

CHINA LAKE
A Stephan Raszer Short Story

A.W. HILL

Raszer cupped his salt-sprayed hand around the cell phone and raised his voice above the Baja surf. “Are you sure I’m the best man for the job?” he asked.

“You may be the only man,” she said. “If what I have heard is true.”

Her voice had the dusting of an accent. It might have been Italian or Sardinian--even Argentinian. He couldn’t peg it with the Pacific roaring on his left. Whatever it was had been ground and polished by residence in the capitols of the world, and by that particular sort of buffing that comes from being around money. Currently, she was in Los Angeles, undoubtedly living well. At the end of each phrase she uttered, there was a little curl of pitch that went straight to the first chakra, and as he walked down Estero Beach with his khakis rolled and damp at the cuff, eased into afternoon by a lunch of lobster and cold beer, he found himself gently aroused by it.

He shifted the cell phone to the other ear. “What’ve you heard?”

“That Stephan Raszer is a man who can bring children back from hell.”

She’d pronounced his name correctly, which said something. Stee-van Ray-zer.

With that little curl at the end.

“And that’s where you think your son is?”

There was a silence. A clearing of grief from the throat.

“What’s his name?”

“Sebastien.”

“How old is he?”

“Nineteen.”

That, he guessed, made her forty, at most. Maybe even younger, judging by the suppleness of the voice. The voice told stories, not all of them happy. There was a wry quality that might armor despair. Raszer’s clients, whose children or wives or husbands had gone off the grid, gone missing, gone native, were often damaged children themselves. Damage begets damage, like seeks like somewhere in the tangle of genetic threads. Raszer often had to untangle those knots before he could begin searching. Few people ran away unless they were running from something, and few lambs were taken that hadn’t already strayed from the flock.

“You say it began with a 2012 obsession? An end of the world scenario?”

“Yes. He says...he has to be ready for the Omega Point. He says that only those who are ready will cross over.”

“I’ll bet he’s a bright kid, right?”

“Too bright, if you ask me,” she said with a dry little laugh.

“Give me your address, Mrs. DuBarry. I’ll stop by when I get back.”

“How soon will that be?” she asked.

“Two days.”

“Come quickly. He has been out there in the desert three weeks. The police can do nothing because he is of legal age, and because this guru—this charlatan—he is with is not holding him against his will. If you knew how little will my son has, you would know how wrong they are. He told me in his letter that he wanted to be first on the beach when the

‘time wave’ breaks. What does that mean?”

“That’s what’s supposed to happen on or about December 21, 2012, when the ingress of novelty into the world reaches saturation point, or the ecliptic aligns with the galactic center, or the Lord Hachakyum destroys the world. Or Sarah Palin is elected president. Choose your apocalypse. Has he been on meds of any kind?”

“He says that doctors are part of the conspiracy. I wonder sometimes if he’s--“

“Right...”

“Believe me, he’s taken every pill there is.”

“I’ll call you as soon as I’m back in L.A.. Meanwhile, gather everything you have from the weeks and months before he went out to the Mojave to join this group. Letters, emails, web bookmarks, police reports. I’ll need it all.”

“All right,” she said. “I will.” She hesitated. “Can I...ask you one last thing?”

“Sure.” He was enjoying the effect of her voice, despite the bad connection.

“Is it true what they say about your left eye? That it has a light. That you can see into the soul of evil? That you can tell truth from counterfeit?”

“If I could do all that,” he answered. “I wouldn’t need a P.I. license.”

He ended the call and walked another mile before turning back. It took him that long to shake the voice. He hadn’t taken the job yet, but it was already inside him.

The desert that laps hungrily at L.A.’s eastern perimeter was once a great inland sea, and is no less a sea now for being made of dust and sand. It exists to inundate and consume, and to one day meet the Pacific halfway and claim the cities of the coast. On his way out to China Lake, after having taken Vida DuBarry’s retainer and put in three weeks

researching the sect that had beguiled her son, Raszer stopped on the edge of the wasteland in Inyokern to fill his tank. There, at the gas pump, was one of the Mojave's latter-day prophets. Thin as a mendicant and leathery as a wildcatter, he seemed somehow aggrieved that Raszer had taken the self-serve sign so literally. He wasn't the type to wash the windows of Raszer's rebuilt 1967 Avanti, so he just stood there in an anticipatory half-crouch.

"Live out here?" Raszer had asked him.

