June 12, Sunday

It was late on a full-mooned Sunday night when the two figures in tan fatigues appeared on Highway 27 just outside the small college town of Ashton. ~~in upstate New York~~. They were tall, at least seven feet, strongly built, perfectly proportioned. One was dark-haired and sharp-featured, the other blond and ~~powerful~~. From a half mile away they looked toward the town, regarding the loud-colored glow in the sky above it and hearing the cacophonic sounds of gaity from the storefronts, streets and alleys within it. They started walking.

The Ashton Summer Festival was the town's yearly exercise in frivolity and chaos, its way of saying thank you, come again, good luck and nice to have you to the most of ~~eight hundred~~ or so students at Whitmore College who would be getting their long awaited summer break from classes. Most would pack up and go home, but all would definitely stay at least long enough to take in the festivities, the street disco, the carnival rides, the nickel movies and whatever else could be had, over or under the table, for kicks. It was a time to get drunk, pregnant, beat up, ripped off and sick, all in the same night, ~~an impulsive exercise in an escapade in self destruction for indulgence fun and profit, in which common sense was bulldozed under by impulsive idiocy and tenacious tradition.~~

On the outskirts of town, a community-conscious landowner had opened up a two acre pasture that cattle didn't want and permitted a travelling troupe of enterprising migrants to set up their carnival with rides, booths and porta-potties. The rides were very typical ~~and very usual~~ for the festival: an escapade in gaily lit rust, powered by unmuffled

tractor engines that ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx all but drowned out the traditional recorded organ music.~~ ~~played~~ more onkey than the recorded ~~organ~~ music they drowned out. But ~~xx~~ on a warm night, amidst the bright ~~carnival~~ lights and cotton candied throngs, ~~it~~ could only be enjoyed. A ferris wheel slowly turned, hesitated for boarding, turned some more for disgorging, then took a few full rotations to give its passengers their money's worth, ~~seventy-five cents for one minute~~; a merry-go-round spun eccentrically in a brightly lit, gaudy circle, the aging and dismembered horses still prancing to the ~~indiscernable melody~~ of the ~~recorded~~ callipe; carnival goers threw baseballs at baskets, dimes at ash trays, darts at balloons and money to the wind along the hastily assembled, ramshackle gayway where the hawkers ~~xxxxxx~~ the same try-yer-luck chatter for each passerby.

Ashton was not a big town, only about twelve thousand in population counting the college students, and yet the festival seemed to multiply that number tenfold. ~~People seemed to appear from nowhere~~ The usually quiet, keep-to-itself population turned out in droves, augmented by ~~visitors~~ from elsewhere, until the streets, taverns, stores, alleys and parking spots were jammed. Police usually had their hands full, but were philosophical about it - it was good for the town, they said.

It was toward the end of the festival, ~~late on a Friday night, that~~ two ~~xxx~~ gentlemen ~~showed up~~ on Main Street, ~~walking leisurely~~ past ~~xxx~~ O'Malley's Tavern featuring the Dust Bowl Boys, ~~whose country licks clashed with the hard rock of~~ Les Noyse and the Maniacs ~~next door at the Midnight Club.~~ ~~These men were tall, over six feet, maybe seven, and very strongly built.~~ They ~~seemed just a little~~ inquisitive, and didn't ~~really~~ say much to each other; ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx as if they weren't~~ really getting in to the spirit of things. They paused for just a moment between the ~~xxx~~ nightclub and the tavern, the very spot where the country licks of the ~~first band~~ collided with the ~~wah-wah and fuzz~~ fuzzed-out ~~tumult~~ of the ~~rock band~~,

and observed as a young wished-he-was-a-cowboy stumbled hurriedly out of O'Malley's and threw up on the sidewalk. He got right back inside with a whoop, and the two men continued on.

A deafening sound system forged an iron beat that pounded the street and pummelled the senses of anyone passing by the street disco, sort of a Roman orgy standing up; all the partidipants, like caterpillars on a hot stove, jerked and undulated with varying degrees of sensual creativity, in clothes taken in for the occasion while strobe lights seemed to cut time into broken fragments. It was impossible to hear any voice or even any thought, and as for sight, you took, what, you, could, when, you, could. The two visitors passed through the center of the packed, boiling organism and went their way without brushing an elbow.

They moved smoothly, unfalteringly, passing through the main part of town at a brisk pace. Their final destination was a mile past the center of town, right on Poplar Street, and up to the top of Morgan Hill about a half mile. Practically no time at all had passed before they stood before the little white church on its postage stamp lot, with the well-groomed lawn and dainty Sunday-School-and-Services Billboard standing in the front. Across the top of the little sign was the name ~~of the church~~, "Ashton Community Church," and in black letters hastily painted over whatever name used to be there was the name, Rev. Henry L. Busche, pastor.

They looked back. From this lofty hill one could look out over the whole town and see it spread from city limit to city limt. To the west sparkled the caramel colored carnival; to the east stood the dignified and matronly Whitmore College campus; along Highway 27, Main Street through town, were the storefront offices, the smalltown sized Sears, a few gas stations at war, a True Value Hardware, the local newspaper, several small family businesses. From here the town looked so typically American, small, innocent, harmless, like the background for every Norman Rockwell painting.

But the two visitors did not perceive with eyes only. Even from this vantage point the true substratum of Ashton weighed very heavily upon their spirits and minds. They could feel it: restless, strong, growing, very designed and purposeful... a very special kind of Evil.

Why here? they wondered. It was not unlike either of them to ask questions, to study, to probe. More often than not it came with their job, and so they naturally hesitated in their business, pausing to wonder, why here?

But only for an instant. It could have been some acute sensitivity, an instinct, a very faint but for them discernible impression, but it was enough to make them both instantly vanish around the corner of the church, ~~melding themselves against the bevelled siding, almost indiscernible there in an instant of time. They suddenly seemed to meld into the wall of the church, hardly discernible there in the dark.~~ in the dark. They didn't speak, they didn't move, but watched with a piercing gaze as something approached.

The night scene of the quiet street was a collage of stark blue street light and bottomless shadows, but as they watched, one shadow did not stir with the wind as did the tree shadows, neither did it stand still as did the building shadows. It crawled, quivered, moved along the street toward the church, ~~swallowing up the dim light and then casting it behind.~~ while any light it erased seemed to sink into its blackness, as if it were ~~an infinite hole~~

breach torn in space. But this shadow had a shape, a moving, animated, creaturelike shape, and as it neared the church, sounds could be heard: low, asthmatic hisses from a rattling, chasmic throat, the clicking and scratching of black claws along the ground, the faint rustling of membranous wings waiting breeze-blown just above the creature's shoulders.

It had arms and it had legs, but seemed to move without them as much as with them, crossing the street and mounting the front steps of the church, it's bulbous leering eyes reflecting back the stark blue light of the streetlamps with their own jaundiced glow of dull yellow. The gnarled head protruded from hunched shoulders and wisps of rancid red breath seethed in labored hisses through rows of jagged, fanglike teeth. ~~It reared on its legs from~~ From its crawling, sneaking posture it reared up on its legs and a black, taloned hand grasped the door handle, pulling and jerking. The door would not rattle as it would have if latched, but remained totally immovable, much to the creature's sudden rage. It grimaced in an expression of raging hatred, a scream gargling up out of its throat, and struggled to open the door, mounting it with arms and legs, pushing, pulling, wrestling, the membranes on its back billowing and enfolding great bodies of air.

Inside the church, one strong hand held the door fast.

The struggle lasted only a few minutes. The air turned putrid with the reddish breath of the creature and for a moment the night was filled with its cries. But it soon backed down and stood glaring at the door, ~~and then, giving the door a childish swat with its hand~~ disgruntled and mystified. With a tight, steel-like fist it gave the door one hammering thud and then, its membranes ~~vanishing~~ oscillating into a rushing blur of power, it swooped upward into the night sky.

Around the corner of the building, there remained only ~~one of the visitors~~, the dark-haired visitor, but with the speed of a thought he was inside the church, joining his companion who still had hold of the door.

RW — demon tries to pass through door, is blocked, slams down nt.

It either laughed or it coughed. The asthmatic wheezes puffing out from deep within its throat could have been perceived as either one. From its crawling, sneaking posture it reared up on its legs and looked about the quiet neighborhood, the black, leathery jowls pulling back into a hideous, deathmask grin. It moved toward the front door and prepared to pass through it.

The black hand passed through the door like a spear through liquid, the body hobbled forward and sank only halfway into the door. Then, suddenly, as if colliding with a fiercely charging wall, the creature was knocked backward and into a raging tumble down the steps, the glowing red breath tracing a corkscrew trail through the air. He cried out in rage and indignity as he gathered himself up off the sidewalk and leered at the strange door that would not let him pass through. The membranes on his back began to billow, engolding great bodies of air, and he flew with a roar headlong at the door,

through the door, into the foyer and into a cloud of white hot light. The creature screamed and covered his eyes and felt himself being grabbed by a huge, powerful vise of a hand. In an instant he found himself hurling through space like a ragdoll, outside again, forcefully ousted.

He swirled about, banked sharply in a flying turn and headed for the door again, red vapors chugging out of his nostrils, talons bared and poised for attack, an eerie, siren of a scream rising in his throat. Like an arrow at a target, like a bullet through a board, he streaked through the door and instantly felt his insides tearing loose.

His eyes rolled and bulged out of his face, a violent gush of red vapor shot out of his gaping mouth and he began to wither, to disintegrate, folding up upon himself as if being sucked through a tiny hole in space.

A huge, gleaming sword remained solid and immovable and he hung on it like a speared fish, quickly vanishing as his body, like smoke, curled and sucked into his own wound. In a short moment the flailing arms shrank, lost their shape, and like blobs of lifeless spirit vanished through a pinpoint in space and were gone.

Nothing remained but the quickly fading stench of sulphur and the

become invisible then ~~hung his head slightly~~

~~letting it~~ faded quickly away.

big blond man replaced his sword, ~~in its sheath~~ ~~The white light was all around the two men who now stood in the foyer.~~ The big man gave his friend a look that showed he was very impressed.

Several demons chased out.

~~The big blond man released his hold on the door and looked at his friend with a xxxgx slight touch of awe in his face.~~ ~~gave his friend a look that showed he was quite impressed.~~

"~~I suppose~~ and that was one of the smaller ones?" ~~he~~ ~~asked~~ said.

"I've not seen one smaller."

"~~And how~~ Just many would you say there are?"

"More, much more than we, and everywhere. ~~They've been busy.~~ Never idle"

"So I've seen," the big man sighed.

"But what are they doing here? We've never seen such concentration before, not here."

"Oh, ~~xexwixxxxkxexwx~~ ~~there's a~~ the reason, ~~and it~~ won't be hidden for long." He looked through the foyer doors and ~~xxxx~~ toward the sanctuary. "Let's see this warrior of yours."

They turned from the door and walked through the small foyer. The bulletin board on the wall carried requests for groceries for a needy family, ~~xxxxxx~~ some babysitting, and prayer for a sick missionary. A large bill announced the quarterly business meeting for next Friday. ~~Nearby~~ On the other wall, the record of weekly offerings indicated the offerings were down from last week; so was the attendance, from sixty-one to forty-two.

Insert

...watching, studying, pondering.

"The little warrior," said the dark haired one.

~~The big blond man seemed overcome by a sense of reverence, as if standing in the presence of some mighty man~~

~~The big blond man formed the words himself in silence, looking down~~ at the contrite man in prayer.

"Yes," he observed, "this is the one. ~~He's~~ Even now interceding, standing before the Lord for the sake of the people, for the town..."

"Almost every night he's here."

"a spirit of harassment?" he asked. "Or doubt, or fear... who knows?"

See? It would be better to cut down the opening stuff.

"So indeed.

Insert

Down the short and narrow aisle they went, past the orderly ranks of dark stained, plank and slat pews, toward the front of the sanctuary where one small spotlight illumined a rustic two-by-four cross hanging above the baptistry. In the center of the WORN-carpeted platform stood the little sacred desk, the pulpit, with a Bible laid open upon it.

These were humble furnishings, functional but not at all elaborate, revealing either humility on the part of the people or neglect.

Then the first sound was added to the picture: a soft, muffled sobbing from the right front pew. There, kneeling in earnest prayer, his head resting on the hard wood seat, one hand clenched around the slat in the pew and the other clenched in a fist was a young man. Very young, the two men thought at first; young, vulnerable, sensitive. It all showed in his countenance, now the very picture of pain, grief and...love. His lips moved without sound, but they could make out some of the words being repeated often: Please...,please, Lord... please.

They couldn't help but just stand there for a moment, watching, studying, pondering.

"The little warrior," said the dark haired one with a sigh.

"Always little..." mused the other. "Always broken...helpless."

"But they never are as small as they look."

The big blond man chuckled. "After so many times, so many battles, what else could we expect? The Lord has His ways."

The dark-haired one found it hard to chuckle back. "But this struggle is going to be hard. He's going to get hurt, you know that."

"And so will the newspaperman. And so will we."

"But will we win?"

At that remark, the big man smiled. "He's not so little."

But his friend seemed cautious, apprehensive.

"But he's the only one. He's alone."

"No," the big man shook his head. "There are others. There are always others. They just have to be found. For now, his single, vigilant prayer is the beginning."

"He's...he's going to be hurt, you know that."

"And so will the newspaperman. And so will we."

"But will we win?"

The big man's eyes seemed to burn with a rekindled fire. "We will fight."

"We will fight," his friend agreed.

"We will fight," The blond man answered, and he loved the very sound of it. ~~"But he, the little warrior, the struggler, the intercessor...will win."~~

~~"And here...right here...is where the battle has already begun."~~

"We will fight," the other agreed.

They stood over the kneeling warrior, on either side, and at that moment, little by little, like the bloom of a flower, ~~a sourceless~~ the white light began to fill the room. It illumined the cross on the back wall, slowly brought out the colors and grain in every plank of every pew, rose and rose in intensity until the once plain and humble sanctuary came alive with an unearthly beauty. The walls glimmered, the warn rugs glowed, the little pulpit stood tall and stark as a sentinel backlit by the sun.

And now The two ~~men~~ were brilliant white now, their former ~~street clothes~~ tan clothing transfigured by garments that seemed to burn with white-hot intensity. Their faces were bronze and glowing, their eyes shone like fire, and each man wore a ~~shimmering~~ glistening golden belt from which hung a sword. ~~polished and~~ flashing They placed their hands upon the shoulders of the young pastor, and ~~a new wonder appeared.~~ then, Just like a gracefully spreading canopy, ~~silken~~ shimmering, glistening, nearly transparent membranes began to unfurl from their backs and shoulders and rise to meet and flap over ~~each other~~ above their heads, gently undulating ~~and swirling like the tail of a tropical fish.~~ in a spiritual wind.

~~They~~ Together they ministered to their young charge, "Peace," and ~~the~~ his many tears ~~gradually~~ began to subside.

June 13, Monday

FINALED

The Ashton Clarion was a small town newspaper; it was little and quaint, maybe just a touch unorganized at times, unassuming, very grassroots. It was, in other words, the printed expression of what the town of Ashton was. It occupied a small storefront space on Main Street in the middle of town, just a one story affair with large display windows and a heavy, toe-scuffed door with a mail slot. The paper came out twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, and didn't make a lot of money. By the appearance of the office and ~~printing~~ lay-out facilities, one could tell it was a low budget operation.

In the front half of the building was the office and newsroom area. It consisted of three desks, two typewriters, two wastebaskets, two telephones, one coffeemaker without a cord and what looked like all the scattered notes, papers, stationery and ~~desk~~ office bric-a-brac in the world. ~~The~~ An old, worn-round-on-the-edges counter from a railroad station that got torn down formed a ~~reception~~ divider between the functioning office and the reception area, and of course there was a small bell above the door that jingled every time someone came in.

Toward the back of this maze of smallscale activity was one luxury that looked just a little too bigtown for this place: a glassed-in office for the editor. It was in fact a new addition. The new editor/owner was a former big city reporter and ~~fr~~ as near as anyone could figure, having a glassed-in editor's office had been one of his life's dreams.

This new fellow was Marshall Hogan, a strong, big-framed bustle hustler whom his staff - the typesetter, the secretary/reporter/ad girl, the paste-up and print man and the reporter/columnist - lovingly referred to as Attila the Hogan. He'd just bought the paper a few months ago, and the clash between ~~the~~ his bigcity ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ polish and the smalltown easy-go still roused some confrontations from time to time. Marshall was after a quality paper, one that ran efficiently and smoothly and made its deadlines, with ~~xxxxx~~ a place for everything and everything in its place. The problem was, that the transition from the New York Times to the Ashton Clarion was like jumping off

a speeding train into a wall of half-set jello. Things just didn't click as fast in this little ~~xxxx~~ office, and the high-powered efficiency Marshall was used to ~~hdd~~ had to give way to such Ashton Clarion quirks as saving all the coffee grounds for the secretary's compost pile and someone finally ~~getting~~ turning in a long-awaited ~~xxxxxx~~ human interest story, but with parakeet droppings on it.

Right now, early Monday morning, the ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ traffic patterns were very busy and hectic, and there was no time for any weekend hangovers. The Tuesday edition was being brought forth in a rush, and the entire staff was feeling the labor pains, rushing back and forth between their desks in front and the paste-up and print facility in the back, usually having to squeeze past each other in the narrow passage between the two rooms, CARRYING rough copy for articles and ads to be typeset, finished typeset gallies that had to be cut to fit their appointed slots on each page, assorted shapes and sizes of half-tones of photographs that would highlight the news pages.

In the back, amid bright lights, cluttered work tables and rapidly moving bodies, Marshall and Tom the paste-up man were bent over a large, benchlike easel, assembling Tuesday's ~~xxxxxx~~ Clarion out of bits and pieces that seemed to be scattered everywhere. This goes here, this can't so we have to shove it somewhere else, this is too big, what will we use to fill this? Marshall was getting miffed. So far, every Monday and Thursday he got miffed.

~~"Edie!" he hollerdd....~~

The Ashton Clarion was just a small newspaper, only publishing on Tuesdays and Fridays, but in its own miniature way it was a hectic place to work. On this Monday morning the small staff - the editor, the typesetter, the secretary/reporter/ad girl and paste-up man were scurrying back and forth, up and down the narrow passage from the office in front to the print shop and paste-up room in the back carrying rough copy for articles and ads, typeset gallies still needing a place to put them, half-tones of photos that would highlight the news pages.

Marshall Hogan, new owner of the Clarion, a strong, big-framed man, determined to run a tight ship but was finding he only added a few more gray hairs to his natural red for every edition he put out. He hadn't owned the Clarion for very long, but already he'd made many changes that the staff were still trying to get used to. Right now he was bent over the paste-up table, painstakingly creating Tuesday's Clarion out of bits and pieces that seemed to be scattered everywhere.

"Edie!" he hollered, and his secretary answered, "Coming," and he told her for the umpteenth time, "The gallies go in the trays over the table, not on the table, not on the floor, not on the--"

"I didn't put any gallies on the floor!" Edie protested as she hurried into the paste-up room with more gallies in her hand. She was a tough little gal of forty, married, a proud mother, and had just the right personality to stand up to Marshall's brusqueness. She still knew where to find things around the office better than anyone, especially her new boss. "I've got them in your cute little trays, right where you want them."

"So how'd these here get on the floor?"

"Wind, Marshall, and don't make me tell you where that came from!"

"~~Hey~~ all right, Marshall," said Tom, ~~the paste-up man~~, "~~we've~~ that takes care of ~~got~~ pages three, four, six, seven...what about one and two? What are we gonna do with all these ~~holes~~ empty slots?"

"We are going to put in Bernie's coverage of the festival, with clever writing, dramatic, human interest photos, the whole bit, as soon as she gets her rear in here and gives them to us! ~~Marcy~~ Edie!"

"Yo!"

"Bernie's an hour late, for crying out loud! Call her again, will you?"

"Just did. No answer."

"Nuts."

George, the small, retired ~~typesetter~~ ~~swiveled~~ typesetter who still worked for the fun of it, swiveled his chair away from the typesetting machine and offered, "How about the Ladies' Auxiliary Barbecue? I'm just finishing that up, and that photo of Mrs. Marmaselle is spicy enough for a lawsuit."

"Yeah," Marshall groaned, "right on page one. That's all I need, a good ~~first~~ impression."

"So what now?" ~~Marcy~~ Edie asked.

"Anybody make it to the festival?"

"Went fishing," said George. "That festival's too wild for me." "My wife wouldn't let me," said Tom.

"I caught some of it," said ~~Marcy~~ Edie.

"Start writing," said Marshall. "The biggest townbuster of the year, we've got to have something on it~~ for the paper~~."

The phone rang./

"Saved by the bell?" ~~Marcy~~ Edie hoped, and picked up the backroom extension. "Good morning, the Clarion." Suddenly she brightened. "Hey, Bernice! Where are you?"

"Where is she?" Marshall demanded at the same time.

~~Marcy~~ Edie listened and her face filled with horror.

"Yes, well, calm down now. We'll get you out."

Marshall spouted, "Well where the heck is she?"

Edie gave him a scolding look and answered, "In jail!"

FINALED

Marshall Hogan, chief editor and edi the new editor/owner of the twice-a-week Ashton Clarion, stood in hurried into the basement of the Ashton Police Station, almost immediately wished he could disconnect his nose and ears. Beyond the heavily barred gate to the cell block, and the tiny row of jail cells crowded into this small and musty space little didn't smell of sound much different from the carnival the night before. On his way here he had noticed how quiet the streets were this morning. No wonder; all the noise had moved inside, into these half dozen peeling-painted cells set in cold, echoing concrete. Here were all the dopers, vandals, rowdies, drunks and no-goods the police could scrape off the face of the town, collected in what amounted to an overcrowded zoo. Some were making a party of it, playing poker for cigarettes with heavily finger-smeared cards and trying to outdo each other's tales of illicit exploits. Toward the end of the cells a gang of young bucks made obscene comments to a cageful of hookers with no better place to be locked up. Others just slumped in corners in a drunken stew or a depressed slump or both. The remainder glared at him from behind the bars, made snide remarks, begged for peanuts. He was glad he left Kate upstairs.

Jimmy Dunlop, the new deputy, was stationed loyally at the guard desk, filling out forms and drinking strong coffee.

"Hey, Mr. Hogan got right down here. Marshall," he said, "you made it early."

"I couldn't wait...and I won't wait!" he snapped. He wasn't feeling well. This had been his first Festival, and that was bad enough, but he never expected, never dreamed of a prolonging of the agony such as this. He towered over the desk, his big frame shifting forward to accentuate his impatience. "Well?" he asked, or rather demanded.

"Hmmm?"

"I'm here to get my reporter out of the can."

"Sure, I know that. Have you got a release?"

"Listen. I just paid off came from those eight-balls upstairs. They were supposed

to call you down here."

"Well....I haven't heard a thing, and I have to have authorization."

"Jimmy...."

"Yeh?"

"Your phone's off the hook."

"Oh...!"

Marshall set the phone down right in front of him with a firmness that made the phone jingle in pain.

"Call 'em."

Marshall straightened up, watched Jimmy dial wrong, dial again, try to get through. He goes well with the rest of the town, Marshall thought, nervously running his fingers through his graying red hair. Aw, it was a nice town, sure. Cute would be a better word. Cute, maybe a little dumb, kind of like a bumbling kid who always got himself into jams. Things weren't really better in the big city, he tried to remind himself.

"Uh, Mr. Hogan," Jimmy asked, his hand over the receiver, "who was it you talked to?"

"Kinney."

"Sargeant Kinney, please."

Marshall was impatient. "Let's have the key for the gate. I'll let her know I'm here."

It was against regulations, but Jimmy gave him the key anyway. He'd argued with Marshall Hogan before.

A whoop of mack welcome poured out from the cells along with hurled cigarette butts and whistled march tunes as Marshall passed by. He waved it all off and lost no time finding who he wanted.

"All right, Krueger, I know you're in there!"

"Come and get me, Hogan," ~~yelled a sweet voice made tough~~ came the reply from a desperate and somewhat outraged female voice down near the end.

"Well, stick out your arm, wave at me or something!"

A hand stuck out through the bodies and bars and gave him a desperate wave. He got there, gave the palm a slap, and found himself face to face with Bernice Krueger, jailbird, his prize comumnist and reporter. She was a young, shapely gal in her mid-twenties with short brown hair and large, wire-rimmed glasses, unkempt and fogged up, respectively. She'd obviously had a hard night and was presently keeping company with at least a dozen women, some older, some shockingly younger, mostly trucked-in prostitutes as close as Marshall could figure. He didn't know whether to laugh or spit.

"I won't mince words, you look terrible," he said.

"Only in keeping with my vocation. I'm a hooker now."

"Yeah, yeah, one of us," a chunky gal sang out.

Marshall grimaced and shook his head. "What kind of questions were you asking out there?"

"Right now no joke is funny. No anecdote of the last night's events is funny. I'm not laughing, I'm seething. The assignment was an insult in the first place."

"Look, somebody had to cover the carnival."

"But we were quite right in our prognostication; there was certainly nothing new under the sun, nor the moon, as it were. ~~You'll be paying overtime for sheer drivel.~~"

"You got arrested," he offered.

"For the sake of grabbing the reader with a scandaulous lead. What else was there to write about?"

"So rea d it to me."

A Spanish girl from the back of the cell offered, "She tried to do business with the wrong trick," at which the whole cell block guffawed and hooted and a young derelict inserted some choice insinuations.

"I demand to be released!" Bernice fumed. "And have you stepped in

epoxy? Do something!"

"Jimmy's on the phone with Kinney. I paid your bail. We'll get you out of here."

A moment to simmer down and then, "In answer to your question, I was carrying on spot interviews, trying to get some good pictures, good quotes, good...anything. I assume that Nancy and Rosie here -" she looked toward two young ladies who could have been twins, and they smiled at Marshall "- wondered what I was doing, constantly circumnavigating the carnival grounds looking bewildered. They struck up a conversation that really got us nowhere news-wise, but did get us all in trouble when Nancy propositioned an undercover cop and we all got busted together."

"I think she'd be good at it," quipped Nancy as Rosie gave her a playful hit.

Marshall asked, "And you didn't show him your I.D., your press card?"

"He wouldn't give me a chance! I told him who I was."

"Well did he hear you?" Marshall asked the girls, "Did he hear her?"

They only shrugged, but Bernice shifted her voice into high gear and cried, "Is this voice loud enough for you? I employed it last night while he slapped the cuffs on me!"

"Welcome to Ashton."

"I will have his badge!"

"It'll only turn your chest green." Hogan held up his hand to halt another outburst. "Hey, listen, it isn't worth the trouble..."

"There are different schools of thought!"

"Bernie..."

"I have some things I would love to print, four columns wide, all about Supercop and that do-nothing cretin of a Chief! Where is he, anyway?"

"Who, you mean Brummel?"

"He has a very handy way of disappearing, you know. He knows who I am. Where is he?"

"I don't know. I couldn't reach him this morning."

"And he turned his back last night!"

"What are you talking about?"

Suddenly she clammed up, but Marshall read her face clear as a bell: Make sure you ask me later.

Just then the big gate opened and in came Jimmy Dunlop.

"We'll discuss it later," said Marshall. "All set, Jimmy?"

Jimmy was too intimidated by the yells, demands, hoots and jeers coming from the cages to answer right away. But he did have the key to the d cell in his hand, and that said enough.

"Step away from the door, please," he ordered.

"Hey, when's your voice gonna change?" was characteristic of the answers he got. They did mave away from the door. Jimmy opened it, Bernice stepped out qaickly, and he slammed it shut again behind her.

"Okay,"he said, "you're free to leave on bail. You'll be notified of the date for your hearing."

"Just return my purse, my press card, my notepad...and my camera!" Bernice hissed, making tracks for the door.

Kate Hogan, a slender, dignified ~~beauty~~ redhead who looked very good for forty-two, tried to make good use of the time she had to wait upstairs in the station lobby. There was much to observe here after the Festival, although it certainly wasn't pleasant: some woeful souls were escorted and/or dragged in, struggling against their cuffs all the way and spouting obscenities; many others were just now being released after spending the night behind bars. It almost looked like a change of shifts at some bizarre factory, the first shift leaving, somewhat sheepishly, their scant belongings still in the little paper bags, and the second shift coming in, all bound up and indignant. Most of the police officers were strangers from elsewhere, overtimers sent in to beef up the very small staff Ashton staff, and they weren't being paid to be kind or courteous.

The heavily jowled lady at the main desk had two cigarettes smoldering in her ash tray, but seldom had time to take a drag between processing papers on every case coming in or going out. From Kate's viewpoint the whole operation was starting to look very hurried and slipshod. There were a few public defenders passing out their cards, but one night in jail seemed to be the extent of punishment any of these people would have to bear, and they only wanted now to get out of town in peace.

Kate unconsciously shook her head. To think of poor Bernice being herded through this place like so much rabble. She must be furious.

She felt a strong but gentle arm around her, and let herself sink into its embrace.

"Mmmmmm," she said, "now there's a pleasant change."

"After what I had to look at downstairs I need some healing up," Marshall told her.

She put her arm around him and pulled him close.

"Is it like this every year?" she asked.

"No, I hear it gets worse each time." Kate shook her head again, and Marshall added, "But ~~I think~~ the Clarion will have something to say about it. Ashton could use a change of direction; they ~~xxxxxx~~ should be able to see that by now."

"How is Bernice?"

"She'll be one heck of an editorialist for a while. She's okay. She'll live."

"Are you going to talk to somebody about this?"

"Alf Brummel's not around. He's smart. But I'll catch him later today and see what I can do. And I wouldn't mind getting my twenty-five dollars back."

"Well he must be busy. I'd hate to be the Police Chief on a day like this."

~~"Oh, I'll help him hate it more if I can help it."~~
"Oh, he'll hate it even more if I can help it."

Bernice's return from a night of incarceration was marked by an angry countenance and sharp, staccato footsteps of the linoleum. She too was carrying ~~her~~ a paper bag, ~~but she was~~ angrily rummaging through it to make sure everything was there.

Kate extended her arms to give Bernice a comforting hug. Bernice was happy to receive it.

"Bernice, how are you?"

"Brummel's name will soon be mud, the Mayor's name will be dung, and I won't be able to print what that cop's name will be. I'm indignant, I could be constipated and I desperately need a bath."

"Well," said Marshall, "~~take the day off to settle down,~~ take it out on your typewriter, swat some flies. ~~We'll tackle the Thursday paper tomorrow.~~"

"Perhaps by then I will have regained my professional objectivity."

"You'll smell better."

"Marshall!" said Kate.

"It's okay," said Bernice. "He hands me that stuff all the time." By now she had recovered her purse, ~~notepad,~~ presscard and camera and ~~threw~~ the wadded paper bag spitefully against the wall. "So what's the car situation?"

"~~We have your car outside~~," Marshall explained, "If you could take ~~Kate~~ her home that should work things out best for me. I've got to get things salvaged at the paper and then try to track down Brummel."

Bernice's thoughts snapped into gear. "~~Oh... Er, Brummel.~~ ~~Can~~ I talk to you~~, for a second~~?"

She started pulling Marshall aside before he could say yea or nay, and he could only give Kate an apologetic glance before he and Bernice rounded a corner and stood out of sight ~~xxxxxx~~ near the restrooms.

INSERT

Bernice immediately fumbled through ~~the paper bag~~ her pockets and retrieved ~~her~~ a wad of crinkled ~~notepad~~ toilet paper, giving it to Marshall with forcefulness.

"Your loyal reporter, always on the job," she said. "What else was there to do in there ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ besides watch the paint peel and wait in line for the toilet? I think you'll find the whole write-up very descriptive, and I threw in an on-the-spot interview with some jailed hookers for extra flavor. Who knows? Maybe it'll make this town wonder what it's coming to."

"Any pictures?" Marshall asked.

Bernice handed him a can of exposed film. "You should find something in there you can use. I've got some film still in the damera, but that's of personal interest to me.."

Marshall smiled. He was impressed. ""Take the day off, on me. Things will look better tomorrow."

Bernice spoke in lowered tones. "If you're going to accost Mr. Brummel today, I want you to know what I know."

"Besides the obvious?"

"~~Besides the obvious~~. It's pieces, disjointed observations, but maybe they'll make sense someday. I think I saw your pastor and he in together at the carnival last night."

"Pastor Young?"

"Ashton ~~Presbyterian~~, right? President of the local ministerial, endorses religious tolerance and condemns vivisection."

"Yeah, okay."

"They were off behind the dart throwing booth, in the semi-dark, with ~~two~~ three other people, some short, older, pudgy fellow and a ~~slinky~~ broad in sunglasses. Sunglasses at night!"

Marshall wasn't impressed yet. He just kept listening for Bernice to make her point.

She continued like she was trying to sell him something. "I think I committed a cardinal sin against them: I snapped their picture and from all appearances they didn't want that. Brummel was quite unnerved and stuttered at me, Young asked me in firm tones to leave, it was a private meeting. The ~~two~~ three other people didn't look happy at all at being discovered. The pudgy fellow turned away, ~~the~~ that woman just stared at me with her mouth open."

"Have you considered how this might all appear to you after a good bath and a decent night's sleep?"

"Just let me finish and then we'll find out, all right? Now, right after that little incident was when Nancy and Rosie latched onto me. I mean to say, I did not approach them, they approached me, and soon afterward, I was arrested and my camera confiscated."

She could see she wasn't getting through to him. He was looking around impatiently, shifting his weight back toward the lobby.

"All right, all right, one more thing," she said, trying to hold him in place. "Brummel was there, Marshall. He saw the whole thing."

"What whole thing?"

"My arrest! I was trying to explain who I was to the cop, I was trying to show him my press card, he only took my purse and camera away from me and handcuffed me, and I looked over toward the dart throwing booth again and I saw Brummel watching. He ducked out of sight right away, but I swear I saw him watching the whole thing! Marshall, I went over this all night last night, I replayed it and replayed it, and I think...well, I don't know what to think, but it has to mean something."

"To continue the scenario," Marshall ventured, "the film is gone from your camera."

Bernie checked. "Oh, it's still in the camera, but that means nothing."

Hogan sighed and looked to and fro as he thought the thing over. "Okay, so shoot up the rest of the roll, and try to get something we can use, right? Then develop it and we'll see."

"If the film is blank, and if the rest of the pictures are okay, then we know that some tampering has been done. If the whole roll is blank, then it's not valid proof of anything, and why am I even talking about this?" he groaned, looking toward heaven.

"Can we go now?"

"Have I ever made any impulsive, imprudent, over-assuming mistake like this before?"

"Sure you have."

"No, Bernie."

Aw, c'mon now!

"So please...please remember that, and extend me a little grace just this once."

"I'll...try to close my eyes."

"Your wife's waiting."

"I know, I know."

~~The whole little.~~ The whole thing was nothing but awkward, and Marshall didn't quite know what to say to Kate when they rejoined her.

"Sorry about this..." he muttered.

Kate tried to pick ~~him~~ up from where they left off.

"Now then," she said, trying to overcome a sense of being miffed, "we were talking about vehicles. Bernice, I had to drive your car here so that you could have it to get home. If you could drop me off at our house..."

"Yes, right, right," said Bernice.

"And you want the car for the day," she confirmed with Marshall.

"Right again, ~~for reasons already cited.~~"

"Can you pick up Sandy after her ~~last~~ Philosophy class ~~today~~?"

~~His face resounded with no, but he~~ Marshall didn't say a word, but his face showed a resounding no.

Kate took a set of keys from her purse and handed them to Bernice. "Your car is right ~~around~~ around the corner, next to ours in the press space. Why don't you bring it around?"

Bernice took her cue and went out the door. Kate held Marshall ~~with~~ a loving arm and searched his face for a moment.

"Hey, love, c'mon. Try it. Just once."

"But cockfights are illegal in this state."

"If you ask me, she's just a chip off the old block."

"Yeah, blame it on me..."

"~~I meant that.~~ That's a compliment, big fella. I like what you have and I like what she has, but it's time for a truce."

He had to hug her, love her back. She was right. She wasn't nagging or rubbing it in, she was just right.

"I dontt know where I'll start," he said.

"Just being there to pick her up will mean something. Cash in on it."

As they started for the door, Marshall looked around with his eyes, felt around with his gut senses.

"Can you figure ~~it~~ this town, Kate?" he said finally. "It's like some kind of ~~disease.~~ Everybody's got the ~~same~~ weird disease around here."

FINALED

June 13, Monday

A sunny morning always makes the previous night's problems less severe. At least that is what Hank Busche thought as he pushed open his front screendoor and stepped out onto the small concrete stoop. His home was a low-rent one bedroom house not far from the ~~postcard~~ little white church at the top of Morgan Hill, a little white box that had settled in one corner, siding, small hedged yard, and mossy, three-tabbed roof. It wasn't much, often seemed far less, but it was all he could afford on his pastor's salary. Well, he wasn't complaining. He and Mary were comfortable and sheltered, and the morning was beautiful. Two quarts of milk had been waiting at the base of the steps. He snatched them up, a milk-sodden bowl of wheaties, looking forward to a little bit of distraction from his trials and tribulations. INSERT

This was Hank & Mary's day to sleep in, and

Had he backed into the house again without turning he would have spared himself an outrage and kept his lightened spirit. But he turned to go back in, and immediately confronted the huge black, dripping letters spray-painted on the front of the house: "YOU'RE DEAD MEAT, BIGOT! FOR CHRIST." His eyes saw it, then did a slow pan from one side of the house to the other, taking it all in. It was one of those things that take time to register, and his reaction was confused, neither angry or surprised, much less even believing. Part of him almost expected such a thing and part of him couldn't even imagine it. All he could do was stand there for a moment, first wondering who could have done it, then wondering why, then wondering if it would ever come off. He looked closer, touched it with his finger. It had to have been done during the night; it was quite dry.

INSERT

This was some kind of life, being a pastor. He'd always known it was what he was cut out for, but even his years in Bible school and internship did not quite prppare him for the rough road he now felt himself on.

He'd known trouble before, that was nothing new. His father had been a pastor ~~before he and his brother~~ while Hank and his brother were growing up, and the ~~three~~ two of them had lived through a great many glories and hassles, the kind that come with ~~the ministry.~~ pioneering churches, pastoring, itinerating. Hank knew from the time he was young that this was the life he wanted for himself, the way he wanted to serve the Lord. For him the kingdom of God had always been a very exciting place to work; it was exciting helping his father out in the earlier years, it was exciting going through Bible school and then two years of pastoral internship. It was...well, it was exciting now too, but it was definitely an excitement of an unsavory kind, sort of the same exhilaration the Texans must have felt at the Alamo. Hank was young, just twenty-six, and usually full of fire, but this particular pastorate, his very first, was a difficult place to get the fire spread around - somebody'd wetted down all the kindling. He didn't quite know what to makeof it yet. For some reason he'd been voted in as pastor, which meant somebody in the church wanted his kind of ministry, but then there were all the others, the ones who...made it exciting. They made it exciting whenever he preached on repentance; they made it exciting when he confronted sin in the fellowship; they made it exciting whenever he brought up the cross of Christ and the message of salvation. At this point, it was more Hank's faith and assurance that he was where God wanted him than any other factor that kept him by his guns, standing steadfast while getting shot at. Ah well, Hank, at least enjoy the morning. The Lord put it here just for you.

Not far from the postcard church at the top of Morgan Hill, the screendoor of a humble low-rent one bedroom house opened and moved and Hank Busche, still in his bathrobe, stepped out onto the too small concrete stoop and picked up the Monday morning Clarion. Had he backed into the house again, without turning as he did, he could have spared himself an outrage. Spray-painted across the dull white siding were the black, dripping letters, "NAZIS FOR CHRIST." For Hank it was Hank's reaction was confused, neither angry nor surprised. It was like he half expected such a thing and half never imagined it. All he could do was stand there a moment, first wondering who could have done it, then wondering why, then wondering if it would ever come off. He looked closer, touched it with his finger. It had to have been done during the night; it was quite dry.

"Honey," came Mary's voice from inside, "you're leaving the door open."

"Mmmmm," was all he said, having no better words. He didn't really want her to know.

He went back inside, closing the door firmly, and joined young, beautiful, long-tressed dark-haired Mary over a bowl of ~~corn flakes~~ Wheaties and some INSERT- and hot, buttered toast.

~~"Anything in the paper?" she asked.~~

~~"Haven't looked at it yet," he said, not really wanting to anyway.~~

"What's wrong?" she asked immediately.

Rats! You do what you can to hide it, you try to act normal, but she still picks it up, Hank thought.

"Ummm..." he started to say.

"Still bothered about ~~last night?~~ the board meeting?"

There's your out, Busche. Take it.

"Sure, a little." ~~Well, no, a lot."~~

"How'd you sleep?" ~~You got home awful lat~~

"I don't remember. Guess that means I did all right. No, really, I slept okay. I surprised myself."

INSERT

Now here was the sunny spot in a cloudy sky for Hank. She was a doll and she had real grit too. She was one of those beautiful preacher's daughters who grew up wanting to marry a minister, who absolutely, positively did not go to Bible school just to catch a husband, and who met Hank in Bible school ~~there~~ and married him. Hank often regretted that she ~~now~~ had to go through the struggles they were now having.- after all, she could have married some stable, boring accountant or insurance salesman - but she was really a terrific support for him, always there, always believing God for the best and always believing in Hank too.

"I didn't even hear you come home. Did the meeting last real late?"

"No. They all went home...left me to lick my wounds. I stuck around and prayed for a while. I think it worked. I felt okay after that." He brightened just a bit. "As a matter of fact, I feel just a little bit cocky."

She was tickled to hear that and broke into a smile. He smiled back and dug into his ~~corn flakes~~ Wheaties.

"I still think they picked a funny time to call a board meeting, right during the ~~f~~Festival," she said.

"and on Sunday night" He spoke through his ~~corn~~ flakes. "Aw, they were all upset about Lou, all bent out of shape."

"Well what did you tell them?"

"Just what the Bible says. I went to him, then John and I went to him, and then we brought it before the rest of the church, and then we, well, we ~~kicked him out.~~ removed him from fellowship."

"Well, you ~~kicked~~ asked him ~~out~~ to leave. I don't think the rest of the church has even decided."

"They can't read. Don't the Ten Commandments have something in there about adultery?"

"I know, I know."

Hank set down his spoon so he could gesture better.

"And they were mad at me last night. Started giving me all this stuff about judging not lest I be judged..."

"Who did?"

"Oh, Sam Turner and Alf Brummel, you know, the Old Guard."

"Well just don't let them push you around."

"~~Well~~, They won't change my mind, anyway. ~~which means I might have to get on with Ben fulltime.~~ Don't know what kind of job security that gives me."

Mary didn't say anything, but Hank could feel the spirit of the room sink a few notches. Ben, Hank's older brother, was now into construction and remodelling, doing very well at it, ~~and much relieved to be away from the Ashton Community Chruch once and for all~~ Right now Hank supplemented their tiny income by working parttime with Ben, and Ben was always quick to tell Hank he should drop his entire struggle at the church and come work fulltime. After all, Ben kept telling him, the money's better, the life is better, and no hassles like you're going through now. As far as Ben himself was concerned, he was much relieved to be away from the church once and for all, and it seemed to Hank and Mary that not even the Lord Himself could find much room in Ben's schedule anymore, which was the real tragedy. Before Hank, Ben had been the pastor.

"So then," said Mary, "the two of you can form your own ousted pastors' club."

"The whole thing does seem a lot like an instant replay, doesn't it?"

Now Mary was getting indignant. "Well what on earth is wrong with Alf Brummel? Has he got something against ~~anyone named Busche?~~ the Bible or the truth or what!?"

"Jesus loves him, Mary," Hank cautioned. "It's just that he's as convicted as all get out, he's guilty, he's a sinner, he knows it, and guys like us will always bug guys like him. The last pastor preached the Word and he didn't like it, now I'm preaching the Word and he doesn't like it, and he practically owns the church so I guess he thinks he can dictate what comes across that pulpit."

"Well he can't!"

"Not in my case, anyway. Oh well," he added, picking up ~~the~~ Friday's newspaper, "I guess he doesn't really own the church so much anymore anyway. He says he won't support it as long as I'm the pastor."

"So why doesn't he just go somewhere else?"

Mary didn't say anything, but Hank could feel the spirit of the room sink a few notches. Ben, Hank's brother, was now into construction and remodelling, doing very well at it, and much relieved to be away from the Ashton Community Church once and for all. As far as either one of them knew, not even the Lord Himself could find room in Ben's schedule anymore, which was really tragic. Before Hank, Ben used to be the pastor.

"There's something really wrong about that," said Mary finally.

"Well," Hank muttered, "it does seem to get a little repetitive after a while."

"Well what on earth is wrong with Alf Brummel? Has he got something against anybody named Busche?" Mary was getting feisty now.

"Mary, he's as convicted as all get out, he's guilty, he's a sinner, he knows it, and guys like us bug a guy like that. Ben preached the Word, I preach the Word, and he owns the church, practically, so he thinks he can dictate what comes across that pulpit."

"Well he can't!"

"You better believe he can't! And besides," he added, picking up the newspaper, "he doesn't own the church so much anymore anyway. He says he won't support it as long as I'm the pastor."

"So why doesn't he just go somewhere else?"

Hank pointed his finger dramatically. "That, dear wife, is a good question!"

He perused the front page of the Clarion for a moment, making whatever faces the headlines called for. The paper covered important news and got right down to it; Hank liked that. The whole paper seemed a lot cleaner, hard hitting, succinct. It must be the new editor, Hank thought. Page two covered some of the festival action and there were some choice pictures. The editorial page had some good comments on the preceding week; Hank fully agreed with the editor's conservative, clean-up-our-act position.

"He's right, you know," he told Mary. "Maybe the festival brings in business, but a little self-respect wouldn't hurt the town."

"It's just the picture they keep painting of you... you're just not like that."

"Sure," she replied. "I like the flower show and the Arts and Crafts Fair, and the paintings..." What kind of person do they really think you are, anyway?"

"Hmmm, yes, paintings. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

Hank drew a breath, sighed it out, looked at her. "We had some visitors last night. They...painted a slogan on the front of the house."

"What? Our house?"

"Ever met Hitler?" "Well... yeah."

She got up. "Where?"

He followed her. May as well let her look. How do you break something like this to her gently? She went out the front door, her slippers skiffing on the front walk.

"Oh, NO!"

Hank joined her and they drank the view in together. It was still there, real as ever.

"Now that makes me mad!" she declared, but now she was crying. "What'd we ever do to anybody?"

"I think we were just talking about it," Hank suggested.

Mary didn't catch what he said, but had a theory of her own, the most obvious one, "That carnival! Every year something like this happens!" "Maybe the festival... it always brings out the worst in everyone..."

Hank let it go. He had his own theory, but hers would be good enough for her. It had to be someone in the church, he thought. He'd been called a bigot before, a heel-dragger, an overly moral troublemaker. He'd even been accused of being a homosexual and beating his wife. Some angry church member could have done it, perhaps a friend of Lou Stanley, the adulterer. Perhaps Lou himself. He would probably never know, but that was all right. God knew.

(Must gradually gain a town perspective through the story.)

FINALED

June 13, Monday

High over the town, ~~xxjxxx an airliner~~ a private jet droned through the sky heading east. In first class, a middle-aged, roundly built man ~~spoke dictation~~ talked business with ~~to~~ his secretary, a tall and slender woman with long, black hair and pale complexion. ~~The letter went on, covering~~ He talked crisply and succinctly as she took fluid shorthand, laying out some big scale business deal, but then something occurred to the man.

"That reminds me," he said, and the secretary looked up from her pad. "The good professor claims she sent me a package some time ago, but I don't recall ever receiving it."

"What kind of package?"

"A small book. A personal item. Why not make a note to yourself to check for it back at the office?"

The secretary ~~made a notation in her private portfolio.~~ opened her portfolio and appeared to make a note of it. Actually, ~~since her pen~~ she wrote nothing.

FINALED

June 13, Monday

~~It was Alf Brummel who called Marshall first.~~ Marshall was in his glass-enclosed office at the Clarion mapping out the Thursday edition and just about to try Brummel's office again when Alf Brummel called him first.

It was Marshall's second visit to Courthouse Square in the same day, first to get Bernice bailed out, and now to pay a visit to Alf Brummel, the Chief of Police. Marshall had been in his glass-enclosed office at the Clarion mapping out the Thursday edition and just about to try Brummel's office again when Brummel's secretary called him. first.

It was Marshall's second visit to Courthouse Square in the same day. The first time was to get Bernice bailed out, and now it was to pay a visit to the very man Bernice wanted to string up: Alf Brummel, the Chief of Police. As it turned out, the Clarion finally got to press and Marshall was about to call Brummel, but Brummel's secretary called Marshall first.and made an appointment for two o'clock afternoon ~~ten o'clock that morning~~, which was downright prompt in Marshall's eyes. Maybe this whole fiasco was about to blow over very nicely.

Who's running the paper?

He pulled his Buick into his reserved parking space in front of the new Courthouse complex and paused beside his car for a moment to look up and down the street, surveying the aftermath of the Festival's final ~~death throes~~ Sunday night death throes. Main Street was trying to be the same old Main Street again, but to Marshall's discerning eye the whole town seemed to be walking with a limp, sort of tired, sore, sluggish. The usual little gaggles of half-hurried pedestrians were doing a lot of pausing, looking, headshaking, regretting. For generations Ashton had taken pride in its grassroots warmth and dignity and had strived to be a good place for its children to grow up. But now there were inner turmoils, anxieties, fears, as if some kind of cancer was eating away at the town and invisibly destroying it. On the exterior, there were the store windows now replaced with unsightly plywood, the many parking meters

?

broken off, the litter and broken glass up and down the street. But even as the store owners and businessmen swept up the debris, there seemed to be an unspoken ~~assurance~~ awareness that the inner problems would remain, the troubles would continue. Crime was up, especially among the youth; simple, common trust in one's neighbor was diminishing; never had the town been so full of rumors, scandals, malicious gossip. In the shadow of fear and suspicion, life here was gradually losing its joy and simplicity, AND no one seemed to know why or how.

Marshall returned to business, walking toward the Courthouse.

The courthouse was a new complex of offices, modern, clean, efficient. The Police Department with its three squad cars and some dozen officers had its offices and garage at one end. The courthouse and judge's chambers were at the other end, and in the middle was the office space allotted to the mayor

Enough deep stuff.

Marshall headed into Courthouse Square. tastefully garnished with willows & shrubs,

The ~~Courthouse~~ Square consisted of two buildings, facing a common parking lot. On one side was a low, one-story brick building housing the courthouse and police department; on the other side was a two-story, glass-fronted office building housing the city's decision makers as well as rented office space. Marshall headed for the Police Department.

one of the city's three squad cars was parked outside;

He went through the unimposing, plain doorway marked "Police" and found the small reception area empty. He could hear voices from down the hall and behind some of the closed doors, but Sara the receptionist seemed to be temporarily out of the room.

No, behind the receptionist's formica-topped counter a huge file cabinet was slowly rocking back and forth, and grunts and groans were coming up from below. Marshall leaned over the counter to see a familiar backside. Sara, on her knees dress or no dress, was in the middle of a blue-streak struggle with a jammed file drawer that had entangled itself with her desk. The scene was close to ludicrous; her tiny cubicle was very cramped as it was, but

now she had to share that space with a row of ponderous, long-drawered file cabinets. Apparently the score was File Drawers 3, Sara's Shins 0, and Sara was a poor loser. So were her ~~xxxxxx~~ pantyhose.

She let out an ill-timed curse, letting it roll out just as her eye caught him standing there, and by then it was too late to rebuild her usual poised image. She only laughed and blushed a little, standing up.

"Oh, Hi, Marshall..."

"Wear your Marine boots next time. They're better for kicking things in."

At least they knew each other, and Sara was glad for that. Marshall had been ~~xxxx~~ in this place often enough to ~~xxxx~~ become well acquainted with most of the staff.

"These," she said with the tone of an articulate tourguide, "are the famous file cabinets of Mr. Alf Brummel, Chief of Police. Why I have to have them in my office is beyond me, but upon his express orders, here they must stay!"

"They're too ugly to go in his office."

"Maybe a little decoupage would cheer them up. If they must move in here the least they can do is smile." ~~Then she pointed to one cabinet at the end. "Especially that one! It won't even open without a key, and guess what?"~~

~~"None of them open it."~~

~~"Your tax dollars at work. I just hope he got a good deal on them."~~

"What'd he do, mug a trash compactor?"

Just then the intercom buzzed. She pressed the button and answered.

"Yessir?"

Brummel's voice squawked out of the little box, "Hey, my security alarm is flashing..."

"Sorry, that was me. I was trying to get one of your file drawers shut."

"Yeah, right. Well, try to rearrange things, will you?"

"Marshall Hogan is here to see you."

"Oh, right. Send him in."

She looked up at Marshall and only shook her head pathetically.

"~~Still~~ Got an opening for a secretary?" she muttered. Marshall smiled ~~and nodded~~. She explained, "~~The~~ files ~~sit~~ right next to the silent alarm button. Every time I open a drawer the building's surrounded."

With a good-bye wave, Marshall went to the nearest office door and met himself into Brummel's office. Alf Brummel stood and extended his hand, his face exploding in a wide, ivory smile.

"Hey, there's the man!"

"Hey, Alf."

They shook hands, Brummel ushered Marshall in and closed the door. Brummel was a man somewhere in his thirties, new ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ at his position, a one-time hotshot city cop with a big buck lifestyle ~~xxxxxxxx~~ that belied his policeman's salary. He always came on like a likeable guy, but Marshall never really trusted him. Come to think of it, he didn't like him that much either. Too much teeth for no reason.

"Well," Brummel grinned, "have a seat, have a seat." He was talking again before either man's cushion could compress. "Looks like we made a laughable mistake this weekend."

Marshall recalled the sight of his reporter sharing a cell with prostitutes. "Bernice didn't laugh the whole time I bailed her out, and I'm ~~short now by~~ twenty-five dollars."

"Well," said Brummel, reaching into his top desk drawer, "that's why we're having this meeting, to clear this whole thing up. Here." He produced a check and handed it to Marshall. "This is your refund on that

bail money, and I want you to know that Bernice will be receiving an official, signed apology from myself and this office. But Marshall, please tell me what happened. If I had just been there I could have put a stop to it."

Marshall didn't skip a beat.

"Bernie says you were there."

But Brummel did.

"I was...where? I know I was in and out of the station all night, but..."

"No, she saw you at the carnival."

Brummel ~~seemed to lose track of his thoughts for a second.~~ forced a wider grin "Well...I don't know who it was she saw in actuality, but I wasn't at the carnival last night. I was too busy here. I just wish I really was there. But go on, tell me what happened. I really need to get to the bottom of this."

Marshall, more out of courtesy than any willingness, rattled the story off in neat, almost news copy form, much the way he heard it from Bernice, but cautiously leaving out ~~any implicating details.~~ he mention of he shared with him. As he talked, his eyes studied Brummel, Brummel's office, particular details in decor, layout, agenda. It was reflex, mostly. Over the years he'd developed the ability to observe and gather information without looking like he was doing it. Once a reporter, always a reporter. He could see Brummel's office belonged to a fastidious man, from the highly polished, orderly desk right down to the pencils in the desk caddy, every point honed to perfect sharpness. ~~Reading upside down was a practiced skill also, one he employed as his eyes scanned over Brummel's desk calendar. One name immediately caught his eye: Rev. Oliver Young, Marshall's pastor. Brummel had an appointment with Young tomorrow at two p.m.~~

~~He interrupted his recounting of the Bernice incident long enough to ask, "Oh, gonna pay my pastor a visit tomorrow?"~~

Brummel's reaction was not what one would call conversational. Actually, his mind missed on a few cylinders before he could get out a smooth, amicable answer.

INSERT

~~In the corner,~~ along one wall where the ugly filing cabinets used to stand, now ~~stood a very expensive, looking cabinet, with glass panels, brass~~ stood a very attractive set of cabinets and shelves of oil-rubbed oak, with glass door panels and brass hardware.

"Say, moving up in the world, huh Alf?" Marshall quipped, his eyes looking toward the cabinets.

"Like them?"

"Love them. What are they?"

"A very attractive replacement for those old filing cabinets. It just goes to show what you can do if you save your pennies."

~~"They don't look much like filing cabinets."~~ "You're going to keep your files in there?"

No, we're still using the old filing cabinets outside now. I just wanted "A more personal touch for the office. My own coffeemaker, bookshelves, ~~that sort of thing.~~ SAFE storage, that sort of thing."

"Boy, you even have a phone in there?"

"A phone? Uh, no."

"What's that wire there coming out of the wall?"

"That's for the coffeemaker. But where were we, anyway?"

"Yeah, yeah, what happened to Bernice..." and Marshall continued his story where he left off, just noting in a fleeting second that Brummel seemed a little uncomfortable. ~~The slight discomfort he felt on the part of Brummel whenever Marshall strayed from there were somethings that people didn't want to talk about~~

And then there was Brummel's desk calendar. Marshall was well practiced in reading upside down, and while he continued to talk he scanned the calendar. Tuesday afternoons stuck out a little because ~~they~~ even though they were consistently blank, ~~but not~~ Brummel's day off, tomorrow, a Tuesday, did have one ~~significant~~ appointment written down: Rev. Oliver Young, at ~~exx~~ two p.m.

"Oh," he said conversationally, "gonna pay my pastor a visit tomorrow?"

He could tell right away that he'd overstepped his bounds; Brummel looked amazed and irritated at the same time.

Brummel forced a toothy grin and said, "Oh yes, ~~Oliver~~ Young is your pastor, isn't he?"

"I didn't know you two knew each other."

not really. We have met

"Well, on an occasional, professional basis, I suppose..."

"But don't you go to that other church, that little one?"

"Yes, Ashton Community. But, go on, let's hear the rest of what happened."

"Well..." "Well" "Eh..." he said, with a weak chuckle, breaking somewhat crookedly into his usual smile, "Rev. Young is...your pastor? Well, how about that." "Ya... it's pretty funny."

"I didn't know you two knew each other."

"Well, we don't, really. I don't really know him that well, we don't, actually. But go on, tell me the rest of the story."

"Don't you go to that other church... the little one...?"

Marshall was impressed at how easy this guy was to fluster, but he tried not to press his challenge any further. Not yet, anyway. Instead, he picked up his tale where he left off, brought it to a neat finish, including how outraged Bernice was, and then wondered to himself why Bernice had not been called instead of himself. He also noticed that Brummel had found some important paperwork to look over - papers that covered up the desk calendar.

Marshall asked, "Say, just who was this turkey cop who wouldn't let Bernice identify herself?"

"An outsider, not even on the force here. If Bernice can get us the name or badge number, I can see that he is confronted with his behaviour. You see, we had to bring in some auxilliaries to beef things up for the festival. As for our own men, they all know full well who Bernice Krueger is." Brummel said that last line with a slightly wolfish tone.

"So why isn't she sitting here hearing all this apologizing instead of me?"

Brummel leaned forward and looked serious. "I thought it best to talk to you, Marshall, rather than cause her to parade through this office, already somewhat stigmatized. I suppose you know what that girl's been through. God knows I don't want to put her through anymore."

Okay, thought Marshall, I'll ask. "I'm new in town, Alf."

"She hasn't told you?"

And you'd love to, Marshall just about said, but then settled for

" "And you'd love to?"

It slipped out, and it stung. Brummel sank back just a little in his chair and studidd Marshall's face.

Marshall was surprised at himself, but This guy was so vulnerable he seemed to ask for it. "Sorry...I'm upset in case you hadn't noticed."

~~Brummel relaxed, started a new paragraph. "Marshall...~~

"She hasn't told you?"

"And you'd love to?"

That stung. Brummel sank back just a little in his chair and studied Marshall's face. Marshall was actually a little surprised at himself.

Brummel started a new paragraph. "Marshall...I wanted to see you personally today because I wanted to...One, heal this thing up. It was a mistake, a humiliating one, quite frankly..."

"Hey," said Marshall, holding up his hand, "don't let it bother you, and as for me, I'm miffed, sure, but you're doing fine. It's me, really."

The teeth reappeared. "Guess Ashton isn't much like New York. You'll just have to bear with us..."

"Ashton's got heart, Alf, something New York never had, not for me, anyway. I came here because I wanted to. Sure, things are slow, maybe too la-dee-dah, and maybe a little dumb. Sometimes, yeah, I miss the class of the big town; you know, that confidence you get when your shoes are well tied and your collar's straight. But as far as class goes, this town's redefined the word. I just need to change my thinking." and I'm trying."

Brummel was listening, relaxing.

"Uh," Marshall continued, "in other words, don't worry about Number One. I'll be responsible for my own indignity. That's done. Any further problem is mine and I'll just have to handle it. (He never does call her.) You might give Bernie a call, though. He was hurt in a pretty personal way. "I'll do that, Marshall. Now what was Number Two?"

Brummel felt better and it showed. He leaned forward again with the same serious air as before, his hands folded tightly on the desk and his grey eyes giving Marshall a penetrating, strangely pacifying gaze.

"Number Two," he said with a little lubricating laugh, "is that we...I...want a good relationship between us. We're glad to have you here to take over at the Clarion. We knew your fresh approaches to journalism would be good for the community. I can be straightforward in saying that the last editor was...rather injurious to the mood of this town, especially toward the end. It was, well, just really bad. And, of course, his character reflected his work and vice versa."

sensed something coming.

Marshall was ~~being a willing audience. Despite his best desires he couldn't help hearing something that Brummel wasn't speaking. He couldn't put his finger on it just yet, but he knew it was there.~~ sensed

Brummel continued, and some of his awkwardness began to fade, plowed under what began to sound like a pitch.

"We need your kind of class, Marshall. Some of that class you talked about could be well used in our local media, particularly the ~~newspaper.~~ Clarion. You wield a great deal of power through the press, and we all know it, but it takes the right man to keep that power guided in the right direction, for the common good. We, all of us in the offices of public service, are here to serve the best interests of the community, of the human race when you get right down to it. But so are you, Marshall. You're here for the sake of the people, just like the rest of us." Brummel combed his hair with his fingers a bit, a nervous gesture, then asked, "Well, do you get what I'm saying?"

"No."

"Well," Brummel struggled, groping for a new opener, "I...guess it's like you said, you're new in town. Why don't I...simply try the direct approach?"

Marshall shrugged a "why not?" and let Brummel continue.

