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### The Astrologer of the Fifteenth Floor

By the time he reached the office, I could see that Harrison Leong was extremely glad that Mr. Norbu hadn't chosen a location with a better view. Since the Three Quake weekend, the elevators didn't run past the Pyramid's 10<sup>th</sup> floor, and Leong had to walk the last five, and the increased tilt of the building made each set a stairs just a *little* bit harder. Leong had trained in the martial arts as a young man, but two decades of sitting behind a desk had softened his body and hardened his resolve.

Like many of the Mr. Norbu's other clients, Leong probably suspected that the office had been chosen for the usual reasons: location, location, location. This wasn't strictly true. Certainly the former Transamerica Center sat close enough to San Francisco's Financial District and Chinatown to bring in the right sort of clients and possessed excellent *feng shui*. To be honest, Mr. Norbu had chosen the pyramid for its low overhead and privacy. All astrologers desired the former. Mr. Norbu's business model demanded the latter.

The building was officially condemned following the severe thrashing by the San Andreas Fault, but thanks to an army of lawyers and insurance adjusters, no had quite figured out what to with squatters like Mr. Norbu. He continued his practice free from landlords and city bureaucrats.

From my vantage point on the ceiling, I watched Leong pause at the directory next to the defunct elevator and double-check the listing: NORBU ASTROLOGY AND INVESTIGA-

TIONS. Suite 1525. (These numbers are very auspicious, and Mr. Norbu had exchanged a larger suite on the same floor to secure them.)

After catching his breath, Leong dragged a comb through his thinning silver hair and made his way down the dimly lit hall to the office. Standing before the simple wooden door with a name plaque, Leong noticed a square of rice paper mounted to the left of the door at his eye level. (I moved the notice for each client. A nice touch, even if I do say so myself.) On the rice paper were written the following words in Mr. Norbu's precise, straight strokes: *May all beings who enter here leave behind suffering and attachment. Please remove your shoes before entering.* Looking down, Leong saw a small pair of work boots, the sort of things his 13-year-old daughter might wear.

Leong paused with his hand on the knob. His eyes caught the glint of the small crystal sphere suspended from a piece of fishing line above him. (Excellent! Not everyone noticed.) He slipped off his Italian loafers, then pushed the door open.

Norbu's office appeared, at first glance, rather ordinary. With each step, however, Leong saw something that removed this place from the usual business environment. In the far corner, Leong spied a desk containing a ridiculously outdated computer, a stack of rice paper, and an inkpot with a selection of brushes. The opposite corner lay hidden behind two tall shoji screens, positioned to catch the light from the spotless windows behind them. (Like many people, Leong wondered how Norbu cleaned the outside panes. He doesn't: it's one of my chores.) In the not-quite center of the room rested a short, beautiful teakwood table. Zabuton flanked the table, framing its contents: a steaming electric kettle, a porcelain tea set, and a single narcissus blossom.

Leong paused. His grandfather had cultivated prize-winning narcissus flowers back in China. It was strange coincidence, he thought, and like many successful Asian businessmen, he

carried a pocket full of superstition under his tailored shirts. He wavered for a moment then, and we almost lost him. But then his curiosity won out over his fear, and he sat down to wait.

I had learned about Leong's grandfather, and many other useful things, during a particularly frustrating wedding banquet that I had crashed a month before. It was so beautiful: long tables set with platters of roast beef, smoked salmon, hot breads, cold vegetables, and cases of expensive wine from a private cellar in Rutherford. As I floated there, unseen and starving, I sensed that Harrison Leong might be a suitable client. I followed him for a few weeks, listening to his secret councils and public conversations, and found him ripe. Mr. Norbu listened to my observations, then agreed to meet with Leong.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Leong," said Mr. Norbu as he stepped from behind the shoji. Leong saw a short, middle-aged Asian man, with a neat beard and sparkling eyes. He thought about standing up, but he was too tired. He settled for extending his hand.

"You're welcome, Mr. Norbu. I was... ah, interested in your services."

"Of course." Mr. Norbu returned the handshake with a firm grip and folded himself into half-lotus on the remaining zabuton. "Will you have tea, or something else? Plum wine?"

Leong gave a slight grimace. He hated plum wine. "Tea will be fine, thank you."

Mr. Norbu poured two cups and served. "I am pleased to offer traditional astrological forecasts drawn from the lunar calendar. Each is carefully researched, then drawn on rice paper or silk canvas. They may be framed, of course, although I do not recommend using glass. It encourages fingerprints."

