enough water trickling through the ditch to make a mumbling noise, dripping from the leaves on the trees to sound like movement, dribbling over the macadam to suggest a slippery motion. He fought through the tidal agony in his skull and pushed on for another step, then another.

There it was again. The dead man up the road--he must be dead, and yet.

"Ginnie Mac, get up," Jefferson said. She sat in the road in about the very spot where the Mark Four began its rollover. It was as if she'd been removed through the window and set on the road.

"Up you get," he said, and forced another three steps out of himself. He told himself it was getting easier.

This time there was no denying it: the dead man up the road lifted his elbow, pressed one hand against the road, and pushed himself over onto his back. He drew in a raspy gurgling breath and with his exhale he wheezed a sound that was a cross between a wounded animal and an angry predator.

Jefferson quickened his pace. "Ginnie Mac. On your feet, girl. Now."

"Where's Isabelle?" Ginnie Mac said. "She was in the backseat when I turned off the

lights. I didn't mean to turn them off. I flipped the wrong button."

Jefferson pulled her up to her feet, stood her up. He was relieved when she stayed on her feet. "Listen to me, sugar. We're not out of this yet. We have to go. Now. We've got to run. We're going to my house. It's not far," he said. And it was mostly downhill, he thought, but his head had caught up to him and he was overcome with dizziness and nausea. He breathed hard.

"I understand," Ginnie Mac said. The little girl silliness was gone from her expression. "I killed that man. And Isabelle, she didn't survive the crash, did she?"

"Kiddo," Jefferson said. "I've got some good news and some bad news. Actually, it's all bad news, but after the day you've had, I think you can handle it."

He pointed up the road to where the ghoulish man was getting to his feet.

Ginnie Mac stared. She stepped back, bumping into Jefferson. "Okay," she said. "Let's go."

Chapter Fifteen

A heavy mist passed through the air. Drops of water like tiny diamonds sparkled, catching the light from the sodium lamps bolted to the iron fence that surrounded the Cabott's acreage. Jefferson looked up towards the top of Mount Tabor but nearby fir trees and pines blocked his view.

He checked his pockets and found that he still had the Cabott's gate key. But the way they'd come, the way back to the Cabott's gate, lay beyond the fat-necked ghoul who was even now struggling to get himself to his feet.

Up the hill, or down? That's the choice Jefferson tried to focus on. He tried, but goddamn his head hurt. This wasn't the first time Jefferson Shannon had been knocked around. He knew a thing or two about pain. He liked to think he had an endurance for that sort of thing. But endurance was a funny thing. It meant you were familiar with the pain, not that it wouldn't hurt.

Ginnie Mac looked at him with a quick glance but kept her focus on the ghoul up the road. "You okay?" she said.

"My head," he said. "I think I might have a concussion."

"Is that bad?"

"For some people," Jefferson said. "We should get going. I'm not sure how fast I can run." He tugged at her coat, pulling her away from the ghoul.

"We should go back up the hill," she said. "We should let Penelope know they're getting closer." Ginnie Mac pointed at the ghoul. It was now on his feet and breathing in that wretched, scratchy way.

Jefferson didn't like the odds of getting back up that hill. He pulled again on Ginnie Mac's coat and together they started a slow jog down the road. The ghoul shuffled his feet with a horrible jerking limp.

"We'll be safe at my house," Jefferson said. "It's not far and it's not uphill."

The ghoul wheezed a strange sound that caused Jefferson and Ginnie Mac to look at it. It appeared to be stretching, turning. It made the sound again, like a whimper, like that mean and injured sound Jefferson had heard earlier. After its stretch, the ghoul shuffled without a limp. It seemed to have fixed itself.

"Did you see that?" Ginnie Mac said.

Jefferson was concentrating very hard on not throwing up. Sledgehammers pounded the inside of his skull with every bone-jarring step. He knew he looked weak and he didn't want Ginnie Mac to worry over him.

"It's getting faster," Ginnie Mac said. "It's walking as fast as you are."

"I'm fine," Jefferson said.

"What's that?" Ginnie Mac pointed down the hill ahead of them to where the macadamed road intersected with an orchard road on the right.

The orchard was filled with rows of apple trees that sloped downhill to the west. About five miles in that direction flowed the Willamette River. Jefferson couldn't see downtown Portland from where he was, but he thought he could see brighter clouds over downtown, probably caused by fires. His head hurt and it was hard to concentrate. Something was moving in the shadows of the apple trees.

"You don't happen to have a gun on you, do you?" Jefferson said.

Ginnie Mac ignored his question. "They're going to cut us off," she said.

Jefferson put his arm over Ginnie Mac's shoulder. He meant to comfort her but realized that he needed her support. "You're right," he said. "We need a plan."

He looked around. The horde were approaching through the orchard to the west. Mount Tabor was surrounded by an iron fence with pointed tops that weren't sharp but were never the less intimidating when he looked at them.

"Do you think you can climb that fence?" he said.

"You want to head back up to Cabott House?" she said.

"I want to keep you safe," he said.

"Yes," she said. "No more of this running away. That's not what my dad would have done, is it? That's not what he did when he stood his ground and fought."

"There's too many of them for us to fight," Jefferson said. Good heavens his head was killing him.

"Maybe we can't take them on here," Ginnie Mac said. "But if we help out the Cabotts then we might be able to put an end to this. That's more important than running away."

"I don't want you to get hurt," Jefferson said.

"I appreciate that," Ginnie Mac said. "But it's not your call. Like it or not, I'm on my own. I want you to help me. We should stick together, but what I do with the life my father left for me is my choice. I want us to go back up that hill. Are you with me?"

"We go up that hill," Jefferson said. "We're entering a world of darkness."

"It's in the darkness that we find hope," Ginnie Mac said. "We are what's good about this world, Jefferson. That's what my dad always told me. Right now the world needs our goodness. It's up to us to do something. Can you do the right thing?"

Her words rattled around in his brain. It felt like Jefferson had a wall of water between his brain and his ears and it made Ginnie Mac sound like she was talking to him from far away. But he heard her. And she made sense. Could he do it? He honestly didn't know if he could. For a flashing moment he remembered how he felt the opening day at the fair, when the machine was first turned on and he saw the blue sky through the clouds and he felt exposed.

"I'll race you to the top," he said.

The iron fence was about twenty feet off the road. They had to trudge through some tall ferns, downed branches, and a lot of mud to reach it. It was slow going, but Jefferson told himself

it'd be even tougher for those fat-necked bastards.

When they reached the fence Jefferson realized it was bigger than it had looked. The ground dipped down right before the fence. He checked over his shoulder to see what the ghouls were doing. They were congregating in the road. None of them seemed any brighter than the next but Jefferson had the feeling that they weren't just moving about at random. He never saw them communicating but he wondered why they seemed to be working together at all. Could it be that they were just attracted to non-infected people? Or was there something more to it than that?

"Up you get," Jefferson said.

Ginnie Mac had no trouble scaling the tall iron bars. She scrambled to the top like a monkey, flipped over to the other side and took in the view.

"They're coming," she said. "Some of them are going up the road to the gate." She looked down at Jefferson. He still had his left hand bandaged. "Do you need my help?" she said.

"Watch out," he said. "I'm coming over."

Ginnie Mac dropped to the other side of the fence, into Mount Tabor and the Cabott's acreage. She looked around and rubbed her hands on her legs and watched Jefferson with a twitchy kind of apprehension.

"I'll be fine," he said. "But I might make a lot of noise going over."

He grabbed hold with his good hand and hauled himself up to stand on the lower cross-bar. For the next part he was going to need both hands. There was no way around it. He reached over the upper cross-bar with his bandaged hand and hooked his elbow in between two iron posts. With his good hand for leverage, he threw his right leg up to the upper cross-bar and hooked his toe between two posts. Then he pulled himself up by his elbow until he could use his knee on the edge of the upper cross-bar. The ground around Ginnie Mac looked soft and he decided to go for it. He tumbled over the fence and landed on spongy grasses and damp earth.

Ginnie Mac screamed.