"It's a small town, first of all, and that means that one little problem, even a handful of between people, is going to be felt and worried about by almost everyone else. And You can't hide behind anonymity because there simply is no such thing. Now, the last editor didn't realize that and really caused some problems that affected the whole ~~town.~~ population. He was a ~~real~~ pathological soap-boxer. He destroyed the good faith of the people in their local government, their public servants, each other, and ultimately, himself. That hurt. It was a wound in our side, and It's taken time for ~~all~~ of us ~~and our citizens~~ to heal up from ~~all~~ that. I'll cap it off by telling you, for your own information, that had to leave that man finally ~~left~~ this town in disgrace. He'd molested a twelve-year-old girl. I ~~handled the indictment, got it~~ tried to get that case settled as quietly as I could.

But in this town
It was really awkward, difficult. I did what I felt would be the least
cause
amount of trouble and wounding for the girl's family and the town at
people
large. I didn't go through with any legal proceedings against this man
press for
provided he leave town and never show his face around here again. He
Ashton
was agreeable to that. But I'll never forget the impact it made, and I
doubt that the town has ever forgotten it.

"Which brings us to you, And us, the elected servants, and the citizens
public
ALSO
of this community. One of the greatest reasons I regret what happened
this mixup with
to Bernice is that I really desired a good relationship between this office
and the Clarion, between myself and you personally. I'd hate to see anything
ruin that. We need unity around here, comradeship, a good community spirit."
He paused for effect. "Marshall, we'd like to know that you'll be standing
toward
with us in working for that goal."

Then there came the pause and the expectant gaze. Marshall was on.
almost avoiding those gaping grey eyes.
He shifted around a little in his chair, sorting his thoughts, probing
his feelings, He'd come in here just a little spring-loaded, he
had to admit, but now it seemed that Brummel had won him over and he
wasn't sure he wanted to be won over that easily. The last time he'd listened
to a pitch like that his wallet was lifted, and swallowing it now would be
wouldn't feel tense
like taking a Valium - he but he wouldn't feel good.
But...what was this feeling, anyway? In all the rush and crammed
time schedule he never had the time to analyze it. It was just there, sort
of a strange, so-what attitude that could have come from some
it just wasn't like him.
kind of pill - he had never been prone to it on his own. A backlash, maybe,
the kind of laid-back cultural shock that came from switching from a
high-powered city editor job in New York to the editor of a small, laid-back
town.

But Brummel was still waiting for an answer,

"I..." Marshall began, and now he felt as awkward as Brummel in trying
am
to get started. "I guess I'm tired of fighting, Alf. Maybe I was raised

Then there came the pause and the long, expectant gaze. Marshall was on. He shifted around a little in his chair, sorting his thoughts, probing his feelings, almost avoiding those gazing grey eyes. Maybe this guy was on the up and up, or maybe this whole little speech was some diplomatic ploy to shy him away from what Bernice might be sniffing out. Marshall's problem was that his own feelings were so screwed up at the moment. He was mad over Bernice's arrest, but Brummel seemed to be taking care of that; he was concerned over the contradiction between what Bernice said she saw and what Brummel was denying, but perhaps Bernice was mistaken. Add to these his personal concerns over the Clarion and his reputation in this little town. Ashton was supposed to be a change of style for him, a time to quit fighting and scratching the big city intrigues and just get down to the simpler news stories, things like high school paper drives and cats up trees. Taking Brummel on like some kind of inquisitor was probably just force of habit, something he just automatically fell into from his years in the city room of the Times. But a very large part of him wanted to put that stuff aside and relax into a calmer, more sedate roll. Ashton looked good to him when he and Kate decided to make the move. They'd be near Sandy's college, the Clarion needed a new editor, The whole thing was perfect, like falling from the frying pan...into a feather bed. Suddenly he felt tired of fighting, began blaming himself for trying to start a problem where there really didn't need to be one. He suddenly knew for sure that Bernice's film would be just fine and that the pictures would prove Brummel to be right and Bernice wrong. Marshall really wanted it that way.

But Brummel was still waiting for an answer, still giving him that numbing gaze.

"I..." Marshall began, and now he felt as awkward as Brummel in trying to get started. "Listen, I really am tired of fighting, Alf.

Maybe I was raised that way, maybe that's what made me good at my job with the Times, but I did decide to move here, and that's got to say something. I'm tired, Alf, and not any younger. I need to heal up. I need to learn what being human and living in a town with other humans is really like."

"Yes," said Brummel, "that's it. That's exactly it."

"So...in answer to Number Two, don't worry. I'm here after some peace and quiet just like everybody else. I don't want any fights, I don't want any trouble. You've got nothing to fear from me."

Brummel was ecstatic, and shot out his hand to shake on it. As Marshall took the hand and they shook, he almost felt he had sold part of his soul. Did Marshall Hogan really say all that? I must be tired, he thought.

Then he remembered some unfinished business that might now be important to him. Just how reliable was Bernice?

"Uh, yeah, listen, Bernice is a good reporter, she does good work..."

"Sure she does."

"But...let's talk some business, canning any idea of gossip. I just need to know...is there something about her I don't know that I really should, as her employer?"

"Oh," Brummel mused for a moment. "I doubt that anything from her past will ever have a direct bearing on her performance. It doesn't seem to have impeded her thus far..."

Marshall felt like backing out. "Well, that's good enough for me."

"Well, I will tell you. You might find the information helpful in your dealings with her. It was ~~just a few~~ several months before you took over the paper that she herself came to Ashton, and it was just a few weeks before that that her sister who had been attending the college committed suicide. ~~It could be that~~ Bernice came to Ashton with ~~some kind of~~ a fierce vindictiveness, ~~in mind~~, trying to...get to the bottom of the ~~whole thing~~ mystery surrounding her sister's death, but...well,

I guess she found her answers and seems to have been content ever since."

"Well, she does have a reporter's nose."

"Oh, that she does! We knew that the ~~first time~~ day she started with the Clarion. We really were sympathetic, but her sister's death was just one of those things for which there will never be any answer. Perhaps she's resigned herself to that."

"But everybody knows about it..."

Brummel put his hand on Marshall's shoulder. "And wants to forget it."

"Right," Marshall nodded.

And again, he felt as if he had given up part of himself.

After the door closed and Marshall was gone, Alf Brummel sat down at his desk and heaved a depp sigh. For a moment he sat still, staring into space, his fingers nervously drumming the table. Then he pulled the desk phone a little closer, hurriedly dialed a number and waited.

Hank was touching up his paint job om the front of the house when the phone rang and Mary called, "Hank...it's Alf Brummel!"

Wow, thought Hank. And here I am with a loaded paint brush in my hand. Wish he was standing here.

He confessed his sin to the Lord on the way in to answer the phone.

"Hi there," he said.

In his office, Alf Brummel turned his back to the door to make it a private conversation ev en though he was alone, and spoke in a lowered voice.

"Hi, Hank. This is Alf, ~~Brummel.~~ I thought I should call you this morning and see how you were...since last ~~Friday~~ night."

"Oh..." said Hank, feeling like a mouse in a cat's mouth, "I'm okay, I guess. Better, maybe."

"So you've given it some thought?"

"Oh, sure. I've thought a lot about it. I've prayed about it, rechecked the Word about it."

"Hmmm. Sounds like you haven't changed your mind."

"Well...if the Word of God would change then I'd change, but I guess the Lordw won't back down from what He says and you know where that leaves me."

"Well...you know, the coggreagtional meeting is this Friday."

"I know."

"Hank...I'd really like to help you. I don't want to see you destroy yourself. You've been good for the church, I think, but...what can I say? The division, the bickering...it's all about to tear that church apart."

"Who's bickering?"

"Oh, come on..."

"You are. Sam is. Gordon is. I have no doubt that Lou is, and whoever painted on the front of my house is."

"We're just concerned, that's all. You're...you're fighting against what ~~the people really want~~ is best for the church."

"Did you hear me? I said someone painted on the fron t of my house."

"What...painted what?"

"~~Nazis for Christ.~~" Hank let him have it all.

Brummel let out a groan, "Aw, Hank, that's sick!"

"And so is Mary. And so am I. Put yourself in our position."

"~~Hank, if I were in your position~~, I'd reconsider. Can't you see what's happening? Word's getting around ~~the town~~ now, and ~~You're~~ setting the whole ~~community~~ town against you. That also means the whole ~~community~~ town's going to be set against our church before long, and we have to survive in this town, Hank. ~~Hank~~, We're here to help people, to reach out to them, not drive a wedge between ~~everybody~~ ourselves and the community."

"I ~~offer them~~ preach ~~the gospel of~~ Jesus Christ, ~~they reject it, reject me, paint on my house.~~ and plenty appreciate it . . . except you. Just who's driving the wedge around here?"

Brummel was getting impatient. "Hank..learn from ~~your brother.~~ the last pastor. He made the same mistake. Look what happened to him."

"I ~~have~~ did learned from ~~my brother~~ him. I learned that all I have to do is ~~give up~~, bag it, bury the truth in a drawer somewhere where it won't hurt anybody. Then I'll be fine, everybody will like me, we'll be one big happy ~~family~~ again. Yeah, if that's the truth, Jesus was ~~stupid~~. He could have kept a lot of friends by ~~shutting up~~ wilting and playing politics." misguided.

"But you want to be crucified!"

"I want to save souls, I want to convict sinners, I want to help newborn believers grow up in the truth. If I don't do that, I'll have a lot more to fear than you and the rest of the board."

"I don't call that love, Hank."

"I love you all, Alf. That's why I give you your medicine, and that goes especially for Lou. ~~I don't want to see him disfellowshipped; I want to see him back home with Margie and the kids.~~ ~~But I can't put a stamp of approval on him by letting him stay in the church as if what he's doing is okay, normal. I'd be doing him a disservice, not to mention his family.~~"

Brummel pulled a big gun. "Hank, have you considered that he could sue you?" There was a significant pause at the other end.

"No," said Hank.

"He could sue you for damages, slander, defamation of character, mental anguish, who knows what else?"

Hank drew a deep breath and called on the Lord for patience and wisdom.

"You see the problem?" he asked finally. "~~Nobody knows~~ -or wants to know- ~~what~~ what the truth is anymore. We don't stand for something, so we fall for anything, and now guys like Lou get into a fog where they can hurt their families, start their own gossip, ruin their own reputations, make themselves miserable in their sin...~~and blame it on everybody else!~~ Hey, who's the real victim here? Do you even know?"

Brummel only sighed. "We'll talk it all out Friday ~~night~~ night. You will be there?"

"Yes, I will. I'll be counselling somebody and then I'll go in for the meeting. Ever done any counselling?"

"Not your kind."

"It gives you a real respect for the truth when you have to clean up lives based on a lie. Think about it."

"Hank, I have other people's wishes to think about."

~~And then Hank heard the click of the receiver.~~

June 13, Monday

~~As the day~~ Could anyone have seen him, ~~their~~ the initial impression would not have been so much his reptilian, ~~xxxxxx~~ warted appearance ~~xxxpx~~, but rather the way his figure seemed to absorb light and not return it, as if he ~~w~~here more a shadow than a ~~Nxpxixxx~~ object, a strange, animated hole in space. But this little spirit was invisible to the eyes of men, unseen and immaterial, drifting lazily over the town, banking one way and then the other, guided by will ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ and not wind, his swirling, silken wings quivering in a greyish blue as they propelled him.

~~He was like some high-strung little gargoyle, with a blackness xfxxxxxx xxxx that seemed infinitely deep, punctuated by two very large, knoblike xxx yellow eyes~~ He was like some high-strung little gargoyle, his hide a slimy, deep, bottomless black, ^ his body thin and spiderlike in configuration, half humanoid, half animal, totally demon. Two huge, yellow, ~~d~~ cateyes ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ bulged out of his grotesque face, darting to and fro, peering, searching, full of menace as his breath came in short, sulphurous gasps, visible as glowing yellow vapor.

He was about his business, carefully watching and following his charge, the driver of a tan Buick moving through the streets of Ashton far below.

Marshall got out of the Clarion office just a little early today, and gladly enough, he was fully able to do so. After all the morning's confusion it was a surprise to find that routine was finally beginning to settle in. Tuesday's Clarion was now off to the printer and the staff was ~~and the dummy sheets for Thursday's edition were all laid out except for the late news slots,~~ already gearing up for Friday. ~~the ads and some available advertising space.~~ Doing a smalltown paper ~~was a lot easier than the grind and pace of~~ was just about the pace he was glad ~~xxx~~ to finally have. Now perhaps he could get to know his ~~xxxxxx~~ daughter again.

Sandy. Yes sir, a Beautiful redhead, ~~xxxxx~~ he and Kate's only child, a terrific gal with nothing but potential, ~~but~~ a childhood ~~spent with~~ which spent most of her ~~xxxxxxxx~~ an overtime mother and a hardly-there father. Marshall was quite successful in New York, all right, at just about everything except being ~~a good father to~~ the kind of Dad Sandy needed. ~~and Sandy~~

She'd always let him know about it, too, but like Kate said, the two of them were too much alike; her cries for love and attention always came out like stabs, and Marshall gave her attention, all right, like ~~Godzilla gave Tokyo.~~ dogs give to cats.

That was what concerned Marshall now. They'd made this move to a small town just so things could change, so he could quit his demanding job with the Times and repair things in his family. But day by day, even as they settled into their new life and Sandy started college, the haunting realization gradually grew in Kate's heart that perhaps they were too late. Sandy was her own person now, and Marshall could clearly see that she and her parents were heading down completely different roads. He didn't know when she took her own turn away from their best wishes for her, but he did know that he hadn't been there when her choice had to be made. It had taken him long enough to come to grips with that. His problem now was how to call her back, maybe start over, take a fresh look at things; he didn't know how in the world to even start.

No more fights, he kept telling himself, no more picking and scratching and hurting. Let her talk, let her spill how she feels, and don't come down hard on her. Love her for who she is, let her be herself, don't try to corral her...

Marshall started to punish the steering wheel, but really he was punishing himself. It was screwy how his love for her kept coming out like spite, with anger and cutting words. He knew he was only reaching for her, trying to bring her back. It just never worked.

He made a left turn and could see the college ahead.

Marshall got out of the office just a little early today, and gladly enough, he was fully able to do so. The Clarion for Tuesday was ready to go except for late news, and the assistant editor would be on hand to slot it into the two first pages. With some time on his hands, Marshall had another duty to fulfill. He made a call to Kate and told her he would be bringing Sandy home from the college.

Driving through town, he tried to rehearse what he would say, but couldn't come up with anything smooth and convincing. Ice! For crying out loud, ice between a man and his own daughter! Kate was right in her fears and concerns, and Marshall could kick himself for letting it deteriorate to this point. Well, God willing, he'd get something going again between them. He didn't know how, but he would try.

Aw, but who cares? he heard himself think, and immediately gave the steering wheel a pound of anger. What kind of an attitude was that? He gripped the steering wheel more firmly until his knuckles went white, angry at himself. Had he burned himself out in New York? Had he blown a fuse? For the next few miles he struggled with himself, blaming himself, condemning himself, mentally kicking himself. He cared, all right. He had to. He always used to. Besides, this was his daughter, his only kid.

The Whitmore College campus was like most American campuses - beautiful, with stately old buildings that made you feel smart just to look at them, wide, neatly lawned plazas with walkways in carefully laid patterns of brick and stone; landscaping with rocks, greenery, statuary. It was everything a good college should be, right down to the fifteen-minute parking spaces. Marshall parked the car and set out for Stewart Hall, home of the Philosophy Department and Sandy's last class for the day.

Whitmore was a privately-endowed college, founded by some pioneer named Whitmore back in the 1800's. From old photos of the place one could

discover that some of the old red brick and white pillared lecture halls were as old as the college itself. They'd had a few facelifts, of course, but they were still there, monuments of the past and supposedly guardians of the future.

It was now the summer quarter and the campus was relatively quiet. Marshall got directions from a frisbee-throwing sophomore and turned left down an elm-lined street with restricted access to motor vehicles, which meant people could walk in it. At the end of the street he found Stewart Hall, an imposing structure patterned after some European cathedral with towers and archways. He pulled open one of the big oak doors and found himself in a spacious, echoing hallway. The clanking close of the big door made such a reverbrating thunder off the high vaulted ceiling and smooth plaster walls that he'd disturbed every class on the floor.

But now he was lost. This place happened to have three floors and some sixty classrooms, and he had no idea which one was Sandy's. He started walking down the hall, trying to keep his heels from tapping too loud. You couldn't even get away with a burp in this place.

Sandy was a freshman this year. Their move to Ashton had been just a little late, so Sandy was enrolled in summer classes to catch up, but all in all it was at just the right point of transition for her, out of high school and ready for college. She was an undeclared major for now, feeling her way and taking what was prerequisite. Where a class in the Philosophy of Meaning fit into all that, Marshall couldn't guess, but he and Kate weren't out to rush her. She had time, and so did they.

From somewhere down the cavernous hall echoed the indistinguishable but well-ordered words of a lecture in progress, some woman's voice.

Looking at his watch he found that he had a little time to kill anyway, so he decided to check it out. He moved past several frosted-glassed classroom doors, a drinking fountain, the restrooms, a pondersouly ascending stone and iron staircase, and began to make out the words of the lecture as he drew near Room 101.

"...so if we settle for a simple ontological formula, "I think therefore I am," that should certainly be the end of the question. But it doesn't stop there..."

here was more of that

Yeah, college stuff, that funny conglomeration of sixty-four dollar words that can impress people with your academic prowess but can't get you a paying job. Hogan had to smirk to himself a little bit. Philosophy. Where did it ever get anybody? To him, the whole field seemed to boil down to much ado about things we must all live with whether we ~~believe~~ can explain ~~in~~ them or not; existence, for example. That was Sandy's bag right now. Every night she'd come home trying to figure out ~~if she really existed~~ "her place in the cosmos" ~~or not, and why. At least that's the way it sounded to Marshall.~~ and other such very vague questions.

He peeked in the door and saw the very large lecture room, a theater arrangement with rows of seats built in steadily rising levels toward the back of the room and the small platform in front with the professor lecturing against a massive blackboard backdrop.

"Which brings us to the dichotomous question of Closed versus Open system..." the professor continued.

The professor. Whoosh! ~~She was nothing like~~ For some reason Marshall ~~would have~~ had expected an older woman, skinny, hair in a bun, horn-rimmed glasses with their little beady chain looped around her neck. ~~No~~ But this gal was a startling surprise, something right out of a lipstick or pantyhose commercial: long, blond hair, trim figure, deep, dark eyes that twitched a bit but certainly needed no glasses, horn-rimmed or otherwise.

~~Then~~ Marshall ~~his eyes caught~~ the glint of deep red hair, and he looked in that direction to find Sandy sitting toward the front of the hall, listening intently and feverishly scrawling notes. Bingo! Finding her was easy. Now Marshall wondered what to do next, and decided he would slip in quietly and listen to the tail end of the lecture. If for no other reason, it might give him some idea of what Sandy was learning and then they'd have something to talk about. He stepped silently through the door, and ~~found an~~ took one of the empty seats ~~among the many~~ in the back.

Then it happened. The professor had turned her back to her audience and was writing on the blackboard when Marshall went in, and so things went along comfortably enough during that short space of time. It was when she turned to face the class again that some kind of radar in her head must have clicked on. Almost immediately she homed in on Marshall sitting there and simply would not look away from him. He looked back at her, and for a moment there was a strange, awkward staring going on between them as each seemed to wait for the next move from the other. He had no intention of drawing any attention to himself - he was rapidly getting too much of that now anyway, both from the professor and from the class - so he said nothing. But still the professor seemed to examine him, searching his face as if it were familiar to her, as if she were trying to remember someone she was sure she must have known before. The image that crossed her face began to give Marshall a chill: a piercing knifelike gaze, the kind he'd seen before in the eyes of a treed cougar. He began to feel a corresponding defense instinct twisting a knot in his stomach.

The professor had her back to her audience when he came in, but she no sooner turned around to address the class than she saw him sitting there, her eyes homing in on him like radar. He'd seen that expression before in the eyes of a treed cougar. At first there was a look of puzzlement on her face, and then...a piercing, knifelike gaze, the kind he'd seen before in the eyes of a treed cougar. Marshall could feel a corresponding defense instinct twisting a knot in his stomach.

"Is there something you want? Yes?" she demanded, and all Marshall could see were her two piercing eyes burning at him like the light of an oncoming train.

Marshall stiffened his muscles as if expecting a blow, and said, "I'm just waiting for my daughter," and his tone was courteous.

"Would you like to wait outside?" she said, and it wasn't a question.

Now every eye in the room was on him, and he never felt so unwelcome in any place in his life. He even saw Sandy looking at him, her big brown eyes widening with shock and then turning quickly away in embarrassment.

Then, before he knew it, he was out in the hall trying to analyze what had happened by watching an instant reply in his dumbfounded, stymied brain. His head was spinning and he had no recollection of getting up and leaving. All he could do now was... He remembered a long moment of confrontation with mouths saying nothing but eyes saying everything. The look in that woman's face told him that she knew who he was and hated who he was, but he knew they'd never even met. He never felt such hate. Why? An answer to these images definitely felt the old Hogan feistiness rising in him, and was fully intending to stay right there where he felt he had every right to be, except that...something crept into him like novacaine and left him feeling as strong as a dead man. He could not fight this situation, but limply give in to it, and now, perhaps for the first time in his life, he stood on the outside looking in, like a cat put out for the night, feeling put down, embarrassed,

He was out in the hall. He had no understanding of why he was there

The next few moments ~~as~~ were foggy, and events seemed to happen incredibly fast, faster than he could keep up with for some reason. Before he knew it, he was out in the hall, not really understanding why he was there ~~when he knew he really had no intention of being there at all.~~ when he knew full well he didn't want to be, but he was out in the hall. ~~He wanted to be in the lecture hall.~~ ~~But Here he stood,~~ He was leaning against the wall, staring at the linoleum, unable to recall getting up and leaving, ~~going back~~ through the door, or coming to the spot where he now was.

~~He felt so shymed;~~ ~~Right at this moment~~ His mind was spinning, he was disoriented, and it almost scared him. He forced himself to think, to play back the whole thing in his mind. It had all happened too fast; he needed to see it again.

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He remembered ~~that there had been~~ a long moment of confrontation with mouths saying nothing but eyes saying everything. The look in that woman's eyes told him that she knew who he was, even though he knew they had never met - and he had never seen or felt such hate. Right at that moment ~~he'd definitely felt~~ an uncanny, chilling fear without a cause began to creep up inside him. His immediate response was the old Hogan feistyness ~~rising in him~~, and ~~he was ready~~ readiness for whatever hassle might arise, except that...just then something seemed to creep into him like novacaine, leaving him feeling as strong as a dead man. He'd been unable to fight that situation, and he'd limply given in to it. Now, perhaps for the first time in his life, he stood on the outside looking in, like a cat put out for the night, feeling put down, embarrassed,

INSERT

He could remember a long, uncomfortable moment of confrontation with mouths tightlipped and silent but eyes saying everything. That woman's eyes! The way they looked told him ~~that~~ she somehow knew who he was, even though they had never met - and he had never seen or felt such hate. But it wasn't just the eyes; it was also the fear; the steadily rising, face draining, heart pounding fear that had crept into him for no reason, with no visible cause. Without the slightest motion or physical threat, Marshall could not help but feel at that moment he was in for the fight of his life. But at that moment, when he'd so needed the inner strength he knew he always had...it wasn't there. He'd felt the confrontation and the fear, but it was as if someone had shot novacaine into his brain, leaving him as strong and feisty as a dead man. He simply couldn't fight the situation in that room, and so he limply gave in to it. Now, perhaps for the first time in his life, he stood on the outside looking in, like a cat put out for the night, feeling put down, embarrassed,

decimated.

For the first time? For an instant the image of Alf Brummel's gazing grey eyes flashed across his mind. He blinked the image away, took a deep breath. Where was the old Hogan gut strength? For some crazy reason, he found himself entertaining thoughts that he had left at least half of it back in Brummel's office.

He had no conclusions, no theories, no explanations, and only derision for himself, but he did allow himself to mutter, "So...I gave in again, like a rotted tree," and like a rotted tree he leaned against the wall and waited.

In just a few minutes the door to the lecture hall burst open and students began to fan outward like bees from a hive. Marshall felt invisible the way they ignored him, but that was fine with him for now. At the moment he felt weaker than any of them.

Then came Sandy. He straightened up, walked toward her, started to say hello...and she walked right by! She didn't pause, smile, return his greeting, nothing! He stood there dumbly for a moment, watching her walk down the hall toward the exit.

He began to follow her. He wasn't limping, but for some reason he felt like he was. He wasn't really dragging his feet, but they felt like they were lead weights. ~~He began to feel a pain in his heart, a pain he'd never had time for in the past. Was it...breaking?~~

He saw His little girl went out the door without looking back. The ~~clanging~~ clunk of the big door closing echoed through the huge hall with a ponderous, condemning finality, like the crash of a huge gate dividing him forever from the one he loved. He stopped there in the hall, numb, helpless, his big frame looking very small in this place.

Unseen by Marshall, small wisps of sulphurous breath crept along the floor like slow water, and there was an unheard scraping and scratching noise along the floor.

Like a black leech, the demon clung to him, his black, taloned fingers entwining Marshall's legs like parasitic tendrils, holding him back, poisoning his spirits. The yellow eyes bulged out of the blackness surrounding the gnarled face, watched him, bored into him, peered with a whammy-like gaze.

But Marshall was getting hard to contain in his own personal pain, and as he stood there in the big empty hall, something began to arouse itself inside him; something began to fight. He started toward the door, feeling like quitting, like turning back, like calling it quits, but forcing himself to move anyway.

The demon was dragged along the floor behind him, its hands still clinging to him, a deeper rage and fury rising in its eyes and the sulphurous vapors chugging out its nostrils. The wings began to spread in search of anchoring, any way to hold Marshall back, but they found none.

Sandy, Marshall thought, ~~don't let this be it.~~ Give your old man a break. ~~I love you. Just let me say it just once.~~

By the time he reached the end of the hall he was nearly into a run, when his big hands hit the crash bar on the door and the door flung open, slamming into the doorstop on the outside steps. He ran down the stairs and out into the pedestrian walkway shaded by the elms. He looked up the street, across the lawn in front of Stewart Hall, down the other way, but she was gone.

The demon gripped him tighter, began to climb and slither upward, and Marshall felt the first pangs of despair as he stood there alone.

"I'm over here, Daddy."

Immediately the demon lost his grip and fell free, snorting with indignity. Marshall spun around and saw Sandy, standing just beside

the door he had just burst out of, apparently trying to hide herself from her classmates among the camelia bushes, ~~At least she was still there, facing him,~~ and looking very much like she was about to take him to task. Well, anything was better than losing her, Marshall ~~knew he would not let that happen.~~ thought.

"Well," he said before he considered, "pardon me, but I get the distinct impression you disowned me in there."

"Daddy," she began, and she had a very firm lecture prepared, "It's very painful ~~refuse~~ to be party to any of your...bullish bunglings, much less even be identified with them. You caused me a lot of embarrassment in there."

The demon reached out to grab Marshall again, but he slipped out of its grasp and stormed up the steps to face his daughter squarely. They certainly were two peas in a pod. She was small, statuesque, freckled, red-headed but their scowling expressions and fighting stance could have been mirror images, ~~as well as the fiery red hair they both had.~~

"Well, hi there, Sandy," he began, and his sarcasm could have cut through a diamond. "Boy, it sure is good to see you again, and come by to give you a ride home so we could talk about every little old thing. So tell me, what's new?"

She sighed, maybe a little ashamed.

"All right, all right," she said, looking aside rather than right at him, "I admit... I didn't want to be seen with you. I was embarrassed."

"So who stole the "No Parents Allowed" signs?"

"I don't know what's wrong with Professor Langstrat. I've seen visitors to class before and she never asked them to leave. Does she know you or something?"

"I've been told I bear a strong resemblance to Typhoid Mary."

"Daddy...."

"No! I've never seen her before, not before today."

Sandy tried to stand straight, to face him in her hurt and anger, but she still could not look him squarely in the eye.

"It was...it was just too painful."

"What was?"

"~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ You know...that whole thing in there..."

"Well, I like coming on with a real splash, you know. Something people will remember..."

"Daddy!"

"So who stole all the "No Parents Allowed" signs? How was I to know she didn't want me in there? And just what's so all-fired precious and secret that she doesn't want any outsiders to hear it?"

Now Sandy's anger rose ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ above her hurt, and she could look at him squarely. "Nothing! Nothing at all. It was just a lecture."

"So ~~is she always like that?~~ just what is her problem?"

~~"No,"~~ ~~and then~~ Sandy groped for an explanation. "I don't know. I guess ~~"Not enough to hate me."~~ "No way." She must know ~~you're~~ who you are." I've never even seen her before." And then a question automatically popped into Marshall's mind, "What do you mean, she must know ~~me?~~ who I am?"

Sandy immediately looked very cornered. "I mean...oh, ~~I don't know.~~ c'mon. Maybe she knows you're the ~~news~~ editor of the paper. Maybe she doesn't want reporters snooping around."

"Well, I hope I can tell you ~~that~~ I wasn't snooping. I was just looking for you."

Sandy wanted to end the course of their discussion in the worst way. "All right, Daddy, all right. She just read you wrong, okay? I don't know what her problem was. She has the right to choose her audience, I suppose."

"And I don't have the right to know what my daughter is learning?"

Sandy stopped a word halfway up her throat and inferred a few things first. "You were snooping!"

It was strange. Even as it was happening, Marshall knew good and well that they were at it again, the old cats and dogs, fighting roosters routine. It was crazy. Part of him didn't want it to happen, but the rest of him was too frustrated and angry to stop.

As for the demon, he only cowered nearby, shying from Marshall as if he were red hot. The demon watched, waited, fretted.

"In a pig's eye I was snooping!" Marshall roared. "I'm here because your mother wanted me to pick you up after classes. Stewart Hall, that's all I knew. I just happened to find you and..." He tried to brake himself. He deflated a little, covered his eyes with his hand and sighed.

"And you thought you'd keep an eye on me!" Sandy suggested spitefully.

"Got some law against that?"

"Okay. Okay, I'll lay it out for you!

"I'm a human being, Daddy, and every human being, I don't care who he or she is, is inviolable. If Professor Langstrat doesn't want you present at her lecture, it's her prerogative to demand that you leave!"

"And just who's paying her salary, anyway?"

She ignored the question. "And as for me, and what I am learning, and what I am becoming, and where I am going, and what I wish, you have no right to know any of that unless I personally grant you that right!"

Marshall's eyesight was getting blurred by visions of Sandy turned over his knee. He was enraged, and had to lash out at somebody, but now he was trying to steer his attacks away from Sandy. He pointed back toward Stewart Hall and demanded, "Did...did she teach you that?"

"You don't need to know."

"I have a right to know!"

"You waived that right, Daddy, years ago!"

confirmation
good crowd

That punch sent him into the ropes, and he couldn't fully recover before she took off down the street, escaping him, escaping their miserable, bullish battle. He hollered after her, some stupid-sounding question about how she'll get home, but it was all futile. She didn't even slow down.

The demon grabbed its chance and Marshall, and Marshall felt his anger and self-righteousness give way to ~~slumping~~ sinking despair. He'd blown it. The very thing he never wanted to do again, he did. Why in the world was he wired up this way? Why couldn't he just reach her, love her, win her back? She was disappearing from sight even now, becoming smaller and smaller as she hurried away across the campus, and she seemed so very, very far away, farther than any loving arm could ever reach.

~~The pain came from deep inside him, a special kind of hurt that could reach the very core of his being. He tried not to be touched by too many things, not to be vulnerable, but now~~

He'd always tried to be strong, to stand tough through life and through struggles, but right now the hurt was so bad he couldn't keep that strength from crumbling, simply falling away from him in pitiful pieces. As he watched, Sandy disappeared around a distant corner without looking back, and something broke inside him. ~~and the bleeding started.~~ His soul felt like it would melt, and at this moment there was no one person on the face of the earth he hated more than himself.

The strength of his legs seemed to surrender under the load of his sorrow, and he sank to the steps in front of the old building, down, despondent, with no immediate plans to move from that spot.

The demon's talons surrounded his heart and he muttered in a quivering voice, "What's the use...?"

"Yahaaaa!" came a thundering cry from the nearby shrubs. The demon bolted ~~aside in a startled leap and~~ recognized a much feared and familiar glimmer of bluish-white lightx flashing momentarily ~~behind the cover of some bushes.~~ In an instant the demon released its grip on Marshall and bolted like a terrified fly, landing some distance away in a trembling, defensive stance, its huge yellow eyes nearly popping out of its head and a soot black, barbed scimitar ready in its quivering hand. But then there came an unexplainable commotion behind those same bushes, some kind of struggle, and ~~then~~ the source of the light disappeared around the corner of ~~the~~ Stewart Hall.

The demon did not stir, but waited, listened, watched. No sound could be heard except the light breeze. ~~It~~ The demon stalked ever so cautiously back to where Marshall still sat, went past him and peered through the shrubbery and around the corner of the building. Nothing. As if held for this entire time, a long, slow breath of foul, yellow vapor curled in lacy wisps from the demon's nostrils. Yes, it knew what it had seen; there was no mistaking it. But why had they fled?

June 13, Monday

"Yahaaaa!" came a thundering cry from the nearby shrubs, and the demon, terrified, spun around just in time to see a familiar and much feared glimmer of white light, disappear through the bushes and around the corner of the building. The demon immediately released its grip on Marshall, and in an instant took a defensive stance some distance away, its huge yellow eyes nearly popping out of its head. It waited, listened, watched, but nothing more happened. With careful, cautious steps, a soot black barbed scimitar now ready in its hand, it stalked back to where Marshall sat, went past him and peered into the dense tangles and then around the corner of Stewart Hall. There was nothing to see. As this entire time, a long, slow breath of foul yellow vapor curled in lacy wisps out of the demon's nostrils. It knew what it had seen; there was no mistaking it. But why had they fled?

A short distance across campus, but enough distance to be safe, two giant men descended to earth like two flaming white comets, held aloft by rushing, shimmering wings that swirled in a blur and burned like lightning. One of them, a huge, burly, black-bearded bull of a man, was quite angry and indignant, bellowing & making fierce gestures with a huge gleaming sword. The other was a little smaller, and kept looking about with great caution, trying to get his associate to calm down.

FINALED

In a graceful, faery spiral they drifted down behind one of the college dormitories and came to rest in the cover of some overhanging willows. The moment their feet touched down, the light from their clothes and bodies began to fade, the shimmering wings gently subsided, and then, save for their towering stature, they appeard as two ordinary men, one trim and blonde, the other built like a tank, both dressed in what looked like matching tan fatigues. Golden belts had become like dark leather, their swords were not visible at all, and the glowing, bronze biddings on their feet had become simple leather sandals.

The big fellow got the discussion started immediately was ready for a.

"Triskal!" he bellowed growled, but at his friends desperate gestures he spoke just a little softer, "what are you doing here?"

Triskal kept his hands up to keep his friend quiet.

"Shh, Guilo! The Spirit brought me here, just the same as you. I arrived yesterday."

"You know not what that way? A demon of complacency and deppair if ever I saw one! Why did you forbid me to strike?" Had your arm not held me, I could have struck him, and only once!"

"Oh, yes, Guilo, only once," his friend agredd, "but you don't understand. You just got here, but it a good thing I saw you and stopped you in time. but you've just arrived and you don't understnad..."

"And what have I yet to know? Why must you hold back the sword of Guilo?"

Triskal tried to say it in a convincing manner. "We...must not fight, Guilo. Not yet. We must not resist."

Guilo was sure his friend was mistaken somehow. He took firm hold of Triskal's shoulder and looked him right in the xxxx eye.

"Why does Guilo go anywhere but to fight?" he stated. "Here I was called. Here I will fight!"

"Yes," said Triskal, nodding furiously. "Just...not yet, that's all."

"Then Triskal must have orders! You do have orders?"

Triskal paused for effect, then said, "Tal's orders."

Guilo's angry expression at once melted into a mixture of shock and perplexity.

Dusk was settling over Ashton as the little white church on Morgan Hill was washed with the warm, rusty glow of the setting sun. Outside in the small churchyard, the church's young pastor hurriedly mowed the lawn, hoping to be finished before dark. Dogs were barking in the neighborhood,

people were arriving back home from work, kids were being called in for supper.

Unseen by these mortals, Guilo and Triskal came hurriedly up the hill toward the church, on foot, secretive and unglorified byt moving like the wind nevertheless. As they arrived in front of the church, Hank Bushne came around the corner behind the roaring lawn mower, and Guilo had to pause to look him over. Guilo could figure out the answer to the question even before he asked it.

"Is he the one?" he asked Triskal. "Did the call begin with him?"

"Yes," answered Triskal, "months ago. He's praying even now, and often walks the streets of Ashton interceding for it."

"But...this place is so small. Why was Guilo called? No, no, why was such as Tal called?"

Triskal only pulled at his arm. "Hurry inside."

They passed through the walls of the church and through the main floor into the basement. Triskal led Guilo to a Sunday School room labelled "Juniors," and they entered the small enclosure. The room was packed with warriors, and this moment could have been a joyful reunion of old friends except for the exceptionally somber and grim mood. Guilo immediately felt very sober, as if any jesting would most certainly be wasted on this bunch. He looked around the room and recognized many whom he had fought alongside in times far past: Nathan, a towering Arabian who fought fiercely and spoke little. It was he who had taken three demons by their heels and used them as warclubs against their own fellows; Armoth, the big African whose war cry had often been enough to send the enemy fleeing before he even confronted them. The two of them had battled the demon chiefs of villages in Chad and personally guarded a family of missionaries on their many long hikes through the jungles; Chimon,

INSERT: into the humble little sanctuary, inside they found a gathering of in the pews sitting around the small wooden table, standing against the walls, around the platform, filling the room and standing as tall as the ceiling, all dressed much like Guilo and Triskal.

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They passed quickly through the walls of the church and into the humble little sanctuary. Inside they found a contingent of warriors already gathered, some sitting in the pews, others standing around the platform, still others acting as sentries, looking cautiously ~~x~~out the stained glass windows./ They were all dressed much the same as Triskal and Guilo, ~~b~~ut Guilo was immediately impressed by the imposing stature ~~appearance~~ of them all; these were mighty, powerful warriors, and more than he had ever seen gathered in one place. ~~Many of them he recognized~~ And the mood of the gathering also struck him immediately.

There were dozens all mighty, from near and far, It was an awesome gathering, each with his own astounding record of exploits. Guilo didn't know the others, but he could tell they were the meek XXXXXX European with the golden hair, who bore on his forearms these marks of a dying demon's last blows before Chimon banished him forever into the abyss. Guilo had never met this one, but had heard of his exploits and his ability to take blows simply as a shield for others and then to rally himself to defeat untold numbers alone.

any more?

He Guilo went around the room, clasping hands and quietly greeting his old comrades and meeting those he hadn't met before. He had a feeling they would all become very close.

Then "Welcome, Guilo, the Strength of Many!" came the greeting of the oldest ~~and most cherished friend.~~

Yes, it was indeed Tal, the Captain of the Host. It looked so strange, this mighty warrior standing in this humble little ~~room with all the children's crayon posters on the walls.~~ place. Guilo'd seen ~~this warrior~~ him near the throne room of heaven itself, in conference with none other than Michael, but now here he stood, still the same impressive figure with golden hair and ruddy complexion, intense golden eyes like fire and the unchallengeable air of authority, ~~now seemingly hiding down here in this little basement room.~~ Guilo could not imagine that Tal was really

Guilo approached his captain and the two of them clasped hands.

"And we are together again," said Guilo as a thousand memories flooded his mind. No warrior Guilo had ever seen could fight as Tal could; no demon could outmaneuver or outspeed him, and no sword could parry a blow from the sword of Tal. Side by side, Guilo and his captain had vanquished ~~many~~ demonic powers ~~that exist here and did exist~~ for as long as those rebels had existed, and had been companions in the Lord's service before there had been any rebellion at all. "Greetings, my dear Captain!"

Tal said by way of explanation, "It is a serious business that brings us together once again."

"Our kind of business, yes?"

Guilo now searched Tal's face. Yes, there was plenty of confidence there, and no timidity. But there was definitely a strange grimness in the eyes and mouth, and Guilo looked around the room once again, double-checking and comparing all the other faces. Ah yes, now he could feel it, that strange silent prelude to the breaking of grim news. They all knew something he didn't but were waiting for the appointed person, most likely Tal, to speak it.

Guilo couldn't stand the silence, much less the suspense. "Twenty-three," he counted, "of the very best, the very most gallant, the very most undefeatable...gathered now as though under siege, startled, cowering in a flimsy fortress from a dreaded enemy? But surely as the very best have been gathered, the very fiercest of battles must lie ahead." With an air of drama, he drew his huge sword and cradled the blade in his free hand. "Captain Tal, who is this enemy?"

Tal answered slowly and clearly, "Rafar, Prince of Babylon."

All eyes were now on Guilo's face, and his reaction was much like that of every other warrior upon hearing the news: shock, disbelief, an awkward pause to see if anyone would laugh and verify that it was only a mistake. There was no such reprieve from the truth. On the contrary, everyone in the room continued to look at Guilo with the same deadly serious expression, driving the gravity of the situation home - mercilessly.

Guilo looked down at his sword. Was it now shaking in his hands? He made a point to hold it still. But he couldn't help staring for a moment at the blade, still discolored gash from the last time Guilo and Tal had confronted this baal-prince from the ancient times. Guilo and Tal had struggled against him twenty-three days before finally defeating him on the eve of Babylon's fall. Guilo could still remember the darkness, the sticking blood, the fierce, and horrible struggle and grappling while pain and anguish seared every inch of his being like

waves of liquid fire. The evil of this would-be pagan god seemed to envelop him and everything around him like thick smoke and half the time the two warriors had to maneuver and strike blindly, each one not even knowing if the other was still in the fight. To this day neither of them even knew which one finally delivered the blow that sent Rafar plummeting into the abyss. All they remembered was his heaven-shaking scream as he fell through a jagged rift in space, and then seeing each other again when the great darkness that surrounded them cleared like a melting fog. At that moment and for some time afterward, each looked like he had aged twenty years.

"I know you speak the truth," Guilo said at last, "but...would such as Rafar come to this place? He is a prince of nations, not mere hamlets. What is this place? What interest could he possibly have in it?"

Tal only shook his head. "We don't know. But it is Rafar, there's no question, and the stirrings in the enemy's realm indicate something is in the making. The Spirit wants us here. We must confront whatever it is."

Guilo looked around the room. He needed to know: "And who ~~is~~ are 'we'? How many are 'we'?"

Tal answered, "We are twenty-three." as you counted,

Guilo looked arounnd the room again, and as eyes met eyes there was no doubt or vagueness about how they all felt.

"yes..." said Guilo slowly, giving words to every warrior's expression, "here we stand, to ~~face~~ oppose the ~~Prince of Persia, Greece, Italy, nation upon nation upon nation~~ demon prince of nation upon nation, the Prince poisonous catalyst of bloody warfare and tyranny... ...the exalted shaid-god of Babylon... with his innumerable hosts, of course!" Guilo couldn't help but sneer. "We, the mighty... twenty-three!"

Triskal began, "Guilo, that's why I was telling you -"

"We are not to fight, we are not to resist!" Guilo finished the sentence for him, then looked at Tal. "I will be most fascinated to hear your next order, Tal. We cannot fight?"

"You know we can't. We're too few.

"There are to be no skirmishes, confrontations. We are not to show ourselves in any way as aggressors. As long as we cower, stay out of their way, keep close to this place, and pose not threat to them, our presence here will seem normal and harmless enough." like normal watchcare over a few struggling saints.

Guilo now felt a little out of step still holding his sword, and sheathed it with a slight air of disgust.

"And," he prodded, "you do have a plan? We were not all called here to watch the town fall?"

The A lawn mower roared by the basement window, and Tal guided their attention to its operator. "Every day hour of every day he prays," he said, "and his prayers have been heard, and we are here. Perhaps the adversary has a vital interest in this town, but the Lord has a vital interest in His people - in Henry and in Marshall, and in whatever remnant of saints can be found in this town.

"It was Chimon's task to bring him here," he said, "to blind the eyes of his enemies and slip him through ahead of the adversary's choice for the shepherdship of this flock. Chimon succeeded, he was voted in by one vote, and now Henry Busche is here in Ashton, and every hour of every day he prays. He is one of the last.

"We were called here for his sake, ~~for the saints of God and for the Lamb.~~"

~~"For the saints of God and for the Lamb!" they all echoed.~~

Tal looked at ~~Krioni~~ a tall, dark-haired warrior, the one who had taken him through the town the night of the festival, and smiled. "One vote, you say?"

~~Krioni~~ The warrior shrugged. "The Lord wanted him here. ~~to shepherd this flock. The man they wanted took most of the congregation's vote. We had to change some of the ballots.~~ Chinon and I We had to make sure he won against the other man who has no fear of God."

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~~"So how many votes did you have to cast?"~~

~~"Hank would have lost by eight votes. We changed nine."~~ Hey! This is dishonest!

Tal watched Hank finishing up the lawn and praying outloud at the same time. ~~"So now Hank's enemies are wondering who the traitors in the congregation are, and~~ So now, as his enemies in the congregation regroup and try to figure out who the traitors are, he continues to pray for Ashton. He is one of the last."

"If not the last!" lamented Krioni.

"No," cautioned Tal, "he's not alone. There is still a remnant of saints somewhere in this town. There is always a Remnant."

"There is always a Remnant," they all echoed.

INSERT

Tal introduced Guilo to the man. "Guilo, this is Krioni, watchcarer of our prayer warrior here and of the town of Ashton. Our call began with Hank, but Hank's presence here began with Krioni." ~~He asked Krioni, "So how many votes did you have to cast?"~~ Guilo and Krioni nodded greetings to each other.

~~Krioni answered, "Hank would have lost by eight votes. We changed nine."~~

"Our conflict begins here. We'll make this our location for now, hedge it in and work from here." He spoke to a tall oriental in the back of the room, "Signa, take post. Krioni, add to your charge this building, and choose two now to stand with you. This is our rest point. Make it secure. No demon is to approach it."

Krioni immediately found two volunteers to work with him. They vanished to their posts.

"And now, Triskal, I'll hear news of our Mister Hogan."

Triskal spoke up, "I followed him up to my encounter with Guilo. Though Krioni has reported a rather eventless situation up to the time of the festival, ever since then he's been followed by a demon of complacency and despair."

Tal received that news with great interest. "Oh-oh. Looks like he's beginning to stir. They're covering him, trying to hold him in check."

Krioni added, "I never thought I'd see it happen. The Lord wanted him in charge of the Clarion, and we took care of that too, but never have I seen a more..."tired" individual."

"Tired, yes, but waking up, just as the Lord foreknew."

"Though he could awaken to his own destruction," said Triskal. "They must be watching him. They fear what he might do."

"Well," replied Tal, "we must try to keep it quelled to something on the level of bear baiting. It's going to be a very critical business. I need a better grip on everything.

Now Tal seemed ready to move. He addressed the whole group. "I expect Rafar to take power here by nightfall. No doubt we'll all feel it when he does. He will immediately search out the greatest threat to him and try to remove it."

"Henry Busche," said Guilo.

"Krioni and Triskal, he rarely makes direct visitations himself, but you can be sure he'll send a personally chosen envoy after Hank, probably

Krioni added, "I never thought I'd see it happen. The Lord wanted him in charge of the Clarion, and we took care of that too, but never have I seen a more/..."tired' individual."

"Tired, yes, but that will only make him ~~that much~~ more usable ~~when he is~~ in the Lord's hands. And...I perceive that he is indeed waking up, just as the Lord foreknew."

"Though he could awaken only to be destroyed," said Triskal. "They must be watching him. They fear what he could do in his influential position."

"True," replied Tal. "So while they ~~might~~ may bait our bear, we must be sure ~~that~~ they stir him up and no more than that. It's going to be a very critical business."

Now Tal was ready to move. He addressed the whole group. "I expect Rafar to take power here by nightfall. No doubt we'll all feel it when he does, so be ready. And be sure of this: he means to succeed, and will immediately search out the greatest threat to him and try to remove it."

"Ah, Henry Bushhe," said Guilo.

"Krioni and Triskal, ~~I'm certain he won't make any visitation himself, but you~~ can be sure that a troop of some kind will be sent to test Hank's spirit. Select for yourselves four warriors and watch over him." Tal became grim as he said, "Krioni, up until now you have done very well in protecting Hank from any direct onslaughts. You are commended."

"Thank you, Captain."

"I ask you now to do a difficult thing. Tonight you must stand by and keep watch. Do not let Hank's life be touched. But aside from that... prevent nothing."

There was a slight moment of surprise and wonderment, but each warrior was ready to trust Tal's judgment.

Tal continued, "As for Marshall Hogan...he's the only one I'm not

sure about yet. Rafar will give his lackeys incredible license with Hogan, and Hogan could go either way, either collapse and retreat, or - as we all hope - rouse himself and fight back. He'll be of special interest to Rafar -and to me - tonight. Guilo, select two warriors for your charge and two for mine. We'll watchcare over Marshall ~~King~~ tonight and see how he responds."

The selections were made quickly as every warrior seemed to know his place before even being told. Chimon and three others went with Krioni and Triskal; Nathan and Armoth joined Guilo along with two others to accompany Tal.

Eight were left.

"Search out the Remnant," Tal told them.

Then Tal drew his sword and held it high. The others did the same and a forest of shining blades appeared, held aloft in strong, sinewy arms.

"Rafar," Tal said in a low, musing voice, "we meet again." Then, in the voice of a Captain of the Host: "For the saints of God and for the Lamb!"

"For the saints of God and for the Lamb!" they echoed.

June 13, Monday pm

Complacency unfurled his wings and drifted sulkingly into Stewart Hall, sinking down through the main floor and into the catacombs of the basement level, the area set aside for administration and the private offices of the professors and teacher-assistants of the Philosophy Department. It was a dismal nether world down here; the ceiling was low and oppressive and crawling with water pipes and heat ducts that seemed ~~to coil and writhe~~ like so many huge snakes waiting to drop on someone. Everything - the walls, ceiling, pipes, woodwork - was painted the same, dirty-looking beige, and light was scarce, which suited Complacency just fine, as well as his associates. ~~Darkness was actually preferred,~~ like actually preferred the darkness and Complacency noticed that there seemed to be a touch more of it than usual. The others must have arrived.

He floated down a long, burrow of a hallway to a large, solid-looking door at the end marked "Conference Room," and passed through the door into a cauldron of living evil. The room was dark, but the darkness was more of a presence than a physical condition; it was a force, an atmosphere that drifted and crept about the room like something alive. Out of that darkness glared many pairs of dull yellow cateyes that belonged to a horrible ~~array~~ gallery of grotesque faces. As Complacency looked about the room, the various shapes of his fellow workers could be seen, outlined and backlit by a sourceless red glow. Yellow, sulphurous vapor ~~filled~~ slithered in and lazy wisps about the room and filled the air with its stench.

How about some action, some talking?

intro ones used specifically later

Hate was there, a powerful monster with a black, hulking frame and arms that could crush the love out of anyone. In the corner stood Lust, a disgusting embodiment of selfishness and unharnessed desire, his talons long and sharp, his deepset eyes darting and shifty. Nearby stood the quiet, studious one, Deception. He was a strange one; his appearance was actually quite placid, ~~and not too horrible at all,~~ even close to human and though he carried a weapon he seldom used it. His greatest victories came simply through compelling, persuasive argument.

as the many apparitions carried on their hushed, hissing, gargling conversations there in the dark.

Complacency hould sense their common disdain for him, but the feeling was mutual enough. These belligerent egotists would walk on anyone to exalt themselves, and Complacency just happened to be the smallest, hence the easiest to select out for persecution.

He approached two hulking forms in the middle of some debate, and from their massive, spine-covered arms and poisonous words he could tell they were demons who specialized in hate - in planting it, aggravating it, spreading it, USING their crushing arms and venomous quills to contract and poison the love out of anyone.

Complacency asked them, "Where is the Princey Lucius?"

"Find him yourself, lizard!" one of them growled, shoving Complacency aside.

A demon of lust, a slithery creature with darting and shifty eyes and slippery hide overheard this short scuffle and joined in, snatching Complacency into the air with his long, sharp talons.

"And where have you been sleeping today?" it asked with a sneer.

"I do not sleep!" Complacency retorted. "I cause people to sleep!"

"To lust and steal innocence is far better!"

"But someone must turn away the eyes of others!"

Lust thought that over and gave a smirk of approval. He dropped Complacency rudely as those who watched laughed.

Complacency passed Deception, but didn't bother to ask him anything. Deception was the proudest, haughtiest demon of them all, very arrogant in his supposedly superior knowledge of how to control men's minds. His appearance was not even as gruesome as the other demons; he almost looked human, and ~~normally~~ acted very snobbish and studious. His weapon, he ~~always~~ boasted, was always a compelling, persuasive argument.

Many others were there: Murder, his talons still dripping with blood; Lawlessness, his knuckles honed into spikelike protrusions and his hide think and leathery; Jealousy, as suspicious and difficult a demon to work with as any.

But Complacency finally found Lucius ~~himself~~, the Prince of Ashton, the demon who held the highest position of all of them, ~~laying more plans for the town with some of his top aides in the furthering of despair, destruction and chaos.~~ Lucius was in conference with a tight huddle of other power holders, going over the next strategies for controlling the town.

There was no question that he was the demon in charge...

Murder was there too, a towering, fanged apparition with blood dripping from his talons.

Lawlessness and Strife were over ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ by the large conference table, laying more plans with the Prince of Ashton, Lucius. Lawlessness was a slimy sort who not only did his job, he lived his job, doing what he pleased despite any orders to the contrayy. Strife was more deliberate and cunning, a real craftsman who knew how to irritate and establish grudges between people.

Lucius was a wirey, hyper sort, a smaller sized demon although he held great authority. He carried power and knew how to use it; it was by defeating all other takers that he achieved his post

As for Lucius, he was definitely the demon in charge and he made sure everybody knew it. He

As for Lucius, there could be no question that he was the demon in charge. He was huge to begin with, but ~~xxxx~~ always maintained an imposing posture with his wings wrapped loosely about him, his arms flexed, his fists clenched and ready for ~~xxxxxx~~ blows. ~~He was not respected, but greatly feared, and had shied away from no battle or duel to stay right where he was.~~ There were many demons who coveted his rank and ~~xxxxx~~ he knew it; he had fought and banished ~~xxxxxx~~ many of them to get where he was, and now he had every intention of staying there. He trusted no one, suspected everyone, and his black, gnarled face and hawk-sharp eyes always carried the message that even his associates were his enemies.

~~Complacency~~ He had words for Lucius ~~xxx~~ and shoved his way over to the table. Lucius saw him and spoke first. He always tried to speak first.

"Why aren't you with Hogan?" he growled.

"Why do you bother his daughter?" Complacency hissed.

"Dare you to question me?" ~~Lucius~~ he roared, arching his whole body like a thundercloud over the much smaller Complacency.

well hope to see how the story unfolds + get back to this.

But C was upset enough to challenge the prince.

The yellow eyes narrowed and deep furrows formed in Lucius' brow.

We need to enrich this scene

Complacency was desperate and enraged, enough to violate Lucius' ideas of respect and decorum. He shoved his way through the group and right up to Lucius, who glared at him, surprised by the rude interruption.

"My Prince," Complacency pleaded, "I must have a word with you."

Lucius' eyes narrowed. Who was this little lizard to interrupt him in the middle of a conference, to violate decorum in front of these others?

"Why aren't you with Hogan?" he growled.

"I must speak with you!"

"Dare you to speak to me without my first speaking to you?"

"It is vitally important! You're...you're making a mistake! You're bothering Hogan's daughter, and - "

Lucius immediately became like a small volcano, erupting and spewing forth horrible cursings and wrath. "You accuse your prince of a mistake? You dare to question my actions?"

Complacency began to ~~xxxxx~~ cower, expecting a stinging blow any moment, but he spoke anyway.

"Hogan will do us no harm if you let him alone! But you have only lit a fire within him, and he casts me off!"

a walloping swat from the back of Lucius' hand

The blow came, ~~as expected~~, and as Complacency tumbled across the room he debated whether or not to speak another word. When he came to rest and regathered himself, he looked up to see every eye upon him, and he could feel their mocking disdain.

Lucius walked slowly toward him, and from Complacency's point of view ~~xxxxxxx~~ on the floor ~~he could have been a mountain.~~ Lucius towered over him like a giant tree.

Lucius was incensed. "Hogan...casts you off? Is it not you who releases him?"

"Do not strike me! Only hear my appeal!"

Lucius' big fists ~~dug deep into Complacency's~~ clenched painfully around handfuls of Complacency's flesh and ~~held~~ him aloft. ~~Lucius held him~~ so they were eye to eye. "He could stand in our way, and I won't have that! You know your duty. Perform it!"

"Well I was, well I was!" Complacency dried. "He was nothing to fear at all, a slug, a lump of clay! I could have held him there forever!"

"So do it!"

"Prince Lucius, please hear me! Give him no enemy! Let him have no need to fight."

Lucius dropped him and he hit the floor ~~shamefully~~ in a humiliated heap. ~~Then~~ The prince strode away, addressing the others in the room.

"We have given Mr. Hogan an enemy?"

They all knew how to answer. "No indeed!"

"Deception," Lucius called, and Deception stepped forward, giving Lucius a formal bow. "Complacency accuses his prince of bothering Mr. Hogan's daughter. You would know about that."

"You have ordered no attack on Sandy Hogan, prince," Deception answered.

Complacency pointed his taloned finger and screamed, "You have followed her! You and your lackeys! You have spoken words to her mind, confused her!"

Deception only raised his eyebrows in mild indignation and answered sedately, "Only upon her own invitation. We have only told her what she prefers to know. That can hardly be called an attack."

Lucius seemed to take on some of Deception's maddening haughtiness as he said, "Sandy Hogan is one case, but certainly her father is quite another. She poses no threat to us. He does. Shall we send someone else to hold him in check?"

Complacency had no answer, but added another note of concern. "I... I saw messengers of the living God today!"

That only brought laughter from the group.

Lucius sneered, "Are you becoming that timid, Complacency? We see messengers of the living God every day."

"But they were close! About to attack! They knew my actions, I am sure!"

"You look all right to me. Though if I were one of them, I would surely pick you out as an easy prey." More laughter from the group, which spurred Lucius ~~responded~~ on to ~~that with~~ more chiding. "A limp and easy target for mere sport...a lame demon with which a weak angel can prove his strength!"

Complacency only cowered in shame. Lucius strode about, addressing the group.

"Do we fear the hosts of heaven?" he asked.

"As you do not, we do not!" they answered with great polish.

Insert before INSERT →

"You see, Complacency, you can be sure that we have things very well in control here. No worker from our number has ever had to sneak about for fear of attack. We roam this town freely, doing our work unhampered,

You listless living little bugger!

and we will

~~I mean to~~ succeed in every place until the town is fully ours. ~~There is glory in that, not fear."~~ To fear is to fail!

INSERT

But Lucius had hardly gotten the word "~~fear~~ fail" out of his mouth before ~~the entire ceiling of the room seemed to slam down like some giant, black vise,~~ a violent, ~~black~~ boiling cloud of evil and darkness ~~and~~ darkness poured into the room like a tidal wave, powerful enough to sweep all the room's occupants across the floor and ~~pin them~~ throw them in a heap against one wall - all except for Lucius. As the demons recovered from the initial shock wave of this new ~~blackness~~ presence, they looked up and saw ~~him~~ contorted like a broken toy, his body ~~slung over~~ in the grip of a huge black hand, ~~something~~ the table ~~and his face pressed into the table's surface by what looked like a huge black hand.~~ He struggled, choked, gagged, cried for mercy, but the hand ~~remained there,~~ only tightened its crushing grip inflicting punishment without mercy, descending down out of the darkness like a cyclone dropping from a ~~black, boiling~~ thunder cloud. Then ~~the hand jerked him up from the table and~~ the full figure of a spirit appeared, carrying Lucius by the throat and shaking him about like a rag doll ~~and slamming him against the wall~~. The thing was bigger than any they had ever seen before, a giant demon with a lion-like face, fiery eyes, incredibly muscular body, and billowing, leathery wings that filled the room.

Then the thing spoke, and the voice gargled up from deep within the demon's torso and sprayed out in clouds of fiery red vapor.

"You...who have no fear...~~will learn to fear!~~ begin to fear! Are you now afraid?"

The demon angrily hurled And with that word of correction, Lucius ~~immediately found himself thrown~~ across the room to join the others.

Now they could all see the demon, standing like a mountain in the center of the room, a deadly, S-curved sword the size of the door drawn in his massive, ~~ring bedecked~~ hand. He was an awesome sight, his bared fangs glistening like the jewelled chains he wore around his neck and across his chest. Obviously this was a prince of princes who had been

INSERT Then it happened, and all very suddenly, faster than any of them could respond with anything other than filling the room with ~~xxxxx~~ air piercing shrieks of terror. Lucius had hardly gottne the word "fail" out of his mough before a violent, boiling cloud of evil and darkness crashed and thundered into the room like a tidal wave, a sudden avalanche of force that crushed like ~~pulverized~~ iron and struck like a hurricane. The demons were overpowered, swept across the room like so much debris in a raging tide, tumbling, screaming, wrapping their wings tightly ~~around them in terror~~ all except for Lucius.

Insert before INSERT

As the demons remained in their basement lair, ~~continued~~ patting each other ~~on the~~ back and stabbing Complaceney's, they took no notice of the strange, not-so-natural cold front outside that moved slowly over the town, bringing a cold, harsh wind and chilling rain. Where once the evening promised to be bright and clear, ~~and many had made plans for enjoying~~ it now grew dark under a low aggressive cloud ~~dark~~ shroud, half ~~xxxxxx~~ natural, half...spirit.

Atop the little white church, Signa and his two companions continued to stand guard and watched as the darkness ~~xxxx crept over the town~~ descended over Dalton, deeper & older with each moment. All over the nearby neighborhood, ~~xxxx~~ dogs began to bark and howl. Here and there a quarrel broke out.

"He's here," Signa said.

In the meantime, Lucius' preoccupation with his own glory drew a ludicrous contrast to the fear and caution the rest of the demons were beginning to sense. They could all feel that something was up but couldn't get a word in edgewise.