"Mmm," the attendant affirmed.

"Like it?"

"Too many people," the man said.

Raszer scanned the surroundings and counted only two structures in the stark, burnt-out hills that might have been human dwellings.

"All relative, I guess," said Raszer.

"No relatives here," the attendant said. "All dead. Good riddance."

"Uh-huh. Ever run into these folks who live out by China Lake? The Christian community. The Church of the Eschaton."

"Esha-what?"

"Eschaton. The Day of Judgement."

"Uh-huh," said the attendant, and spat. "They ran outta gas once, up the road. Two girls in angel robes walked six miles with a canister. And *him*. The leader. They're all his wives, I guess. Must be nice."

"What did you make of him?" Raszer asked.

"Prob'ly nuts. Eyes that burn. But he did say thank you." He paused. "We've seen his type before."

“What type is that?” Raszer asked.

But the attendant said nothing.

“Well, thanks for the fill-up,” said Raszer. He’d just gotten behind the wheel when the man spoke again.

“Tell you one thing. When the day comes, I expect he’ll be ready. And the day *will* come. The Mojave will sweep it all to Kingdom Come.”

“I suppose nature’s on your side,” said Raszer. He pointed ahead, down the two-lane track of Highway 176. “They’re just up this road, right? Near the Naval Weapons Center?”

“About eighteen miles on the right. They took over the old Mandarin Motor Inn. But they keep the vacancy light on.”

Raszer had kept his eye on the side mirror as he pulled away. For a solid half-minute, the man remained in the half-crouch, then went to reset the pump.

A ball of tumbleweed, lifted and held by the breath of the wind, appeared at the window of Raszer’s room at the Mandarin Inn, seeking entry like a fugitive creature from the inland sea. It gave two spindly taps and disappeared, and Raszer returned to his meditation. During the three days he had been the captive of the Church of the Eschaton and its seventeen female and two male followers, he’d often thought of the pump jockey’s prophecy. *When the day comes, he will be ready.* He’d also thought of Vida DuBarry, waiting pensively back there in the city the desert would one day seize by right of eminent domain, wondering what sort of man could have torn the son from her breast and what sort of man she’d hired to return him. Having taken her measure, Raszer could not help but ask himself if she also wondered what sort of mother a son would want to leave.

He could still smell the jasmine from her stoop. Her house had been in Nichols Canyon Road north of Sunset Boulevard, set back, though not as far back as the more palatial retreats. There was a Lexus in the driveway. The house, he learned, had been the present of divorce. There were four bedrooms upstairs, enough to suggest that a larger family might once have been envisioned. Vida DuBarry had come to the door preceded by her shadow, and the shadow had remained on her as she opened it. She had on a sundress in a blood red and pink floral print. The round face, dark hair, brown shoulders, and the shadow were all a match for the voice. She looked like a woman with something to live down.

“Mrs. DuBarry,” he’d begun, “I’m Stephan Raszer. Sorry I couldn’t come sooner.”

“But you did come,” she said. “Please call me Vida.” “Is this a good time, Vida?”

“As good as any. Please come in.”

After coffee, he’d followed her upstairs to her son’s empty bedroom. As she put her hand on the doorknob, she turned and said, “I’ll warn you...it’s strange in there.”

The bedroom might have held many things: Trent Reznor posters, Toltec talismans, bongos or bushido blades, treatises on anarchy: none would have surprised him. What he found instead informed him that Sebastien was serious and that bringing him back would be hard. The room had been cleared entirely of furniture and its pine plank floor painted with a perfect replica of the Mayan Long-Count calendar and its Great Cycle of 5124 years, the cycle that was to end on December 21, 2012.

The woman watched him from the doorway as he circumnavigated her son’s masterpiece. It was ten feet in diameter, every inch finely wrought in enamel paint.

“It’s an amazing reproduction,” he said. “Museum worthy. How long did it take?”

“For a full year, he didn’t leave this room,” she answered. I brought food up and left

it, praying he would eat. But he didn't. I don't know how he survived. He didn't sleep. It was as if that thing..." She indicated the calendar. "...had become his food."

"What happened just before he left for the desert?"

"I think now that he had been corresponding with this man...this doomsday prophet...for some time. He told me they have a calendar just like it but four times the size. He told me that they had figured out how to survive the end of the world by becoming...*post-human*. My son had lost his mind and all I could do was weep. Then, one day, he told me he had received the call to come. What craziness. What evil."

