

JesusLand

The 3013-15 Existential Crisis

A NewChristian Cosmopolis Institute Reproduction

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The Magician's Isle
3894 NewChristian Era

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Prologue

The tomb had lain empty for so long that even the memory of the memory of the memory of its existence had faded from the stream of time. Long before the NewChristian movement had landed on the ocean shore, naming the land JesusLand and embarking on the centuries long task of reshaping the environment to suit their own urban needs; long before the warrior tribes gathered along the foothills to raid each other in a struggle for wealth and more than that, prestige; long before the village clans gathered in the high mountains to eke out an existence amid towering snow-covered peaks and deep valleys; long before any of these, there lived an ancient people whose artifacts still cropped up now and then, revealed by the turn of a plough or the stumble of a foot.

Such things were of little interest to those caught up in the reality of their own affairs, for time had robbed such artifacts of all shape and purpose, leaving behind bits of metal that still fought the degrading effects of time to little avail. But then a little known and totally insignificant shepherd of an out-of-the-way mountain village entered a recently exposed cave. It led to a tomb. The tomb was empty.

It was the year 3013 in the NewChristian calendar.

The year everything changed.

Chapter 1

And So It Begins

There are shepherds whose long hours of solitude filled with reflection on the meaning and purpose of life have left them wiser than most men.

But Pard was not one of them.

A simple village lad tasked with the care of a small herd of mountain sheep, he drew his strength from family and clan bonds and not from his own skills in thinking things through. The traditions handed down from a past so distant it had no name were good enough for him, guiding him in all that he did, framing his very existence, grounding his very being.

Although he didn't know it, this was about to change. For one of his sheep, a yearling, had disappeared into a dark hole in the side of the mountain where they routinely grazed, a recent uncovering given the fresh scars left by a landslide. He was faced with the task of entering a darkness that repelled as much as it beckoned, not drawn to mystery though mystery was drawn to him. Yet he could hear the plaintive bleat of one of his sheep echoing from a gap that was not much larger than the sheep itself.

Pard had no choice: he had to enter the darkness or admit to the village leaders that he had lost one of the few valuable sheep entrusted to his care. So, after ensuring the safety of the others now grazing quietly on the hillside, Pard went down on his hands and knees, and poked his head just inside the entrance—for entrance it was. The cave went deep into the side of the mountain. He knew that from the distant sound of the bleating within, that and the echoes the sound made before it reached out to grab him.

At least the air was fresh, suggesting no predator had taken up residence. His heart eased up a bit, for though the cave held its darkness close, it was a familiar situation.

Holding that thought, he crawled into the opening, bare knees scrapping against brush and rock, dirt and sharp stones, all of which dug into his skin. A few yards beyond the rough opening revealed by the landslide, the cave floor turned flat, free of both dirt and stones that made crawling like this a real chore. A faint light echoing from the entrance drew the ceiling away from his head, leaving him space enough to stand on two feet, all while pressing his palms flat against walls to keep him from being hemmed in on both sides.

The lamb's bleating sounded no closer. The faint light grew dimmer the deeper he went in to search for the missing lamb. Eventually, he couldn't see his hand in front of his face and had to continue by touch and sound alone. At least there were no branches, nor rock-falls, nor outcrops to confuse his way. In fact, the cave was remarkable uniform—though Pard was not strictly speaking fully conscious of this fact.

The implications of that would come later.

But for now, the bleating of the missing lamb was close. His palms ran into a ridge running down both sides of the cave and as he explored the floor, along the bottom as well. And the ceiling. Pard realized that this ridge of stone—no, something smoother than stone—ran all around the cave walls, ceiling, and floor. In fact, this ridge closed the cave to a mere fraction of its size, as if it sought to block future passage.

But that would mean...? And his fingers found what he was beginning to suspect, hinges on one side of the opening and a door quite ajar that no longer served to block the passage. Suddenly two images superimposed themselves on his mind: the cave of wind, water, and stone; a man-made cave of hearth and home. Doors kept the bad without and the good within, but who was to say this was the case here and now?

Then his fingers encountered wool; in exploring the wool, the young sheep. And the lamb recognized him, his shepherd, and bleated all the more loudly now that rescue was at hand.

Further exploration found that the lamb had fallen across the floor ridge that was almost as high as the yearling himself. When it went over, it hurt its leg, and because of that was unable to jump back over to escape into daylight. All it could do was call out for help.

All this Pard figured out after crossing the floor “ridge” into the space beyond, kneeling down beside the panicking lamb, and tenderly checking for damage. Nothing broken; only a painful scrape. His task became a tiny bit easier, for his eyes were beginning to penetrate the deep gloom of the cave.

It came as a sudden shock when Pard realized that his eyes were not finally adjusting to the dark but the dark itself was easing away! A soft light was defusing around him, a light that unlike the sun had no source but was simply *there*.

And you thought darkness was mysterious.

Pard’s ears stretched out to catch the smallest sound. The lamb lay silent in his arms; so too did the cave around them, only not in his arms. But nothing stirred. Nothing. Not the slightest hint of movement, but only the kind of silence possible when one was totally isolated, shut away from the entire world.

The dim source-less glow increased so slowly that Pard could not detect any change. Yet change there was, for now he could see even deeper into the cave, so deep that he could see the cave walls and ceiling slipping away to reveal a large cavern, a bubble in the cave that like the cave’s entrance beckoned him on.

How could he say no?

Easily, but not in this case.

Carefully cradling the lamb in his arms, he cautiously stepped forward through what remained of the cave entrance and into the sizable cavern beyond. The moment his foot stepped into the open space deep within the mountain, the ambient light increased to the point that it resembled the flickering light of an open fire—yet there was no flickering; there was no fire; there was no sound of crackling logs or spitting sparks. Only dead silence, except of course for their quiet breaths, his pumping heart, and the scrape of shepherd well-worn sandals across the stone floor. For he was drawn toward a large body-sized oblong pedestal rising straight up from the floor. If the soft light could be said to have a source, this would be it.

Pard slowly advanced up to the bier, his eyes carefully scanning the cavern's walls for any sign of danger. For bier it was, a stone pillar rising seamlessly from the floor, whose purpose could only be to support a body after death. All this was a tomb, Pard's mind rapidly recasting the scene before him. But . . . no body. Only a silver-white sheet carefully folded and placed where a body should have been.

But the bier was not to be touched. In fact, there was something preventing his feet from moving closer, his hands from reaching out, and his fingers from grasping . . . anything. Not that he could do anything, given the lamb he held in his hands. But that made little difference. Even if he had wanted to reach out, he could not.

Pard didn't know how long he stood in front of the stone slab, eyes focused on the folded cloth lying at its center. Suddenly he came to himself, not knowing he was away until the act of returning struck him. Released from whatever spell that held him, for his tribal gods could explain it in no other way, his eyes flashed around the cavern's walls. Something had changed. The soft mellow light had ebbed away from the bier and was now rising up around the base of the walls. This light revealed two small niches that called to him from their very intensity, their very *need*.

One stone niche faced the head of the bier, so known by the pillow-like rise at that end of the slab. The other faced the foot. Diametrically opposed by position; united in a common symbol of death. One embraced the mind; the other movement itself. Both contained objects.

Moving to the wall niche at the head, with the bier at his back, his hands reached in to tentatively touch the single object within and then, when it didn't bite him, to remove it and carefully place it within the tanned hide satchel that hung around any shepherd's shoulders. But not before he recognized NewChristian lettering: D ... S ... M ... 7 ... 5 0 ... *DSM-750*, he muttered to himself, quickly looking around to see if anyone—or anything—had noticed and been offended.

As the light in this niche faded, he slid along the cool stone wall to face the niche at the foot of the bier. Like the first niche, the light was strong within the cavity. Illuminated within was a single flat sheet with markings upon its surface, a drawing of some sort, through Pard could not make it out. As he cautiously slipped the tablet from its ancient resting place, he noticed there were more NewChristian lettering in the upper left corner. S ... C ... H ... E ... M ... A ... T ... I ... C ... *Schematic*, he spelled to himself.

Pard was proud to have gone to the village school for three years. He was an educated shepherd.

As he put the tablet next to the book-like object in his satchel, not only did the light in the niche fade but the light in the cavern grew dim. This left Pard little time to make a quick retreat to the cave tunnel he had entered. Cradling the lamb in one hand while walking one palm against the wall, he passed the ridged doorway and headed out toward the dim light of day that was gradually revealing the passage before him. Finally entering into daylight in a low crouch, he drew a heavy sigh, checked to make sure the remaining sheep were ok, and packed them off toward the village pen where they would spend the night.

As for Pard, he would talk to the village shaman, the holder of village memories, bringing him the two objects he had found in the tomb. After all, it was best to let Herb, the village Sage, deal with it all.

And with that, he tucked the whole episode into the back of his mind and returned to his appointed task of tending to the welfare of the village's sheep.

It was very demanding and quite responsible work.

Chapter 2

The Point of Infection

Herb was *the* village Shaman, holder of the clan's sacred memories and official Sage for all nearby mountain villages. Now he held the two objects rather gingerly in his hands. As his eyes shifted from one to the other of the things in the flickering light of the hearth fire, he thought about the young shepherd's strange tale of the empty tomb, strange lights, and a mysterious presence, and . . . and what?

Was there something at work, some presence he neither understood nor perhaps wanted to understand? His first thought was of a mischievous god or spirit entity, but such were not likely to be associated with a tomb. *Most* unlikely. Did this mean that both tomb and these things in his hands might not only stand outside his tribal lore but stand in opposition to it?

He prayed to the goddess they would not. But he simply couldn't be sure. Like it or not, he knew deep down that he would have to have Pard take him to the cave, the tomb—if that was what it was—and guide him to the chamber where these two artifacts had apparently once lain.

The problem for Herb was that he suspected that the tomb was not really the origin of these two ancient artifacts that lay so innocently in his hands. Their source lay within the minds, the culture that not only created the tomb but used it to pass something of themselves down through the streams of time. It seems, Herb reflected in a rather poetic turn of mind, that we might be entering an historical period when such a stream erupted into a series of rapids and sharp waterfalls after centuries of nothing but gentle and sedate flows.

He need to know, to know if what he suspected deep within was true or not—hoping against hope that it was not. For if it was, he would have to discard as false all that had defined him up to this point in time. And that included his position not only within this village but the surrounding mountain clusters of local communities as well, all of whom relied upon his wisdom and tribal lure to manage any problems that would arise during the daily and seasonal course of affairs.

Mountain time was eternal time, cyclic time repeating itself over and over again with the same themes constantly in play. But these artifacts so cool in his hands suggested time was not cyclic, but . . . ? They simply did not belong in village time; they were too different, too odd, too *strange*.

He could feel the tension growing, there, just behind his eyes.

The thing is, He—Herb—had no idea of what had just taken place, only that what had taken place with Pard's revelation of the existence of the tomb and these two objects that lay here in his hands were significant, meaningful in a way he knew not. Herb, the clan Sage, knew without knowing how he knew, that they changed everything.

Perhaps he too would have to pass these objects over to more knowledgeable hands. Herb had heard of a new group that recently had emerged from within the NewChristian community down by the sea, a group whose charismatic leader—a man named Doc—had taken up the task of reforming NewChristian healing practices along new lines. What this meant, Herb didn't know. But he did respect anyone capable of undertaking the healing work he himself carried out within his own cluster of villages.

Looking down into his hands, deep into the two objects his finger contained that somehow contained him, Herb knew that one object was a book of the type NewChristians often employed to record their own thoughts. Yet it was a book printed on strange paper indeed, paper more metal than paper even though it folded with equal ease. As for this plaque, this tablet, what strange image was this engraved upon its surface?

It was rare indeed that Herb was confused, was mystified, was uncertain, for he held with himself all the traditional authority passed down through centuries, custodian of a lore created and tested by these very same currents of time now threatened them all.

Darkness seemed to open up beneath his feet, the ground itself becoming vague, listless, and empty leaving only the hint of an abyss, the threat of an abyss, the presence of an abyss that in the coming days would haunt his very dreams. For the one thing about an abyss, it has no bottom. One can fall without the fall every coming to an end.

It was in this meditative state that his friend, Bellwether, found him.

Now why Herb and Bellwether should ever have become close friends amazed both of them. Normally, Herb's traditional authority and Bellwether's free-wheeling mentality would have set them at each other's throats. It was not that Bellwether ever directly confronted Herb, either in public or in private, so Herb had little to complain about in that regard. But neither did Bellwether actually respect the role and tasks his role required, assuming only that Herb played them well. Very well indeed, should Bellwether be pressed to admit this.