"I see," said Leong. He took a sip of tea to gather his thoughts. "Ah, actually, I wanted to discuss your *other* services...."

"Investigations. Of course. The two services are interconnected. When I produce a forecast based on a person's birth, I look at the circumstances of his life, the patterns of his

movements, his health, and most importantly, the ripeness of his karma. In the course of this research, many useful facts present themselves.” Norbu took a sip of tea. “One item of interest is the date of transition to the next realm.”

“Really?” Harrison perked up. This was what he wanted. Or at least, what he thought he wanted. “You can predict when someone will die?”

“I have never been wrong. I have been blessed with a gift.”

I had been the recipient of Mr. Norbu’s gift. It took the form of a gentle tug on my ankle that sent me sprawling down a narrow staircase. The police ruled my tragic death an accident. Amateurs.

“I think we may be able to make an arrangement,” Leong said. “There is a man who has offered me certain business opportunities, but I don’t know his references. It would be prudent to learn what sort of man he is.”

“Most prudent,” Norbu agreed. “How detailed a report do you require?”

They composed the terms of their agreement after that, in the gentle and convoluted way that civilized men use when discussing subjects of dubious legality. Norbu poured more tea and offered almond cookies, then excused himself to fetch paper and ink to make notes. I could see Leong tensing a bit then, until Norbu assured him anything he recorded was for his own benefit, and would be burned on his altar at the end of the day.

Leong snuck several glances at the notes, and literally could not make heads or tails of the characters on the rice paper. Then again, he'd probably never seen Sanskrit. Norbu asked several questions about the subject of his investigations, filled three page with notes, then dipped his brush a final time and asked. “Do you know the exact date and place of your birth, Mr. Leong?”

Of course he did. Nevertheless, he hesitated. “May I ask...?”

“This is for your own astrological forecast. To see if you are compatible with your proposed business partner. Auspicious relationships are frequently determined by circumstances of birth.” Mr. Norbu smiled, a warm, disarming smile. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Ah, yes.” I could see that Leong was somewhat uncomfortable, but he couldn’t see any reason to disagree without causing offense. He also had the distinct impression that such offense would impact more than their business relationship. Leong gave a date and the name of a hospital in San Francisco.

Mr. Norbu wrote a series of numbers along the margin of the page. “Now, then, how soon would you like this information?”

“I will be traveling next week. Shall we say the first of the month?”

“This is my bank information in Sri Lanka,” Mr. Norbu said. He took a fresh sheet of paper and wrote two lines. “The first amount is my retainer, which you may wire to my account within the next five business days. The balance of my fee is due when you approve the report.”

Harrison took a measured swallow of tea to cover his discomfort. His heart rate and blood pressure had both spiked alarmingly. The total fee would drain all his cash reserves, almost down to the last dollar. Still, it would be worth it to be rid of the old bastard.

“Until next month, then.” He pushed himself up unsteadily, offered a handshake and a perfunctory bow. Then he left as quickly as his tired knees and dignity permitted.

Mr. Norbu cleared away the dishes and began to stretch. After working the opposing pairs of muscles in his arms, legs, torso, and neck, he composed himself in the sevenfold physical posture, with his spine straight, legs crossed in lotus, and his eyes half closed (or half open, depending on your attitude). He remained in this position for the space of 104 measured breaths, then went to his desk.

He booted his computer and connected to the building's anonymous internet link. Within a short time, he found Leong's object of interest in several business directories and genealogy services. "Most interesting," Mr. Norbu said.

"How so?" I floated near.

"Our client failed to mention that his erstwhile business partner, Ushi Chan, is actually a great uncle."

"So it's a family squabble," I commented.

"Not necessary so. Mr. Chan owns several telecommunications companies in Qinghai province that Mr. Leong wants for his own. He has already attempted a proxy takeover." He rubbed his beard and read a bit more. "Still, it shouldn't matter if his karma is ripe."

I looked over his shoulder at the monitor. "Ushi Chan lives in North Beach?"

"Yes," Mr. Norbu said, "which is fortunate, since I'm in the mood for Italian food."