Vida had seemed surprised that Raszer hadn't immediately echoed her judgement. "It *is* craziness, isn't it?" she demanded to know. "It *is* evil..."

"We can't know that until I'm inside," Raszer answered. "So far, what you're describing sounds a lot like millennial Catholicism. Crazy in some eyes, maybe."

Getting *inside* was, of course, the first stage of Raszer's art, and almost always required subterfuge. If the goal was to make an intimate connection with someone in thrall to a religious or politico-religious enterprise—particularly one that was suspected of being fraudulent, dangerous, or both—he couldn't just knock on the front door. Over the years of penetrating such movements, he'd collected a half-dozen alternate identities, never using the same one twice in a row. Some—like journalist, scholar, author—played to the self-importance of the group he was investigating or the vanity of its leader. Others—attorney or doctor—were designed to catalyze response. And then there was the one that came closest to his true calling: the pilgrim or renegade priest, searching for something...*anything*...genuine. Raszer wanted to believe, but found skepticism the safest

harbor on a sea of holy plunderers and pirates.

To gain entry to The Church of the Eschaton, or COTE, he had dusted off a persona he hadn't worn in years, that of Dr. Noel Branch, a Canadian expert in new and emerging religions, affiliated with a think tank based in Turin, Italy. His gut had told him that the man who went by the name "The Rabbi" wanted to be taken seriously.

To say that he was now The Rabbi's 'captive' wasn't strictly accurate. He was free to leave, but not to wander. He'd been restricted to quarters until such time as COTE's chief of security could confirm his credentials. The chief of security was none other than Sebastien DuBarry.

This was both good and bad. Raszer chose to look at the good side. He wouldn't have to angle for access to the young apostle. Sebastien would, inevitably, come to him.

There was a knock at the motel room door. Speak of the devil, he thought.

Sebastien was with one of the angels, Audrey, a square-faced girl whose upper lip curled like Elvis Presley's. Raszer took one look at the face and saw a girl who'd lost her virginity at thirteen, been rehab'd at fifteen, found Jesus at sixteen, and then found the wilder Jesus—the Jesus of the desert and the fiery pit—as she'd entered what passed today for adulthood. There were people who sought extreme religion the way some seek extreme sports. Spiritual bungee jumping. *Ravish me, Oh, Lord. Take me to the edge of myself.* Raszer understood the appeal better than almost anyone knew.

Young women held a special place in the Church of the Eschaton, and especially young women with grievous psychic wounds. The Rabbi, Raszer had learned, believed that there was no greater sign of evil's dominion on earth than the mistreatment of women. He believed that women were the vessels of the holy spirit, and that men, in seeking over the

centuries to drive their demons out—whether by fire, flogging, or holy matrimony—had in fact been killing Christ over and over again. It was the task of his ministry to heal the wounds of women. Once healed, they would become the arks of the new covenant, and come the eschaton, the female of the species would be the first to ascend. In fact, his doctrine stated, females were already in a quasi-post-human state.

With much of this, Raszer did not take great philosophical issue. He'd long felt that the scepter of priesthood rightfully belonged on the distaff side. If there was a chink in the Rabbi's argument, it was that he apparently felt it took a man to make this happen.

From what little he'd been allowed to witness so far, it appeared that the gas station attendant had been wrong about at least one thing. There was no indication of a conjugal relationship between The Rabbi and his girls. The Rabbi, he was told, prayed for seventeen hours a day, ministered for four, and slept for three.

Sebastien was tall and bony, a different body type from his mother, but like her in face: olive-skinned, dark-haired, smoldering with fate. He handed Raszer his documents.

"Can you come with us, Mr. Branch?" he said politely.

"With pleasure," answered Raszer, and pulled his boots on.

COTE's nerve center occupied what had once been the motel office. There were three computer workstations and a server, which suggested that The Rabbi's network extended beyond this two acre plot of desert. On the way across the courtyard, Raszer had looked up to the hard blue Mojave sky and seen sunlight glinting off what looked like a transmitter tower. This was an operation.

The floor was cluttered with open cartons, containing papers, books, hard drives, and

provisions. Whether being packed or unpacked wasn't clear, but Raszer sensed the former. Beside Sebastien, on a credenza, an iMac was streaming a prodigious amount of data, numbers turning over faster than pennies on a gas pump. Something was being monitored.