Lucius gave Complacency a taunting kick in the sides as he walked by him and continued his boasting.

greatly honored for victories and past glories. His jet black hair hung down to his shoulders, and on each wrist he wore a gold bracelet studded with sparkling stones; his fingers wore several rings, and a ~~golden~~ ruby-red belt and scabbard adorned his waist. The expansive black wings finished thepicture, draping down behind him now like the robe of a monarch.

For an eternity he stood there, glaring at them with sinister, smoldering eyes, studying them, and all they could do was remain motionless in their terror like a macabre tableau of frightened goblins.

The big voice echoed off the walls, "Lucius, I feel I was not expected."

Lucius could feel them all staring at him, but he couldn't come up with any answer.

"You will announce me," the demon said. "On your feet!"

The sword moved across the room in a fraction of time and the tip snagged Lucius in the hide of his neck, jolting him to his feet.

Lucius knew he was being belittled in the sight of the underlings ~~everybody~~, but he made every effort to hide his rising bitterness and anger. His fear showed well enough, and that covered adequately his other feelings.

"Fellow workers..." he said, his voice quivering despite his every effort to be firm and strong, "~~Lord~~ Ba-al Rafar, the Prince of Babylone"

Automatically they all leaped to their feet ~~anticipating Rafar's method of motivation of Lucius.~~ partly out of fearful respect, mostly out of fear of the tip of Rafar's sword, still waving slowly back and forth, ready to move against any dawdlers.

Rafar gave them all a quick looking over without saying a word. Then he inflicted another personal blow against Lucius.

"Lucius, you will stand with the others. I have come, and only one prince is needed."

Friction. Everyone could feel it immediately. Lucius refused to move. His body was stiff, his fists clenched as tightly as ever, and though he was visibly trembling, he purposely returned the glaring look of Rafar and stood his ground.

"You...have not asked me to yield my place!" he challenged.

The others were not about to intervene or even get close. They backed off, remembering that Rafar's sword could probably sweep a very wide radius.

The sword did move, but so quickly that the very first thing anyone perceived was a scream of pain from Lucius as he ~~Lucius screamed and coiled~~ into a twisted knot on the floor, struck down like a gutted animal. Lucius' sword + scabbard now lay on the floor, skillfully cut away from him by one swift slash from Rafar. Again the sword moved, and this time the flat of the blade clamped Lucius to the floor by his hair. Lucius cried out in stark terror, COVERING his head with his arms.

Rafar leaned over him, blood red breath spewing from his mouth and nostrils as he spoke.

"I perceive you wish me to challenge you for your position." Lucius said nothing. "ANSWERR!"

"No!" Lucius cried. "I yield!"

"Up! Get up!"

Lucius struggled to his feet and Rafar's strong arm stood him with the others. By now Lucius was a most pitiful sight, totally humiliated. Rafar reached down with his sword and with the barbed tip picked up Lucius' sword and scabbard. Rafar's sword swung like a huge crane and deposited Lucius' weapons in the deposed demon's hands.

"Listen well, all of you," Rafar addressed them. "Lucius, who fears not the hosts of heaven, has shown fear. He is a liar and a worm and is not to be heeded. I say to you, fear the hosts of heaven. They are your enemies and they are intent on defeating you. As they are ignored, as they are given place, so they shall overcome you."

Rafar walked with heavy, ponderous steps up and down the line of demons, giving them all a closer look. When he came to Complacency, he drew closer in and Complacency just about fell backwards, but Rafar caught him around the back of the neck with one finger and pulled him up straight.

"Tell me, little lizard, what did you see today?"

Complacency was suffering from a sudden memory lapse. Rafar prodded him, "Messengers of the living God, you said?" Complacency nodded. "Where?"

"Just outside this building..."

"What were they doing?"

"I...I..."

"Did they attack you?"

"No."

"Was there a flash of light?"

That seemed to register with Complacency. He nodded.

"When a messenger of God attacks, there is always light." Rafar addressed all of them angrily, "And you let it slip by! You laughed! You mocked! A near attack from the enemy and you ignored it!"

Now Rafar returned to grill Lucius some more.

"Tell me, deposed prince, how stands the town of Ashton? Is it ready?"

Lucius was quick to say "Yes, Lord Rafar!"

"Oh, then you have taken care of this...this praying Busche and this sleeping troublemaker Hogan!"

Lucius was silent.

"You have not! First you allow them to come into places we reserved for our own special appointments - "

"It was a mistake, Lord Rafar!" Lucius blurted. "The Clarion editor was eliminated according to our orders, but...no one knows where this Hogan came from. He bought the paper before anything could be done."

"And Busche? It was my understanding that he fled from ~~xxx~~ your attacks."

man of God. The first one.

"That...that was another ~~Busche~~. ~~Benjamin~~. He did flee."

"And?"

This man

"His younger ~~brother~~ sprung up in his place. From nowhere."

A long, foul sigh hissed out through ~~Rafxx~~ Rafar's fangs.

"The host of heaven," he said. "While you have taken them for granted, they have moved in the Lord's chosen right under your nowes! It is no secret that Henry Busche is a man who prays. Do you fear that?"

Lucius nodded. "Yes, of course, more than anything. We have been attacking him, trying to drive him out."

"And bw has he responded?"

"He...he..."

"Speak up!"

"He prays."

Yes, yes, He is a

Rafar shook his head. ~~"Direct attacks, no doubt. They won't work on such a~~ man of God. And what about Hogan? What have you done about him?"

"We...we have attacked his daughter!"

Complacency's ears perked up at that.

Rafar was curious about Lucius' answer. "~~Why~~ His daughter?"

But Complacency couldn't contain himself. "I told them it wouldn't work! It would only make Hogan more aggressive and wake him from his lethargy!"

Lucius grabbed for Rafar's attention. "If my lord would be so kind to let me explain!"

"Explain," Rafar instructed Lucius while warily eyeing Complanency.

Lucius quickly formulated a plan in his mind. "~~As you said,~~ Sometimes a direct attack is not wide, so...we found a weakness in his daughter and felt we could divert his energies toward her, perhaps destroy him at

home and distintegrate his family. It seemed to work on the ~~former~~ former editor. It was at least a start."

"It will fail!" cried Complacency. "He was harmless until they tampered with his sense of wellbeing and comfort. Now I fear I won't be able to hold him back~~."~~ He is —"

A quick, threatening gesture from Rafar's outstretched hand stifled Complacency's wailings in an instant.

"I do not want Hogan held back," Rafar said. "I want him destroyed. Yes, take his daughter. Take anything else that can be corrupted. A risk is best removed, not tolerated."

"But...!" cried Complacency, but Rafar quickly took hold of him and spoke with noxious fumings right into his face.

"Discourage him. Surely you can do that."

"Well...."

But Rafar was in no mood to wait for an answer. With a powerful spin of his wrist he hurled Complacency out of the room and back to work.

"We will destroy him, assault him on every side until he has no solid ground left from which to fight. As for this new man of God who ~~Busche~~ that has sprung up... I'm sure an adequate trap can be laid. But concerning our enemies: How strong are they?"

"Not strong at all," answered Lucius, trying to recover his competency rating.

"But cunning enough to make you think they are weak. A fatal mistake, Lucius." He addressed all of them. "You are to no longer take the enemy for granted. Watch him. Count his numbers. Know his whereabouts, his skill, his name. No mission was ever undertaken that was not challenged by the hosts of heaven, and this mission is nothing small. Our Lord has very important plans for this town, he has sent me to fulfill them, and that is enough to draw the very hordes of the enemy down upon our heads. Be fearful of that, and give place to no enemy!

And as for these two thorns in our ~~paw~~ hoof, these two implanted barriers...

~~I'll have a look at them~~ tonight ~~and just see~~ we will see what they are made of."

FINALED

June 13, Monday night

~~It was a gloomy night right out of an old Boris Karloff movie~~

It was a dark, ~~rainy~~ night, and the ~~xxxx~~ raindrops pelting against the old, single-pane windows in their bedroom made sleep for Hank and Mary just ~~xx~~ a little difficult. Mary dropped off eventually, but Hank, ~~knowing he would have to get up extra early the next morning to meet Ben on the job,~~ already troubled in his spirit, found it that much ~~xxxx~~ harder to relax and ~~xxxxxxxx~~ fall asleep. ~~It had been a lousy day;~~ anyway ~~his ears were still ringing~~ with the conversations he had had with Alf Brummel ~~and the rest of the board~~. and his mind was still playing over and over the bitter comments from the board meeting. And then there would be a full day with Ben tomorrow from whom he would ~~no doubt hear a further helping of the same, aggravating give-it-up dogma.~~ It had been a lousy day anyway; all through the day he'd worked on painting that slogan off the front of the house and had tried to figure out who in the world would write such a thing against him; his ears were still ringing with the conversation he had had with Alf Brummel and his mind was still playing over and over the bitter comments from the board meeting. Now he could add to that ~~the full day tomorrow with Ben, from whom he would no doubt hear a further helping xx of the same, aggravating give-it-up dogma.~~ his apprehensions about the congregational meeting on Friday, and he prayed to the Lord in desperate, hushed whispers as he lay here in the dark.

Funny how every lump in the mattress seems to stick up that much further when you're upset. Hank began to worry that he would be keeping Mary awake with all his tossing and turning. He ~~xxxx~~ lay on his back, his side, his other side, put his arms under his pillow, over his pillow, he grabbed a Kleenex and blew his nose. He looked over at the clock: Twelve ~~xxxx~~ twenty. They'd turned in right around ten.

But sleep finally does come, ~~unannounced. Hank dropped off to sleep~~ usually in such an unannounced way that you don't even know ~~at last~~ you're out until you wake up. Sometime that night Hank ~~xxx~~ finally dozed off and did all right for ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ a few hours.

~~And~~ But then his dreams began to go sour. They were the usual silly thing at first, things like driving a car through his living room and then flying in the car as it turned into an airplane and on and on. But

then ~~things started~~ the images began to rush just through his head, growing frantic and chaotic. In his ~~dark~~ dreams he started running from dangers, he could hear screams, there was often the sensation of falling and the sight and taste of blood. Images went from bright and colorful to monochromatic and dismal to dark and foreboding. He was constantly fighting, struggling for his life, ~~and~~ innumerable dangers and enemies were all around him, closing in on him as he faced one after another and fought it off. None of it made any sense, it all ran together, but one thing was very clear and definite throughout: ,stark terror. He wanted desperately to scream but didn't have time between fighting off enemies, monsters, unseen forces.

Two ~~One~~ thirty. His pounding pulse began to rush in his ears. The whole world seemed to reel and throb.

The horrible conflict pounding and thundering in his head finally began to push its way to the surface of the conscious, everyday Hank. He stirred in the bed, rolled over on his back, drew a deep waking up breath. His eyes half opened, not focused on anything. He was in that strange state of stupor halfway between sleep and consciousness.

Did he really see it? It was like some eerie projection in midair, ~~like~~ a glowing painting on black velvet. Right above the bed, so close he could smell the sulphurous breath, a hideous mask of a face hovered over him, contarting in grotesque, spastic~~like~~ movements as it spit out vicious ~~formed~~ words he couldn't ~~make out~~ understand. ~~It seemed to be cursing him, spitting insults and murderous blasphemies~~ Course.

Hank's eyes opened like a trap being released. He thought he could still see the face, just fading away, but ~~now he was sure someone had delivered~~ instantly he felt like he'd been struck by a very heavy blow to his chest; his heart began to race and pound and felt like it would burst through his ribs. He could feel his pajamas and the bedsheets sticking to him, drenched in sweat.....

then ~~his dreams started to quicken in pace~~ things started to rush through his head, growing frantic and chaotic. In his dreams He started running from dangers, he could hear screams, there was often a sensation of falling and the sight and taste of blood. Images went from bright and colorful to monochromatic and dismal to dark and forbboding, ~~and so did the mood.~~ ~~The Hank in the dreams~~ He was constantly fighting, struggling for his life, and innumerable daggers and enemies were all around him, closing in on him as he faced one after another and fought it off. None of it made any sense, but one thing was there throughout: Terror. ~~The Dream Hank~~ He wanted desperately to scream but didn't have time between fighting off enemies, monsters, unseen forces.

The horrific conflict pounding in his head finally began to push its way to the surface of the conscious, everyday ~~Hank~~ Hank stirred in the bed, rolled over on his back, drew a deep waking up breath. His eyes half opened, not focused on anything. He was in that strange state of stupor ~~exactly~~ halfway between sleep and consciousness.

Did he really see it ~~or didn't he?~~ It was like some eerie projection on midair, like a glowing painting on black velvet. Right above the bed, so close ~~to his face~~ he could smell the sulphurous breath, a hideous mask of a face hovered over him, contorting grotesquely as it formed ~~the~~ words. ~~"We will defeat you!~~ "You shall fail!" He couldn't make out. It seemed to be cursing him, spitting insults and ~~taking~~ blasphemies.

~~Now~~ Hank's eyes opened like a trap being released, ~~and~~ he ~~immediately~~ He thought he could still see the face fading away, but now was sure ~~felt like~~ someone had delivered a very heavy blow to his chest; his heart began to race and pound ~~like it would push right through his chest~~ and felt like it would burst through his ribs. He could feel ~~burst,~~ ~~and he noticed he was~~ his pajamas and the bedsheets sticking to him, drenched in sweat. He ~~waited~~ lay there, panting for breath, waiting for his heart to calm down, for the stark terror to go away, but nothing changed for what seemed an interminable time. He You're just having a nightmare, he kept telling himself, but he couldn't seem ~~to calm himself down.~~ wake up from it. He purposely opened his eyes wide and looked around the darkened room, ~~much as~~ even though part of him wanted to regress back to childhood and just hide under the covers until the boogymen went away. Now He saw nothing in the room out of the ordinary, ~~although with a little imagination his shirt hanging on the back of a chair could serve as a very convincing goblin.~~

A goblin in the corner was nothing but his shirt hanging on a chair, and the strange ~~little circle~~ halo of light on the wall was nothing but ~~moonlight~~ the streetlight

reflecting off the crystal of his watch.

But he was scared. He could feel himself shaking a bit, and his mind was finding it difficult to sort out hallucination and reality. He watched, listened. Even the silence seemed sinister. Who or what could be hiding behind it? Maybe an intruder or a ghost or a demon, was no longer in the room, but just outside the bedroom door, waiting for him to go to sleep again.

What was that? A creak in the house? No, just the wind against the windows. The rain had stopped but the wind was blowing a bit. Another noise, this time in the living room. He'd never heard that kind of noise before. I gotta wake up, I gotta wake up. Come on, heart, quiet down so I can hear.

He forced himself to sit up in bed, and remained there for several minutes trying to stifle his heart's pounding with his hand over his chest. It finally settled back a little, but kept going at a pretty quick rate. Hank began to feel a bit of a chill from the cold sweat clinging to his back. Hank could feel the sweat in his pajamas turning cold against his skin. To get up or go back to sleep? He doubted he could go back to sleep yet anyway. He decided to get up,

A clatter this time, in the kitchen. Now Hank figured he'd have to get up. He knew he'd never be able to sleep until he checked out the house.

Marshall felt the same way. He'd had the same kind of dreams, now felt the same heart-pounding fear, and was just climbing out of bed himself. He thought he'd heard voices, but was currently entertaining the theory that a radio was playing somewhere. Maybe Sandy was up and was moving about.

But who knows? he thought to himself. This town is going crazy anyway, and now the sickies are in my house. He had the presence of mind to put on his slippers, and then he moved stealthily over to the closet

from which he procured a baseball bat. Just like back home, he thought. Now Somebody's gonna have mush for brains.

He looked out his bedroom door, up and down the hallway. No lights were on anywhere, No flashlight beams playing about. But his guts were doing a square dance under his ribs and there had to be some reason for it. He reached for the hallway light and flipped the switch. Nuts! The bulb was burnt out. Since when he didn't know, but here he stood, still in the dark and feeling his courage ~~set back~~ deflated just that much more. He gripped the bat more tightly and moved down the hall staying close to the wall, looking ahead, looking behind, listening. He thought he could hear a quiet rustling somewhere, something moving.

He came to the archway that led into the living room and ~~dashed for the other side~~, but then his eye caught something pressed himself against the wall for ~~cover~~ concealment. The front door was open. Now his heart really started pounding, thudding rudely in his ears. but in a strange, jungle sort of way he felt better; at least there ~~seemed to be~~ was an indication of a real enemy. It was this lousy fear without any reason that was spooking him. He'd already been through ~~this~~ that sort of thing once today.

With that thought he couldn't hold back another thought that played through his mind: That professor lady must be in the house.

He did want to make sure he was between the intruder and his family, so he moved down the hall just far enough to check Sandy's room and make sure she was all right. After that he could stay between both Kate and Sandy and whatever was out there in the rest of the house. Her bedroom door was open, and that was unusual, making him all the more cautious. He inched along the wall toward the doorway, and then, bat ready in his hands, he peered into the room.

Something was up. Sandy was, at least. Her bed was empty and she was gone. He flicked on her bedroom light. The bed had been slept in, but now the covers were thrown back hastily, the room was in disarray, and she was gone.

As he moved cautiously down the dark hallway, it did occur to him that under normal circumstances he would assume

As he moved cautiously down the darkened hallway, it did occur to him that Sandy might just be up getting a drink, using the bathroom, reading. ~~The logic just didn't~~ But such simple logic was getting weaker and weaker as a defense against the horrible feelings that something was dreadfully wrong. He was taking deep breaths, trying with his greatest effort to hold himself steady while all the time he ~~felt an insidious~~, unearthly terror overtaking him as if he were inches from the crushing teeth of some monster he couldn't see but could feel as sure as anything.

The bathroom was cold and dark. He turned on the light and even winced a little at what he thought he might see. He saw ~~nothing~~ out of the ordinary. He left that light on and headed back toward the living room.

He peered like some kind of stalking fugitive through the archway. There was that rustling sound again. He flipped on the lights. Ah. The cold night air was coming in through the front door, rustling the drapes. No, Sandy was nowhere to be seen, not in the living room, not anywhere in or near the kitchen. Well, if she wasn't right outside, she just wasn't there at all.

But he had undeniable qualms about crossing the living room to the front door, walking past all the furniture that could be hiding an assailant. He gripped the bat tightly, keeping it up and ready. He inched along, keeping his back to the wall as he made his way around the perimeter of the room, stepping around the sofa after checking behind it, hurriedly maneuvering around the stereo, and finally reaching the door.

He went out onto the porch, into the cool night air, and for some reason he suddenly felt safer. The town was still out there, quiet this time of night. Most everyone else was certainly asleep right now, not sneaking around their houses with baseball bats.

He took a moment to rest, regather himself, and then went back inside.

He closed the door behind him, locking it, and it was just like he had locked himself in a dark closet with a couple huddred vipers. The fear returned and so did his grip on the bat. He stood with his back against the door and looked around the room again. Why was it so dark? The lights were on, but every bulb seemed so dim, as if there were some kind of brown-wout. Hogan, he thought to himself, either you've really lost a screw or you're in big, big trouble. He remained frozen there by the door, motionless, looking and listening. There had to be somebody or something in the house. He couldn't hear them or see them, but he could certainly feel them.

Outside the house, laying low in the evergreens and hedges, Tal and his company watched as demons - at least forty according to Tal's count - played havoc with Marshall's mind and spirit. They swooped like deadly black swallows in and out of the house, through the rooms, around and around Marshall, screaming taunts and blasphemies and clowning with him, playing with and ever increasing his fears. Tal kept a careful watch from his hidigg place, trying to see any sign of the dread Rafar, but the ba-al wasn't among this wild group. There could be no doubt, however, that Rafar had sent them. Tal and the others watched, agonizing and feeling Marshall's pain.

One demon, an ugly little imp with bristling, needle-sharp quills all over his body, leaped upon Marshall's shoulders and beat upon his head, screaming, "You're going to die, Hogan! You're going to die! Your daughter is dead and you are going to die!"

Guilo could hardly control himself. His big sword slipped with a metallic ring from its sheath, but Tal's strong arm held him back.

"Please, Captain!" Guilo hissed, "Never before have I only watched and let such as this happen!"

"Bridal yourself, dear warrior!" Tal cautioned.

"I will strike them, and only once!"

Guilo could see that even Tal was severely pained by his own order: "Forbear. Forbear. ~~Marshall Hogan must cry out.~~ He must go through it"

Hank had the lights on in the house, but his eyes must have been playing tricks on him ~~xxxx~~ because the rooms still looked very dark, the shadows deep. From time to time he couldn't tell if it was himself moving or the shadows in the room; there seemed to be a strange, waving, undulating motion in the light and shadows as if the depths in the house were ~~xxxxxxx~~ shifting back and forth like the slow, steady motion of breathing. he also thought

Hank now stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, just watching and listening, trying to sort out what he was ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ perceiving and what was really there. He thought he could feel a ~~breeze~~ wind moving through the house, but not a cold one from outside. It was more like ~~the~~ hot, sticky breath ~~of . . . something. The air felt like molasses, very~~ laden with repulsive odors, close and surrounding, heavy and oppressive.

He'd discovered that the clatter in the kitchen was due to a ~~xxxxxx~~ spatula sliding off the drainboard and onto the floor. That should have calmed his nerves right down, but it didn't. He still felt terrified.

Though each step was a real act of courage and faith, he knew he would sooner or later have to move into the living room to have a look. He took his first step out of the doorway and into the room.

He could literally feel the hairs on his neck bristling as if with static electricity. That first step into the living room was just like falling into a bottomless well of blackness and terror. His lips started spilling out a frantic prayer.

Then he went down, immediately, suddenly, before he even knew what was happening, and instinctively became like an animal under attack. He grappled about on the floor

Then he went down.

Immediately, suddenly, before he even knew what was happening, his body pitched forward and slammed into the floor. He became trapped a animal, instinctively struggling, grappling, trying to get loose from an unseen crushing weight that held him down. He could vaguely feel his arms and legs were smacking into furniture and knocking things over, but in his terror and shock he felt no pain. He squirmed, twisted, gasped for breath and lashed out at whatever it was, feeling resistance against the motion of his arms like stroking through water. The room seemed filled with smoke.

Blackness, like blindness, a loss of bearings, a loss of contact with the real world, time standing still. He could feel himself dying. An image, a hallucination, a vision or a real sight broke through for an instant to his retinas: two ghastly yellow eyes full of hate. His throat began to compress, squeezing shut.

"Jesus!" he heard his mind cry out, "help me!"

He was drowning in the darkness, being crushed in a vise. Air shot from his lungs, but none could be drawn in. His chest was collapsing.

His next thought, a tiny, instant flash, must have come from the Lord: "Rebuke it! You have the authority!"

Hank spoke the words though he couldn't hear the sound of them: "I rebuke you in Jesus' Name!"

The crushing weight upon him lifted so quickly Hank felt he would sail upward from the floor. He filled his lungs with air and noticed he was no struggling against absolutely nothing. But the terror was still there, the black, sinister presenee.

He sat up halfway, drew another breath, and spoke it clearly and loudly, "In the Name of Jesus I command you to get out of this house!"

Mary awoke with a jerk, startled and then terrified by the sound of a multitude screaming in anquish and pain. The cries were deafening at first, but then faded as if moving off into the unseen distance.

"HANK!" she screamed.

Marshall roared like an attacking savage and raised the bat high to strike down his attacker. The attacker screamed also, out of stark terror.

It was Kate. They had unknowingly backed into each other in the dark hallway.

"Marshall!" she exclaimed, and her voice quivered, as she was close to tears and angry at the same time. "What on earth are you doing out here!"

"Kate...." Marshall sighed, feeling himself shrink like a punctured inner tube. "You just about made me poop in my pants."

"What's wrong?" She was looking at the baseball bat and knew something was up. She clung to him in fear. "Is there someone in the house?"

"No..." he muttered in a combination of relief and disgust. "Nobody. I looked."

Who was it?"

~~"What happened? Did you hear something?"~~

~~"Yeah...I mean no. I mean I thought I did." Then he grabbed for the only statement that halfway made sense. "Sandy's gone."~~

~~"Gone? Gone where?"~~

~~"I dunno. Her bed's empty, her room's a mess, she's gone."~~

~~Kate hurried down the hall and looked in Sandy's room.~~

"Nobody, I said."

"But ~~I heard voices out here.~~ I thought you were talking to someone."

He looked at her with the utmost impatience and said with a steadily building volume, "Do I look like I've been having a friendly chat with someone?"

Kate shook her head. "I must have been dreaming. But it was the voices that woke me up."

"What voices?"

"Marshall, it sounded like a New Year's Eve party in there. Come on, who was it?"

"Nobody. There wasn;t anybody here. I looked."

Kate was very flustered. "I know I was awake."

"You heard ghosts."

He could feel her hand squeezing the blood out of his arm. "Don't talk like that!"

"Sandy's gone."

"What do you mean, gone? Gone where?"

"She's gone. Her room's empty, she's not in the house. She's poof! Gone!"

Kate hurried down the hall and looked in Sandy's room. Marshall followed after her and observed from the doorway as Kate checked the room over, looked through the closet and some of the drawers.

Kate reported with alarm, "Some of her clothes are gone. Her schoolbooks are missing." She looked at Marshall with a very helpless look that made him feel a little accused. "Marshall...she's left home!"

He looked back at her for a long moment, then looked around the room, then rested his head against the door jamb with a quiet thud.

"Nuts," he said.

"I knew she wasn't herself tonight. I should have found out what was wrong."

"We didn't hit it off too well today..."

"Well that was obvious. You came home without her."

"How'd she get home, anyway?"

"Her girlfriend Terry brought her."

"Maybe she went over to Terry's for the night."

~~"Do you think we should call?"~~ should we call and find out?

"I dunno..."
"You don't know!?"

Marshall closed his eyes and tried to think. "Naw. It's late. Either she's there or she isn't. If she isn't, we'll be getting them out of bed for nothing, and if she is, well, she's okay anyway."

Kate seemed resolute, but probably a little panicked. "I'm going to call!"

Marshall held up his hand to quiet her down and leaned his head against the door jamb again as he said, "Hey, don't get all sppoked now, all right? Gimme a minute."

"I just want to see if she's there..."

"All right, all right..."

But then Kate could see something was very wrong with Marshall. He looked like he'd just been through a terrible brawl. He was pale, weak, shaken. "Gimme a minute..."

"What's the matter, Marshall? Come on, tell me. What's wrong?"

"Just don't get all upset, okay? Keep cool."

She put her arm around him, concerned. "What is it?"

He had quite a struggle getting it out: "I'm scared." He didn't move from that spot, he didn't even look up. He just remained as he was, trembling a bit, his eyes closed, his head resting against the door jamb, and he said again, "I'm really scared and I don't know why."

And that scared Kate. "Marshall..."

"Don't get upset, will you? Keep it level."

"Can I do anything?"

"Just be tough, that's all."

Kate thought for a moment, and came up with a suggestion. "Well, why don't you get your robe on? I'll warm you some milk, okay?"

"Yeah, great."

It was the first time any demons had ever been actually confronted and rebuked by Hank Busche. They had certainly come with an arrogant brashness at first, descedding on the house in the dead of night to raid and ravage, screaming and whooping through the rooms and leaping on Hank, trying to terrify him. But as Krioni, Triskal and the others watched from their hiding place, confused and scattered flocks of them suddenly came thundering and fluttering out of the house like bats from a cavern, screaming, indignant, stopping their ears. There must have been close to a hundred, all the lesser sort of demonic pranksters and troublemakers Krioni was used to seeing at work all over the town. No doubt the great ba-al had sent them, and now that they had been routed there was no telling what Rafar's reaction or his next plan would be. But as for Hank, he had proven himself very well.

In a moment the coast was clear, the trouble was over, and the warriors came out of hiding, breathing easier. Krioni and Triskal were impressed.

Krioni commented, "Tal was right. He's not so little."

Triskal agreed, "Stern stuff, this Henry Busche."

But as Hank and Mary sat trembling at their kitchen table, she preparing an icepack and he spotting a welt on his forehead besides a great many bruises and scrapings on his arms and shins, neither one of them felt entirely stern, powerful or victorious. At the moment Hank was thankful to have excaped with his life and Mary was still in a mild state of shock and disbelief.

It was awkward at first, with neither one of them wanting to relate his or her experience first for fear that the whole thing was nothing but too many pickles and pastrami before bedtime. But Hank's welt kept growing and he could only tell what he knew. Mary bought every word of it, scared as she was by the screams that had awakened her. Now, as they shared their experiences, they were able to steadily reinforce the not-so-pleasant acceptance that the whole night of madness had been very frighteningly real and not some nightmare. "Demons..." Hank concluded. Mary could only nod.

"But why?" Hank pleaded to know. "What was it for?"

Mary wasn't quite ready to come up with any answers. She kept waiting for Hank to do that.

Hank muttered, "Like Lesson Number One in Frontlines Combat. I wasn't a bit ready for it. I think I flunked."

Mary gave him the icepack and he placed it against the welt, wincing at the pressure.

"What makes you think you flunked?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just walked into it, I guess. I let them clobber me." Then he prayed, "O Lord God, help me to be ready next time. Give me the smarts, the sensitivity to know what they're up to."

Mary squeezed his hand, said amen, and then commented, "You know, I might be wrong, but...hasn't the Lord already done that? I mean, how are you going to know how to fight Satan's direct attacks unless you just...do it?"

That was just what Hank needed to hear. He took a few moments to digest that, to let it sink in.

"Wow..." he mused. "I'm sort of a veteran."

"And I don't think you flunked, either. They're gone, aren't they? And you're still here, and you should have heard those screams."

"Are you sure it wasb't me?"

"Quite sure."

Then came a long, troubled silence. They both could not stop shaking, and neither could come up with anything really wise or proper to say. All they could do was sit there and feel the terror of it, the very immenseness of the battle they had taken upon themselves just by being ~~there.~~ in Ashton.

"So what now?" Mary finally asked.

"Uh...let's pray." said Hank. For him, that option was always easy to jump to.

~~he figured~~ the problem ~~was~~ got too big for him to face alone, and he didn't think anyone would believe him...I mean, just who can you turn to when you know something like this is going on?"

"~~Yeah~~ Well, talk to him tomorrow. Ask him."

Hank was getting more excited the more he thought about it. "Yeah.. what if there really is a pattern to this whole thing? A scheme, a plan, something that goes far beyond what we've been able to see?"

"Talk to Ben, Hank."

"I wonder what the stakes are?"

"I want to go to bed."

"We've got to pray first."

And pray they did, clasping hands at the little kitchen table, having a conference with the Lord. They thanked him for the experience of that night, for protecting them from danger, for showing them a very close glimpse of their enemy. Over an hour passed, and during that time the field of concern continued to grow outward; their own problems began to take ~~their~~ a small place in a vastly wider perspective as Hank and Mary began to pray for their church, the people in it, the town, the people that ran it, the state, the nation, the world. Through it all came the beautiful assurance that they had indeed connected with the throne of God and had ~~done~~ conducted serious business with the Lord. Hank for one was now all the more determined to stay in the battle and give Satan a real run for his money. He was sure that was what God wanted.

GOALS: Hogan must awaken, decide to fight back. Factors: The feelings, terror on one hand, sluggishness and passivity on the other....doesn't like the person he's become who lets others walk on him. Somebody's doing a number on him and he doesn't like it. Recalls the professor and the whole incident with Sandy, relates that to the experience of this night. Feels somethigg is going on, wants to find out what.

Possible order of events: fears that Sandy has run off, brief recounting of past problems and turmoils. Kate tries to persuade Hogan to go for help, talk to Young. Hogan doesn't like or trust Young...inwardly remembers his strange actions reported by Bernice. A lot on his mind(see above). Just then Bernice calls, reports the film was tampered with. That tips Hogan over the brink. He will talk to Young, makes date to coincide with Brummel's appointment.

The ~~coffee went down black and hot~~ warm milk and Kate's company seemed to have a soothing effect on Marshall's nerves. With each swallow and each additional minute of normalcy, he gained more andmore assurance that the world would still go on, he would live, the sun would rise in the morning. He was amazed at how bleak things had looked ~~xj~~ just a little while ago.

"Feeling better?" Kate asked, buttering some toast that had just popped up.

"Yeah...yeah," he answered, noticing that his heart had retreated back into his chest quietly and was back to its normal, everyday pace. "Boy, I don't know what got into me."

Kate placed the two slices of toast on a plate and set them on the table, sitting across ~~fxx~~ from Marshall. Marshall crunched off a bite of toast and asked, "Is she not at Terry's?" Kate shook her head.

"Do you want to talk about Sandy?"

Marshall ~~MxgMx~~ was ready. "~~Ixx~~ We probably ~~ought~~ need to talk about a lot of things."

"I don't know how to start..."

"You think it's my fault?"

"Oh, Marshall..."

"C'mon, be honest now. I've been gettingx my butt whipped all day, I'll listen."

~~She met his eyes~~ Her eyes met his and remained in place, denoting a sincerity and love that was firm and undying.

"Categorically, no," she said.

"I botched it today."

"I think we've all botched it, and that includes Sandy. She's made some choices too, remember."

"Yeah, but maybe it was because we didn't have anything better to give her."

"What do you think of talking to Pastor Young?"

"Case in point."

"Hmmmm?"

Hogan shook his head despondently. "Maybe...maybe Young's just a little too cush, you know? He's into all this...this Family of Man stuff, and doing your own thing, and ~~being kind to animals...~~ saving the whales..."

Kate was a little surprised. "I thought you liked Pastor Young."

"Well...I guess I do. But sometimes...no, a lot of the time, I don't even feel like I"m going to church. I may as well be sitting at a lodge meeting ~~talking about what candidates we're going to support or something.~~ planning a kiddy parade and beer bust." He checked her eyes. They were still steady. She was listening. "Kate, don't you ever get the feeling that God's got to be... you know, a little...bigger? Tougher? The God we get at that church... hey, I feel like we're all just making Him up, and sometimes He's dumber than we are." I can't expect Sandy to buy that stuff. I don't even go for it myself."

"I never knew you felt this way, Marshall."

"Well, maybe I never did either. It's just that this thing tonight... I've really got to think about it, there's been so much of it going on lately..."

What do you mean?

"~~Like what?~~ What's been going on?"

I can't tell her, Marshall thought to himself. No, he just didn't have it figured out enough. How could he explain the strange, hypnotic persuasion he was sure he got from Brummel, the spooky feelings he'd gotten from Sandy's professor, the stark terror he'd felt that night? None of it made sense, and now, to top it off, Sandy was gone. All throggh these situations he'd been horrified by his own inability to fight back. He'd felt controlled, not in control. But he couldn't tell Kate anything like that.

"Aw...it's a long story," he said finally. "All I know is, this whole thing - our lifestyle, our schedule, our family, our religion, whatever it is - just isn't working. Something's got to change."

Marshall again envisioned the events of the day, the spooky feelings he'd gotten from ~~the~~ Sandy's professor, the hypnotic persuasion he'd gotten from Brummel, the stark terror he'd felt that night. ~~And how the Sandy was gone.~~ ~~It all had to be connected.~~

But he just didn't have it all sorted out yet.

"Ah, it's a long ~~story~~," he told Kate. "But all I know is, this our lifestyle, our schedule, our family, whatever it is, whole thing isn't working. Something's got to change."

~~On top of that was~~ And one thing ~~that~~ pothered him ~~more than~~ about all these things. ~~others~~: his helplessness, the way ~~He'd given in to those situations.~~ ~~They were bigger than he was~~ ~~He'd let people walk on him, control him.~~ He felt controlled, not in control. Maybe there was something behind it, maybe not, but that sort of thing just couldn't go on. Where would it end?

"~~So~~ But...you don't think you want to talk to Pastor Young?"

~~Then his mind raced through what he'd heard from Bernice~~ "aw, he's a turkey..."

Just then, three a.m. or not, the phone rang.

~~"What in the world...?"~~ "Sandy!" Kate exclaimed. ~~"Sandy! Maybe that's her."~~

Marshall reached over to the ~~counter~~ and snatched up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hello?" came a female voice. "You're up!"

Marshall recognized the voice, with some ~~xxxx~~ disappointment. It was Bernice.

"Oh, hi, Bernie," he said, looking at Kate, whose face ~~sagged~~ sank now with ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ frustration.

"Don't hang up! I'm sorry for calling at this late hour, but I had a date tonight~~x~~ and I didn't get home until late but I wanted to develop that film...are you mad?"

"I'll be mad tomorrow. Right ~~now~~ I'm too tired. What have you got?"

I know the film in the camera had "Get this. ~~I snapped~~ twelve~~x~~ pictures ~~at~~ of the carnival, including the ones of Brummel, Young and those ~~two xxxx~~ three unknowns. ~~Then~~ Today I went home ~~today~~ and shot the rest of the role, twelve more frames: My cat, the

neighbor lady with the big mole, the evening news, etc. ~~Those pictures~~ Today's pictures came out."

There was a pause, and Marshall knew he would have to ask. "What about the other ones?"

"Blank. ~~And I didn't change a thing on the camera.~~" Marshall said nothing for a long moment. "Marshall, hello?"

"That's interesting," he said.

"They're up to something! It's got me all excited." There was another long pause. "Hello?"

~~"Yeah," said Marshall, "that's interesting. I'll see you in the morning."~~

~~"Good-bye, and thanks for answering."~~

Click. Marshall hung up the phone. Kate studied his expression and could sense the wheels in his mind turning furiously.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Mmmmmm," he said, still thinking. Then he answered, "Uh, newspaper stuff. What with deadlines, she wasn't sure it could wait until morning. No biggie. What was it we were talking about, anyway?"

"Well, if it still matters, we were just talking about whether or not you should talk to Pastor Young about our problem..."

"Young..."

"But if you don't want to..." Marshall stared at the table while his coffee got cold. Kate waited, then roused him with, "Would you rather talk about this in the morning?"

"I'll talk to him," Marshall said flatly. "I...I want to talk to him."

"It couldn't hurt."

"No, it sure couldn't."

"I don't know when he'll be able to see you, but..."

INSERT

"What did that other woman look like, the blond one?"

"...not too old...long blond hair...kind of mean looking..."

"Heavy? Thin? In between?"

"She looked good."

Marshall's forehead crinkled a bit and his eyes shifted about as if he was watching his ideas in the form of movies. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Good-bye, and thanks for answering."

strike this sentence. Rewrite. Drummond

"One o'clock would be nice..."

"One o'clock," Marshall ~~blurted~~, "~~It's got to be one o'clock.~~"

"Why one o'clock? Don't you break for lunch at twelve?"

"I'll...I'll just ~~have to~~ make an exception. Young's a ~~busy man~~. He's real busy."

"Marshall..." Kate started to say, but she kept it back. There was something happening to her husband, ~~that alarmed her. She looked at him carefully. She could recognize that look in his eye, that particular~~ and she picked it up in his voice, in his expression ~~xxxxxx~~ She knew his mind was racing, that a storm was brewing somewhere deep inside him. She hadn't seen him this way since New York, and though part of her was glad to get away from all that life, and all the anxiety for him that went with it, still, ever since they'd moved here to Ashton and he'd

Suddenly, she could see a familiar glint in his eyes, a certain fire, that she hadn't seen since they'd made their move. Part of her was glad to see that fire; part of her was afraid of what it might ~~start~~. Yes, it was the furious fight in Marshall's nature that made him the man he was, the man she'd married.

She'd never really missed that fire ~~she now saw~~ in his eyes; ~~it was that warlike spirit in Marshall that made him the success he'd been~~ perhaps she'd never known it was gone until this moment when, for the first time since they'd left New York, she ~~saw~~ saw it again. It was suddenly amusing Some old, unpleasant ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ feelings ~~were~~ too rising up within her, feelings she had no desire to cope with late at night with her daughter mysteriously missing, ~~but she knew from experience and because she knew her husband that~~

"Marshall..." she said, sliding her chair out, picking up the plate of half-eaten toast, "let's get some sleep."

"I may not be able to sleep."

"I know," she said quietly.

~~All this time, Tal and Guido were standing~~ Nathan Arnoth over them, carefully observing. Tal & Guido also stood and Guido began to chuckle in his gruff, quaking way.

Tal said with a smile, "No, Marshall Hogan. You never were much of a sleeper...and now Ba-al Rafar has helped to awaken you again!"

all this time, Tal, Guido, Nathan & Arnoth were standing in the room, carefully observing,

June 14, Tuesday AM

Hank found the name and number in the church records of Rev. James Farrel. He'd never met Farrel and didn't know much about him; all he knew was the tasteless and malicious gossip going around about the man who had been his predecessor and had since moved far away from Ashton. It all sounded so familiar, like the same ridiculous grinder Hank was going through now. It was a whim, a stab in the dark, Hank knew that, but he had to give this man a call.

It was morning, the sun was shining through the windows, Mary was busy beating the daylights out of some bread dough. Maybe Farrel was home, maybe he didn't even live there anymore, Hank didn't know. But Hank sat down on the couch, and picked up the phone, and dialed the number.

"Hello?" came a tired, older man's voice.

"Hello," said Hank, trying to sound pleasant despite his tight nerves. "James Farrel?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This is Hank Busche, pastor of the Ashton Community Church. I... guess you must know who I am."

"Yes, Pastor Busche. So how are you?"

Let's see, now, thought Hank. How do I answer that? "Uhh...okay in some respects."

"And not okay in other respects," Farrel offered, completing Hank's thought.

"Boy, you've really been keeping up on things."

"Well, not actively. I do hear from some of the members from time to time." Then he added a quick note, "I'm glad you called. What can I do for you?"

"Uh...talk to me, I guess."

"All right."

Boy, Hank thought, this guy is sure nice.

Farrel continued, "I'm sure there is a lot I could say to you. I do hear there's a congregational meeting this Friday. Is that true?"

"Yes, it is."

"A vote of donfidence, I understand."

"That's right."

"Yes, I went through the same thing, you know. Brummel, Turner, and Mayer Stanley were in charge of that one, too."

"You gotta be kidding."

"Oh, it's strictly history repeating itself, Hank, take it from me."

"They drummed you out?"

"They decided they didn't like what I was preaching and the direction of my ministry, so they stirred up the congregation against me and then managed to take it to a vote. I didn't lose by much, but I did lose."

"The same ~~three~~ four guys!"

"The same ~~three~~ four...but now, did I hear right? Did you really disfellowship Lou Stanley?"

"Well, yeah, ~~I...the congregation did.~~"

"Now that is something. I can't imagine Lou letting anyone do that to him."

"Well, ~~Alf and Sam~~ the other 3 made that a pivotal issue; they haven't left me alone about it."

"And how is the congregation leaning?"

"I don't know. They seem pretty evenly divided."

"~~And~~ So how are you standing up under all this?"

Hank thought for just a moment, could think of no better way to phrase it, and said, "I think I'm under attack; direct, spiritual attack."

There was silence at the other end. "Hello?"

"Oh, I'm here." Farrel talked slowly, faltering-ly, as if thinking hard while trying to converse. "~~...~~What kind of spiritual attack?"

"Ummm..." Hank stammered a bit. He could imagine how his experienced of last night would sound to a stranger. "Well...I just think Satan is really involved here..."

"Hank," Farrel was almost demanding, "What kind of spiritual attack?"

So Hank explained a little, gave background, led into it, and then

~~Hank~~ his account began carefully, trying very hard to sound like a sane and responsible individual as he related the ~~events:~~ major points: the fetish Brummel seemed to have for getting rid of ~~Hank~~ him, the slogan painted on the house, the gossip, and then...the spiritual wrestling match he'd gone through last night. Farrel interrupted only to ask clarifying questions, but always told Hank to continue, to go on, to tell him everything.

the church division, the angry board,

"I know it sounds crazy..." Hank apologized.

All Farrel could do was let out a deep sigh and mutter, "Oh, blast it all...!"

Hank asked, "Well...~~have~~ like you say, it's just like history repeating itself. No doubt you've ~~ever~~ encountered ~~anything~~ things like this, right? Or am I the one who has the real problem here?"

Farrel struggled with the words. "Hank...~~I don't know if you're going to like hearing this, but I am glad you called.~~ I am glad you called. I always struggled with whether or not I should call you...so, we may as well talk about it now..." Farrel paused for new strength, then said, "Hank, are you sure you belong there?"

Oh-oh.

Hank felt a definite defensiveness rising in him. "I do believe firmly in my heart that God called me here, yes."

"Do you know you were chosen as pastor by accident?"

"Well, some are saying that, but - "

"It is true, Hank. You should really consider that. You see, the church ousted me; they had some other minister all picked out and ready to move in, some guy who had a wide ~~enough~~ and liberal enough religious philosophy to suit them. Hank, I really don't know how you ended up with the job, but it was definitely some kind of organizational fluke. The one thing they did not want in there was another fundamentalist minister, not after they went to such great lengths to get rid of the one they had."

"But they voted me in."

"It was an accident. Brummel and the others were definitely not planning on it."

"Well that's obvious now."

Okay, good, you can see that. So let me just get right down to some direct advice. ~~But let's get down to the major points here.~~ Now, after Friday this may all be moot anyway, but if I were you, I'd get packing and start looking for a position elsewhere, I don't care how the vote comes out."

Hank deflated a little. This conversation was turning sour; he just couldn't buy it. All he could do was sigh into the phone.

Farrel was forceful. "Hank, I've been there, I've been through it, I know what you're going through and I know what you still have yet to go through. Believe me, it isn't worth it. Let them have that church, let them have the whole town, just don't sacrifice yourself."

But "I can't leave..."

"Yeah, right, you have a calling from God. Hank, so did I. I was ready to go into the battle, to make a real stand in that town for God. You know, it cost me my home, my reputation, my health, it almost cost me my marriage. I left Ashton literally planning on changing my name."

Hank was dubious. "But...I just don't see how they could get away with something like that."

"That's because you have no idea of who you're really dealing with. ~~there.~~ There are forces at work in that town ~~that are more powerful than anything you'll ever encounter in your life...~~."

"What kind of forces?"

"Well...political, social...spiritual too, of course. ~~I suppose.~~"

~~"Oh yeah, you never did answer my question."~~

"Oh yeah, you never did answer my question: What about what happened to me last night? What do you think about that?"

Farrel hesitated, then said, "Hank, right now I can honestly say I'm a much happier man. I have a good job, my family is together, I'm living in peace. If I'd stayed in Ashton I honestly don't know ~~if I'd even~~ what would have happened to me."

"So...you have had...you know, encounters like this?"

"Hank...I don't know why, but it's very difficult for me to talk about such things. All I can say to you, again and again, is get out of that place while you can. Just drop it. The church doesn't want you there, the town doesn't want you there."

"I can't leave, I told you that."

Farrel paused for a long time. Hank was almost afraid he'd hung up. But then he said, "All right, Hank. I'll tell you, and you listen. What you went through last night...well, I think I may have had similar experiences, but I can assure you, whatever it was, it was only the beginning." ~~That kind of thing you can usually live through. From now on it will not be easy at all."~~

"Pastor Farrel..."

"I'm not a pastor, just call me Jim."

"That's what the gospel is all about, fighting Satan, shining the light of the gospel into the darkness..."

"Hank, all the nice little homilies you can dig up won't help you there. Now I don't know how equipped or ready you are, but to be perfectly honest, if you come through it all with even your life I'll be surprised. I'm serious!"

Hank had no other answer he could give. "Jim...I'll let you know how it turns out. Maybe I'll win...maybe I won't come out alive. But God didn't tell me I'd come out alive; He just told me to stay and fight. You've made one thing clear to me now: Satan does want this town. I can't let him have it. I have to stay."

The rest of the conversation was halting, awkward, a pitiful dribbling of regrets mixed with good-lucks. Hank replaced the receiver and felt he would cry.

"Lord God," he prayed, "Lord God, what shall I do?"

A scripture came to his mind immediately: "Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee..."

The Lord gave no immediate answer, and Hank sat there in the couch for several minutes trying to regather his strength and confidence. Mary was still busy in the kitchen. That was good. He just couldn't talk to her right now; there were too many thoughts and feelings to be sorted out.

Then, for no apparent reason, a scripture came to his mind: "Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee..."

THIS SCENE COULD BE A PROBLEM,
1) possibly combine this expo w/ Friday Meeting 2) Rafer can't be shown as weak yet.

HANK WALKS THE TOWN....brainspill.
Hank wants to feel the town out for himself...talks to many whether he knows them or not...helps a shopbwner sweep up, put in a new windowpane. Talks about it. Runs into a pro-Hank church member who urges him to leave. Hank won't.
Info to cover: Start out at a slothing store. Hank helping the owner for no apparent reason. Owner hasn't much use for religion, laments the sinking mood and morals of the town. It started just a few years ago. H: Ever see anything weird? O: all the time...but nothing like Hank is after.
Hank stands at end of street, looks up the street, prays. Feels like Daniel or Joshua.
Meets church member who is sympathetic. Here is where a lot of the HankandBen stuff is covered and the warning given, with Hanks's big ultimatum line at the end.

"Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee..."

Hank went for a walk. Maybe it was kind of assuming on his part, and maybe he was...well, twisting the Lord's arm, or that verse of scripture. But when he came across God's promise to Abraham in the book of Genesis, he felt a very strong pull in his heart to take a good look at Ashton. Maybe there was something the Lord could show him that he'd never seen before. Maybe if he could just see this town the way God saw it.

Aw, he didn't know exactly why he went out for his long walk today. All he knew was, he had to do it. He couldn't stand just sitting at home fussing and fuming and not really doing anything.
Maybe there was a specific strategy, an avenue to follow, a lead, an open door.

Well, it sure beat sitting at home just fussing and fuming and not really doing anything, that was for sure, so on went his sneakers and out the door he went.

Krioni and Triskal were just outside, waiting for their charge. Invisibly they joined Hank, one on each side, and walked with him down Morgan Hill toward the center of town. Hank wasn't really a man of great stature anyway, but between these two giants he looked even smaller. He did, however, appear very, very safe.

It was a mixed up, boiling soup of feelings Hank had to sort out as he walked along. It had always been so easy to simply tag the devil the enemy and spend the rest of his Christian walk and his ministry prattling little homilies against a foe who never really seemed to be there...not really there. It was always so easy to blame everything on Satan; after all, he never seemed to leap up through some fiery hole in the ground and refute such accusations.

My reputation's already on the ropes, so what am I trying to do now, make a total mess of it?

He walked and walked, down the hill, into the center of town, clear to the ends of town, and then back again until finally his feet hurt and he parked himself on a sidewalk bench to sit and watch the people and traffic pass by on the Main Street.

~~But~~ ~~Krioni and~~ Triskal ~~weren't at all~~ wasn't very happy about this. ~~Triskal~~ He kept a wary eye open and said, "What's he up to, anyway?"

Krioni knew Hank pretty well by now. "I don't think he even knows. The Spirit is driving him. He's giving action to a burden in his heart."

"Oh, we'll have action, all right."

"Just don't be a threat. So far it's the best way to survive in this town."

"So tell that to the little pastor, here."

As Hank neared the main business district he paused on a corner to look up and down the street, ~~This was the town he prayed night and day for, where the evil last night was so thick you could cut it with a knife, and now...it looked like a busy little town, and nothing more. Lord, he prayed, what and where is the evil?~~

watching new cars, old cars, vans and four-wheels by-fours, shoppers, walkers, joggers and bicyclers stream in four and more directions, ~~at the main intersection, mostly~~ taking regarding the orders of the traffic light as mere suggestions. The place was moving, alive and kicking, it had things to do ~~and hadn't slowed down much.~~ and all its time was taken.

So Where was the evil? How could it be so vivid last night and so much like a distant, dubious memory today? There were no demons or devils lurking in the ~~store~~ office windows, reaching out of the ~~curb~~ storm drains; the people were the same, simple, ordinary folks he'd always seen before, still ignoring him and passing by.

Yes, this was the town he prayed for night and day with deep groanings of the heart because of a burden he couldn't explain, and now it was taxing his patience, unsettling him.

"Well, are you in trouble or aren't you, or dontt you care?" he said out loud.

Nobody listened. No deep, sinister voices answered back a threat.

But the Spirit of the Lord inside him wouldn't leave him alone. Pray, Hank. Pray for these people. Don't let them escape your heart. The pain is there, the fear is there, the danger is there.

So when do we win, Hank answered the Lord. Do you know how long I've been sweating and praying over this place? Just once I'd like to hear my little pebble make a splash; I'd like to see this dead dog twitch just a little when I poke it.

It was amazing to him how well the demons could hide, even behind the doubts he sometimes felt about their very existence.

"I know you're out there," he said quietly, gazing carefully over the ~~many fronts~~ blankly staring faces of the buildings, the concrete, the brick, the glass, the trash. They were teasing him. They could descend on him in a moment, terrorize and choke him, be just as real as a wild, mauling beast, and then vanish, slipping back into the hiding places behind the facade of the town, snickering, hide-and-seeking, watching him grope about like a blind fool.

He sat down on a sidewalk bench feeling miffed.

save

"I'm here, Satan," he said. "I can't see you, and maybe you can move faster than I can, but I'm still here, and by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit I intend to be a thorn in your side until ones of us has had enough."

"I can feel it," Triskal told Krioni.

Krinni nodded. "~~We've got~~ There's trouble. You'd better get out of sight."

Triskal was gone instantly, but not far. Krioni backed away, took a passive ~~xxxxx~~ posture, watched.

Hank looked down the street and his eyes met those of a rather large, well-dressed businessman coming toward him, a tall, heavy set fellow. No, thought Hank, he isn't looking at me. Then again, maybe he was. The man was still too far ~~xxx~~ away to tell for awhile. A second look, and now the man was looking elsewherex. Hank didn't recall ever seeing him before, but that meant xnothing. Perhaps it was just that gut feeling Hank had about him, that unexplainable sense that the guy just didn't fit in this place.

Hank looked somewhere else; the sidewalk with the grass in the cracks, the strofoam cup in the gutter. Maybe I'll get going, he thought.

~~Across the street was the impressive building of the Ashton Presbyterian Church. Hank had known some wonderful Presbyterians~~

Across the street was the impressive structure of the Ashton United Christian Church. ~~As far as Hank knew, the United Christian denomination~~ Hank had known many people who belonged to that particular denomination, and they were fine people, true believers in Jesus Christ and the ~~scriptures~~ Bible, but this particular bunch in Ashton he wasn't too sure about. He'd only met ~~the~~ Pastor Oliver Young a few times and could never get very close to him; Young actually seemed rather cold and aloof, and Hank could never figure out why.

As Hank sat there, watching a brown Buick ~~park in front of~~ pull into the church parking lot, ~~he caught himself toying with the idea that part of the town's problem could be the odd~~ Triskal and Krioni stood beside the bench, also watching the car come to a stop. Only ~~the~~ the two of them could see the car's special passengers: sitting on the roof were two big warriors, the Arabian and ~~and~~ the African, Nathan and Armoth. No swords were visible. ~~They~~, they were taking a passive, non-combatant posture according to Tals' orders, just like all the rest.

June 14, Tuesday AM

Marshall had seen Bernice's film. He'd seen the minute scratches from some kind of mishandling, he'd seen the clumsy fingerprints at regular intervals that could very well have been placed there by a hand pulling the film out of the aamera, unrolling it in the light.

Marshall had gotten his appointment with Young for one p'clock.

Now he pulled into the vast, blacktop parking lot at twelve forty-five, still downing a deluxe cheeseburger and large coffee.

This scene needs some trimming 3/1/82

Still does 4/18/82

"How about one thirty?"

"Each appointment is for an hour..."

"One forty-five?"

Something had manage to go right the next day: Marshall had called Pastor Young's office and got ten his appointment for one o'clock. He drove over to the church and pulled into the parking lot at twelve forty-five, still munching on a deluxe cheeseburger and large coffee.

Be sure you finish that thought. It is not all like this one.

During the week there was no problem finding a place to park today. in the vast blacktop parking lot beside the church. Sundays were a different story, with so many cars around you often had to park way up the street and walk the distance to the big church. It did have a large membership.

Ashton United Christian Presbyterian was one of the large, stately looking edifices around town, constructed in the traditional European style with heavy stone, and stained glass, towering lines, majestic steeple. The front door fit the rest of the overall motif: large, awesome, solid, even a little intimidating, especially when you had to try to leave it open all by yourself. The church was located near the center of town, and the carillon in the tower chimed each hour and gave a short concert of hymns at noon. It was a respected establishment, Young was a respected minister. The people who attended the church were respected members of the community. Marshall had often thought that respect and status just might be a prerequisite for membership.

He engaged the big front door in a short Indian arm wrestle and finally got inside. No, this congregation had never spared the expense on this place, that was for sure. The floors of the foyer, stairs and sanctuary were covered with a thick red carpet, the woodwork was all deep finished oak and walnut. On top of that was all the brass: brass door handles, coat hooks, stairway railings, offering plates, window latches. The windows, of course, were stained glass, very classy artwork portraying saints,

parables, the Lord praying in the garden, the Dove of the Holy Spirit. All the ceilings were high, ~~xxxxx~~ lofty, with great hanging chandeliers and delicate scrollwork . It would take more time than most people had to thoroughly look at ~~xxxxxxxx~~ and appreciate every detail in this place.

Marshall entered the sanctuary through another ponderous door and walked down the long center aisle ~~xxxxxx~~ toward the front. Needless to say, this room was a ~~xxxxx~~ aross between an apera house and a cavern. ~~The platform in front~~ Everything was big; the platform was big, the pulpit was big, the choir loft was big. Yes, the choir was big, too.

Pastor Young's office was big. It was just off to the side of the sanctuary, affording a very ~~good~~ visible access to the platform and pulpit, and Pastor Young's entrance through the big oak door each Sunday morning was definitely a traditional part of the ceremonies. ~~Everyone always waited for him to appear through the big door that Marshall now pushed open.~~

Marshall pushed that big door open and stepped into the ~~little~~ reception office. ~~The secretary was busily at work at her desk~~

The ~~xxxxx~~ pretty secretary greeted him but didn't know who he was. He told her, she checked the appointment book and verified it. Marshall checked the book too, reading upside down again. The two o'clock hour was ~~blank~~ marked A. Brummel ~~So fat that xxxxxx meant nothing~~

~~It wasn't a long wait. Someone came out of the inner office, smilin nd sak~~

It wasn't a long wait. In just a few minutes the door to Young's office opened and Young emerged, saying good-bye to ~~some xxxxx~~ a young in-love couple.

"Well, Marshall," Young said with a cordial, businesslike smile and handshake, "come in, come in."

Marshall followed Young into his big, plush office. Young, a rather largely built man in his sixties with roundish face, wire-rimmed glasses and thin, well-oiled hair, really seemed to enjoy his position both in the church and in the community. His ~~xxx~~ dark panelled walls

sported many plaques from community and charitable organizations recognizing his involvement and invaluable assistance. Along with those were several framed photographs of him posing with well-knowns such as the governor, a few ~~mxxx~~ popular evangelists, some authors, a senator.

As Young sat down behind his impressive desk he created a perfect picture of the powerful, sudcessful professional. The high-backed leather chair ~~almost seemed like~~ became a throne, and his own reflection in the top of the neat and very large desk ~~looked a lot like a scenic postcard picture of a mountain~~ made him all the more scenic and impressive, like a mountain reflected in an alpine lake.

He motioned Marshall to a chair, and Marshall sat down, noticing that he sank down to an eye level quite below Young's. Marshall began to feel a familiar tinge of intimidation; this whole office seemed to be designed for it. Well, he determined, it will not happen this time.

"Nice office," he said by way of ice breaking.

"Thank you very much," said Young with that same smile that shoved his cheeks into piles against his ears. He sat there, leaning back in his chair, his fingers interlaced and wiggling on the edge of his desk, just looking Marshall over. "I enjoy it, am thankful for it, and I rather appreciate the warmth, the atmosphere of the place. It sort of sets one at ease."

~~Marshall didn't feel too eased. He didn't feel very much in control either~~ Sets you at ease, thought Marshall. "Yeah...yeah."

~~"Yeah...yeah. Like my office at the paper. All it does is keep you going. If I had an office like this I don't know if I'd ever get anything done."~~ "I do

"How is the Clarion these days?"

"Oh, pulling itself together. Did you get ~~Monday~~ today's?"

"Yes, it was very good. Very neat, stylish. You've brought some of that big city class here with you, I see."

"Mm-hmmm." Marshall suddenly didn't feel too talkative.

"I'm glad you're with us, Marshall. We're looking forward to a very good relationship."

"Well yeah, thanks."

"So what was on your mind?"

Marshall fidgeted just a little, then jumped to his feet. "Can I stand up to talk, walk around?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Whatever you like."

Marshall just had to get out of that chair; it made him feel too much like a microbe under a microscope. Next time I'll bring a big desk too, he thought. He walked around the office, trying to look casual, just looking over the degrees on the wall, the photos, the bric-a-brac.

"We've got a lot to cover in an hour," he began.

"We can always have more meetings."

"Yeah, sure. Well, first of all, Sandy - that's my daughter - ran off last night. We haven't heard anything, we don't know where she is..." He went on to tell Young a quick synopsis of the problem and its history, and Young listened intently with no interruptions.

"So..." Young finally asked, "you seem to think she has turned her back on your more traditional values and that disturbs you?"

"Hey, ~~I'm not saying it's not my fault. Maybe my values don't fit anymore, maybe I don't believe in them enough myself;~~ I'm not a deeply religious person, you know what I mean? But some things have got to be right and some things have got to be wrong, and I have trouble with Sandy just...just jumping over the fence from one to the other like ~~that.~~ she does."

INSERT: ~~I've always believed in God, the Ten Commandments, doing~~ unto others, ~~the whole thing, and I've tried to live right. I don't know what more I'm supposed to do, but whatever it is I guess I've missed it.~~

Sandy and I don't see things the same at all. She's got no time for religion, at least not my kind. I really don't understand what she's gotten herself into. Like, she's taking all these Philosophy courses at Whitmore and coming home all spaced out and trying to figure out what's true and what isn't, and why we're here, and if we're really here, and then she starts giving me all this stuff about contradictions: 'Truth does not contradict itself...' She says I'm a walking contradiction, my religion is full of contradictions... she's thrown the whole thing out, everything we've tried to teach her. Sure, she has to make her own way, but...

Young rose majestically from his desk and walked toward Marshall with the air of an understanding father.

He put his hand on Marshall's shoulder and said, "Do you think she's happy, Marshall?"

"I never see her happy, but that's probably because she's around me every time I see her."

"And that could be because you find it hard to understand the direction she's now choosing for her life. Obviously, you project a definite displeasure at her philosophies..."

"Yeah, and that professor lady at who dumps all those philosophies on her. You ever met that...what's her name...Professor Langstrat, out at the college?"