And perhaps, wearing these close-fitting clothes that carefully defined and prescribed his life, Herb allowed himself to recognize that bit within that sought an irresponsible life. But because he could never do such things, he passed them on to Bellwether who did them for him. Yet who really knows what passes in the deep psyche of men and women? His own profession gave witness to the greater depths of human existence than superficial realities would profess. And this did not admit only the mystery of the gods and goddess that held the villager's destiny in their collective hands, but the deeper mystery of existence itself.

Funny he should think of existence at this time.

To explain everything in terms of these gods and goddess was now somehow, to Herb, lacking in . . . foundations? Why this was so, he could not explain. Indeed, it was something that rarely if ever penetrated into his mind, a question that never sprung into consciousness. Yet it was still there, a nagging feeling hovering in the background, tainting the important and necessary work of healing the community that was his responsibility as the Sage, the shaman.

It seems that these objects, so simple in themselves, were setting into motion a slow-motion crisis of faith that would end with him adrift from all that was familiar and assured. What this crisis was, or is, was still a matter of conjecture. It might not even be real. If indeed it was, then this feeling of existential distress was only the first sign of a cascade of disasters to come. And to make the situation worse, there was no possible way out. Silently, reflectively, he placed the two artifacts in Bellwether's hands.

Turning them over, Bellwether was struck not only by the strange feel of the artifacts, as if there were far heavier than they looked, but the equally weird reaction his friend Herb was having to their presence.

Putting aside for the time being the mental state of his friend, Bellwether focused his attention on the things resting in his hands. It was obvious from the very first that both were artificial, ancient artifacts belonging to some strange perhaps mythical world in the very, very distant past. It seemed that this mythological world was not so mythological at all, if this was the origin of such artifacts. Certainly the warrior tribes could never fashion such things. Nor would the NewChristians ever produce such finery, such authority, in anything not having to do with their religion—not that they could, given the degree of craftsmanship involved in these objects.

He turned them over. The back of the “Schematic” was blank, a smooth metallic surface that came close to being a mirror were it not for the matte burnishing upon its surface. The same was not true for the “DSM-750”, whatever that might mean. Much to his surprise, engraved upon its equally “metallic” back cover was an image at once familiar, at least to those of the village people that followed the ways and lore of NewChristians.

It was the image of two serpents wrapped around a winged staff.

It was the same image used by the NewChristian movement started only a few years ago by a man named Doc, a sect that was known as . . . MED+?

So, something to do with NewChristian healing. Turning it over, Bellwether flipped through the many pages that made up the volume. Details, fine details in tiny print, all laid out in NewChristian letters though the meaning to these particular worlds had been long lost except to a few NewChristian scholars. A guide to healing, spelled out in such detail by those who knew far more of these arts than Herb, the clan Sage?

No wonder his friend was in such a degree of emotional stress. There before him lay knowledge of human healing that likely so surpassed Herb’s achievements to such a degree that he would only be considered an ignorant practitioner to those who produced such a work. What a downer.

He stole a quick glance at his friend from the corner of his eye. Herb was quietly pacing back and forth across the small room of his healing lodge, eyes fixed only on the objects in Bellwether’s hands.

Now the possible loss of professional status didn’t affect Bellwether, for unlike Herb his sense of self did not depend on the role he played within the village community. However, this individuality brought its own problems, for on what *did* his sense of self depend? That question he had yet to answer, though for him such an answer was not really needed. The

question itself contained its own answer, and Bellwether did not need to understand why this should be so in order to be content with it being so.

Handing the two artifacts back to Herb meant he had to face his friend once again. And to face his friend meant facing the emotional distress that was passing through Herb's face. And to that emotional pain he had no answer.

Herb took up this burden once again, the relics weighting heavily in his hands. A sigh escaped his lips. That a shepherd should have ever found the tomb, much less bought these artifacts back into the light of day only to place them in his hands . . . but what really bothered him is that this should happen on his watch. It was his problem to face, should he decide to face it. It might be prudent to set it aside, at least for the moment, and carry on as usual. But like most decisions of that type, the underlying question would only fester beneath the conscious mind, setting in motion changes in the relationships between people as intersubjective dynamics became unsettled. People would know something was up, that something had changed, even if they couldn't specify the change itself.

And so it was that Herb's first healing lodge challenge came into being. And with it his first failure.

Now, the great advantage of the healing lodge over NewChristian medical practices was that it treated the state of the person's soul. Or rather, since individuality itself was not considered important in village life, the ease and mutual trust of intersubjective and emotionally based relationships within the community. The health of the community was more important than the health of any one individual, given that any failure to provide a steady stream of goods in an environment where resources were limited and famine an ever-present threat meant the destruction of all.

And central to that communal healing process was the healing lodge, the healing circle, the place where infractions and discords could be ironed out more or less to the satisfactions of all. Such processes do not depend on the imposition of an outside power but on the mutual interaction among members who were essentially equal to each other. Not that there were differences in power and authority in village life, but only that all depended on all and in that sense all were of equal importance in the maintenance of village life.

It was Herb's task to run the healing lodge, not to control it but to manage the conditions within which such communal healing could take place. But now he had a problem. The assurance that normally accompanied him when carrying out such a task was no longer there. Or perhaps it would be better to say that his assurance that all was right was not innate, an extension of his very self, but had suddenly become a persona that he now had to don to make things happen as traditionally they should.

Thus the disturbance was brought to the healing lodge. Villagers who entered the lodge seeking healing and harmony among themselves now encountered a shaman who was no

longer a traditional Sage but a persona. In most affairs, this would not have been a problem. Bellwether was well aware that all people wore personas they used in their interactions with others. And indeed, others in living their own persona recognized the personas donned by others in a mutual interlocking dance of getting on with business.

But a persona was not sufficient when what was needed was a true believer. And Herb was no longer, deep down, a true believer. The question posed by the two artifacts rested there, nestled in his mind like a thorn under the skin, an irritant that would not go away. Then there was the looming reality of a personal visit to the empty tomb.

At first, the healing lodge ceremony went as expected. The stage was set, the air warmed by a bed of coals and a layer of hot rocks. The distractions of the world laid aside by that first step into this enclosed window-less room, sealed by the closing of the flap that contained the within and isolated it from the without. As people sought their respective places around the central fire, they also sought the stillness and willingness within to enter into the ceremony. Sitting in silence around common warmth, internally prepared for the long process of healing, they met face to face in a direct encounter with the reality of each other. It was at this point that the shaman, Herb, stood and addressed those assembled there for healing. But as they listened to their sage, the initial problem requiring the healing lodge slipped aside and outline of a new problem began to emerge. Although the dimensions of this new problem had still to be understood much less defined, it was clear at some deep level that it was the healer that need healing. Always sensitive to the intersubjective dimension of human relationships, the collective began to sort through the underlying problem.

What started was a discussion on the issue that had brought them together here in the healing lodge but while words said one thing meaning revolved around whatever had stripped their healer from them. It was a language beyond language. All this was something new, for the Sages assurance was always there in support of the communal need for healing. Now it was . . . not gone, exactly, but missing. And that missing element created a new dynamic within the lodge.

Unfortunately, it was not a dynamic that lay within their common experience. It was something new, something unforeseen, something that touched the village community at the deepest of all levels. And so it was that the existential distress experienced by their Sage communicated itself to those in the healing lodge. And the failure of the healing lodge to deal with the original problem, given the rise of an entirely new complication, communicated that distress to the villagers. What was already a crisis for the shaman was rapidly becoming a crisis for not only the village but the clan.

It was only a few days later that Bellwether set out to take both artifacts to Doc. This was a trip he did not want to make for it not only took him through territory occupied by warrior tribes crossing the great plain, but exposed him to the whims and wishes of the NewChristian harbor city—and threatened to tie him in people's minds to the charismatic

healing movement created by a controversial NewChristian mover and maker. For someone who had slipped into the role of outsider, or at least had not defined himself in any tribal identity, this potential involvement with non-village NewChristian citizens posed a bit of a problem.

It was also soon after the debacle of the healing lodge that Herb sought out the shepherd Pard, and together they took off in the early hours of the morning after Bellwether had left to find that small opening in the mountainside leading to the empty tomb inside. They did not take the lamb with them.

Unbeknownst to either party, the size of the now defunct healing lodge was expanding. But how large would it grow? And in what form would or could any healing take place?

Chapter 3

The Quest Starts

It wasn't easy for Bellwether to leave his mountain community.

Not that he wasn't psychically prepared to leave, for there were numerous times he had ventured forth into the lands beyond the familiar mountains. Once he had even seen ships at harbor in the NewChristian city, standing on the wharf along which many ships were moored. Now *that* was a strange sight for a mountain man.

These and other journeys had been enough to satisfy his curiosity and wonder-lust. He had no interest in either the cultural dynamics of the NewChristians nor the rough and ready ways of those warrior tribes that would lie between him and the goal he ultimately sought. On top of it all, Doc and the community he had formed lay out in the harbor on a small island that for one reason or other they had named *The Magician's Isle*.

That in itself gave him pause. Not because he believed in either magicians or spirits, and certainly he knew the NewChristian Doc was no magician, no spirit. Neither did Bellwether fear facing another's strange beliefs, for that he had done many times over among his own people. No, it was the idea of setting to sea, for the only way to the isle was by boat and the very depths of the salt water plus the ever-present waves that sometimes ran higher than a man himself sent shivers up his spine.

Besides, it was rather presumptuous of Doc to give a barren off-shore island he intended to make his home such a name.

Yet, it was a journey that had to be undertaken—if not for the healing of his friend but the well-being of his mountain people. For somehow, Herb’s existential distress—dread might be the better word—had spread to those Herb served. Or at least, some of them, the more intelligent who might find them ensnared in such “spirit” traps. But there were enough of them to disturb the equilibrium of uncountable centuries of mountain life.

Funny that this problem did not infect him; he was certainly intelligent enough.

No, the problem in leaving the village was a strange one. It seemed that those caught up in this existential distress found some form of relieve by his very presence. It was as if he provided a degree of immunity to what was rapidly becoming a major and unsolvable problem in the lives of his friends and neighbors. How could he leave them in such distress?

Yet leave them he must, for he had no answers to give and his mere presence did little to stem the underlying condition that simmered below the surface. Luckily, at least for now the daily concerns of surviving in harsh conditions were enough to keep them going. But the ultimate impact of such an assault on meaning, such a loss of purpose, might well destroy them all as the distress worked itself out within the community. Relying on traditions was all well and good as long as things didn’t change too much or too fast. But quite often traditions failed when new things came along, when some fundamental change took place that challenged traditional authorities. Who am I, if I’m not defined by my culture?

The loss of past brought with it a loss of future. Constrained to a small arc of a psychological presence with a shaky past and little future, for what do men and women have to live? Before too long there would be a lack of children, Bellwether realized. For who would want to raise children if all they had to offer them was a meaningless life? Why seek to have children in the first place, especially when the communal standards for raising them were slipping by the wayside?

Strange that such a joy should be ever be given up by men and women. Strange indeed it would be if they decided to forgo such pleasures. It seemed that the mysterious currents of the human psyche run deep into areas not meant for mankind to inhabit.

But it was not in Bellwether’s nature to reflect on such matters. He found sufficient interest in the affairs at hand to bother much with highly speculative matters of the mind. Not that he didn’t enjoy a good argument. Only that he preferred concrete reality to “abstract” spiritual thought. The world was strange enough, mysterious enough, to occupy a person for a countless number of lives. Existence itself was a mystery having no possibility of resolution. In fact, it was this sense of mystery in existence that released him from the conceptual confines of mountain clans, to embrace a world beyond that of his own natal community. And there was no need to understand that larger world; only to embrace the reality of its existence.

As he hiked down the mountain trail along the banks of the Jonah River along whose banks ran a crude road used by simple tradesmen to transport materials from the mountains to the plains and supplies back again, his thoughts rested on the crunch of gravel beneath his feet, the smell of flowers in his nose, the chirping of birds in nearby bushes disturbed by his passage, the feel of the sun upon his head, the smooth movements of his limbs—in short, he lived in the moment in which he lived, content with that which was and is, and in doing so quite open to whatever might be around the corner. For the drive to achieve, to dominate, to control invariably shifted the mind from the present to “what if” worlds that had little reality outside that of the dreams and magic desires of conquest and domination by those that dreamed such dreams.

It was not that Bellwether didn’t dream; he did. It was only that his dreams did not involve the control of either himself or the universe. He accepted both as mysteries to be lived, to be discovered, to allow the unfolding of both as they might without fear of loss or anxiety of want. And while the conscious mind had a role in all this, it was not to dominate reality. His dreams unfolded reality as it should be, as reality itself would have it. So in some strange way he moved around the world as if a child constantly amazed at a steady stream of new experiences and insights into reality.