"I'm fine," he said. "What are you--"

Something tugged on his coat. He looked and saw that a ghoul had reached through the fence and grabbed him. Its grip was unshakable. Jefferson pulled and the ghoul's head knocked into the iron bars. It wheezed its pitiful repulsive breath. Jefferson pulled and pulled and the thing's head bonked and bonked on the bars. It was almost funny, until he remembered that these guys liked to eat people. Jefferson pulled again and this time he slipped on the muddy slope.

The ghoul pulled on Jefferson's arm and another ghoul reached for his leg.

Jefferson heard a wretched squealing from one of the ghouls. He looked and saw that it had a stick in its eye. Ginnie Mac had found a branch and was poking it from a distance. The beastly creature let go and Jefferson scrambled back away from the fence.

"Be careful," he said.

Ginnie Mac looked at him. "Says the man I just saved."

"I mean, thanks for saving me," he said.

"You're welcome." Ginnie Mac poked the stick at the ghouls, but one of them grabbed it and she let it go.

"They were faster," she said. "They had no trouble with the bushes. If they figure out how to climb that gate--"

"All right," Jefferson said. He didn't want her to finish that thought out loud. They had enough trouble.

The climb to the top of Mount Tabor was about a two hundred foot elevation gain. There was a road that circled the property all the way up from the gate to the garage and then the house. Jefferson said they should try to reach that road. The climb would be a lot easier if they didn't have to push bushes out of the way and slip on the muddy slopes.

The gate they'd come through was off to their left, so they went a little ways away from the fence and closer to the cover of trees and started walking towards the gate.

The ghouls paralleled their trek, following them on the other side of the fence. Jefferson hoped there were no other gates around the property or that they were at least locked.

"She gave you a key," Ginnie Mac said. "She wouldn't have given you a key if we could just come through any open door."

Jefferson thought she had a point.

"But maybe she gave you that key because she wants you to come back and kiss her some more," Ginnie Mac said.

"March," Jefferson said. She was enjoying herself and Jefferson thought that was worth a little teasing.

They reached the road and found a crush of ghouls straining the lock on the gate with the sheer force of their combined pressure. Those things wanted in. Ginnie Mac hopped and jogged ahead of him up the road.

"Not so fast," he said. "Stick together."

"Can't you go faster?" she said.

"Trying," he said. "My head feels like it's exploding with every step I take."

"Well I'm not leaving you," she said. "So, march."

The road wound up into the trees and curved up and to the right. As they lost sight of the gate, maybe two hundred yards distant, they heard a faint jingling echo. It sounded to Jefferson a lot like an iron gate busting off its hinges.

"All right," he said. "You stay ahead of me, but save your energy for the last bit. I think they just busted through the gate. If they stay on the road we might still reach Cabott House first, but if you use up all your energy now then you'll just slow down at the end and then they're sure to catch up to you."

"Sounds like you're convincing yourself," Ginnie Mac said.

"I do that," he said.

He jogged behind her and soon the road turned a sharp left and continued up at the same steep grade. As he went around the corner he looked down and saw the first of the ghouls coming up the road. They were a ways off still, but too close for comfort.

Ginnie Mac pointed to a trail that appeared to lead up and to the right.

Climbing straight up the hillside to Cabott House would be more direct, but he didn't know the trails, it would be too easy to get lost, and the slippery steepness would exhaust him. He told her to stick to the road. He hoped he was right.

The road curved again up and to the right this time, then it leveled out and curved around to the left, hugging the steep hillside, before cutting up away to the right. Jefferson could hear the ghouls behind them but didn't see them.

"We're almost to the garage," Ginnie Mac said.

She didn't sound winded at all. She sounded like she had been skipping rope at a tea party and might even have been a little bored at the slow pace. Jefferson felt very old, a wrecked old man with injuries and bad habits. But he also felt a strange sense of the frontier before him.

Martin had been like a father to Jefferson and now he was dead. Isabelle, well, she was dead, too. For better or for worse there were no more elders for Jefferson to sit with anymore, not ever, and knowing that made him feel the loss. They had always been there, in his mind if not in actuality, like ghosts standing between him and the frontier. And now they were gone and he had nobody left to tell him stories about how the world worked. They were gone and he needed them now more than ever. Ginnie Mac was going to need him now, too, even if she didn't know it yet.

"Penelope told us there was a tunnel entrance near the garage, remember?" Jefferson said.

"I see the garage," Ginnie Mac said.

Jefferson was surprised to find they'd reached the garage already. He looked behind him down the hill. The ghouls were closing in.

"Check to see if it's open," he said. His head felt like it could burst apart with his next

step. The thought of walking the rest of the way up to Cabott House filled him with despair. He might as well be hiking to the moon.

Ginnie Mac shouted back that the garage door was locked. Jefferson tossed her the key as he drew near and she opened the door right as he caught up to her.

"There's supposed to be another entrance in here somewhere," Jefferson said. They looked around at the garage and were disheartened to see that it looked very plainly like nothing more than a garage. Ginnie Mac ran to the back wall and tried knocking on it, but when she did, she was surprised to hear something knock back.

"What was that?" Jefferson said, but he thought he knew the answer. "We have to go."

He turned around and saw that he was standing next to the row of motorized bicycles. He looked at the handle bars. "Ginnie Mac," he said. "Can we turn these on?"

She ran over to him and the bikes. "Let me see," she said. There were more scratching and clawing sounds outside the garage. Ginnie Mac flipped a switch, adjusted two valves, and kicked hard on the side-lever and the bike roared to life. She laughed and looked at Jefferson like she'd completely forgotten that they were being chased by undying ghouls.

The expression on her face changed, though, when the ghouls pushed open the garage door.

"Get on this one." She held the bike steady as Jefferson grabbed hold of the handlebars and straddled the engine. "It's pretty neat," she said. She showed him how to accelerate and stop while she climbed on the next bike over and got it started. "Got it?"

"This is insane," he said. "Why didn't we start a car."

"Follow me," she said.

Ginnie Mac made her bike roar as she shot forward and drove through the ghouls. Jefferson felt like his heart stopped beating until he saw her zooming away on the other side of the ghouls. She'd done it.

He pulled the throttle and shot forward and held on for dear life as he crashed through the wall of ghouls and broke free into the dark shadows of Mount Tabor.

Ginnie Mac had waited for him a short way off. She waved at him. Jefferson took one look back at the garage, the ghouls had swarmed around it, but they were turning now and shuffling their way up the hill. He throttled the engine and chased after Ginnie Mac.

Chapter Sixteen

Jefferson Shannon clenched his teeth and followed Ginnie Mac up the hill. His skull ached from the engine's violent shaking and loud noise. The pain was impossible to ignore. His knees loosened up and one foot slipped and touched the road and shot back behind him. The motorcycle wobbled. He brought his foot back, pulled the throttle and raced ahead.

Somewhere beyond the pounding drums of his own heartbeat Jefferson wondered if anything human still lived inside the ghouls. What had they become? He didn't know, but they were hideous. He knew he hated them, but he also still thought of them as victims.

Ginnie Mac rode well. She was accurate but Jefferson rode desperately. He knew he might pass out at any minute, so he wanted to get as close to the front door as he could. He caught up with Ginnie Mac and they arrived together at the covered entrance outside the Cabott House's front door.

Jefferson stepped off his bike and let it fall over with the engine still running. Ginnie Mac cut both engines and ran to the front door.

"It's locked." She tugged on the door latch and then banged her small fist against the door with a strength that surprised Jefferson.

The horde drew closer.

"Try the key," Jefferson said.

She had forgotten she had it in her pocket. It fit into the lock and when she turned the key Jefferson heard the most satisfying click of his life. He hurried Ginnie Mac inside. The horde were scraping their way towards them, coming up underneath the covered entry way. He stepped inside and slammed the door shut. He threw the bolts and appreciated that it was a heavy, solid door with no windows.

The whole of the ground level of the house had a sturdy design in keeping with the

Craftsman style.