"So," said Vida DuBarry's son, "Why do you want to write about us?"

"Because while everybody pays lip service to the notion of marrying quantum physics and religion, you're actually performing the nuptials."

"Do you believe us?"

"I don't know. I think faith is a diamond with a lot of facets. My biggest question for The Rabbi has to do with the rate at which he says the change is approaching. Even if you take Deutsch and Tipler's equations at face value, extrapolate Turing's theories about the increase of computational power near the Omega Point, and factor in the Mayans and Teilhard de Chardin, it's hard to get to the end of the world by 2012."

"You have to factor in God," said Sebastien.

"Good point," said Raszer, and glanced over at the blazing numbers on the computer screen. "You're running a sequence over there with what looks like a whopping number of variables." He leaned in for a closer look. "Is it the polar ice caps? Are those temperatures or cubic meters on the left? It looks like you're monitoring in real time."

"We are," he said. "But not what you think."

"Okay," said Raszer. "What are we looking at?"

"The first number in column one is the atomic clock at the U.S. Naval Observatory, and below that, a bunch of other time markers: population growth, bank failures, currency fluctuations, mass murders, and the average number of times in a week that the male gorillas at the L.A. Zoo masturbate."

“What does that last one relate to?” Raszer asked.

“Fear of death. Instinctual.”

“What about the numbers at the upper right?” he asked.

“Arcseconds of declination from alignment of the ecliptic with the galactic equator, and then the declination of earth itself.” He pointed to a fourth column, its digits rolling over in a blur. “This one’s the rate of approach to Omega. It’s accelerating.”

“I can see that. But if the rate results from weighting the other variables—like the gorillas, for example—you could be skewing the outcome.”

“I don’t think so,” said the young man.

“Is that the Mayan clock in column three? With all the decimals?”

“The calendar, yeah. We’re at 12 baktuns, 27 katuns, 9 tuns, 6 uinals, and 2 kins. When it turns over 13.0.0.0.0, we’ll be there. Timewave Zero. According to the Mayan long-count, we’ll come to the end of a world age on December 21, 2012, when the earth and the ecliptic line up with the galactic center. But the Mayans didn’t anticipate things like temporal acceleration, so the date could be off by a couple years.”

“Who wrote the program?”

“The Rabbi did,” Sebastien said. “But God gave him the code.”

“Okay. What happens when all the numbers stop?”

“A channel opens up. Connecting all presents in the multiverse into one big *now*.”

“And you go through?” Raszer said.

“We go through. But not, like, physically. More like an upload. I can’t explain it.

You should ask The Rabbi.”

“Does it ever scare you to stake your life on something you can’t explain?”

“No. That’s what faith is, right?”

Raszer nodded, then indicated the moving cartons surrounding them.

“Going somewhere?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s coming. We have to go to Megiddo. That’s why The Rabbi wants to talk to you.”

“All right, then,” said Raszer, pushing back his chair. “Lead on.” He paused. “I wonder if I can ask you...because when I write about new religious movements, I’m writing about the people, not just the beliefs...who were you before you met The Rabbi?”

“Before that,” came the reply, “I was nobody.”

“Did you leave anyone behind?”

“Nobody,” Sebastien said again.

Seven o’clock and the rose-colored sunset came, and still Raszer had not been called to his meeting. In the meantime, two large passenger vans with deeply tinted windows and luggage racks had materialized in the motel’s courtyard. All through the late afternoon, The Rabbi’s angels packed and carried boxes and roped them to the racks, singing pretty, sad little tunes The Rabbi had taught them. Raszer had parked himself on the warm tiles near the Mandarin Inn’s dry fountain and watched them come and go. Every so often, one would offer him a smile. They were pretty girls, most of them small-breasted and thin, none past their mid-twenties.

The last item to be loaded required assistance from the until now absent second male, a twenty-ish Latino with a neck beard and embroidered cowboy boots. It was a four foot wooden crate with a shape that suggested munitions. Once the girls had the vans packed, they set off to deliver baskets of canned goods to the residents of a nearby Indian

reservation. It was just after they'd left to make their rounds that The Rabbi called for him.

He wore loose trousers of unbleached muslin and a v-neck smock to match, which on first glimpse made him look like a surgeon. Confounding Raszer's expectations, his hair was not long and messianic, but cut within a half-inch of the scalp. He sat on the floor, against the unadorned mission white wall of Room 11, forearms resting on his knee. He was the most relaxed individual Raszer had ever encountered.