But not as a child. This difference, hard to define, made all the difference. Perhaps Doc could shed light on such matters. Such thoughts were certainly beyond his limited intellectual powers.

It was when he approached the river bridge at the fork leading to the plains that Bellwether’s luck ran out. Up until then his travels were as pleasant as they could be. Good weather, the hum of bees in their search for nectar, the soothing sound of the river water turning restlessly in its bed, all this and more brought comfort out of him. But that was not to last. And the reason why lay with a circle of tents at the end of the bridge and the soft pale-white smoke rising into the pale-blue sky from the fire-circle within them. They could only be a band of young tribal warriors out to test both luck and mettle in their quest to become true men.

So trouble there certainly was going to be. But what kind of trouble depended on who was leading this little nomadic band of warriors. Of that there were really only two choices: T-Dog or Chall. If it was T-Dog, then reason stood a chance. If it was Chall, then . . . well, let’s say that Chall sought to displace T-Dog from his position of top dog among all warriors. Now this was not necessarily a bad thing. But combine such a drive for dominance with a fixation on nothing else, mixed well with a level of stupidity that had to be seen to be believed . . .

It was Chall who came out to greet him.

Now it was rumored that Chall the Challenger didn’t have a creative bone in his body, cared about no one but himself, was brilliant in digging out anything that might benefit him, and to top it all off had the type of arrogance that came from a deep sense of entitlement. He

should be chief of all the warrior tribes, and the fact that he was not rankled. If true, Bellwether thought, he would be a difficult man with which to deal. Mediocre he might be, but his confidence suggested otherwise to those who admired him almost as a father figure.

It was true, all of it and more. But Chall was good at hiding his real intentions behind a mask, a persona of friendliness, good cheer, and all those characteristics he thought appropriate to pass himself off as chief of all the tribes. It took a few days for Bellwether to confirm these rumors, days of being hosted by Chall before the tribe during the day and kept in bondage during the night. But all that was yet to come.

Chall welcomed Bellwether to sit with his fellow warriors around the crackling evening fire, sharing the day's end with his little band of raiding brothers while at the same time quietly instructing a warrior to go through Bellwether's things. When the warrior returned with the two artifacts, they provoked a stream of questions, at first polite and then more aggressive as it became clear that Bellwether was unwilling or perhaps unable to answer them. Probably more the former rather than the latter.

Unwilling was the key word, for knowledge of the empty tomb and the two artifacts that remained would do these warriors no good and perhaps much harm, for among other things it might send them up into the mountains in search of other wealth. For the moment, though, Chall was already speculating on how he could put both Bellwether and his "gifts" he had brought them to good use in toppling T-Dog from his pinnacle of warrior power. His ambitions traveled no further, opened no new lands. Those things Bellwether carried could be used to further his aims, or not. They certainly had no intrinsic value.

That was the difference between Chall and T-Dog. T-Dog would have recognized the deeper significance of these objects, even though he certain would not understand them. For that matter, the same held true for Bellwether. At least the two of them could speculate together, something quite impossible to do with Chall.

The next day, Chall "invited" Bellwether to accompany the band back to their tribal camp located a few day's ride away, just within the boundaries of a large forest that offered a modicum of protection. It was well off the road to the city/town of New Jerusalem, for the path leading to the bridge met with another path from the North Mountains to form a proper road created and maintained by the NewChristian people. Now they were riding at an angle across grass-lands that stretched out for miles in every direction. A premonition of the sea he sought to cross on his way to the isle? But at least the grass didn't heave in the wind—or at least bob up and down with the gait of the horse on which he was precariously perched hanging tightly to the warrior seated ahead of him.

The artifacts stayed with Chall. Bellwether could see them strapped to the side of his saddle as if they were sacks of grain, although grain would have been of greater value to the rider.

That evening the warriors managed to set up camp without either taking their eyes off him or letting him approach the edge of their temporary site. And they were not quiet about it, especially since they knew Bellwether lacked the plainsmen skills to erect either tent or fire. And being sent out to collect tinder was clearly out of the question.

It was after the evening meal, when the fire was dying down to a faint glow of ashes that Chall came into the tent. In his hands he bore the two artifacts with a recklessness that belied the attention he was giving them. Despite the fatigue of the day, Bellwether came fully alert within seconds of the flap being drawn. But Chall only sat in silence, staring off into the distance, casually toying with book and sketch before leaving as abruptly as he had come.

Ah, softening me up for something, I suspect. The thought ran through Bellwether's mind, accompanied by another one, I wonder for what?

Another day and another silent vigil before the band reached their tribal camping grounds. T-Dog was there to greet them, knowing full well that he had to keep constant tabs on Chall's movements if he was to—literally—keep his head much less his status as top ranking warrior, war chief of all the tribes.

The first evening at the main tribal camp was again spent around a fire. Bellwether was directed by Chall to sit at his side, where the both of them would face T-Dog over dancing flames. Conversation was weird, for the only way the two could communicate was to pass a verbal message to the person next to him, who would pass it on to the next, and so on until the message was received by the intended recipient. This suited the both of them, for at the same time it revealed, it concealed. Between the ambiguities, the real work went on. And the real work had to do with the fate of Bellwether, although the topic of discussion revolved around the two artifacts that lay in Chall's lap. Eventually, though, the objects were passed around the circle where each person had a chance to finger the strange things before passing them on to the next. When they reached T-Dog, Bellwether was startled to note a brief moment of recognition in the chief's eyes before they too went silent, masked by the deeper issues playing themselves out amid the tongues of dancing flames and soaring sparks that marked a warrior's conference.

One by one, the warrior's eyes began to droop until the only people left awake were T-Dog, Chall, and Bellwether. The three of them retired to the chief's tent, leaving the other warriors to nod off in their own dreams of glory and conquest while they pursued reality. Or at least T-Dog and Chall did; Bellwether was only a pawn in their game. After awhile it became clear that while Chall sought only his own power to dominate the tribes, T-Dog only sought the well-being of his tribes. He used his powers as chief to better their circumstances while Chall was quite content to let them stagnate as long as he was the one overseeing it.

That difference changed Bellwether's strategy, which up to that point was to stay out of trouble and protect the artifacts as best he might. Not only was it clear that T-Dog

recognized the artifacts, although how that might be Bellwether did not know, but T-Dog recognized them as being important for his people. Chall clearly did not, being interested only in how Bellwether could be used to advance his own position.

It was a most interesting choice on the part of both men, perhaps truly revealing the gulf between them and the likely consequences should Chall succeed in taking over the reins of power. Mind you, there are times the position changes the man. But Bellwether didn't think much of the odds that would happen.

It was T-Dog that drove events. In his role as chief, he requested Chall to retire to his own quarters in order to prepare for tomorrow's breaking camp. At the same time, he retained the two artifacts, holding them in his lap as if they were of so little consequence, that he could give them to his children as toys. Of course, Chall had to pretend that he couldn't care less about them as well, something that was partially true. They had their usefulness in keeping Bellwether at his side, and besides, they might be objects of power that he could employ for his own interests. Still, he had to pretend they were of little importance.

This left T-Dog and Bellwether facing each other over a much small fire at the center of the tent. More coals than flame, it radiated heat that created a zone of comfort made cozy by the all-enclosing hide walls of the tent with its vent to the stars above their heads.

At first they sat in silence as the sounds of the camp preparing for night faded in time with the dying fires.

Where did these come from? Bellwether related the story of Pard and the empty tomb.

Why do you carry them? Bellwether related the growing distress not only of his best friend Herb but of the village community in which he lived. Something had to be done, and since none of them understood what was taking place they sought answers elsewhere.

Where "elsewhere"? *The Magician's Isle* and its resident mage, the Doc.

There ensued another long period of silence, significant or not cannot be told. But at the end of it, T-Dog rose from his cushion of pine branches and deer hides, placed the artifacts in Bellwether's hands, and bid him rise and follow him through the flap covering the exit from the tent. Carefully, step by step, Bellwether followed him through the dark crannies of the camp, carefully avoiding any well-lit areas as well as any warrior who might still be about and still on guard. Reaching the coral, T-Dog harnessed one of his own horses, gave Bellwether back his own kit in which to carry the artifacts, and laden down with two days supplies sent him off alone and unescorted into the darkness.

Luckily, the horse seemed to know the way.

T-Dog never did tell Bellwether about the artifacts, or the reason he was letting Bellwether go. But whatever the answers might have been, it was clear the two were related. Anyway, T-Dog was doing something Chall could never do, namely helping him on his way in his quest for knowledge.

It was the mark of a real warrior.

Chapter 4

The Plot Thickens

For the second time, Pard crept on his knees through the cave's dark entrance. This time Herb held close to his heels, so close Pard could feel the Sage's breath upon his bare legs.

Pard didn't know what to make of all this, especially since it was common knowledge that the healing session held at the lodge had failed and that the village that he had spent all his life was not quite the same as it had been before this event. Exactly what this difference was, he did not know—or ever care to define. It was enough that things were different, that what used to work didn't.

For the moment, the only thing that mattered was creeping along in near total darkness, his fingers searching for the ridge that marked the real entrance to the tomb. That he expected everything to be exactly the same came as no surprise. It was the way of empty tombs to remain unfilled, especially this tomb whose existence had little or nothing to do with the oral history of his own people passed down from Sage to Sage.

Besides, he had already removed the only two objects that could be removed. What more could happen?

The same did not hold true for Herb, the sage who was no longer a Sage. Not that he could admit this to himself, for he still held the title and the role even if the recent failure at the healing lodge offered a challenge yet to be faced. Or perhaps he was facing it now, crawling along the dark tunnel keeping as close as he could to Pard's heels advancing ever deeper into the darkness that lay before him.

At least, he told himself, I have some degree of courage. Or did he? Perhaps he was just running away from the community whose needs he could no longer met? Did he ever know anymore?

Now that was simply silly of him, especially as the village's shaman. He was crawling towards the source of the problem. He would find the truth, and the truth would set him

free. And once free of this internal distress, this truth would heal others. At least, that's what he hoped.

They found the door jam, door still ajar, with the hinges rusted so tight that nothing could move. Stepping across the threshold, Pard realized that he expected a repeat of the dim glow to reveal the way, guiding their feet way into the chamber that he knew lay only a short distance ahead of them. Instead, all remained dark, dark . . . and silent. Not even the usual drip of water off the walls of a cave existed to break the loss of all sound other than their own breathing.

Herb had prepared for such an eventuality. Pulling out two pine-tar torches, he bent to the task of igniting tinder with flint and steel, carefully building a flame until the fire took hold of the pitch and refused to let go. The smoke from the sputtering flames drifted upward, following the curve of the cave's roof to the top of the large inner chamber. Light flickered off the walls as unsettled as the hands that steadied the torches. But the one thing that leaped out at them was what Pard had called the sheet, that silver-white slightly luminescent cloth so carefully folded and placed at the center of the bier.

The only thought Herb had was that it *was* there. Shroud or not, it was there, real, before him, touchable should he want to touch it. And despite his misgivings, he did want to reach out and touch it, to slide his fingers across a surface lightly touched by a thin layer of dust from the passage of countless ages. It must have been placed there long before his own people had occupied these barren hillsides.

Pard had said that he was unable to reach out and touch this new artifact. In fact, he still held back, gaze fixed on the bier, his eyes occasionally glancing over to the two now empty niches in the cavern's walls. His hands remembered, even when his mind refused to do so.

Herb reached out, almost as if someone else was reaching out for him, took the folded cloth into his hands and carefully lifted it off the stone slab.

Almost at once, the column of stone started to sink into the ground. Slowly, silently, it merged into the floor so that anyone passing through and looking down would see no sign of it ever having been there. At the same time, dust rose from both niches as the wall around them started to disintegrate. High above, hidden by the cloud of smoke generated by the torches, the sounds of creaking and cracking suggested a conflict of some dimension going on above their heads. When this was accompanied by a fall of fine dust and tiny stone flakes, they knew it was time to leave.

Actually, they knew that a long time before and were already over halfway to the inner cave door when the collapse of the chamber behind them really got underway. Trailing a cloud of dust reaching out for their heels, they jumped through the door that already with a rusty screech was inching closed. They made it through just in time, though they lost both torches in doing so. Clutching the silver-white sheet in his hands, closely followed by Pard, they shot

forth from the mouth of the cave just before another rockslide covered the site for whatever remained of eternity. Not that there was much to be left to hide, though there must have been some mechanism to control both lights and structure that could have survived the crush of stone.