"Don't move." The voice at the top of the stairs belonged to Penelope Cabott. Jefferson turned--too quickly. He became dizzy, reached out to steady himself but caught nothing and tipped over onto the stone floor. As he went down he saw Penelope atop the stairs with something long and dangerous looking in her arms.

"Don't shoot," Ginnie Mac said.

Penelope recognized Ginnie Mac and Jefferson and rushed down the stairs.

"Jefferson," Penelope said. "Are you all right? Genevieve, what's happened? Why have you come back?"

"The infected," Ginnie Mac said. "They've surrounded Cabott House. I was driving--"

Jefferson heard Ginnie Mac's voice choke at the memory of running into that person. Creature of the damned or not, when she hit it with the Mark Four it was a person's body that rolled over the hood.

"Where is Isabelle?" Penelope asked.

Jefferson shook his head.

The ghouls scratched at the front door.

Penelope Cabott took Jefferson's head in her hands. Her fingers were soft and warm. She moved his head around with the expert efficiency of a doctor examining a patient.

"Open your eyes," she said. "You've hit your head pretty badly."

Penelope directed Ginnie Mac to help her get Jefferson to his feet. She asked Ginnie Mac if Jefferson had hit his head and Ginnie Mac explained about the car crash. She apologized for wrecking the Mark Four.

"Please," Penelope said. "I'm just glad you are all right. We need to get you two downstairs."

The three of them walked down the hall, Jefferson relying heavily on Ginnie Mac and

Penelope to help him. He was blind with the pain in his head and he was starting to hurt in his neck, shoulders, and back from compensating for his tender skull. Back down the hall the scratching at the door quieted and Jefferson wasn't sure if it had stopped or they'd just got far enough away from the foyer.

"Are we safe here?" Ginnie Mac said. "Are they going to get in?"

"Darling," Penelope said. She grabbed hold of Ginnie Mac's hand and looked her in the eye. "They are not coming in here."

"Hurry," Penelope said. She pulled a book off the bookshelf in the hall. The bookshelf clicked and popped forward an inch. Penelope pulled it open and ushered Ginnie Mac and Jefferson into the space behind it. As she pulled the bookshelf closed, Jefferson heard a sound like thunder splintering the heavy wood door at the front of the house.

They were in a stairwell, built from the same stones Jefferson had stared at on his climb up from the sanatorium--basalt bricks that had once been used as ballast by the ships that came empty to Portland and left filled with timber and wool. The stairwell curved downward, lit by electric bulbs. None of them spoke as they raced downstairs. Jefferson felt as if he were spinning around on a merry-go-round and twice he nearly spun away from the wall before Penelope caught him by his shoulders.

At the bottom of the stairs they came to a heavy door. Penelope produced a key like the one she'd given Jefferson. As she fit the key into the lock, the stairwell above them echoed with the sound of splintering wood. Penelope flinched at the sound and jerked her head around to look up the stairwell.

"They're coming," Ginnie Mac said.

"But they won't get us down here," Penelope said.

"That's what you said about the front door," Ginnie Mac said. She chewed her lower lip and her nose was red and the rims of her eyes were raw.

"We'll be all right," Jefferson said. "As long as we stick together. Okay?"

Ginnie Mac shot a worried look at him as they went through the door.

"I don't think it's us they're after," Penelope said.

"What do you mean?" Ginnie Mac said. "They eat people."

Penelope was horrified by Ginnie Mac's candor, but recovered enough to guide her and Jefferson into the room beyond the door. They were back in Theodor's lab, except Sun and Theodor were no longer there, and the smaller machine was now turned on, glowing and pulsing as the gears sputtered and spun.

"Why else would they be here?" Jefferson said.

Penelope said, "When Theodor interrupted the Fantastic Machine, he canceled its frequency with this prototype machine. The ghouls must be coming here to destroy it."

"How would they know to come here?" Ginnie Mac said.

"The Whisperer," Jefferson said. "Somehow he controls them."

"If they destroy this machine," Penelope said, "then they'll destroy the only thing that's keeping that portal closed. It is the only chance Theodor and Sun have of getting close enough to shatter the green stone."

"You think this door's gonna stop them?" Jefferson said. He held his head in his hand and spoke quietly for the pain.

"It has to," Penelope said. "Jefferson, you need to lie down."

"Forget it," Jefferson said. "There's time enough to rest in the grave. How are we going to defend this room?"

Penelope led them deeper into the lab. While she rummaged for weapons, Jefferson told Ginnie Mac that he thought she was being very brave.

"I don't feel brave at all," she said. "I'm so scared. I just want to hide and cry and I wish it would all just go away."

"I know," Jefferson said. "And you're going to keep feeling like that until we get out of this mess. But you're on your feet and that counts for something."

Ginnie Mac watched the door like she expected it to open. "Poppa always told me that it was okay to fail, but not to try at all was unacceptable."

"That's about it," Jefferson said. "I'm proud of you, Ginnie Mac. And I know you're dad's proud of you too."

Penelope shouted that she had found something. Jefferson and Ginnie Mac joined her to see what she had found.

"Hold it like this," Penelope said. She hefted something that vaguely resembled a gun. Three metal rods stuck out from the front of a round barrel. It looked like three coffee cans wrapped in copper wire. Penelope handed the gun to Jefferson and took a spool of long copper wire. "I've got to attach this to a power source."

Jefferson held the gun as awkwardly as if it were a baby. The bandages on his left hand prevented him from doing much with the lame appendage. He used it to prop up the coiled barrel and used his right hand to hold the handle.

Penelope tugged on the copper rope and wrapped it around a bolt and secured it tight.

"That's not going to hold the power surge," Ginnie Mac said.

"Trust me, young lady," Penelope said. "I know what I'm doing."

The heavy door at the opposite end of the lab echoed with the clawing sounds of the ghouls.

"Set it down," Penelope said. She pointed Ginnie Mac towards a pile of debris and told her what to look for. "You," she said to Jefferson. "Your brain is swollen with extra blood and the pain your feeling is pressure inside your skull. It's going to get worse if you don't lie down--" she shushed his protest and continued. "If you did lie down it'd only slow the process. I know you won't agree to that but I want you to understand how dangerous it is for you to remain standing."

Ginnie Mac returned. She had with her a stand that fit the coil gun into a sling. Penelope flipped a switch and the gun began to hum. Jefferson watched as Penelope and Ginnie Mac set it up beside Theodor Cabott's prototyped Fantastic Machine.

The heavy door groaned and came unhinged. It fell into the lab and sent small eddy's of dust swirling out from underneath it. Under the sodium lights of the laboratory the ghouls were even more hideous.

Penelope pulled the trigger.

There was a loud pop-sound and something sizzled off to the side of the room where Penelope had bolted the copper wire.

"No," Penelope said.

"It's the connection," Ginnie Mac said.

The sizzling grew louder and then came a pop sound.

"No. No. No." Penelope pulled the trigger again and again but nothing happened.

The ghouls were staggering into the room.

Penelope backed away from the gun. "My fault," she said. "We'd better run. Looks like I was wrong about them being able to get into the lab. It's time to get creative." She pushed Ginnie Mac and Jefferson to the back of the room.

"Through that door over there," Penelope said. She held her hand high over her head so she could see by the eerie light.

As the three of them raced through the door to escape the lab, the ghouls crowded around the prototype machine.

Chapter Seventeen

Jefferson Shannon decided that he hated basalt stone. Without a doubt it was the worst stone he had ever known. It had to be, because that's what the Cabotts had used in the floors, the walls, the steps, the never-ending steps. The basalt rock had a dull gray color to it that reminded him of the Cloud that had become a permanent fixture in his life. He carried his foot up to the next stair, pressed down onto the hated basalt, and he climbed.

Ginnie Mac sprinted ahead of him a few steps and then stopped and looked down the stairs whenever there was a loud bang from the laboratory. She was as twitchy as a deer in a valley full of cougars.

Penelope Cabott led the charge up the stairs. She climbed steadily lunging forward two steps at a time.

"Almost there," Penelope said. Jefferson didn't hear anything in her voice to suggest she was winded or even afraid. He should have found it comforting, instead he found it irritating.