He shut down the computer, then showered and dressed in the old executive bathroom down the hall. Half an hour later, he boarded a creaking fuel cell bus and rode it to Columbus Avenue and a small place that specialized in delicate gnocchi seasoned with parmesan. I followed discretely, drifting about the bus and sampling the thoughts of the other passengers. Mr. Norbu always rides the bus, or the train, or walks. He has never driven a car, nor does he desire the experience. He prefers the sight and smell of humanity to remind him of *mara*, the illusion of the world. He claims it's all part of his efforts to escape *samsara* and the wheel of rebirth.

Since he arrived during the peak hour, Mr. Norbu had to settle for a table near the kitchen at the ristorante Little South Italy. Not that he minded his location. It gave him the opportunity to strike up conversations with the serving staff, and after many demitasses of espresso, a chance to thank the chef for such an excellent meal. As it turned out, the chef, a round man with a large

mustache, happened to have a passing acquaintance with Ushi Chan's cook, since they both frequented the local farmers markets. (Sometimes I think that Mr. Norbu's entire business acumen is based on six degrees of separation.)

The sight and smell of all that food was too much for me. I fled Little South Italy and found myself a nearby tree to wait. Sometimes the minds of simple creatures like birds and domestic pets provide me with a few moments of peace. Their hungers are simple, and easily satisfied. "Possessing the body of animals is too tempting for you," Mr. Norbu has warned me numerous times. "You have to free yourself from such thinking if you're ever going to achieve enlightenment." That's easy for him to say. He doesn't spend his days surrounded by things he can't have. And he's not perfect, that's for sure. While his mental discipline is strong enough to keep me out of his thoughts, I can tell how much he likes to eat. Unlike his teachers back in Tibet, Mr. Norbu has never been content to survive off whatever falls into his begging bowl.

So I sat there for another half hour, encouraging a crow to ruin the hats of passersby, until Mr. Norbu emerged and meandered off down Grant Street. He walked like a tourist, poking his nose into every window, stopping to ask the prices of souvenirs and occasionally for directions in a truly bad broken English. Later, if anyone asked, no one would remember the little Asian man with the bright eyes.

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Since I don't sleep, I spend a lot of time waiting for Mr. Norbu. He sleeps about five hours a night, filling up a large portion of his remaining day with meditation, yoga, and calligraphy. This morning, after breakfast, he casually remarked, "I wish to begin Mr. Chan's astrology chart. Anything you can do to dispel my ignorance would be appreciated." I took my cue and headed back to North Beach, where I took up residence in Ushi Chan's household, wedged behind a jar of coffee in the pantry.

I don't work for Mr. Norbu, not, exactly. I like to think that my efforts are helpful, and they sometimes alleviate the nagging pain and hunger that drive my days. Besides, Mr. Norbu put me in this situation, and I figure he can get me out. So I sat in Chan's kitchen, sampling the words and dreams of the house for three days, until I learned what I needed to know.

The next morning, long before sunrise, Mr. Norbu woke from a light sleep, stretched and dressed against the damp coolness, and walked for an hour until he reached Mr. Chan's house. There were few people at home that day, as Chan's wife was away visiting her sister in Santa Cruz. Mr. Norbu let himself into the house, disabling the security system with the code I provided, then padded through the kitchen, a happy smile on his face. He made his way upstairs, his slippers making no sound as he avoided the creaky sixth and ninth step.

The door to the master bedroom was unlocked, its hinges well oiled. Chan lay curled up among many pillows. Expensive, tasteless paintings hung on the walls. Mr. Norbu sat himself on the floor near the foot of the bed, and listened very carefully to the sleeping man's breath. He carefully examined the body, noting Chan's swollen hands and feet. He laid his fingertips along the radial artery of Chan's left wrist, counting the pulses and determining their nature. The slippery and wiry pulse led him to investigate a blockage in the Lung chi.

Using a set of extremely fine Japanese needles, Mr. Norbu stimulated points along the Lung meridian. He re-checked Chan's pulses and, apparently satisfied with his work, put away the needles and brought his attention to the more difficult task: weighing Chan's karma. From what I can gather, it is a subtle, almost subjective process, something closer to dowsing for water than diagnosing an ailment. There are methods, however, and Mr. Norbu's teachers had instructed him well.

I sat on the dresser, growing more bored by the minute, when I heard a noise. If Mr. Norbu noticed anything, he did not react. Concerned, I made my way downstairs, following a

series of rattles and scrapes in the kitchen. There I encountered a most unusual sight: a hungry ghost like myself. Normally, after death, beings like us find ourselves trapped in a vast desert realm, where we spend years (or longer) searching for sustenance, finding nothing. The kitchen's visitor, like myself, had somehow found a way back to the more corporeal human realm and its many temptations. He was opening cabinets at random, trying to stuff food into his long, narrow neck. As soon as he managed to swallow a crumb, he gagged and moved on to something else.