Young thought, shook his head.

"I think Sandy's taken a couple of courses from her now, and every quarter I find my daughter losing more and more of her touch with reality, with good, practical sense."

Young smiled and chuckled a bit. "Marshall, it sounds like she's just exploring, just trying to find out about the world, about the universe she lives

in. Don't you remember growing up? So many things just weren't true until you could prove themx yourself. That's probably the way it is right now with Sandy. She's a very bright girl. I'm sure she jm just needs to explore, to find herself."

"Well whenever she finds out where she is I hope she calls." ~~She's been gone since last night~~

"Marshall, I'm sure she would feel much more free to cal l if she could be sure she would find understanding hearts at home. ~~I know this all might sound new to you, but remember what Jesus said about judging.~~ It's not for us to determine what another person must do with himself, or think about his place in the cosmos. Each person must find his own way, his own truth. ~~What is true for you may not be true for Sandy. Truth is so very relative, it can change from one human to the next. I guess what has really set the church back so far from where it could be today is that old pet peeve of mine, intolerance.~~ If we're ever going to get along like any kind of civilized family on this earth, we're going to have to learn to respect the other man's right to his own views."

Marshall felt a flash of deja vu, as if a recording had been taken from Sandy's brain and plugged into Young's. He ~~Marshall~~ couldn't help but ask, "You sure you never met Professor Langstrat?"

"Quite sure," Young answered with a smile.

"How about Alf Brummel?"

"Who?"

"Alf Brummel, the Police Chief."

"Well..."

Marshall watched his face. Was he struggling for an answer?

Young finally answered, "~~Yes, I've met him on occasion.~~ I may have ~~I was just trying to match the name with the face in my mind.~~" He seems to be a competent fine man.

~~"He's good friend. Why?"~~

← KEEP THIS ↙

"Well, you'd like him. I think he thinks the way you do. Talks a lot about getting along and being peaceful. How he got to be a cop, I'll never know."

"But weren't we talking about Sandy?"

"Yeah, which got us on the subject of truth being adjustable to fit the man, which made me think of Professor Langstrat because I think that's what she's been pumping into Sandy, which made me think of Alf Brummel, because this town needs cleaning up."

"Well yes, you wrote about that at length in the Monday edition. But—"

"If truth is so adjustable, where do right and wrong come in? See? We're back to Sandy in a nice, tight loop. I'm just trying to give you an inkling of where I'm coming from. I'm all for individual rights, but this thing you said about truth...what if drugs and crime aren't okay for me but are okay for the other guy? Does Alf Brummel stay home and be tolerant?"

Young was holding up his hand, trying to ease the pace a little. Marshall was pushing a little hard.

"Whoa there, Marshall," Young said with a nervous laugh. "You're pushing into some very deep questions."

"Well here's some of the questions I have to push into every day: What's Sandy going to do about God? He's either there or He isn't, and if He is there, then He is what He is, not what someone makes Him."

"Marshall, don't you see? That wasn't a question; that was a question-and then an answer - your answer. Sandy's answer might be different."

"So what are you saying?"

Young tried to gather his thoughts. Both of them knew they were talking on different frequencies.

"All the questions you're struggling with, the matters of right and wrong, or what Truth is, or our different views of these issues...so many of these things are unknowable, save in the heart. We all feel the truth,

like a common heartbeat in all of us. Each human has the natural capacity for good, for love, for expecting and striving for the best interests of himself and his neighbor.

"I guess you weren't here for the festival."

Young chuckled, "I'll admit we humans can certainly misdirect our better inclinations."

"Say, did you make the festival, by the way?"

"Yes, some parts of it. Most of it was of little interest to me, I'm afraid."

"So you didn't drop by the carnival, eh?"

"Most certainly not. It's a waste of money. But about Sandy..."

"Yeah, we were talking about what's true, and every one's view...

"This must be the main bone of contention between you and Sandy."

"Mmm, just the latest. Like the whole subject of God, for example. She can't seem to find him, I'm just trying to pin him down, we can't agree on our religion, and so far you haven't helped much."

Young smiled thoughtfully. Marshall could feel a very lofty homily coming.

"Your God," said Young, "is where you find him, and to find Him, we need only to open our eyes and realize that He is truly within all of us. We've never been without Him at all, Marshall; it's just that we've been blinded by our ignorance, and that has kept us from the love, security and meaning that we all desire.

Jesus revealed our problem on the cross, remember? Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not..." So His example to us is to search for knowledge, wherever we may find it. That's what you are doing, and I'm convinced that's what Sandy is doing. The source of your problem is a narrow perspective, Marshall. You must widen your perspective, be open minded. You must search, and Sandy must search."

Marshall was really beginning to regret this visit. From this closer perspective, Young seemed just this side of a very thin line between for real and bonkers.

"So..." Marshall said thoughtfully, "you're saying it's all a matter of how we look at things?"

"That would be part of it, yes."

"And...if I might perceive something a certain way, that doesn't mean everybody's going to see it that way, right?"

"Yes, that's right!" Young seemed very pleased with his student.

"So...now let me just see if I've got this right...if my reporter, Bernice Krueger, perceived that you, Brummel, and three other people were having some kind of little meeting behind the dart throwing booth at the carnival...well, that's just her perception of reality?"

That didn't shake Young much at all. He smiled, looked at Marshall with a funny kind of what-are-you-trying-to-pull grin, and answered, "I suppose so, Marshall. I guess that would be a case in point. I was nowhere near the carnival, and I told you that. I abhor that kind of place."

"You weren't there with Alf Brummel?"

"No, not at all. So you see, Ms. Krueger had quite an incorrect perception of someone else."

"Of both of you, ~~Three other people~~, I suppose."

Young smiled and appeared to shrug it off.

~~Marshall thought outloud so Young could overhear, "She mistook someone for you, someone else for Brummel, and someone else for Langstrat.~~

Marshall pressed a little. "What do you suppose the odds are of that happening?"

Young just kept smiling, but his face was getting just a little red. "Marshall, what do you wish me to do? Argue with you? Certainly you didn't come here for that sort of thing."

Marshall took a real stab at whatever it might catch. "She even took some pictures of you."

Young sighed, looked for a moment at the floor, and just kept ~~smiling~~ calm in his controlled, professional sort of way. Then he looked at Marshall and said just a little cooly, "Then why don't you bring those photographs next time, and then we can discuss it?"

The little smile that suddenly appeared on Young's face hit Marshall like a spittle.

"Okay..." Marshall muttered, not dropping his eyes.

~~"You can make another appointment with Marge out at the des~~

"Marge will set another appointment for you."

"Thanks a lot."

Marshall checked his watch, went to the door, and opened it. "Come on in, Alf."

Alf Brummel had been sitting in the ~~waiting~~ reception area. At the sight of Marshall he jumped awkwardly to his feet. ~~and his face turned white. Young was right behind Marshall, and immediately grabbed Brummel's hand, shaking it vigorously.~~ Marshall took note of Alf's expression, a look one might display a split second before being hit by a train.

Yes, Young was the cool one, but Brummel was a pansy.

Young led Brummel quickly into his office, saying over his shoulder, "Marge, make another appointment for Mr. Hogan."

But Mr. Hogan had gone out the door.

Marshall spoke firmly and overly ~~friendly~~

Marshall grabbed Alf by the hand and shook that hand excitedly. "Alf, buddy! Say, seeing as how the two of you don't seem to know each other very well, let me introduce you. Alf Brummel, this is Reverend Oliver Young. Rev. Young, Alf Brummel, the Chief of Police!"

Brummel didn't seem to appreciate Marshall's cordiality at all, but Young did. He stepped forward, ~~grb~~ grabbed Brummel's hand, shook it, and then pulled Brummel quickly into his office, saying over his shoulder, ~~to his new secretary,~~ Marge, ~~You can~~ make another appointment for Mr. Hogan."

But Mr. Hogan had left.

FINALED

June 14, Tuesday PM

Sandy Hogan sat dismally at a small lunch table in a quaint on-campus plaza shaded by an expansive grape arbor, she was staring at a slowly cooling microwaved packaged hamburger and a slowly warming half pint carton of milk. ~~Classes that morning only slipped by, mostly unheard.~~ She had made her classes that morning, but they had all slipped by her, mostly ~~unheard.~~ unabsorbed. Her mind was too much on herself, her family, her belligerent father, And what a lousy way to spend the night, walking clear across town and then sitting in the Ashton bus depot all night reading from her Psychology textbook. After her last class of the day she'd tried to take a nap out on the lawn in the ~~sculpture~~ garden and had managed to doze for a short time. ~~But~~ When she ~~awakened~~ awoke her world was really no better and she had only two impressions: hunger and loneliness.

Now, sitting at this little table with a machine vended lunch, her loneliness was stealing away her hunger and she was on the brink of crying.

"Why, Daddy?" she whispered in very soft tones, dabbling her straw in her carton of milk. ~~"Why won't you let me be me?~~ Why can't you love me for what I am?"

How could he have so much against her when he hardly even knew her? How could he be so adamant against her thoughts and philosophies when he couldn't even understand them? They were living in two different worlds, and each disdained that of the other.

Last night had just gotten to be too much. She and her father ~~they~~ never said a word to each other the whole evening and Sandy went to bed feeling depressed and angry. Even as she lay in bed and could hear her folks going through the house, turning out the lights, brushing their teeth, turning in for the night, they seemed half a world away. She wanted to call them into her room and reach out th them, but she knew it wouldn't work; Daddy would only make demands and place conditions on their relationship instead of loving her - just loving her.

She still didn't know what had terrified her last night. All she could remember was waking up in the pit of the night plagued by every fear she'd ever had known - fear of dying, fear of failure, fear of loneliness. She just had to get out of the house. ~~It was foolish and she knew it even as she~~ She knew even as she hastily dressed and ran out the door ~~from the house~~ that what she was doing was foolish and pointless, but the feelings were greater than any common sense she could muster to fight them.

Now she felt very much like some poor animal shot into space with no means of returning, just floating, drifting, listlessly waiting for nothing in particular and with nothing much to look forward to anyway.

"Oh, Daddy...." she whimpered, and then she ~~did~~ began ~~start~~ to cry.

"Uh..." came a soft and hesitant voice, "excuse me..."

Sandy looked up and saw a young man, blond, slightly thin, with big brown eyes that were full of compassion.

The young man said, "Please forgive me for intruding...but...is there anything I can do to help?"

INSERT: ~~She~~ She bowed her head and let her red hair fall down like soft blinds on either side of her face. ~~and allowed herself the shedding of many tears.~~ She could hear people passing, but ~~no one stopped to bother her in her private moment.~~ they chose to live in their own world and left her alone in hers. She tried to cry softly, which was hard to do when her emotions wanted so ~~strongly~~ much to rush ~~right up~~ out of her, like the cascade from a ~~broken~~ dam ~~having been pent up for so long.~~

~~For a moment she detached herself from the world around her and let her universe go no further than the little table - all the universe she could cope with.~~

But she did cry, long and steady, until...

Retyped INSERT

She gently bowed her head ~~and covered her face with her hands.~~ and ~~She~~ let her red hair fall down like soft blinds on either side of her face as her tears dropped one by one to the table top. She could hear people passing, but they chose to live in their own world and left her alone in hers. She tried to cry softly, which was hard to do when her emotions wanted so much to rush out of her like the cascade from a broken dam. But she did cry, long and steady, until...

June 14, Tuesday PM

It was dark in Professor Juleen Langstrat's apartment; the drapes were drawn, the lights were out. Only one ~~xxxx~~ candle burned on the ~~xxxxxxx~~ table in a small set-aside place Langstrat called the consultation room

It was dark in Professor Juleen Langstrat's apartment, and very, very quiet. ~~XX~~ Langstrat sat in the living room in an overstuffed chair, her head laid back against the cushion, her arms outstretched in front of her, the hands making gentle, sweeping motions as if she were treading water.

It was dark in the living room of Professor Juleen Langstrat's apartment, and very, very quiet. One candle on the ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ coffee table cast ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ a dull, yellow light on the ceiling-high bookcases, the strange oriental masks, the neatly arranged furniture, and the faces of two people who sat opposite each other in comfortable chairs, the candle between them. One of the people was the Professor, her head laid back against the back of her chair, her eyes closed, her expression intense, her arms outstretched in front of her, her hands making gentle, sweeping motions as if she were treading water.

The man sitting opposite her was Brummel, also with eyes closed, but not mirroring the expression and actions of Langstrat very well. He looked very tense, stiff, uncomfortable. At short intervals, and for just a split second, he would crack his eyes open just enough to see what Langstrat was doing.

Langstrat began to moan and her face registered pain and displeasure. She opened her eyes, and sat upright. Brummel opened his eyes and looked back at her, ~~appearing somewhat listless.~~

"You don't feel well at all today, do you?" she asked.

He shrugged, looked at the floor. "Ehhh, I'm okay. Just tired."

She shook her head, not pleased or satisfied with his answer. "No, no, it's the energy I feel from you. You're very disturbed."

Brummel was silent, having no answer.

"Did you talk to Oliver today?" she asked him probingly.

He didn't answer right away, but finally said, "Yeah, sure."

"And you went to talk to him about our relationship."

That got some action out of him. "No! That's - "

"Don't lie to me."

He wilted a little, let out a frustrated sigh. "Yeah, sure, we talked about it. We talked about other things too, though."

Langstrat probed him with her eyes as if doing some kind of x-ray scan. Her hands opened and began to wave in the air just slightly. Brummel tried to sink out of sight into his chair.

"Hey, listen," he said shakily, "it's no big deal..."

She began to speak as if reading off a note pinned on his chest. "You're... frightened, you feel cornered, you went to tell Oliver...you also feel controlled..." She looked at his face. "Controlled? By whom?"

"I don't feel controlled!"

She laughed a little to put him at ease. "Well of course you do. I just read it ~~in your energy field.~~"

Brummel looked for just a second toward the telephone on the end table. "Did Young call you?"

She smiled with amusement ~~and shook her head.~~ "There was no need to. Oliver is very close to the Universal Mind. I'm really beginning to ~~hear~~ meld with his thoughts now." She firmed up her expression and said, "Alf, I really wish you were doing as well."

Brummel sighed again, hid his face behind his hands, looked at the floor, thought for a moment, then finally blurted out, "Hey, listen, I can't do everything at once! There's just too much going on!"

She put her hand on his hand comfortingly. "Well then, let's deal with these things one at a time. Alf?" He looked up at her. "You're frightened, aren't you? What are you frightened of?" ~~about?~~"

"You tell me," and it was almost a dare.

"I'm giving you a chance to speak first."

"Well then, I'm not frightened."

At least not until this very second, when Langstrat's eyes narrowed and began to bore into him.

"You are indeed frightened," she said sternly. "You are ~~convinced that~~ frightened because we were photographed the other night by that reporter from the Clarion, isn't that right?"

Brummel pointed his finger at her angrily. "See? Now that was exactly one of the ~~exact~~ things Young and I talked about! He called you! He had to have called you!"

She was unabashed as she nodded. "Yes, of course he called me. He withholds nothing from me. None of us withholds truth from all the others, you know that."

Brummel figured he may as well open up. "I'm concerned about the Plan. We're...we're getting too big, too big to hide anymore, ~~and~~ we're risking exposure in too many places. I think we were ~~too~~ careless to meet out in public like that."

"But it's all been taken care of. There's nothing to worry about."

"Oh no? Now Hogan's on our scent! I suppose you know he was ~~in~~ asking Oliver some very delicate questions."

"Oliver can handle himself."

"So how do we handle Hogan?"

"The same way we handle anyone else. Are you aware that he ~~has~~ talked to Oliver about problems he's having with his daughter? You should find that interesting in itself."

Brummel was interested. "What kind of problems?"

"She's run away from home...and~~x~~ yet she still had the desire to be in my class today. I like the sound of that."

"So how do we use it?"

She smiled her cunning smile. "All in good time, Alf. We can't rush things."

couldn't sit in that chair any longer. He was too nervous and all that pressure from Langtrat wasn't helping any. He got up and paced a little

Brummel √ ſ d → r ; q r e √ c r h 2 ~~h~~ d

2 e. → . √ ?, 6 .

"With Hogan I'm not so sure. He...he may not be the pushover that Harmel was."

"~~But you've used your powers well enough.~~ Oh, I'm sure just the right opportunity will come up for you to take care of him very discreetly ~~nicely~~."

Brummel shook his head with self-disgust. "Maybe having Krueger arrested was the wrong thing to do."

"But you got access to the film; you had it destroyed."

He turned to face her, trying to get her to see his point. "And what did that get us? Before that, they weren't asking any questions, and now they are! Come on~~x~~, I know what I'd think if I got my camera back and the~~x~~ film was ruined! Hogan and Krueger just aren't that gullible!"

Langstrat tried to speak soothingly, putting her arms around him like the tendrils of a vine. "Ah, but they are vulnerable, first to you, and ultimatelyx, to me."

"Just like everybody,.." he muttered.

Brummel gave in. "It was...uh...Krueger. Bernice Krueger. She saw all of us together." I know we shouldn't have met out in public! I told them!

"But it's all been taken care of. There's nothing to worry about."

"Then why was Hogan in Young's office? Hogan never talked to Young before. I know that guy. He's a snoop!" Krueger told him everything!"

"Listen. Oliver said he was also there to talk about problems he's having with his daughter. You should find that interesting in itself."

"What kind of problems?" And yet she was in my class today.

"She's run away from home. I like the sound of that."

"So how do we use it?"

She shook her head. "Alf, you have such power, there are so many avenues at your disposal. You really must learn to use them."

"I did use them! I had Krueger arrested, didn't I?"

"And the film destroyed."

"Hogan claims some of the pictures came out."

"It's a lie. He was just trying to bait you two."

Brummel couldn't sit in that chair any longer; he was too nervous and all the pressure from Langstrat wasn't helping any. He got up, paced a little.

"But that's just it! Why would he even be doing that, why would he be asking Young and me about our being at the carnival? I know what I'd think if I got my camera back and the film was ruined!"

Langstrat tried to speak soothingly, putting her arms around him like the tendrils of a vine. "I might just think that the night was too dark to take pictures and that my camera was set wrong."

"Hogan and Krueger aren't that gullible."

"Ah, but they are vulnerable. First to you, and ultimately, to me."

"Just like everybody..." he muttered.

Her reaction was what Brummel had come to expect. She firmly turned him around and looked right into his eyes She grew very cold and frightening and looked right into his eyes.

"And that," she said, "is another topic you discussed with Oliver today."

"He tells you everything!"

"He always would tell me even if he didn't."

"I will always know whether he tells me or not."

Brummel tried to turn his eyes away from her. He couldn't stand whatever it was about her that could make such beauty so immensely hideous.

"Look at me!" she insisted, and Brummel obeyed. Her tone sounded so devious, so other-worldly as she said, "If you are not happy with our

INSERT

He was getting desperate to appease her, to get her to let go of him. "I...I just don't want things to get out of our control..."

She gave him a slow, vampiric kiss. "You are the one who needs more control. ~~You are letting the wrong feelings~~. Haven't I always taught you that?"

She was cutting him to pieces and he knew it, but she had him. He belonged toher.

He still had a concern he chuldn't shake. "But...how many adversaries can we continue to remove? It seems like ever timew we get rid of one, bingo, another one pops up in his place. Harmel went out, in came Hogan..."

She completed the thought for him. "You took care of Rev. Farrel, and in came Henry Busche!"

"It can't go on. The odds are against us."

"Busche is as good as gone! Isn't there a confidence vote this Friday?"

relationship, I can always have it terminated."

He looked down, stuttered a bit. "It's..it's okay..."

"What?"

"I mean I'm happy with our relationship."

"Truly happy?"

He was getting desperate to appease her, to get her to let go of him. "Listen, like I said, I need time."

She gave him a kiss; Brummel was almost afraid she would bite him.

She gave him a slow, vampiric kiss. "How much do you need? More than you've already been given?"

She was cutting him to pieces without the slightest show of temper or violence. She had him; he belonged to her. "You did fine. You saw to it that the pastor was expelled and ruined. What went wrong?"

"Hey, I'm working on it, I'm working on it. This Hank Busche is a stubborn little character."

"So isn't there a confidence vote this Friday?"

"He'll lose. I'm sure of it."

"He wasn't supposed to win the last one. Why did he?"

"I don't know."

"Do you need some help?"

"No, no, I can handle it. I think I have some stuff on him I can use. But..."

"Yes?"

"You know he removed Lou Stanley from the church for adultery?"

"Ah, yes. That should help the congregation decided."

"A lot of people agreed with that move!"

She backed away from him just a little just so she could gaze at him better, freezing his blood with her demonlike eyes. "You are afraid of Henry Busche!"

"Listen. He has a lot of support in the church, more than I thought he did. Well just look at the situation: he actually had the clout to remove Lou Stanley, and he was able to do it and still remain as pastor!"

"You are afraid of him!"

"Somebody's on his side. I don't know who, but...sooner or later he will he's going to find out about us."

"He will never find out anything!" she said, and if she had fangs they would have been showing. "He will be destroyed as a minister long before then. You will see to that, won't you?"

"I'm working on it."

"Do not bow to this Henry Busche! He bows to you, and you bow to me!"

"I'm working on it," I said!"

She relaxed, smiled a conniving kind of smile and said, "Next Tuesday, then?"

"Ehh..." "Mmmm," was all he could say.

"We'll celebrate Busche's Friday demise. You can tell me all about it."

"What about Hogan?" "He's been looking out for you, you know!" "He's responsibility!"

"Don't worry about him. That's not your department."

"Hogan is a limp fool. and weakened"

Before Brummel knew it, he was standing outside her back door. Their meeting was over. She was through with him for now.

Langstrat watched him through her window until he drove off, taking the usual alley route where he would not be seen. She then opened the drapes to let some light in, extinguished the candle on the coffeetable, and went to a file cabinet in her office corner. Opening a drawer, she pulled out a file and laid it open on her desk. Soon she had arranged, in neat piles by category, life histories, personality profiles and current photographs of Marshall, Kate and Sandy Hogan. When her eyes fell on the photograph of Sandy, they took on a very scheming, malicious glint.

Hovering invisibly over Langstrat's shoulder was a huge black hand adorned with jewelled rings and bracelet of gold. A deep and seductive voice spoke thoughts to her mind.

FINALED

June 14, Tuesday PM

~~Tuesday mornings at the Clarion were like walking across a battlefield after everyone was either dead or retreated.~~

~~Tuesday morning~~

Tuesday afternoon at the Clarion was a lot like a battlefield after everyone is either dead or retreated. The place was deathly quiet. For one thing, George the typesetter usually took the day after publishing off to recover from the wild deadline race, so he was gone for the day. Tom the paste-up man was out covering a local story. He'd never done that much reporting before, but Marshall figured it was time for him to branch out a little; ~~be of more use,~~ they were understaffed as it was.

As for Edie the secretary/reporter/ad girl, she had flat out resigned and walked off the job as of last night. Marshall wasn't in the least bit prepared for it; he hadn't known her long enough to know that she once was happily married, but gradually became unhappily married, and finally got a little thing going with some trucker that eventually resulted in a very recent blow-up at home. Now she was gone, just like that, and Marshall could really feel the void. ~~She knew where everything was, including a lot of the paper's books. He didn't even know how much to pay her in back wages.~~

fleeing abruptly in opposite directions with pieces of marriage flying everywhere and spouses

Right now only Bernice and he were there at the paper, sitting alone in Marshall's glass enclosed office at the back of the little newsroom/ad room/front office. ~~Through the glass~~ Marshall could look through the glass and survey the three desks, two typewriters, two wastebaskets, two telephones and one coffeemaker. Everything looked ~~very well used and very~~ busy, with papers and copy laying everywhere, as if there had been a sudden evacuation, ~~in the middle of a big rush day,~~ but ~~boy~~, the place was sure small, ~~though~~.

sitting at his ten dollar secondhand desk

so cluttered and but absolutely nothing was happening

a maze for being so small.

"I don't suppose you know where everything is?" he muttered to Bernice.

~~Bernice was stirring her little styrofoam cup of coffee~~ sat on worktable

Bernice was sitting up on the worktable adjacent to Marshall's desk, her back ~~leaning~~ against the wall, stirring a personalized mug of hot chocolate.

"Aw, we'll find it all," she answered. "I know where she kept the books,

"I don't suppose you know where everything is?" he muttered to Bernice.

Bernice was sitting up on the worktable adjacent to Marshall's desk, her back against the wall, stirring a personalized mug of hot chocolate.

"Aw, we'll find it all," she answered. "I know where she kept the books, and I'm sure her Rollodex has all the addresses and phone numbers."

"What about the cord to the coffeemaker?"

"Why do you think I'm drinking hot chocolate?"

"Nuts. I wish somebody would've told me."

"I don't think anybody really knew."

"We'd better get an ad in for a new secretary this week. Edie carried more than her weight around here."

"I guess it was a bad blow-up. She's leaving town for good, and pronto, before her husband's black eyes heal up and he can see to find her."

"Affairs. Nothing good ever comes of 'em."

"So have you heard the latest about Alf Brummel?"

Marshall looked up at her, perched up on the worktable like some coy cockatoo, trying to look like she was more interested in her hot chocolate than in telling him the supposedly spicy news.

"Under the circumstances," he said, "I'm dying to hear it."

"I had lunch with Sara, his secretary, today. Guess he's gone for several hours every Tuesday afternoon and never says where, but Sara knows. Guess our friend Alf has a special girlfriend."

"Yeah, Juleen Langstrat, philosophy prof out at the college."

That ruined it for Bernice. "How did you know?"

"The blonde woman you saw that night, remember? The day after one of my reporters gets busted for taking the wrong pictures at the carnival, Langstrat kicks me out of her class. Add to that Oliver Young's ears getting all red when he told me he didn't know her."

"You're brilliant Hogan."

"I just guessed right."

"She and Brummel have something going. He calls it some kind of therapy, but I think he enjoys it, if you get my drift."

"So what's Young's connection to either of them?"

Bernice didn't hear his question. "Too bad Brummel isn't already married. I could have done more with it."

"Hey, reset your frequency, will you? We've got ouselves a little club here and all three of these people are members."

"Sorry."

"What we're really after is whatever it is they don't want us to know, especially if - and I mean IF - whatever it is is worth trumping up a false arrest to cover up."

"And destroying my film."

"I wonder if any of those fingerprints on the film would tell us something?"

"Not much. They're not on file."

Marshall twisted in his chair to face her more directly. "All right, who do you know?"

Bernice was smug about it. "I have an uncle who's very close to Justin Parker's office."

"What? You mean the County Prosecutor?"

"Sure. He does just about anything for me."

"Hey, don't bring them into this! Notyet..."

Bernice raised her hands as if he was pointing a gun at her and assured him, "Not yet, not yet."

"But they may come in handy."

"Don't think I haven't thought of that."

"But tell me this. Did Brummel ever apologize?"

"Are you kidding?"

"No official, signed apology from his and his office?"

"Is that what he told you?"

Marshall sneered. "Aw, both Brummel and Young told me all kinds of things, how they were never anywhere near the carnival... boy, I just wish we had those pictures!"

Bernice was offended. "Hey, you can believe me, Hogan. You really can!"

Marshall looked into space for a second or two, musing things over. "Brummel and Langstrat. Therapy. Eh...I guess that makes sense now...Let me think for a minute..."

Bernice was too impatient to let him. "C'mon, let's get all th pieces out on the table."

What pieces? Marshall thought. How do you lay out vague feelings, strange experiences, vibes?

He finally said, "Uh...this Brummel and Langstrat...they're both really into the same kind of thing. I can tell."

"What kind of thing?"

Marshall didn't want to say, but felt cornered. "Uh...how about... Whammies?"

Bernice looked at him with a predictably puzzled expression. Oh c'mon Krueger, don't make me have to explain it.

She said, "You'll have to explain that to me."

Oh boy, here we go, Marshall thought. ~~"Well...have you ever met this Langstrat?"~~

~~"Nope. Never seen her."~~

~~"Brummel?"~~

~~"Enough to hate his looks."~~

~~"I try to stay away from dark alleys."~~ ~~"Down a dark alley."~~

"Well...now it's gonna sound crazy, but...I talked to ~~both~~ each of them when ~~yesterday...~~ ... and you ought to try it sometime. ~~Both of them~~ each had this weird, gooney-eyed thing they do... kind of like they're hypnotizing you or something..."

Bernice started to crack up.

Marshall knew she would. "Ehhh, go ahead, laugh." ~~But that makes more sense to me now. They both have the same hobby.~~ now it just kind of like on the same wavelength."

"What? Some kind of Svengali trip?" are you saying? What they're all into

"I don't know how to label it yet, ~~but yeah.~~ Brummel's not nearly as good at it as ~~Langstrat~~ Lance. He smiles too much. Young man words..."

Bernice studied his face for just the slightest moment and then said, "I think you need a good, stiff drink. Would a hot chocolate do?"

"Sure, get me one. Please."

She scooted off the table and went into the back room.

He stuck his head out the office door and hollered after her, ~~"But I found out Brummel is a friend of my pastor, and I never knew that before either. They met with each other today."~~ But Brummel is kind of a bad egg, you know. Young

"I already told you they were in cahoots," she hollered back. "They were together Sunday night."

"Yeah, well, I asked both of them about that and they both denied it."

"Yeah, and tried to put a whammy on you."

"Hey now, I gave you a break over that film!"

"Okay, we're even!"

Bernice returned with another personalized mug - Edie's - full of hot chocolate. She gave it to him, "Hope it's strong enough," and they went back into the office.

But "Brummel's not very good at lying either. He said he didn't really know Young, and that was obviously untrue. They met with each other today."

"All three of those people, Langstrat and Brummel and even Young...they really push the power, you know what I mean?"

"I don't know if I'm ready for all this supernatural stuff," she hollered back.

"Well, it's not supernatural. I just mean they like pushing their weight around, pulling your strings."

"Oh, I agree totally with that."

Bernice returned with another personalized mug - Edie's - full of hot chocolate. She gave it to him, "Hope it's strong enough," and hopped back up onto the table.

"But they try to look unconnected..." Marshall mused. "Brummel doesn't want me to know he knows Young, Young acts like he doesn't know Langstrat, but who knows?"

"It all looks very clandestine to me."

"Well what else do you know about Brummel and Langstrat?"

"But they do try to look unconnected..." Marshall wondered.

"Very clandestine, I'd say."

"And what about the other two unknowns? Ever seen them before?"

"Never. They could have been out-of-towners."

Marshall sighed. "It's a dead end."

"Maybe not yet. Brummel does go to that little white church, Ashton Community, and I heard somebody just got kicked out of there for shacking up or something..."

"Bernice, that's gossip!"

"Don't worry. I'll follow it on my own time."

"Just don't make anymore problems for me. I have enough as it is."

"Sandy?"

Yes, Marshall, it's back to the really tough subjects. "We haven't heard a thing yet, but we're still calling around, checking with relatives and friends. We're sure she'll come home sooner or later."

then

"Well...what would you say to my talking to a friend on the Whitmore faculty who might be able to tell me something about this mysterious professor lady?"

Marshall looked doubtful. ~~only shook his head and scratched his chin.~~ "Bernice, I'm only concerned with news...I mean, real news. I don't want people to see my reporter nosing around in people's private affairs. I have enough trouble now as it is."

"~~Well~~ Listen, ~~go ahead, provided~~ you have to uncover some news, and I mean real news. Don't go poking your nose where it doesn't belong." ~~If Langstrat and Brummel have a little fling going, but that's all, I'm not interested.~~"

"~~Well~~ But like you say, if it's a stone, turn it over. One lead might lead to another."

"But please don't make anymore problems for me. I have enough as it is."

"Sandy?"

Yes, Marshall, it's back to the really tough subjects. "We haven't heard a thing yet, but we're still calling around, checking with relatives and friends. We're sure she'll come home sooner or later."

"Isn't she in Langstrat's class?"

Marshall answered with some bitterness, "She's been in several of Langstrat's classes..." But then he had to pause and take a careful look at Bernice. "Don't you think we might be blurring the line between unbiased journalism and...personal ~~vendettas~~ vengeance?"

Bernice shrugged. "I'll only find ~~out what I can~~. Either it'll be news or it won't be. ~~But~~ In the meantime, I thought perhaps you'd appreciate a little background..."

Marshall couldn't shake off the memory of his encounter with the fiery Julèen Langstrat, and he hurt deeply every time he recalled that professor's ~~words~~ ideas being spit at him through the mouth of his own daughter.

"If it's a stone, turn it over," he said ~~with a shrug.~~ finally.

"On my time or the Clarion's?"

"Just turn it over ," he said, and started pounding the daylights out of his typewriter.

FINALED

June 14, Tuesday evening

That evening Marshall and Kate set three places at the ~~table~~ dinner table. Sure, it was an act of faith, or trusting that Sandy ~~will~~ would be there just like she always had been. Sometimes, when nothing else seems to work, simple little remembrances, habits, customs are grasped upon. As for the two of them, there was nothing either of them could say that they hadn't said many times before. They'd called everyone they knew, but none had seen Sandy anywhere. The police hadn't turned up anything. They'd also called the college to check whether or not Sandy had been to her classes that day, but so far none of her professors or teacher assistants could be reached for a definite answer.

Marshall sat at the table staring at his empty plate and Sandy's empty chair. Kate sat across from him, silent, waiting for the rice to steam. ~~get done.~~

"Marshall," she said, "don't torture yourself."

"I'm ~~having my butt whipped, that's what it is.~~"

"Oh stop it!"

"And the problem is, now that I know I blew it, there isn't much chance of a retake."

Kate reached across the table and took his hand. "There certainly is. She'll come back. She's old enough to be reasonable and take care of herself. I mean, just look at how much she took with her. She just can't be planning on being gone indefinitely."

Just then the doorbell rang. They both jumped just a little.

"Yeah," said Marshall, "go ahead. Be the mailman or a girl scout selling cookies or a Jehovah's Witness...!"

"Well, Sandy wouldn't ring the doorbell anyway."

"That's just what I mean. I can't take the torture."

Kate got up to answer the door, but Marshall got up and hurried ahead of her. They both reached the door at about the same time and Marshall

opened it.

This was something neither of them was expecting: a young man, blond and neat, very much college material. He was by himself, carried no leaflets or religious propaganda and seemed ~~almost~~ shy about even being there.

"Mr. Hogan?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Marshall. "Who are you?"

The young man was quiet but assertive enough to do business. "My name is Shawn Ormsby. I'm a junior at Whitmore and a friend of your daughter Sandy."

Kate started to say, "Well, please come in," but Marshall interrupted her with, "Do you know where she is?"

Shawn paused just long enough to let energies and emotions season just a bit, then answered carefully, "Yes. Yes, I do."

"Well?" said Marshall.

"May I ~~xxx~~ come in?" he asked politely.

Kate nodded graciously, stepping aside and almost pushing Marshall aside. "Yes, please do."

They showed him into the living room and let him have a seat. Kate held Marshall's hand for just a moment, just long enough to get him into a chair and silently remind him to control himself.

"Thank you very much for coming," Kate said. "We've been very concerned."

Marshall's voice was controlled and gentle as he said, "What've you got?"

Shawn was visibly uncomfortable and having a hard time finding a place to start.

"I...I met her on campus yesterday..."

"She went to school yesterday?" Marshall blurted, startled.

"Let him talk, Marshall," Kate reminded him.

"Well," said Shawn, "yes. Yes, she did. But I met her in Jones Plaza,

an outdoor eating area. She was by herself and so visibly upset that...well, I just felt I had to get involved."

Marshall was sitting on pins and needles. "What do you mean, visibly upset? Is she okay?"

"Oh, yes! She's perfectly all right. That is, she hasn't come to any harm. But...like I said, I've become involved, and now...I'm here on her behalf." This time both of them were listening without blurts or questions, so Shawn continued. "We talked for quite a while and she told me her side of the story...She really does want to come home, I should tell you that first."

"But?" Marshall prompted.

"Well, Mr. Hogan...that's the first thing I tried to persuade her to do, but...if you can accept this, she feels afraid to come back, and I think a little ashamed."

"Because of me?"

Shawn was very afraid of walking on some very thin ice. "Can you...are you able to accept that?"

Marshall was ready to be tough on himself. "Yeah...I can accept that, all right. I've been asking for it for years. I had it coming."

Shawn looked visibly relieved to hear that. "Well...that's what I'm trying, in my own weak, limited way, to accomplish. I'm no professional, I don't claim to know anything about socialogy - my major's in geology- but I'd just like to see this family together again."

Kate said humbly, "We would too."

"Yeah," said Marshall, "we really want to work on it. Listen, Shawn, you get to know me and you'll realize I came out of a pretty bent mold and I'm really tough to straighten out..."

"No you didn't!" Kate lovingly protested.

"Yeah, yeah I did. But I'm learning all the time. I want to keep on learning." He leaned forward in his chair, not in any threatening way, but out of earnestness. "Say...I take it Sandy sent you here to see us?"

Shawn looked out the window. "She's out in the car right now."

Kate was on her feeet even before she knew she was. Marshall grabbed her hand and settled her back into her seat.

"Hey ~~Kate~~," he said, "who's being over-anxious now?" He turned to Shawn. "How is she? Is she still afraid? Does she think I'm going to jump on her?"

Shawn nodded meekly.

"Well," said Marshall, feeling emotions he really didn't want anyone to see, "listen, tell her I won't jump on her. I won't yell, I won't accuse, I won't get sly or nasty. I just...well, I..."

"He~~r~~ loves her," Kate said for him. "He really does."

"Do you, sir?" Shawn asked.

Marshall nodded.

"Tell me," said Shawn. "Say it."

Marshall looked right in his eyes. "I love her, Shawn. She's my kid, my daughter. She's my life. I love her and I want her back."

Shawn smiled and rose from his seat. "I'll bring her in."

That evening there were four place settings at the table. ~~and dinner lasted a long time.~~ ~~was long, relaxed and meaningful.~~

FINALED

June 17, Friday Noon-ish

Now it was Friday, this day's edition of the Clarion was on the streets, and the usual post-publication lull around the office gave Bernice the chance she needed to do some hoofing. She'd been waiting eagerly for a chance to get back over to Whitmore College to talk to some people she'd gotten to know, and today was the day. A few phone calls had landed her an important lunch appointment.

The North Campus Cafeteria was a new addition to the college campus, a modern, red brick structure with floor-to-ceiling blue tinted windows and carefully kept flower gardens. One could choose to eat inside at any one of hundreds of small, two or four person tables, or sit outside on the patio in the sunshine. The format was buffet, the menu selection was excellent and widely varied, and the food wasn't bad at all.

Bernice came out back door and onto the patio, carrying a tray with coffee and a light salad. Alongside her was Ruth Williams, a cheerful, middle-aged professor in economics, carrying a taco salad. Professor Williams was a middle-aged woman, slightly chunky, with a cheerful demeanor.

They chose a secluded table near the edge of the patio in the semi-shade. For the first half of their meal they indulged in small talk and general catching up, making comments on the food occasionally and trading bites for bites. But Williams knew Bernice pretty well by now.

But Williams knew Bernice pretty well by now.

"Bernice," she said at last, "I can tell you have something on your mind."

Bernice was able to be honest with her friend. "Ruth, it's something unprofessional and distasteful."

Williams gave Bernice an understanding look. "Do you mean to say you've uncovered something new?"

"Oh, oh no, not about Pat. No, that subject has been dormant for quite some time. You can be sure it will reawaken if anything new comes up, though."

"I'm sure it will."

Bernice looked at Williams for a moment, studying her. "You..don't think I'll ever find anything, do you?"

"Bernice, you know that I support you in your efforts one hundred percent, but ~~xxxbxx~~ with that support I must add my sincere doubts that your efforts will ever uncover anything. It ~~all happened so~~ was long ago," and just so... futile... so tragic.

Bernice shrugged. "Well, that's why I'm trying to ~~put~~ focus my efforts ~~in only the effective xxxxx areas~~ only where they'll do some good. Which brings me to the uncomfortable subject for the day, and let me lead into it with this: Did you know I was arrested and jailed Sunday night?"

Williams was, of course, incredulous. "Jailed? Whatever for?"

"Soliciting an undercover cop for an act of prostitution."

That brought the right response from Williams. Bernice wanted to get her good and disgusted. Bernice went on to tell Williams as much of the indignities as she could remember and embellish, and these details made for an even better effect.

"I can't believe it!" Williams kept saying. "That is disgusting! I can't believe it!"

"Well, anyway," Bernice said, bringing in the punch line, "I feel I have good cause to question ~~the chief of police's~~ Mr. Brummels motives. Mind you, I only have theory and speculation, but I want to chase these things to their end to see if anything really lies behind them."

"Well I can understand that. And what could I possibly know that would help you?"

"Have you ever met Professor Julien Langstrat, over in the Philospphy Department?"

"~~A few times.~~ Oh... once or twice. We shared a table once at a faculty luncheon."

Bernice caught a glint of distaste in Williams' expression. "Hmmmm. Something wrong with her?"

~~Williams was careful in answering; she didn't like saying~~

Williams was careful in answering; she hated sounding like a godsip. "Apparently you've had a confrontation with Langstrat."

~~"Never met her."~~

~~"What's she done?"~~

"No, but I understand she has her...peculiar qualities."

"Well, to each his own..." said Williams, looking down and stirring her fork absentmindedly in her salad. "But I found her very difficult to relate to. It was next to impossible to start any coherent conversation."

"~~But~~ How does she carry herself? Is she forceful, retiring, assertive, obnoxious...?"

"Aloof, for one thing, and I guess mysterious, although I use that word for lack of one better. I get the impression that people as they are are nothing but a bore to her. ~~I don't know what it is she thinks she knows that we don't, but whatever~~ her academic interests are very esoteric & almost metaphysical in nature, & she seems to prefer them to bland reality."

"What kind of company does she keep?"

"I wouldn't know. I'd almost be surprised to find her consorting with anyone at all."

"So you've never seen her in the company of Alf Brummel?"

"Oh, and this must be the ultimate goal of your questions. No, never at all."

"But...I guess you don't see her much anyway."

"She's not very social, so no. But listen, I really try to mind my own business, if you catch my meaning. I would definitely like to help you in any way I can to satisfy yourself concerning Pat's death, but what you're after this time is..."

"Unprofessional and distasteful."

"Yes, you were certainly right on that score. ~~But again, my own feelings aside.~~ But again, accompanied with my own advice to you to disengage yourself from this thing, let me, as a friend, refer you to someone who might know more."

"You're a doll!"

"Just a klutz, actually, who values her friends. Got your pencil ready? His name is Albert Darr, and she's in the Philosophy Department. From what I've heard, mostly from him, she rubs shoulders with Langstrat every day, doesn't like her at all, and loves to gossip. I'll even go so far as to call him for you."

Albert Darr, a ~~relatively~~ young and baby-faced professor with stylish tastes in clothes and a certain penchant for ladies, just happened to be in his office grading papers and had time to talk, especially to the ~~reputed~~ lovely reporter from the Clarion.

"Well, hello hello," came his greeting as Bernice came in the door. ~~The tone of his voice was enough to make her turn tail and leave, but she marched in~~

"Well, hello hello yourself," she responded informally. "Bernice Krueger, the friend of Ruth Williams."

He rose from his paper strewn desk and extended his hand in greeting. She gave it a firm shake.

"Uh..." he looked to and fro for an empty chair, and finally moved a pile of reference books to clear one for her to sit in. "Have a seat. Pardon the mess, but ~~it is always like this~~. We all have our strong points, ~~but~~ and tidiness isn't one of mine."

"Well, I'm not from Better Homes and Gardens, so what the heck ~~fuck~~..."

He sat down on another pile of books and papers that could have had a chair under it. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, this isn't really an official visit, Professor Darr - "

"Albert."

"Thank you. Albert. I'm actually here on a personal matter, but if my theories are right, it could be important in a newsworthy sense." She paused to indicate a new paragraph and a difficult question. "Now, Ruth tells

me you know Juleen Langstrat..."

Darr suddenly smiled broadly, leaned back in his piled up chair and rested his hands behind his neck. This was going to be an enjoyable subject for him, it seemed.

"Ahhhh," he said gleefully. "So you've gotten wind of the infamous Langstrat Inner Circle!"

Oh-oh, Bernice thought. Something new here. "Uh...what's that?"

"Oh, you haven't gotten wind of it."

"I'm listening, I'm listening."

"Oh, hold on now."

Darr looked around the room in mock suspicion, searching for imaginary eavesdroppers, then leaned forward and said in a lowered voice, "There are certain things no one is supposed to know, not even myself." Then he brightened up again and said, "But our dear Professor has had many an occasion to hurt and slight me and therefore I feel indebted to her not in the least."

"Well...you seem to know a lot...I hardly know where to start."

"What is it you want to know?"

"Do you know Alf Brummel?"

"What is it you wish to know?"

Bernice figured it would be best to just dive right into it; this guy didn't seem to need formalities.

"To begin with," she said, readying her pen and pad, "what I'm really trying to find out about Alf Brummel, the chief of police. I've been informed that he and Langstrat have something going. Can you verify that?"

"What do you mean, 'something?"

"You fill in the blank."

"If you mean an affair..." and then he smiled, shook his head. "Oh dear. I don't know if you'll like this answer, but no, I don't think anything like that is going on."

Bernice really didn't want to be disappointed. "But he does see her quite regularly."

"A lot of people do. She does counselling in her off hours. Tell me, does Mr. Brummel see her every week?"

With ebbing spirit, Bernice answered, "Yes, every Tuesday. On the dot."

"Well there, you see? He goes to her for regular weekly sessions."

"By why won't he tell anybody? He's very secretive about it."

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "The inner circle, Bernice. No one is supposed to know about these sessions, no one but the privileged, the elite, the powerful, the many special patrons that go to her."

~~Bernice waited, then egged him, "Explain, explain."~~

"Mind you now," he said with a mischievous glint in his eye, "this is privileged information, and I might also caution you that it is not entirely reliable. I know very little of this from direct observation; most of it I've just managed to pick up around the department here. Fortunately, Professor Langstrat has made enough enemies around here that few on the staff feel any commitment or loyalty to her." Then he repositioned himself into a more concentrated, eye-to-eye posture. "Bernice, Professor Langstrat is...how should I say it? Not a...ground level person. Her area of philosophy goes beyond anything any of the rest of us have had any desire to tamper with. Plato, Descartes, Socrates, they are one thing, but the...the Source, the Universal Mind, the Ascended Planes, they are quite another."

~~"Would it bother you if I told you~~ I don't know what you're talking about?"

~~"Not at all.~~ None of us know what she's talking about ~~half the time~~! Some of us are very concerned about it; we don't know if she's ~~really~~ very brilliant and making some real breakthroughs, or if she's...somewhat deranged."

"Well what is all this stuff, this Source, and this Mind...?"

"All right. Uh...as near as we can tell, she derives it from some of the more ancient Eastern religions, the old mystic cults and writings, things I know nothing about and don't want to know anything about. As far as I'm concerned, her studies in these areas have caused her to lose all contact with reality. As a matter of fact, I may even be mocked and maligned among my peers for saying this, but I don't see Langstrat's advances in these areas as anything other than foolish, neo-paganistic witchcraft! I think she's desperately confused!"

Bernice now recalled to mind Marshall's strange descriptions of Langstrat. "Uhhh...I've heard she does strange things to people..."

"Oh, she bothers a lot of people!"

"Well what kind of things have you experienced?"

"Foolishness. Sheer foolishness. I think she believes she can read my mind, control me, put spells on me, whatever. That really seems to be the way she conducts herself. I simply dismiss it and try very hard to be elsewhere."

"But does any of it have credence?"

"You want my opinion?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely not. The only people she can control or affect are the poor dupes in the Inner Circle who are stupid and gullible enough to ~~believe that she really can.~~"

"The Inner Circle"... you used that term before..." I coined that title myself.

He held up his hand in caution her. "No facts, no facts. All I have is a two here and a two there to put together and get a very persuasive four. All I've ever heard her admit is that she counsels these people who come to her. But what does she know about counselling? She's

a philosophy professor, for goddness' sake, what does she know about counselling? Except... not any kind of professional social worker or counsellor or psychologist. However...

"Yes?"

"I would expect it would be very much like her to...claim a very special advantage in such a situation. Who knows, maybe she holds seances and mind reading sessions. Maybe she cooks slug tails and newt's eyes and serves them with breaded spider legs to evoke some answer from the supernatural...but now I'm getting facetious."

"But you do see this as a possibility?"

"Well not nearly as bizarre as I've described, but yes, something along those lines, in keeping with her neo-pagan and occult interests."

"And who are these people in the Inner Circle? Are they all people who are see her regularly?"

"As far as I know. Some don't anymore, some still do. I really have no idea how it's set up or why people even go. What on earth could she be getting out of it?"

"Can you give me some for-instances?"

"Well..." He thought for a moment. "Of course, we've already mentioned and verified your Mr. Brummel. Oh, and you might know of Ted Harmel?"

Bernice just about dropped her pen. "Ted?"

"Yes, the former editor of the Clarion."

"I worked for him, before he left and Hogan bought the paper."

"Uh, the way I understand it, Mr. Harmel didn't just 'leave.'"

"No, he actually fled. But who else?"

"Mrs. Pinckston, a trustee on the Board of Regents." {"ah, so it's not just men." "Oh, certainly not."

Bernice kept writing. "Yes, go on, go on."

"Oh dear, who else? Uh, I think Dwight Brandon..."

"Who's Dwight Brandon?"

Darr looked at her condescendingly. "He only owns the property the college is built on."

"Ohhhh....." She wrote the name down with a bold lettered explanation.

"Oh, and that Reverend fellow, that Oliver Young."

This time Bernice did drop her pen.

Darr looked at her condescendingly. "He only owns the property the college is built on."

"Ohhhh....." She wrote the name down with a bold lettered explanation.

"Oh, and then there's Eugene Baylor. He's general treasurer, a very influential man on the board of regents, I understand. It seems he's been needled just a little about whatever it is he and the professor do in their sessions together, but he remains self-righteous and steadfast in his convictions."

"Hmm."

"~~XXX~~ Ah, and there's also that Reverend fellow, that...uh...~~Young Oliver Young."~~

~~This time Bernice did drop her pen.~~

"Oliver Young."

"How did you know?"

Bernice only smiled. "a lucky guess. Carry on."

She'd never really missed that fire in his eyes; perhaps she'd never known it was gone until this moment when for the first time since they'd left New York, she saw it again. It was suddenly causing some old, unpleasant feelings to rise up within her, feelings she had no desire to cope with late at night with her daughter mysteriously missing.

"Marshall..." she said, sliding her chair out and picking up the plate of half-eaten toast, "let's get some sleep."

"I may not be able to sleep."

"I know," she said quietly.

All this time, Tal, Guilo, Nathan & Armoth were standing in the room, carefully observing, and Guilo began to chuckle in his gruff, quaking way.

Tal said with a smile, "No, Marshall Hogan. You never were much of a sleeper...and now Ba-al Rafar has helped to awaken you again!"

FINALED

June 17, Friday pm

It was Friday evening, and Hank had that night's business meeting on his mind, so much so that it was all he could do to pay attention to the young lady sti

It was Friday evening, and Hank couldn't get the upcoming business meeting off his mind, which was probably to his ~~could have proven a certain~~ advantage ~~for the present moment. He was sitting in his small corner of the house turned into an office with~~ considering the young lady sitting across from him in his little corner of the house turned into an office. He'd already warned Mary about her and even asked Mary to stick closely around and act very loving and wifely. This young lady - Carmen was the only name she gave - was quite a case load. The way she dressed and carried herself...well, Hank made sure that it was Mary who answered her knock at the door and let her in. Hank even told Mary to be plainly visible to any neighbors who might be doing surveillanee.. ~~Carmen seemed real enough, just sincerely overdone, that was all.~~ As far as Hank could tell, Carmen wasn't trying to put on a facade; she seemed real enough, just...sincerely overdone, that was all. And as for her reasons for wanting counselling...

"I think..." she began, "I think I'm just very lonely, and that's why I keep hearing voices..."

Immediately she examined Hank's and Mary's faces to see what their reaction would be. After their recent experiences, nothing sounded too far out to them anymore.

Hank asked her, "What kind of voices? What kind of things do they say?"

She thought for a moment, searching the ceiling with big, overly innocent blue eyes.

"What I'm experiencing is legitimate," she said. "I'm not crazy."

"No problem there," Hank said. "But tell us about these voices. When do they talk to you?"

"When I'm alone, especially. Like ~~yesterday~~ last night, I was lying in bed and..."

she related the words the voice spoke to her, and it could have been a perfect script for an abscene phone call.

Mary didn't know what to say; this was getting a little too heavy a discussion for her. As for Hank, it sounded kind of familiar, and though he felt very cautious about Carmen and her motives, he still remained open to the possibility that she was encounteráng some of the same demonic forces he'd been dealing with.

"Carmen," he asked, "do these voices ever say who they are?"

She thought for a moment. "I think...I think one of them was Spanish or Italian. ~~or something like that.~~ He had an accent, and his name was... Amano, or Amanzo, or something like that. He always spoke very soothingly and always said he wanted to make love to me..."

Just then the phone rang. Mary, quite relieved, got up to answer it.

"Hurry back," said Hank.

She hurried away, that was for sure. Hank was watching her go when he suddenly felt Carmen touching his hand.

"You don't think I'm crazy, do you?" she asked with pleading eyes.

"Uh..." Hank withdrew his hand to scratch a non-existent itch. "No, Carmen, ~~XXX~~ I'm not...I mean I don't. But I do want to know where these voices came from. When did you first start hearing them?"

"When I came to Ashton. My husband left me and I came here to start over, but...I get so lonely."

"You first started hearing them when you came to Ashton?"

"I think it was because I was lonely. And I still am lonely."

"What was it they said at first? How did they introduce themselves?"

"I was alone, and ~~xxxxx~~ lonely, I'd just moved here...and I thought I heard Jim's voice. You know, my husband..."

~~Her hand was on his again. Hank used that~~ his hand to gesture ~~as he said, "Go on."~~

"I really thought it was him. I didn't even think about how he could talk to me without being there, but I talked back and he told me how much he missed me but how he thought it would be better this way, and he spent the rest of the night with me." She began to shed some tears. ~~Hank really didn't know what to make of all this.~~ "It was ~~xxxxxx~~ beautiful," ~~she said.~~

Hank didn't know what to make of all this. "...incredible..." was all he could say.

She looked at him with those big, pleading eyes again and said through her tears, "I knew you'd believe me. I've heard about you. They say you're a ~~xxxx~~ very compassionate man, and very~~xx~~ understanding..."

Depends on who you listen to, Hank thought, ~~but then her hand was touching his hadd again. No, she was really holding his hand this time. Time to call a recess, Hank thought.~~ INSERT

"Uh..." he said, trying to be comforting, sincere, and non-judgmental, "Listen, I think it's been a fruitful hour..." "Oh, yes!" "Would you like to come again, next week sometime?"

"Oh, I'd love to!" she exclaimed, and Hank felt like he'd just asked her for a date. "I've so much more to tell you!"

"Well, okay, I think next Friday will be fine for me if it's fine for you..."

Oh, it was, it was, and Hank stood to his feet to give her the hint that the session was over for now. ~~They~~ They hadn't covered much ground, but as far as Hank was concerned, ~~it had been far more than enough.~~ boy was it enough.

"Now let's both take some time to think about these things. After a week they may be a little clearer to us. They might make more sense," and where, oh where was Mary?

Ah, she came back into the room. "Oh, leaving so soon?"

"It was wonderful!" Carmen sighed, but at least she'd let go of Hank's hand.

Getting Carmen out the door was easier than Hank had expected. Perhaps it was because Mary was back. Good old Mary. What a lifesaver.

Hank closed the door and leaned against it.

"Whew!" was all he could say.

"Hank," Mary said in a very ~~xxxxxxx~~ hushed voice, "I don't think I like this!"

"She's...she's a real hot one, she is."

"What do you think of what she said?"

"Ehhhhh. I'll wait and see. Who was that on the phone?"

"Just wait until you hear this! It was some lady from the Clarion wanting to know if it was Alf Brummel we disfellowshipped from the church!"

Hank suddenly looked like an inflatable toy that had sprung a leak.

FINALED

June 17, Friday evening

Bernice walked into Marshall's office, a little let down but at least satisfied that she had a better grip on what was really going on in town.

Marshall was there at his desk, trying to go over some new advertising copy for Tuesday's edition. ~~It was getting late~~ It was after hours now, both of them should have gone home an hour ago, but Marshall was preoccupied with getting some more advertising accounts and Bernice was preoccupied with her independent investigation.

"So what'd they say?" he asked her without looking up.

"Nope, it isn't Bmummel, and I guess it wasn't a very tactful question. I talked to the pastor's wife and by her tone of voice I can infer that the whole subject is very touchy over there."

"Yeah, I've heard talk around town. Down at the barbershop some guy was saying they're going to vote the pastor out tonight."

"Ah, so they do have troubles."

"But totally unrelated to ours and I'm glad. It's gone far enough." Marshall looked again at the list of names Bernice had gotten from Albert Darr. "How am I supposed to get any of the work done around here with this kind of stuff hanging around unresolved? Bernie, you're getting to be a lot of trouble, you know that?"

She took it as a compliment. "And have you looked over that flyer of elective courses Langstrat is teaching?"

Marshall picked it up from his desk and could only shake his head incredulously. "What in blazes is all this stuff? 'Introduction to Goddess Consciousness and the Craft: goddess consciousness, nymph, maiden, crone, the Sacred Wheel, warlock, how do spells and rituals work?' You gotta be kidding!"

"Read on, boss!"

"'Pathways to Your Inner Light: meet your own spiritual guides, discover the light within...harmonize your mental, physical, emotional and spiritual levels of beingness through hypnosis and meditation.'" Marshall read a little further and then exclaimed, "What!? 'How to Enjoy the Present by Experiencing Past and Future Lives'!"

"I like that one near the bottom there: 'In the Beginning was the Goddess.' Langstrat, maybe?"

"~~It's funny~~ They didn't want any of this stuff advertised in the school paper?"

"~~It's not even that widely advertised on the campus.~~ Albert Darr gave me the flyer himself and said it was a somewhat exclusive pass-around item among the interested students."

"And my little Sandy is sitting in this woman's class..."

"And so are all those people on the list."

PAGE STUFF

"Oh no. Here we come back to that list again." Marshall set down the flyer and picked up the list. He shook his head again; it was all he could do. "I guess I don't mind it too much if a bunch of dupes want to be taken in by this Langstrat, but - "

"But they're all too important," Bernice volunteered. "Just look at that: Two of the college regents, the owner of the college land, the County Comptroller, the district judge, for crying out loud!"

"And Young! Respected, reverred, influential, community involved Oliver Young! Bernice, I'm telling you, he denied knowing Langstrat! I asked him directly, right to his face, and he told me he didn't know her!"

"And denied seeing me and vice versa at the carnival."

"Somebody's lying."

"Young is. Brummel is."

"But I just wish we had some more corroboration."

"Yeah, we've only just met Darr."

"What about Ted Harmel? He's...well, maybe he's out of this whole thing, he's away from it all."

"Maybe."

"How well did you know him?"

"Well enough, I suppose. You heard why he left?"

"Brummel said some kind of scandal, but who can you believe these days?"

"Ted denied it."

"Aw, everybody's saying everything and everybody's denying everything."

"Well I believe Ted. I think he was set up."

"Well call him anyway. I have the number."

Marshall looked at all the advertising copy still on his desk, awaiting his time and attention. "How am I going to get any of this stuff done around here?"

"Hey, it's no biggie. If I could do some independent hoofing, the least you can do is give Ted a call. Do it tomorrow. Saturday, your day off. Reporter to reporter, newsman to newsman. You might hit it off with him."

Marshall sighed and shook his head for the third time. "Let's have the number."

"And Young! Respected, reverred, influential, community involved Oliver Young!" Marshall let some memory tapes play in his mind. "Yeah, it fits, it makes sense now, all that vague, noncommital stuff he was handing me in his office. Young's got a religion all his own. He's no Hardshell Baptist, I'll tell you that!"

"Religion I don't care about. Lies and cover-ups I do care about!"

"Well, he most certainly denied knowing Langstrat. I asked him directly, right to his face, and he told me he didn't know her."

"I said it once and I'll say it again: I saw he and Langstrat together at the carnival, along with Brummel and those other two people, and Young saw me. Of course, he denies that."

"Somebody's lying," Bernice sing-songed.

June 17, Friday night

It was Friday night.

Mary finished up the dinner dishes, put up the towel and made her way through the little house to the back bedroom. There, in the dark, Hank knelt beside the bed in prayer. She knelt down beside him, took his hand, and together they placed themselves in the hands of the Lord. God's will would be done this night, and they would accept it, whatever it was.

Alf Brummel had a key to the church and was already there, switching on the lights and turning up the thermostat. He wasn't feeling well at all inside and felt angry that he ever had to be put through this kind of trouble. They'd just better vote right this time, he kept thinking.

Outside, even though it was still a half hour before the meeting, cars began to arrive - more than were usually there on Sundays. Sam Turner, Brummel's chief cohort, drove up in his big Cadillac and helped his wife Helen from the car. He was a rancher of sorts, not at all a land baron, but he still acted like one. ~~He'd seen every rerun of Bonanza and scowled like Ben Cartwright.~~ Tonight he was grim and determined, as was his wife. In another car came John Coleman and his wife Patricia, a quiet couple who came to Ashton Community after leaving a large church elsewhere in town. They really liked Hank and made no effort to hide it. They knew good and well that Alf Brummel would not be happy to see them there.

~~Atop the church, sitting side by side right next to the little steeple, were Signa and his two right hand men, keeping watch over the little building and everything that went on in and around it. Yes, there were demons around, they could clearly see them, and the demons were just as aware of their presence, but neither side made any aggressive moves.~~

Mota, a burly polynesian, asked Signa, "Did Tal say he would be here?"

Signa answered, ~~"He wouldn't miss this for anything~~. Tonight is a vital ~~very~~ great turning point ~~for all events~~. He will be here, ~~if he isn't already.~~"

Others arrived, parking their cars, quickly coagulating into little clusters of similar sentiment, speaking in quick syllables and hushed tones and keeping their eyes to themselves, all except for the few rubbernecking nose counters trying to foresee the final tally, how many for Hank and how many against.

As the parking lot continued to fill with cars and the sanctuary with people, several dark shadows kept a wary eye on everything that happened from their perch atop the church roof, their stations around the building and their appointed posts even in the sanctuary.