"Already?" he said. "I was kind of hoping we could climb a few more stairs, you know?"

Ginnie Mac danced back and forth on the steps, twisting to look around Jefferson when another bang echoed up the stairwell. This time there were sounds that lingered after it, sounds Jefferson recognized as the heavy breathing and scraping steps of the infected ghouls.

Penelope said that they had arrived and when Jefferson looked up at her he saw her standing beside a door. She held the door open and ushered Ginnie Mac through, telling her to continue on to the end of the hall. When Jefferson reached the door, Penelope stopped him with a hand on his chest. She leaned closer to him. For a moment Jefferson thought she intended to kiss him again. But that's not what Penelope had in mind. She put a hand on his face and pried open his eye-lids, studied his pupils, and frowned.

"Damn," she said. "I don't know how you're still on your feet."

"Someone decided to throw their own little Apocalypse party and invited me to be guest of honor." Jefferson couldn't say it without wincing and he wasn't sure if he managed to say the last words out loud or just thought them.

He must have said enough, though, because what little sparkle had been in Penelope's eyes faded and her expression hardened. She shoved him through the door and told him to march. She caught up to Ginnie Mac at the entrance to a reading room, hexagonal and lined with books, room enough for two high-backed chairs with a small table between them. Jefferson stumbled to the doorway in time to see Ginnie Mac climbing a ladder they'd pulled down from the ceiling.

"Up you get," Penelope said.

Jefferson climbed. He had to lean against the ladder, and thank goodness it was at a slight angle, but he made it up into a dark room with stale air. Penelope joined them and pulled the ladder up behind her, closing out the light, plunging them into darkness. And then she opened a door.

Fresh air, damp and cool, washed into the room along with a faint glow of morning's light spreading gray-blue over Portland. Jefferson staggered through the door and onto an outdoor patio. Treetops came to the edge of the patio and he saw that he had come to the roof at the south end of Cabott House. Before him, he saw it clearly now, was a dirigible.

"You know how to fly one of these things?" Jefferson said.

"Well, I don't know Mister Shannon," Penelope said. "I guess we just untie it and float around until God lands us safely in a field of daisy's and bunny rabbits. Isn't that how it works?"

Penelope pulled a rope ladder down from the side of the small cabin beneath the bullet shaped bag of hydrogen gas. Jefferson watched her climb up--the ladder went up far enough to bring a person beside the door. She unlatched the door and swung herself around the wall into the cabin. She poked her head out of the door. "Move it."

Ginnie Mac tried to hide her smile. "I think she likes you," she said as she stood at the

rope ladder.

"Get on up," he said.

Ginnie Mac went up the ladder and into the cabin. It hurt his brain to look up but he knew she'd finished climbing when he felt the tension go slack on the ladder.

"Okay," Ginnie Mac said. "Your turn."

Jefferson climbed the ladder, scratchy hemp rope woven in thick braids, and pulled himself into the cabin. Wood planks lined the floor. He was relieved to find himself standing on something other than stone.

The airship cabin was a room approximately ten feet wide by fifteen feet long with a ceiling at seven feet, which felt low to Jefferson. It was not a claustrophobic space, though. Windows ringed the entire cabin. A console panel and two chairs took up the front. Penelope and Ginnie Mac were already seated. The rest of the cabin was bare. Jefferson slid the door shut and secured it with a latch.

Penelope threw a switch, turned a knob and gave Ginnie Mac directions. The airship had been moored to eye-bolts on the roof. Ginnie Mac pushed a lever forward and Jefferson felt the cabin slide a little to the right. Through the windows he saw the house and the tops of the trees fall away. He saw downtown Portland across the Willamette River, smoke rose up from buildings. And above it all, the Cloud.

The cabin rattled and a loud noise chortled overhead. Jefferson flinched at the sound, which made his head hurt, but quickly gathered that it was the airship's engines.

He breathed deep to try and steady his nerves and stared out at the view.

"I'm going to sedate you if you do not sit down, Mister Shannon," Penelope said.

"Get off my back," he said. "I've been staring at bricks and death for the last twenty-four hours. If I'm going to die then at least I'm taking in the view."

Penelope pointed at a few things on the console and gave Ginnie Mac instructions.

Between the rumbling sound of the engines overhead and the throbbing ache between his ears he found that looking out the window was actually more than he could bear.

Cabott House was quickly drifting away behind them as Ginnie Mac steered the dirigible west.

"Jefferson," Penelope said. She climbed out of her seat and walked towards him. "I appreciate that you've had a difficult day and I'm very sorry for your losses. But I will remind you, and only this once, that you are not the only one, not by a long shot are you the only one to have suffered."

Jefferson saw the bright light fill the cabin behind Penelope before he heard the thundering explosion. For a moment he thought they'd been hit. And then the sound came, an explosion from somewhere farther away than the ship.

Cabott House spewed flame. The rooftop patio where the dirigible had just been collapsed in on itself and belched out a black cloud.

Penelope threw her arms out for balance and staggered back to the control panels. "Give us full power, Genevieve," she said. "If any of those embers reach us we're done for."

Jefferson looked back out the window at Cabott House, at the flames leaping from the windows and spreading out to the green tops of the Douglas fir trees. Part of him felt hopeful at the sight of the fire. He wondered if the hideous monsters inside it had been trapped and he found himself hoping for their hot, crispy deaths.

"Look." Ginnie Mac pointed out the window. Jefferson saw it, north of downtown over the Exposition fairgrounds, above the Fantastic Machine. The ring of light had returned.

"You know that thing out there is going to zap us right out of the sky, right?" Jefferson said.

"The corsair is a fast ship," Penelope said.

"Fast ship? That's got nothing to do with--"

"Genevieve," Penelope said. "Watch your gauges. The pressure's too high on the main engine."

"Sorry, ma'am," Ginnie Mac said. She adjusted some settings.

The main engine must have been the rear engine, Jefferson figured, because he heard a high whine coming from it. He thought he could feel a wobbly vibration, too.

"Shut down the main," Penelope said. "Shut it down now."

Ginnie Mac reached for a lever and pulled it back with both hands, but too late.

Jefferson heard something overhead pop and hiss.

"The connector's blown," Penelope said. "It's all right, Genevieve. It's my fault. I tried pushing the engines too hard before they'd pressurized."

"What happens now?" Ginnie Mac said. They were floating westward without an engine to power the propellers.

"You watch the gauges," Penelope said. "I'll reconnect the valve. Don't worry," she said when Ginnie Mac looked startled. "It's not as scary as it sounds."

Jefferson blocked Penelope at the door.

"I'll do it," he said.

Penelope's shoulders dropped and she shook her head. "Your last minute chivalry is not appreciated. You can't even stand up and as a medical doctor I'm sworn to try and keep you alive. Sending you out there--"

"I'm feeling much better," Jefferson said. He even managed to contort his lips into what he hoped was a smile. Penelope cringed. "I can do it," Jefferson said. He lowered his voice.

"Please. We can't afford to lose you, Penelope. We need you to pilot this thing, and besides, you're a great influence on Ginnie Mac and, well, I'm not so much." Penelope started to protest but he continued. "Listen, I can do this," he said. "I mean it. Besides, you said it was easy."

"I said that because I didn't want to scare her," Penelope said. She put her hand on his

face and examined his pupils and let out a deep sigh. "Are you dizzy?"

"Are you kidding? I feel like I'm floating on air."

He saw her staring at him and remembered to suck in his stomach and stand a little straighter.

"The ladder," she said. "It keeps going up the side of the cabin. It'll bring you underneath the rear engine. There's a valve, it looks like a sliding brass ring on one of the pipes that feeds the pistons, well, anyway, look for the sliding ring. Push it towards the engine and tighten it back in place. Penelope tied a length of rope around his waist. The other end of the rope was wrapped around a winch beside the door.

Penelope stood up on her toes and kissed Jefferson's mouth.

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips against hers, felt her tongue slide across his upper lip. She dropped back down on her heels. "We're stuck without that engine," she said. "Be careful."