His eyes were large and canted. Creature-like. The eyes of a Natalie Portman set in an angular, strong-boned masculine face.

"Please sit down," he said. "And forgive the spartan furnishings. I like emptiness. It asks to be filled."

In the "e's," there was a trace of an Australian accent.

Raszer slid down the wall to the cheaply carpeted floor, about three feet from his host. The Rabbi rolled his head left, regarding him with a gentle intensity that was utterly disarming, and with that single look made it clear that getting Sebastien back to Nichols Canyon would be no easy task. When you're nobody, and made to feel like somebody by another's gaze, an emotional contract is made that isn't easily broken.

"It's good that you came when you did," said The Rabbi. "In another day, you wouldn't have been able to find us."

"Yes, I see you're packing up," said Raszer. "Why are you leaving? Why now?"

"Because this is the way it happens. In a future present, the chronicles of our faith will say that it was on this day that we departed for Megiddo."

"And this future present...is known to you?"

"It's known to everyone, but not at the level of consciousness."

“Where is Megiddo?” Raszer asked.

“In another country,” The Rabbi replied.

“One you can get to in a minibus?”

The Rabbi laughed and said, “At least the first leg of the trip.”

“Is there danger here if you stay?”

“Without a doubt. You’re the first sign of it. You’re my Judas Iscariot. The centurions will follow.”

Raszer blinked slowly.

“You’re here for the boy, aren’t you?”

Raszer remained still, meeting his hosts’s penetrating gaze with his own. A dozen things raced through his brain, but the upshot was this: the game had changed.

“And in order to get him, you’ll have to hurt me...”

“Okay,” said Raszer after a breath. “Let me recalibrate here.” A tiny nerve behind his left eye began to fire. He was in the presence of something extraordinary.

“I would never prevent Sebastien from leaving,” said The Rabbi, “but I doubt he’ll want to go. Have you met the mother?”

Raszer had little choice but to nod an affirmation. The Rabbi said:

“When a mother takes her son as lover, she swallows his personhood. She reclaims him for her womb. But strangely, she also sets him apart. Sebastien can never own his body, but his soul is free. And a soul can only return to its ground by grace.”

“And this is what you offer him?”

The Rabbi smiled softly.

“May I ask you--”

“Anything you like.”

“I’ve encountered more than the usual share of savants and holy men. Most were considerably less than advertised. A few were pretty damned remarkable. But all of them shared the same mortal flaw. Call it a need to play God. I’ve read your writings, and they’re impressive. The world could learn from you. So why hide your light under a bushel? Why not speak truth to power instead of holing up in the desert surrounded by a handful of people too damaged to talk back to you?”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Only the damaged see the world as it is...through the holes torn in the fabric of their souls. But through the same holes, they can also see the light of paradise.”

“True, but that light can play tricks,” said Raszer. “It can blind them to the beauty in the world. The paradise that’s right here, right now. Make them too willing to follow the brightest light they see...right over a cliff.”

“Also true,” said The Rabbi. “So which am I? Gabriel or Lucifer?”

“I don’t know,” Raszer replied.

“You will, soon enough. I said I wouldn’t prevent Sebastien from leaving, and I won’t. But we have some things to attend to first. In two hours, we leave for Megiddo. You’ll come with us. To witness.” The Rabbi rose and went to the door. “You’ll forgive me if I make your attendance compulsory.”

He opened the door, and from the courtyard materialized Sebastien and the Latino boy, each holding shiny, new AR-15 automatic rifles.

“Please take the professor to van number two,” The Rabbi directed. “Bind his wrists and ankles. Not too tightly. Blindfold him. We leave at ten o’clock.”

It was past midnight when Raszer felt and heard the grade change from desert blacktop to the fissured concrete of old roads. He was aware they were traveling deeper into the Mojave, not because his internal gyroscope told him so, but because the air streaming in through the van's windows had grown steadily more arid and scentless. He was on the two-seater bench halfway back, and Sebastien was on his right. The rifle must have been somewhere near, because he could smell the gun grease.

The Rabbi was up ahead in the leader van. Raszer was accompanied by six of the women, including the driver, and Sebastien, whose face he could no longer picture without an overlay of his mother's, without that long, purple shadow she'd brought to the door with her. Of course, it could be untrue. The incest. But he suspected it was true. If she'd given birth to her son at the age of sixteen or seventeen, there had probably been boundary issues from the start. This explained a great many things.