Lucius, looking more nervous than ever, paced and hovered about, keeping a watchful eye on everything. ~~Lord~~ Ba-al Rafar, still wanting a very low profile, had entrusted this task to him, and for this night at least, Lucius was back in his old glory and determined to show the great Rafar how much the Ba-al Prince had underestimated him.

What bothered Lucius the most were the other spirits standing around, the enemies of the cause, some of the host of heaven. They were being held at bay by Lucius' forces to be sure, but Lucius was extremely agitated by their presence. Some of them he knew and had dealt with before in the town, but now there were some new ones present he'd never seen before, and he knew good and well that had to be significant.

INSERT —

In came a young copple, and a very large messenger of God was walking with them. Lucius swooped down and accosted the big figure.

"Do I know you?" he demanded. "From where have you came?"

When Lucius saw the Colemans come in the front door, he was agitated.
~~The front door opened and a young couple walked in. They were new in the church and a real irritation. They were just like Busche. They talked like him, prayed like him~~ drank past, They had never been very strong against any defeats and discouragements Lucius had ordered against them, and their marriage had just about dissolved, ~~but still~~ Then they came and aligned themselves with Praying Busche, hearing his words and becoming stronger all the time. Before long they would be a real threat, as would too many others just like them. blond-haired

But their arrival didn't cause Lucius as much agitation as the huge, messenger of God who accompanied them. Lucius knew for sure he'd never seen this one before. As the Colemans found a seat, Lucius swooped down and accosted this new intruder.

"I've not seen you before!" he said gruffly, as all the other spirits ~~present~~ focused their attention on him and the stranger. "From where do you come?"

INSERT

~~Inside the sanctuary~~

Nearby, but not too near, Signa and his two warriors kept watch. Upon Tal's orders they were to allow demons ~~any~~ access ~~they wanted~~ to the building but were to monitor ~~their~~ the demons' activities and keep an eye out for Rafar. So far their very presence, as well as the presence of so many other warriors, had had a taming effect on the demonic hosts and there had been no incidents. For now that was all Tal wanted.

was Chimon of Europe. He

The stranger said nothing but only rivoted his eyes on those of Lucius and stood firm. Lucius could feel all eyes upon them.

"I'll have your name!" Lucius demanded

The stranger said not a word.

Lucius smiled slyly and nodded. "You are deaf, yes? And dumb? And as middless as you are silent?" The other demons guffawed. They loved this kind of game. "Tell me. Are you a good fighter?"

Silence.

Lucius drew a scimitar that flashed blood red and droned metallically. On cue, all the other demons did the same. The clatter and ring of burnished blades filled the room as crimson crescents of reflected light danced about the walls. The other messengers of God were barred from intervening by an armed ring of demons as Lucius continued to toy with this one single newcomer.

Lucius peered at his solid, unmoving apponent with a burning hatred that made his yellow eyes bulge and his sulphurous breath chug out through widely flared nostrils. He toyed with his sword, waved it in small circles in the stranger's face, watched for the stranger to make the slightest move.

The stranger only watched him back, not moving at all.

With a cry of intense energy, with incredible speed and agility, Lucius swept his sword across the front of the stranger, slashing his garment. ~~neatly open.~~ Cheers and laughter came from the crowd of demons. Lucius poised for a fight, held his sword with both hands, crouched, his wings flared.

Before him stood a statue with a slashed tunic.

"Fight, you listless spirit!" Lucius challenged.

The stranger did not respond, and Lucius cut his face. Another cheer from the demons.

"Shall I remove an ear? Or two? Shall I cut out your tongue if you have one?" Lucius taunted.

"~~Okay~~ "I think it's time we got started," said Alf Brummel from the pulpit. The people in the room stopped their hushed conversations and the place began to quiet down.

Lucius leered at the stranger, motioned him with his sword. "Go, stand with the other cowards."

The newcomer stepped back, then took his place with the other messengers of God behind the demonic barricade. INSERT

Eleven angels had managed to get into the church without raising too much ire from the demons: Triskal and Krioni had already entered with Hank and Mary. They had often been seen with the pastor and his wife, so they were not paid much attention other than they usual threatening expressions and postures. ~~A huge polynesian bronze warrior was also in attendance, a burly polynesian named Mota.~~ a newcomer. The angelic forces were indeed ~~The demons weren't sure if they'd ever seen him before, either,~~ the polynesian, though slowly, and many ~~yellow eyes were giving him more than the usual stares.~~ Guilo was there, as big and threatening as ever, ~~and~~ but apparently no demons were the slightest bit interested in asking him any questions.

~~Mota made his way over to Chimon and aided him in reweaving the slash in Chimon's tunic.~~

a newcomer, a burly Polynesian, ~~The Polynesian~~ Mota made his way over to Chimon and tended the wound in ~~his~~ Chimon's face while Chimon ~~skillfully reweaved~~ repaired the slash in his tunic.

called here
"Mota from Polynesia," came the introduction.
"Chimon of Europe. Welcome to our numbers."

Triskal and Krioni had already entered with Hank and Mary. They had often been seen with the pastor and his wife, so they were not paid much attention other than the usual threatening expressions and postures from the demonic forces. Mota the Polynesian made his way over to Chimon who was trying to repair his tunic and tend to his face.

"Can you continue?" Mota asked.

"I will continue," Chimon answered, skillfully reweaving his tunic with only his fingers. "Where is Tal?"

"Not here yet, but he said he would be."

"A demon of fever tried to stop the Colemans. No doubt Tal has encountered an attack on Duster."

"I don't know how he'll ward it off without making himself visible."

Chimon looked about. "I don't see the Ba-al Prince anywhere."

"He'll do it."

"We may never."

"And may he never see Tal."

Brummel brought the meeting to order, standing behind the pulpit and looking out over the nearly fifty people who had gathered. From this vantage point even he couldn't help but try to guess the final tally. Some of the people were definitely going to give Hank the ax, some were definitely not going to, and then there was that frustrating and unpredictable group he couldn't be sure about.

"I want to thank you all for coming tonight," he said. "This is a painful matter for us to decide. I'd always hoped that this night would never come, but...well, we all want God's will to be done and we want what will be best for His people, and so, let us open with a word of prayer and commit the rest of the evening to His care and guidance."

With that, Brummel began a very pious prayer, appealing to the Lord for grace and mercy and using all the right words to bring a tear to the coldest heart, the driest eye.

In the front corner of the sanctuary, Guilo stood sulking, wishing an angel could spit on a human.

Triskal asked Chimon, "Getting any strength?"

Chimon answered, "Why? Is somebody else going to pray?"

Brummel finished his prayer, the roomful muttered a few Amens, and then he went on with his introduction to the proceedings.

"The purpose of this meeting is to openly discuss our feelings regarding Pastor Hank, to put an end once and for all to all the backbiting and murmuring

that's been going on and to finally end our meeting with a final vote of confidence. I would hope that we would all have the mind of the Lord in these matters.

"If you have something you wish to say to the group, we would ask that you limit your time to three minutes. I'll be letting you know when your time is up, so keep that in mind. Now..." and Brummel looked at Hank and Mary, "I think it would be good to let the Pastor have the first say. Afterwards, he'll leave us alone so we can talk freely."

Mary squeezed Hank's hand as he got up. He went to the pulpit and stood behind it, gripping its sides, and for the longest time he couldn't say a word, but only looked into every eye of every face. ~~It must have been the Lord really working in his heart~~ He suddenly noticed how much he truly loved these people - all of them. He could see the hardness in some of the faces, but he couldn't help seeing past that to the pain and bondage these people were under, deluded, led astray by sin, by greed, by bitterness and rebellion. In so many other faces he could read the pain they were feeling for him; he could tell that some of them were silently praying even now for God's mercy and intervention.

Hank let a quick prayer course through his thoughts as he began. "I have always counted it a privilege to stand behind this sacred desk, to preach the Word and speak the truth." He surveyed their faces again for just a moment and then continued, "And even tonight, I feel I cannot stray from God's commission to me and the purpose ~~I feel I must always~~ for which I have ever stood before you. I am not here to defend myself or my ministry. Jesus is my Advocate, and I rest the course of my life on His grace, guidance and mercy. So tonight, seeing that I am standing behind this pulpit once again, let me do nothing other than share with you what I have received from God."

Hank opened his Bible and read from Second Timothy, chapter four, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearance and His kingdom: preach the Word, be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. ~~be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.~~ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

""But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evengelist, fulfill your ministry...'" Hank closed his Bible, looked about the room and spoke firmly, "Let each one of us apply God's Word where it may apply. Tonight I will speak only for myself. I have my call from God; I just read it. Some of you, I know, have really gotten the impression that Hank Busche is obsessed with the gospel, that's it's all he ever thinks about. Well, that's true. Sometimes I even wonder why I remain in such a difficult position, such an uphill effort,..but for me, God's call on my life is really an inescapable commission, and as Paul said, Woe is me if I don not preach the gospel. I understand that sometimes the truth of God's Word can become a divider, an irritation, a block of stumbling. But that's only because it remains unchanged, uncompromising, and steadfast, and what better reason could there be to build our lives on such an immovable foundation? To violate the Word Of God is only to destroy ourselves, our joy, our peace, our happiness.

"I want to be fair with you, and so I'll be truthfulx in letting you know exactly what you may expect from me. I intend to love all of you, no matter what. I intend to shepherd and feed you for as long as you'll have me. I will not discredit, compromise or turn my back on what I believe the Word of God teaches, and that may mean that there may be times when you'll feel my shepherd's crook around your neck, not to judge or malign you, but to help you move in the right direction, to protect you, to heal you. I intend to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, for that is my calling. I have a burden for this town; sometimes I feel that burden so strngly I have to ask myself why, but it's still there and I can't turn my back on it or try to deny it. Until the Lord tells me otherwise, I intend to remain in Ashton to answer that burden. I hope that my work can continue here in this church, among you. But if not..." Hank became choked with emotion and had to pause. He took a few deep breaths, relaxed, continued. "If not...I guess you'll still see me around somewhere. Only the Lord knows whatever it is He is trying to do in and through me, add I'm trusting Him to figure out the Howw of it. I may preach here, I may preach on street corners, I don't know. All I know right now is that I have to preach, I have to pray for this town, I have to pray for you. Now...if that is the kind of pastor you want, then you can let me know tonight. If you do not want that kind of pastor...well, I really need to know that too.

"XX I love all of you. I want the very best God has to give you.

And...I guess that's all I have to say."

Hank stepped down from the platform, took Mary's hand, and the two of them walked down the aisle to the door. ~~Hank tried to look as many people as he~~ Hank tried to catch the eyes of as many people as he could. Some returned looks of love and encouragement; some looked away.

Krioni and Triskal stepped out and joined Hank and Mary at the door, leaving with them. Lucius watched with mocking disdain, just as happy to see them go.

Guilo muttered to his fellows, "While the cat's away, the mice will play."

"Where is Tal?" Chimon wanted to know.

Brummel stood before the group. "We'll now hear statements from the congregation. Just raise your hand to be recognized. Yeah, Sam, why don't you go first."

Sam Turner stood, and walked to the front of the sancturary.

"Thanks, Alf," he said. "Well, I've no doubt you all know me and my wife Helen. We've been citizens of this community for over thirty years and we've supported this church through thick and through thin. Now I don't have a lot to say tonight. You all know what kind of man I am, how I believe in loving one's neighbor and living a good life. I've tried to do right and be a good example of what a Christian should be.

"And I'm angry tonight. I'm angry for my friend, Lou Stanley. You may have noticed Lou isn't here tonight, and I'm sure I know why. It used to be he could show his face in this church and be a part of it, and we all loved him and he loved us, and I think we all still do. But this Busche fellow, who thinks he's God's ~~gift~~ gift to this earth, thought he had a right to judge Lou and kick him out of the church. Now friends, let me tell you one thing: nobody kicks Lou Stanley out of anything if Lou doesn't feel like it, and the very fact that Lou went along with this whole smear on his character only shows the goodness of his heart. He could have sued Busche by now, or he could have settled the matter like I've seen him settle other matters. He's not afraid of anything. But I just think Lou's so ashamed of the horrible things that have been said about him and so hurt by what he thinks we must think of him that he decided he'd better just stay away.

"Now we have this self-righteous, Bible-pounding gossip monger to blame for these troubles. Forgive me if I sound a bit harsh, but listen, I've been around a long time, and I can remember when this church was like a family. How long now since it's been that way? Look what's happened to this family; here we all are, having a big bicker meeting, and why? Because we let Hank Busche come in here and stir us all up. Now I haven't got time to say everything, but

let me put my feelings out as simply as I can: Ashton used to be a peaceful town, this church used to be a peaceful church, and I say we do what's necessary to get it that way again."

Turner took his seat again as a few nearby nodded their silent encouragement and approval.

John Coleman was recognized next. He was a shy person and very nervous about speaking in front of everyone, but he was concerned enough to do it anyway.

"Well," he said, nervously handling his Bible and looking at the floor a lot, "I don't usually say much, and I'm scared to death to be standing up here, but...I think Hank Busche is a real man of God, a good pastor, and I'd really hate to see him go. ~~Now Pat and I haven't been at this church long, and we didn't really even know there was trouble.~~ Pat's ~~But~~ The church we came from, well, it just wasn't meeting our needs, and we were getting hungry: hungry for the milk of the Word, for the presence of God. We thought we'd found those things here, and we were really looking forward to being involved and growing in the Lord under Hank's ministry, and I know a lot of other folks feel that way too. ~~I don't know what all~~ as far as this stuff about Lou is ~~all about,~~ concerned, what was ~~and I don't want to know, it's none of my business. All I know is~~ not just Hank's doing. all of us were involved in that decision including me, and I know, Hank's not trying to hurt anybody. He's just not that kind of person at all. We just need to give him a chance. Thank you."

John sat down and Patricia patted his arm and said, "You did fine." John wasn't sure he'd done fine at all.

Brummel addressed the group. "I think it might be a good idea for us now to hear what the church secretary, Gordan Mayers, has to say."

Gordon Mayers went to the front with ~~his~~ some of the church records and minutes in his hand. He was an ~~older gentleman~~ nervous, wound-up sort of man with a tight expression and gruff voice.

"I have ~~two~~ three items I'd like to address before this group," he said. "One from the business side of things and one from the personal side. First of all, from the business side, you all need to be aware that the offerings have been decreasing over the past several months, but our bills have been staying steady if not going up. In other words, we're running out of money, and I personally have no doubts about why. There are differences among us we really need to get resolved, and ~~this~~ withholding your giving is not the way to do it. If you have a gripe against the pastor, then get it out in the open, off your chest, and do whatever you have to do tonight, but let's not bring the whole church down over this one man.

~~Busche being here is a colossal mistake anyway.~~

~~"Now, from the personal side~~

~~"Now, some of you may not be aware of this, but~~ For whatever it's worth, let me tell you ~~how Hank Busche came to be the pastor.~~ that the original pulpit committee was considering another man for the job; ~~when someone introduced Hank Busche. Now, those of you who were here and involved in that final vote, you know who you are and you have your own conscience to live with, but~~ I ~~xxx~~ was on that pulpit committee, and I can assure you that the committee had no intention of recommending Busche for the office. I don't know how he came to be voted in ~~anyway~~, but I'm ~~personally~~ convineed the whole thing was a fluke, a grave mistake. ~~Maybe it was just Busche's good looks or something, I don't know, but however he got in here, it was not according to our constitutional guidelines. Well,~~ we voted in the wrong man, and now we're paying for it.

~~"From the personal side, I just have to say that I am personally~~ disappointed in this man. Now I had hoped that we could have a minister in here who could really be a source of spiritual leadership for my kids, but that just never happened. You all know how Rosie's left home and how Ben's been arrested for possession of drugs. If Hank Busche had been doing his job the way a pastor should, he would have done something about it. ~~I'm~~ really disappointed.

"So let me just close with this: Sure, we've made a mistake and we've paid for it, but I have faith in this group here, and I think we can turn the whole thing around and start doing things right for a change. I say ~~we take advantage of this opportunity and set things right.~~ Let's do it."

And so the evening went, for the better part of two hours as both sides took turns, ~~in first~~ crucifying and ~~then~~ praising Hank Busche. The second hand on the big wall clock continued to sweep away the time, nerves got raw, bottoms got numb, backs got ~~xxxxx~~ sticky, and the opposing views became more and more vehement in their convictions. After two hours a common sentiment began to mutter its way around the room, "C'mon, let's have the vote..."

Brummel had taken his jacket off now, loosened his tie, rolled up his sleeves. He was gathering up a pile of small squares of paper, the ballots.

"Okay, this will be by secret ballot," he said, handing the slips of paper to two quickly appointed ushers who passed them out. "Let's just keep it simple. If you want to keep the pastor, say yes, and if you want to find someone else, say no."

Of course there were questions. Yes if he goes? No if he goes? Are we voting yes to get another pastor of yes to keep the one we have? Does anybody have a pencil?

"Will Hank have enough votes?

Mota Chimon

~~Triskal~~ nudged ~~Krioni~~. "~~How did you fix the vote last time?~~"

Chimon only

~~Krioni~~ shook his head. "~~I couldn't do it again. The demons are watching too closely.~~"

"We're not sure."

~~Triskal was having trouble believing it.~~ "You mean...he could lose?"

~~Krioni shrugged and replied,~~ "Let us hope the Remnant is praying."

"Where, oh where is Tal?"

Brummel got all the paper ballots passed out and all the questions answered. Writing a simple yes or no didn't take long, so almost immediately the two ushers were given the offering plates and were passed them among the people.

Guilo stood still in his corner, glaring at as many demons as would look at him. Some of the smaller, Karagaing spirits were flitting about the sanctuary trying to see what people were marking on their ballots, grinning, scowling, cheering and cursing according to what they saw. Guilo could envision three of four of their wirey little necks in his fists. Someday soon, little demons, someday soon.

Brummel took charge again. "All right, in the interest of fairness, let's have representatives from the two different...uh...viewpoints come up and do the counting."

There was a little bit of nervous chuckling, then John Coleman was selected by the yeas and Gordon Mayer by the nays to count the ballots. The two men took the offering plates full of ballots and carried them to a back pew to count. A flock of flapping, hissing demons converged on the scene, wanting to see the outcome.

Guilo stepped out too. It was only fair, he thought. Lucius swooped down from the ceiling in an instant and accosted him.

"Get back in your corner!" Lucius hissed.

"I wish to see the outcome!"

"Oh, don't you now?" Lucius sneered. "And what if I decide to cut you open as I did your friend?"

There was somethigg about the way Guilo answered, "Try it," that may have caused Lucius to reconsider.

The demon only sneered and cackled and said, "You'd better hurry," then mockingly showed Guilo the way with a flourish of his wing.

Guilo went back to where the two men counted. His approach sent the little demons fluttering away like a frightened flock of chickens. He bent over the two men to have a look. Gordon Mayer was counting first, silently, then handing the ballots to John Coleman. Guilo watched with interest as Mayer stealthily hid a few yea ballots in his palm. Guilo checked to see how

INSERT

closely the demons were watching, then made a stealthy move himself, touching the back of Mayers' hand. The ballots dropped out of Mayer's hand and John Coleman saw them.

"You dropped something there," he said very sweetly.

Mayers couldn't say anything. He just handed the ballots over.

The count was finished, but Mayers wanted to count again. Coleman insisted on doing the first count and Mayers agreed. They counted the ballots again. The count came out the same.

A tie.

The two reported the result to Brummel, who told the congregation, who moaned quietly.

Alf Brummel could feel his hands getting very oozey; he tried drying them on his handkerchief.

"Well, listen," he said, "there may not be much chance that any of you could reconsider, but...I'm sure that none of us want to prolong this thing past tonight. I tell you what, why don't we take a short break, give some of you a chance to get up, stretch, use the restroom, and let me encourage you all to talk the matter over with each other and then we'll regather and vote again."

Just as Brummel was talkigg, the demons posted around the church saw something they found very unsettling. Just up the street about a block were two old women, hobbling toward the church. One walked along with the assistance of a cane and also a helping hand from her friend. ~~The one with the cane~~ She did not look well at all, very pale and thin, but her jaw was set and her eyes were bright and determined. She hobbled along jerkily, the cane clacking out a syncopated rhythmn with her footsteps. Her friend, ~~another elderly woman~~ in better health and stronger, kept up with her, holding her arm to support her and talking gently to her.

The two demons on the front porch of the church eyed the two women warily.

"One of them, the one with the cane, is Duster," said one.

"What went wrong?" the other wondered. "I thought she'd been taken care of."

"Oh, she's ill, all right, but she's come anyway!"

"And who is the old woman with her?"

INSERT:

A demon saw it and struck Guilo's hand with bared talons. Guilo ~~xxxxx~~ jerked his hand away and came infinitely close to tearing the demon to shreds but he caught himself and honored Tal's orders.

"What is your name?" Guilo wanted to know.

"Cheating," the demon answered.

"Cheating..." Guilo rehearsed as he went back to his corner. "Cheating."

But Guilo's move succeeded in foiling Mayer's effort.

"Edith Duster has many friends. We should have known."

The two ladies made their way up the church steps, each step a major task in itself, first one foot, then the other, then the cane placed on the next step, then one foot, then the other, until they were finally up to the front door.

"There, look at that now!" cackled the stronger one, "I knew you could do it! The Lord's gotten you this far, He'll take care of you the rest of the way!"

~~Edith Duster reached for the latch on the door. Just then a demon drew his sword.~~

~~"I think she could use a stroke right about now," it murmured, and slithered in to strike the woman.~~

"What Edith Duster needs is a stroke, right now," murmured a sickness demon, drawing his sword.

Perhaps it was simply luck, or incredible coincidence, or terribly frustrating timing, but just as the demon lunged forward with great speed to slash the arteries in Edith Duster's brain, the other woman went forward to open the door and got right in the way. The tip of the demon's sword struck the woman in the shoulder and the shoulder could have been. The sword stopped short, but the demon did not, but concrete. The demon catapulted over the two women and fluttered like a fractured kite into the church yard as the woman opened the door and escorted Edith Duster inside.

Sickness gathered himself up off the ground and screamed, "The Host of Heaven!"

The other demon guards stared at him blankly. It had all happened so fast.

Brummel saw Edith Duster come in. She was alone. He cursed silently. This would be the vote to break the tie, but she would most certainly vote for Busche. The people were gathering again, ready to vote.

The messengers of God were elated to see Edith Duster come in.

"Looks like Tal came through," said Mota.

Chimon was concerned, however. "With such a heavy cover of the enemy, he most certainly had to show himself."

Guilo chuckled. "Oh, I'm sure our Captain was very...discreet!"

A few of the demons were in fact wondering what had happened to Edith Duster's companion between the front door and the sanctuary. Sickness was still insisting it had been a heavenly warrior, but where was she now?

Tal, Captain of the Host, joined Signa and the other sentries at their concealed position.

"You had me fooled, Captain," said Signa.

Tal only breathed a sigh of relief. "Maybe you'll try it yourself someday." ~~"Don't ever try it yourself."~~

"Oh, ~~no.~~ Oh, I'd love to."

Brummel groped about mentally for a trump card. He could just see the burning eyes of Langstrat if this vote went the wrong way.

"Well," he said, "why don't we come to order now and get ready to take another vote?" The people settled in and quieted down. They were ready. The yea side was now more than reddy.

"Now that we've prayed about it, talked about it, maybe some of us will feel differently about the future of the church here. I...um..." Come on, Alf, say something, but don't make a fool of yourself. "I guess I could say a few words; I haven't really shared my feelings. You know, Hank Busche is a little young..."

[illegible]

A middle-aged plumber on the yea side piped up, "Hey now, if you're going to put in some negative input we've got to have equal time for some positive!"

The yeas all murmured in agreement while the nays sat in cold silence.

"No, listen," Brummel stammered, his face bright red, "I had no intention of trying to sway the vote. I was just...uh..."

"Let's have the vote!" someone said.

"Yes, vote, and quick!" ~~Kribbi~~ Mota whispered.

Just then the door opened. Oh no, thought Brummel, who's coming in this time?

The silence fell like a shroud of death over the whole group. Lou Stanley had just come in. He nodded greeting to them all, looking grim, and took a seat in a back pew. He looked old.

Gordon Mayer piped up, "Let's have the vote!"

Brummel let his head sway and shake in a nod that said yes, no and maybe, and then gave offering plates full of ballots to the ushers again. The ushers passed out the ballots while Brummel tried to plan a good escape route in case he had to throw up—his nerves were just about shot. He ~~tried to catch~~ caught Lou Stanley's attention. Lou looked at him and seemed to laugh nervously, smiling at him. ~~Now what in the world does he mean by that, Brummel wondered.~~

"Uh...make sure Lou back there gets a ballot," Brummel told one of the ushers. The usher made sure.

Chimon whispered to ~~Krioni~~ Quilo, "I think we're ready for any tricks you Krioni might have."

"Any tie breakers, you mean," ~~Krioni~~ Guilo answered.

"We may be in for a logg night," said ~~Guilo~~. Mota

The ballots were collected, and Lucius kept his demons tightly around each offering plate and his eyes on every heavenly warrior.

Guilo whispered to the others, "Say, why don't we just vanquish all of them and ruin everything?"

some angels ~~Irriskal~~ smiled weakly, Chimon shrugged, Mota ~~Krioni~~ didn't think it was funny.

Mayer# and Coleman went back to count again as the tension in the air continued to tighten. Little was said except for small, furtive little ' conversations started just to ease the anxiety. The demons watched. The angels watched. The people watched. T

Mayer# and Coleman kept a close eye on each other, silently mouthing as they counted. Mayer# finished counting, waited for Coleman to finish. Coleman finished, and looked at Mayer# and asked him if he wanted to count again. They counted again.

At last all the ballots had been doubly counted. Mayer# took his pen, wrote the result on a slip of paper, and carried it up to Brummel. Mayer# and Coleman took their seats as Brummel unfolded the paper.

Brummel was visibly shaken and it took a few moments for him to put on his relaxed, businesslike, public image.

"Well..." he began, trying to control the tone of his voice, "all right, then. The...pastor has been retained." ~~We will...let him continue.~~

"By two votes!" John whispered to Patricia.

"Looks like ~~we'll have to let~~ Hank Busche will remain on as pastor..." Brummel announced.

One side of the room loosened up, tittered and smiled. The other side gathered up coats and belongings to leave.

"Alf, what was the vote?" someone wanted to know.

"Uh...it doesn't say."

"Twenty-eight to twenty-six!" Gordon Mayer# said accusingly, looking back toward Lou Stanley.

However, Lou Stanley ~~was gone.~~ had left.

FINALED

June 17, Friday night

Tal, Signa and the other sentries could see the explosion from where they stood. Suddenly, with cries and wails of rage, demons scattered everywhere, erupting through the roof and sides of the church like shrapnel and fanning out in all directions over the town. ~~Triskal and Krioni were there in an instant to report~~. Their cries became a loud, echoing drone of savage fury that filled the sky and rang over the whole town like a thousand melancholy factory whistles, sirens and horns.

"They will wreak havoc tonight," said Tal.

~~Now Krioni and Triskal,~~ Mota Chimon and Guilo were there to report.

"By two votes," said ~~Krioni~~ Mota.

Tal smiled and said, "Very well, then."

"But Lou Stanley!" ~~Triskal~~ Chimon exclaimed. "Was that really Lou Stanley?"

Tal caught the implication. "Yes, that was certainly Mr. Stanley. I've been standing right here ever since I delivered Edith Duster."

"Methinks the Spirit has been working!" Guilo chuckled.

~~"Krioni and Triskal, to your charge," Tal ordered. "Our opponents can be very poor losers."~~ "To your posts. Everyone to your posts. There will be an angry spirit over the town tonight."

~~Krioni and Triskal and four other warriors~~ vanished to ~~look after Hank and Mary.~~

"Let's get Edith home safely and get a guard around her. ~~As for Prince Rafar and his lackeys, we'll let them fester for a while and then~~

That night the police were busy. Fights broke out in the local taverns, slogans were spray-painted on the courthouse, some cars were stolen and joy-ridden through the lawn and flowers in the park.

Late into the night, Juleen Langstrat hovered in a inescapable trance, halfway between a tormented life on earth and the ~~eingelige~~ lurking, searing flames of hell. She lay on her bed, she tumbled to the floor, she clawed her way up the wall to stand on her feet, staggered about the room, fell to the floor again. Mocking, threatening voices were exploding with unimaginable force in her head; she thought her skull would burst open, She could feel claws spattering the walls with monsters, flames & blood. tearing at her throat, creatures squirming and biting inside her, chains around her arms and legs. She could hear the voices of spirits all around her, smell their sulphurous breath. She was on fire. Flames were all around her. The Masters were angry! are their eyes & fangs,

"Failed...failed...failed...fail" pounded in her brain and paraded before her eyes. "Brummel has failed, you have failed, he will die, you will die..."

Did she really hold a knife in her hand, or was this two a vision from the higher planes? She could feel a yearning, a terribly strong impulse to ~~had to~~ be free of the torment, ~~she must~~ to break loose from the bodily shell, the prison of flesh that bound her.

"Join us, join us, join us," said the voices. She felt the edge of the blade and blood trickled down her finger.

The ~~xxxxx~~ telephone rang. (~~It~~ The telephone rang again.) Time froze. The bedroom registered on her retinas. She was in her bedroom. Home. There was blood on the floor. The telephone rang. The knife fell from her hands. She could hear the voices, angry voices. The telephone rang.

She was on her knees on the floor of her bedroom. She had cut her finger. The phone was still ringing. She called out hello but it still rang.

"I won't fail you," she said to her visitors. "Leave me, I won't fail you."

The telephone rang.

Alf Brummel sat in his home, listening to the whir of the phone ringing on the other end. Juleen must not be home. He hung up, relieved, if only for the moment. She would not be happy about the vote. Another delay, still another delay in the plan. ~~But~~ He knew he could not avoid her, that she would find out, that he would be confronted and punished by the others.

He flopped down on his bed and contemplated escape, suicide, resigning, and any other option he could think of.

any pay-off?

FINALED

June 18, Saturday AM

It was A Saturday morning, the sun was out, the lawn mowers were calling to each other across fences, hedges and cul-de-sacs; kids were playing, parents were yelling after them, hoses were spraying dirty cars.

Marshall was sitting in the kitchen, the table filled with advertising copy and a list of new and old accounts; The Clarion It was still without a secretary. He'd been up for several hours now and began to feel relieved about the progress he'd made on getting the whole mess organized, slotted in the paper and just plain cleared away. Kate was gone getting groceries and the quiet around the house was very conducive to getting something done. Sandy was out in the yard, lounging in the morning sun and studying. ~~There had been no major blow-ups lately; both she and Marshall had been treading softly and diplomatically around each other. Marshall was just now trying to learn how to be nice to her and was starting to get the hang of it.~~

The front door opened and in came Kate. "I need a hand!"

Yes, the inevitable unloading of groceries.

"Sandy!" Marshall hollered out the back door, "Let's go get on these groceries."

Sandy very reluctantly got up and came in to help. ~~Over the years they'd developed a pretty good system of grocery stacking.~~ the family Dad separating, handing and stacking. It wouldn't take long.

"Marshall," said Kate, "are you still working on that copy? It's Saturday!"

passing vegetables from a sack to him as he loaded the refrigerator,

"Almost finished. I hate to have stuff stack up on me. How's Joe and the gang?"

Kate stopped a bunch of celery in mid-transfer and said, "You know what? Joe's gone. He sold the store and moved away and I didn't even hear about it."

"Brother. Things happen fast around here."

"Well that's what I thought."

"Sandy, here come some cans." Sandy stood on a chair to take cans from Marshall & stock a high cupboard.

"So where'd he move?"

"I don't know. Nobody would tell me. As a matter of fact, I don't think I like that new owner."

"What's this cleaner here?" It went under the sink.

"Oh...put that under the sink. I asked that guy about Joe and Marge, and I asked him why they sold the store and why they moved and where they moved and he wouldn't tell me anything, just said he didn't know."

"That's the owner of the store? What's his name?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't tell me that either."

"Well does he talk? Does he know English?"

"Enough to ring up your groceries and take your money and that's about it."

Now could we get all this stuff off the table?"

Marshall started gathering up all his papers before the oncoming invasion of cans and produce.

Kate ~~continued~~ sorted out the food bound for the freezer and the canned goods bound for the pantry and continued, "I guess I'll get used to it, but for a while I thought I'd gone into the wrong store. I didn't recognize anybddy. They might even have all new people working there."

Sandy spoke for the first time. "Something weird's going on in this town."

Marshall asked, "Oh yeah?"

Sandy didn't elaborate.

Marshall tried to draw ~~something~~ it out of her. "Well what do you ~~know~~ think it is?"

"Aw, nothing, really. It's just a feeling I get. People around here are/weird. I think we're starting to act I think we're being invaded by aliens."

She was being noncommittal and evasive. Marshall let it go. ~~and just tried to read between the lines~~

The groceries were all put away, Sandy went back to her studies, Kate got ready to work in the garden. As for Marshall, ~~he had~~ there was a phone call he had to make. He really hadn't thought too much about it until now, but talking about weird aliens invading the town jarred his memory and also his reporter's nose. Maybe Langstrat ~~may not be~~ wasn't an alien, but she was certainly weird.

He sat on the couch in the living room and took the slip of paper with Ted Harmel's phone number from his wallet. A sunny Saturday morning would be a strange time to find someone home and indoors, but Marshall figured he'd try anyway. ~~He dialed~~

The phone on the other end whirred several times and then a man's voice answered, "Hello?"

"Hello, Ted Harmel?"

"Yes. Who's this?" I don't think you know me.

"This is Marshall Hogan. I bought the Clarion. I'm the new editor."

That seemed to ring a bell and relax Harmel a bit. "Oh, uh-huh..." Then he waited for Marshall to say something and there was an awkward silence.

"Well, anyway, you know, I have ~~Bernice Krueger~~ her working for me." Bernice Krueger, right?

"Oh, she's still there, eh? How's she doing?"

"Well, great, just great. She's a good reporter; not much gets by her." Right. She's always been that way. ~~Sometimes~~ she ~~gets to be~~ sometimes a pain in the neck, but she gets a story. Has she found out anything more about her sister?"

"Mm, I don't know much about that, she's never told me."

"Oh.

"Well, she will when she's ready, I suppose. So how's the paper doing?" ~~Marshall detected an abrupt change of subject here~~.

"Not bad. It was a real madhouse for a while..."

They talked for a few minutes about the Clarion, the office, who was still there and who wasn't, whatever may have happened to the cord to the coffeemaker. Harmel seemed particularly concerned to hear that Edie had left and wanted to know why.

"Her marriage broke up," Marshall told him. "Hey, it was a complete surprise to me, I came in too late to know what was going on."

"Hmmm...yeah..." Harmel was doing some thinking on the other end.

Keep it flowing, Hogan → "Yeah, well, I've got a daughter who's a freshman at the college."

"Is that right."

"Yeah, doing her prerequisites, jumping through the hoop. She likes it."

"Well, more power to her."

~~Marshall could sense that both of them knew Harmel was certainly being patient, Marshall thought~~, to carry on such a long conversation without ever getting around to the real purpose for the call. Well, I guess I'll try to inch my way into it.

"You know, Sandy has a professor in her philosophy class I thought was an interesting gal."

"Langstrat."

Bingo. "Yeah, yeah. A lot of unusual ideas."

"I bet."

"You know, I went in there to pick Sandy up one day and Langstrat booted me out of her class."

"Is that right!"

"I don't think I understand her too well. She's wired up kind of funny."

"Yeah...yeah..."

"Well, do you know anything about her?"

Harmel paused, sighed, then asked, "Well, what is it you want to know?"

"Well, where's she coming from, anyway? Sandy's coming home with some weird ideas..."

Harmel had trouble coming up with an answer. "It's...uh...Eastern mysticism, ancient religious craft. ~~I think~~ She's just really into...oh, ~~what is that stuff?~~ You know, meditation, higher consciousness...uh...the oneness of the universe. I don't know if any of that makes sense to you."

"Not much. But she seems to spread it around a lot, doesn't she?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what is this thing that she does? She meets with people, has... what? Therapy sessions?"

"I don't follow you."

"You know, she meets with people on a regular basis; the chief of police..."

"Alf Brummel?"

"Yeah, Brummel, and...uh, who else? Pinckston..."

"Delores Pinckston?"

"Right, on the Board of Regents. Dwight Brandon, Eugene Baylor..."

Harmel cut in abruptly. "Well what is it you want to know?"

"Well, I understand you were pretty close to the situation - "

"No, that's wrong."

"Well didn't you have sessions with her yourself?"

There was a long pause — "Who told you that?"

"Oh, we...just found out."

~~There was a~~ another long pause. Harmel sighed through his nose. He was troubled.

"Listen," he asked, "what else do you know?"

"Not much. It just smells like there might be a story in it. You know what that's like."

Harmel was struggling, fuming, groping for words. "Yes, I know what it's like. But you ~~don't~~ re wrong this time... you're just... you're really wrong!" Another pause, another struggle. "Oh brother, I wish you ~~wouldn't have~~ hadn't called me."

"Hey listen, we're both newspapermen - "

"No! You're the newspaperman! I'm out. I'm sure you know all about me."

"I know your name, your number, and that you used to own the Clarion."

"All right. Listen, let's leave it at that. I still have respect for the vocation, I don't want to see you ruined."

~~Hogan~~ Marshall tried not to lose a big fish. "Well...say, don't leave me in the dark.".

"I'm not trying to leave you in the dark. I just don't know what to tell you. There are some things I just can't talk about."

"Sure, I understand. No problem."

No, "~~You~~ You don't understand, ~~Listen,~~ now just listen to me! I don't know what you've found out but whatever it is, ~~just~~ bury it. Do something else. Cover the Kiwanis tree planting, ~~or something else~~ like anything but innocuous, just keep your nose clean."

"What are you talking about?"

"And quit pumping me for information! What I'm giving you is all you're going to get, and you'd better make really good use of it. I'm telling you,

forget Langstrat, forget anything you may have heard about her. Now ~~listen,~~ I know ~~what you're going to do;~~ I know you're a reporter and so you're going to go out and do just the opposite ~~of~~ what I'm telling you, ~~so~~ but let me give you fair warning: Don't. Just leave it alone." Hogan didn't answer. "Hogan, you hear me?"

"How can I possibly leave it alone now?"

"It's easy. You have a wife, a daughter? Think of them. Think of yourself. Just leave the whole thing alone or you'll be out on your ear like everybody else."

"What do you mean, everybody else?"

"I don't know, okay?"

"Hey, if there's something I need to know..."

"I don't know anything, I don't know Langstrat, I don't know you, I don't live there anymore. Period."

"Ted, are you in trouble?"

"Leave it alone!"

He hung up. Marshall slammed the receiver ~~down~~ and let his mind race as he sat there. Leave it alone, Harmel said. ~~Then there was something there, something dangerous enough to~~ leave it alone.

In a pig's eye.

June 18, Sat. AM

Edith Duster, the wise old matron of the church, former missionary to China, a widow of some thirty years, lived in ~~a small apartment,~~ one of the Willow Terrace Apartments, a small retirement complex not far from the church. She was in her eighties, lived meagerly on Social Security and a minister's pension from her denomination, and loved to have company, especially since it was difficult for her to get out and around these days.

Hank and Mary sat at her little dinette near the large window overlooking the building's courtyard. ~~The day was beautiful, the sunlight streaming in brightly illuminated the~~ Grandma Duster was pouring tea from a very old, very classy, very charming teapot into equally charming and classy teacups. She was dressed almost formally, nicely, just as she always was whenever she received guests.

"No," she said as she sat down at last, the morning tea table properly set, the pastries in place, "I don't believe God's purposes are ever thwarted for long. He has His own ways of working His people through difficulties."

Hank agreed, but weakly, "I imagine so..." Mary held his hand.

Grandma was firm. "I know so, Henry Busche. Your being here is not a mistake; I strongly disagree with ~~Brother Mayers on that one~~ that notion. If you were not supposed to be here, the Lord would not have accomplished the things He has through your ministry."

Mary volunteered some information. "He feels a bit down about the vote."

Grandma smiled lovingly and looked into Hank's eyes. "I think the Lord is forcing a ~~shift in direction~~ revival upon that church, but it's like the turning of the tide. ~~But~~ Before the tide can come back in, it first has to slow to a stop from all its going out. Give the church time to turn around. Expect opposition, even expect to lose a few people, but the direction will change after the lull. Just give it time."

Mary had some compliments to make concerning the tea, and pastries and the dishes upon which they were served. Grandma told her all about where she got the recipes and where she got the dishes and how long she'd had both. Then she came back to the original subject.

"But I do know one thing: there was nothing that could keep me away from that meeting lastnight. I was dreadfully sick, Satan's attack, I suppose, but it was the Lord who got me out. Right about the time of the meeting I could just feel His arms bearing me up and I got my coat on and got down there, and just in time, too. I don't know if I'd even go that far to get groceries, but I made it that far last night. It was the Lord, I just know it. I'm just sorry I only had one vote." ~~I could cast. I would have cast more if I knew it meant that much to you~~

"So who do you suppose the other vote came from?" Hank asked.

Mary quickly added, "It couldn't have been Lou Stanley."

Grandma smiled. "Oh, now don't say that. You never know what the Lord might do. But you are curious, aren't you?"

"I'm really curious," said Hank, and now he smiled too.

"Well, you might find out, and maybe you never will. But it's all in the Lord's hands, and so are you. Let me warm up your tea."

"That church can't possibly survive if half the congregation removes its support, and I can't imagine them supporting a pastor they don't want."

"Oh, [illegible] "I've had dreams of angels lately." Grandma was always so very matter-of-fact about such matters. "And I don't usually, but I've seen angels before, and always when there was great headway to be made for the kingdom of God. I don't know. I just have a ~~stirring~~ feeling in my spirit that something is ~~brewing~~ really stirring here. ~~Well,~~ Haven't you felt that way?"

Hank and Mary looked at each other almost to see which of them should speak first. Hank spoke first and told Grandma all about the battle of the other night and the burden he had felt lately for the town. Mary added her ~~Finally he said,~~ "

little remembrances, slipping them in whenever they came to her. Between the two of them they got the story out in pretty ~~good~~ fine detail, and Grandma listened with great fascination, responding at key moments with "Oh dear," "Well, praise the Lord," and "Well....!"

"Yes..." she said finally. Yes, "That makes a lot of sense to me. ~~Well Satan is involved in all this, there's no question about that.~~ You know, I had an experience just the other night, standing right by that window." She pointed to the front window overlooking the courtyard. "I was getting the place straightened up, getting ready for bed, and I walked by that window and looked out at the rooftops and the streetlights and all of a sudden I got really dizzy. I had to sit down or I'd fall down. And I never get dizzy. The only time that ever happened before was in China. We were visiting a woman's home there, and she was a medium, a spiritist, and I knew she hated us and I think she was trying to put a curse on us. But just outside her door I had the same dizzy sensation and I'll never forget it. Standing here by the window I had that same feeling right away and I thought of that time in "China."

"What did you do?" Mary asked.

"Oh, I prayed. I just said, 'Demon, be begone in the name of Jesus!' and it went away, just like that. But I haven't had an experience like that for years."

Hank asked, "So you think it was a demon?"

"Oh yes. I've sort of sensed it for quite a while now. God is moving and Satan doesn't like it. I do think there are evil spirits out there."

"But don't you feel like there are more than usual? I mean, I've been a Christian all my life and I've never come up against anything that felt like this."

Her face grew pensive. "It'll take prayer, Hank. A lot of prayer. 'This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.' We need to pray, and we need to get other people praying. That's just what the angels keep telling me."

Mary was intrigued. "The angels in your dreams?" Grandma nodded. "What did they look like?"

"Oh, people, ~~not too~~ but different from ~~you and me~~ anybody else. They're big, very handsome, bright clothes, big swords at their sides, very large, bright wings. One of them I dreamt of last night reminded me of my son; he was tall, blond, he looked Scandinavian." She looked at Hank. "He was telling me to pray for you, and you were in the dream too. I could see you up behind that pulpit preaching, and he was standing there behind you with his wings stretched out over you like a big canopy, and he looked back at me and said, "Pray for this man.""

"Ooo, isn't that neat?" said Mary with a girlish giggle.

"But that's all they tell me, just to pray, and so I do. But you know, even as I sit here talking about all this I get the feeling that we need to get others praying too. Maybe the angels weren't just talking to me."

"Well see now," said Hank, "I never knew you were praying for me."

"Well it's time somebody else was praying too. You know, I don't get out much, but one way or another the Lord has brought some people to me. You'd be surprised how many ~~people there~~ true believers are out there, right in this town, ~~who are believers but~~ who really have no place to call home; they're like sheep without a shepherd."

Hank and Mary were encouraged and surprised at the same time.

"There are believers out there?" Hank asked incredulously. "In Ashton?"

"They do exist, believe it or not."

"Well where are they? Where have they been all this time?"

Grandma just shook her head. "Maybe it's only recently that the Lord has raised them up, called them out. I know some of them have come out of the lifeless churches in town but don't know where else to go. Some of them, well, ~~Bob~~ Buck Stone for one, just came to Ashton because the Lord called him here."

"Now who's Bob Stone?"

"A young man I met just the other day. He's a lone, self-supported missionary to the young people in town, the college students, high school students. He witnesses on the street, the college campus, wherever. I don't even know how he makes his living, but he's here. Now isn't that just like the Lord?"

"Just like...what do you mean?"

"The tide is turning, Hank, and you need true believers, true visionaries who can stand with you to pray for this town, the Lord just might be gathering them in."

I'm not alone, thought Hank. I'm not alone! "How do I get in touch with Bob Stone?"

Grandma shook her head. "I don't know. He just came and went one day; he was going through the apartments here, witnessing and passing out tracts. But I wouldn't be surprised if you found him out on the street during the day. Look for him. He's a little chubby, has blond hair and a beard. He looks a little like a Viking."

"So maybe I'm not really alone in this town."

"Oh, Hank, you never were, and now the Lord's gathering even more people to join you. But I think that's what the Lord's urging us to do right now, join hands with any other believers we can find, and pray for this town."

It was so easy, so automatic then, to join hands in praise to the Lord and thanksgiving for the first really encouraging news to come along in quite some time. Hank prayed a prayer of thanks and could hardly get through it as his emotions welled up inside him. Mary was thankful, not only for the encouragement but for Hank's revived spirits.

Then Grandma prayed; Edith Duster, who'd fought in spiritual wars before, who'd won victories on foreign soils, so far from home but so close to God and the frontline warfare, tightly grasped the hands of this young, ministering couple and prayed.

"Lord God," she said, and the warmth of the Holy Spirit flowed through them, "I build now a hedge around this young couple, and I bind the spirits in Jesus' name. Satan, whatever your plans for this town, I rebuke you, I bind you and I cast you out!"

June 18, Sat. AM

DEMONCONFERENCE TWO

Clunk! Two demons drop their swords. Rafar spins, glares at them, they expect the worst. One tries to pick sword up, Rafar holds it down with his foot. Paces away, agitated, cogitates. "Tal..."t
Raves a bit, then takes it out on Complacency, banishes him...orders as per card.

Clunk!

Baal Rafar's eyes darted toward the sound that had interrupted his talking, and saw two swords fallen from thier owners' hands. The two demons, formidable warriors, were nonplused. They both stooped hurriedly to gather up their weapons, bowing, apologizing, begging for pardon.

Slam! Rafar's foot fell on one sword, his own huge sword clamped the other down. The two warriors, startled and terrified, backed away, cowering.

"Please pardon, my Prince!" said one.

"Yes, please pardon!" said the other. "This has never happened before..."

"Silence, you two!" Rafar bellowed.

The two warriors were bracing themselves for a terrible punishment; their frightened yellow eyes peered out from behind ~~enfolding~~ black wings unfurled for protection - as if there was any protection from Baal Rafar's wrath.

But Rafar did not lash out at them. He seemed more interested in the fallen swords; he stared at them, thinking, his brow furrowed and his big yellow eyes narrowing. He walked slowly around the swords, strangely bothered by them, agitated in a way the warriors had never seen before.

"Uhnnnnhhhh..." came a low, gurgling growl from deep in his throat as his nostrils belched forth yellow vapor.

He slowly went down on one knee and picked up one sword in his hand. In his huge fist it looked like a toy. He looked at the sword, looked at the demon who had dropped it, then looked off into space, his gnarled face registering ~~alarming thoughts.~~ angry, burning hatred slowly rising from deep inside him.

"Tal...," he whispered.

Then, like a slowly swelling volcano, he rose to his feet, the anger building inside him, until suddenly, with a roar that shook the room and terrified all those present, he exploded in a fit of fury and hurled the sword through the basement wall, through the earth around Stewart Hall, through the air, through several other buildings on the college campus, and up into the sky where it tumbled end over end in a long arc of several miles, the echoes of his roar reverbrating again and again. ~~through the air.~~

His initial explosion released, he grabbed the sword's owner and with

the order, "Go after it!" flung the demon like a spear ~~after the sword~~ along the ~~sword's~~ same trajectory.

He grabbed up the other sword and flung it at the other demon who sidestepped it just in time to save himself. Then that demon he too went after ~~it~~ his sword.

There were some in the room to whom the word Tal meant nothing, but they could see by the faces and deflating postures of those who did know what the word meant that it had to mean something dreadful.

Rafar began to storm about the room, venting his anger, growling indiscernible phrases and sounds, waving his sword at invisible enemies. The others gave him time to vent himself before daring to ask him any question. Lucius finally stepped forward and bowed low, much as he hated to do so.

~~Finally, Lucius stepped forward and bowed low, much as he hated to do so.~~ "We are at your service, ~~Lord~~ Ba-al Rafar. Can you tell us, who is this Tal?"

Rafar spun around in fury, his wings unfurling like a clap of thunder and his eyes like hot coals. "WHO IS THIS TAL!?" he screamed, and every demon present fell on his face. "Who is this Tal, this warrior, this Captain of the Hosts of Heaven, this sneaky, conniving rival of rivals! Who is this Tal!?"

Rafar stomped about the room, looking for anything to vent his anger upon. Complacency, ~~unfortunately for him,~~ happened to be within grabbing distance. With a huge fist around Complacency's scrawny neck, Rafar plucked him up like a frail weed and held him high.

"You," Rafar growled with a cloud of sulphur and steam, "have failed because of this Tal!" Complacency could only tremble, speechless with terror. "Hogan has become a hound, snuffing and barking after our scent, and I have had my fill of you and your whining excuses!"

~~The huge sword flashed in a crimson arc across the floor and the earth opened up, slit open like a gaping wound, boiling with fire and a boiling cauldron of fire and brimstone.~~
~~and sliced open a hole in space from which fire and smoke~~

The huge sword flashed in a wide, crimson arc, cutting a gash open in space which became a deep, bottomless abyss into which all light seemed to drain like water. Complacency's eyes swelled in stark terror and he screamed his last scream upon the earth. "No, Baal, nooooo!" With a mighty thrust of his arm, Rafar cast him Complacency headlong into the abyss. Complacency tumbled, tumbled, fell and kept falling, his screams becoming fainter and fainter, until he had vanished altogether. Rafar wiped the rift in space shut again with the flat of his blade and it was the room was just as before.

~~Tal's strength is not in his sword, but in the saints of God~~

Rafar addressed the others. "On your feet!" Their compliance was instant. He had their rapt attention. The two demons who had just returned with their lost swords. "

Just then the two warriors returned with their swords. He grabbed both of them by their wings and jerked them together in front of him.

"On your feet, all of you!" he hollered at the others. They complied instantly. He had their rapt attention. Now he held the two demons aloft as an exhibit. "Who is this Tal? He is a strategist who can make warriors drop their swords!" With that, he hurled the two into the group, causing several of them to go sprawling. They picked themselves up and got back on their feet as quickly as they could. "Who is this Tal? He is a subtle warrior who knows his limitations, who never enters a battle he cannot win, who knows all too well the power of the saints of God, a lesson you could all stand to learn."

Rafar held his sword ~~tightly~~, waving it about to give extra force to his words. "I knew, I knew all too well to expect him. Michael would never have sent anyone less to pit against me, Now Hogan is revived, and it is clear why he was even brought to Ashton to begin with; Henry Busche is still retained and the Ashton Community Church has not fallen, but ~~still~~ remains as a bastion to stand against us; now the warriors are dropping their swords like clumsy fools. But this is Tal's ~~plan~~. This is Tal's manner. His strength is not in his own sword, but in the saints of God. Somewhere, someone is praying." ~~Yes, Tal has arrived, and already he is mobilizing his forces in a careful plan against us, true to his style.~~ "Busche and Hogan were handpicked. ~~The~~ plan must ~~rexix~~ revolve around them; if they fall, ~~the plan~~ falls." Rafar selected out a very slimy looking demon and asked, "Have you laid a trap for Busche?"

"Oh, yes, Lord Rafar," said the demon, and he couldn't help laughing at his own cleverness.

~~Busche is a~~

"Be sure it is subtle. Remember, no frontal assault will work."

"Leave it to me."

"And what ~~might we have that can~~ has been done to destroy Marshall Hogan?"

Strife stepped forward. ~~"Perhaps," hex said,~~ "his family ~~can be destroyed.~~ He derives a great amount of strength from his wife. If that support were ripped away..."

"Do it, ~~Any~~ way you can."

"Yes, my prince."

"And let us not neglect some other avenues. Hogan could be lethal, and

Krueger just the same, but they could be made to ~~destroy~~ compromise each other..." Rafar appointed some demons to look into that possibility. "And what about Hogan's daughter?"

Deception stepped forward. "She is already within our hands..."

June 18, Sat.

The leaves were green, that fresh, new-growth kind of green the leaves wear in the early months of summer. From their small table on the red brick plaza below, Sandy and Shawn could look up and see the leaves glowing green, backlit by the sun, and watch the birds flit about in the branches between their regular ~~expeditions~~ bread crumb scavenging for bread crumbs, ~~and other handouts from the~~ and french fries. This spot on the campus was Sandy's favorite. It was so peaceful here, almost a world away from the harshness, the strife, the questions and disputes at home.

Shawn enjoyed watching the brown sparrows with the little round, bodies, cheeping and scrambling for every bread crumb he tossed out onto the bricks.

"I love the way the universe all fits together," he said. "The tree grew here to give us shade, we sit here and eat and give food to the birds that live in the tree. It all works together."

Sandy was fascinated by the concept. On the surface it seemed very simple, almost storybookish, but part of her was so thirsty for this kind of peace she just drank it all in.

"What happens when the universe doesn't fit together?" she asked.

Shawn smiled. "The universe always fits together. The problem is when people don't realize it."

"So how do you explain the problem I'm having with my folks?"

"None of your minds are tuned in right. It's just like an FM station not tuned in right on your radio. If the signal is fuzzy and the voices hiss and sputter, don't blame the broadcasting station - adjust your radio. Sandy, the universe is perfect. It is unified. ~~If it wasn't it wouldn't have lasted for all the eternities that it has~~. The peace, the unity, the wholeness are really there, and all of us are a part of the universe, we're made of the same stuff, so there's no reason why we shouldn't just fit into the whole peaceful, unified scheme of things. If we don't, well, we just took a wrong turn somewhere. We're out of touch with what's going on."

"Boy, I guess so," Sandy muttered. "But that's what gets me! My folks and I are ~~Here we're~~ supposed to be Christians and loving each other and close to God and everything, but all we ever do is argue about who's right and who's wrong."

Shawn laughed and nodded his head. "Yeah, yeah, I know all about that. I've been there too."

"Okay, so how did you solve it?"

"I could only solve it for myself. ~~I didn't solve it entirely.~~ I can't change other people's minds, only my own. It's a little hard to explain, but if you're in tune with the universe, a few little quirks in it that aren't in tune won't bother you much. That kind of thing is only an illusion of the mind anyway.

Once you stop listening to the lies your mind's been telling you, you'll see very clearly and you'll be able to see clearly that God is big enough for everybody and Nobody can put him in a jar and keep that in everybody.
Him all to themselves, according to their own whims and ideas," so I just don't."

"I just wish I could find Him, for real."

Shawn looked at her comfortingly and touched her hand. "Hey. He's no trouble to find. We're all a part of him." ~~He's closer than you think.~~"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's like I said, the whole universe all fits together, it's made of the same essence, the same spirit, the same...oh...energy. We're part of the universe, right?" Sandy shrugged, nodded her head. "Well, whatever our individual concept of God might be, we all know that there is something there, a force, a principle, an energy, that holds everything together. If that force is part of the universe, then it must be a part of us."

Sandy wasn't grasping it. "Ehhhh..."

"Have I lost you?"

"I've just never heard stuff like this before."

"No, all you've heard is religion, right?"

She thought for a moment, then conceded, "Right."

"Well you see, the problem with religion, any religion, is that it ~~a religion~~ is basically a limited perspective, only a partial perspective of the whole."

"Now you sound like Langstrath."

"Oh, she's right on, I think. When you think about it long enough, it makes a lot of sense. It's just like the story about the blind men who encountered the elephant."

"Yeah, yeah..." ~~She'd heard it. "I took that class~~ I heard her tell that story too." Each man's perspective of the elephant was limited to the part that he touched, so since they all touched different parts, they couldn't agree on what an elephant was really like.

"Well? See? They got in a fight over it, just like religionists throughout history have done, and all they needed to realize was that the elephant was only one elephant. It wasn't the elephant's fault that they couldn't agree with each other. They weren't tuned in to each other and to the whole elephant."

"So you're saying we're all blind? Something like that?"

Shawn gave a strong, affirmative nod. "We're just like a bunch of bugs crawling around on the ground, never looking up. If an ant could talk, you could ask him if he knew what a tree was, and if he'd never come out of the field and actually climbed a tree, he'd probably argue with you that the tree didn't exist. But who's wrong? Who's really blind? We're just like that. We've allowed ourselves to be fooled by our own limited perceptions. Are you into Plato at all?"

Sandy laughed a little and shook her head. "I studied that last quarter and I don't think I got that either."

"Hey, he was into the same enlightenment. He figured there had to be a higher reality, an ideal, a perfect existence of which all we see is a copy. It's kind of like what we see with our limited senses is so limited, so imperfect, so broken up into pieces, we can't perceive the way the universe really is, all perfect, running smoothly, everything fitting together, all the same essence. You could even say that reality as we know it is just an illusion, ~~but that's a little complex... really getting into it.~~ a trick of our ego, our mind."

"Sounds pretty far out to me."

"Oh, but it's dynamite once you really get into it. It really answers a lot of questions and solves a lot of problems."

"Yeah, if you can ever get into it."

Shawn leaned forward. "You don't get into it, Sandy. It's already in you. Think about that for a minute."

"I don't feel anything..."

"And why not? Guess!"

"Uh..." She twisted an invisible radio dial with her fingers. "I'm not tuned in?"

Shawn laughed with delight. "Right! Right! Listen. The universe is there, we're a part of it, it never changes, it is right, it is cohesive, it is one big, unified force. It doesn't change, but we can; if we're not lined up with it, not tuned in, we're the ones who are blind, who are living in an illusion. Say, if your life is messed up, it's really a matter of how you look at things."

Sandy scoffed, "Come on,now. You're not going to tell me that it's all in my mind!"

Shawn put up hands of caution. "Hey, don't knock it until you try it." He looked again at the sunshine, the green trees, the busy birds. "Just listen for a minute."

"Listen to what?"

"The wind. The birds. Watch those leaves waving in the breeze."

For a moment they were silent, listening and watching.

Shawn spoke quietly, almost in a whisper. "Now be honest. Haven't you ever felt a sort of...kinship, you know...with the trees, and with the birds, with just about everything? Wouldn't you miss them if they weren't there? Have you ever talked to a houseplant?"

Sandy began to ponder these questions, and then she nodded. Shawn had a point there.

"Now don't resist that, because what you're experiencing there is just a glimpse of the real universe; you're feeling the oneness of everything.

Everything is fitted together, interwoven, interlocked. Now you've felt that before, haven't you?"

She nodded.

"So you know the feeling?"

"Yeah...I guess so."

"So that's what I'm trying to show you: the truth is already within you. You're a part of it. You're a part of God. You just never knew it."

Sandy became very quiet and relaxed. She could hear the birds so clearly now, and the wind seemed almost melodic as it shifted in pitch and intensity through the branches of the trees. The sun was warm, benevolent, cheering. Suddenly she felt so strongly that she had been in this place before, had known these trees and these birds before. They were trying to reach out to her, to talk to her.

Then she noticed that for the first time in many months she felt peace inside. Her heart was at rest. It wasn't an all-pervading peace, and she didn't know if it would last, but she could feel it and she knew she wanted more.

"I think maybe I'm tuning in a little bit," she said.

Shawn smiled and squeezed her hand encouragingly.

Meanwhile, with very gentle, very subtle combing motions of his talons, Deception stood behind Sandy, stroking her blond hair and speaking very sweet words of comfort to her mind.

June 18, Sat PM

Gathering up the Remnant....we'll need some names.

John and Patricia Coleman (CONGREGATIONAL VOTE #1)
Bob Stone (HANK AT FUN UNLIMITED)
Andy and June Forsyth (REMNANT ONE)
Ron Forsyth and Mary Sanders (YOUNG MAN AND GIRL FRIEND GET SAVED)

Tal and his troops were gathered once again in the little church, and conditions felt somewhat different: they had just seen their first victory last night,

Tal and his troops were gathered once again in the little church, and the mood was better this time. They had been active, they'd tasted the first promises of battle; a victory, even though a small one, had been won the night before, and most of all, there were more of them. The original twenty-three had grown now to forty-seven as more mighty warriors had gathered, called in by the prayers of...

"The Remnant!" said Tal with a note of anticipation as he looked over a preliminary list presented to him.

Scion, a red-haired, freckled fighter from the British Isles, explained the progress of the search. "They're out there, Cap, and there's a lotta them, but these be the ones we'll be bringing in for sure."

Tal read the names. "John and Patricia Coleman..."

Scion explained, "They were here last night, spoke up for the preacher, and now they're all the more for him. They drop to their knees as easy as dropping a hat. We've got them working."

"Oh yes, Buck Stone..."

An evangelist.

"A good man. He goes where the sinners are, so it weren't hard to get him to Ashton. He'll take good leadership too, knows he needs it. He already has the burden."

Tal looked up from the list. "Krioni and Triskal, have you been keeping up on this man?"

Krioni brought another warrior forward. "Seth here's been with him."