He opened the door and swung out onto the rope ladder, holding tightly with his good hand wrapped around the scratchy hemp braids. Despite his bandaged left hand he had an easy time climbing to the top of the cabin. The engine was there just as Penelope said it would be. He found the sliding valve ring. He touched it and yanked his hand away.

The damn thing felt like it was a thousand degrees.

While keeping his balance atop the cabin and not touching the engine, Jefferson unwrapped his bandages and used them to grab the valve ring and slide it into place. He tightened it by hand and wadded up the bandages and shoved them into his pocket. Holding onto the rope ladder he leaned over the top edge of the cabin and saw Penelope standing in the open doorway holding the bars on either side of the door.

"Give it a try," Jefferson said.

Penelope nodded, turned and gave orders to Ginnie Mac. A moment later the engine

rumbled to life, sputtering at first. The sound of it felt like knives in Jefferson's head, but he stayed where he was. The engine parts quickly picked up speed until the pistons made one continuous hum. Ginnie Mac said something and Penelope relayed the message.

"Looks good," Penelope said. "Come back inside."

He looked towards the dark halo in the Cloud, the glowing ring above the Fantastic Machine and he saw the bolt of crooked lightning zigzag across the sky. The white light blinded him. It shone directly into the back of his skull. He heard Penelope scream.

Jefferson felt the volts charging through his body, his skin alive with thousands of vibrating pores.

The light faded to black in an instant. He released his grip on the hemp braid and fell overboard. He heard wind in his ears and then he jerked to a stop. The rope around his waist held fast. He pulled on it and twisted himself until he could look up and see the bottom of the cabin. Penelope stuck her head out the door and looked down at him, her black hair with wisps of silver whipping in the wind.

"I'm pulling you up now," she said. And as she said it, Jefferson saw the flap of canvas on the dirigible, a rip in the fabric as long as his arm.

"Look out," he said.

"What?" She hadn't understood.

The fireball blossomed out from the hydrogen sack and Jefferson Shannon closed his eyes.

Chapter Eighteen

The sludge-filled waters of the Willamette River welcomed Jefferson with a mule-kick. He crashed into the darkness without any breath to hold. The river's surface glowed with firelight and erupted as the Corsair breached the barrier. He thrashed about underwater, clawed his way around the sinking aircraft to the surface, to a mouthful of tacky, oily river water, to air.

He felt something bite his waist and pull him back underwater. The rope! It was still tied around his waist. He grabbed the knot and tried blindly to untie it. His left hand was useless because of his injuries and the fingers on his right hand were not enough to pry open the knot. The river surface pulled away from him--just out of reach, then five feet, then blackness. Jefferson Shannon prepared himself to die.

Something hit him in the side of his head, a glancing blow. He flinched and released his air, twisting to escape whatever hideousness had found him. Without air, Jefferson seized and convulsed and drew in a mouthful of gritty oil. Thing hit him again, this time it clamped his arm with crawling fingers. Jefferson didn't know if his eyes were shut or open, the water's blackness hid everything from sight. His convulsions slowed. The rope around his waist tugged at him, and the last thing Jefferson remembered was a feeling of weightlessness.

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Someone stomped on his chest and told him to breathe. He thought his ribs might crack from the pressure but when he tried to cry out he couldn't, and then his body took over, tightened, and forced out the fetid waters of the Willamette.

Someone rolled him over onto his side and held him while he coughed and wretched. The river lapped at the edge of the dock and Jefferson felt the rough grain of solid wood beneath his cheek. A heavy blanket was draped over him and he realized he'd been shivering and cold.

"Thank you," he said.

"You had us worried," Penelope said.

"You're a good swimmer."

Penelope laughed without mirth. "Not I," she said.

"Welcome back, Mister Shannon." There was a softness to the man's voice and an accent that sounded familiar.

Jefferson sat up. "Kazuo?" he said.

Several people stood around him, their faces shadowed in what little morning light penetrated the Cloud.

"Hai," Kazuo said. "Rest now."

"Ginnie Mac?" Jefferson said. "Where is she?"

"I'm right here," she said. "And freezing."

"What happened?" Jefferson said.

"We crashed," Ginnie Mac said.

"It was the Fantastic Machine," a woman said, it was not Penelope. "Frankly, I'm surprised you made it this far."

"Mei." Jefferson recognized her slight frame and her shushing Chinese accent. "Wow, gang's all here."

"We went to Bow Li Wei's as agreed," Kazuo said. He turned and looked at Ginnie Mac for a moment and then back at Jefferson. "We met Xuan Mei and her friends there."

Xuan Mei dropped to her haunches beside Jefferson. "When the light went out on the Fantastic Machine we sent search parties out to find and help people. Kazuo and his brother offered to help. And then we saw your airship. The only thing in the air, you see. It caught our attention."

Jefferson removed the coat that had been draped over him, Kazuo's coat, and offered it to Ginnie Mac. He moved slowly, cautious for any pain in his head. It still hurt, but a little less than

before. He had to favor his left hand, though. Purple and yellow flesh stretched tight across it.

"I don't suppose you've got any aspirin," Jefferson said.

Three men came running along the seawall above the dock, one of them shouted for Mei and spoke to her in rapid Chinese. Jefferson recognized him as Cheung, the man with the gravelly voice. In the growing light he recognized the second man as Keung, whom he'd met earlier with Mei and Cheung. The third man, slender and precise, nodded perfunctorily to Kazuo and then to Jefferson. It was Keisuke, Kazuo's brother.

"They've breached the wall," Mei said to Jefferson and the others on the dock. "We must go."

"Wait," Penelope said. "We need to get to the Exposition. To the Fantastic Machine."

"The jiang-shi will be all over this area in about one minute," Mei said. "We need to be somewhere else."

"Who?" Penelope said.

"Jiang-shi. The dead who walk." Mei ushered them up the gangway. "All those people who were infected by those plants. The plants that came through the hole in the sky when that man, what did you call him?" She snapped her fingers at Jefferson. "The Whisperer. When he forced my uncle to kill himself on your husband's machine."

"You're Bow's niece," Penelope said. She looked like that bit of news was more than she could take. Jefferson had an urge to console Penelope, until he remembered she'd been lying to him about Heppner.

Xuan Mei and Kazuo led the group north along the seawall with Ginnie Mac, Penelope, and Jefferson penned in by Keisuke, Cheung, and Keung in the rear. Jefferson put their location at just south of Burnside Blvd when they entered a warehouse that overlooked the river. A canning machine stood silent at one end of the warehouse, tubs of fish left to thaw and rot gave the room a stench so foul Jefferson could taste it.

Through the floor of the office they climbed down into a store-room. Cheung shut the trap door and joined them. An oil lamp on a table in the center of the room shined its light through frosted glass.

"Why are you going to the Fantastic Machine?" Mei pointed at Penelope Cabott. "Can you stop this?"

Penelope and Mei were about the same height and they both stood up straight as they stared into the others eyes.

"To be honest," Penelope said. "I don't know."

The room erupted in noise. Three languages talking over each other. Mei quieted everyone down by reminding them they were still within earshot of the ghouls.

"On the dock, you said you needed to get to the Fantastic Machine," Mei said. "Why do you say you do not know?"

"Because," Jefferson said. He leaned his back against the wall and used his good hand to shield his eyes from the lantern's bright light. He spoke slowly, so he wouldn't have to speak loud. "She doesn't know because everything she and her brilliant husband have ever tried has only ever made things worse."

"Jefferson, please," Penelope said.

"Please what?" Jefferson said. "Please don't tell them that your husband is the reason they're all in danger? The reason their uncles and cousins and fathers and mothers are dead?"

"You brought those things here?" Mei said.

"If we knew this would happen," Penelope said, "do you think we would have gone ahead with it? Do you think we don't care who gets hurt? I've spent my fortune caring for the people who've gotten hurt."

"People you've hurt," Jefferson said. "The Heppner Emergency Relief Organization isn't as philanthropic as all that. And it won't buy your way to a clear conscience."

"What are you talking about?" Mei said.