But that would require a mind knowledgeable about both science and technology and not a mountain people who believed in neither. The gods and goddess were having their laugh, looking down from their snow-topped mountain heights. And there was little these poor mortals could do about the matter.

Pard and Herb looked at each other, looked at the dust settling around the mountain behind them, looked at each other once again, and finally focused their gaze on the only thing left of their little adventure into the now non-existent and now really empty tomb. This silver-white cloth ignored them both, as oblivious to their concerns as they might be if contemplating the fate of a butterfly flitting from blossom to blossom in the search for the nourishment of nectar.

There was no clue as to why they both might feel that way. Certainly this piece of cloth, if that is what it was, just lay there like any other bit of cloth, inert and lifeless, perhaps fluttering slightly as a breeze passed by, but equally uncaring about the concerns of men. But this cloth cared, as if it had a life and purpose of its own—or in death had inherited the life and purpose of the person it once held?

If so, the thought scared Herb to the bone—while leaving Pard quite unmoved.

They looked at each other once again. Then Pard turned away, heading for the shepherd's shack that was his home during the sheep pasturing season, while Herb turned his feet toward the healing lodge, carrying the piece of cloth as if it were the most precious object on the face of the earth. Perhaps that might be so, although when Herb thought about it so too might be the two relics named "DSM-750" and "Schematic." After all, all three artifacts came from the same place.

For a brief moment, he wondered what would happen if the three were brought together in one place, bound together in time for one purpose. For intentionality lay behind all this, even if he as shaman and Sage fell short in understanding.

Perhaps his friend Bellwether would have more luck at *The Magician's Isle*. But in the meantime he would bring the cloth to the healing lodge where he would enact the sacred ceremony that allowed healing processes to begin. Somehow they belonged together, lodge and cloth; both were sacred in their own way. Both contained hints to the nature of the universe, to a deeper layer of meaning, to a reality more real than the tradition-bound existence to which they adhered with such intensity and purpose.

Such were the thoughts passing through his head when he shifted the heavy lodge door-flap to the side and took his first step within the healing space. Then his second. Then his third, the curtain now whispering closed behind him leaving only shadows.

It was the strangest thing. The fire in the center of the healing lodge was no more than a heap of ashes, the coals themselves having long expired to the dictates of time. The sole entrance was closed, the flap sealing the entry so that no light could penetrate within. There were no windows to illuminate the interior, for the outside light to creep in and disturb by its very presence the inner peace of those sitting within. Yet, he could see. Not see exactly, but he was aware of every stone, every log, every branch and cushion that defined the interior of the lodge.

Seeing without seeing?

Looking around, he located the small table normally used to hold sacred ritual objects that he used to guide the communal healing process. Empty now, its sacred tools carefully stowed away in their protective containers, it was the perfect place—the only place—that he could put the carefully folded piece of cloth. And so he did . . .

And the world went black.

He could see nothing. It was as if light itself had bled out of the lodge leaving not darkness but the very absence of light behind.

He touched the cloth, and the world returned. But it was a different world, one far larger than the interior of the lodge that he had seen when first entering the sacred healing space. Now he could see the surrounds, both the adjacent house he called home, the path leading to the village, and even the buildings of the village itself with its people going about their daily business.

He lifted his hand from the cloth, now Cloth, and the world went black before his eyes. Now down, and his vision returned as detailed as it was before, as real-seeming as it was before. But was it real? He lifted his hand once again, and stumbled in the darkness to the lodge's entrance. Pulling the hide flap aside, he emerged into the world only to find the house and the surround land in exactly the same state as he had observed from within the lodge.

Turning his feet to the path, he entered the village—only to find that not only were the houses in the same state as he had imagined, including opened doors and closed windows, the same people were in the same places doing the same things he had “observed” from within the lodge.

Shaken, Herb returned, re-entered the lodge, and knowing the interior better than he knew his own palm soon found the table holding the cloth. But this time he didn't reach out, couldn't reach out, for in some way, for some reason, the Cloth refused his further touch. At

least for now. But Herb was sure this would change. Otherwise, why would it have shown him, or given him the temporary power, to perceive the world as the Cloth itself perceived it. Herb was sure, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that what he had experienced was the world seen through its eyes.

This begged all sorts of questions. Did other senses exist of equal or greater power than those possessed by humans? Was what they revealed built around the proportionate understanding of mere mortals like him, or was it grounded in an understanding from some higher perspective of existence, some higher being? And just how far did these senses extend in terms of space? Or, come to think about it, time?

Now that was an interesting question. For Herb knew from his experience in the healing lodge that each person lived in a psychological present, one that included bits of past history and anticipations of futures to come. In fact, much of Herb's work consisted in helping participants modify such bits so as to restore a degree of harmony and mutual cooperation among members of the community. Did the Cloth provide the same service?

It was several days before Herb began to have some hint of an answer. During that time he had not only closed down the lodge to all those who sought its healing powers but gone into a meditative retreat so deep that no one in the village could find him. Though search parties did, for the existential distress had not gone away with the passage of time.

Finally, he came down from his mountain sanctuary and once again entered into the healing lodge. All was the same as it was before. The villagers had not sought to find him within, so had left everything as it was. Why they had thought so rather puzzled him, for he certainly had need of healing. Yet they hadn't, so that was that.

Once again he stood in front of the Cloth. Now in the darkness it was softly glowing—emitting light as Pard once told him the tomb itself had emitted light. So that part was true.

And his part? He was about to find out, for now it appeared that the Cloth was prepared for the next stage of their encounter. And an encounter it was, for the Cloth held the past, Herb held the present, and unknown to both Bellwether held the future. But the latter had still to be revealed to mortal eyes, so we are left with the encounter between past and present. This Herb knew as a result of his long sojourn within himself. Not the equal part of it, but the part that had to do with far distant past encountering present realities.

It was in fact the source of the existential distress that he and many members of his community faced, yet not Bellwether for some reason. Herb knew that he was about to descend into the meaningless abyss of his own existence with the distinct possibility he might not survive the encounter. Yet the very existence of this distress made it an essential he do exactly that. And with that thought, he once again placed his hands upon the Cloth.

And the Cloth reached out and touched him.

Chapter 5

Entering New Jerusalem

T-Dog's horse had gratefully traced his trail back to his rightful home, having discharged his assigned duty to Bellwether. In fact, the horse had gone way above any call to duty, carrying him so close to the gates of the city/town that it was only a day's walk away. Any closer and Bellwether was likely to lose his steed to the greed of the towners inside the gate, and T-Dog's warrior horse knew this.

New Jerusalem was a gated city. It had been built that way partly as a defense against marauding warrior tribes that held the plains to be their own and hated any intruders, and partly in memory of the original gated city of that name. Now New Jerusalem as a hub of commercial activity seemed far more interested in material than spiritual success. The original founder would have stood aghast at how his committed and converted community of would-be saints' descendants would turn out. As centuries flowed past, the original heighten state of being created by the creator as those who he created sought to reach the Divine Mystery's own standards lapsed into concerns more worldly than spiritual. Though the spiritual still remained, the language it spoke was the language of worldly men rather than God.

Still, there were true believers. And Pree, the high priest, was one of them. At least, he was the last time Bellwether and Pree's course had crossed. Even then, Bellwether realized that Pree was a man of little creativity, a loyal traditionalist with a distinctly ruthless and relentless streak when it came to religious matters. Whether or not he was a false leader, someone who thinks he or she is deeply spiritual when they are not, a seducer of others into false paths, that was still to be seen.

Bellwether believed that the crisis nagging at his heels would bring the reality of "existential distress" into the public realm. It would be interesting to see how Pree responded to the changes that would soon unfold in JesusLand, not that he believed any changes were necessary other than those of repentance and redemption. What Bellwether didn't know but would soon find out was that this crisis over meaning had preceded him, entering the city/town through another gate well in advance of his own arrival.

ProPost was quite different from Pree. An extremely wealthy and well-placed citizen of New Jerusalem who saw himself as the ultimate individualist and achiever, he thrived on challenges that other men and women would flee; no matter what, he would stand up to reality and stare it down. Or so he thought. No existential dread could touch the surface of his existence, for he would only retreat into the stability of his own wealth, property, and status. In no way was he as a wealthy and prosperous citizen of New Jerusalem likely to face the abyss with its hidden potential for religious conversion.

For both Pree and ProPost, time would tell. For the moment, however, Bellwether faced the challenge of entering the city/town. Guards still manned gates, perhaps less vigorously as in the early days when the city/town was being built, yet still mindful of the possibility of bands of raiding nomadic warriors or the occasional incursions of destitute mountain people. Although more or less peaceful accommodations had been worked out over centuries that had lessened the possibility of outright conflict, still there were differences. And every once in a while they would rise to the surface, briefly explode in a flash of passion, only to reside once again into a state of grudging acceptance and mutual tolerance.

To top it off, the small medical team assembled under the charismatic leadership of someone called Doc were not exactly embraced by city folk. In fact, they felt the MED+, as they named themselves, to be a slap in the face of their own traditional healers. Which indeed they were, if they were as Bellwether suspected they were, namely a hard core band of reformers whose zeal came close to matching that of the city/town founders. Taking these two ancient possibly priceless artifacts to such a group might not please the guardians within the gates. Nor would the artifacts provide a pass for those standing guard at the gates, for they not only distrusted change but would be called to account should anything go wrong on their watch.

The problem was amplified by the fact that the two people he knew who could grant passage—Pree and ProPost—would each have their own motives for letting him enter only to confiscating his goods once he was firmly within their grasp. No doubt this act would reverberate among the city members, for each would seek to use the artifacts to strengthen their own position at the expense of the other. So blowback was inevitable. The prognosis? It would likely mean an extended period of chaos and conflict while things sorted themselves out as best they might.

In fact, if Bellwether did get through and deliver the artifacts to Doc and this act became public knowledge, then the same dynamics would apply. Only this time, the MED+ team would be in the crosshairs, not him.

That was a pleasant thought.

Still, what a mess. Once one has to deceive there is no end to it. Or at least, that is the way it seems to be. Only time will tell.

And time was not standing still, though Bellwether certainly was as he waited before the city/town western gate. True, guards were idle and showing signs of boredom, but all that could change in an instant. Yet an answer had to be found to the existential distress now passing through his mountain village. And that problem did have a due date, even if no one could set the exact time. So passing through the gates became a moral imperative.

With a sigh, pretending to be an innocent mountain trader rather bored with it all, Bellwether causally stepped up before the one who seemed to be in charge. The guard didn't

look up, leaving Bellwether a bit at odds. But this was expected practice, that visitors to the city/town had to be put into their place, authority had to be made present, and the seeker-of-entry made to feel little compared with the power of the city state. In other words, it was bureaucracy at its finest. Can't live with them; can't live without them. They can only be tolerated and perhaps given a slap on the wrist when they misbehave.

Bellwether gave a short cough. The guard raised his eyes and brought them to focus on this strange being before him. And strange he was to New Christian eyes, attired as he was in drab mountain garb rather than the flashy extravagant colors of a true NewChristian towner. Pushing his papers away from him on his desk, the guard raked his eyes over the obvious non-NewChristian standing before him and asked the dreaded question.

Inspired, Bellwether coughed again, pointing at his throat, and gave signs that he had lost his voice, that this was a major problem for him, and that—pointing to the city within the gates—he believed the healers within were more powerful than the healers without. Flattery will get you anywhere, some say. Or not, as others say. In this case it brought only the guard's guard, a burly no-nonsense sergeant taking a military stance hinting at someone who would quite easily with no conscience getting in the way happily sell his own grandmother to the slaver down the street.

And all for the price of a pint of beer.

Again Bellwether started his pantomime, this time fully aware there was a good chance he would be admitted only to be committed. He had seen NewChristian jails during his last visit, at least from the outside, and was not impressed by the quality of their service.

Suddenly a young man garbed in colors that would have made any mountain villager gag, grabbed his arm, yanked him back, and proceeded to dress down the guard. As far as Bellwether could make out from the rapid flow of verbiage cast between the two, although it was mostly a one-way conversation, the guard was an idiot, a no-brainer who couldn't tie his own shoes, and wouldn't know a guest from an enemy pounding at the gate if the enemy hit him in the face and held a sign "I am an enemy!" mere inches before his eyes. In the midst of all that, the stranger handed Bellwether the hat that Bellwether had dropped while pantomiming and pulled him by one arm into the city, leaving a sputtering and frustrated guard behind to stare at his underling who was in turn turning his head to look off across the distant plains.