Seth, a young looking Anglo-Saxon, bowed and said, "A very productive investment. He has a burden for souls, and the Spirit uses him mightily."

has led many to the Lord, and knows a good number."

Tal liked the sound of that. "Then see to it that Hank and Buck join forces. The prayers will multiply once they combine their burdens." Tal looked at the list again. "Andy and June Forsythe.."

Scion explained, "Lost sheep, you could say. Left the United Christian church here in Ashton out of sheer hunger. We'll bring them to church tomorrow. They have a son, Ron, who's searching for the Lord, a bit wayward now but reaching his fill of his ways."

"And plenty more, I see," said Tal with a smile. He handed the list to Guilo. "Assign some of our newcomers to this list. I want these people praying."

Guilo took the list and conferred with several new warriors.

"And what about relatives, friends elsewhere?" Tal asked Scion.

"Plenty of them are redeemed and ready for prayer. Shall I send emissaries to burden them?"

Tal shook his head. "I can't spare them...But send messengers to the watchcarers of their towns. Tell them to contact these people, have them pray earnestly for their loved ones here."

"Done."

Scion set right to work, assigning messengers who immediately vanished to their missions.

("I can't let any warriors be gone for long. Instead, have messengers carry word to the watchcarers over these people's towns and cities, and let the watchcarers see that these people are burdened with prayer for their loved ones here."

"Done."

Scion set right to work, assigning messengers who immediately vanished to their missions.

Guilo had sent his warriors also and was excited to see the wheels in motion. "I like the feel of this, Captain."

"It is a good beginning," said Tal.

"And what of the ba-al Rafar? Do you suppose he knows of your presence here?"

"He knows. The two of us know each other all too well."

"Then he will be expecting a fight, and soon."

"Which is why we won't fight, not yet. Not until the prayer cover is sufficient and we know why Rafar is here. He's no prince of small towns, but of empires, and he would never be here for any task below his pride. What we've seen thus far is far less than what the enemy has planned."

Tal went on to another concern.

"How's Mr. Hogan?"

"I hear little Complacency has been banished for failure and the Ba-al ~~recently flew into~~ in a rage."

Tal chuckled. "Hogan has come to life like a dormant seed. ~~Krioni~~ Nathan! Arnuth! ~~Triskadi~~!"

They were there immediately. "You have more warriors now. Take as many as you need to ~~protect~~ surround Marshall Hogan. Greater numbers may intimidate where ~~do the job that~~ swords cannot."

Guilo was visibly indignant and looked longingly at his sheathed sword.

Tal cautioned him, "Not yet, brave Guilo. Not yet."

June 18, Sat. night

Right after Marshall's call to Harmel, Bernice' phone just about jumped off the wall. Marshall didn't ask her, he told her, "Be at the office tonight at seven, we've got work to do," ~~and that was only because neither of them could make it right that moment.~~

~~Now it was Saturday night at the Clarion~~

Now it was a little after seven and the rest of the Clarion office was deserted and dark. Marshall and Bernice were in the back room, digging old issues of the Clarion out of the archives. Ted Harmel had been quite fastidious in keeping old issues; most of them were neatly kept in huge binders.

"So when did Harmel get run out of town?" Marshall asked as he flipped through several old pages of a back issue.

"About a year ago," Bernice answered, bringing more binders up to the big work table. "The paper kept operating on a skeleton crew for several months before you bought it. I, Edie, Tom, and some of the college journalism majors kept it going. Some of the issues were okay, some of them were a lot like...well, like a college paper."

"Like this one here?"

Bernice looked at the old issue from the previous August. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't look too closely."

Marshall flipped the pages backward. "I want to see the issues up to the time Harmel left."

"Okay, that would be...these right here. Ted left in late July. Here's June...May...April. Just what is it you're looking for?"

"The reason why he got run out."

"You know the story, of course."

"Brummel says he molested some girl."

"Yes, that's Brummel. He says a lot of things. I don't really trust any of it."

"Well did he or didn't he?"

"The girl said he did. She was...about twelve, I guess, a daughter of one of the college regents."

"Which one?"

Bernice probed her brain, finally forced the memory out. "Forsythe. Adam Forsythe. I think he's still there."

"Is he on that list you got from Darr?"

"Nope. But perhaps he should be."

"You've got that right."

"Ted knew Jarred pretty well. The two of them used to go fishing together. He did know the daughter, had frequent access to her, and that helped the case against him."

"So why was he prosecuted?"

"I don't think it ever went that far. He was arraigned before the district judge..."

"Baker?"

"Yes, the one on the list. The case went into the judge's chambers and apparently they struck some kind of deal. Ted was gone just a few days after that."

Marshall let out a forceful and frustrated sigh, giving the worktable an angry slap. "Boy, I wish I wouldn't have let that guy get away."

~~"Sorry. I guess it just hasn't worn off yet."~~

"You didn't tell me I'd be putting my fist through a beehive."

"I didn't know that much about it."

Marshall kept scanning the pages in front of him; Bernice was going through the previous month.

"You say this all blew up in July?"

"Mid to late July."

"The paper's pretty quiet about it."

"Oh sure. Ted wasn't going to print anything against himself, obviously. Besides, he didn't have to; his reputation was shot to pieces anyway."

"He could have defended himself, I suppose."

"He wasn't the type, and besides, who'd read it? Our circulation dropped critically. Several weeks went by without any paycheck."

"Oh-oh. What's this?"

The two of them zeroed in on a letter to the editor in a Friday issue from early July.

Marshall saanned, muttered as he read, "'I must express my indignation at the unfair treatment this Board of Regents has received by the local press...malfeasance of journalism...' Boy, this guy's hot!"

"The recent articles published in the Ashton Clarion amount to nothing less than blatant malfeasance of journalism and we hope our local editor will be professional enough to check his facts from now on before printing anymore groundless innuendoes...'"

"Yes!" Bernice brightened with recollection. "This was a letter from Eugene Baylor." and then she slapped her hands to either side of her face and exclaimed, "Oh...!"

"What?"

~~"You gotta be dig kidding!"~~

Marshall ~~waited for her to get over her slight fit. Besides, he~~ could see that some things would need a few moments to spill completely from her buried memories.

finally

"Those articles!" Bernice exclaimed, and started flipping hurriedly through the June binder. "Yes, here's one." ~~I think it's the first.~~"

Marshall had a look. The headline read, "~~Strachan~~ STRACHAN CALLS FOR AUDIT" Marshall read the lead: ~~"Despite opposition from the Board of Regents,~~ College Dean Brandon Strachan today publicly called for an audit of all Whitmore College accounts despite continuing opposition from the Board of Regents, still voicing his concern over recent allegations of mishandling of funds. Despite continuing opposition from the Whitmore College Board of Regents, College Dean ~~Brandon~~ Eldon Strachan today called for an audit of all Whitmore College accounts and investments, still voicing his concern over recent allegations of mishandling of funds.'"

Boy, this may be more than just a bee hive!

Bernice' eyes rolled up and scanned the heavens as she said, "~~Oh, if I'd know then what I know now...~~"

Marshall read a little further: "'Strachan has asserted that there is "more than adequate evidence" to justify such an audit even though the audit would be costly and premature as the Board of Regents still maintains.'"

Bernice gushed, "You see, I never paid that much attention when all this was going on. Ted was an aggressive sort, he'd gotten on the bad side of people before, and this just sounded like ~~some~~ an other mundane political thing. I was just a reporter on the innocuous human interest stuff, what did I care about all this?"

Marshall finished the article. "So the college dean got himself in hot water with the regents. Sounds like a real feud."

"Ted was a good friend of ~~Brandon~~ Eldon Strachan. Hey, Ted took sides, let's face it, and the regents didn't like it."

"Here's another one, just the week after."

"'REGENT MAULS STRACHAN. Whitmore College Regent Eugene Baylor, the college general treasurer, today accused Dean ~~Brandon~~ Eldon Strachan of "malicious political hatcheting," asserting that Strachan is using "deplorable and unethical methods to further his own dynasty within the college administration.'"

~~Hmmph~~ Heh. Not exactly a harmless little tiff between friends."

"Oh, I understand it got bitter, really bitter. And Ted probably stuck his nose out a little too far. He got too involved in it, and started catching the crossfire."

"Hence Eugene Baylor's angry letter."

"Along with political pressure, I'm sure. Strachan and Ted had ~~a lot~~ many ~~of~~ meetings and Ted was finding out a lot. ~~He put in a lot of time on it.~~ maybe too much."

"But you have no details..."

Bernice only threw up her hands and shook her head. "We have these articles and Ted's phone number and...the list."

"Yeah," Marshall mused, "the list. A lot of college regents on it."

"Plus the Chief of Police and the District Judge who cooked Ted's goose."

"So what became of Strachan?"

"Fired."

INSERT

Bernice flipped through some more old Clarions. ~~She found an article in from late June.~~ "Yes, here's the write-up," she said.

"'STRACHAN FIRED. Citing conflicts of interest and professional incompetency as their reasons, the Whitmore College Board of Regents today unanimously called for Dean Eldon Strachan's resignation...' Not a very long article."

"Ted put it in because he had to, but it's obvious he held back any damaging details. He firmly believed Strachan's case was just."

Marshall kept flipping through the pages. "Ehhh, what's this one here? 'WHITMORE COULD BE MILLIONS IN ARREARS, SAYS STRACHAN.'" Marshall read that one carefully. "Wait a minute here, he's saying the college could be in big trouble but he isn't saying how he knows."

"It kept coming out in bits and pieces. We just never got all of them before Strachan and Ted were silenced."

"But millions...I mean, you're talking real money here."

"But you see all the connections?"

"Yeah. The regents, the judge, the police chief, Young, the comptroller, and who knows who else, all connected to Langstrat and very quiet about it."

"And don't forget Ted Hammel."

"Yeah, he's quiet about it too. I mean, real quiet. The guy's scared out of his socks. ~~But he's the connection between this inner Circle and whatever was going on at the college.~~ But he wasn't a very loyal member of the group if he sided with Strachan against the regents."

"So they rubbed him out, so to speak," along with Strachan."

"Maybe. So far we have just a theory, and it's foggy."

"But we do have a theory, and ~~But~~ my being in jail fits in ~~nicely now.~~ the pattern."

INSERT

A loose page fluttered out and to the floor. Marshall picked it up. Something on the page caught his eye and he perused it until Bernice found what she was looking for, an article from late June.

"Too nicely just yet," Marshall thought outloud. "We need ~~to be careful~~ to realize what we're saying here. We're talking political corruption, abuse of process, racketeering, who knows what else? We'd better be really sure of ourselves."

"What was that page there that dropped?"

"Huh?"

"The one you picked up."

"Mm. It was out of order. It's dated clear back in January."

Bernice reached for the proper binder on the archive shelf. "Eh...what year?"

"~~This~~ Last year. Hey, I'll take care of it, don't worry about it."

"No, let's just do it before we forget. I don't want the archives all screwed up after - hey, what'd you fold it all up for?"

Marshall just stood there, holding the folded up page in his hand. He shrugged a little, sighed a little, gave her a very gentle look she'd never seen on his face before, and unfolded the page.

"There's an article about your sister," he said.

She took the page from him and looked at the news story. The headline read, "KRUEGER DEATH RULED SUICIDE." She put the page down quickly and looked for the appropriate binder to put it in.

It had stung her. Marshall could tell.

"I figured you wouldn't want to be reminded," he said.

"I've seen it before," she said ~~snappishly~~ abruptly. "I have a copy of it at home."

"I read ~~it~~ the article just now."

"I know."

She found the binder she was looking for, but also pulled out another, opening it on the worktable.

"Marshall," she said, "you may as well know everything about it. It may very well come up again. It might affect my work, it might affect my emotions. The case is not resolved in my mind and it's been a very difficult battle for me."

Marshall only sighed and said, "You started this, remember that now."

Bernice kept her lips tight and her body straight and moved with quick, deliberate movements. She was trying to be a detached machine.

She pointed to the first story that broke in mid-January: "BRUTAL DEATH ON CAMPUS."

Marshall read silently. He wasn't ~~ready~~ prepared for the horrible details. ~~An expletive whispered out his lips~~ He whispered an expletive.

"The story isn't entirely accurate," Bernice commented in a very guarded tone of voice. "They didn't find Pat in her own dorm room; she was down the hall in another room that was unoccupied. I guess some of the girls used that room to study ~~by~~ themselves if it got too noisy on the floor. No one knew where she was until someone spotted the blood running out under the door..." Her voice cracked. ~~She turned away.~~ She shut her mouth tightly and tried to be tough.

Marshall was horrified by the story: ~~He kept reading.~~ Patricia Elizabeth Krueger, age nineteen, ~~had been~~ was found in a dorm room, naked and very dead, her throat slashed. There was no sign of a struggle, ~~but blood was spattered everywhere~~. The entire college was in a state of shock, ~~So far~~ there were no witnesses.

Bernice flipped to another page and another headline, "NO CLUES TO KRUEGER DEATH." Marshall read it quickly, feeling more and more like he was invading a very sensitive area where he shouldn't be. The article stated that no witnesses had come forth, no one had heard or seen anything, there was no clue to who the assailant might be.

"And you read the last one," Bernice said. "They finally ruled it was a suicide. They decided that my sister had stripped herself, and cut her own throat." ~~and spattered the walls with her own blood."~~

Marshall was indredulous. "And that was that?"

"That was that."

~~XXIMXMXXXXXX~~ Marshall closed the binder quietly. He'd never seen Bernice looking so vulnerable. ~~A jail cell full of hookers she could take, but~~ The feisty little reporter who could hold her own in a jail cell full of hookers ~~did~~ had ~~have one side of her being~~ part laid bare and wounded beyond healing. ~~this...~~ still He went to her, put his hands gently on her shoulders.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's why I came here, you know." She wiped her eyes with her fingers, reached for a nearby shop tissue to wipe her nose. "I...I just couldn't leave it at that. I knew Pat. I knew her better than anyone. She just wasn't the type to do such a thing. She was happy, well adjusted, she liked college. She sounded just fine in her letters."

"Why...why don't we just pack it up for the night?"

Bernice didn't acknowledge his suggestion. "I checked the dorm layout, the room where she died, ~~I checked~~ the roster for the names of every girl living in that building; I talked to all of them. I checked the police reports, the coroner's report, I went through all of Pat's personal effects. I tried to track down Pat's roommate, but she'd left. I ~~really didn't even know~~ still can't remember her name. I only met her once when I was here for a visit.

"I finally decided just to stick around, get a job, wait and see. I had some newspaper background, the job here was easy enough to land."

"So...has anything else ever developed?"

"No...not really. I just don't know where else to look."

Marshall moved alongside her, put his arm around her shoulders. "Well listen. I'll help you out, any way I can. You don't have to carry this whole thing by yourself."

She relaxed a bit, leaned into him just enough to acknowledge his embracing arm. ~~"I guess that's best.~~ "I don't want to bother you."

"You're not bothering me. Listen, as soon as you're ready, we can go over it, recheck everything. There might still be some leads somewhere."

Bernice shook her two fists and whimpered, "If I could just be more objective about it!"

~~Marshall gave a comforting laugh and~~

Marshall gave her a gentle, comforting chuckle and a friendly squeeze. "Well, maybe I can handle that end of it. You're doing a good job, Bernie. Just hang in there."

She was a nice kid, Marshall thought, and as far as he could remember, this was the first time he'd ever even touched her.

June 19, Sun. AM

It was Sunday mornigg. ~~The carillon at Ashton United~~ Church bells carried on the clean summer air from one end of the town to the other, and while many set their watches and then went back to their normal Sunday mornings of yardwork, outings or television footballs, the churchgoers started driving or walking to morning worship. The young, the aged, the well-dressed and the casual all found their way to their respective churches.

Hank usually liked to walk to church. The walk was not very long, and was usually very pleasant.

Sometimes a minister gets tired;

Hank had no idea how the Sunday mroning worship service was going to go; he hadn't seen or talked to anyone except Grandma Duster

Hank had no idea how the Sunday morning service was really going to go; he'd heard from several members of the congregation on Saturday, but only those who were really glad he won the confidence vote and wanted to encourage him.

For obvious reasons,

The congregation of The Ashton Community Church was ~~not as full as usual~~ much smaller, fragmented and scattered about the sanctuary this Sunday morning, but Hank had to admit the whole atmosphere of the place was much more peaceful. As he stood behind the old pulpit to open the service with some announcements and then some prayer, he could see the smiling faces of his supporters peppered throughout the small crowd; yes, there were the Colemans sitting in their usual spot. Grandma Duster was there too, in much better health, praise the Lord, Alf Brummel didn't make it this morning, although Gordon Mayer and his wife were there, as well as Sam and Helen Turner. Sam still had his Stetson on his head, sort of his way of saying he was there but not really. Some of the not-so-actives were there for their usual once-in-about-a-month drop-in, and Hank gave them special glances and smiles just to let them know they were noticed.

Yes, and there were the Cogers, the Harrises and Ben Squires the mailman.

During the song service, as Mary banged out "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" on the piano and Hank led the singing, another ~~young~~ couple came in the back door and took a seat near the rear just like new folks usually did. Hank didn't recognize them at all.

Scion remained near the back door, watching Andy and June Forsythe take their seats. Then he looked up toward the platform and gave Krioni and Triskal a friendly salute. They smiled and saluted back. A few demons ~~were there,~~ not at all happy to see this new heavenly stranger lurking about, much less bringing new people into the church. Scion only smiled at them and had come in with the people they ~~owned~~, and they were with their human hosts

backed nonthreateningly out the door.

Hank continued the service, and though he couldn't explain why he felt as joyful as he did this morning, he still was glad he did. Maybe it was having Grandma Duster there, and the Colemans, and the new couple, and then there was that other new fellow, the big blonde guy sitting in the back. He had to be a football lineman or something, he was so big.

Hank preached from Isaiah 55

Hank just kept remembering what Grandma had said to him, "...the Lord's gathering going to even more people to join you," and this morning, even though he tried to remain cautious about jumping to quick conclusions, he had to still found the presence of these new people very encouraging. admit that there was quite a number of visitors there.

He finally got to the sermon, and opened his Bible to Isaiah 55. Somehow it seemed right; it had been a scripture that spoke to his heart again and again the whole week. Today would be an appropriate time to preach on it. He directed the congregation to the passage and then read verses six through twelve as the scriptures called out to the people to turn from their wicked ways and back to God, to seek Him while He may be found; Hank let the passage do most of the talking while he paused once in a while to explain and illustrate

"Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall my word be which goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. For you will go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

Hank loved that passage, and this morning it meant even more to him, more than it ever had before. He couldn't help smiling and getting excited as he began to explain it, illustrate it, preach it. Some of the people simply stared at him, listening out of some unexplainable sense of obligation. The others, however, even leaned

forward in their seats, hagging on his every word. The new couple sitting in the back just kept nodding their heads with very intent expressions. — INSERT

When the service ended, some made a beeline for the door. Others made a beeline for ~~them from~~ Hank.

~~"Pastor," said the new man, shaking Hank's hand~~

"Pastor, my name is Andy Forsythe, and this is my wife June."

"Hello, hello," Hank said, and he could feel a wide smile stretching his face.

"That was great," Andy said, shaking his head in amazement and still shaking Hank's hand. "It was...boy, it was really great!"

Hank shook June's hand also, and she was beaming.

"It was just what we needed to hear. It was just wonderful!" she said.

They made some small talk for a few minutes, finding out the usual little tidbits about each other. Andy ~~worked at~~ owned and ran the lumberyard just on the outskirts of town, Junewas a legal secretary. They had a son, Ron, who was in trouble with drugs and needed the Lord.

"Well," said Andy, "we haven't been saved too long ourselves. We used to go to the Ashton United Christian..." Then his voice trailed off. Apparently the facts were unsavory and he didn't feel comfortable discussing it.

June was less inhibited. "We were starving there. We couldn't wait to get out."

Andy cut back in, "Yeah, that's right. We heard about this church...well, actually, we heard about you; we heard you were in a bit of trouble for being such a stickler with the Word of God, and we just thought to ourselves, 'We ought to check that guy out.' Now I'm glad we did."

Hank didn't know what to do or say other than to be cordial and pastorly. "Well...well..."

"We'd like to have you over sometime."

"Sure. That'd be really nice."

Andy looked at the floor, then looked at June, then looked at the floor, then looked back at Hank again just the moment before Hank thought the conversation was over.

"Pastor," he said finally, "I want you to know there are a lot of hungry people out there. We have some friends who love the Lord and have noplace to go. It's been really strange the last few years. One by one the churches around here have kind of died. Oh, they're still there all right, and they have the people and the bucks, but...well, you know what I mean."

INSERT

The big blonde man smiled, nodded his head, even shouted out an "Amen!"

The words kept coming to Hank's heart and mind. It had to be the Lord's anointing, and he loved the feel of it. First would come the feelings welling up deep inside him, and only seconds before it would be time to express them, the words would be there, pouring forth from his lips. He stopped by the pulpit from time to time to look at his notes lest he get lost, but most of the time he was all over the platform, feeling like he was somewhere between heaven and earth, speaking forth the Word of God.

The few little demons lurking about could only cower and sneer. Some did manage to stop the ears of the people they owned, but the onslaught this morning was particularly severe and painful. To them, Hank's preaching had the soothing effect of a buzz saw.

On top of the church, Signa and his warriers simply would not bend or back down. Lucius dropped by once with a sizable flock of demons just in time for the service, but Signa would not step aside.

"You will know better than to tamper with me!" Lucius threatened.

"I'm sorry, we cannot allow anymore demons into the church this morning." ~~"No new demons this morning, I'm sorry."~~ Signa was so sickeningly polite, he would have made a good clerk in a department store.

Lucius must have had more important things for his demons to do that morning than try to hack and chop their way through a wall of obstinate angels. He delivered a few choice insults and then the whole bunch of them roared off into the air, bound for some other mischief.

Hank wasn't sure he ddd. "What do you mean?"

Andy just shook his head. "Satan's just really playing games with this town, I guess. Ashton never used to be this way; you know, the crime, the weird stuff going on, the violence..."

"And the churches!" blurted June. "You just can't find a true, Bible believing church here anymore. The United Christian I guess the used to have a wonderful pastor and the Spirit was really there, but it sure isn't like that now."

Andy had to add,

"Hey, you may have trouble believing this, but we have friends who have dropped out of three...no, four of the local churches. Like I said, there are a lot of hungry people out there, sheep without a shepherd. The churches around here just don't cut it. They don't preach the gospel."

"We didn't even get saved in a church. We found Christ through a street preacher." resolve church attendance problem here.

"Ever met Buck Stone?"

Hank said, "No. Who's he?"

Andy got a little ecstatic. "Great guy! Really great guy! I think he's still around town. I see him every once in a while, preaching on the street!"

June said warmly, "Oh, you really should! You two would be really good for each other!"

Just then Mary walked up. Hank happily introduced her to them.

Then Mary said, "Hank, I'd like you to meet - " and turned toward the empty room. Whoever was supposed to be there wasn't. She looked around the room for him. "Well...! He's gone!"

"Who was it?"

"Oh, you remember that big guy sitting in the back?"

"The big blonde guy?"

"Yes."

"He looked like a viking or something?"

"Yes. I got a chance to talk to him. He was really something. He told me to tell you that" and Mary deepened her voice to imitate him " - The Lord is with you, keep praying and keep listening."

"Wow, that was nice. Who was he?"

"I didn't get his name."

Andy asked, "Who was this?"

"Oh," said Hank, "you know, that big guy in the back. He was sitting right next to you."

Andy looked at June, and her eyes got wide. Andy started smiling, then he started laughing, and then he started clapping his hands and practically dancing.

"Praise the Lord!" he exclaimed, and Hank hadn't seen such enthusiasm in a long time. "Praise the Lord, there was nobody there, Pastor! We didn't see a soul!"

Mary's mouth dropped open and she covered it with her fingers. "Oh dear...," she said.

~~I'd left the area hastily and went back to work.~~

Oliver Young was a real showman; he could work an audience right down to each tears or titters and time it so well the congregation became just so many puppets on a string. He would stand behind that pulpit with incredible dignity and poise, and his words were always so well chosen that whatever he was saying just had to be right. The vast congregation certainly seemed to think so; they had packed the place out. Many of them were professionals, doctors, teachers, lawyers, self-proclaimed philosophers and poets; a very large segment was from or connected in some way with the college. ~~The church was packed out, and~~ By the way so many of them parishioners were taking fastidious notes on Young's message, one would think THIS was not a sermon but a lecture.

Marshall, as usual, couldn't follow it. He could never really get into Young's far-out metaphysics anyway, but this morning was simply out of the question; all Marshall could think about were the questions he couldn't wait to spring on Young after the service was over.

Young continued his catechism. "What is the Good? Some say it is merely the absence of evil, the purging away of sin, if you will. But are we to say that the Good is merely a void left in the absence of Evil, ~~which is~~ and that Evil is a Force, a substance, a thing? No, rather let us regard Good as a Force, and Evil as a Force, as well these two being opposed to one another but still essentially interlocked, still entirely dependant on each other for their own existence, for their own impetus..."

Marshall took a quick and furtive glance sideways. His whole family was in church. There was Kate, and there was Sandy taking notes like mad, and next to her sat Shawn Ormsby. ~~It was clear to Marshall and Kate that Sandy was here because Shawn was. The two of them had been hitting it off pretty well, and he had been a definite positive influence in her life.~~ Sandy & Shawn

Shawn had made a deal with Sandy: he would go to church with her if she would go with her folks. Marshall had to admit, even though a little reluctantly, that Shawn had a way with Sandy and could communicate with her in ways Marshall never could. There had been several occasions when Shawn had served quite well as a liason or interpreter between Sandy and Marshall and opened lines of communication neither of them thought could ever materialize. That was great. Things were getting peaceful around the house at last; Shawn was definitely a real peacemaker, a gentle sort who had a real gift for refereeing.

~~But still Marshall felt very unsettled. Finally his whole family was at peace and attending church together, and that was an incredible leap forward for them.~~ But what was Marshall about to find out about this Young? Would it turn out that these new advances his family had made would have to be diverted, maybe even torn down just when they were getting started?

So what do I do now? Marshall wondered. He still didn't like this church, he still didn't like Young, not to mention the fact that with each passing day he was becoming more andmore convinced that Young was some kind of crook. But then, here was Sandy sitting with him and Kate in church, and that was like some kind of miracle happening in a day when miracles were certainly hard to find. Maybe I'd better not touch this thing at all, he thought. I can't afford to screw it up.

His reporter's instincts were sure battling against that. If only he could resolve all the contradictions, all the mysterious goings-on that still remained shrouded in a maddening secrecy that only made him all the more curious. ~~What was really going on around here?~~

So, while Pastor Oliver Young was up there trying to get across his ideas on the "interdependence in the midst of conflict" between the ideal Good and the undeniable Evil, ~~but~~ Marshall had his own nagging conflicts to think about.

He didn't like Young, he didn't like the church, his own heart was beginning to churn and long for something better and he'd told Kate so; but now things were just beginning to patch up and Sandy was coming with them, talking to them at home, starting to communicate. He couldn't ruin all that. He'd just have to cool it, wait, just see how it panned out.

On top of that, But then the questions kept racing through his reporter's brain, those nagging, unresolved contradictions, the whole mysterious bag of hidden goings-on. Young was up there talking about the conflict between the Good and the Evil, but for this morning Marshall had his own conflict to think about.

The service ended punctually at twelve noon and the carillon in the tower automatically clicked on and began to play a very traditional, very Christian sounding accompaniment to all the hand-shaking, visiting and filing out of the people.

Marshall and his family entered the flow of traffic that oozed yakkily along toward the foyer, passed with all the others through the big sanctuary door and then made their way slowly toward the front door.

Oliver Young was standing by the front door in his usual spot, greeting all his parishioners, shaking hands, cootchy-cooing the babies, being pastorly. Soon Marshall, Kate, Sandy and Shawn had their turn with him.

"Well, Marshall, good to see you!" Young gushed, shaking Marshall's hand.

"Have you met Sandy?" Marshall asked, and formally introduced Young to his daughter, and then to Shawn Ormsby.

Young was very pleased and very warm toward her: "Sandy, I'm very glad to see you!

"And...Shawn!" Young exclaimed. "Shawn Ormsby!" The two of them shook hands.

"Oh, so you two know each other!" Marshall asked.

"Oh, I've known Shawn since he was just a little shaver. Shawn, don't make yourself so scarce, all right?"

Sandy at least acted like she was glad to be there.

"All right," Shawn answered with a shy smile.

The four of them moved on so the next group could have a chance to greet the pastor, but then Marshall lagged behind and came up close on the other side to speak to Young some more. Just a few questions, he thought.

He waited until Young had just finished greeting one little group of people, and then interjected into that pause, "Hey, I just thought you'd like to know that things are going better now with Sandy and me."

Young smiled, shook a few hands, then said sideways to Marshall, "Wonderful! That's really wonderful, Marshall." Then he offered his hand to someone else, "Nice to see you here today.!"

In another space between exiting greetees, Marshall interjected, "Yeah, she really enjoyed your sermon this morning. She said it was very challenging."

"Well, thank you for saying so. Yes, Mr. Beaumont, how are you?"

"You know, it even seemed to be along the same lines as what Sandy's studying in school, in ~~Jaileen~~ Juleen Langstrat's class."

Young didn't answer that but directed all his attention to a young couple with a baby. "Oh my, she's getting so big!"

Marshall continued, "You're going to have to meet Professor Langstrat sometime. There's a very interesting parallel between what she teaches and what you preach." There was no response from Young. "I understand, as a matter of fact, that Langstrat's pretty deeply involved in occultism and Eastern mysticism..."

"Well," Young finally responded, "I wouldn't know anything about that, Marshall."

"And you definitely don't know this Professor Langstrat?"

"No. I told you that."

"Haven't you ~~had~~ attended several private sessions with her ~~yourself, even~~ on a regular basis, and not only you, but also Alf Brummel, Ted Harmel, Delores Pinckston, Eugene Baylor, and ~~what about~~ even Judge Baker?"

Young turned just a little red, then thought for a moment, then grimaced with chagrined recollection. ~~"Oh, for goodness' sake!"~~

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" he laughed. "Where in the world has my mind been? You know, all this time I've been thinking of someone else!"

"So you do know her?"

"Well, yes, of course. Many of us do."

Young turned aside to greet some more people. When those people had gone, Marshall was still standing there.

Marshall pressed, "So what about these private sessions? Does she really have a clientele including community leaders, elected officials, regents at the college..."

Young looked directly at Marshall. "Marshall, just what is your specific concern here?"

"Just doing my job. Whatever this all is, it seems to be something the people of Ashton should know about, especially because it involves so many of the influential people who are shaping this town."

"Well, if you are concerned about it, I'm not the person to talk to. You should go and ask Professor Langstrat herself."

"Oh, I intend to. ~~I was just hoping that I might get some honest answers from you first~~ I just wanted to give you the chance to give me some honest answers...something I feel you're not quite doing."

Young's voice got a bit strained. "Marshall, if I seem to be elusive it is because what you are trying to pry into is protected by professional ethics. It is privileged information. I was simply hoping you would figure that out without my having to tell you!"

Kate was calling from the sidewalk. "Marshall, we're all waiting for you!"

Marshall stepped away from Young and went to join his family. This interview was getting him nowhere anyway; Young was too cool, unshakable, and slippery.

June 19, Sun.

A few states away, somewhere in a deep, secluded and steep-sided valley rimmed by high, craggy mountains and carpeted with thick green ground cover, gld graying snags and moss-tufted rock, a small but well-constructed cluster of buildings nestled like a lonely outpost in the center of the valley floor, accessible only by one rough and meandering gravel road. ~~The xxxxx xxxxxx. One larger building was a dormitory, Clouds hung over the valley in paper-thin layers and mist dampened the ground. The air was silent and cold.~~

~~The xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ buiddings were plain, constructed of stone and brick, and ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ included a small dormitory, and office complex, a ~~meeting~~ dining hall, a maintenance building, a clinic, and several private dwellings. There were no siggs, no labals anywhere, nothing to indicate where or what anything was.

Tracing a charcoal streak across the sky, a sinister, black object ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ flew over the mountaintops and began to drop into the valley, piercing like through the paper thin layers of mist. Cloaked by oppressive, spiritual darkness, and silent as a black ~~mist~~ cloud, ~~rolling over the land~~, Ba-al Rafar, the Prince of Babylon, floated on huge black wings, staying close to the ~~xxxxxxx~~ contour of the mountainside, maneuvering in a ~~xxx~~ course that weaved this way and that among the dead ~~xxxxx~~ snags and rocky crags. The canopy of darkness followed him like a cast shadow, like a tiny circle of night upon the landscape; a faint streak of red and yellow vapor trailed from his nostrils and hung in the air behind him like a long, slowly settling ribbon.

~~a once dismal and dilapidated old ranch had been expanded~~ That little cluster of buildings, ~~once a dismal~~

and rebuilt into a

The once a dismal and dilapidated old ranch, had not been

expanded into a ~~small~~ complex of stone and brick buildings which now housed a

INSERT

Below him ~~he could see~~ the little cluster of buildings, ~~but to his eyes it~~ looked like a ~~mixxxxxxx~~ huge hive of hideous black insects. ~~as demons of all shapes, and sizes and strengths hovered, flitted, darted about in a boiling mass of activity. At the outer edges of the complex, several layers of ruthless warriors hovered almost stationery in a vast dome of defense over the complex, swords drawn, yellow eyes peering out into the valley. Within the initial, protective layers, the xxxxxxx was very active, and~~ Rafar noted that much of the activity was centered around one of the private dwellings on the fringe of the cluster. The Strongman is there, he thought, and banked gently to one side, changing his course for that building.

Below him the ~~little cluster of buildings~~ ranch looked like a huge hive of hideous black insects. Several layers of ruthless warriors hovered almost stationary in a vast dome of defense over the complex, swords drawn, yellow eyes peering out across the valley. Deep within this shell, demons of all shapes, sizes and strengths hovered, flitted, darted about in a boiling mass of activity. As Rafar dropped closer, he noted ~~xxxx~~ a concentration of black spirits around ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ a large, multistoried stone house on the fringe of the cluster. The Strongman is there, he thought, ~~and~~ as he banked gently to one side, changing his course for that building.

The outer sentinels saw him approaching and gave an eerie, sirenlike wail. Immediately the defenders radiated outward from Rafar's flight path, opening a channel through the defense layers. Rafar swooped skillfully through the channel as demons on all sides saluted him with upheld swords, their glowing yellow eyes looking like thousands of paired yellow stars on black velvet. He ignored them and passed quickly through. The channel closed again behind him like a living gate.

He floated slowly down through the roof of the house, through the attic, past rafters, walls, plaster, through an upstairs bedroom, through a thick, beam-supported floor and down into a spacious living room below.

The evil in the room was thick and confining, the darkness like black liquid that swirled about with any motion of the limbs. The room was crowded.

"Ba-al Rafar, the Prince of Babylon!" a demon announced from somewhere, and monstrous demons all around the perimeter of the room bowed in respect.

Rafar folded his wings in regal, capelike fashion and stood with an intimidating air of royalty and might, his jewels flashing impressively. ~~He took a moment to look up and down the ranks of demons all lined in orderly ranks around the room~~

His big yellow eyes studied carefully the orderly ranks of demons lined up all around him. A horrible gathering. These were spirits from the principality levels, princes themselves of their own nations, peoples, tribes. Some were from Africa, some were from the Orient, several were from Europe. All were involved in this project and all were ~~unstoppable~~. invincible. Rafar noted their tremendous size and formidable appearance; they all matched him for size and ferocity and he doubted he he would ever venture to challenge any of them. To receive a bow from them was a great honor, a compliment indeed.

"Hail, Rafar," came a rumbling, gargling voice from the end of the room.

The Strongman. It was forbidden to speak his name. He was one of the few majesties who were intimate with Lucifer himself, a vicious, global tyrant whose responsibility had been ~~had been responsible~~ for the past hundred centuries for resisting the plans of the living God and establishing Lucifer's kingdom on the earth. Rafar and his kind controlled nations - such as The Strongman controlled Rafar and his kind.

The Strongman rose from his place and his huge form filled that whole part of the room. The evil that emanated from him could be felt everywhere, almost like an extension of his body. He was grotesque, hulking, his black hide hanging like sacks and curtains from his limbs and torso, his face a macabre landscape of boney prominences and deep, folded furrows.

He was regal in his adornments, his jewels flashed brilliantly from his neck, chest, arms; his big black wings ~~hung to the floor and even covered~~ draped his body like a royal robe and trailed along the floor.

Rafar bowed low in homage and could feel the Strongman's presence from clear across the room. "Hail, my lord."

The ~~Strongman~~ Strongman never wasted words. "Shall we be detained again?"

"The new resistance is failing, my lord. Soon the site will be ready."

"And what of the host of heaven?"

"Limited."

The Strongman didn't respond for a moment. ~~Rafar could distinctly feel that The Strongman was not satisfied with his answer.~~ He did not like Rafar's answer - Rafar could feel that distinctly.

The Strongman spoke slowly, "We have received reports of a strong Captain of the Host being sent to Ashton. I believe you know him."

"I have reason to believe Tal has been sent, but I have antidipated him."

The big, velvet-draped eyes burned with fury. "Is it not this Tal who vanquished you at the fall of Babylon?"

Rafar knew he must answer, and quickly. "It is this Tal."

"Then the delays have cost us our advantage. You have now been matched strength for strength."

"My lord, you will see what your servant can do."

"Bold words, Ba-al Rafar, but ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ your strengths ~~will be outweighed xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ can only succeed with immediacy; ~~and you have little time.~~ the strengths of our enemies will grow with time."

"All will be ready."

"And what of the man of God and the newspaper man?"

"Does my lord even give them his attention?"

"Your lord wishes you to give them yours! ~~They are an unforeseen and xxxx intolerable frustration.~~"

"They are now powerless, my lord, and will soon be removed."

"But for Tal," the Strongman said derisively. "Let me see it happen before you bother me in boasting about it.. Until then, we remain confined here. Ba-al Rafar, I will not wait long!"

"Nor shall you need to."

The Strongman only smirked. "You have your orders. Begone."

Rafar bowed low and with an unfurling of his wings he quietly rose through the house until he was outside. Then, with a furious burst of rage he swooped upward, sending unexpecting demons tumbling out of the ~~xxxx~~ way.

The error of Lucius are being corrected.

The Strongman's eyes burned with fury. "Is it not this Tal who vanquished you at the fall of Babylon?"

"It is this Tal."

"And will he vanquish you again?"

"My lord, you will see what your servant can do." I am back, I face him again "Bold words, Ba-al Rafar. The time is very close. I must go there, I must complete the plan. You must prepare the way. You will need more than words. But you have little time. I must go there and the way must be prepared and ready. You will need more than words."

"All will be ready."

"And what of the man of God and the newspaperman?"

"Does my lord even give them his attention?"

"Your Lord wishes you to give them yours!"

"And so I have. They are now powerless and soon will be destroyed."

"Let me see it happen, and quickly. Until then, I hold more confidence in this Tal than you do. You are a lord of nations, Tal is their defender. The host of heaven have matched you

"Until then, we remain confined here. I will not wait long!"

"Nor shall you need to."

The Strongman only smirked. "You have your orders. Begone."

Rafar bowed low and then swooped up out of the house, sending unexpecting demons tumbling out of the way. He picked up spped, his wings rushing furiously, and the defenders could barely get a channel opened before he burst through it trailing a hot stream of sulphurous breath. The defenders closed up the channel again and watched him soar away, giving each other curious looks.

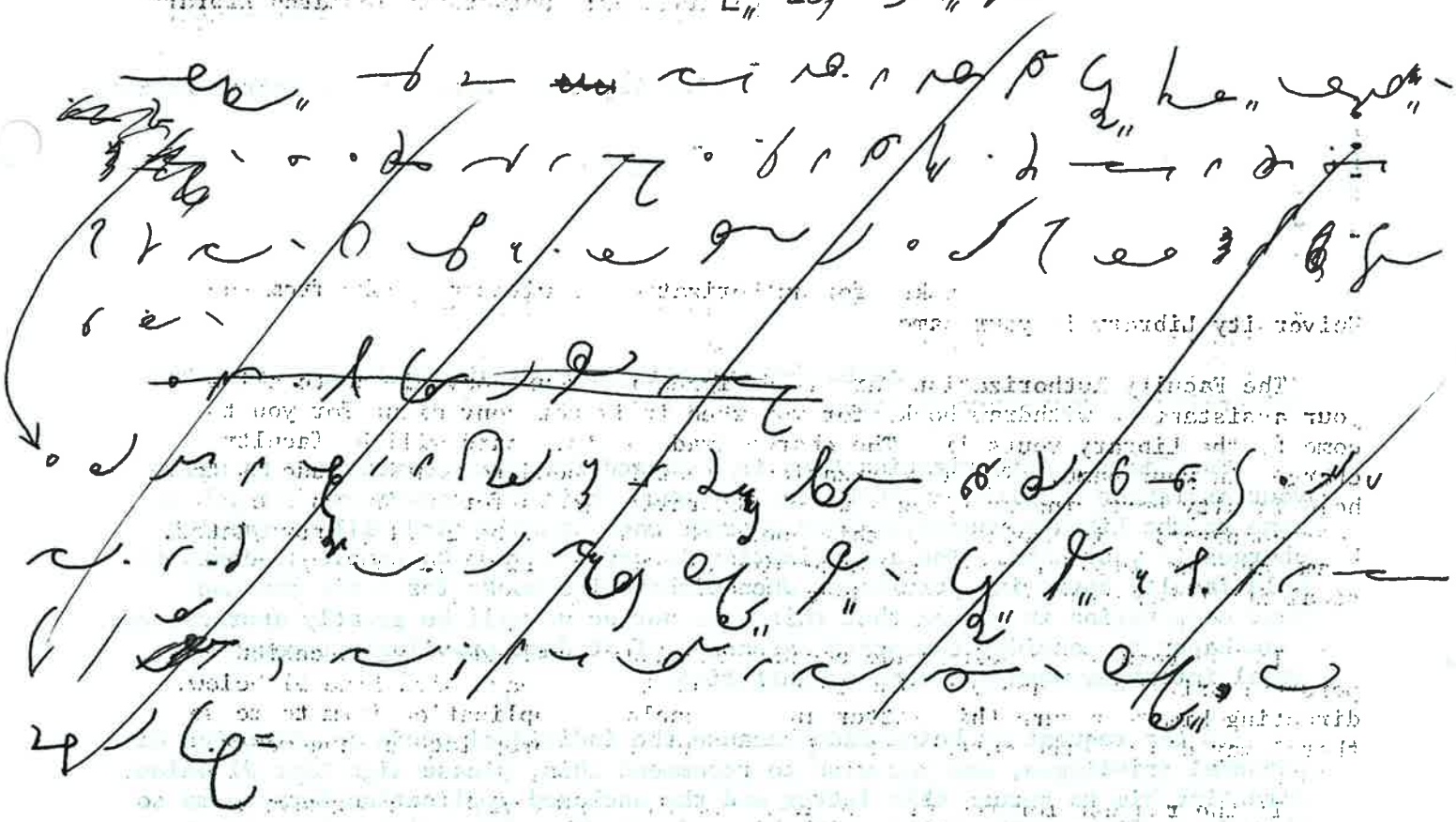
Up, up Rafar swooped, up the side of the mountains and then out over the top and back toward the little town of Ashton. He cared not who saw him, he cared not about stealth or even decorum. He was Rafar, the Prince of Babylon, and let all the world bow before him or be decimated under the edge of his sword, for that was the way it would be.

Tal. Tal! The very name was bitterness itself on his tongue. The lords of Lucifer would never let Rafar forget that defeat so long ago. Never. No, never, until the day when Rafar redeemed his honor.

Rafar could see his sword gutting Tal and scattering him across the sky; he could feel the impact in his arms, he could hear the ripping sound of it.

From the mountaintops around the valley Rafar appeared as ~~[illegible]~~ an ever shrinking black streak approaching the horizon until finally he vanished in the great distance.

Among the jagged rocks on one mountain's summit a silver-haired man came out of hiding to watch Rafar quickly shrink into the distance, the indignant demon etching a long, black trail ~~thread arched~~ across the sky, until he vanished over the horizon. Then several more men appeared from their hiding places. They looked down at the ~~little~~ demon-warmed cluster of buildings in the valley, then looked again toward the horizon, then vanished down the other side of the mountain in a flash of light and a flurry of wings.



Well, thought Marshall, sooner or later I just have to get around to it, and so, ~~that~~ Thursday afternoon, when things were more quiet, he closed himself in his office and made some calls trying to track down Professor Juleen Langstrat. He called the college, and got the number of the Philosophy Department; he called the Philosophy Department and went through two receptionists in two different offices before he finally found out that Langstrat was not in today and had an unlisted home number.

~~Then~~ Marshall thought of the very cooperative Albert Darr, and gave his office a ring. Professor Darr was teaching, but would return his call if ~~he would~~ leave a message. Marshall left a message. Two hours later, Albert Darr returned Marshall's call. Albert Darr did have the unlisted number for Juleen Langstrat's apartment. Marshall thanked Albert Darr.

Marshall called the number.

It was busy.

June 23, Thursday

The living room was dimly lit by one small lamp on the mantel. The room was quiet, warm, comfortable. The shades were drawn to block out distractions, bright light, any other disturbances.

Juleen Langstrat sat in her chair, speaking quietly to her counselee who sat in the chair opposite her.

"You hear only the sound of my voice..." she said, then repeated that phrase several times quietly and clearly. "You hear only the sound of my voice..."

This went on for several minutes until her subject was in a deep, hypnotic trance.

"You are descending...descending deep within yourself..." Langstrat watched the face of her subject carefully. She then extended her hands palms out, fingers spread, and began to move her hands up and down just inches away from the subject's body as if feeling for something. "Release your life energy...let it go...it is flowing forth from you now...Yes! There it is! I can feel it. Can you read me?"

The subject murmured, "Yes..."

"Do you feel anyone else there with you?"

"No..."

"Someone will come..."

"You are free from your body now...you feel the bounds of your body dissolving away..."

Langstrat leaned in close, still using her hands to feeling all around her subject's body.

"You are free now..." she prodded.

"Yes...yes, I am free!"

"I feel you coming out, expanding."

"Yes, I can feel it!"

"That's enough! You may stop there."

Langstrat was intense, closely observing everything. "Go back...go back... yes, I can feel you receding. In a moment you will feel me slipping from you; don't be alarmed, I'm still here..."

In the next several minutes she brought her subject slowly back out of the trance, step by step, suggestion by suggestion.

Finally, she said, "All right, when I count to three, you will awake! One, two, three."

Sandy Hogan opened her eyes, rolled them about dizzily, then took a deep breath, coming fully around.

"Wow...!" she responded.

The three of them laughed together.

"Wasn't that something?" asked Shawn, sitting next to Langstrat.

"Wow," was all Sandy could say.

It had been quite an event, a real first for Sandy. It had been Shawn's idea, and though she had been hesitant at first, now she was very glad that she'd gone along with it.

The apartment ~~lights went back on, the~~ shades were opened, and Sandy and Shawn prepared to go back to their afternoon classes.

"Well, thank you for coming," said the Professor at the door.

"Thank you!" Sandy piped.

"And thank you for bringing her," Langstrat told Shawn. Then she said to the two of them, "Now remember, I wouldn't advise speaking to anyone about this. It's really a very personal and intimate experience that we should all respect."

"Yeah, right, right," said Sandy.

Shawn drove her back to the campus.

June 24, Friday PM

A few little tightpage notes: Carmen still trying to seduce Hank...probably is unhappy that Mary is around...perhaps tried to set up ~~xx~~ a different way to meet....invites him to lunch? Hank realizes that would be a terrible idea. Perhaps Mary is out for groceries but plans to ~~xx~~ be back in time... then the demons cause her car to conk out.
Carmen mentions how she has seen Buck Stone several times at Fun Unlimited. This baits Hank to go down there, but she resists that.
Hank gets worried because Mary hasn't returned...begins to pray. Carmen gets upset, has to leave.
Ah...perhaps Krioni could be watching Hank while Triskal is with Mary.
Rafar encounters Triskal and his other warriors and detains them, roughing them up, leaving a message for Tal

INSERT ONE

Mary wasn't so sure she liked the new owners of what used to be Joe's Supermarket. ~~xxxxxxx~~ Oh, it wasn't their service or the way they ran the store or whether or not they were friendly; they were okay in most of these departments, and Mary also figured it would take time for them to know everyone and vice versa. What bothered Mary was how obviously secretive they were being any time she asked them whatever became of Joe Carlucci and his family. As far as Mary could find out, Joe, ~~and his wife~~ Angelina and their children left Ashton abruptly and didn't tell anyone, and so far no one could be found who even knew where they went.

Oh well. She hurried out of the store and toward her car, ~~xxxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ a young box boy pushing a cart of groceries along behind her, and unseen Triskal and ~~two~~ other warriors accompanying her, keeping an eye out for any problems that might arise. ~~With xxxx Hank and Mary separated~~ ~~They arose.~~

Mary opened the trunk and watched the box boy put the groceries in, but right at that moment ~~xxxx~~ she felt an unexplainable tinge of emotion, an odd mixture of fear and depression. She felt cold, ~~xxxxxxx~~ nervous, and could think of nothing else but getting home right away. With the sudden shock as Triskal had sprung a trap, ~~Suddenly, abruptly, shockingly, there like a trap springing~~ Triskal suddenly found his way blocked by three hideous spirits that ~~sprang up suddenly~~ shot up between him and Mary, their black wings unfurled, and rushing, and ready for instant maneuvering, their huge swords drawn and glowing blood~~xxx~~ red. Triskal froze where he was, He kept his eyes on them, watching for any sign of aggression toward Mary. ~~He wasn't sure what he would do, being alone and outnumbered.~~ But what could he do?

No time for another thought passed before Then ~~xxx~~ he heard ~~another~~ a sudden and stupefying rush of wings behind him and could feel a wave of evil. ~~washing over him from behind.~~ He half turned, and felt fear and deeper

INSERT

These were new in town. ~~xxxxxxxx~~ He'd never seen such size, strength

INSERT ONE

It was Friday again, and Hank sat in his little corner office at home looking anxiously at the clock. Mary was usually very reliable. She did say she would be back before Carmen got there for her afternoon counselling appointment. Hank had no idea really if there were any spies watching the house, but he could never really be sure. All he needed was for someone to figure out that Cammen was dropping in to see him while Mary was gone grocery shopping. He wasn't altogether sure about this Carmen anyway; Hank's fearful side could envision all kinds of plots his enemies might be forming against him, such as sending some strange and seductive woman to compromise and ruin him.

Well, he certainly knew one thing: If Carmen didn't genuinely show a genuine responsiveness to the counselling and begin to apply real solutions to a real problem, that would be the end of it as far as he was concerned.

Oh-oh. There was the doorbell. He sneaked a look out the window: Carmen's red Fiat was parked out front. Yes, there she was, standing at the door, Oh brother, right in broad daylight, in full view, of at least...teh, fifteen houses. The way she was dressed today made Hank figure he'd better let her in right away if only to get her out of sight.

Where, oh where was Mary?

INSERT TWO

"And how are you today?" Hank asked as he showed Carmen to a comfortable chair in his office area.

She sank into the chair with a coo and a sigh and Hank began to wonder where he left his tape recorder - he knew he was a good boy, but some proof would be nice.

"I'm much better," she answered, and her voice was pleasant and even. "You know, maybe you can tell me why, but I haven't heard any voices talking to me all week."

"Oh...um...yeah," said Hank, finally getting his counselor's thoughts in gear.. "That was what we were talking about, wasn't it?"

INSERT THREE

Hank didn't want to let any false confidence or assurance leak into his head where it wasn't wanted, but the session was going better than the last one. Carmen did seem like she'd been thinking about her problems and dealing with them.

Mary wasn't so sure she liked...where they went.

Oh well. She hurried out of the store and toward her car, a young box boy pushing a cart of groceries along behind her. She opened the trunk and watched the boy load the groceries in.

And then she felt it, suddenly, without any apparent reason: an unexplainable tinge of emotion, an odd mixture of fear and depression. She felt cold, nervous, a little shakey, ~~and suddenly desired nothing~~ and could think of nothing else but just getting out of that place and ~~getting~~ hurrying home.

Triskal had been accompanying her, guarding her, and he felt it too, but he knew exactly what it was. With a metallic ring and a flicker of light, his sword was instantly in his hand, his eyes were burning, he looked all around.

Too late! From somewhere behind him came a stunning blow on the back of his neck! He toppled forward. His wings shot out to grip the air and steady him, but an incredible weight came down on his back like a pile driver and pinned him down.

Now he could see their feet, like the clawed feet of hideous reptiles. He could see the red flicker of their blades and hear their sulphurous gasping. He looked up at their faces. There were at least a dozen of them. They were towering, fierce, with glowing yellow eyes and dripping fangs, and they were sneering and gargling with laughter.

Triskal looked to see if Mary was all right, and so far she was, but he knew her safety would soon be threatened if he didn't act. But then, whatever could he do?

~~was so very heavy, so~~

What was that? No! ~~It felt unspeakably evil!~~ A dark, evil presence rolled over him like a wave! He could feel it!

"Pick him up," came a voice like thunder.

Triskal felt himself jerked up as if he were a toy, held tightly by the neck. Now he could see these spirits eye to eye, new faces he'd never seen before, demons of incredible strength, size, and all around him, and then his whole body was jerked around and brazenness. he found himself face to face with terror itself.

There, flanked by no less than ten more huge demonic warriors, stood a gargantuan spirit with an absolutely terrifying appearance, an S-curved sword in his monstrous black hand. Fear and despair pierced through Triskal like a knife. He knew he was finished.

A viselike hand curled around his neck and jerked him up as if he were a toy. Now he was looking at all these spirits eye to eye, ~~and they were all around him.~~ They were newcomers to Ashton, he could see that. He'd never seen such size, strength and brazenness before. Their bodies were covered with thick, ironlike scales, their arms rippled thick with power, their faces were mocking, Their sulphurous breath choked him.

They spun him around and held him tightly, and he found himself face to face with a vision of sheer ~~terror~~ horror. He knew he was finished. There

There, flanked by no less than ten more huge demonic warriors, stood a gargantuan spirit with an absolutely terrifying appearance, an S-curved sword in his monstrous black hand.

Rafar! The thought coursed through Triskal's mind like a death sentence; every inch of his being tightened with the anticipation of blows, defeat, unbearable pain.

and brazenness before. The fangs were dripping at him, the eyes mocking.

pierce through him like a knife. He knew he was finished.

There, flanked by no less than ten more huge demonic warriors, stood a gargantuan spirit with an absolutely terrifying appearance, holding an enormous, S-curved sword in his monstrous black hand.

Rafar. The thought coursed throggh Triskal's mind like a death sentence; every inch of his being tightened with the anticipation of blows, defeat, unbearable pain.

The big, fanged mouth broke into a mocking and hideous grin; amber saliva dripped from the fangs and sulphur chugged forth in rancid clouds as the giant warlord chuckled mockingly.

"Are you so surprised?" Rafar asked.

INSERT TWO →

Triskal looked toward Mary. She was all right, just now thanking the box boy and closing her trunk.

Rafar watched Triskal, amused. "Oh, I see. You are here to protect her. From what? Did you enter into your charge expecting to swat away mere flies?" Triskal had no answer. Rafar's tone became cruel and cutting. "No, you are mistaken, little angel. It is a much greater power with whom you have to do."

Rafar tapped the ground with his sword and Triskal immediately felt iron hands of two demons clamping his arms from behind. He looked toward Mary. She was looking for the key to the car door. Now two more demons held him. He looked at Rafar, looked at Mary. She was getting into the car. Another demon stretched out his swofd and pierced the hood of the car. Mary tried to start the engine. Nothing happened.

Rafar looked toward the nearby laundromat that faced the parking lot. A demon superimposed over the body of a young, greasy looking character stood in front of it, leanigg against a post. At Rafar's nod, the prodded the man and he demon started toward the car.

INSERT THREE →

Mary checked her lights. No, she had not left them on. She turned the key on and turned on the radio. It played. The horn honked. What on earth was the matter? She chanced to look out and saw a young man coming her way from the direction of the laundromat. Oh, great! I hope he doesn't come over here. He looks creepy.

As Triskal watched helplessly, the demon guided the man up to the car window.

"Hey, cutie," said the man, "having some trouble here?"

Mary looked out at him and felt sick. He was

skinny, dirty, heavily pimpled, dressed in black leather and chrome chains.

She called through the window, "Uh...no thanks. I'm all right."

He only smirked at her, eyeing her up and down as he said, "Why don't you open up and let me see what I can do?"

INSERT THREE →

Mary could feel her heart pounding. She ~~moved in a flash and~~ looked all around to make sure all the doors were locked.

The man leaned against the windows and his breath fogged the glass as he said, "Say, sweetheart, why don't you tell me your name?"

Rafar grabbed Triskal by the hair and jerked his head around, so they were eye-to-eye. Triskal thought his head would twist off.

Rafar breathed sulphur right into Triskal's face as he said, "And now, little angel, I will have some words with you." The tip of the long sword came up to Triskal's throat. "Where is your Captain?"

Triskal did not answer; his mouth remained shut. Rafar yanked his head around and let him look again toward Mary.

The man tried the latch on Mary's door. He grasped for every lock button in the car, pushing each one down only seconds before the man could grab the latch. Mary was terrified. She tried the horn again. The demon had already taken care of that - it didn't work. Rafar grabbed Triskal by the back of the head and twisted his head around again. The cold blade pressed against Triskal's face.

"I will now ask you again: Where is your Captain?"

INSERT FOUR →

The man in black leather leaned close to Mary's window, threatened her with horrible obscenities, banged on the glass with a large metal buckle. For Mary & for Triskal, an eternity passed.

"I await your answer," said Rafar

Triskal moaned, "The brake...."

Rafar held him tighter, leaned closer. "I didn't hear you!"

Triskal repeated it. "The brake!"

"And where is the brake?"

Mary had a flash. The car was parked on an incline; it wasn't much, but it might be enough to get the car moving. She released the parking brake and the car started to roll. The man banged on the windows, tried to move around in front of the car to stop it. By now the car was rolling at a good, smooth clip and his efforts were becoming a little too obvious to conceal from the other shoppers. The demon controlling him couldn't afford

A husky contractor standing by his four-wheel finally saw what was going on and hollered, "Hey, creep, whaddaya doin'?"

He tried all the doors, a leering smile on his face.

INSERT THREE

Hank didn't feel right about it, at least not yet: Carmen was making a lot more sense today. She seemed to be dealing with her problems intelligently and with a genuine desire to get them straightened out. He didn't think he was that good a counselor.

"Well," Hank got around to asking, "just what would you say are some significant influences in your life? What sources of friendship and support are themost important to you?"

Hank didn't feel right about ~~it, at least not yet.~~ any of this. Where was Mary? At least Carmen was making a ~~lot~~ little more sense this time, and seemed to be dealing with her problems intelligently and with a genuine desire to change things. ~~It seemed to Hank to be a very abrupt change from the woman who'd been there the week before.~~ Maybe it would be different this time, but Hank wasn't banking on it.

"So..." he asked, "what do you suppose became of those amorous voices in the night?"

"I don't listen to them anymore," she answered. "There's one thing you helped me to realize, just be talking about it: Those voices aren't real. I've only been fooling myself."

Hank was very gentle when he agreed, "Yes, I think you're right."

She heaved a deep sigh and looked at him with those big, blue eyes. "I was trying to cope with my loneliness, is all. I think that was it. Pastor, you're just so strong! I wish I could be that way!"

"Well, the Bible says, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.'"

"Uh-huh. Where is your wife?"

"Getting groceries. She should be back any minute."

"Well..." Carmen leaned forward and smiled ever so sweetly. "I'm really drawing strength from your company. I want you to know that."

Hank finally realized the true impact of what Carment was telling him. He was no longer skeptical at all, but very, very concerned.

INSERT FOUR

~~Hank could have gotten a very swelled head~~

Carmen was still telling Hank how much good this counselling was doing her, how he reminded her of her former husband, how she was looking for a man with his qualities. Hank had to put a lid on this ~~xxx~~ stuff.

"Well..." he finally gut in. "Do you have~~x~~ any other people at all in your life that you feel are significant as far as...strength, support, friendship, those kinds of things?" ~~He was looking for another direction to send her~~

She looked at him just a little mournfully. "Sort of...I have friends who hang out at the tavern and...sometimes I go to The Cave and find some guys there..."

"What's the Cave?"

"It's an arcade down on 9th. You know, video games, fun times."

"I see."

"But nothing ever lasts." She ~~thought~~ let her thoughts brew for a moment, then asked, "Do you think I'm attractive?"

Rafar watched it all happen, and the anger coursed through his big fist; Triskal thought his neck would crack any moment. Tis it began to close on Triskal's neck

"Desist!" Rafar called to the demon, and the creep gave up his chase and tried to saunter nonchalantly away. The big contractor went after him and he fled.

Mary kept the car rolling. There was an exit from the parking lot down at the bottom that emptied onto a backstreet with a fairly good grade. She made a beeline for it, hoping no other cars or pedestrians would get in her way.

Triskal saw she would make it. So did Rafar.

Well done, little angel. The cold steel of his blade pressed against Triskal's throat.

I will leave only "Just a message for today," Rafar hissed. "Pay careful attention."

And with that, Triskal was hurled into the waiting

And with that, Rafar released Triskal into the will of his henchmen. One huge, warty demon pounded his iron fist into Triskal's torso and sent him thrust him into the air where another demon swooped up with rushing wings and intercepted him with a skillful swish of his sword, smacking Triskal to the ground again, a deep gash carved neatly in his back. Triskal tumbled down, another demon picked him up, twi

Another Triskal fluttered down; another demon snatched him and hurled him into the waiting fists of two more demons who met his flying, limp body with powerful, iron blows. pummeled his flying, limp body like an oncoming brick wall. Triskal flopped to the ground and Rafar's big taloned foot stomped down on his neck. Triskal looked up, looking with fear at the towering demon holding him down. The big sword swung down again and waved in small circles before Triskal's eyes as the demon master spoke.

You will "Tell your Captain that Rafar, the Prince of Babylon, is looking for him."

The big foot pressed harder. "You will tell him!"

And suddenly, Triskal was alone, a limp, ragged wreck. He struggled to his feet again and set off in search of Mary.