"Theodor Cabott has made mistakes," Jefferson said. "That first mistake, maybe it wasn't his fault. The Cloud over Atlanta. Theodor caught something, I don't understand it but he got sick."

He held his head in his hand and took a deep breath. Whether it was the throbbing pain of his concussion or the guilty memory of surviving his last night in Heppner, he didn't know.

"Where Theodor messed up," he said. "Where he really messed up, was when he tried to fix this thing on his own. He caused the Heppner Flood to happen. He brought the Cloud to the Northwest. And when he tried to get rid of it he made his biggest mistake yet."

"The dark halo," Penelope said.

"So he is responsible," Mei said.

"He is responsible for some of this," Ginnie Mac said.

She sat in a squat position on the floor, hugging her knees, still wet and looking very small in Kazuo's coat. She looked around the room as she spoke.

"He messed up. But when he asked us to help him, we didn't. Sun Yat-sen was the only person around that agreed to try. So they're out there, right now, trying to put this right.

"Because of what happened, my daddy had to die. He wouldn't have if Theodor Cabott hadn't done what he did, but he did, and now here we are. And if he can't fix it, alone or with help, then it won't get fixed. So are you going to sit here and argue about who made the mistakes? Or are you going to try and fix it?"

"I'll tell you what my daddy would say right now, if he were here. He'd tell you all to stop fighting. He'd say there's a job needs doing. It may be a hard job. It may be more than we can handle. We might even fail. But to not even try? That is unacceptable."

"I was with your father when he died," Kazuo said. "I am ashamed that I could not prevent his death, but I think he would be proud to hear you say this."

Kazuo hugged Ginnie Mac. Her speech brought everyone together for the common cause. Jefferson rubbed at his temples with his forefinger and thumb and thought Kazuo was right. Ginnie Mac was right. If they were going to act they needed to act now. If he survived, then he could figure out what to do about the Cabotts. If not then it wouldn't matter anyway.

"She's right," Jefferson said. "What's done is done. Our best chance at fixing this is if we work together. Penelope, sorry I was picking on you." He offered his good hand to her and she took it in both of hers.

"You have every reason to be upset," she said.

Jefferson turned to Xuan Mei. "Thank you for all your help," he said. "If you could point us in the right direction, then we'll get out of your hair."

"Every time I turn around I see you laying at death's door," Mei said. "What's your plan? You're going to ask the Whisperer to leave? Whatever trouble you think you're getting into, you're in over your head."

"That may be," Jefferson said. "But we've got to try something."

"Of course you do," Mei said. "That's why Cheung and Keung are going with you. Besides, you don't know the way."

Mei pounded her fist three times on the wall behind Jefferson. A door opened. It had been hidden by the vertical wood slats in the wall. Mei walked through the door, but before she did, she said, "All right, everyone who wants to save the world, let's go."

Chapter Nineteen

Xuan Mei led them through the tunnels at almost a running pace. Jefferson was the slowest person in the group, mostly because he felt like his brain was shaking loose with every step. As a result he found himself at the back of the pack with Cheung the gravel-voiced man and Keisuke, Kazuo's silent brother.

The tunnels were lit every twenty paces or so with oil lanterns that hung on pieces of wire looped around the pneumatic tubeways. The light was dim and full of shadows, but it wasn't pitch dark.

After a while they joined up with a Public Computing Works tunnel, which was cleaner and used electric lights.

"This one goes straight to the data foundry," Cheung said. "Underneath Thurmond and Twenty-Fifth. That's how we'll get up into the fairgrounds."

"How do you keep the ghouls out of here?" Jefferson said.

Cheung's laughter sounded like two pieces of sandpaper rubbing together. "Let me know when you see one," he said, "and I'll show you."

Jefferson stopped trying to keep pace with the others. He slowed to a stop and bent over with his hands on his knees and gave his head a break. Keisuke stayed with him, stayed silent, and after a minute he put a hand on Jefferson's elbow.

"All right," Jefferson said. "I'm coming."

Jefferson had never seen a data

foundry before. Turns out it's an especially large room, or a bigger than average tunnel, depending on your perspective. It was a block wide and several blocks long. The computer took up the entire space of one of those long walls. File cabinets and desks covered the opposite wall. There were parts, too: rods, pipes, wrenches. Mei encouraged everyone to find something they

could heft well and bring it along. They continued past the computers until they came to an iron staircase leading up. The hall continued on into darkness.

"This is it," Mei said. "This will get us into the Exposition." She spoke quietly but without any doubt. She sounded to Jefferson like someone who was used to giving orders. She climbed the stairs and waited on the platform there for the others to join her: Kazuo with Penelope and Ginnie Mac, Cheung and Keung, and Jefferson.

Keisuke, who was dutifully bringing up the rear, stopped after the first few steps. He narrowed his eyes and stood perfectly still, staring into the darkness farther down the hall. Jefferson stopped, too, and watched him. He didn't like the idea of Keisuke on edge.

Mei called down from the platform at the top: "What's the hold-up?"

Keisuke started up the stairs. Jefferson didn't expect an explanation, he just started climbing as fast as he could. The explanation would make itself known soon enough, he was sure. And he was right. Before he and Keisuke joined the others at the top of the stairs, ghouls were already staggering out from the dark end of the hall.

"Nowhere to go but up," Mei said. She climbed the short ladder and unlatched the hatch-door. She looked around and climbed out, holding the hatch-door open as Kazuo raced up the ladder to join her.

The ghouls below, there must have been two-dozen already and more were still emerging from the shadows. They began navigating the bottom stairs. They weren't very fast but they were persistent.

Kazuo and Mei helped the others up the ladder. Jefferson had a hard time of it with his broken hand. When he reached the top, he let Kazuo and Mei hoist him out of the hole. Keisuke joined them and Mei shut the hatch.

"There's no way to lock it from this side," she said.

"That's all right," Kazuo said. "I don't think we'll be staying around here for long

anyway."

They had come up inside a small grassy park within the Exposition fairgrounds, not far from the sunken garden and the Fantastic Machine and the Engineering and Transportation Hall where Ginnie Mac had found the Blue Bird. They were surrounded on three sides by small hills.

"If I never see this place again," Jefferson said, "it'll be too soon."

Mei shushed him. "The jiang-shi are just over those hills. Don't make a sound."

"Too late," Penelope said. "They're coming this way."

They were surrounded.

Jefferson pointed to Ginnie Mac and Penelope. "You two stay in the middle. Don't take any chances."

"You don't look so good yourself," Ginnie Mac said.

"Maybe so," he said and joined them.

"We're cut off," Cheung said as several ghouls blocked the flat path out of the grassy park.

"Everyone stay close," Mei said. "We're going to stick together." She and Kazuo started swinging at the ghouls on the hill. Their weapons, a lead pipe and a heavy iron wrench, cracked the ghouls' skulls open. Penelope gasped.

As he crested the small hill, Jefferson saw the Fantastic Machine, its parts hurrying with activity and before it a spastic rope of lightning writhed just like the last time he was here, when the Whisperer stood before the machine sacrificing children to the hole in the sky. There were a whole host of ghouls between it and him and as he searched the field, he saw something off to one side, a commotion outside the Engineering and Transportation Hall.

"Look," he said. "It's Theodor and Sun. They're surrounded."

"There's not a lot of fight in these," Kazuo said as he brained two more. "Come on, I think we can make it through here."

All eight of them, even Ginnie Mac and Penelope, smashed their way through the ghouls. These weren't the fastest ones Jefferson had seen, but they were still dangerous. But with eight bludgeoning weapons on their side, and the confidence that comes from being with seven people who've got your back, the gang cut a line through the ghouls with relative ease. Within minutes they enveloped Sun Yat-sen and Theodor Cabott, but the ghouls continued their inexorable march.

"Not that I'm not grateful for the help," Theodor Cabott said, "but what the hell are you doing here?"

"We had a change of heart," Jefferson said.

"And some of us," Mei said, "wanted to make sure you didn't mess this one up like you've done in the past."

"What is she talking about?" Theodor said.

"She knows," Penelope said.