The guns were troubling, but not a total surprise. Esoteric religions carry the ark of their secrets from church to church the way *homo erectus* once carried fire from camp to camp, and guard them just as jealously. The danger arose with a threat from the outside. Then you had the makings of Waco. Then you had Masada, or Jonestown.

"Any chance you can take the blindfold off?" Raszer asked.

"Pretty soon," said Sebastien.

"Are we leaving the state?" "Oh, yeah," he said. "For sure."

The girls sang songs and spoke in whispers, like co-eds en route to an exchange semester in Florence. Much of what Raszer heard was open to multiple interpretations. They were going to "the new place." "I'm so ready," said one. "I'm so over this place." But the

physical dimension of what they were anticipating didn't come into register until the girl riding shotgun let slip with this:

“And no more bleeding! Yes!”

“No more periods!” echoed a voice he recognized as Audrey's. *“No more pencils, no more books. No more teacher's dirty looks!”*

The girl in the front improvised:

“No more cramps or PMS. No more make-up, no more mess.”

They had a laugh. *Jesus*, thought Raszer. *They're going to kill themselves.*

He turned to Sebastien. “Do you know why The Rabbi asked you to tie me up?”

“Just to be sure, I guess,” answered the boy. “I didn't question it.”

“Because I came for you,” said Raszer.

He felt the boy shift, suddenly aware of intimacy.

“What do you mean?” Sebastien asked, in a whisper. “How?”

“If you want the chain of causation,” said Raszer. “It began with a call from your mother.”

“My mother,” he said hollowly.

“She seemed...stricken. Scared. Maybe even responsible. I was in your room. I can see that you're on to something. You want to break through. Start again.”

“So you tracked me here. Lied your way in. What? To ‘rescue’ me?”

“That's what I do when I'm told someone might be in trouble.”

“What are you really? Some kind of deprogrammer?”

“Deprogramming is just reprogramming. I'm not out to take anyone's faith away. People hire me to get to the lost lambs before the wolves do.”

The girl in the shotgun seat turned abruptly and scowled.

“I think that’s enough, mister,” she said, her soft features hardening. “Don’t mess with his head. Sebastien knows what he’s doing.”

Audrey spoke from the backseat. “Tell him about the timewave, Sebastien. The vector. How it collapses, like you said. How the numbers stopped spinning that day.”

“No, don’t,” ordered the driver, eyeing Raszer in her rear view mirror.

“You,” Sebastian said to Raszer, “are going to be very surprised.”

“I hope so,” said Raszer. “Nothing I’d like better.”

Forty odd minutes later they were off the road and in a place quiet enough to hear a heartbeat. Now that the blindfold had been removed, Raszer was able to see that they’d pulled into a steep, narrow canyon made of rock that seemed to phosphoresce in the starlight. Nothing was remotely familiar, but that was expected. Any desert is far bigger than its geography. And who knew if they were on terrain known to cartographers?

He’d lost track of time. On The Rabbi’s direction, his watch had been taken. The sole indicator of location was the vibe of the place. All places on earth—but especially holy places—had a kind of magnetic signature, a geomantic fingerprint. Pigeons know this, as do rodents and reptiles, but people forget. Raszer knew, but he was a human anomaly. Right now, the vibe told him they might be in the Owens Valley, that vast stretch of nothingness on the lee side of the Sierra Nevada, a place where 65% of the population claimed to have seen UFOs.

The Rabbi had gone ahead to pray and to “prepare” the new place. Praying was considerably more than meditation for The Rabbi. Doing it right established, in his words,

“a quantum coherent communion” with the godhead. In his cosmology, reality was a trinity: the Big Bang singularity was the Holy Spirit; the many worlds at the edge of the universe were the Son; the Omega Point, to which all returned, was the Father.

Over the next two days, they set up camp. The vehicles mysteriously disappeared one night, probably driven to a remote location to seal their exile. An enormous, billowing and semi-translucent tarpaulin of some exotic silk-like fabric was staked to the cliffs and suspended over the canyon. It was rose-colored, and lent a lovely pink glow to the camp, and to the skin of the acolytes. A giant firepit was dug, with a council circle, and The Rabbi’s readings were as often from Tolkien, or Gaiman, or Roald Dahl as they were from scripture. Six spacious igloo tents of the same rose fabric served for sleeping, and before long, the canyon resembled a Himalayan base camp designed by Cristo, complete with Tantric prayer wheels, incense burners, and hammocks. If this was Armageddon, the world was going to end not with a bang or a whimper, but with a sigh.