Mary had to the car rolling down the street when suddenly, for no known reason, everything came to life again; the engine kicked over, the car jolted forward, and Mary sped for home, tears running down her cheeks.

with iron fists and taloned feet.

For several horrible minutes the demons made violent sport with him as Rafar coldly watched. Finally the great Baal gave a growled command and the demons let Triskal go.

INSERTX

Hank gently took hold of Carmen's hand, lifted it off his own hand and placed it courteously and gentlemanly in her lap. He held it there for just a moment and looked into her eyes with compassinn and yet firmness. He let go of it and then leaned back in his chair to a safe distance.

"Carmen," he said with a soft and understanding voice. "I am very flattered that you are so impressed with my masculine qualities...and really, I have no doubts that a woman of your particular qualities will have no trouble finding a good man with whom you can build a lasting and meaningful relationshipp But I hope you won't think me too brazen or abrupt if I emphasize one thing at this point: I am not that man. You really must not allow yourself to become emotionally entangled with me. I am here as a minister and counselor, and we should keep this relationship strictly limited to that of a counselor and his client..."

Carmen seemed very disturbed, very offended. "What are you saying to me?"

"I'm saying from the outset that we really cannot continue these appointments if it means emotional conflicts for you, Therefore, you might so I think you'll be better off going to someone else."

She looked down, wrung her hands just a little. "You religious men are all alike. You always make me feel like I'm no good."

"Carmen, it's not a matter of your personal qualities. It's simply Very simply, if you want a manfriend, you should definitely seek one out who isn't already married."

She shook her head, puzzled and grieved. "You sound just like Buck Stone..." she muttered.

Hank's ears perked up. "Who?"

Where, oh where, was Mary? Hank now sat in his little office corner of the house, and this was now counselling session number two with...

"Carmen..."

There she sat, ~~more flesh showing than clothing~~ her big blue eyes wide with innocence, her wardrobe somewhat lacking in area.

"

Let's get way above this thing and see how it looks:

A plot to take over a town....angels against demons, reporters against politicians, pastor against pepple...

Mary was crying, wiping the tears from her face with her sleeve and praying a mile a ~~xxxx~~ minute, "Father God, dear Jesus, save me, ~~xxxx~~ save me, save me!" The hill was beginning to flatten out, the car was slowing down; fifteen, ten, five miles an hour. She looked behind her and saw no one following, but she was too scared by now to be comforted. She just wanted to get home.

Then, up the street behind her and maybe ten feet above the ground, Triskal bore down on her, his clothes flashing with white hot light and his wings rushing. His flight path was ~~a little~~ wobbly and the rhythmn of his wings ~~a little~~ out of sync, but he ~~came soaring after her anyway, very~~ was determined to get to her regardless. His face was etched with deep lines concerned for her welfare. He spread his tattered wings like a large canopy and let them brake him to a stop, ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ as he settled down onto the roof of the car. By now the car was barely rolling and Mary just kept crying and wailing, jerking her body in futile attempts to urge the car onward.

Triskal reached down through the roof and gently placed his hand on Mary's shoulder. "Shhh..~~xxxx~~ ~~take it easy~~ be calm, it's all right now. You're safe."

She looked around again, looked behind her, began to calm down a little.

Triskal told her heart, "The Lord has saved you. He won't let you go. You're ~~okay.~~ all right."

~~The car had come to a complete stop now.~~

The car was almost to a complete stop now. Mary pulled it over to the side of the street and parked it while she still had the momentum to do so. She pulled on the parking brake and sat there for several minutes just to compose herself.

"That's it," said Triskal, comforting her in her spirit. "Rest in the Lord, He's here."

INSERT FIVE

Triskal slid down off the roof and looked up and down the street. A quaint yellow house a few doors up belonged to a member of the congregation, a good friend and supporter. Triskal flew to the house while still keeping an eye on Mary.

reached his arm down through the hood

Hank had managed to get Carmen to tell him just a little about Buck Stone, particularly where Stone was last seen.

"He hangs around the Cave a lot. The kids all like him; he just makes himself their friend and doesn't put them down or try to lay heavy trips on them. He's religious, just like you. I liked him. I thought he liked me."

"I'll bet he does like you. I like you."

"Yeah...I guess so." She was resigning herself to certain never-before-considered rules of life. "But he isn't married."

"But you can tell he has very strong religious convictions, right?"

"Yeah, right, I guess."

sounds like an interesting guy

"I've been hearing a lot about him lately. I ought to go down there and see if I can't bump into him."

"Down where?"

"Oh...the Cave, I guess. I've never seen that place."

She was a little upset about that proposal. "No, listen, you don't need to go there. That's a bad place, pastor, a really bad place."

"Well, then maybe a place like that needs a person like me."

Just then a car pulled up in front of the house, some car doors slammed.

"Oh," said Hank, "maybe that's Mary."

He rose to look out the window.

Carmen asked him, "You're not really going to go to The Cave, are you?"

Hank looked out the window and answered her question, "Say, I haven't decided yet, don't worry about it," while he watched Mary get her groceries out of the trunk of John Coleman's car. "Boy, I wonder what took her so long?" Ford. Oh brother.

6

INSERT FIVE

Triskal slid down off the roof of the car and reached his arm down through the hood, probing around. He found whatever it was he was looking for.

"Mary," he said, "why don't you try it again?"

Mary sat in the car thinking to herself that the stupid thing would never start and what horrible timing it had to die and leave her in such a fix.

"C'mon," Triskal prodded. "Take a step of faith. Trust God. You never know what He might do."

Mary decided to take one more stab at starting the car even though she had little faith that anything would happen. She twisted the key. The engine cranked over, then sputtered, then started. She gave it several powerful revs just to make sure it stayed awake. Then, still in a very great hurry to get home to Hank's protecting arms, she pulled out into the street and hot-rodded it for home.

Carmen got up. "Well, I guess I'd better go."

Now that Mary was here, "Oh, listen, you don't have to. You can stay for a while."

"No, no, I'll just leave. Maybe I ought to go out the back, eh?"

"No, don't be silly. Here. I'll see you to the door. I need to help Mary will want ~~ME to help her~~ with those groceries anyway."

But Mary had forgotten about the groceries and only wanted to get inside.

~~Triskal walked beside Mary up to the front door.~~ Triskal was right beside her; he was ~~He was~~ limping, battered, ~~a bit~~, his clothing was torn, ~~his wings tattered~~, he could still feel the firey wound in his back.

~~Just as Mary got close to the door,~~ Hank opened the door. ~~it from the inside.~~

"Hi, hon," he said, very happy to see her. "Boy, I was getting worried about you."

He saw her ~~Mary still had~~ tear-stained eyes. ~~and Hank just now noticed them.~~ He was just about to ask her what was wrong, and she was just about to break down and cry again and tell him what had happned, but both of them couldn't open their mouths before Carmen started to step out the door, took one look just past Mary and let out a horrible scream!

"NOOO!" she shrieked, her arms guarding her face. "Are you mad? Get away from me, you hear? Get away!"

As Hank and Mary both looked on in horror, Carmen backed into the room, waving her arms as if trying to shield herself from some invisible attacker. She stumbled around the room, tumbled over the furniture, ~~She began to~~ cursed and spewed horrible obscenities; she was terrified and enraged at the same time, her eyes wide and glassy, her face contorted.

Krioni tried to grab Triskal and hold him back - Triskal had glorified, and was a shimmering white, his tattered wings filled the room and glimmered like a thousand rainbows. He held a gleaming sword in his hand and the sword flashed in blinding, brilliant arcs, as Triskal engaged in a ~~fierce~~, frenzied battle with...

Lust. A hideous demon with a black-scaled slippery body like a lizard and a red tongue that lashed about his face like ~~the whip of~~ a snake's tail. Lust was first defending himself, then lashing back with his glowing red sword, the crescent blade cutting crimson arcs through the air.

"Let me be, I tell you!" Lust screamed, his wings propelling him like a trapped hornet about the room.

"Let him be!" shouted Krioni, trying to hold Triskal back while staying out of the path of that infinitely sharp blade. "Do you hear my order? Let him be!"

withdrew, but

Triskal held his sword steady and kept it raised in front of him, the light from the blade illuminating his raging face, his burning eyes. Lust backed off, folded his wings, and circled carefully around the two heavenly warriors and over to the door, ~~where Carmen was now standing~~ his sword still raised in ~~a defense position.~~ for defense.

"I was leaving anyway..." the demon hissed.

"I was leaving anyway," said Carmen, composing herself. "There's... there's bad energy in this place. Good-bye."

She bolted out the door. Mary tried to call after her, but Hank touched Mary's arm and let her know that silence would be best for now.

INSERT

Carmen calmed down, rubbed her eyes, and looked about the room with a frightened expression. Hank and Mary went to her immediately and tried to comfort her.

"What's wrong, Carmen?" Mary asked, wide-eyed and concerned. "It's just me, Mary. Did I do something? I didn't mean to scare you."

"No...no," moaned Carmen. "It wasn't you. It was...~~just your~~ somebody else..." ~~and Ugly.~~"

"~~Or~~ What?"

Krioni held Triskal until the light around him faded and the sword disappeared. Triskal was shaking.

"Triskal..." Krioni scolded, "you know Tal's orders. ~~Hank did just fine~~ I was with Hank the whole time; he did just fine. There was no need - " then Krioni ~~saw~~ gave thought to Triskal's many injuries and the deep wound in his back. "Triskal....what happened?"

"I could not let myself be assailed by still another..." Triskal muttered. "Krioni, we are more than matched!"

Mary finally remembered that she was about to cry. She picked up where she left off.

"Mary, what in the world is going on here?" Hank asked, putting his arms around her.

"Just close the door, honey!" she cried. "Just close the door and hold me, please!"

June 24, Friday PM

Kate grabbed a kitchen towel and hurriedly wiped her hands so she could pick up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi there." It was Marshall.

Kate almost knew what was coming; it had been happening a lot the last two weeks. "Marshall, I am cooking dinner and I am cooking enough for all four of us..."

"Yeah, well..." Marshall had that same old tone of voice he always had when he was about to weasel out of something.

"Marshall!" Then Kate turned her back toward the living room where Sandy and Shawn were studying and visiting but mostly visiting; she didn't want them to see the distress in her face. She lowered her voice. "I want you home for dinner. You've been out late all this week, you've been so busy and so preoccupied I hardly have a husband anymore."."

"Kate!" Marshall finally broke in. "It won't be as bad as you thought; I'm just calling to say I'll be a little late, not that I won't be there."

"How late?"

"Oh brother..." Marshall wasn't sure at all. "How about an hour?"

"An hour!? Marshall, it's almost ready now."

"I've got some things here that just can't wait."

Kate couldn't think of what to say. She only sighed in disgust and anger.

Marshall tried to appease her. "Listen, I'll get there as soon as I can."

Kate decided to say it over the phone; she might never get the chance any other time. "Marshall, I'm concerned about Sandy."

"What's wrong with her now?"

Oh, she could just PUNCH him for that tone of voice! "Marshall, if you'd just be around here once in a while you'd know! She's...I don't know. She just isn't the same old Sandy anymore. I'm afraid of what Shawn is doing to her." "What Shawn is doing to her?"

"I can't talk about it over the phone."

Now Marshall sighed. "All right, all right. We'll talk about it."

"When, Marshall?"

"Oh, tonight, when I get home..."

"We can't talk right in front of them - "

"I mean...oh, you know what I mean!" Marshall was tiring of this conversation.

"Well just get home, Marshall, please!"

"All right, all right!"

Marshall hung up the phone with hardly a loving gentleness. For a split second he regretted the act and thought about how it must have made Kate feel, but immediately after that a question from Bernice grabbed all his attention.

"So I'd like to ~~know~~ how when you're finally going to corner Langstrat..." ~~herself,~~ she quippped, flipping through some papers at ~~one of the front desks.~~ her desk in the front.

Marshall ~~came out of his office running his fingers through his hair and feeling~~ felt like his face must be awfully red.

"Boy, your face is sure red," Bernice said.

~~That was the last thing Marshall wanted to discuss.~~ ~~"I'll talk to Langstrat when I'm good and ready, and part of that includes some background on that woman. I think that was your assignment."~~

~~Marshall GOING Back to her papers. "Well," Bernice said, "we've been awfully busy, haven't we?"~~

A wad of paper bounced off her head. She turned around and saw Marshall looking over some lists. Her looked like he couldn't possibly have tossed that little projectile.

~~"What I need is some way to get back to~~ Harmel, ~~to talk to him some more...~~" he said.

The same wad of paper bounced off his ~~head~~ ear. He looked at Bernice ~~and she was~~ dead serious, all business.

"Well it's obvious he knew too much. ~~I wouldn't be surprised if he got bumped out of the way the same way Strachan did.~~"

"Yeah..." Marshall had a memory come to the surface. ~~"That's what~~ Harmel talked that way, warning me! he said, something like, I'd be out on my ear like everybody else."

"So who's everybody else?"

"Yeah, who else do we know who could have been removed?"

Bernice looked over some of her notes. "Well, you know, now that I look over this list, none of these people has really been in their position for a very long time..."

The wad of paper richcheted off her head and skittered across her desk.

"So who did they replace?" Marshall asked.

Bernice solemnly picked up the wad of paper as she said, "We can check that out. In the meantime, the most obvious thing to do is call Strachan and see what - " She hurled the wad at Marshall ~~and he ducked~~ "

" he has to say!"

INSERT

INSERT TWO

Not all have to do

Payoff?

Wait for and get her answer so she'll talk to me...

"Boy, I wonder if I could contact Harmel again? But he won't talk either."

They got him so they got Strachan and he are running scared.

he and Strachan are running good and scared.

INSERT

Marshall hung up the phone with hardly a lovigg gentleness. For a split second he regretted the act and thought about how it must have made Kate feel, but he forced ~~himself~~ his thoughts onward ~~into the next subject for mental discussion~~ to the next, very pressing project: interviewing Professor Juleen Langstrat.

Friday evening. She should be home now. Maybe. He dialed the number. This time it rang. And rang. And rang one more time.

Click. "Hello?"

"Hello, this is Marshall Hogan, editor of the Ashton Clarion. Am I speaking with Professor Juleen Langstrat?"

"Yes you are. What can I do for you, Mr. Hogan?"

"My daughter Sandy is in one of your classes."

She seemed pleased enough to hear that. "Oh, very good!"

"At any rate, I was wondering if we might set up a date for an interview."

"Well, you'd have to speak with one of my teacher assistants. ~~One of them would have a more~~ They are the ones responsible for checking ~~the progress and problems of the students. The classes are large, you~~ understand."

"Oh, well, no, that's not exactly what I had in mind. I was thinking I would like to interview you."

~~"Pertaining to your daughter?" I'm afraid I don't know her. I wouldn't be able to tell you much..."~~

~~"Well,~~ Ha, we could talk a little about the class, of course, but I was also curious about the other interests you're pursuing there on the campus, the elective classes you've been teaching at night..."

"Oohh..." she said, with a down note at the end that didn't sound promising. ~~"Well Mr. Hogan, apart from the realm of~~ "Well, that was part of an experimental college idea we were trying. If you wish to check that out, the registrar might have some old flyers available. But I

should inform you that I am very uncomfortable with the idea of granting any interview to the press, and I really cannot do so."

"So...you're not willing to discuss the very influential people you have among your circle of friends?"

"I don't understand the question," and it sounded like she didn't appreciate it either.

"Alf Brummel, Chief of Police, Reverend Oliver Young, Delores Pinckston, Dwight Brandon, Eugene Baylor, Judge John Baker..."

"I have no comment," she said sharply, "and I really have some other things that are very pressing. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Well..." Marshall thought he'd go ahead and try for it. "I guess the only other thing I could ask you about is why you ejected me from your class."

Now she was getting indignant. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your class on Monday afternoon...two weeks ago...the Philospphy of Meaning, I think it was. I'm the big guy you told to leave."

She began to laugh incredulously. "I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about! You must have the wrong person."

"You don't remember telling me to wait outside?"

"I am convinced you have me mixed up with someone else. "

"Well, do you have long, blond hair?"

She said simply, "Good night, Mr. Hogan," and hung up.

Marshall stood there for a moment, then asked himself, "C'mon, Hogan, what did you expect?"

He dropped the receiver into the cradle and went out into the front office, where a question from Bernice grabbed his attention.

INSERT TWO.

"Talking to too many temperamental women in one night," he explained. "Langstrat was one of them. Boy, I thought Harmel was bad!"

Bernice turned around just a little excited. "You got Langstrat on the phone?"

"For all of thirty-two seconds. She had absolutely nothing to say to me, and she didn't remember kicking me out of her class."

Bernice made a screwy face. "Isn't it funny how no one seems to remember having any encounters with us? Marshall, we must be invisible!"

"No, just very undesirable and very inconvenient."

"Well," Bernice said, going back to her paperwork, "Professor Langstrat probably has been very busy, too busy to talk to nosey reporters..."

Marshall grabbed the wad in midflight ~~but then~~ and quickly crumpled another one to add to his arsenal, ~~and sent~~ sending them both back in Bernice' direction. Bernice began to prepare an adequate counterattack.

"All right," Marshall said, starting to crack up with laughter, "I'll give him a ring." He was suddenly in the middle of a blizzard of paper wads. "But I think we'd better get out of here, ~~before we make a shm~~ my wife's waiting."

Bernice was not finished with the war yet, so they finished it and then had to clean up after it before they could lock the place up.

Rafar paced up and down the xxxxx dark, basement room, chugging out hot red breath that obscurred his face at times. He was visibly disturbed, angered, maybe even...humiliated

Lucius stood in the corner watching Rafar and thinking the great Prince could even be...humiliated. The great braggart!

Rafar paced and pounded up and down the dark basement room, chugging out xxxxxxxxxhot red and yellow breath that became a layer of cloud ~~that~~ obscurring him from the shoulders up. He pounded his fists together, he tore invisible enemies in his outstretched talons, he cursed and fumed in terrible anger.

Lucius stood with the other warriors, waiting for Rafar to calm down and give the reason for this meeting he had called. Lucius rather enjoyed this little scene before him. It was very obvious that Rafar, the great braggart, had been cut down to size in his meeting with the Strongman! It was all Lucius could do to keep a hideous smirk off his face.

"Wouldn't the little angel tell you where you could find this... what was that name again?" Lucius asked, knowing full well Tal's name.

"TAL!" Rafar roared, and Lucius could detect Rafar's humiliation at the very sound of the name.

"The little angel, the helpless little angel, told you nothing?"

~~A monstrous black fist instantly closed tightly around Lucius' throat~~

Rafar's immediate response was a xxxx monstrous black fist clamped instantly around Lucius' throat. "Do you mock me, little imp?"

Lucius had learned by now the right tone of groovelling to please this tyrant. "Oh, be not offended, great one! I only seek your pleasure!"

"Then seek this Tal!" Rafar growled. RELeased Lucius and He turned to all the other demons present. "All of you! Seek this Tal! I want him in my hands to shred him at my pleasure! This battle could be settled easily between the two of us! Find him! Bring me word!"

Lucius tried to hide his words behind a whimpering tone, but they were specially selected for another purpose. "Indeed we shall, great one! But Surely this Tal must be a formidable foe to have routed you at the fall of Babylon! Whatever will you do should we find him? Will you dare to assail such as he again?"

Rafar grinned, his fangs shining. "You will see what your Ba-al can do!"

"Oh...and may we not see what this Tal can do!"

Rafar drew up close to Lucius and stared him down with fiery yellow orbs. ~~"First I shall vanquish this Tal and scatter him across the sky...and then I shall~~ When I have vanquished this Tal and ~~spread~~ hurled his little pieces across the skies as my victory banner, ~~if I will see to it that you share the same fate~~ I will most certainly give you your chance to better me! I will relish every moment of it!"

Rafar turned away and for an instant the whole room was filled with his black wings before he shot upward through the building above them and into the sky.

Perhaps Tal and others could be patching up Trishal. June 24, Sat. AM

Soon, all over Ashton watched from

As angels in their discrete hiding places watched, a huge black spirit flew rather slowly over the town, leaving a black streak behind him and holding out his carving a sinister furrow of darkness through the otherwise sunny day. The spirit held a menacing, S-curved sword straight out in front of him so that red flashes of light reflected from its sides. Up, down, back and forth he flew, weaving in among the downtown buildings, then soaring high above the town in graceful arcs.

Down below, through the window of an obscure store basement, Scion watched Rafar pass overhead for still another time and then turned to his Captain who was sitting nearby, consulting with Guilo, Krioni and Nathan.

"I don't understand," said the angel. "What's he think he's doing?"

Tal looked up and said matter-of-factly, "He's trying to draw me out."

Scion was puzzled. "So why are we hiding here?"

Guilo answered impatiently, "The devils are crawling all over the church with no other aim but to find the Captain. It was the first place they looked."

Nathan added, "Rafar has offered great honors to whatever demon can find Captain Tal and report his whereabouts."

Tal anticiapted Scion's next qustion and answered it. "The others are still there at the church. We've tried to keep our guard there looking as it usually does."

Scion watched Rafar circle over the far side of the town and come back for another pass. "I'd have trouble being teased by such as him."

Tal wasn't ashamed but just spoke the truth, "If I were to meet him now, I would most certainly lose, and he knows it. The prayer cover is insufficient while he has all the backing he needs."

Then they could all hear the rushing of Rafar's huge, leathery wings and see his shadow fall over the building for an instant as Rafar passed overhead.

"We will all have to be very, very careful," Tal said.

June 25, Sat.

The Cave. It was aptly named: the power it took to run the rows upon rows of flickering, blurping, beeping video games was made up for in the total absence of any other lights except a little blue globe here and there in the black ceiling with an occasional watt meandering through it. There was more sound than light: heavy metal rock music pounded from speakers all around the room and clashed painfully with the myriads of electronic sounds tumbling out of the machines. One lone proprietor sat behind his little cash register in the corner, reading a true confession magazine in between making change for the game players. Hank had never seen so many quarters in one place.

And here were the kids, of all ages, with not too many other places to go, admittedly. After school and late into the night, all through the weekends, here they congregated to rack up the points and compete in game marathons. There was nothing blatantly wrong with what they were doing, and some of them were very good at it, but this place! Boy, did it have a feeling about it!

Krioni and Triskal were both with Hank this time, having gotten some extra reserves to stay at home and watch over Mary. ~~Krioni didn't want another incident such as Triskal had experienced, and Triskal was still a little edgey, which made Krioni not want to leave him alone in such a situation.~~ Krioni was hoping to prevent another incident between demons and one lone aggel; besides that, Triskal was still a little edgey and best not left to himself just yet. They walked on either side of Hank as he walked down the rows of machines just looking around, watching games over the players' shoulders and trying to get his eyes used to the dark. Krioni and Triskal didn't have any trouble at all seeing the hundred or so pairs of narrowing, yellow eyes peering at them from the corners and dark hiding places of the room. They'd already heard several metallic rings as blades were drawn and made ready.

"Do I look harmless enough?" Triskal quietly asked Krioni.

"They do not think you are harmless anymore," Krioni said dryly. ~~"I guess a reputation like that could work either way."~~

"Well, they haven't made a move yet."

still you should ~~"Try~~ smiling."

The two of them looked around at all the eyes looking back at them. They smiled in a trucelike way, raising their empty hands to show no intent of hostility. The demons made no reply, but several blades could be seen glowing in the dark.

Hank continued to walk around the place, wondering what his next move might be. He still didn't feel comfortable in here, and maybe he never would, but sooner or later, he supposed, he would have to ask somebody about this preacher ~~elusive~~ Buck Stone.

"So where is Seth?" Triskal asked Krioni.

"On his way, I'm sure. Stone is a ~~sensitive and~~ cooperative sort; I Seth feels Stone he ~~can get him here~~ will respond quickly ~~guess he's very obedient to the Spirit's leading.~~"

~~Krioni could feel~~ Triskal tensed up, and Krioni followed Triskal's look to see a surly looking demon approach them. The demon's hand was on his sword, but the sword was not drawn. Plenty of other swords were drawn behind him, though.

The black spirit looked the two of them up and down and hissed, "You are not welcome here. What is your business?"

Krioni answered quickly and politely, "We are watching over the man of God."

INSERT ONE → The demon only sneered, ~~then took a second look at Triskal~~. "Are you Triskal?"

"I am."

The demon laughed, coughing up puffs of red and yellow vapor. "You ~~xxxxx~~ enjoy a fight, don't you?" Several other demons joined him in laughter.

INSERT ONE

The demon took one look at Hank and lost the better portion of his cockiness. "Busche...!" he ~~hissed~~ said nervously, and the others behind him backed off a little. "What is he doing here?"

"That's nothing we wish to discuss," said Triskal.

Triskal had no intention of answering. The demon had no time to demand an answer. Suddenly, for some invisible, unknown reason, all of the leering, mocking spirits grrew very tense, afraid. Their eyes darted about and like a timid flock of cattle, they backed away into their dark corners. At the same time, Krioni and Triskal could feel a new strength coursing through them. They looked down at Hank.

Hank was praying.

"Dear Lord," Hank prayed silently, "I pray for these kids. Help me to reach them, to touch their lives." Then he added, "and right now, help me to find Buck Stone."

Krioni and Triskal heard a strange wail coming from near the back door. A demon was hurriedly slinking away from that entrance, his sword dragging, just as Seth, the tall, strong, Anglo-Saxon warrior entered with none other than Buck Stone.

"Well," said Triskal, "Seth is very prompt indeed!"

Some of the young folks in the place recognized Buck Stone immediately. "Hey, Buck!" they called, providing they were not currently absorbed in a game. Buck returned their greetings, checked their progress in vanquishing the space invaders and monsters, and immediately fit right into the scene.

"Praise the Lord!" Hank said out loud. Did God answer prayer or did He answer prayer? Hank felt a sudden tinge of nervousness, as if some great movie star had just walked into the room. For a moment Hank remained where he was beside the race car game, just watching the blond, bearded man strike up conversations with the patrons; he talked football w/ three coke-sipping sophomores and gave quick dating advice to two giddy girls. The man was so natural, so unassuming. Buck It seemed he knew all of the kids' names, what they were doing, how the school team was doing, how things were at home with the folks, or at school with teachers, team mates, boy and girl friends.

Buck finished his conversation with his young friends, giving them

some literature he seemed to have plenty of, then went further into the arcade, greeting others. Some knew him, some didn't, some were friendly, some wanted nothing to do with him. There really was no question about where Buck Stood: he was carrying a Bible and talking freely about the Lord.

~~"You really should meet this man," Krioni told Hank.~~

Hank knew he had to meet this man. The very fact that such a missionary and spiritual fighter had even come to Ashton seemed to Hank to be a miracle in itself. ~~But Hank couldn't help feeling held back, nervous, unable to step out and say hello.~~

~~Krioni and Triskal looked at each other d~~

~~Krioni and Triskal were now wondering what their next move would be - xxxxxxxx six large demons had just stepped out between Hank and Buck, and were blocking Hank's way. Seth was still leading Buck toward Hank, but Hank would also have to move.~~

"Let's go," Krioni said quietly, and the two of them ministered some boldness to Hank as they eased him forward.

"No!" a demon screamed suddenly. "Get out of here!"

Hank just kept walking, step by step.

A sword flashed in front of them, but it was only a bluff. Other demons screamed curses and spewed threats, but none touched them or came near, not as long as Hank was praying, and he was certainly doing that.

The two men finally met right in the middle of the video arcade, and in the midst of interstellar battles and ~~one-man~~ push button commando raids, Hank introduced himself to Buck Stone.

"Praise the Lord," said Buck, shaking Hank's hand. "Pastor Busche, I've heard a lot about you."

"And I've heard a lot about you," Hank replied.

Yeah,
"Andy and June Forsyth visited your church, right?"

"Yes, and I understand you've met Edith Duster?" "Right, right!"

Buck nodded excitedly, then started reeling off a list of brand new names. "What about the Smiths, do you know them? Greg and Eva Smith?"

"No."

Buck rattled off more names: The Bartons, the Jennings, Clint Neal, several others.

Hank was perplexed. "Who are all these people?"

"Spiritual refugees, I guess you'd call them. Some are the fruit of my ministry. They're all believers with nowhere to go. We've been meeting for prayer and Bible study, but we all know without saying it that we need to be one flock with one purpose and one shepherd."

"Where did you all come from?"

"Oh, some are from out of town, just moved here and couldn't find a church to fellowship with, others found Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and then discovered they couldn't really stay in the churches where they were. I've been kicked out of a few churches too, I might add.
Some are still in some of the churches in town, but purely as missionaries; they get their fellowship and support from the rest of us."

Hank was flabbergasted. "Could...could we find somplace to talk?"

Buck led him outside to a quieter dining area, a small patio with tables and chairs and a handy row of junk food vending machines.

"I never realized so many believers were out there," Hank said.

"Well...I really don't like the idea of an underground church, but that's basically what it is: new Christians, even some older Christians, all hiding in the woodwork." Buck spoke at Hank with great earnestness. "It's this town, Hank. Satan has such an incredible hold on things that the evil here is so intense that the true believers are ... well, stymied, frustrated, like soldiers without a general. They know where they need, but don't have a clear sense of direction."

Many have become strong and outspoken, but it has cost them in terms of friendships, jobs, respect in the community. Most of the others are practicing their faith at home, almost hiding. Let's face it, they're drifting, floating, they're like sheep without a shepherd."

"So where do you come in?"

Buck shook his head. "Hey, they've asked me to be their pastor, but I know my limitations. I'm an evangelist, a frontlines man. Personally speaking, I know I'm not stable enough. I wouldn't be good for them. God has called me to Ashton to spread the gospel, and up until this point that's all I've known and all I've been able to go on. But how do you feel, Hank? Do you think God might be moving in your life to bring you into all this somewhere?"

"Sure," said Hank, and he felt it more strongly than he dared to say it. "I...I don't think I can just come charging in like some kind of invader..."

Buck only laughed. "Ah, you just wait. You see, it's only been since the Colemans checked you out that anyone's even known about you. I really believe the Lord has brought us together; it's part of His plan."

The two of them continued to talk, and they found it remarkable how everything seemed to fit into place. Hank shared the burden he'd always felt for the town, and Buck related how the Lord had placed an identical burden on his own heart. Each of them was answering God's call in his own particular way, but they could see that God's plan had to be the same for both of them.

"As for all the believers out there, I think it's high time they got themselves formed into a tangible body," Buck said. "You never know what the Lord will do eventually, but for now, I wouldn't be surprised to see a great number of them checking out your church."

Hold on, here, Hank thought. This was all happening very fast. Buck sure didn't hesitate to get right down to his real thoughts in the matter.

Boy, this guy could get right down to business! Hank tried to at least catch up with him, at least. "I...well, sure, I'm a pastor..."

"Well I just might have some sheep for you."

"But...I don't even know them, and they don't know me...are they even ready to be pastored? Is that what they want?"

INSERT

Buck ~~shook his head~~ thought about it and smiled. "~~No, it won't be that way.~~ Well, Hank, I'll tell you how I see it. I see it just like a harvest: the sheaves are ready for gathering. I've been planting ~~for just about a year now~~ like mad, and if somebody doesn't gather~~x~~ all these new souls into a sheepfold somewhere, they're going to get lost, wander off, become useless. ~~No, I think the Lord has everything right in step, right on schedule.~~" Yes

They kept right on talking, comparing notes, ~~feelings~~ theologies, experiences, stories.

? INSERT— ~~It was remarkable how it all seemed to fit together.~~

Buck shared, "I still don't know what the end purpose of my being here is. All I know is that I have an unshakable burden to be here and give Satan a run for his money."

Hank could hardly sit still in his chair. "That's the way I've been feeling!"

Both men were hesitant to call it all a miracle, but both of them thought that was exactly what it was.

"God is in this," said Hank.

~~"I hear you, bro, I hear you," said Buck.~~

"Praise God, I think He's in this!" Buck exclaimed, bouncing excitedly in his seat. "Now I hope I'm not being hasty, but it could be that... if God lays it upon your heart to be the general, I know I can put you in touch with~~x~~ a lot of good soldiers!"

Krioni ~~and~~ Triskal and Seth were feeling better than they had felt in a long time. ~~This could be it, the first xxxx gxxxxxing~~ major gathering of ~~the Remnant~~.

Krioni said, "Tal will be glad to hear the results of this meeting."

"The Remnant!" Triskal said, and the very word was good news in itself.

"Careful!" ~~whispered~~ Seth, whispered abruptly.

~~The three of them saw xxx~~ four ~~demons approach.xxxx~~ In the middle of the four demons walked a young man, high school age.

INSERT

They kept right on talking, getting to know one another. Hank found Buck was single
still single, had gone
out that Buck, ~~xxx~~ to a well-recognized Bible School ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
but that he was still seeking the Lord's will for what sort of ministry
to enter. For now, Buck's burden was the streets, and what better place
to confront the darkness than in Ashton?

Buck had to laugh when he thought about it. "Hey, I was just passing
through on the train, heading west to see my folks. ~~I got out during the~~ The train was only going
~~to stop for fifteen minutes, you know. I wanted to have a look around, and~~ here
~~whistle stop and decided to stay.~~ ~~xxxxxxx~~ I could feel the burden, the town a strong for
the minute I stepped off the ~~xxxxx~~ train. I stayed, I got a room for the night and I've
been here ever since. I still don't know where it's all going to lead.
All I know is that I can't shake the burden to stay here and give Satan
a real run for his money."

They looked toward the back door of The Cave and saw a party of four demons coming out, surrounding a young man of high school age. These were not powerful warriors, only petty pranksters, demons of bondage and confusion. ~~All three angels felt at the same time that this~~ One rode on the young man's back, and nodded and drooled in a drugged stupor. ~~A mischievous spirit of cheating and dishonesty remained at the young man's side, and a spirit of hate stood at his other side, and rebellion followed behind.~~ At the young man's side was a creeping, prickly thing with long, entwining talons and shifty eyes. On the other side, a strong spirit of fearsome countenance held the young man in a very strong, iron grip and chugged angry words into the young man's mind. A loathsome creature followed behind, with upraised, clenched fists and gritted teeth.

"Drugs..." Triskal guessed.

"Cheating, dishonesty," came Krioni's observation of another spirit.

"And I would say...hate on the one side and rebellion following behind," said Seth.

Buck looked up from the table and saw the young man. He broke into a grin and called, "Hey, Ron! How's it going?"

Ron, dazed and rubberlegged, ambled over to where Hank and Buck were sitting. "Hey, Buck," he said, holding out a drooping, swaying hand.

Buck grabbed the hand and said, "God bless you, pal!"

The demons wailed and snarled at that, but the three warriors merely shifted their weight in the demons' direction and the snarling eased up.

Hate glared at them and spit out rancid saliva as he said, "What is your business with us?"

"The lad," said Krioni.

"He belongs to us!" Rebellion hissed. "You can't tell us what to do!"

Buck invited Ron to sit down, and Ron sank into a chair like a ragdoll in slow motion.

"Ron," Buck said, "this here is Hank Busche. He's the pastor of the Ashton Community Church up on the hill."

Rebellion and Hate spoke together, "So what?"

"So what?" muttered Ron.

"He knows Jesus, just like I do," said Buck. "Hey, Jesus loves you, man, and we do too."

Drugs enclosed Ron's head in his heavy, slimy arms.

Ron nodded there in his chair, almost oblivious to Buck and Hank.

Buck told Hank, "This is Ron Forsythe, Andy and June's son."

Hank looked at Ron and felt a deep pain in his heart. "He's really out of it, isn't he?"

Buck nodded. "Stoned. Grass, downers." He grabbed Ron's arm. "Ron. Ron!"

Ron didn't answer right away, but then let out a barely decipherable "Yeah?"

"Ron, we're going to pray for you." Buck held Ron's hand and then grabbed Hank's. "Lord, Jesus, we just pray right now for Ron..."

Buck kept praying, then Hank threw in some choice words of his own.

The demons stopped their ears, loosened their grips on the boy and began to fade back from him. Triskal remained by Hank, Seth by Buck, and Krioni moved forward and shooed the demons away, chasing them off into the nearby trees.

Ron raised his head and looked at Buck and Hank. The eyes were clearer now.

"Thanks," he said.

"Hey, any time, man," said Buck. "We're pulling for you."

Ron looked at Hank. "You're the pastor, eh? My folks were talking about you. I thought you were older than that."

"Not too much older," Hank quipped.

Ron smiled. "You a friend of Buck?"

Buck answered, "Yep, sure is. You've got friends, Ron. Most of all, you've got Jesus. He cares about you."

"Yeah....far out."

They talked. They talked about school, the town, Ron's folks, drugs in general and in particular, Hank's church, the Christians who were around, the move of God in the town. Ron seemed to have a grip, however shakey, on the truth and on his need for God. He really wasnt as far gone as Hank had first thought.

Finally Ron got up and walked away, his legs much steadier.

"We've got our work cut out for us, Pastor Busche," said Buck.

"Yeah," he replied. "There is a war on, isn't there?"

"Just you wait," said Trickel.

June 25, ~~'96~~ Sat.

Tightpage: Strachan is cordial and helpful...knows of the network/mob/racketeering atmosphere, evens chuckles about it. They seem to have some common enemies. Eugene Baylor is the general treasurer, and the one most insulted and angry at Strahhan's accusations.

Present Dean must be identified. Strachan has no proof...the proof would be in the college records. Them money coming in from tuition and grants was not staying in the college, but apparently going somewhere else even though the books called such leaks legitimate investments. There was a glitch somewhere in the accounting. Point: The money has been going somewhere else for a long time, but no one knows where.

Concerned about Langstrat and the whole network/fellowship/madness that is spreading. Out of touch with reality, a cander that will ruin the college.

Ted took a lot of blows for my sake. The scandal is a plot, I'm sure. The case was never even investigated, there were no medical reports, nothing.

Nathan + Arnuth flew high above the beatiful summer countryside, following as always the speeding brown Buick. Things were definitely quieter out here, far from the strife-torn town of Ashton. Still they watched their charge carefully. Even though no trouble was openly visible, something somewhere didn't feel right. Sooner or later they were bound to uncover whatever it was.

Former college Dean Eldon Strachan now lived ~~halfway across the state~~ on a quaint and unpretentious ~~farm~~ ten-acre farm, an hour away from Ashton. He was not farming the place, just living there, and as Marsahall and Bernice drove up the long, gravel driveway they could tell his interests for now extended no further than the immediate yard of the white farmhouse. The lawn was small and manicured, the fruit trees pruned and bearing, the flower beds soft with freshly turned and weeded soil. Some chickens meandered about, pecking and scratching. A collie greeted their approach with furious barking.

"Wow, a normal human being to talk to for once," Marshall quipped.

"That's why he moved out of Ashton," said Bernice.

Strachan stepped out onto his porch as the collie ran and barked beside him.

"Hi there!" he called to Marshall and Bernice as they got out of the car, and "Quiet down now, Lady," he said to the collie. Lady never did obey such commands.

He was a healthy, white-haired fellow who'd gotten plenty of exercise on this place and showed it. He was dressed in work clothes

and still carrying a pair of garden gloves in his hand.

Marshall extended his hand and got himself a good firm handshake. So did Bernice. They exchanged introductions and then Strachan invited them around the barking Lady and into the house.

"Doris," Strachan called, "Mr. Hogan and Miss Krueger are here."

Within minutes Doris, a sweet and rotund little grandma type, had set the coffee table with tea, coffee, rolls and goodies, and they were having pleasant conversation about the farm, the countryside, the weather, the neighbor's wandering cow. They all knew it was obligatory, but the Strachans were very pleasant people and a joy to talk and visit with.

Finally, Eldon Strachan introduced the transitional sentence: "Yes, I suppose things in Ashton aren't quite this nice."

~~Marshall could see Bernice getting out her notepad.~~

Bernice got out her notepad as Marshall said, "Yeah, and I kind of hate to drag it all out here with us."

Strachan smiled and said philosophically, "You can run but you can't hide." He looked out the window at the trees backed by endless blue sky and said, "I always have wondered if just leaving it all was the right thing. But what else could I do?"

Marshall double-checked his own notes. "Let's see now. You told me on the telephone when you left..."

"The second week in August, a year ago."

"And Ralph Kuklinski took your place."

"And he's still there, I understand."

"Yeah, still there. Was he in on any of this ~~stuff~~ this 'secret society' stuff? I don't know what else to call it."

Stranhan thought for a short moment. "I don't know for sure, but I wouldn't be surprised if he was. You really had to be one of the group

to get into any kind of position like that."

"Okay, so you're saying there is an 'in' group there?"

"Absolutely. Like peas in a pod, like...like clones of each other. They all act the same, talk the same...it's a genuine madness."

"You're talking about the college regents?"

"For starters. A lot of the faculty are also involved in it, but...let's see...Yes, I would say the entire college board of regents is now taken over by this...this club, this clique, if you will."

"And it revolves around Juleen Langstrat?"

Strachan had to chuckle. "Ah, the dear professor..." He considered the question for a moment. "I wish I really knew to what extent she was involved. She was always a definite influence, to be sure, but...I don't think she was the final say in things. I don't know how I know this, but it seemed to me that she had a lot to do with controlling the regents while someone else had much to do with controlling her. The powers involved seemed more far-reaching than just that one person..."

"But is there...do you see any kind of purpose, or conspiracy, whatever, behind this exclusive group? What's the motivation behind it?"

Strachan only shook his head. "I would be the last one to know. I knew too much as it was, and that's why they fired me."

"What about the college funds?"

"The proof would be in the accounting office, if Eugene Baylor hasn't covered his tracks by now. He's slick."

"Is the college in trouble?"

"It was. No, it still is. It has to be. There's no way short of a miracle that it could ever get out of the mess it was in." Strachan had to resift through his memory. "I never suspected anything until we started having some unexplained disbursement delays. Our bills were being paid late, our payrolls were behind. ~~There had been some attempts to keep things going smoothly and the payment schedules were staggered just enough to...you know, rob Peter to pay Paul. But it got to be such a noticeable thing after a~~

It wasn't even my job to be hounding after these sorts of things, but when I started getting some indirect complaints - you know, hearing others talking about it - I asked Baylor what the problem was. He never directly answered my questions, or at least I didn't like the sound of his answers. That's when I asked an independent accountant, a friend of mine, to look into it, maybe do some quick scanning of what the accounting office was doing. I don't know how he ever got access to the information, but he is a clever character, and he found a way.

INSERT

"He came back horrified. According to his findings, monies from grants and tuitions were being reinvested at an alarming rate, but apparently there were no dividends or returns of any kind from whatever the investments were, as if the money had been poured down a bottomless well somewhere. The figures had been juggled to cover it up, accounts payable had been staggered so that other accounts could be dipped into to pay those due...it was just one colossal mess."

"A mess worth millions?"

"I would say so. "Absolutely." "Maybe." I never could find out more about the investments. The college money had been leaking out in large amounts for years, but I simply could not find out where it was going. Apparently some of it must have come back from legitimate investments, but that amount was far below what it should have been. Somewhere out there is a hungry money monster that was gobbling up all the college's assets."

"And that's when you called for the audit."

"And Eugene Baylor hit the ceiling. The whole thing went from professional to personal in an instant and we became intimate enemies. From all that, I'm even more convinced than before that the college is in big trouble and that Baylor has a lot to do with it. But then again, there is nothing Baylor does that all the others don't know about. I'm sure they're all aware of the problem, and it's my feeling that their unanimous vote for my resignation was just another act of a common conspiracy."

INSERT

Bernice was ready with the question. "Can we have his name?"

Strachan shrugged. "Johnson. Ernie Johnson."

"How do we reach him?"

"He's dead."

Marshall ~~wanted to know~~ asked abruptly, "How did he die?"

Strachan caught his drift. "I'm pretty sure it was from natural causes."

"A heart attack, I believe. At least, that's what I heard."

"~~What about~~ Did he leave you any records, anything written down?"

Strachan only shook his head. "Why do you think I've been sitting out here so silently? If I thought I had anything I could present as proof, I certainly would stick my neck out...I think. But I don't, and I'm afraid I've just given up the fight as too futile."

"So what else can you tell us? How'd Ernie do?"

Strachan only shook his head. "Why do you think I've been sitting out here so silently? Listen, I even ~~thought of going to Norm Mattily~~ know Norm Mattily pretty well, and I thought of going to him and the State Attorney General, and telling him about what I thought was going on, but let's face it; those big folks at the top don't give you the time of day unless you have something really substantial, some real proof. It's tough to get the authorities to stick their necks out. They just won't do it."

"But what if we could find some proof, some records, something to show that something criminal was going on?"

"You find something like that and Norm might look at it. More power to you. In the meantime, [illegible]"

"Well, just what was it that Ernie Johnson found out?"

JRC:

"But to what end?" Bernice asked. "What is it they want ultimately?"

"I don't know. It doesn't make much sense, does it? Why would they work toward destroying their source of ~~an occupation~~ employment?"

"You think they actually wanted to destroy the college?"

"I just don't know ~~if they want to or not~~, but unless there's something else hidden somewhere that is going to explain where these funds are going and how the losses are going to be made up, that college is most certainly headed for bankruptcy. Kuklinski must know that. As far as I knew, he was in total agreement with the financial policies and with my resignation."

Marshall flipped to some other notes he'd made. "So what do you know about our kind professor Langstrat?" Strachan scratched his memory." Graduate of UCLA, has taught at other universities until she came here.

"She's been on the faculty for at least ~~ten~~ six years, the first ~~five~~ three or so of which she was very amicable, level-headed, sparkling. I realized she always did have a very strong interest in eastern philosppy and occultism. She was once involved in some kind of neo-pagan religious group in California. I can't say for sure, but I think these interests came to the forefront about ~~five~~ three years ago when she began to openly espouse them in her classes. It aroused a lot of interest, but I saw no harm in it. The problem arose when her beliefs and practices started to spread among the faculty."

"Who on the faculty?" Marshall asked.

Strachan shook his head. "As would be expected, I was the last one to ever know about it. A few people in the philosophy department first got into it, and then they began to proselytize new initiates from the English and History departments, and also the Humanities. Mind you, none of this, and I mean none of it was above board and seen by the public, much less me. The only indication that ever came to me was the way these people all began to have a very unique and indefinable rapport with each other: No one person could do anything without everyone else knowing all about it. Modern communications would be slow and ponderous compared to how fast word would spread among Langstrat and her ~~bunch~~ followers."

"So what were the practices of this group?"

~~"And just what was it they were doing?"~~ Bernice wanted to know.

Strachan shrugged. "That's a good question. Just what is it that people into the occult do? As far as I know, they would meditate, have seances or something like that, probe into one another's minds and spirits... I really don't know what they did. All I know is that our campus was being slowly taken over by...well, I'll use the word again: a madness."

For just a moment, Marshall had a flashback, a quick, fleeting memory of his daughter Sandy helping put away groceries and saying, "People around here are starting to act weird. I think we're being invaded by aliens." That memory was xxxxx immediately followed by Kate's voice over the phone, "I'm concerned about Sandy...she just isn't the same old Sandy anymore..." Marshall snapped out of his daydream to find Strachan still talking. Marshall had no idea how much he had missed.

"Uh..." he cut in, "did Langstrat and the others...did they ever teach this stuff to their students?"

"~~I don't know that they did.~~ Well, It certainly was not an approved paft of the curriculum, but then again, the indtructors did have some latitude as to how they handled each course."

Marshall leafed and fumbled through his materials. He finally found an old list Bernice had found. "What about stuff like, 'Introduction to God and Goddess Consciousness and the Craft...nymph, maiden, warlock, crone... spells and rituals...Pathways to Your Inner Light, meet your own spiritual guides...'" Marshall could see Strachan nodding with recognition as he read from the list. "You mean to say that was being taught on the college campus?"

"They were elective courses open to the public in the evenings. It was an extracurricular arrangement, paid for out of fees from each student who signed up. At first I thought it was simply a study of...you know, old folk myths and traditions, not..."

"Not ~~actually~~ seriously studying the stuff, learning it."

"That's right."

"But it looks like it really took off."

"You might say that a great percentage of the staff and student body are now...bewitched."

"Including the regents."

"And Kuklinski, don't forget," and Dwight Brandon, the owner of the land."

"And Ted Harmel?"

Strachan tightened his lips, looked at the floor and sighed. "Yes. I'm not sure why he dabbled in it, whether it was for a story or whether he genuinely believed in that nonsense, but as near as I can tell, he got in too far before he tried to back out. They had invested too much trust and too much information in him. When they couldn't control him anymore - I have myself and our friendship to blame for that - they arranged to defame him and chase him out of town with that ridiculous scandal."

"Mmmmm," said Bernice. "So Ted had a real conflict of interest? arose?"

"Of course. He really wanted to be involved in this exciting new philosophy. I heard him say once that they had promised him great success with his newspaper because he had aligned himself with them..."

Marshall had another flashback and he couldn't shake it off: He saw Brummel looking at him with those numbing gray eyes, saying ever so sweetly, "Marshall, we'd like to know that you'll be standing with us..."

Strachan was still talking.

Marshall woke up and said, "Uh, excuse me, what was that again?"

"Oh," said Strachan, "I was just saying that Ted became torn between two loyalities: first and foremost, he was loyal to the truth and to his friends, and that included me. His other loyalty was to the...the Langstrat bunnh and their philosophies. I guess he thought that the truth was invholable and that the press would always be free, but whatever the reason, he began to print stories about the financial problems, and that was definitely stepping over the line as far as the regents were concerned."

"Yes..." Bernice recalled. "I remember him saying that they were trying to control him, and dictate what he printed. He was really mad about it."

"Well of course, " said Strachan. "When it came right down to principles, regardless of what religious or metaphysical philosophies he may have been interested in, Ted was still a newspaperman and would not be intimidated." Strachan sighed and looked at the floor again. "So, I'm afraid he got himself caught in the crossfire of my battle with the college regents. Consequently, we both lost our positions, our good standing in the community... everything. I guess you could say I was well content to leave it behind. It seemed impossible to fight it."

Marshall never did like that kind of talk. "Are they...is this thing... really that strong?"

Strachan gave Marshall a very serious look. "I don't think I ever realized how vast and strong it really was. Mr. Hogan, I have no idea just what the final goal of this group, this disease, this thing is, but it seems pretty clear to me that nothing that stands in its way will escape some kind of stamping out. I can think back over the last few years, and I'm very frightened when I think of how people have had such a tendency to drop out of sight so abruptly."

Joe, the supermarket owner, Marshall thought, and ... what about Edie?*

"Five of the regents," Strachan said, "~~Five of them~~ were not there a year and a half ago. There are twelve regent positions altogether, and half have been suddenly and abruptly replaced in the last year and a half. Why else would the vote for my resignation be unanimous? I used to have some very loyal friends on that board."

"What are their names and where have they gone?" Marshall asked.

"I can give you their names," said Strachan, "but I'm not sure where

most of them xx have gone."

Bernice started writing the names down along with any information Strachan could provide about them. Jake Abernathy had died, x Morris James had gone bankrupt and moved away to another job, Fred Ainsworth, George Olson and Rita Jacobson had all left Ashton with no word as to where they had gone.

"That's an incredible administrative upheaval in so short a span of time," Bernice observed.

"No big problem," Strachan quipped. "They simply blamed me and booted me out, and that cleaned the slate for all of them. Now nothing stands in their way, no killjoys, no snoops. Except..."

And now Strachan was looking back and forth at Bernice and Marshall. "Just what do you people intend to do with this information?"

Marshall had to be honest. "I don't really know yet. There are too many missing pieces, too many assumptions. I don't really have anything I can print."

"You do remember what happened to Ted?"

Marshall didn't want to think about that. He did want to find out something else. "Ted wouldn't talk to me."

"He's scared, Marshall."

"Scared of what?"

"I don't know. He knows more about the weird goings-on than I do; I guess he knows enough to be a lot more scared than I am. I don't discount that fear for one minute. I believe there is a genuine danger here."

"But...he's x out of it now, he's out of the way, no longer a threat."

Strachan only threw up his hands x a little and said, "Hey, call it religious brainwashing, or intimidation or whatever, but he's still being controlled by something. He's keeping his mouth shut."

"Well does he ever talk to you?"

"Sure, about anything besides what you're after."

"But the two of you are in touch?"

"Sure, we fish, hunt, go out for some beers. He's not far from here."

"Could you call him?"

~~Strachan didn't know for sure if he wanted to do that.~~

"What, you mean call him and put in a plug for you?"

Marshall was earnest. "That's exactly what I mean."

Strachan was showing a lot of caution. "Hey, he may not want to talk, and I can't push him."

"But will you just call him, see if he'll talk to me just one more time?"

Strachan shrugged, threw up his hands again. "Sure, I can call him. I don't know what good it will do. It might spoil our friendship..."

"Hey, I'd appreciate it. ~~Thank you.~~"

"But ~~Mr. Hogan~~ Marshall..." Strachan reached over, grabbed Marshall's arm. He looked at both Marshall and Bernice and said in great earnest, "You people watch out for yourselves. You're not invincible. None of the rest of us were. Just watch ~~your step~~ out for yourselves. I do believe it's possible for you to lose everything if you make one wrong move, take one wrong step." He looked at them both to make sure they were really listening. "Be ~~sneaky~~ subtle. Be careful."

Note: [illegible] — spaced.

June 25, Saturday

At the Clarion, Tom the paste-up man had nther things to do than answer the door, but with Hogan and Bernice gone, he was the only remaining fort-holder-downer. Usually he could get a lot of Tuesdwy's edition started

At the Clarion, Tom the paste-up man was just getting the usual ads, fillers and completed galleys into the Tuesday edition when the bell over the front door jingled. He had better things to do than answer the door, but with Hogan and Bernice out on their mysterious mission of intrigue, he was the only rmaining fort holder-downer. Boy, he wished Edie had stuck around. The paper was getting to be more of a shambles every day, and whatever wild goose chase xxdx Hogan and Bernice were on, it was taking their attentinn away from the many takks that were piling up around the place.

"Hello?" a woman's sweet voice called from up front.

Tom grabbed a shop cloth to wipe his hands on and hollered back, "Hold on, I'm coming."

He scurried up the narrow passage to the front office and saw a very attractive and neatly dressed young woman standing at the counter. She smiled when she saw him. Ah yes, thought Tom, xxxxxxxxxxxx if I were only youggxrx again.

"Hello there," he said, still wiping his hands on the shop cloth. "What can I do for you?"

The young lady said, "I read your ad for a secretary and general office manager. I've come to apply."

It had to be an angel, Tom thought. "Boy, if you can cut it, let me tell you, there's sure a job to be had around here!"

"Well I'm ready to start," she said with a bright smile.

Tom made sure his hand was clean enough and then extended it. "Tom McBride, the paste-up man and general worrier."

She shook his hand firmly and said her name, "Carmen."

"Pleased to meet you, Carmen...uh...Carmen who?"

She laughed at her lapse of mind and said, "Oh, Carmen Fraser. I get so used to just going by my first name."

Tom swung the little gate open at the end of the counter and Carmen followed him into the office area.

"Let me show you what the devil's going on here," he said, hardly knowing where to start.

June 25, Sat.

MAIDSERVANT READS DIARY:

Tightpage: In addition to the card...other details should include: Some mention of a Plan...their lovey, lusty relationship...how Kaseph doesn't really trust her...how they are presently in the mysterious valley complex but intend tom move very soon...how Susan may have some misgivings about the Plan...

In the faraway secluded valley, in the little cluster of unlabeled buildings hidden by the towering rocky crags, a regular work day was in full swing. Men and women of all ages, descriptions and nationalities went about their business in the offices complex while kitchen staff prepared meals in the dinigg hall. The maintenance people in their blue coveralls drove their small trucks and tractors about the grounds, moving sand, shrubs, building materials, ~~keeping the place immaculate while planning other projects.~~

In the office complex, about fifty people of all ages, descriptions and nationalities were hard at work typing letters, going through metal files, chattering on telephones in different languages. The activity was brisk and hurried as maintenance people in blue coveralls brought in large stacks of boxes and crates on handtrucks and the office workers meticulously began to fill the boxes with the contents of the files, with any office paraphernalia not immediately needed, with other books and records ready to be moved out.

Outside the office, trucks were being loaded with the crates as more maintenance people driving little grounds tractors went about the complex shutting down various hookups and utilities no longer needed and boarding up any buildings no longer occupied.

~~From the large, multistoried stone house on the edge of the grounds, a woman watched all the activity from her~~

~~A woman walked across the open plaza between the office complex and the big, stone house on the outskirts of the grounds~~

~~A woman with long, black hair~~ A tall and slender woman with long, jet black hair came out the front door of the big, stone house on the edge of

Nearby, on the porch of the big stone house on the edge of the grounds, a woman paused to watch all the activity. She was tall and slender, with long, jet black hair, dressed in a black, loose fitting clothes, and she clutched her shoulder bag close to her side with a pale, trembling hands. She looked this way and that, purposely trying to relax herself. She took a few deep breaths. She reached into her bag and brought out a pair of dark sunglasses which she used to hide her eyes. Then she stepped down from the porch and started across the plaza toward the office building.

Her steps were firm and deliberate, her eyes remained straight ahead. A few office personnel passed her on their way somewhere and saluted her, in a prayerful position by pressing their palms together in front of their chins and bowing slightly. She nodded back at them and kept walking.

The office staff saluted her in the same way as she entered and she smiled back at them, not speaking a word. Upon receiving her smile, the office manager, they went back to work just as feverishly as ever. Then a well-dressed woman with tightly pinned hair, stepped up to her, gave a slight bow, and said, "Good morning. What does the Maidservant require?"

The Maidservant smiled and said, "I like to run off some copies."

"I can do it immediately!"

"No, I wish to run them off myself."

"Certainly. I'll warm up the machine for you."

The woman scurried toward a small room off to the side and the Maidservant followed. Several clerks and accountants and filing clerks, some oriental, some East Indian, some European, bowed as she passed and then went back to their consulting with each other.

The office manager had the copier ready in less than a minute.

"You may go now," said the Maidservant.

"Certainly," answered the woman. "I am at your disposal if you have any problems or questions."

"Thank you."

The manager left and the Maidservant closed the door behind her, shutting out the rest of the office and any intrusions. Then, quickly, the Maidservant reached into her bag and brought out a small package wrapped in plain brown paper, bound with string. With a handy pair of scissors she opened the package very carefully book. She leafed through the little book, it skimming over reading through the handwritten pages until she found what she was looking for. Then, laying the book open and face down on the copier, she started pressing the buttons and copying page after page.

Forty pages later, she turned off the machine, folded the copies neatly and placed them in a compartment of her bag, along with the little book. She left the office directly and went back to the big stone house.

The house was rather majestic in its size and decor, with a large stone hearth and soaring, rough-beamed ceilings. The Maidservant hurried up the thinkly carpeted staircase to her bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Placing the little book on her stately, antique vanity, she opened a went through the drawers until she found some brown wrapping paper, string and a pair of scissors and unwrapped some and some twine. The paper already had a name written on it, the addressee: Alexander M. Kaseph. She quickly rewrapped the book and did her best to make it look like it had never been opened, then bound the package with string.

Elsewhere in the house, in a very large and impressive office, a middle-aged, roundly built man dressed in loose trousers and tunic sat Indian fashion on a large cushion, his hands clenched in strange little his eyes closed, his breathing deep. All around him were the fine furnishings of a man with great prestige and power: souvenirs from around the world such as swords, warclubs, african artifacts, religious relics; a very large battleship of a desk with built-in computer console and intercom; and multilined telephone; a long, deep-cushioned couch with matching hand-carved oak chairs and coffee table; hunting trophies of bears, elks, moose and lions hanging hung on the walls.

Without hearing a knock, the man spoke loftily, "Come in, Susan."

The big oak door opened silently and the Maidservant entered, carrying the brown paper package.

Without opening his eyes, the man said, "Put it on my desk."

The Maidservant did so, and the man began to stir from his motionless position, opening his eyes, stretching his arms as if awakening from sleep.

"So you finally found it," he said with a teasing smile.

"It was there all the time. With all the packing and rearranging it got shoved over in a corner. I just had to look farther."

The man rose from his cushion, stretched his legs, and walked around a few laps the office. "I really don't know what it is," he said as if answering a question. ~~Professor Langstrat sends me lots of things, but she mentioned that it might be important to me.~~

"I didn't wonder..." said the Maidservant.

He smiled condescendingly and said, "Oh, maybe not, but it felt like you did." He went up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders, speaking into her ear. "Sometimes I can read you just so very well, and sometimes...ah, you drift away. You've been feeling so troubled lately. Why?"

"Oh, all the moving, I guess, the upheaval."

He put his arms around her waist and held her close as he said, "Say, don't let it bother you. We're going to a far better place. I have a house all picked out. You'll love it."

"I grew up in that town, you know."

"No. No, not really. It won't be the same town at all, not as you remember it. It will be better. But you don't believe that, do you?"

"Like I said, I grew up in Ashton.." ~~My feelings are confused.~~

"And all you wanted was to get out of there!"

so you can see why "My feelings are confused."

He twirled her around and laughed playfully as he looked into her eyes. "~~Well of course they are! But believe me, returning to your home town will not be a step backwards! You will return with me~~

"Yes, I know! On the one hand, you have no desire at all for the town, and on the other hand, you sneak off to attend the carnival!"

She blushed a little and looked at the floor. "I was searching for something from my past, something from which to envision my future."

He held her hand and said, "There is no past. You should have stayed with me. I hold the answers for you now."

"Yes, I can see that. I couldn't before."

He laughed and went behind his desk. "Well, good, good. We don't need anymore meetings held in hiding places behind a noisy carnival! You should have seen how embarrassed our friends were to have to meet there."

"But why did you even have to come looking for me? Why did you have to drag them along?"

He sat at the desk and leaned on his elbows, drumming his fingers together. "Because, dear Maidservant, I do not trust you. I love you, I am one in essense with you, but...I do not trust you. You are a woman given to many conflicting passions."

"I cannot hamm the Plan. I am only one person among myriads."

"You share my life, my secrets, my purposes. I have to protect my interests."

She smiled in acquiescance and leaned over the desk to kiss him. "I am, and will always be, yours," she said.

He sat at the desk and began handling a wicked looking ceremonial knife with a golden handle and razor sharp blade.

Looking over the edge of the blade at her, he said, "Because, dear Maidservant, I do not trust you. I love you, I am one in essence with you, but..." He held the knife up to the level of his eye and peered down the edge of the blade at her, his eyes as sharply cutting as the knife would have been. "I do not trust you. You are a woman given to many conflicting passions."