"I told them," Jefferson said. "And guess what? We're here to help anyway."

Theodor looked upset but he held his tongue.

Sun Yat-sen wore a backpack that fed lines to an enormous gauntlet on his right hand. He gestured with it as he spoke. "Thank goodness you're here. When the power came back on the Whisperer took up the position he's in now." He looked to Jefferson. "Just like before. I thought the ghouls would be as lifeless as they were then, but it appears I was wrong. They've got a little fight left in them."

As he spoke, Cheung and Keung and Kazuo and Keisuke continued braining nearby ghouls.

"We've got the advantage now," Mei said. "How can we put an end to this?"

"We need to get close to the Fantastic Machine," Theodor said. "The gauntlet has a limited range, but every time we get near, the Whisperer discharges electricity at us. I ... I don't know what to do."

"You know what to do," Penelope said. "You're just afraid to do it."

Theodor looked from Penelope to Jefferson. "And why wouldn't I be afraid. Would you want me to unleash that beast? I can feel its willpower fighting against my own. It longs to be free. Do you understand? If I bring it out, I may not be able to put it away again."

"Darling," Penelope said. "You are a man of reason. A scientist. Can you think of any other way we can challenge the Whisperer's strength?"

"I don't want to be reduced to a beast," Theodor said.

"What are you people talking about?" Mei said.

"Are you familiar with the Chiye-tanka?" Theodor said. Seeing the blank look on Mei's face, he said, "The Bigfoot? Yeti? Mai Gow?"

"I've heard of the Mi-go," Mei said. "Is that it? The gigantic furry man-beast? But what has that got to do with anything?"

"He's one of them," Jefferson said. "Remember I told you he got a sickness from Atlanta?"

"I don't believe it," Mei said.

"You will," Theodor said. "Soon enough."

Mei looked like she was beginning to doubt partnering up with this crazy bunch.

"Fine," Jefferson said. "So if you get the Whisperer out of the way, then what? How do we close the portal?"

"With this." Sun held up the gauntlet. It was enormous, maybe four times the size of his hand.

"What are you going to do?" Mei said. "Punch the sky?"

"In simple terms," Theodor said, "the gauntlet can shine a very special kind of light."

Sun wore the gauntlet on his right hand, he rotated it for everyone to see. Mostly leather, it was covered with cables and vacuum tubes and a row of nobs farther up the forearm where the

cables ran from the gauntlet to the backpack. A matching pair of polarized lenses were embedded into the glove, one on the back of the gigantic hand and one in the palm.

"Give it to me," Jefferson said. "If this is built like any of his other contraptions you're likely to lose your arm. You need that arm, Sun. You've got a nation to fix. I'll fire it. Give it over."

"I'll fire it," Mei said. "The whole lot of you are nuts, but if we're betting all our marbles on this contraption than I want to see that the job is done right."

"I've got it," Sun said. "We're wasting time."

"I cannot allow you to risk you life," Kazuo said. "Jefferson is right. You have a responsibility to China and I have a responsibility to protect you. I will wear the glove."

Keisuke stepped forward. "I will wear it," he said. His English was as perfect as his brother's.

"You can speak?" Jefferson said.

Keisuke gave a curt nod. "Jefferson, you must watch over Ginnie Mac. You are the last link she has to her father. Xuan Mei, your bravery does you great honor. But I think perhaps you have lost too much already, your uncle and family. When the fighting starts, you must lead the others to cover my flank. Sun, my brother is correct, we must protect you, but I must also protect my brother. Kazuo, you are the head of our house. You are the eldest. I will wear the gauntlet."

Sun let Keisuke take the gauntlet and backpack from him without further resistance.

"Give me some room," Theodor said. "This is going to hurt." Penelope gave him a kiss on the cheek and wished him luck. She backed away to join the others. Theodor closed his eyes and turned his attention inward, took a deep breath and let it all the way out. And then, as if a cold wind had blown over him, he shivered.

Theodor doubled over, collapsed onto the ground, caught himself on his hands and knees and groaned. His eyes opened, nostrils flared, and he let fly a scream full of agony, full of regret.

Jefferson cringed at the sight and sound of Theodor's transformation. It changed how he felt about the man, to know that Theodor had the strength of will to subject himself to this torture for just the chance to help the people around him. Maybe he'd judged Theodor Cabott too harshly.

Theodor's transformation captured everyone's attention, and in that moment, one of the ghouls slipped past the Cheung-Keung defense.

Keisuke cried out in pain. Jefferson saw Kazuo and Sun already at his side. Cheung and Keung fought off the other ghouls gathering at that edge of their little group.

At Jefferson's feet lay the gauntlet and the backpack. Keisuke was out for the count, and the others were busy fighting off the ghouls. Behind him Theodor Cabott brought himself up to his full height, ten feet tall, golden brown fur, and eyes black as crude. Jefferson felt like he was right back in the rising waters of Willow Creek.

"Suit up," Theodor said, with a voice that sounded like a grizzly bear. "And aim for the green stone."

Theodor growled with furious power. He stared down in wonder at his own magnificent form and laughed.

The sound sent chills up Jefferson's spine.

"After you start shooting," Theodor growled, "then I'll hit him." With that said, Theodor stomped through the ghouls like a bear through tall grass.

Ginnie Mac stood beside Jefferson and held the gauntlet in her arms. It was the size of a large baby or a small hog. Penelope lifted the backpack and helped Jefferson into that. He slid his right hand into the glove.

"How's it work?" he said.

Sun Yat-sen approached him, winded from battling ghouls. He adjusted settings that were completely foreign to Jefferson, but when he was done the gauntlet shook as the charge ran through it.

"Just point your fingers in the direction of the Fantastic Machine," Sun said. He pointed at a button on the side of the gauntlet. "And when you're ready, hit this."

"Come on," Mei said. "We'll clear the way."

Ginnie Mac grabbed Jefferson's coat and dragged him forward towards the Fantastic Machine while the rest of them beat back any ghouls that came within reach. They set up a position on the terrace overlooking the spot where he had first seen the Whisperer.

The gauntlet was drawn to the Fantastic Machine. He could feel it as real as if someone were trying to pull it off his hand. He spread his fingers and found the button Sun Yat-sen had told him about.

"Hit the button," he said to Ginnie Mac. "And then get out of the way, just in case."

Ginnie Mac looked up at him, her eyes were wet with tears. "He'd be proud of you, too," she said, and then she hit the button.

Chapter Twenty

Jefferson's right arm shook, wavered up and down as unseen forces pulled and repelled the gauntlet between the earth and sky. The backpack was heavy and the straps dug into his shoulders. The gauntlet hurt. It hurt his hand with electrical charges that made him wonder if it was wired wrong. It felt like the glove was sending a thousand needles into his hand and arm. It pulled him towards the Fantastic Machine, towards the green stone encased there. The pull he felt was not going to take the glove from him, but it might remove his arm. He spread his feet apart and lowered his center of gravity and grit his teeth.

The components of the Fantastic Machine pumped and churned at a furious pace. Above it the dark halo glistened like an oil-slick on the underside of the great and terrible Cloud. There Jefferson saw three long, reaching tentacles probe forth from the halo's abyss, full and round and slick, testing the atmosphere, searching. The Whisperer stood before the Fantastic Machine bathed in a bolt of writhing white light, a light that came down from the dark halo.

A writhing tangle of violet light glowed from the gauntlet, a living thread that enveloped it and tethered it to the green stone. The thread whipped past the Whisperer. It did not go unnoticed.

When the light from Jefferson's gauntlet tethered itself to the green stone inside the Fantastic Machine, the Whisperer's light went out.

The Whisperer turned its dark, burned head and using eyes that were not there it followed the path of the intrusive light back to the gauntlet on Jefferson's arm. With an awkward motion, unbalanced, it took its first step towards him.

The block of marble flew by so fast Jefferson didn't know what it was until the gigantic hairy creature, the Chiye-tanka, the Mai Gow, Theodor Cabott, leaped from the far terrace with a white marble pillar held in one hand like a toy. He used that toy on the Whisperer.