And all through it, The Rabbi treated Raszer as some great Bedouin prince might treat an honored guest, inviting him to share in their meals of curried lentil and honeyed yogurt, to join in the readings and prayers and music-making and circle dances. And to question all that they believed. The guns seemed to have vanished with the vans, and so had the suspicious glances. There was no talk—even euphemistically—of anything like mass suicide. No talk of “transit” or “ascent.” The Rabbi insisted that they’d come to this sublimely quiet place to “tune their receivers” in preparation for the broadcast.

Eccentric, unorthodox, maybe delusional. But Raszer could see nothing sinister.

Then it began.

On the third night, when they gathered around the fire for vespers, one of the angels

was missing. She was a formless girl named Inez, and Raszer noticed her absence only because he'd noticed her discomfort on the previous evening. He reasoned that she might have split, making a beeline for the bus station in Barstow, and this seemed to back up The Rabbi's assurance that participation in the end game was voluntary.

Until the next day, when two more girls were missing from midday devotions.

"I'm puzzled," Raszer said through the woodsmoke. "What's happened to Inez, and Martha, and the other one--"

"Beatrice," The Rabbi finished. "They've gone on walkabout. It's part of the tuning process. I spent three years in the Australian bush with the aboriginals. You have to get away from the interference in order to fine-tune your receiver."

"Will they be coming back?" Raszer asked.

"Yes," said The Rabbi. "When the time is right."

His eyes were absent of guile, but they permitted no questions.

On the fourth day, three more of the women were absent from the choir, bringing their number down to fifteen. At this rate, the camp would be empty by week's end.

"I'm sorry, Rabbi," Raszer said, taking his host aside. "But you asked me to witness, and I don't like what I'm witnessing. In this heat, nobody survives the desert for more than a couple of days."

"The prophets did," said the Rabbi.

"In that case, maybe you ought to be out there with them."

"A shepherd doesn't rest until all sheep are in the fold. The captain is last to leave a sinking ship. And anyway, I've already been where they are. I came from there."

Three times that day, Raszer hit Sebastien with a look that said "talk to me," and

three times, Sebastien averted his eyes. Something was wrong. That night, Raszer kept a vigil, pretending to sleep, waiting for the last ember to go cold. The moon rose and then fell to that perilous interstice between night and dawn, and Raszer heard the rustle of fabric and the soft squeaking of feet on the sand. He slipped out of the tent, and by starlight, counted four figures, and then a fifth. The fifth, he was sure, was male.

He could only follow at considerable distance, because even breath carries in the Mojave. Beyond fifty yards, nothing could be seen, so he followed scent and heat as much as the faint disturbance in the atmosphere that signaled their presence, the reflection of moonlight from white robes. It was open desert, broken only by boulders and the spiky, spectral forms of Joshua trees, which he mistook more than once for The Rabbi, arms lifted in benediction.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, he shuddered and stopped. He'd lost them, and now was lost himself. Raszer cursed softly and turned back, with only the fading stars as guide. Seconds after crossing a dry creek bed, he ran headlong into an immovable black shape and cried out in spite of himself. He ran his hands over cool metal until he was sure he had, in fact, discovered the location of the two vans. The driver's door of one was open, and the keys were on the seat. He pocketed them, and then waited until there was enough light in the sky to follow the jagged purple line of the cliffs back to camp. When he arrived, The Rabbi was waiting at the fire.

"You need to tell me what's going on," he said in a harsh whisper. "*This* shepherd doesn't rest when the pasture gate is open."

The Rabbi didn't reply. His eyes were open, but he was a long way away. Raszer stepped directly into his line of sight and squatted down.

“I’m taking the rest of them back,” he said. “Do you hear me, Rabbi?”

The Rabbi’s face was untroubled, and his mien betrayed no urgency as he rose slowly from the fire, turned, and began to walk toward open desert. It struck Raszer at that moment that there was a hair’s breadth of difference between saint and madman, and only a hair more between madman and a mythomaniac.

He looked up and saw that Sebastien was standing near, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Raszer gave him a nod and stood up. He squeezed the boy’s shoulder. Then he began to walk briskly to the mouth of the canyon.