He looked terrible, a short fellow with scrawny arms and legs that didn't look capable of supporting his huge, protruding belly. His long hair was lank and greasy, his eyes sunken and touched by madness.

It was a depressing reminder of my own state.

"Get out of here," I hissed. I repeated myself in Mandarin and English. No one except Mr. Norbu could hear me, but the clatter of cans and jars might rouse one of the servants. The ghost regarded me for a brief moment, then growled and tried to open a beer by banging it against the counter.

"Hey, stop that!" I grabbed his weak hands in my own, and we wrestled for a moment, two mounds of insubstantial flesh rolling around the floor like drunken sumo. Finally, I managed to get my fingers around his tiny neck and squeeze with my meager strength. He withdrew, cursing me in some Chinese dialect I'd never heard.

By the time I finished putting things back in order, Mr. Norbu appeared at the foot of the stairs. "Is everything all right down here?" he said, quietly.

"Yes," I said. "No thanks to you."

"I have faith in your negotiation skills."

"But he didn't understand a word I said to him."

Mr. Norbu was genuinely surprised. “No?”

“No. It’s not like we all get together every year at the *Yue Lan* Festival and swap war stories.”

“No, I suppose not,” Mr. Norbu said. “Shall we go home?”

“Sure.”

Before he left, he helped himself to a red plastic kitten figurine from the kitchen table. It was the sort of good luck charm that populated most of the Chinese restaurants in the city.

I followed him out the door, waited while he re-set the security system and locked the house. The first hints of dawn were painting the streets as we made our way to one of the commuter bus stops. I caught a whiff of someone’s coffee machine as it dripped the first cup of the day. My stomach growled so loudly that it woke a cat dozing on a nearby fence.

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After Mr. Norbu had performed his Sun Salutations and 104 sets of nine-round breathing, he made himself a large pot of ginger tea and set out his calligraphy brushes. He selected two sheets of hand-pressed rice paper about the size of a table runner, then set to work. With a little flourish, he wrote out *USHI CHAN* at the top of one sheet. Then, slowing, he dipped the brush and wrote out Chan's birth information in the first column. After looking up the latitude and longitude for the hospital, Mr. Norbu checked the time against GMT, then looked up a series of figures in two books with cracked leather bindings. He manipulated these numbers on an abacus before sketching out the Chan's dominant houses. The poor guy was a Taurus born in the Year of Ox. That explained a lot. Harrison Leong, on the other hand, turned out to be a strong Pisces born in the Year of the Dragon. The two of them were fated to quarrel. Oh well.

I sat there for a long time, watching as Mr. Norbu transferred drops of ink from pot to paper, teasing forth exquisite characters with a precision and grace that would make the neurosur-

geons at Stanford envious. Since he was using standard ideograms, I was able to follow Mr. Leong's life story. Then I noticed something odd.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Yes?"

"Could you clarify something for me?"

"If I can," Mr. Norbu said. He put the final stroke on one column, blew on the paper gently, and returned the brush to its tray.

I floated near and pointed at a series of characters. "This shows that Mr. Leong will achieve great successful in his business."

"Correct."

"But his life progression is less clear."

"Also correct," said Mr. Norbu. "His *prana*, his life energy, is very strong now. If he channels that effort into his business, he will become even wealthier and wield enormous influence."

"But he won't be happy," I said.

"That would appear to the case. If his karma leads him in that direction, there is very little he can do about it, other than embrace it and learn to recognize his mistakes in the next incarnation." He pointed to a series of characters. "However, there are influences here that have yet to manifest themselves. When you first brought him to my attention, I saw that his life was approaching a critical decision point. If he is able to observe his condition without attachment, his choices will be clear and obvious. On the other hand, if he can't let go of his ego...." He opened his hands and shrugged.

He sounded almost smug, and part of me wanted to strangle him. But another, more rational part knew Mr. Norbu wasn't trying to hurt my feelings. He was simply stating the truth.

Karma didn't play favorites. I was in my present state precisely because I should be, and Mr. Leong, if he didn't watch his step, might find himself in my shoes, or worse.

I rubbed my belly and tried not to think about eating. "And what of Mr. Chan?"