Rounding the corner of the next building, the stranger drew back and held out his hand for the price of getting Bellwether through the gates. Why Bellwether wanted to get into the city didn't matter at all to him. Bellwether was only the means to gain a bit of money, quite a bit if the illegal entrant was up to no good and wanted to get away without being noticed. Sadly, it was a sign of the times.

Bellwether paid the suggested sum; the two parted ways.

One problem solved, and the next in line rose to demand his full attention. He had to get through the maze of narrow streets and down to the harbor before he could even start to think about passage to *The Magician's Isle*. Despite recent evidence to the contrary, he doubted anyone would grab his arm and walk him over the waves, the NewChristian Christ-myth to the contrary. Though that would certainly raise the eyes of any NewChristian lucky enough, or unlucky enough, to witness that little miracle.

Street maps were not a source to knowing the layout of the city/town, for those who lived there knew it full well and had no such printer's gift to remember passageways travel since birth. And those just visiting, as few as they were, already had a destination in mind and had been given the route to take before entering the city. As for tourists, there were none. So, no guides.

But men of the mountains knew terrain. Even if the land was covered with man-made structures, the land remained. And to those who could read its map, the direction was clear. The drift of salt air off the ocean combined with the gentle slope of the river he had been following ever since he left the mountains set him off towards the harbor. It took nearly a day to make the short journey, given the maze of dead-ends and curved streets through which he had to move. But the geological reading held true and soon Bellwether stood on the wharf, the exact same place he had stood so many years ago, looking out over a harbor that had changed little since then. This time his eye was not drawn to the boats that swayed to-and-fro in their moorings, but instead focused on a small rocky island out there just this side of the horizon.

The Magician's Isle.

It was time to walk on water.

But fate spared him that fate, for in all likelihood that particular task fell outside his area of competence and any results would have been catastrophic. On the other hand, when he was fished out of the water, assuming that happened in the first place, those who rescued him might be on their way to the isle and take him with them. So it was a mixed blessing.

It's amazing what the mind can conjure up when need is great and means lacking. Bellwether was about to find out that the two artifacts he carried within his kit were not the inert objects he first supposed. It would turn out they had a will and a purpose all of their own, and now close to the object of their desire, they made that will manifest.

Later, Bellwether was never sure that what he saw and heard actually took place or was a phantom of his own mind. Hopefully the latter, but as I say he was not quite sure and the ancient artifacts kept their lips tightly sealed. At least to Bellwether. As for Doc, he would never say one way or another. But for the moment Bellwether was standing alone on the

wharf, staring out at the distant isle with its tower lights, long past the time the sun had set, leaving all in a darkness that for a moment reverberated in Bellwether's soul.

One of the few times, I imagine. For despair lingered at its own peril in such a divinely inspired being. But again, we get ahead of ourselves.

No, what was needed was a stack of wood, hopefully arranged in boat-like fashion, a motive power capable of driving said stack, and a guide to wind, waves, and reefs sufficiently knowledgeable of the sea to get them all to the isle in a safe and sound mode of travel. Existential distress means nothing to someone whose life is in peril, something that should give you a clue as to conditions that allow for its surfacing.

Bellwether had his doubts about crafting a craft from the piles of unloaded lumber waiting for the morning construction crews to arrive. And the only motive power at hand were his hands, something that seemed not quite up to the task of getting him from here to there.

Once again, he glanced at the distant tower lights perched above the sea, seemingly lying in wait, taunting almost in its solid state-ness, its utter unwillingness to move or even to adjust to reality in any meaningful way. Insolent isle! Bad isle! Why, even the thought of hiring a boat to get me to you . . .

By now it was getting rather personal, a battle between opposing wills, a tempest in a teapot or perhaps a teapot in a tempest? To Bellwether, all was getting a bit hazy, a bit lazy, and more than a bit crazy when a long-boat drew up to the side of the wharf where Bellwether was waxing and waning according to the lunar tides that swept over him.

Bellwether continued his tirade to the isle, to New Jerusalem, to the universe at large that had so conspired against him and kin as oars were struck and the boatswain ascended the wharf's ladder to take up a position close—but not too close—to the ranting and raving idiot before him. The boatswain gave a gentle cough; no response, at least to the cough. A second louder harrumph followed by an equal lack of follow-up on the part of the cursing madman. Finally the boatswain cocked his arm and dealt the lunatic before him a mighty smack upon the cheek, whereupon the said lunatic rose from the heaving deck of the wharf to smite the boatswain back. But the boatswain was ready for this, and adroitly danced back out of range—only to fall over the side and land smack on his back in the salt water.

Well, how could one stay mad at the universe when the universe cooked up such entertaining meat? Bellwether dropped down into the waiting boat, helped the men heave the now soaked boatswain on board, handed him a wool blanket to guard against the chill was descending with the night air. Then the boatswain and Bellwether took a good look at each other and burst out laughing. A healing moment for sure, between two people and between them and the universe at large.

As the men joined in the merriment, although not sure exactly why, the boatswain explained to Bellwether that Doc had sent him and his crew from the isle to meet him, Bellwether, on the wharf with the directive being to bring him and the artifacts with him back safely to *The Magician's Isle* and the medical genius who had taken up residence upon its rocky shores. When asked how Doc knew he was here, waiting on shore, the boatswain replied that Doc had received a message to that effect and immediately dispatched him and his crew to pick him up.

It was at this moment that Bellwether began to suspect that the artifacts taken from the empty tomb had a will and power all of their own.

Chapter 6

The Gods Arise

Herb was having the exact same thought, kneeling as he was before the healing lodge table with only the soft glow surrounding the Cloth to illuminate such a sacred space. But his thoughts were not of tools, of man-made instruments. No, they were of gods and goddess surrounding the mountain villages, the powers of storm and wind, the might of spring growth and fertile sheep, the deep magic of love and hate and resentment and guilt and spite. The great explainer, these gods and goddess who ruled over them from the high distant snow-covered hills. It was at their whim that summer turned to winter, that crops flourished with the arrival of spring, that disease and famine did not wipe whole villages off the face of the earth. Always the need to placate those spirits to ensure their survival, their well-being. Always true healing came through them, for Herb's role was to channel their great power into the minor power of the healing lodge.

This Cloth, this *Burial Shroud*? This couldn't, didn't, descend from any of the clan's well-known gods. Yet here it was, resting on the sacred table within the healing lodge, the center of Herb's domain, the core of the healer's work. It was *real*.

Had the gods given him a new sacred object to use to summon their healing presence? Herb was not so naïve the pantheon of gods and goddess all equally cared for them, that there were not gods and goddess who only wished them harm. The latter brought the scourge of plagues, crop failures, and hard driven storms that ripped away what few productive fields the villagers possessed. Herb knew from experience that there were harmful spirits, spiteful spirits that sometimes took root in a villager's heart, creating murder and mayhem—well, murders were few but mayhem was there, hiding deep in the hearts of men and women. Such spirits had to be sent back from where they came.

Herb was good at that, something the villagers appreciated.

But a *burial cloth*? How did that fit in the scheme of things? What spirit possessed it, that it should glow with such a cool light, that it should allow him, the Sage, access to its own senses? What meaning these artifacts shielded from his gaze Herb didn't know; he couldn't be sure. Both this Shroud and the two prior artifacts from the empty tomb came from a totally different time, a dissimilar age, perhaps one where the gods themselves strode upon the earth?

Now that was an interesting thought. A tomb of a god who had perished long before the world began. Could a god die? And if so what god had been buried with those objects that had served him or her well in life—well in the eternal perhaps now not-so-eternal life of the gods. Perhaps. But the tomb itself, did it release something into the world, a spirit once trapped but now roaming wild? If it was contained within the tomb, did that mean it had been imprisoned by other gods, other spirits, to prevent it from meddling in their affairs?

A renegade god? Possible, given the tales about their loves and conflicts. But taken to that extent?

Herb's reflections came to an end with a gentle almost tentative knock on the stout door-frame of the lodge. A long pause, then the knock repeated itself, perhaps with a bit more vigor, suspecting that within the silent non-response someone breathed. With a soft quiet sigh, Herb rose to his feet, skirted the long-dead fire pit, and drew the entrance curtain to one side. He was expecting a single villager, since it was rare that anyone sought to disturb the village shaman in his most sacred place. Dangerous, actually.

Instead he found most of the villagers standing silently around the lodge. He looked at them; they looked at him. And in the eyes of all of them was a need, a hunger, and a fear. For the villagers knew that Herb had wandered around the village in spirit while they also knew he was sitting in the lodge; they had felt his presence as he moved among them. This had never been recorded in all of their carefully crafted and consistent oral tradition. It was a new experience, one whose existence demanded understanding that traditions could not supply. So they came to Herb, the official understander, to explain in terms they could understand what was happening. And perhaps more importantly, what this foretold of things to come.

Herb had nothing for them. Oh, he had the platitudes, the sayings, the words of wisdom, but they all stuck to his lips, refusing to be released. He was incapable of releasing them from this existential distress, unable to restore familiar territory beneath their feet, friendly faces, and honest work so they could once again take up the many tasks that were necessary to maintain a village among the high mountains. He could not even free himself from the chains of traditional thought that bound them all as one.

To them the problem was clear enough. They knew deep down in their soul that evil spirits roamed the earth seeking mischief—no, more than that, seeking to destroy all that was

precious to them. Filled with hate, malice, and spite, such spirits were known to have brought pestilence upon the land, infecting individuals with boils and sores, constricting their breath, heating their bodies until they were too hot to touch. The fact of such wicked spirits was a reality of their lives, brought to the surface when disasters struck and such spirits had to be found and driven out.

Up to now, that was Herb's job.

Herb looked at them; they looked at Herb. And as the silence dragged on, and on, and on, and on, the gradual realization that no help against these malevolent spirits was forthcoming from their sage, the villagers drifted away one by one until no one was left to stand before Herb, before the lodge. In silence, Herb quietly drew the curtain aside and once again entered the lodge to face his nemesis. The Shroud lay where he had left it, untampered by the passage of time, softly glowing without heat or flame, cool to the touch—should Herb by-pass his rising fears and actually touch it. This he was loath to do.

Sheep still needed feeding, garden plots weeding and watering, and people eating—so gradually the business of the village resumed. But it was not the same. There was a nervousness lingering about, a “looking over one's shoulder”, an expectation of something that was about to happen, a tenseness covered by a veneer of resignation, of accepting fate as something beyond their control.

As Herb took up his station before the Shroud, he barely noticed the diminished flow of village life, the now erratic and subdued changes in the seasonal cycles and daily cadences of the villagers. It was a life little noticed, since he had been surrounded by it since birth. But it was now most notable by its absence. A life was ebbing away from all those under his care, his responsibility, his ministrations. Conscientious to a fault and a natural empath, he could only call out in pain to the gods and goddesses who had once gifted him with the grace of healing. This time the scream came from deep within, a reverberation in his soul that had no possibility of redemption: he no longer knew who he was.

The scream never passed his lips.

So began the days of fasting, prayer, and meditation within a lodge with no light, no heat, and no comfort. For although it could hold a dozen men, the roof was too low to stand, the walls too sloped to rest one's back, the floor too bare to sit with any degree of ease. Any trace of heat had long slipped away as embers faded to black, to grey, and joined the dust of time. No breeze caressed the skin, refreshed the air, or carried away the body's odors. Only a daily trip to the latrine interrupted his gaze, now focused exclusively on the silver-white cloth laying there on the small sacred table facing the door at the other end of the circular lodge.

Occasionally a villager would peek through the door flap, spot Herb sitting there cross-legged on the ground, not moving, not twitching, not blinking—at least as far as the villager

could see. Then the flap would slowly be eased back into position and soft footsteps began their retreat.

Herb wasn't aware the chosen villager reported to the village council. The villager assigned the task had to be chosen, for no one in their right mind would ever disturb the meditations of a shaman, at least if he or she still wanted to remain human.

It wasn't until the fourteenth villager made his report that Herb showed the first signs of life. By that time, Herb was not even going to the latrine. His frame had shrunk, revealing ribs and shin bones, eye sockets and pointed elbows. And when he went to rise, his joints creaked in protest, straining to meet the demands now being made upon them, and aching complaining when compelled to do so.

Opening the door flap became an act of intense concentration, as did easing his foot over the door sill. Outside the day was drawing to a close, but even that failing light hurt his eyes so that tears streamed down his face. His clothes were wrinkled, stained, unwashed for over two weeks. His hair had grown thin, patchy in places, grey in others.