“Wait,” Sebastien called. “You don’t understand.”

An instant later came three soft, springy echoes from the canyon walls: sound waves borne on the rarefied air to the first solid object they encountered. *Pqui000— pqui000— pqui000*. The sound of an automatic pistol with an 80db silencer.

Raszer began to run. “Yes, I do!” he called back.

Locating the vans again took less than thirty minutes, but it required the better part of a frantic hour to find his way back to the canyon. The minibus was lousy on sand. Rear-wheel drive and too light to dig in. Moreover, their horseshoe canyon was hardly a unique formation. At least a half-dozen in the area looked just like it. At last, he pulled onto the apron of land beneath the rose-colored canopy and jumped out, carrying the loaded M-15 he’d found cached in the spare tire compartment.

Sebastien was waiting in the counsel circle with the eight remaining girls. Audrey, Raszer noticed, was not among them. She must have been one of the four who’d been taken out to pasture that morning. The Rabbi was nowhere to be seen, nor was the other male in the group, the young Latino with the neck beard.

“Let’s go,” Raszer said, opening the panel door.

The lead angel—the one who’d been his driver—shook her head. The others remained still and sullen, a Girl Scout troop abandoned by its scoutmaster. Suddenly, in their dingy white robes, they looked like the throwaway children they had been, and Raszer ached for them. Promised paradise, they weren’t going to give it up easily.

Sebastian stepped forward.

“It’s not what you think,” the boy said.

“What is it, then?” Raszer asked.

“Once the upload is finished, your body’s nothing but a meat puppet. There’s nothing left that matters. It’s just disposal.”

“There’s another way to get where you want to go, Sebastien. If it doesn’t work for you, the desert will always be there.”

“Don’t leave, Sebastien,” said the lead girl. “We’re almost home.”

“We’re all leaving,” Raszer said. “Heaven can wait.”

“You’ll have to shoot us,” said the girl.

Sebastien dropped to his knees and hammered his fists against his temples. “Fuck,” he groaned. “You fucked it all up. You looked too close. It’s like particle physics. If you interfere with the experiment, everything collapses. The miracle dies.” He turned to the lead girl. “It’s over,” he said. “We missed this wave. We have to wait.”

Three weeks later, Raszer opened the newspaper and read that the Inyo County sheriff had found the bodies of ten young women buried in shallow graves across a square mile of the Mojave near China Lake. All wore white robes, and all had taken a single

gunshot to the back of the head. No sign of The Rabbi or the young Latino man.

On that same day, Sebastien DuBarry called from the house in Nichols Canyon.

“Did you see the news?” Raszer asked.

“Audrey came to see me last night,” was the boy’s reply.

“Audrey?” Raszer hesitated. “Alive?”

“She made it across,” Sebastien answered. “She’s in the cloud. She said it was everything The Rabbi promised it would be. Release. She’s happy...for the first time.”

Raszer put the phone to his chest and felt his pulse quicken.

“Sebastien,” he said, after the pause. “Do you know how to tell the difference between a ghost and a hallucination?”

It was quiet on the other end.

“Neither one’s actually ‘out there,’” he continued, “the way the chair or the bookshelf are out there. Both operate by setting up interference patterns in your brain. But the ghost leaves something behind. An impression...like a finger on soft skin. That’s because the ghost, to make itself known to you, has to enter you. Was that--”

“So he was right, then. The Rabbi.”

“You can be right and still be dead wrong. Sure, there’s another place. Maybe a better one. But you don’t take the bullet train. You move your furniture into it a little bit at a time, and hope that when it’s time to go, the place feels like home.”

“But the Omega Point? All that matching data. All the signs pointed to--”

“Right,” said Raszer softly. “You tapped into the grid. The connectedness. Once you’re in there, you see that every imaginable scenario is a real possibility. The trouble comes when you isolate one of them and call it the only truth.”

“So you think the police are right? He was some kind of mass murderer?”

Raszer felt a sigh escape him, then regretted it.

“Things aren’t that simple for me anymore,” he said. “But let’s put it this way: if I’d known sooner what was going on, I’d have killed him, if necessary, to stop it.”

“Then you don’t believe--”

“Oh, I believe,” said Raszer. “But you’ve got to draw the line somewhere.”

“Oh,” said Sebastien. “The line...”

“There’s always a line,” said Raszer. “Take care of yourself, Sebastien. And give my regards to your mother.”