The Mai Gow bashed the Whisperer and pounded on it. But the Whisperer would not break. The Mai Gow threw the pillar aside and picked up the Whisperer in one mighty hand. He squeezed and Jefferson saw the Whisperer change shape, squish around the Mai Gow's leathery hand like a water-balloon in a child's fist. The Mai Gow howled at the Whisperer's defiance, at his refusal to be destroyed. He grabbed its shoulders and legs and pulled it apart, but the Whisperer stretched like taffy. The Mai Gow smashed the Whisperer into the ground, pummeled it with mighty fists, each blow sounding like thunder and shaking the earth beneath Jefferson's feet. He stretched the Whisperer again and bit down on his enemy, gnashed his teeth, and tore until the thing finally ripped into two parts.

The Mai Gow let loose a primal roar and hurled the parts up into the dark halo above. As they hit the placid surface of the dark void, the tentacles withdrew, and after pressing against the black oil-slick surface for a moment, the Whisperer's parts were absorbed into the dark void and lost from sight.

The Mai Gow turned his rage against the dark void. He picked up a stone statue of Lewis and Clark and hurled it at the dark halo, where it slowly sank upwards into void.

Jefferson screamed as the gauntlet's sting bit into his hand. "Something's wrong," he said. "I thought this was supposed to break the green stone?"

Sun shouted over his shoulder as he brained an approaching ghoul. "That's what Theodor told me."

The Mai Gow stomped across the sunken garden toward the Fantastic Machine. He stepped into the light that tethered the gauntlet to the green stone and his hair singed, its flesh blistered. He punched through the machine's outer hull and ripped it apart like a rotten log. He reached in and grabbed the green stone, his flesh bubbling in the violet light. The gauntlet's tether followed the green stone as the Mai Gow moved it. Jefferson was pulled off balance.

Ginnie Mac and Penelope stood beside him and tried to grab him as he tumbled forward.

"Stay back," Jefferson said. He thought about what the violet light was doing to the Mai Gow's flesh and possibly to his own hand as well. "Don't touch me."

The Mai Gow hurled the green stone up towards the dark halo. Jefferson, feeling like his arm had been torn from his shoulder, attached to the stone by the tether of light, was yanked off his feet and into the air.

The green stone stuck to the oil-slick surface and all the world vanished in a flash of blinding white light.

Jefferson swung at the tether's end, the pain in his arm convincing him he was not dead yet. He blinked away his blindness and saw the dark halo overhead, the tether of light drawing him and the gauntlet up towards the void. He struggled to remove the glove but he was weak and its hold on his flesh was complete.

The void was growing smaller. Like a pool of black water draining into the sky, its surface was shrinking, collapsing in around the tether of light attached to Jefferson's gauntlet.

Tendrils of chaotic electricity whipped wildly from the edges of the dark halo that encompassed the void. They reached into the surrounding Cloud, bright bolts of energy that snapped and flashed. The Cloud began to move, to race into the void.

The sound of screams reached him from the ground below. Theodor, the Mai Gow, was completely out of control. He snarled and howled like an animal as he wrenched the Fantastic Machine off its base, tipped it and hurled it like a missile over the heads of Ginnie Mac and Penelope, Sun Yat-sen, Kazuo and Keisuke, Xuan Mei and Cheung and Keung. It crashed into the Engineering and Transportation Hall, collapsing the front wall of that enormous building.

Ginnie Mac stood with her arms outstretched towards him, her eyes jeweled with tears.

Jefferson struggled to free himself from the gauntlet. He was almost touching the black surface of the void, which had shrunk in size to just a few feet across. From his height he saw blue sky on the horizon. The Cloud, concentrated now around the ever shrinking void, was nearly

gone from the sky.

Jefferson did not want to vanish from this world. He didn't want to leave Ginnie Mac. He didn't want to die.

None of that mattered, though, when his gloved hand touched the void. A terrible cold bit his fingers and raced through his arm. It was a pain so great, so total, that it made him change his mind. As he sank into the void, desperate to end the pain, Jefferson wished for death.

#

Sunlight came through the window and pooled on the tiled floor. Dust floated, drifted, and passed through the light into shadow, and back into the light, for a time.

He was in bed, in a room, alive, and in pain. A plaster cast encased his left hand. There were messages scrawled across it in different colored inks wishing him a speedy recovery and bearing the signatures of those who had fought along side him.

He felt a cramp in his right arm and he lifted it up to examine the source of the pain. His bicep was freshly wrapped and bandaged and below that there was no arm. He moved the shortened appendage up and down, in circles.

"That's about the worst of it," Penelope Cabott said. She came into the room and put a hand to Jefferson's forehead. He was glad to see her.

"You saved the world and all it cost you was your arm." She lured a smile out of him with one of her own.

"How long?" he said. He winced at the dryness of his throat. Penelope poured him a glass of water and held it for him while he drank.

"A couple days," she said. "How does your head feel?"

His head felt fine and he told her so. She was glad to hear it and told him he was lucky to be alive. He looked at the stump of his right arm and the cast on his left hand and then up at Penelope. He felt lucky. It was a new feeling for him.

"Ginnie Mac," he said. "She make it?"

"She made it," Penelope said. "We all did." She helped him with another sip of water.

"What do you remember?"

He shook his head. "Ginnie Mac," he said. "I remember her looking at me. And I remember hole in the sky getting smaller, sucking the clouds into it. I remember hurting."

She brushed some of Jefferson's hair away from his face and smiled at him and rested her hand on his shoulder. Her touch felt good, calming, safe.

"It closed around your arm," she said. "The vortex. A clean cut. You fell out of the sky. You looked for all the world like you were dead, Jefferson." Penelope took a deep breath.

"Theodor tells me the closure gave him a chance to think straight. He says it was like being in a room with a loud phonograph and having it suddenly silenced. He caught you, you know. Gentle as a baby."

She went on to explain that she and Sun Yat-sen had been able to study the infected people, the ghouls. The toxin they'd been infected with had come from the plants and both the plants and the toxin had become inert when the void collapsed. She had arranged shelters across the city to provide medical attention to the people who had been exposed to the toxins.

"God help us," she said, "but I think they might all recover. The ones who became ghouls and somehow survived the madness. There's hope."

She said they could not account for all the plants, but the one's they knew about had gone dormant, so she figured that would be true for all the plants.

"Sounds like we won," Jefferson said. "So why do you look so sad?"

"Theodor," she said. "He's fallen into a terrible depression. He blames himself for all of this."

#

Jefferson found Theodor on Mount Tabor where Penelope said he'd be: sitting at the edge

of the collapsed volcanic neck. Sections of Mount Tabor had collapsed in on itself when the prototype machine had exploded. The house had become a pile of ashes and charred rocks. The garage was now cinders and slag.

"I'm glad to see you up and about," Theodor said. "But if you came here to gloat or tell me I did everything wrong, then you're a little late."

"That's not why I'm here," Jefferson said. "I wanted to thank you."

Theodor shook his head and stared down into earth. "You're a fool if you're thanking me for anything," he said.

"You saved my life in Heppner," Jefferson said. "I never thanked you for that. Hell, I thought I dreamed it. And then you saved my life again. I hear you caught me when I fell."

Theodor shrugged his shoulders. "You practically landed on me," he said. "Wrong place at the wrong time."

"Knock it off," Jefferson said. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You think this is all your fault? All of it?"

"I think that's pretty obvious," Theodor said.

"Well, fine, then. I'm not here to convince you otherwise. But there is something I need to say and you're going to hear it. And I'd rather not say it to the back of your head, if you don't mind."

Theodor stood up and came away from the edge of the hole. Jefferson had forgotten what a frail old man he was.

"Let me have it," Theodor said.

"Very well," Jefferson said. "I forgive you. For all of it. Everything you did, from that mess in Atlanta, to Heppner, to now. You were dealt a bad hand and you did your best to make it right. You tried. And a friend of mine tells me that's what we all need to do. So I forgive you."

"You forgive me," Theodor said.

"That's right."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

The End.