As he stood before the lodge, staring blankly before him, swaying slightly, a villager saw him, said something to another villager, who passed it on to another villager. Before too long news that their Sage had emerged swept through the village, and one by one they converged on the lodge, on Herb.

It's hard to say whether they were filled with an expectation of great news or despair. It's also hard to say whether Herb was using the tools and techniques of a shaman to appeal to the gods and goddesses and through them heal the community. In the end, it didn't matter one way or another. For Herb slowly crumpled to the ground, skin burning hot, eyes looking but not seeing, days of fasting having stripped the flesh from his bone as an evil spirit took up residence within his soul.

The villagers waited.

Finally, a woman beckoned her friend and together they picked up his emaciated body and carried him into his shack, laid him upon his bed, and brought blankets and moist towels to place over his forehead. After talking it over outside the hut, the village elders sent a runner to a distant village where another shaman was known to live, a call for a healer to heal their own healer. Such a trip would take weeks and even then the new shaman might not be up to the task. For everyone among the mountain clans knew that the greatest shaman among them all was Herb.

Now a second vigil commenced. While Herb had knelt before the Shroud in prayer, meditation, and supplication, so now the villagers stood before their shaman's shack also filled with prayers, meditations, and supplications. Some of this was through empathy; some through the practical concern that without a powerful shaman the nasty and evil

spirits would hold sway; and some drawn by the fascination of an evil spirit at work. In any case, without Herb there was little to hold such evils back.

The hearts of men and women are convoluted, twisted, always in tension, always seeking.

Days later, the runner returned; the other shaman is on his way. But before he could arrive, Herb's fever broke, his eyes became lucid, and he could sip his first meal of thin gruel in over three weeks. With an arm reduced to only a few bones, and fingers that resembled twigs, he reached up from his pallet to grasp the arm of the village headman who then leaned over to hear Herb's barely legible words.

Then, without a sound, the village chief rose, stepped down from the shaman's hut, walked over to the healing lodge and very carefully drew aside the door flap. Peering within, he could see the cold fire-pit, the wall covered in mud and branches, the table that held Herb's sacred objects now bare expect for a silver-white cloth. Safe enough, yet still dangerous in the way sacred things are always in some sense dangerous.

With great care he crept over to the table, rested his eyes on the cloth, and with slightly shaking finger poked it. When nothing happened, he picked it up and carried it out. Herb would have been surprised to see that the cloth no longer glowed, but the village chief had never seen it before so he regarded it as a simple piece of cloth—though obviously something more since Herb had placed it there and meditated over it over there, and brooded over it there. And had in fact placed it on the table where only sacred objects important to the clan were kept.

Following Herb's instructions, he unfolded the cloth and draped it over the barely alive form still struggling to draw breath lying on a pallet of straw raised only slightly from the floor. The minute the cloth was drawn over their shaman, Herb drew a deep breath, his skin started to fill out with a healthy flushed tone, and the grimace that had drawn his lips so taut relaxed as if he had come home. And indeed, perhaps he had.

As for the village chief, the tending women, and the few observers in the shack, they knew beyond all doubt that their shaman had the power to move spirits. What they didn't know was that the cloth carefully held in Herb's hands was one of three artifacts that had come from an empty tomb first entered by Pard the shepherd almost a month earlier. They didn't know that this healing was not brought about by Herb, nor the spirits that Herb in some mysterious shamanic way manipulated, but by the silver-white cloth itself. If they had stayed after Herb ordered them all out, they might have suspected something was up. For the moment they closed the door behind them, the now unfolded cloth began to glow and strange shapes flittered to and fro across its surface like flocks of birds swirling in the sky.

Something had changed in Herb's mind. Although his was a world of gods and goddess, spirits both good and bad, and mysterious forces that acted upon the world with no rhyme

or reason, it was now a world that sought to contain the Shroud. And the strange thing of it was, this burial Shroud now covered his own body, the shack his tomb, and his life reborn.

Did this sequence of events mirror that of the original tomb occupant? Did he or she also face death, encounter death, and yet—as evidenced by this shroud—also escape death?

He held the Shroud tight, fingers almost desperately clutching its fine weave, holding to its warmth that spread throughout his emaciated body, granting life when only death would serve. Reborn, but into what, ran through his mind. But that question could be left for the future. It was good now just to rest and be at peace. Outside, a few villagers who looked back to the shaman's shack saw in the dim evening light a soft golden-blue glow escaping from the cracks that adorned—no made up—the shack's walls.

Those that looked back and saw this glow flowing through the cracks looked at each other for a moment and then turned their footsteps back to the village. For the rest of their lives, they never told anyone what they had seen.

Chapter 7

The NewChristian Relief Fund

It was near dawn when the barely seaworthy boat drew close to the wharf on *The Magician's Isle*. By that time the adrenalin cursing through Bellwether's veins had worn off and he had descended into dreamlike state that reflected the very name of the island. Certainly that last few weeks had been . . . stressful. Perhaps now he could place this burden in other hands.

Doc met them at the island's sole wharf. A tall rather imposing man, he stood above average height well accented by a long dark cloak that fell down to his feet. His movements were charismatic, drawing all eyes to him. This explained in part why he was either hated or loved—but not both, except possibly for Chap who rumor had it played the part of the devil's advocate with a devotion due only to saint or sinner.

Chap stood on the opposite side of the wharf from Doc. His stance shouted challenger, for it was obvious that he considered himself to be a critical thinker, a potential reformer, and highly qualified investigator fully equal to Doc but sadly lacking Doc's charismatic presence. He also had a drift to the dark side with a destructive streak that could emerge at any time, or so the rumors went. Bellwether thought it would be interesting to find out whether such tales were true . . . or not.

Standing next to Chap stood a tall elegant woman who everyone called R.N. She was obviously Doc's treasured assistant and one he was lucky to have. For she was a peacemaker where Doc's relentless often ruthlessness drive alienated people. She possessed wisdom in the affairs of men and women that Doc's theoretical orientation and strong ego could not attain. A practical person, she learned more from experience than from books, something that led to a willingness to believe while still retaining the common sense knowledge that people often act according to inner compulsion and that you had to take whatever they said with a certain grain of salt. She gave a quick glance at Chap.

Still, willingness activates potential where suspicion retards development—a difference seen between Chap and R.N. for example. Or perhaps not. For as yet, those gathered on the wharf had no idea of what "potential" and "actualization" actually meant. Nor would they achieve such understanding for some time to come.

Doc came close to ignoring Bellwether in his eagerness to see the two artifacts carried in his kit. That Doc knew of their existence was clear. But how could he have known, unless the artifacts themselves communicated to him from the New Jerusalem city/town wharf? Had they called out to Doc in Bellwether's need? As far as Bellwether went, he would be glad to get them out of his hands. So far these things Herb had he placed in his hands had brought him only worry. In fact, they seemed to radiate misfortune all around.

For a moment, Bellwether's thoughts went back to Herb up there in his native mountain village. Given that this disturbance in the fabric of reality opened up by the unexpected opening of an ancient tomb was still in play, Bellwether would only hope for the best for his friends. But now, there was the business at hand.

Proceeding in a stately procession, the small group of Bellwether, R.N., Chap, and Doc wound their way up a long stone staircase carved into the rock cliff as they ascended toward the only tall structure on *The Magician's Isle*, a solid stone tower that might have been a lighthouse during times of great oceanic voyages and international trade. But in these times, that time was more myth than reality. Behind them, as the ascended the steep cliff, the crew of the small wooden boat stored their oars and manhandled the craft underneath a small half-open shelter located to the side of the wharf, facing out to sea in case the need was urgent.

It turned out that there were a few other structures on the island, notably a large residential structure abutting the base of the tower. But there were also a few small stone beehive shelters constructed among the rocks. Not much in the way of plants. Here and there Bellwether could see a wind-twisted tree holding close to shelter among the stones in a near impossible search for water, soil, and sun. Tough wiry strands of sea-grass dotted the few patches of wind-swept earth. Yet except for medical supplies the small community living there was self-sufficient. This suggested an efficient and effective management team capable of making an inhabitable island habitable.

Doc lived and worked in the tower. For him, living and working were the same, so as long as he was where he could work he was home. Bellwether doubted whether R.N. felt the same. And by the way Chap's eyes constantly scanned the interior it was obvious he sought those secrets Doc sought, consumed by a jealousy? Perhaps, Bellwether wondered, the three of them should enter the healing lodge with Herb.

The minute the four of them entered the tower, Doc asked him for the artifacts. With a certain sense of relief, Bellwether removed them from his kit and handed them over—both the artifacts and the responsibility for them that he had carried for the last few weeks. He did not feel the drive to know that possessed Doc, nor the need to live a traditional life as Herb sought, and the political realm of personalities and values only entertained. So he was not offended when Doc, R.N., and Chap turned their backs to him, ignoring his presence as they looked down to the two artifacts lying side-by-side on the solid wood workbench. These objects were surrounded by all sorts of laboratory equipment, which must make them feel quite at home.

DSM-750. *DSM-750*. Where had Doc seen this particular group of letters? Ah, in an old medical manual that cited a previous manual that in turn cited an even more ancient document that was known as . . . as . . . the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual" for . . . for . . . "Mental Disorders?" Ah, that was it. It made reference to a DSM-5. This was a DSM-750. It must represent a massive improvement in health care, Doc's primary concern even though he had rejected as insufficient to the task the traditional NewChristian methods of healing that must have been an extension of the work laid out in this near-mythical DSM-5.

Flipping the metallic-feeling book over, he saw a figure of two serpents wrapped around a winged stick—some things never change, he muttered to himself.

Then he had a double-take. Even though it represented a late edition, this manual must go back into the myths of history itself, the dawn of time when humans walked like gods through the stars. At least, that is what the ancient oral myths suggested, though these were probably more fantasy than reality. But suppose these ancient stories held an element of truth? Now that would require an extensive rewrite indeed.

He looked down to the workbench.

He looked at the two artifacts lying inert before him.

Tell me about them, he demanded of Bellwether. And Bellwether went through Pard's account of seeking a lost lamb only to find a lost and very empty tomb—well, almost empty tomb. He too was looking down at the bench.

Well, obviously not quite empty, said Doc.

Empty of body—though Pard said there was some kind of cloth, possibly a burial shroud folded on a stone slab that should have held a body.

Don't let the NewChristians hear you say that, came a quick retort.

Herb was supposed to return to the empty tomb with Pard, but by that time I was on my way here. You see, with this discovery something had changed within my village, and not for the better. It was as if a disease had struck, sucking the energy out of all they did. Even the healing lodge failed to heal. So Herb and I decided that the best place for these would be in your hands. You might work out what had happen to my people and somehow heal us once again.

It was a long speech for Bellwether, perhaps more plea than anything else.

While they were gazing down at the artifacts, there was a knock at the door. A man entered, informing them that a boat was rapidly approaching the island and those aboard were demanding they be allowed to dock. And the occupants? The small sailboat carried Pree, the high priest and devotee of the founder of the NewChristian movement, as well as ProPost, the wealthy property owner who in many ways ran if not owned the city/town of New Jerusalem.

The shit was about to hit the fan.

When he arrived, the shit started with Pree.

Perhaps it's best to record their voices directly.

Pree: Do you know what you have done? Do you know . . . the damage . . . you are causing? These rumors, these rumors of some lost tomb discovered by a lunatic shepherd, and empty tomb at that, and one containing a "burial shroud"! *Burial shroud?*

ProPost: And the city! With this religious turmoil taking up space, the city's businesses are going down the drain, down the drain I say!

Pree: Who cares about business? This is a direct attack on the founder himself! It's a direct attack on all we believe . . .

ProPost: (with a snicker) We believe . . .

Pree: Don't you use that tone of voice with me, Magistrate ProPost. Magistrate "PP" for all I care.

ProPost: . . .

Perhaps it's best if we turn off the recorder, at least for now.

By this time it should be clear that news of the find had traveled the jungle telegraph down from the mountains and into the city. But how could this have happened? The mountain villagers had little to do with the city/town of New Jerusalem, and the city people even less with the mountain clans. But they did have mutual contact with the warrior tribes who over the generations had provide the wisdom and knowledge that NewChristian settlers needed to live in their "new" JesusLand.

I wonder, Bellwether thought to himself, if T-Dog had anything to do with this upheaval in New Jerusalem politics? After all, he did recognize the artifacts at first glance. What was it he saw? What meaning did these two objects hold for him? And how could he have known about them in the first place?