"Mr. Chan has led a very fortunate life. He will surely find his way back to the realm of *Manushyas*."

Somehow, I didn't think he would find that knowledge comforting. I sat on the edge of the desk. "Why are you doing this?" I asked. It was a question that I had raised before.

"Because it needs to be done."

"Can you be a little more specific?" I said.

"Certainly," he said. "I am trying to reduce the suffering of the world."

From what I had seen, Chan wasn't actively contributing to the world's pain. In my last life, I had known thieves, corrupt officials, unethical physicians, and even a petty drug dealer who bankrolled internet-based cock fights. Their actions had definitely made a world a worse place. Somehow, I didn't see how Chan fit in with them.

"I still don't get it," I said. "Why him?"

"All sentient beings suffer," Mr. Norbu replied. "It is our nature. Existence itself is suffering."

"And you get your reward in the next life? Now you're sounding like a Christian."

He turned to face me. "Not Christian, even though Jesus was a *bodhisattva* in his own way. He preached compassion and enlightenment. He incarnated himself as a mortal, thus delaying his entrance to nirvana, in order to help others find the way.

"Let me put it this way," Mr. Norbu continued. "Mr. Chan has a belly full of ripe karma and there is a good chance he will do better in his next incarnation."

"So he's not ready for enlightenment, then?" I asked.

“Not that I can see, but then, I am an ignorant man myself.”

I snorted. “And what of Mr. Leong?”

Mr. Norbu smiled. “Mr. Leong is a man of the world, and deeply immersed in *samsara*. Now, if you'll excuse me....” He picked up his brush, stirred the ink pot, and began to write.

In other words, I thought, Leong was a long way from Buddahood.

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On the appointed day, Leong deposited his retainer in Mr. Norbu's account. Soon thereafter, Mr. Norbu completed his astrological charts and requested that I arrange a meeting. So I made my way to Leong's home. While he showered, I left this message on the bathroom's enormous steam-fogged mirror: FRIDAY 8 PM, RHYTHM METHOD. Rhythm Method is a hardcore karaoke bar in the Castro district that catered to gay Asian businessmen.

On Friday, Mr. Norbu carefully packed the astrological charts in *Quickie Delivery* shipping tubes. “Don't you worry about leaving behind fingerprints, or something?” I asked.

“Not particularly,” he replied. “According to the Homeland Security master files, my identity is something of a mystery. They believe I am a deceased school teacher in Akron, Ohio.”

“And you have no inclination to correct this gross error?”

“Since this entire existence is illusionary, it seems of little consequence. I am but a drop in the ocean, after all.” He favored me with a grin as he strapped the cardboard tubes to his back. This afternoon, he wore black shorts with many pockets, half gloves, dirty running shoes and a T-shirt imprinted with the logo of a defunct biotech company. Then I remembered something.

“It's Critical Mass day, isn't it?”

“Yes,” Mr. Norbu said, retrieving a battered but very functional racing bike from the hall closet. “The streets will be busy this evening.”

He had the gift of understatement. On the last Friday of each month, the active political wing of the Anti-Fossil Fuel coalition staged a nonviolent protest by flooding the streets with all manner of people-powered vehicles, usually during rush hour. On a dry night, like tonight, you could expect three to four thousand extra bikes, trikes, and unicycles on the pavement. Who would notice another bike messenger making his last delivery before joining the flood?

Mr. Norbu lifted his bike to his shoulder. “Are you coming?”

“Of course.”

We took the winding, earthquake-twisted fire stairs all the way to the lobby, then set off toward the Castro. We had lots of company. By the time we reached Market Street, we had gathered a few dozen protesters, including several tattooed members of *GET IT THERE YESTERDAY* delivery service. They traded glove slaps with Mr. Norbu and offered him hits of caffeine and **acetylcholine** from their plastic flasks. He accepted a small sip out of courtesy, then left the pack behind at 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue. He parked the bike in a nearby rack, deposited a few coins, and typed in a new password to hold his spot until midnight.

RHYTHM METHOD sported a plain façade, in deference to its clientele. A single tasteful neon sign over the doorway illuminated a small menu that spelled out the establishment’s legal operating hours, maximum occupancy limit, and age requirements. Aspiring crooners as young as 18 were permitted, provided they signed a narcotics waiver. I followed Mr. Norbu in and sat next to him in the large, comfortable booth. Using the booth’s keypad, he ordered a pot of tea and an ethyl alcohol blocker. He settled himself in a booth with a good view of the stage and front door.