"I cannot harm the Plan. I am only one person among myriads."

He rose and came around to the side of the desk where other knives were stuck into the carved head of some pagan idol.

"You, dear Susan, share my life, my secrets, my purposes. I have to protect my interests."

With that, he dropped the knife point first and it thudded into the idol's head.

She smiled in acquiescence and sidled up to him, giving him an alluring kiss. "I am, and will always be, yours," she said.

He gave her a sly smile and the cutting look never left his eyes as he said, "Yes. Of course you are."

Must identify the other man.

High above the little cluster of buildings, amid the rocky crags of the mountaintops, two figures concealed themselves. ~~among the rocks.~~ One was the silver-haired man who had been here before, always watching the activity below. He was stately, mighty, and towering, his piercing eyes full of wisdom. The other was Tal, the Captain of the Host.

"This is what you're looking for," said the silver-haired man. "Rafar had business there only days ~~xgxx~~ ago."

Tal peered down into the valley. ~~The swarms of~~ black demons were more numerous than he could even estimate.

"~~Is there~~ The ~~a~~ strongman?" he asked.

"Undoubtedly, with a ~~thick~~ cloud of guard all around him. We've been unable to penetrate it just yet."

"~~But~~ And ~~so how does she survive in there?~~ she's right in the middle of it!"

~~"The Spirit has placed a stupor on the demonic hosts. It will last long enough for you to get her out. The prayers of her loved ones~~

"The Spirit has been steadily opening her eyes and calling her out. She is close to the strongman - dangerously close. The prayers of ~~her loved ones~~ the Remnant have ~~prxxxxxx~~ placed a stupor on the demonic hosts. ~~It might last long enough for you to get her out.~~ some increase be At present it will buy us you time, but little more."

Tal grimaced ~~at the thought.~~ "It will take more than a stupor ~~to~~ My General, for us to ~~break~~ ~~xxx~~ through to her. We can barely hold the town of Ashton now, much less take on the strongman directly."

~~"But this is where the buildup is~~ "~~But~~ And you can only expect this buildup to ~~only~~ worsen. Their numbers increase tenfold each day."

"Yes, they are preparing, that is for certain."

~~"And~~ But at the same time, her conflicts continue to ~~worsen~~ grow. Soon she won't be able to conceal her true feelings from her lord down there. Tal, She ~~knows~~ has learned of the suicide."

Tal looked directly at the ~~silver-haired man.~~ General. "I understand they were very close."

~~"Ah, it worked, then!"~~

The ~~silver-haired man~~ General nodded. "It jolted her, made her receptive. But her time of safety is limited. Listen carefully."

The two of them stood close and consulted; the ~~silver-haired man~~ General spoke, Tal listened. "She still has one person on the outside she ~~may~~ will try to contact. There is a special dinner coming up this week. It will be held in New York City and Kaseph will not be attending, although his Maidservant will attend. Where Kaspph goes, the strongman goes, and with him most of the demonic cover.

~~"Where Kaseph goes, the Strongman goes, and where Kaseph remains, so does the strongman.~~ He knows A special dinner will be held this week in New York, a fund raiser for the ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ Universal Consciousness Society, of which Alexander Kaseph is a member. Kaspph cannot attend because of the present activities here, but intends to send Susan, deeply involved. Where Kaseph goes, the Strongman goes, and where Kaseph remains, so does the Strongman, along with most of his protective guard This could be the one moment when ~~the~~ demonic cover ~~will be thin enough for her~~ she will be out from under. ~~to get out~~ The Spirit knows she plans this heavy and make contact with one remaining friend on the outside. She will Take this chance, Tal," ~~made~~ You must arrange it. for it to succeed." who can in turn contact your newspaperman.

Tal ~~thought for a moment and his~~ first response was, "Is there prayer cover in New York?"

"You will have it."

Tal looked down at the swarms below. "And they can't find out."

"No. They must not suspect anything has happened until you can get Susan out for good." They would destroy her if they knew."

~~"I have some gathering to do."~~

~~"Godspeed, dear Warrior."~~

And who is "The friend?"

"His name is Devin Weed, her only remaining contact on the outside."

"To work, then. I have some more prayer gathering to do."

"Godspeed, dear Captain!"

Tal climbed behind some conceding rocks before he unfurled his wings. Then, with the silence of a drifting cloud, he floated up over the mountaintops and then sped back for Ashton.

Tal ~~unfurledxhis~~ climbed behind some large rocks for concealment before he unfurled his wings. Then, with the silence and grace of a drifting cloud, he floated up over the mountain top ~~and out of sight.~~ Once he had cleared the ~~mountain~~ summit and could no longer be seen by any of the ~~swarms~~ in the valley, ~~hesxxxxx~~ wings snapped into a ~~mighty~~ roaring rushing pattern and he shot forward like a bullet ~~into the sky~~, trailing ~~xxx~~ a brilliant arc of light ~~over the horizon.~~ that traced his path ~~over the Origon~~ across the sky and down over the horizon.

June 25, Saturday Evening

Marshall and Bernie Krueger drove through the pleasant, forested countryside in the big brown Buick, talking occasionally ~~over and over again~~ about the ~~building~~ investigation, whenever they weren't talking about themselves, their pasts, their families, and anything else that came to mind. They were getting a little tired of only talking about business by now anyway, and it was now getting very enjoyable just sharing each other's company. The Buick came to a Tee in the road and a sign indicated the way back to Ashton was to the left. Marshall turned left.

INSERT ONE

INSERT TWO

About a mile ahead of them was a wide spot in the road referred to as Baker, some little town indicated by the smallest possible dot on the map. It was one of those typical roadsides where truckers and four-wheeling hunters dropped in for black coffee and cold eggs. Blink just once and you'd miss it.

Above the Buick, whisking just over the tops of the trees, Tal and Guilo kept a careful eye on the vehicle, their wings rushing in an even, whirring pattern and their bodies ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ glorified and ~~shining with the~~ and trailing ~~xxxxxx~~ two streaks of diamond-studded light.

"So this is where it all begins..." said Guilo with a playful tone.

"And you have been chosen to strike the blow!" responded Tal.

Guilo smirked. "Child's play!"

Tal teased him a little. "I'm sure someone else would like the honor..."

Guilo drew his sword and it flashed like a lightning bolt. "Oh no, dear ~~Captain!~~ I've waited long enough! I'll take it!"

~~"Be skillful, now."~~

"Just watch this!"

Guilo banked away from Tal, ~~began to drop~~ dropped down ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ over the roadway as it wound through the tall trees, and began to keep pace with the car, flying lazily along about thirty feet just above it. He kept his eye on the little town of Baker now approaching, made a quick judgment as to the coasting distance the car could travel, and then, at the right

INSERT ONE

"I grew up Presbyterian," said Marshall. "Now I don't know what I am."

"My folks were Episcopalian," said Bernice. "I don't think I was every anything. They drug me along to church every Sunday and I couldn't wait to get out of there."

"I didn't mind it that much. I had a good Sunday School teacher."

"Yeah, maybe that's where I missed out. I never went to Sunday School."

"Aw, I think every kid ought to go, at least for a while. A kid needs to ~~have some kind of idea~~ know something about God."

"What if God doesn't exist?"

"See what I mean? You never went to Sunday School!"

"Aw, c'mon, Hogan! If I wanted to believe in God I would!"

INSERT TWO

Bernice answered one of Marshall's questions, "Nope, no parents alive anymore. Dad died in '56 and Mom died...lets see, two years ago."

"That's too bad."

"AND then I lost my only sibling, Patricia."

"Is that right! Boy, I'm sorry."

"It's a lonely world out there sometimes..."

"Yeah, I suppose...and I wonder who there is to meet in Ashton?"

She only looked at him and said, "I'm not looking, Marshall."

moment, he hurled his sword like a fiery spear xxxx downward. The sword travelled a perfect trajectory and shot through the hood of the car.

The engine died.

"Nuts!" said Marshall, shifting quickly into neutral.

"What's wrong?" Bernice asked.

"Something's broke."

Marshall treed to restart the engine as the car continued to coast along. No response.

"Probably electrical..." he muttered.

"Better pull over at that station."

"Yeah, I know, I know."

The Buick limped into the little filling station in Baker and rolled to a stop right at the front door. Marshall and Bernice got out and Marshall opened the hood.

"I'm going to excuse myself," said Bernice.

"Go for me too, will you?" Marshall said crossly, looking here and there around xxxxxxxx the engine compartment.

Bernice went to the next little building, The Evergreen Tavern. Age and settling were slowly swallowing up the building from the bottom up, and one end was badly sunken; the paint on the front door was peeling. The neon beer logo in the window was still working, though, and the juke box inside was twanging some country hit.

Bernice pushed the door open - the bottom scraped xxxxxx a worn arc across the linoleum - and went inside, twisting her nose a little at the blue cigarette smoke that had replaced the air, ~~in this place~~. There were just a few men in the establishment, most likely the first of the logging crews just getting off work. They were talking loudly, swapping stories, cussing it up. Bernice looked directly toward the back of the room, trying to find the little Men and Women signs. Yes, there was Rest Rooms.

She started toward the back, looking around the place just a little bit. ~~One of the men at a nearby table~~ A little too much local color in this place, she thought.

One of the men at a nearby table said, "Hey, baby, how'd it goin'?"

She wasn't going to even look in his direction, but she did just happen to give him a glance and an appropriately dirty look.

She slowed her walk. Her eyes locked on him. He looked back at her with a drugged, lazy-eyed smile on his bearded face.

Another man said, "Looks like you got her attention, buddy."

Bernice kept looking at him. She approached the table and took an even closer look. The hair was long and tangled, bound into a ponytail with a rubber band. The eyes were glassy and now heavily lined. But she knew this man.

The man's friend said, "Good evening, ma'am. ~~This here is Kevin Weed.~~ Don't let him bother you, he's just having a good time, right, Weed?"

"~~Kevin~~ Weed?" Bernice asked. "Kevin Weed?"

Kevin Weed just looked up at her, enjoying the view and saying little. Finally he said, "Can I buy you a beer?"

Bernice came closer to him, made sure he could clearly see her face. "Do you remember me? Bernice Krueger?" Weed only looked puzzled. "Do you remember Pat Krueger?"

A light slowly began to dawn in Weed's face. "Pat Krueger...? Who are you?"

You and Pat's roommate were going together.

"I'm Bernice, Pat's sister. Do you remember me? We met a couple of times."

Weed brightened and smiled and then he cursed and quickly said excuse me. "Bernice Krueger! Pat's sister!" He cursed again and excused himself again. "What're you doin' in this place?"

"Just passing through. And I will take a small Coke, thank you."

Weed smiled and looked at his friends. Their eyes and mouths were getting wide and they were starting to laugh.

Weed said with a leer, "I think it's time you boys found another table..."

They gathered up their hard hats and thermoses and laughed, "Yeah, you got it, Weed, ~~Right on, Weed!~~"

"Dan," Weed hollered, "a small Coke for the lady here!"

Dan had to stare for a moment at the nice girl like Bernice who'd come into a place like his. He got the Coke and brought it to her.

"So what have you been doing?" Weed asked her.

Bernice had her pen and notebook out. She told him a little about what she had been doing and what she was doing now. Then she said, "I haven't seen you since before Pat's death."

"Hey, I'm really sorry about that."

~~"Do you know anything about it?"~~

"Nothing much, no more than what I read in the papers."

~~"That's one thing I'm doing right now: trying to track down the missing facts about it. I'm not satisfied with the suicide story."~~

"What about ~~Susan?~~ Pat's roommate? Do you hear from her anymore?" Bernice noticed Weed's eyes ~~face brighten~~ widen and his mouth drop open the moment she ~~said Susan's name.~~ mentioned the girl.

"Man, this world is ~~getting~~ small er all the time!" he said.

"You saw her?" Bernice couldn't believe her good fortune.

"Well, yeah, sort of,"

"Well did you see her?" Bernice insisted.

"Well just for a little while."

"Where? When?" Bernice was having a very difficult time holding herself back.

"I saw her at the carnival."

"In Ashton?"

"Yeah, yeah, in Ashton. I just ran into her. She called my name and I turned around and there she was."

"Well...what did she say? ~~What did she say?~~ Did she say where she's living now?"

Weed fidgeted a little. "Man, I don't know. I don't really care. She dumped me, you know, ran off with that other goon. She was even with him that night. Man, she's got some kind of crust."

"What was her name?"

"Susan. Susan Jacobson. She's a real heartbreaker, she is."

"Do you have any idea...did she give you any idea of where I might find her? I have to talk to her about Pat. She might know something."

"Man, I don't know. She didn't talk to me for very long at all. She was in a hurry, had to meet her new boyfriend or something. She wanted my phone number, that was about it."

Bernice couldn't let go of her hope. Not yet. "Are you sure she didn't give you some idea of where she's living now, or any way to get in touch with her?" Weed shrugged drunkly. "Kevin, I've been trying for ages! I've got to talk to her!"

Weed was bitter. "Talk to her boyfriend, that fat little geezer with all the bucks!"

No. No, that wasn't really a legitimate hunch that just ran through Bernice's mind. Or was it?

"Kevin," she said, "what did Susan look like?"

He was looking off into space, acting like a drunken and jilted lover. "Foxy," he said. "Long, black hair, black dress, sexy shades. She was bad that night, man, really bad."

Bernice felt her stomach tighten into a knot as she said, "And what about the boyfriend? Did you see him?"

"Yeah, later. Susan acted like she didn't even know me when he came into the picture."

"Well what did he look like?"

"Like some pudgy, wimpy character from fat city. It had to have been his money, that's why Susan latched onto him."

Bernice picked up her pen in a shaking hand. "What's your phone number?" He gave it to her. "Address?" He mumbled that off too. "Now, you say she asked you for your phone number?"

"Yeah, I don't know why. Maybe things aren't working out with loverboy."

"Did you give it to her?"

"Yeah. Maybe I'm a sucker, but yeah, I did."

"So she just might be calling you." He just shrugged. "Kevin..." Bernice gave him one of her cards. "Listen carefully to me. Are you listening?"

He looked at her and said yes.

"If she calls, if you hear anything from her at all, please give her my name and my number and tell her I want to talk to her. Will you do that?"

He took the card and nodded. "Yeah, sure."

She finished her Coke and prepared to leave. He looked at her with his dull, glassy eyes.

"Hey, you doin' anything tonight?" he asked her.

"If you hear from Susan, call me. We'll have plenty to talk about then."

He looked at her card again. "Yeah, sure."

~~Bernice fulfilled her reason for even com~~

Later, A few moments, Bernice was back at the filling station just in time to see Marshall start the car up. The old and bent station owner was looking at the engine and shaking his head.

"Hey, that did it!" Marshall shouted from behind the wheel.

"Heck, I didn't do a thing!" said the old man.

High above the filling station, ~~Guilo~~ Nathan soared skyward to join ~~Tal~~ Armoth, his sword ~~back in its sheath~~ retreated. "Done," he said.

"And now it's off to New York," said ~~Tal~~. well see how the Captain & Guilo succeed in New York."

~~Like projectiles out of a slingshot, the two of them streaked away~~ The Buick started out again, and Nathan and Armoth followed behind and above it like two kites on strings.

~~until the miles swallowed them out of sight in a mere instant.~~

June 26, Sunday

The morning service at Ashton Community Church went well, and seemed so different for some very obvious reasons: a lot of the old faces were gone and many new faces had taken their place. The Colemans were there again, all smiles and encouragement from their place toward the back; Grandma Edith Duster was there, having regained her health and strength from the thrill of spiritual battle if from no other reason.

Hank started the Sunday morning service with a good rousing song, one Mary had a particularly good flair in performing on the piano. Both of them were in very good spirits and feeling very encouraged; it had to be the approaching sounds of battle, the sense that God in His infinite wisdom was indeed working out a very mighty and effective plan for re-establishing his kingdom in the town of Ashton. Victories large and small seemed to be occuring on every hand; Significant developments were being seen in the making, and Hank knew it had to be the hand of God. For one thing, this morning he would be ministering to an almost entirely new congregation, or at least it sure felt like it. Many of the old dissenters had dropped out of the church and taken their embittering presence with them, and the whole mood and spirit of the place had raised several notches just because of their absence. Sure, Alf Brummel, Gordon Mayer, and Sam Turner were still hovering around, brooding and counselling together like some kind of hit squad, but none of them were here in the service this morning while a lot of new, fresh faces were. Buck Stone was there, and his example had been followed by fifteen other people consisting of some married couples, some singles, some students. Grandma Duster was there, as strong and healthy as ever and ready for a spiritual fight; John and Patty Coleman were there again, and John couldn't keep from grinning in his joy and excitement; Andy and June Forsythe were there again, alert and anticipative.

Next to Andy & June, looking just a little sheepish, was Ron Forsythe, their son, along with Ron's girlfriend, a short and heavily make-upped sophomore.

Hank had to choke down some very strong emotion when he saw the Forsythes come in accompanied by their son. It was a miracle, a genuine act of grace by the living God. Hank would have shouted hallelujah right there, but he sure didn't want to scare the young fellow away; this could be one of those kid gloves cases.

After the first song was over, Hank figured he may as well address the situation now before him.

"Well," he said informally, "I don't know whether to call all you people visitors or refugees or what!"

They all laughed and exchanged friendly glances.

Hank continued, "Why don't we just take a moment here to introduce ourselves? I guess you probably know who I am, I'm Hank Busche, the pastor, and this flower sitting at the piano is my dear wife, Mary..." Mary stood quickly, just halfway, then sat down again. "Why don't we go around the room here and tell everybody who we are..."

And the first Roll Call of the Remnant took place as angels and demons watched; Krioni and Triskal stood at their posts right beside Hank and Mary while Signa and his squad that now numbered ten kept a hedge about the building. The only demons that had managed to enter had come in with their human hosts, and now they sat here and there in the congregation, brooding and witnessing this horrible development. Scion stood near the back like a hen watching over its brood, and Seth stood near Buck Stone and the group that had come with him. Outside, Lucius was carrying on a bitter argument with Signa, but knew better not to push the matter too far - Hank Busche was bad enough, but now he had a whole church full of such praying saints, and the heavenly warriors were enjoying their first real advantage. Lucius finally ordered his demons to remain outside and hear what they could.

There was power in this place today, and everyone could feel it grow right along with the jubilation as each new person stood ~~to his or her feet~~ and introduced himself. To Hank, it seemed just like the gathering of a special army.

"Ralph Metzer, sophomore at Whitmore..."

Use the names Buck used in #39

"Judy Kemp, sophomore at Whitmore..."

"Greg and Eva Smith, friends of Buck Stone.

"Bill and Betty Jones. We run the Whatnot Shop over on ~~sixth~~ eighth street..."

"Mike Stewart. I live with the Joneses and I work out at the mill..."

~~"Andy Forsythe. Praise the Lord!"~~ "June

"Buck Stone, evangelist. I want to get to know all of you..."

"Cal and Ginger Barton. We're still new in town.

"Cecil and Miriam Cooper, and we're sure glad to see you all here..."

"Ben Squires. I'm the guy who brings you your mail if you life on the west side..."

"Tom ~~Harris~~ Jenning, and this is my wife Mabel. ~~Welcome to~~ all of you and praise the Lord!"

"Chet Neal. I work at the filling station.

"Greg and Nancy Jenning. I teach and she's a writer.

"Andy Forsythe, and Praise the Lord!"

"June Forsythe, and amen to that."

Ron stood to his feet, put his hands in his pockets and looked at the floor a lot as he said, "I'm...I'm Ron Forsythe, and this here is Cynthia, and...I've kind of been a friend of Buck Stone, and I met the pastor at The Cave, and..." His voice cracked with emotion. "I just want to thank you people for praying for me and for caring..." He stood there for a moment, looking at the floor while tears welled up in his eyes.

June, his mother, stood beside him and addressed the group on his behalf. "Ron wants you all to know that he and Cynthia gave their hearts to Jesus last night."

Everyone ~~laughed and~~ smiled and ~~xxxxxxx~~ chuckled with delight and encouragement and that loosened Ron up enough to say, "Yeah, and we flushed all our drugs down the toilet!"

That brought the house down.

With increased joy + fervor, the Roll Call continued.

Outside, ~~And~~ the demons scattered like enraged bats. ~~Somewhere,~~ Wherever he was now lurking, Rafar must ~~know~~ about this.

Outside, the demons listened with great alarm and hissed exclamations of foreboding.

"Rafar must know of this!" one said.

Lucius, his wings half unfurled just to keep ~~them~~ his fussing ranks from pestering him, stood still and brooded.

One little demon hovered about his head and cried out, "What shall we do, Master Lucius? Shall we find Rafar?"

"Back to whatever you were doing!" he hissed back. "Let me see to informing Ba-al Rafar myself!"

They gathered around him, wanting to hear his next order. Lately, it seemed he had ~~spoken~~ so very little.

"What are you all staring at?" he shrieked. "Go, do mischief! Let me worry about these petty little saints!"

They flurried away in all directions, and Lucius stood ~~in~~ in his place outside the church window.

Tell Rafar indeed! Let Rafar ask! Let Rafar humble himself enough to even care to ask. Lucius would not be his lackey.

June 28, Tuesday

FIRST STRONGMAN INVASION:
TIGHTPAGE:

Tal and Guilo are able to prepare the window without the demons being around yet...they locate the phone booth...all is ready...

That night, they wait for Susan to make her move; it's going to be tight. Two demons guard that side of building. Guilo must lure them away, does so. Tal calls to Susan and she sneaks through the window...he helps her, prompts her which way to the phone booth...Guilo has a real dogfight with the demons and continues to tease them.

Susan makes her call, raises Weed while Tal keeps watch. It might be good to have someone else using the phone booth just when Susan gets there. Tal makes sure the person has to go to be bathroom really bad and leave.

Susan runs back for the restaurant, but Tal sees some more demons, about a dozen have come to fill in the gap. Guilo has not returned. Tal makes his big streak across the demons and puts them all out of commission. Guilo swoops in just in time to help Susan back through the window. Tal and Guilo are gone before any demons really know what has happened, chased away by the demon guards.

It was a nice part of New York City, an area where things were more tailored for the elite and discerning; the shops, boutiques and restaurants were the exclusive kind, the hotels quite lavish. Carefully groomed flowering trees grew in round, stucco planters along the sidewalks and maintenance workers kept the streets and walks spotless.

Among the hurried shoppers and browsers crowding the district that day were two very large men in tan tunics, strolling the sidewalk and looking here and there.

"The Gibson Hotel," Tal read on the front of an old, classy-looking stone building that towered thirty stories above them.

"I see no activity," said Guilo.

"It's early yet. They'll be along. Let's be quick about this."

The two of them slipped through the big front doors and into the hotel lobby. People passed on all sides of them, and sometimes right through them, but that, of course, was of no consequence. Within moments they had checked the schedule at the desk for the hotel's banquet facilities and verified that the Grand Ballroom was reserved for the Universal Consciousness Society that night.

"The General's ~~snoops~~ ~~have been busy~~ information was right," Tal commented with pleasure.

They hurried down a long, thickly carpeted hallway past a barbershop,

beauty salon, shoeshine and gift shop, and at length came to two huge oak doors with lavishly wrought brass handles. They passed through the doors and found themselves in the Grand Ballroom, now filled with dining tables adorned with crystal place settings and white linen tablecloths with one lone, long-stemmed rose in a bud vase at every table. The hotel caterers were scurrying among the tables making final preparations, setting out the artfully folded napkins and wine glasses. At the front of the room was the head table. They checked the placemarks. One place toward the end of the table was marked "Kaseph, Omni Corp." An exit door was nearby, just in back of the table and off to the side.

They went through that exit door and looked right and left. Down the hall to the left and toward the back of the hotel they found the ladies' lounge. They passed a few women primping at the mirrors and found what they were after: the very last stall, designated for use by the handicapped. It was built against the rear wall of the hotel, and just above it was a window large enough for a limber human being to crawl through. Tal reached up, and broke the lock and tested the window to make sure it would open and close easily. Guilo passed quickly through the wall and out into the alley where he found a large dumpster and, with incredible ease, moved it several feet to where it made sure ~~a large dumpster~~ was situated below the window, ~~with a few handily stairstepped crates alongside it.~~

He then found some handy crates and garbage cans that he arranged in a very handy stairstepped fashion against the dumpster.

Tal joined him and the two of them went up the alley to the street. Down one block was a phone booth. They were there in an instant. Tal picked up the receiver and made sure everything was functioning.

"Here they come!" Guilo hissed, and they leaped through the wall of a department store and peered out a window just as a series of long, black limousines made their way in an ominous parade down the street toward the hotel. Inside the limousines were dignitaries and other VIP's

from many different nations and races, and within and on top of each limousine were demons, large, black, warty and fierce, their yellow eyes darting in every direction, looking warily for any trouble.

Tal and Guilo watched with fascination as vehicle after vehicle passed by. In the sky overhead, other demons began to flock to the hotel like swallows, their black, WINGED outlines silhouetted against the reddening evening sky.

"A significant gathering, Captain," said Guilo.

Tal nodded and continued watching. Amid the limousines were many taxis as well, also carrying a vast cross-section of humanity: Orientals, Africans, Europeans, Westerners, Arabians, people of great power, esteem and dignity from all over the worlds, as written in the scriptures

"The Kings of the Earth," Tal observed, "being made drunk with the wine of the great harlot's immorality."

"Babylon the Great," said Guilo. "The Great Harlot Arising at last."

"Yes! Universal Consciousness! A World Religion, the doctrine of demons spreading among all the nations! Babylon revived right before the end of the age."

"Hence the return of the Prince of Babylon, Rafar!"

"Of course. And that explains why we were called to confront him."

Guilo only winced at that. "My Captain, our last battle with Rafar is not a pleasant memory!"

"Not a pleasant expectation."

"Nevertheless, prepare yourself!"

"Do you expect him here?"

"No. This gathering is nothing to him; it is only a party before the real battle, and the real battle is slated for the town of Ashton."

Tal and Guilo remained where they were, watching the gathering forces of mankind and of satanic evil converge on the Gibson Hotel for that evening's banquet. They kept looking for the one key person for the evening: Susan Jacobson, Alexander Kaseph's Maidservant.

It wasn't long before they finally spotted her. She arrived in a very fancy Lincoln Continental, most likely Kaspph's private vehicle, driven by a hired chauffeur. She was accompanied by two escorts sitting in the back seat on either side of her.

"She'll be closely watched," said Tal. "Come on, we need a better look."

They stalked quickly through the department store, through walls, displays and people, then ducked under the street and came up inside the restaurant right across from the hotel's main door. All around them, well-dressed people sat at quiet, candlelit tables eating expensive French cuisine and visiting. They hurried to a front window right next to an older couple enjoying seafood and wine and watched as the Linnoln carrying Susan pulled up in front of the hotel.

Susan's door was opened by the redcoated doorman. One escort got out, and extended his hand to help her disembark; she got out and was immediately joined by the other escort. The two escorts were dressed in tuxedoes and very handsome, but also very intimidating. They were keeping very close to her. Susan was wearing a very loose fitting evening gown that draped her body very stunningly and cascaded down to her feet. ~~Guilo thought of that small bathroom window.~~

Guilo had to ask, "Are her plans the same as ours?"

Tal answered assuredly, "The General has yet to misguess."

Guilo only shook his head in apprehension.

"To the alley," said Tal.

They moved along under the cracked cobbled alley and surfaced to a hiding place behind a fire escape. ~~There, with peering eyes, they sized up the strength of eleven demon sentries that had positioned themselves in the alley.~~

~~It was now very dark in the alley~~

Night had fallen, and it was now very dark in the alley. From their vantage point they could count eleven pairs of shifting, yellow eyes evenly spaced along the alley and against the hotel.

"The sentries are all around the place, about a hundred," said Tal.

"Under better circumstances, a mere handful," Guilo muttered.

"You need only concern yourself with these eleven."

Guilo ~~placed his hand on his sword~~ took his sword in his hand. He could feel ~~xxxxxx~~ the prayers of the local saints surging through him; ~~xxxxx~~ the power was limited, but it was there.

"It will be difficult," he said. "The prayer cover is limited."

"You don't have to ~~fight~~ defeat them," answered Tal. "Just get them to chase after you. We need the alley clear for just a few moments."

They waited. The air in the alley was still and dank. The demons moved very little, remaining at their posts, mumbling back and forth in different languages, ~~little clouds of yellow vapor linking them together with meandering, entwining layers.~~ their sulpurous breath forming a strange, meandering ribbon of yellow vapor that hung the length of the alley like a putrid river floating in midair. Tal and Guilo could feel themselves getting more and ~~more tense with each passing second.~~ like ever-tightening springs. Inside, the banquet must be in ~~xxx~~ progress by now. At any time, Susan could excuse herself from the table.

More time passed. Then, both Tal and Guilo could feel the prompting of the Spirit. Tal looked at Guilo and Guilo nodded. She was on her way. They watched the window. The light from the ladies' lounge shone brightly through it; they could just barely hear the sound of the door opening and closing as patrons came and went.

The door opened. High heels clicked on the tile floor, moving toward the window. The demons began to ~~stir~~ a little, muttering among themselves. The door to the last stall swung open. Guilo's hand ~~went to~~ gripped his sword. he

began to breathe deeply, his big torso heaving in and out, the power of God and of the prayers of the saints coursing through him. Guilo and Tal's eyes were riveted on the window. The demons were becoming more alert, their yellow eyes were wide open and darting back and forth. They were talking louder.

The shadow of a woman's head suddenly appeared on the window. A woman's hand. She was reaching for the latch.

Tal touched Guilo on the shoulder and Guilo instantly dropped into the ground. Only a fraction of a second passed.

"YAHAAAAA!" came the sudden, deafening warcry from Guilo's powerful lungs, and as the whole alley instantly exploded in a blinding flash of white light as Guilo shot up out of the ground, his sword flashing and shimmering, waving, tracing brilliant arcs in the air. The demons jumped about five feet, hooting and shrieking in terror, but recovered immediately and drew their swords. The alley echoed with the metallic ring and the red glow of their blades danced like comets on the high brick walls.

Guilo stood tall and strong, his whole frame a fireball, and he laughed with a bellowed out a laugh that shook the ground. "Now, you black lizards, I'll test your mettle!"

A big spirit on the end shrieked out an order, and all eleven demons converged on Guilo like starving predators, their swords flashing and their fangs bared. Guilo shot straight up out of their midst like a slippery bar of soap and added a colorful spin as he went, throwing light everywhere in colorful spirals. The demons unfurled their wings with a sound like an explosion and shot up after him. As Tal watched, Guilo looped and corkscrewed all over the sky like a loose balloon, laughing, taunting and teasing, staying just out of their reach. The demons were in a blind rage by now.

The alley was empty. The window was opening. Tal was beneath the window in an instant, unglorified and concealed in the darkness. He grabbed

Susan the moment her hand came through the window and helped her so much she practically shot through the window on his strength alone. She was dressed in a simple blouse and jeans and had small slippers on her feet. From the neck up she was still gorgeous - from the neck down she was ready for running down dark alleys.

Tal helped her find her way down off the dumpster and then prodded her up the alley and out to the street. She ran like the wind, in a terrible and desperate hurry. She looked this way and that, then spotted the phone booth. She took off for it running. Tal followed her, trying to stay as concealed as possible. He looked back over his shoulder; ~~no general alarm had sounded among the other demons, everything seemed undisturbed.~~ Guiko's diversion had worked: for now, Gaio was the main problem for the demons and their attention was far from this one woman running frantically.

Susan let out an anguished moan. Someone else was in the phone booth, a woman with lots of time and lots of children ~~xxxxxx~~ on the other end, apparently. Tal moved in to speed the woman up somehow.

Some demons suddenly appeared high above the street. Tal ducked under the sidewalk. Susan stood panting outside the phone booth, desperately wishing the woman would hang up and leave. Tal emerged behind a small newstand and watched as the demons glided down to the front of the hotel and joined the other sentries.

"Excuse me," said Susan, almost crying, "Please let me use the phone!"

The woman ignored her snootily and kept yakking to her children, "All right, Benjamin, now you do like your Mommy says. Now let me talk to Crystal."

~~Then something happened Tal had not anticipated.~~ Susan cried out to God, "Dear God, please get her off that phone!"

~~That was enough. The Spirit of God interceded.~~ The coast was suddenly ~~clear~~

The coast was clear. Tal never liked doing this kind of tactic, but right now it was the only thing he could think of that would not attract attention. He slipped up beside the woman, touched her and greatly accelerated her bodily functions. She at once grew alarmed.

She at once grew alarmed. "Crystal, Crystal honey, Mommy has to go. I'll talk to you later!" She bolted out of the phone booth and raced for a ladees' room.

Susan leaped into the booth and slammed the door behind her. She took a pile of coins from her jeans pocket, dialed the operator and put through a long distance call.

Somewhere between Ashton and the little roadside of Baker, in a rundown warehouse refashioned into low-rent apartments, Kevin Weed was awakened from an exhausted and drunken sleep by the ringing of his phone. He rolled over on his mattress and lifted the receiver.

"Yeah, who's this?" he asked.

"Is this Kevin?" came the desperate voice on the other end.

Kevin perked up a little. It was a woman's voice. "Yeah, that's me. Who's this?"

In the phone booth, Susan looked up and down the street fearfully as she said, "Kevin, this is Susan." Susan Jacobson.

Kevin was beginning to wonder about all this. "Hey, what do you want with me anyway?"

"I need your help, Kevin. I don't have much time. There isn't much time."

~~"Yeah, okay."~~ "Time for what?" he asked very dully.

"Please listen. Write it down if you have to."

"I don't got a pencil."

"Then just listen. Now you know about the Ashton Clarion? The Newspaper in Ashton?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know about it."

"Bernice Krueger works there. She's the sister of my old roommate, Pat, the one who committed suicide."

Kevin was really getting bowled over by The coincidences that were really suddenly piling up. "Oh, man...what's going on around here?"

"Kevin, will you do something for me? Will you get ahold of Bernice Krueger at the Clarion and...Kevin?"

"Yeah, I'm listening."

"Kevin, I'm in trouble. and I need your help. and I need Bernice Krueger's help. Please Tell her all about Alexander Kaseph, everything you know."

Kevin was nonplused. "What??"

"Tell her what happened, you know, between us, with Kaseph, the whole thing. Tell her what Kaseph's up to."

"I don't get this."

"I don't have time to explain. But let her know I have some very important information about her sister Pat. I'll try to reach her but I'm afraid the Clarion phone might be bugged. Kevin, I need you to be there to answer the phone, to..." Susan was frustrated, full of emotion, unable to select the right words. There was just too much to say and too little time.

"You're not making a whole lot of sense," Kevin muttered. "You on something?"

"Just do it, Kevin, please! I'll call you again as soon as I can, or I'll write, or do something, but please call Bernice Krueger and tell her everything you know about Kaseph and about me. Tell her it was me she saw at the carnival."

"How'm I supposed to remember all this stuff?"

"Please do it. I've got to go! Good-bye!"

Susan hung up the phone and dashed out of the booth. Tal followed her, and ducked inside the buildings as much as he could.

He reached the alley a few moments ahead of her to check it out.

Trouble! Four more sentries had moved in to take the place of the original eleven, and they were fully alert. There was no way of knowing where Guilo and the eleven might be. Tal looked behind him. Susan was running full speed for the alley.

Tal dove headfirst through the pavement and penetrated deep under the city, glorifying, gaining speed, bringing forth his big silver sword. The power of God was increasing now; the saints must be praying somewhere. He could feel it. He only had seconds and he knew it. He checked his bearings, made a wide subterranean sweep away from the hotel and then, over a mile away, he circled back, gaining speed, gaining speed, gaining speed, shining light, building power, faster, faster, faster, his sword a blinding lightning bolt, his eyes like fire, the earth a blur around him, the roar of the passing clay, boulders, pipe and stone like a freight train. ~~all around him.~~ He held the sword crossways, the glimmering tip ready for that infinitesimal one moment.

~~The moment was coming. Faster, faster, streaking, roaring, shining, gaining speed, gaining speed, gaining speed.~~

Quicker than a thought, like the explosion of a missle, a brilliant streak of light burst from the ground right across the street from the alley and seemed to cut space in half as it pierced through the alley and right across the eyes of all four demons, ~~vanishing instantly back into the ground.~~ The demons, stunned and blinded, fell to the ground, stumbled about, tried to find each other. The streak of light vanished back into the ground as quickly as it came.

Susan came around the corner and into the alley, heading for the window.

Tal cupped his wings ~~with a boom~~ and braked himself. He had to get back to help her through that window before any demons could recover and sound an alarm. He snapped his wings into a violent forward rush and doubled back.

Susan clambered up the crates and cans and onto the dumpster. The demons

started to regain their vision and were rubbing their eyes. Tal emerged behind the fire escape, trying to judge the remaining time.

Good! Guilo made it back, just in time. He dropped like a hawk into the alley, grabbed Susan and thrust her through the window in an instant, holding her up so she would not tumble to the floor inside. Guilo closed the window himself.

Tal flew out to meet Guilo. "One more time," he shouted.

Nothing more needed to be said. The four sentries had recovered and were pouncing on them, the other eleven were just returning, hot on Guilo's trail. Tal and Guilo shot into the air and streaked away, chased by a flock of growling demons. ~~chugging out their hot, red and yellow breath.~~

Tal and Guilo flew a course high over the city and kept their speed just slow enough to keep the demons encouraged. They headed west, off into the dark night sky, trailing brilliant white streaks behind them. ~~and the demons followed for a few hundred miles until Tal said, "Enough," and the two heavenly warriors suddenly shot like bullets into the darkness and out of sight~~

The demons were tenacious in their pursuit for hundreds of miles, but eventually Tal looked back and found that they had given up the chase and returned to the city. Tal and Guilo picked up speed and headed back for Ashton.

Susan hurriedly rolled up the legs of her jeans, took her evening gown from its hook in the stall and quickly resumed her proper appearance for the banquet. She removed the slippers and put them in her handbag, slipped on her dress shoes, then opened the stall door and came out.

A man's voice outside the lounge door called, "Susan, they're waiting for you! ~~you'll be missed.~~"

She checked her appearance in the mirror, combed her hair, tried to calm her breathing. "Hasty, hasty," she teased back at the man ~~waiting outside.~~

With feminine charm and ladylike dignity she finally emerged into the hallway and took the arm of the escort who had accompanied her. He escorted her back to the Grand Ballroom and to her seat at the head table, giving the other escort a reassuring nod.

June 29, Wednesday

Tightpage: Open with Marshall at Carmen's desk going over some things with her. While they sit there (Carmen sits, Marshall stands....) Carmen is shown to be handling many different items in the office...Tom the paste-up man presents his scribbled copy, she prepares to proofread it, gives Marshall a typed copy of something else, several phone messages and other items of agenda. Finally, Marshall goes to the coffee machine and gets his cup of coffee, noting that the cord has been found. He pours two cups, returns to his office.

Items for Weed to discuss: What they already know: That Susan was Pat's roommate, that she is the one seen at the carnival, that Weed and Susan were once lovers.

Things Weed will add: Susan got involved with Kaseph through the classes Langstrat was teaching....Pat tried to interfere, went crazy. Kaseph was in Ashton quite a while, dealing inreal estate, looking for property and investments...Susan began to keep secrets from Weed, began to align with the Inner Circle group...finally he couldn't even communicate with her anymore. The Evergreen in Baker a favorite hangout. Susan afraid the Clarion phone would be bugged, that's one reason she called Weed. Kaseph a part of the Inner Circle....the connection made between Weed's info and the Universal Mind Group.

Weed's history

Marshall was on his way to get some coffee but had to stop for a quick conference with Carmen, the new office girl.

The Clarion office was finally recovering a nice, healthy efficiency Marshall liked to see, and the new girl, Carmen, had a lot to do with it. In less than a week she had taken the old bull by his horns and had filled more than Edie's shoes, reestablishing a tight office routine.

It was the day after the Tuesday edition came out, but already the paper was in full swing, heading for the Friday edition. Marshall had stopped by Carmen's desk on his way to the coffee machine.

Carmen handed him some fresh copy and said, "This is part one of Tom's article..."

Marshall nodded. "Yeah, the thing on the fire department..."

"I've broken it down into three headings, Staff, History and Goals, and figured we could run it in three parts. Tom already has it slotted for the next two paste-ups and thinks he can bump something for the third."

Marshall was pleased. "Yeah, go with it, I like it. I'm glad you can read Tom's writing."

They continued their quick conference. Carmen had already proofread the bulk of the material for Friday ~~and was halfway through prpparing the~~ copy for ~~XXXXXXX~~ George the typesetter. ~~She had gone through the books~~ and balanced all the accounts. She planned ~~on helping Tom with the~~ paste-up tomorrow. The negatives for the ~~Sportsman's Club layout were~~ ready.

Marshall shook his head with happy ~~a~~mazement. "Glad to have you aboard."

Carmen smiled. "Thank you, sir."

Marshall went to the coffeemaker and poured two cups of coffee. It was just then that it dawned on him: Carmen had found the cord to this fool machine! It was working again!

He took the two cups back toward his office and gave her a smile of approval as he passed her desk. The location of her desk had been her only request on the job. She'd asked if it could be moved to a location right outside Marshall's office door, and Marshall was happy to comply. Now all he had to do was ~~crack his door open~~ turn and holler and she would spring into action to do his bidding. It was a nice arrangement.

Marshall went into his office, set his cup of coffee on his desk and then offered the other cup to the long-haired, slightly dazed man sitting there in the corner. Bernice sat in a chair she had brought in and already had her own cup of coffee.

"Now where were we?" Marshall asked, sitting at his desk.

~~"Better close the door," Bernice reminded him.~~

~~He reached over and pushed the door shut, closing out the bustle of the office and the tack-tacking of Carmen's typewriter.~~ closed, shutting out

Kevin Weed rubbed his face, took a sip of the coffee, and tried to pick up his thoughts again, looking around the floor as if he had dropped them down there somewhere.

Marshall prompted, "Okay, let me at least make sure I've got this straight: Now you used to be the...male acquaintance...of this Susan, and

she used to be the roommate of Pat Krueger, Bernice' sister. Have I got that right?"

Weed nodded. "Yeah, yeah, that's right."

"So what was she doing at the carnival?"

"Beats me. Like I said, she just came up behind me and said hi, and I wasn't even looking for her. I couldn't believe it was her, you know?"

"But she got your phone number and then she called you last night..."

"Yeah, all tripped out, shook up. It was wild. She didn't make a lot of sense."

Marshall looked at both Weed and Bernice and asked, "And this is the same ghosty looking woman you photographed that night?"

Bernice was convinced. "The descriptions Kevin gives me matches the woman I saw perfectly, and also that one older man who was with her."

Kevin said the name as if it tasted bad. "Yeah, Kaseph."

"All right," and Marshall made a list in his mind as he said, "so let's talk about this Kaseph first, then we'll talk about Susan, and then we'll talk about Pat."

Bernice had her notepad ready. "What can you tell us about Kaseph? What's Kaseph's full name, any idea?"

Weed strained his brain. "Alex...Alan...Alexander...something like that."

"But it starts with A."

"Yeah, right."

Marshall asked, "What is he?"

Weed answered, "Susan's new boyfriend, the guy she dumped me for."

Marshall tried to be more specific. "So what does he do? Where does he work?"

Weed shook his head. "I don't know. He's got bucks, though. He's

a real wheeler-dealer. When I first heard about him he was hanging around Ashton and the college and talking about buying property and stuff. Man, the guy was loaded and he liked everybody to know it too."

Then he remembered, "Oh, and Susan said he's trying to take over the town..."

Bernice asked, "So where ~~does he live~~ is he from?"

"What town? This one?"

"Back east, maybe New York. I think he's the big city type."

"I guess..."

Marshall told Bernice, "Make a note for me to call Al Easeley Lesley at the Times. He might be able to track this guy down if he's in New York."

Bernice made the note. Marshall asked Weed, "What else do you know about him?"

"He's weird, man. He's into weird stuff."

Marshall was getting impatient. "C'mon, try harder."

Weed stirred and fidgeted in his chair, trying to get comfortable about talking. "Well, you know, he was like a guru, or a witch doctor, or some kind of far-out ooga-booga man, and he got Susan into all that stuff."

Bernice prodded, "Are you talking about Eastern mysticism?"

"Yeah..."

"Witchcraft? Psychic ~~Phenomena~~ Phenomena?"

"Yeah..."

"Pagan religions, meditation?"

"Yeah, yeah, all that stuff. He was into all that stuff, he and that professor lady ~~at Whitmore~~ at the college... what's-her-name..."

Marshall ~~slapped his desk as hard as the revelation had slapped him.~~ was sick of the name.

"Langstrat!"

Weed's face brightened with recollection. "Yeah, that was her name. I think she's still there at the college, I don't know."

"Were Kaseph and Langstrat associated? Were they friends?"

"Yeah, sure. They were teaching some night classes together, I think, the ones that Susan was going to. Kaseph was kind of a special guest star or something. He really had everybody wowed." I thought he was spooky."

"All right, so Susan was attending these classes..."

"And she got crazy, and I mean crazy. Man, she couldn't have been on a higher trip with mescaline. I couldn't even talk to her anymore. She was always way out in space somewhere."

~~Sandy, Marshall thought.~~

Weed kept talking, starting to roll a little on his own. "That's what really started to torque me, was how she and the rest of that bunch started keeping secrets and talking in codes and not letting me in on what they were talking about. Susan just kept telling me I wasn't enlightened and wouldn't understand. Man, she just gave it all to that Kaseph guy and he took her, I mean he really took her. He owns her now. She's gone. She's had it."

"And was Langstrat mixed up in all this?"

"Oh yeah, but Kaseph was the real heavy. He was the guru, you know. Langstrat was his puppy dog."

Yes, thought Marshall, and a glance from Bernice told him she was thinking the same thing: Kaseph, Susan, Brummel and Young, all together at the carnival, resorting to false arrest and destruction of Bernice' film to keep their little confederacy a secret; XXXXXXXXXX the mysterious Inner Circle of VIP's all under Langstrat's wing, It all fit.

and all very secretive about it. Eldon Strachan's trouble w/ the college regents.

Bernice said, "And now Susan gets your phone number and calls you after all this time."

"And she was scared," said Weed. "She's in trouble, ~~I guess~~. She said I was supposed to get in touch with you guys and tell you what I knew, ~~and she said she had some information on Pat.~~"

~~Bernice was longing to know. "Did she say what kind of information?"~~

~~"No, nothing. But she wants to get ahold of you."~~

"Well why doesn't she just call?"

That question helped Weed to remember something. "Oh, yeah, she thinks your phone might be bugged."

Marshall and Bernice were silent for a moment. That was a comment they didn't know how seriously to take.

Weed added, "I guess she called me to be a go-between, to tip you guys off," Marshall ventured, "Like you're the only one she has left to trust?" Weed only shrugged.

Bernice asked, "Well what do you know about Pat? Did Susan ever tell you anything while you were still going together?"

"Nothing big. Pat was just...just around, you know? I'd pick up / Susan at the dorm and sometimes Pat would be there doing something else, and I'd see her and say hi, just stuff like that."

Marshall thought of the question and didn't wait for Bernice to think of it. "Was Pat involved in any of these classes or with any of these people?" He saw Bernice look at him with a stunned look of realization.

"You mean, like Kaseph and that bunch?"

"Yeah."

"Man..." Weed started remembering some things again. "She stuck her neck out, I mean, she got in the way. Her and Susan had a real fight once about the stuff Susan was getting into, and Pat was trying to talk her out of it." Weed's eyes brightened as he had more recollections. "Yeah, I talked to Pat once, we talked about what Susan was getting into and Pat was really shook up about it, just like I was. Pat and Susan really had some fights about it until Susan finally moved out of the dorm and ran off with Kaseph...boy, she dropped out of her classes and everything."

"Did Pat make any enemies?"

Weed stared for a minute and then said, "I don't know. I think she may have joined them finally. I'm not sure. I mean, for a while she was trying to talk Susan out of running off with this Kaseph guy, and trying to get the low-down on him and snooping around, and

INSERT

One of Weed's most painful undertakings was trying to remember things. "Uh...she and Pat were good friends, for a while, anyway. But you know, Susan left us all out in the cold when she started following after the Kaseph bunch. She kinda pushed me off, and pushed Pat off too. They didn't get along too well after that, and then I remember that Susan didn't have much nice to say about Pat anymore. She kept saying how Pat was...heh...just like me, trying to get in the way, not enlightened, dragging her feet."

Marshall thought of the question and didn't ask for Bernice to ask it. "So, would you say that this Kaseph bunch may have regarded Pat as an enemy?"

INSERT TWO

Weed kept remembering new things that had been buried under the years and the alcohol. "Uh...maybe yeah...yeah, maybe she did."

"Okay, how do you know?"

"It was...I think it was after Susan had run off with this Kaseph guy. Pat told me once she was going to check into this whole thing once and for all, and I think she may have gone to see that Professor Langstrat a few times. I didn't see that much of her after that, but...it was a while later, I did run into her, and she was sitting in a cafeteria on the campus, and she looked like she hadn't slept in days, and I asked her how she was, and she would hardly even talk to me." He kept digging up recollections. "Yeah, I asked her how her investigation was going, you know, her checking out Kaseph and Langstrat and stuff, and she said she'd quit doing anything about that... said it was really no big deal. I thought that was a little weird, she'd been so torn up about it before. Now something else was really bothering her. I asked her, 'Hey, are they coming after you now?'

and she wouldn't talk about it, she said I wouldn't understand. Then she said something about having some ...uh...instructor...some guy that was helping her out and that she was doing okay, and I got the message that she didn't want me butting in, so I just sort of left her there."

"Did her behavior seemed strange to you?" Bernice asked. "Did she seem like herself?"

"No way. Hey, if she hadn't been so against [redacted] that whole Kaseph and Langstrat bunch, I woulda thought she was one of them; she had the same kind of dopey, lost-in-space look all over her."

"When? Just when was it that you saw her like that?"

then, the next time I saw her, she was just like the rest of them were, all spacey and talking weird, but..." Weed stopped short. He had to think about it. "No, she wasn't really like them. She was worse. She was crazy, she kept talking about being followed by somebody and hearing ~~aliens and~~ voices and getting ready to die..."

Bernice was listening raptly. "When? When was she like that?"

Weed knew, but hated to say it. "Hey...just a little while before they found her dead."

"~~What did she say to you?~~ Did she seem afraid? Did she give you any indication of any enemies, anything like that?"

Weed winced and grimaced, trying to remember. "She...she wouldn't talk to me. But I saw her once after that and tried to ask her about Susan, but she acted like I was some kind of mugger or something...she hollered, 'Leave me alone, leave me alone!' and tried to pull away and then she saw it was me...and all she did was look all around and act like somebody was following her..."

"Who? Did she say who?"

"She was crazy, that's all. She'd blown her mind somehow. She was talking about beings...alien...spirits, or something like that, like she was having the D.T.'s or something. She was really tripped out. She even said a bunch of creatures were inside her, telling her to kill herself."

INSERT

Bernice looked down at her notepad and would not look up. Marshall noticed ~~she looked deathly pale and her body was getting shakey.~~ He picked up his coffee cup and held it out to her.

"Say, why don't you get me another cup of coffee, and take as long as you want?"

~~She got up without a word, grabbed the cup and went quickly out the door. He closed it behind her.~~

~~"So what have you been going all this time?" he asked Weed.~~

INSERT

Weed grimaced at the ceiling. "Oh...what was that guy's name?"

Bernice was leaning forward, hanging on his words. "There was somebody?"

It hit him. "Thomas! Some guy named Thomas!"

"Thomas! ~~Did he have a last name~~ Did she ever say his last name?"

Weed thought for a moment and shook his head. "Don't remember any last name. I never met the guy, never saw him, but he sure must have owned her. She acted like he was...really in control of her, following her all around, talking to her...maybe threatening her, I don't know. She seemed pretty afraid of him."

Bernice looked at Marshall and he gave her a raised eyebrow of encouragement. Bernice asked Weed, "This Thomas...was he that instructor ~~Bernice~~ Pat was talking about?"

Weed shrugged. "She didn't say. He could have been."

"Thomas!" Bernice whispered. She said to Weed, "Is there anything else about this Thomas? Anything at all?"

"I never saw him...she didn't say who he was or where she would meet him or...I don't know. But it was kinda strange. One minute she'd be talking like he was the greatest thing that ever happened to her, and then the next minute she'd be hiding out and saying he was following her."

~~"So she was genuinely afraid of him?" Marshall asked.~~

~~"Yeah, she was."~~

INS

Bernice got up and headed for the door. "I think we might have a college roster somewhere..." She went out and began rummaging around in the desks and shelves of the front office.

Weed fell silent. He looked tired. "I wish I could remember more."

Marshall reassured him, "You're doing fine, Kevin. Hey, it's been a while. More of it will come the more you think about it."

More of it came. Weed brightened just a little. "Uh...I don't know if this is important..."

"Consider everything important."

"I think I heard...or did I?...Well, this stuff about Pat having some new instructor...I think some of the Kaseph bunch, maybe it was Susan...they had instructors."

"But I thought Pat didn't want anything to do with that group."

"Yeah. Yeah, that's right."

Weed looked at Marshall and said very quietly, "Oh-oh."

"Don't worry about it," Marshall said.

"I said too much, right?"

"If you hadn't, she would have clawed it out of you. Pat was her sister; this is a tough strain on her."

"I hear that."

"So where do you suppose Pat got all these ideas about aliens?"

"The Kaseph and Langstrat bunch. They used to talk about things like that."

"They used to talk about aliens?"

"No, not like outer space people. More like...oh, teachers, friends, wise types from...from out there somewhere, from the past, from way above us, like they weren't human but were okay. None of it made any sense to me, and it still doesn't."

"So where did you fit into all beside your relationship with Susan?"

"Hey, I didn't want anything to do with it, man."

"Were you going to the school?"

"Yeah, Man, when all this started coming down and then Pat killed herself, hey, I got out of there fast." He looked at the floor and his went tight. "My life's been nothing but hell every since."

"You working?"

"Yeah, logging crew up above Baker." He shook his head. "I didn't think I'd ever see her again."

Marshall turned to his desk and searched for some paper. "Well, we'll have to keep in touch. Now, let me have your number."

Weed gave Marshall his number and then added, "And if I'm not there, you can probably find me at the Evergreen Tavern in Baker. I hang out there a lot."

Marshall wrote it all down. "Okay, listen. If you hear anything else from Joan you let us know, day or night." He gave Weed his card with the home phone number added.

Abruptly, Bernice came back in with the roster. ~~a cup of coffee. She handed it to Marshall. Her face was flushed, but she was in control of things again.~~

"Marshall,
"You have a call. I think it's urgent," she said. Then she turned to Weed. "Kevin, let's you and I step outside and ~~let me get your address and number.~~ go through this roster. Maybe will find that guy's full name."

~~"I just gave it to Mr. Hogan..."~~

~~"I want it too," she said, opening the door as a cue.~~ and you need mine."

Weed stepped outside with Bernice as Marshall picked up the phone.

"Hogan," he said.

"Hogan, this is Ted Harmel..."

~~Things were sure happening fast around here.~~ Marshall scrambled for a pencil. ~~He xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ scribbled hurriedly ~~as Harmel gave him instructions on where they could meet~~

"Hi, Ted. Thank you for calling."

"So you talked to Eldon..."

Harmel sighed and said,
"And Eldon talked to youXX ..."

"You're in trouble, Hogan. I'll give you one interview. ~~You may as well know all you can.~~ Got a pencil handy?"

"I'm ready. Shoot."

Bernice had just said good-bye to Weed and seen him to the door when Marshall emerged fromxx his office with a scribbled-on piece of paper in his hand.

"Okay, Bernie, we're ready for the next round."

They stood in the middle of the office looking over Marshall's notes from the phone call.

Marshall let Bernice look at the notes and again

"I'll drive out and see him tomorrow. He's still as paranoid as all get out; I'm surprised he didn't make me wear a disguise."

"Did he say anything?"

"He wouldn't, not over the phone." Marshall lowered his voice a little as he said, "He'sx another one who thinks our phone might be bugged."

"Thank God for small favors," he said

"Any luck?" he asked.

"Zilch. There are no Thomases of any kind, first or last name."

"It's still a lead, though."

"Who was that on the phone?"

Marshall produced the scrap of paper. "Thank God for small favors. That was Ted Harmel." Bernice brightened considerably and took a look at the paper as Marshall explained. "He wants to see me tomorrow. Here are the directions. It must

Marshall let Bernice look over his hard-to-read notes as he explained quickly, "He wants to see me tomorrow...here are the directions. It must be way the heck back in the toolies. The guy is still as paranoid as all get out. I'm surprised he didn't make me wear a disguise or something."

Bernice looked for other information but didn't find any. "He wouldn't say anything about all this?"

"No, not over the phone. It has to be just the two of us, in private." Marshall leaned over just a little and said, "He's another one who thinks our phone might be bugged."

"We'd better make sure it isn't."

"Okay, that'll be one of your assignments. Now's here's the rest of them."

Bernice grabbed her notepad off her desk and made her list as Marshall spoke. "Check the New York phone book - "

"I did. No A. Kaseph listed."

"Scratch that one. Next: check around with the local real estate offices. If Weed's right about Kaseph looking for property around here, some of those people might know something. And I'd check around in the commercial listings as well."

"Mm-hmm."

"While you're at it, find out what you can about whoever owns Joe's Market."

"It's not Joe?"

"And find out what happened to Joe if you can."

"And you were going to check with your friend at the Times..."

"Yeah, Lemley..." Marshall added a note to his piece of paper.

"That it?"

"That's it for now. In the meantime, let's get back to the mundane business of running this paper."

They did have some other tasks to perform, and so they got to it. In the meantime, as well as all through their meeting with Weed and following conversation, Carmen

sat at her desk busily working and acting like she hadn't heard a word ~~of it.~~

Nathan left Armoth to watch over Marshall while ~~xxxfxxw~~ Nathan flew partway and then sneaked into ~~the bottom of~~ an unused water ~~tank~~ tower in the rail yard north of town.

~~There, in the deep, echoing cannister, he conferred with Tal.~~

There, in the bottom of the deep, dark, echoing TA tank, he conferred with Tal.

"I don't like it. Obviously the enemy has planted her there," Nathan reported.

Tal took a few moments to think it over. "We'll have to leave her there for now. I prefer to let Rafar remain confident."

Nathan reminded Tal, "With those orders, there is no way we can prevent ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ her from damaging Hogan and Krueger's efforts."

"There will be some damage," Tal agreed. "

YOU WIN SOME, YOU LOSE SOME

Now you might win some
And you might lose some.
But when you get to the end,
You'll look back, my friend, and see
It all worked together for your good.

Research:

1. Where are all the various offices? The jail, the office of the DA, the County Prosecutor....what other offices are there? Get a list and location, and also a thorough job description. We need some specific powerholders. What do they do and where are they?

Advise: Check out the city of Kirkland and see how it is run. Not a bad model.

2. One thought: How's your book for depth? Are the characters coming across and three-dimensional? Be sure we get to know them more and more as the story progresses.

3. As far as Scene Seven, we haven't really gotten inside Hank yet. We know very little about him or Mary.

Outline Cards: Notes & Comments.

order of tasks: Read cards, look for holes
2. Read ~~through~~ for each problematic.

1. Must research & build ~~the~~ college sellout scandal. Lien idea?
2. Kaseph clear, evil enough?
~~3. Ben & Hank on same construction crew~~
~~4. The adultor... should be resolved. Enlarge the character.~~
~~5. Where Hanke PP I?~~
~~6. What Langstat One for?~~
~~7. We need a definite turning point where demons and H & H declare war.~~
~~8. Enough Hanke for scenes?~~
9. Re: diary: Kaseph must have a cover story for Pate' death... after all, she and Susan were close friends.
~~10. Not sure where~~
~~10. (cf 1) Does old treasurer get killed? A cover-up for his money scheme~~
11. Figure out other officials to put on Hogan's List
~~12. Hogan must ask: "What the C must Cog?~~
~~13. Development of Hanke's spiritual battle? Problems?~~
14. How does Hogan follow up on Editor's death?
~~15. Say! Hanke experience can include revival with:~~
a man seeking reconciliation & forgiveness with him. - the adulterer
a family healed and reunited
~~soul saved~~
~~a burden of prayer~~
~~a real praise fest & angels joining~~
16. I don't know if I like the "sacrifice" scenes... I don't either!
17. May want to simplify whole story re: Kaseph... no... just make the town smaller, less complicated governmentally. Check Kirkland. Draw from recent Wesleyan experiences... a local ministerial taken over and compromised.... sounds good.
18. The H-K breakup... got to get it smoother, not so "stuck in"

Show "Fun Unlimited" at beginning instead of alley scene.
Also add booths: Psychic Readings, Horoscopes, Astrologers

~~S + DIARY indicate somehow that MS is up to something — suggest one side of it.~~

Problem: Why were Dal + Krion not spotted during opener? . . . appeared as humans?
Yes, she'll need that capability.

~~Problem: demons should be mentioned as being present in town during opener.~~

~~The big meeting with the Omni Bunch can't work. Do something about it.~~

Hogan shouldn't trust Young so much . . . probably skirts the real facts re: Landy, is really after info.

~~Resolve re pay off supermarket ads~~

What happened to bumpers? H needs to follow up . . different bump tactics

~~H needs better problem instead of/during Big Meeting section.~~

~~Options: physical attack~~
~~girl frames, accuses of molestation (or H can already scare them off that because of what old editor has told him. It won't work again . . .)~~
~~phoned threats~~
~~What about Landy?~~

~~H prints what he knows, first calls everyone on list — some break, some don't.~~
~~But publisher/printer won't print it, is scared.~~
~~Calls CP, Young, city commission . . . they won't talk, won't negotiate~~

Heavy meeting: Who have you talked to? Have been harassing, asking Kate.

Possible replacement for DA OUTRAGED: ~~Young~~ Brummel calls H, is concerned, ~~several~~ several people have called, feel he's snooping. H knows better than to buy that line, asks some questions himself: Who owns your homE? Who"s the Omni Corperation? Brummel must expose the bug. Brummel keeps trying to find out who Hogan has talked to. Brummel also asks, What happened to our little agreement? H: Nothing. We both want to protect this town, don't we?

Hogan may need more to go on →

This initial assault on the Network immediately leads to the death of the old editor. They tracked him down, eliminated him. Hogan makes the connection, check up on Dean, who has disappeared, tells Kate to get out of town.