Did Pree and ProPost know who had done this to them? Not likely, for in their power they could not conceive how they could be played by lesser men much less simple warriors. Such is the way of things, he thought, looking away from the protagonists and down to the artifacts below. Did they have anything to do with all this? For sure, though exactly what Bellwether could not say. As for whether it was a good or bad change, that too Bellwether could not say. Any answer to that question involved knowledge of the future they did not yet possess. The only ones who might were long dead. We are simply playing out their hopes and dreams.

Well, it seems we have a new set of gods in our midst. Will they be better than the old ones? Who's to say, for in the end only time will tell. Until that day comes, we play our roles as best we can, keeping an ear to the way the winds blow, and keeping our heads low to the ground—or rocky isle in this case.

Doc would not let him leave the island, sending him off with R.N. to a bunk kept ready in the adjoining room while Chap rather reluctantly left through the door leading into the dining hall. The last Bellwether saw of Doc was him bending over to adjust the light over the worktable to get a better view of the artifacts, totally engrossed in his work and obvious to all going on around him—even the distant shouts of Pree and ProPost as they were forcefully removed from *The Magician's Isle*. A most fit name, they called back, and a most fit end should Doc turn out to be a sorcerer. Healer indeed! NewChristians had their own healer and that was enough. Don't think we're going to fund you for very much longer!

It was long after the lights were doused and night descended into silence that Bellwether was disturbed by the most oddest of sounds, almost a whisper, almost a tight-held scream, almost a sound of fingernails scrapping a blackboard. Whatever it was, he found himself sitting up in the simple cot, ears alert, and facing a thin sliver of light from the door leading into the workroom. As quietly as he could, taking great care not to step on any creaking boards or stumble over a crafty waiting footstool, he slid over to the door. Not daring to open it lest the hinges give him away, Bellwether peaked forth.

At first glance, nothing seemed to have changed. Doc was still hunched over the table, head illuminated by the lamp at his side. The artifacts were cradled in Doc's hands, seemingly as inert as ever. The very air seemed still.

Then Bellwether noticed that Doc's eyes were slowly moving back and forth, back and forth without as far as he could see actually looking at anything. Back and forth, back and forth, both DSM-750 and Schematic in hand but both ignored, both ignored, both ignored—it was getting hypnotic! Bellwether shook his head to clear the cobwebs and once again applied his eye to the crack. Back and forth, back and forth, as regular as a metronome and as monotonous.

Then all motion stopped. Doc blinked once, as if he was coming awake after a long period of sleep. Ah, so that's it, he said, looking down at the artifacts lying in his hands. It almost seemed to Bellwether that they were looking up at Doc as he was looking down on them. With a gentle sigh, Doc placed the two artifacts in the center of the table, drew his hands back to the edge, strengthened his back, stretched his arms out, yawned mightily before resuming his own lone vigil before the work-bench shrine.

Then, abruptly, without moving his body, he turned his head to look directly at the door behind which Bellwether was peering forth. A curled finger beckoned him in. Bellwether carefully opened the door, waiting for a screech from the rusty hinges that never came, and entered the room. They looked at each other, Bellwether and Doc, before Doc said:

I know.

What do you know? Bellwether asked of Doc.

I know what these objects are, what they were meant to do, why they were created—and I ask you, where is the missing third artifact?

What third?

The silver-white folded cloth Pard found in the empty tomb. The one the shepherd couldn't touch, as if someone or something forbade him from doing so.

Someone else has now, Doc said. If it's not Pard, than who?

Who? That's easy. It could only be Herb, the village shaman and Sage. He and Pard were going to enter the tomb the day after I left, so if anyone has a third artifact it would be him.

Could he figure it out?

Not likely. He's a devoted shaman; his whole world revolves around gods and goddesses, good and bad spirits, and healing. Above all, healing. These artifacts lie beyond his comprehension. But not yours, if I'm to believe what you say.

Believe, Doc said. And with that he collapsed in slow motion, his head tilting forward to rest on the table but not before his hands had swept up the artifacts to hold them close beneath him.

Bellwether looked up, disturbed by a slight noise by the main entrance. There stood R.N., Bellwether looked at her; she looked at him; and they both turned to look at Doc asleep at the worktable, a contented look spread across his face.

What else was there to say?

Chapter 8

Baptism of Fire

T-Dog was facing his moment of truth. It was a moment he would have preferred to avoid, but there it was. Staring him in the face, or rather Chall was staring him in the face and he back. This was it, T-Dog thought; but at least it wasn't a stab in the back in the middle of the night. That would not be a true warrior's way.

Somewhat to his surprise, Chall started the attack innocently enough, with a comment about Bellwether and just how he had managed to sneak away from the camp while under guard and ride away on one of T-Dog's own horses. Well, somewhat innocently. It was a direct challenge to T-Dog's competency and reveal his "true" interests.

Irresponsible? Well, two can play that game. Bellwether was a free man of the mountain, a man of the village clans, on a public road, neither threat nor game to such a warrior as you. Was it wise to seize such a person as your own slave, for clearly that is what you would have him be. Or did you lust after his goods, what little he had, for what wealth could such a villager ever carry.

Perhaps T-Dog had gone too far; perhaps not. It was too early in the emerging clash to know.

Bellwether carried great wealth, as you know, T-Dog. And you recognized that wealth the moment you laid eyes on it. Toys? Toys? You would have me believe that these objects of great power were mere toys? You should have confiscated them for the good of the tribes. Such powerful totems could bring us nothing but wealth and honor.

A gasp ran around the circle of warriors who now realized they were there to sit in judgment. Courts are best held at night, conducted around a blazing fire that would concentrate attention on the business at hand. Running around the outside of the inner ring of top warriors containing the judges ran a secondary ring of young warriors who were in turn surrounded by a ring of tribal women. The whole tribe was there, minus the few who had guard duties or other chores to perform. Of course, slaves were not allowed access.

I had never seen these objects before, yet I knew them well. For that knowledge springs from prophecy. Surely you have heard the tale:

Once, long ago, before time itself was set in motion
There lived a people who trod among the stars
As easily as we walk from tent to tent.
Among these vast and powerful people
Rose a wizard whose own expertise
Left others in awe.

Wisdom strode among the stars,
Healing conflicts, easing pain,
Bringing prosperity among those who followed the way
And despair with those that fought every step.

One day he was brought low, killed by a traitor within
Who coveted the source of the wizard's power
The three instruments he welded:
A book of harm, of despair, containing paths to escape pain and suffering,
A sketch laying out the truth of things,
And a cloth that when worn
Extends the senses into vast regions of space and time.

Their mourning was great, when he was entombed
Some saying that a tomb could not hold him so.
With him were buried his three instruments of power
For the traitor was unequal to the task of wielding them
And so had been caught and exiled.

Then the tomb was sealed by door and mountain
Against the ravages of time.
One day, long after his people had been lost to the mists of time,
So the prophecy went,
His tomb would be found, but it would be empty
Of any body, and physical remains
Left would be these three instruments of power

The sheet, the book, and the sketch,
In themselves immortal,
Not subject to the decay of time.

The body of the wizard would never be found,
Though the wise among them thought he had never left
His soul being embodied in the very tools he used
That when released, would carry out his will
Transforming that which can be transformed
Changing everything, yet changing nothing
Only a hard-fought wisdom unleashed once again
Into the world.

When Chall produced the two artifacts, I recognized both book and sketch from the prophecy—and believed I found in the man who carried them the wisdom to carry them well—though perhaps that is still to be seen.

So I sent Bellwether on his way, leaving him to his fate and he has left us to our own. For what he carries will destroy the world we know, whether the world knows it or not. If the prophecy is true, then what we experience as a time of great destruction will be known as a time of rebirth, a transformation of man not carried out through his own will but through an act of obedience to a power far greater than himself.

But, Chall cried out. That awesome power could have been ours! Can you imagine what good we could do with these instruments, these totems that we could call upon to do our bidding? You have cost us dearly, T-Dog. And so it should cost you your position as chief of all the warrior tribes. For what is a warrior, but one who goes out and seizes what he wants?

T-Dog's response was rather interesting. He made two points. The first is that having such power would destroy the tribes, for we are not fit to wield such power as held by the gods. We are too frail a creature to think that we can hunt among the stars when we can barely eke out a living off the Great Plain that stretches out around us. The second is the possibility the pain we suffer, the existential distress felt both by the village clans and soon by the NewChristians, is nothing more than growth pangs. But like any baby being born, we give up the safety and security of a womb and through pain emerge into a world no child could ever understand much less appreciate. Yet it is clear that to remain in the womb is to remain entombed in a life of dependency and irresponsibility.

Now all of this was beyond Chall's comprehension. His horizon was narrow, defined by the extent of his own power, desires, wishes, wants, and needs. While he might admit there were greater forces at play in the universe, they meant as little to him as a mountain wise man sitting high atop a mountain or a NewChristian playing at being a warrior.

Now some would say he was not a bad person per se, but neither was he a good one. As intelligent as he was in playing those around him to his own benefit, as brilliant as he was in making friends of those useful to him, as knowledgeable as he was about the higher more noble values held by others, he could not reach up to them. Instead, he viewed such attempts as self-promotion, to present oneself as being better than one was, self-aggrandizement and pretention in action. That anyone would actually believe such things was beyond his imagination. His resentment ran deep.

The inner ring of warriors were starting to wise up to Chall's inner self, his real self. And in doing so they revealed their own true selves, exposed for all to see by this fight for power between two quite different warriors. For while Chall thought being a warrior was all about seizing the goods of others, T-Dog conceived it as a form of spiritual discipline, of the pursuit of an inner truth that would stand up to the vulgarities of the time.

That the inner ring thought highly of T-Dog said much about them.

That the second ring of young warriors did not, said equally as much about them. The sweet words of power and dominance, of status and position, spoke well to them as they chaffed at the bit to get out and do a bit of honest raiding—possibly starting with a rich NewChristian trader. While such traders had their own defenses, the challenge of meeting them as near equals on the field of battle would be a true test of their own mettle. And to know themselves as men before each other was all they desired.

It was a rather limited idea of manhood.

The opinions of the outer ring of wives and children did not matter. They would have their say at home, which though many warriors did not like to admit, they had a real say. But not in public. Never in public. For to be challenged in public by one's women was to appear weak in the eyes of other men. And to appear weak only invited trouble in the form of those who sought to take you on as a safe easy target. Warrior cultures are rather strict in this, and for good reason.

The strange thing is, T-Dog's world was a transcendent world, one in which every warrior could never rely on his achievements but must always be encouraged to transcend his familiar self for a person he could not as yet envisage. The only attractor, if you could call it that, was the life-stories of those who had achieved a greater degree of contact with the transcendent. For that reason, story-telling around a fire late at night when the day's concerns could be set aside, was the source not only of entertainment but education. Filled with laughter and tears, these transformative encounters would leave the tribe in a better state come morning. This was the warrior tribe's healing lodge.

Funny how the same things crop up in very different societies.

One further question remained. And since Chall had lost the vote, so to speak, or rather had lost status among his peers, which amounted to the same thing, the question was posed by a season warrior who had much to do with the NewChristians living in their city/town of New Jerusalem. Having just returned from there, he had seen firsthand the unsettling turmoil that in recent days had overtaken the towners. His NewChristian associates told him about Bellwether, the artifacts, and the empty tomb; how all of this deeply offended the true NewChristian believers and played havoc with the less spiritual or more physically devoted men of business.

To the warrior, it seemed as if the contagion that had spread around the mountain tribes, something called an “existential distress” as if that meant anything, had spread to the citizens of New Jerusalem. But Bellwether had just arrived and furthermore had been immediately taken to *The Magician’s Isle* where the two artifacts had been placed in the hands of Doc. The warriors thought this exposure to an existential distress a good idea, given what they knew of NewChristians in general. But did T-Dog have anything to do with its rapid spread through New Jerusalem?

Suddenly, that was the question. Up to now T-Dog’s actions had all to do with Bellwether. But if he had interfered in the course of affairs in New Jerusalem, if he had deliberately spread this “existential distress” to the city/town, then that was an entirely different kettle of fish as the mountain people say.

It would upset the generations of unspoken agreements among the two peoples, worked out through mutual need. After all, warriors could use tools developed by technologically trained towners while the same towners could use tried and tested techniques for living in the land they had chosen to build their NewChristian city of New Jerusalem. Calling the Great Plain JesusLand rather rankled and the tribes held to their own customary name, yet still an ongoing truce had held for generations. T-Dog’s action, if true, would jeopardize all that had been rather painfully accomplished by their forefathers.

T-Dog looked around the inner circle. The faces that he saw there were honest, open, yet equally determined to exact justice—for now it was not a question of Chall challenging power, but of power committing treason. But they would be honest judges.