A few regulars arrived to secure good seats and a light dinner of noodles before hitting the beer and Jack Daniels. It took most of my willpower to ignore the smells coming from the kitchen. By the time 8 o’clock, the place was full, and getting louder by the minute. Half an

hour later, our client appeared in the doorway, trying to hide his irritation. Mr. Norbu waved him over.

He stood and offered his hand. "Good evening, sir."

Mr. Leong returned the handshake and quickly slid into the booth. "Traffic is terrible this evening. The streets are full of hooligans on bicycles."

"This is a very political city," Mr. Norbu agreed. "Are you hungry? The chef makes his own udon."

Mr. Leong glanced around. "You eat here often?" he asked suspiciously.

"I find it convenient for business," Mr. Norbu said. "The noodles are a side benefit."

"Unfortunately, I have another appointment this evening, so we shall have to postpone dinner until another day," Leong said, and brought his attention back to the booth.

I snorted. His "appointment" was his biweekly date with his mistress.

"I take it from your message," Leong was saying, "that you have the, ah, completed the forecast that we discussed."

"Just so." Mr. Norbu retrieved his parcels from under the table and presented them with a respectful inclination of his head. "Here are the astrological forecasts. I regret to inform you that any business relationship with Ushi Chan will fail. Your great uncle is not in the best of health."

Mr. Leong held the messenger pack with both hands. The muscles around his eyes and jaws tensed visibly. "How... unfortunate." I almost laughed. Did he really think that Mr. Norbu wouldn't discover their relationship? Leong had apparently seen too many Hong Kong gangster movies: the crime boss raises his eyebrows, comments on the weather, and suddenly his arch rival is found face down in an alley.

He put the pack on the bench seat next to him. "I have changed my mind," he said through clenched teeth. "I will have a Shanghai beer if you don't mind."

"Certainly not," Mr. Norbu said. "I will be happy to join you." He keyed in the order.

"As you wish," Mr. Leong said. "Now tell me what you found."

The first singer of the evening, cheered on by his inebriated companions, crept up to the mike and croaked out an interesting interpretation of "New York, New York." The crowd, which generally supported show tunes, gave him an encouraging round of applause. The singer was quickly replaced by another, more talented fellow who closed his eyes and belted out a rather serious version of "Where the Streets Have No Name." Prodded on by the crowd, he stayed for a passable encore of "Bad."

Meanwhile, Mr. Norbu patiently explained the four major players of astrology: the Sun, the Moon, the Ascendant, and the ruling planet of the Ascendant. Leong tried to follow, but I could see that his attention warred with his irritation and general desire to get the hell out of the bar and over to his mistress's apartment. He could also see that Mr. Norbu was not a man to be rushed, and that they had to play out the entire conversation for the sake of politeness and prudence. Once his great uncle was out of the picture, he would never deal with the likes of Mr. Norbu again.

"You have put a great deal of energy into this project, and for that you have my gratitude," Leong said. "Since you wish to ensure my comprehension of this, ah, research, perhaps I will have some udon."

"Another beer?" Mr. Norbu asked.

Leong didn't see why not.

Mr. Norbu keyed in their order on the table's pad, then produced a piece of paper that contained simplified versions of the natal charts he carried. They were set side by side, with

numerous arrows connecting the two charts. It looked, to Leong, like some sort of football strategy.

“These are the points of intersection between your karmic path and that of Mr. Chan,” Mr. Norbu explained. “I thought that a diagram might make the connections more clear.”

“Ah, yes, thank you.” Leong turned the paper this way and that, tracing his finger along each path in a vague hope of understanding the charts. As he pondered one particular confluence of Venus and Neptune, their food arrived. The server departed, and Leong gratefully seized on his noodles, which he slurped noisily.

The two men finished their bowls, toasting the chef with their beer. I had to bite my tongue to keep my fingers away from the table. Some months before, I had succumbed to temptation and stolen a taste from the kitchen during another of Mr. Norbu’s visits. The exquisite moment of salty noodle had turned bitter and acidic as my stomach rejected the invasion of corporal sustenance.

Mr. Norbu watched with interest as Leong became quietly drunk. The older man began slurring his words, and when he excused himself to take a piss, he nearly collided with several patrons. Mr. Norbu collected his things and went out to the street, where he flagged down a cab. He gave the hack a fifty and told him to wait. Then he used a nearby payphone to call for a tow truck.

When he returned to the table, Leong was nowhere to be seen. Mr. Norbu went to the men’s room and found him leaning against a stall in the men’s room, zipping up his pants with exaggerated care. He waited patiently until Leong finished and slowly washed his hands.

“You are a busy man, Mr. Leong, so I won’t keep you any longer,” he said.

“Ah, thank, thank, you, *shyeh-shyeh*.” He shifted to Mandarin. “*Have we finished?*”

“*Quite so,*” Mr. Norbu replied in the same language. He guided him out of the men’s room and, with gentle pressure on his back, out to the curb.

“Ah, my car?” Leong said.

“Arrangements have been made.”

“Much joy, then. *Dzai-jyen.*” He slid into the cab. Mr. Norbu handed him the natal charts and gave the driver the address of Leong’s home. He slipped an envelope into Leong’s inner jacket pocket and bid him good night.

When Leong woke the next morning, still wearing his clothes from the previous day, he found the envelope in his jacket. It contained two pieces of rice paper.

*Ushi Chan will transition to the next realm at the time of the new moon,* the first page read.

On the second page, he found these words:

*When your own time comes, visualize a vivid presence of the Buddha. Fill your heart with this presence and trust it. Then pray this prayer with the full focus of the heart, mind, and soul:*

*Through your blessing, grace, and guidance, through the power of the light that streams from you:*

*May all my negative karma, destructive emotions, obscurations, and blockages be purified and removed,*

*May I know myself forgiven for all the harm I may have thought and done,*

*And through the triumph of my death, may I be able to benefit all other beings, living or dead.*

*After this prayer, imagine the Buddha’s presence you have invoked is so moved that he responds with pure love and streams of light. The light is completely purifying and healing, and you dissolve completely into the light. If you do this, you might escape this existence.*

Leong contemplated this as he searched the bathroom for something to ease the pounding of his head. His recollection of the previous night was fragmented at best. He found an appropriate bottle, swallowed two pills with water from the tap. While brushing his teeth, he re-read the note.

He was about to flush the first page when he noticed writing on the back.

*You will transition on a Friday.*

With a shudder, Leong crumbled up the note and flushed it down the toilet. The second page he hid among his cufflinks. The next Thursday evening, he retrieved the note, read the prayer, and spent a sleepless night.

A week later, he did it again.

In another part of the city, Ushi Chan took to his couch for his usual afternoon nap and did not wake. The life insurance company's physician performed a post-mortem exam and determined the cause of death to be hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. (Signs of Mr. Norbu's acupuncture had long since faded.)

The proceeds from his generous policies allowed Chan's widow to retire to a condo in Vancouver, where she had many friends.

Mr. Norbu emailed an anonymous copy of Ushi Chan's death certificate to Leong. It was dated the 3<sup>rd</sup>, which coincided with the new phase of the moon.

The balance of Mr. Norbu's fee appeared promptly in his Sri Lanka bank account.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month, when the signs were right, Mr. Norbu compiled a list of births reported by the local hospitals. He winnowed the list down to a likely candidate, then withdrew the bulk of his funds from his overseas accounts. He packed a small bag with a set of monk's

robes and several small cat figurines. Finally, he shaved off his hair and beard, leaving a tonsure of fuzz.

We rode two buses and took the ferry to the Jack London Square landing in Oakland. From there, Mr. Norbu walked into Oakland's Chinatown, where he purchased a baby blanket and had it gift wrapped. He also bought a small red lucky money envelope and filled it with hundred dollar bills.

In a nearby restaurant, he used the none-too-clean bathroom to change into his old saffron-colored robes. He transferred the cat figurines into an inner pocket of his clothes, and gave his street clothes and traveling bag to a homeless man he found sleeping near the restaurant's delivery entrance.

As we headed out of the alley, I fell into step beside him. "Don't you feel like a hypocrite?" I asked.

"Not particularly," he whispered back. People on the crowded sidewalk gave him space out of respect. They took his words for a prayer mantra.

"You abandoned your vows back in Lhasa, if I'm not mistaken."

"No," Mr. Norbu said. "I left the monastery because the abbot and I no longer shared the same opinion about Manjushri's teachings. I strive to maintain my vows."

"Still, I doubt the abbot would approve."

"It wouldn't be the first time," he said, and paused before a doorway. He read the names on the mailbox and pressed the intercom.

A voice answered "Hello?"

"Is Mr. Lee home?"

"This is Mr. Lee. Who is it?"

"I have a gift for your firstborn son."

“Oh! Please, come up. Number 14.” A buzzer sounded, and Mr. Norbu opened the door and ascended the stairs. On the second floor, he found the correct door, knocked once, and stepped back. It was opened immediately by a rather thin Chinese man in his twenties who sported the barest whisper of a mustache. He appeared tired, but happy, like all new fathers.

He bowed. “Welcome to our home,” he said.

“Thank you,” Mr. Norbu said. He extended the brightly wrapped box. “This is for your son.”

Lee accepted the package with another bow. “Come in, please!” He took a step back so Mr. Norbu could fit into the small doorway. It was a clean, cramped apartment, a pleasant mixture of rosewood furniture, books, and many, many paper lanterns and congratulatory cards.

I perched on top of the couch. Mr. Norbu settled himself on the floor and switched on his best smile. “Your son is healthy?”

“Very much so. Lian has a large appetite and strong lungs.” A cry from the next room attested to the latter condition. Lee laughed. “Will you take some tea?”

“Thank you.”

As the other man busied himself in the kitchen, Mr. Norbu removed the cat figurines from his pocket and placed them in his lap. Lee returned with a battered rosewood tray of tea and almond cookies.

“We have had so many family and friends visiting,” he said, “that I have trouble remember everyone’s name.” He looked at Mr. Norbu. “Have we met at the temple?”

“I am on my way to San Francisco,” said Mr. Norbu, avoiding the question. “I am here to bestow a blessing, if I may.”

“We would be honored,” said Lee. “Let me get the baby.” He returned a moment later with a swaddled, wrinkled infant with wild black hair and slightly crossed eyes.

“He is a graceful willow, indeed,” Mr. Norbu said. He reached up and took the boy in his hands, supporting his neck and head as if he’d raised dozen of children. He rocked him gently in his lap and whispered, “*Namo Buddhaya, Namu Dharmaya, Namu Sanghaya.*” As he repeated the refuge prayer, he freed the baby’s hands, which immediately grasped his robe, his fingers, and then the cat figurines.

The baby’s eyes opened wide, and his chubby fingers grabbed and released each cat in turn, settling on the one from Ushi Chan’s house.

From across the room, I heard the young mind shouting “Mine!”

Mr. Norbu finished his prayer and returned the baby to his father, who wrapped him up tightly and sat back on the couch.

“There is another matter,” Mr. Norbu said. The lucky money envelope appeared in his hands. “A distant relation has sent a contribution for young Lian’s trust fund. He wishes the boy to have the opportunity to study and travel.” He handed over the envelope.

“Someone from China?” Lee asked, and lifted a corner with one hand. His eyes widened as he saw the denomination of the bills inside.

“Yes, and he begs forgiveness for not making the trip in person. His words and actions have earned him enemies within the provincial government, and he is afraid to leave.”

Lee closed his eyes and nodded. Most people knew someone in a similar situation back on the mainland. “We are grateful, of course.”

“Someone from the bank will contact you,” Mr. Norbu said, and rose to his feet in one smooth action. “And now I will leave you to rest and enjoy your beautiful family. Thank you for your hospitality.” He left before Lee could invite him to stay for dinner.

When we reached the street, I took a position behind his right shoulder. “So Ushi Chan is now Lian Lee.”

“It would seem so,” Mr. Norbu said. He crossed the street and headed back to the ferry landing. “Let us hope he makes the most of the opportunity.”

We walked into Jack London Square and found a bench to wait for the next ferry. Early dinner crowds were arriving at Tony Roma’s. The evening breeze carried the aroma of pizza and ribs. I took a deep breath, and released it. Normally, I’d have to fight to keep myself from raiding the kitchen. Tonight, though, I was content to share a bench and take in the view.

After a moment, I turned and to look at Mr. Norbu. He was studying me in that quiet, intense way of his. “How are you feeling?” he said, gently.

“I just realized that I’m not hungry,” I said, a little surprised.

“That’s a good sign.” He gave me a warm smile. “It may be your own karma is ready for something other than hungry ghost duty.”

“That would be wonderful,” I said with great sincerity.

“There are practices that help, you know,” Mr. Norbu said. “Since I am between contracts, I would happy to teach you, if you’re ready.”

“I’m ready,” I said.

“Excellent! Then we will begin tomorrow,” he said. “For now, shall we enjoy the sunset?”

We did.

THE END