Not so for the second ring of warriors. Their commitment to truth, justice, and transcendence was less assured. Although they would have no direct say in the outcome, their presence as up-and-comers brought with it a considerable degree of influence. As for the third ring, well he already knew about their likely response and was not moved.

Focusing on his near peers in the inner ring, T-Dog spoke truth to power.

We are not alone in this land. True, we have the run of much of the Great Plain, although the NewChristians have staked agricultural land in a belt around New Jerusalem. And true, the mountains form our western boundary as the sea forms the eastern extent of our lands.

As for the north and the south, conditions there are so poor and the mountains so high they are virtually impossible to transverse. And as well we are bound to the mountain clans. If tradition is correct, they were the first people to arrive, we came second, and the last to settle were the NewChristians.

But all of that is ancient history. The reality now is that we—the warrior tribes, the mountain clans, and the NewChristians—all form one people.

Now I know that this sounds like nonsense, but think about it for a moment. None of us are truly self-sufficient. We need tools the city provides, the city requires our expertise and hunting ability to supply them with food; the mountain people also need the technological products of the city and for them they supply the city with untainted water, mutton and wool, plus whatever ores and other minerals that may be easily found in mountain terrain. The mountain people do provide us with a few slaves, but that is probably nothing to brag about—at least on their part. But as non-nomadic people, they are able to produce clothing and fine goods that we, light and agile as we are, find it hard to supply for ourselves.

In short, we are one people acting as one. And even our cultural differences are such that each provides what the others lack. We are warriors, bearing witness to strength of arm and firmness of will; the mountain villagers are gentle sheep, careful tenders of their flocks and managers of heart and hearth; and the NewChristians are urbanites formed under a religion that enables them to work together in ways far more complex and meaningful than that of our own tribes or the mountain clans.

You see the parts; I see the one. And in this lies my reason for interfering with the NewChristian community. For as much as you are my people, so are they. And as much as I have a responsibility to protect and enhance your own way of living, so do I when it comes to both the mountain clans and the NewChristian towners.

If the prophecy is true, and the presence of these artifacts suggest that this is so, then the changes that both clansmen and towners are going through are the birth pangs to something greater than all of us. If there is to be a shift in perspective, then it can only come with the knowledge and expertise of the towners. Yet for the towners to engage in such strenuous and demanding work there must be an incentive. I provided them with the motivation to do the necessary work for the survival of the mountain people—and possibly for us as well. For our own well-being depends on their well-being. Such is the reality I lay before you.

This is a judging circle; how do you judge.

Chapter 9

The Gathering

Reports were coming in to *The Magician's Isle* from all over JesusLand. They all had one thing in common, the presence of an existential distress that played havoc with traditional patterns of authority.

Mountain clans were shunning healing lodges in favor of a low-scale war pitting family against family, and clan against clan. It seems their gods and goddesses were having fine sport. The warrior tribes were a bit better off. Their merit-orientated culture provided a degree of structure and discipline not available to the two others major groups in JesusLand. Yet T-Dog had told them of the possibility that this discord was only birthing pangs to a better future not yet conceivable. This in itself brought into being a form of existential distress; formally reliable traditional rocks were turning into sand beneath their feet.

But the worse of it all was felt in New Jerusalem, where NewChristians not only had to deal with an apparent conflict with their own deeply held beliefs of the Risen Christ but the disorientation among the populace due to the discovery not so much of the empty tomb but of the very real artifacts it contained. Rumors run rampant as the artifacts, now in the hands of a brilliant but highly suspect NewChristian medical healer of dubious ambitions named Doc, spawned conspiracy theories by the dozen.

So the call went out from *The Magician's Isle*, this rising center of power in JesusLand, a call to bring together key players from around JesusLand to meet and discuss the implications of this new dis-ease for all concerned. To the mountain villages went a call to Herb and Pard; to the warrior tribes, a call to Chall and T-Dog; and to the NewChristians, a call to Pree and ProPost.

And so, with the single exception of Pard who had his sheep to tend, they came, one by one or in small groups as it suited them. And they were greeted along their trip, sometimes with hope, sometimes with fear, but always with a degree of reverence given to anyone caught up in great historical currents. What these people said, what they did, would affect them all. Great or small, they were adrift in the hopes of falling into the hands of something far more powerful than themselves.

What this might be they would eventually find out; but for now it was all a mystery and people did what they had to do as best as they could, hoping in the end that all would turn out for the best. Faith is the arena upon which existential distress plays itself out, which made it a matter of pretending things would all work out while experienced this abyss, this ultimate lack of all meaning that now took up living space to dwell at the core of their being.

The first groups to meet were delegates from the mountain clans and Great Plain tribes. Prior arrangements had been made for them to gather at the river fork at the foothills, the same bridge where Chall had first taken Bellwether under his wings, so to speak. T-Dog and Chall had made good time on their horses, while Herb had rougher footpaths to follow. But the two warriors had brought extra horses with them. So while the village people might find hard sitting in a saddle for long periods of time, having a ride would cut days off traveling down the road running through the plains following the central river to the city gates.

There they were joined by Pree and ProPost, the two delegates from New Jerusalem. Both towners had decided to meet them at the gates in order to guide them through the maze of city streets. Both warriors and villagers were glad, for their first glimpse past the guards revealed a strange place where no horizon could be seen, the greatest distance was no more than a hundred paces, and streets twisted and turned with a logic all of their own they did not wish to share with mere humans.

These narrow twisting streets and blind alleys were all home to Pree and ProPost, however. And with their assurance, this small band passed into the stream of ever-present noise and pedestrian crowds that to Herb, T-Dog, and Chall threaten to hem them in, a flow of people that had no meaning or purpose—at least as far as they could see—other than movement itself. But in respect to their hosts, they said nothing. Besides, as T-Dog muttered to himself, there was bigger game to hunt.

The same boat that had transported Bellwether over to the island was waiting for them at the nearly deserted city/town wharf. Or rather, the same crew was waiting; the boat was only there. Weather was good, water calm, and before they knew it the crew's oars had them flying over the waves with *The Magician's Isle* looming ever closer. Herb couldn't wait until they landed on solid ground, for the rapid motion and choppy waves left a nauseating feeling deep in his gut, but he diverted himself by stretching his hands out to catch the passing spray falling from ranks of oars as they rose into the sky before dipping down into the sea of salty water that sustained their lively craft. T-Dog sat stoically, his face deeply tanned and lined from years spent riding the plains, while Chall faced the island already calculating in his mind how he could shift everything to his own advantage. Apparently his tussle with T-Dog in the judging circle hadn't made a change in his mode of thinking. Besides, that episode was long past, long forgotten, not to be remembered, never happened . . .

You can see where that is going.

There was only Chap to meet them as they disembarked. And only Chap to guide them up to the great hall next to the tower. As they ascended the narrow winding path, the tower appeared and disappeared from sight. Every time it was visible, all eyes except Chap's turned in its direction. For that was the current residence of the now notorious three artifacts or instruments from the so-called empty tomb. There they would gather together to shake out a strategy in this rather primitive form of healing circle. Perhaps they could

arrive at a common understanding of this new phenomenon, this “existential distress” that now plagued all their communities. Unless a solution could be found, assuming that there *was* a solution to be found, all JesusLand could weather away to be lost in the sands of time.

Well, we couldn't have that, could we!

In the Great Hall they met the final members of their rather select team, notably R.N., and came face to face with Doc himself. All had known the others by reputation, some by personal encounters—Bellwether looked askance at Chall, who promptly ignored him. Nevertheless, hands were shaken all around and firm assurances given as to the seriousness of their enterprise and that each would give their best.

All lies of course, but good lies for all that.

Then, with a lack of pomp and circumstance that betrayed its actual significance, Doc walked slowly up to a massive oak door located just behind the head table of the refectory, turned the large iron ring that released the catch, and with obvious effort hauled open the heavy fortified military grade portal so that all members of their merry little band could enter. They did so, one by one, suspecting that not only the three instruments of power lay within but the course of their lives was about to take a major jump off the beaten track. Destiny had other things in mind for them then their own desires and wants.

The clang of the solid oak door closing behind them sealed the moment.

All was dim inside the tower—the sole exception being a lamp standing by itself on a workbench in the corner of the large echoing room. The ceiling was so high it disappeared in the darkness above, and the few windows located high up in the wall were so small they admitted only a tiny fraction of light to disturb the inner scene. But all this only set the scene. The real focus of their attention was these three foreign artifacts laying on the workbench before them, highlighted by the only true source of light, a desk lamp. This was the first time that anybody other than the MED+ team had seen all three together in one place.

In fact, despite the dramatic lighting worthy of the greatest playwright, the objects of their attention were remarkable un-attention getting. They were almost mundane, until as they cautiously approach they could see the newness of the cloth, the book, and the sketch that made them even more so—almost as if they had been crafted this very morning and only now set aside for their true owners. And those gathered around the workbench knew they were not the true owners.

Yet, Bellwether thought to himself, we're the owners now, at least for the present moment. Or perhaps custodians? More likely lab rats, now that he thought about it. But these artifacts would still remain unchanged long after we are gone. And we know they already

have the capability of acting according to the inbuilt intentions of those who made and welded such devices. Herb may think them sacred objects; T-Dog instruments of power; and Pree signs of the anti-Christ; but to Bellwether they were only tools such as an axe or hammer one would use to get on with the business of living.

Perhaps that's why he didn't take them as seriously as the others. For him it was a matter of figuring out what these tools were for, what they were designed to do, and then either set them aside or use them for the purposes they were built. In any case, they lacked intrinsic value in themselves. Only that could be given by the Divine Mystery who created all including man himself. Deep down Bellwether was a profoundly religious man.

Perhaps that's why this "existential distress" had no meaning for him. Given a world created to hold meaning, the apparent lack of meaning had no meaning.

Ah, the twist and turns of the human mind. And with that, Bellwether turned his attention back to Doc.

Doc was standing before the worktable, the other members of the team gather around him, with one hand on the lamp and the other pointing to each artifact in turn. He asked Hebr if this was the object Pard had found, and being assured that it was moved to the second where he asked Herb the same question and received the same answer. For the cloth he also spoke to Herb, and Herb in turn certified its authenticity.

The first task had been accomplished. Now Doc moved on to the second, their respective experience of each.

Herb had little to tell about Pard's first encounter, other than during the shepherd's first entry into the empty tomb he was unable to touch the cloth but quite capable, in fact encouraged to take both book and sketch in hand. So Herb concluded there was some presence associated with the tomb that was actively interfering with the course of events. In short, the tomb was not by any means a passive artifact. It too was an instrument seeking to fulfill the intentions of its creator.

Doc was a little shocked by the matter-of-factness of Herb's conclusion. Given Herb's professional preoccupation with gods, goddesses, and a multitude of good and bad spirits roaming the world, Doc would have thought it perfectly natural for Herb to attribute these events to supernatural entities. But strange as these artifacts were, they struck Doc as instruments not divine tokens.

That the tomb's task was complete when Herb removed the folded cloth from the bier was born out by the collapse of both chamber and cave, its permanent removal from the face of the earth by a heavy landslide that covered whatever fragments that remained. From this Doc concluded that not only had the empty tomb been set up to convey these specific instruments down through time, but that the tomb itself was to be stripped of any appeal

to worshiping pilgrims. That the tomb existed free of any body preserved within was a fact borne out by these three objects resting on the table before them, but it was only meant as a vehicle, a sign carried down through time.

Herb was the first person to inspect the book, to decipher the letters on the cover, and to identify the twined snakes and winged stick on the back as a symbol of healing. Doc confirmed this finding, adding that it was an ancient medical diagnostic manual of a long line of such manuals—apparently 750 in all—that laid out a wide range of dysfunctions with what was known of their cure. Very useful when things were falling apart, but less so when the body politic was healthy.

It was here that Doc added to their knowledge of the sketch. Neither Bellwether nor Herb had been able to make anything of it, except that it was an elaborate drawing of something or other, but it was Doc who made the connection with that something or other. It purported to be a map of meaning, wherein all the key symbols, concepts, relationships, and methods associated with establishing truth and acting in the world were laid out in the same way an engineer uses a drawing to guide in the construction of a bridge or building. Hence the name *Schematic*.

The names themselves were mysteries, for how could it be that so ancient a people and so powerful a culture had the same lettering symbols and signs as those set down in the New Christian bible? Could it be that some future event was so powerful, so strong, that echoes of that event traveled back into the past? The thing is, such signs *must* be arbitrary in nature, one community developing one set, another a completely different set. So no such congruence should be possible. Yet, there it was.

Another mystery.

Attention now turned to the remaining artifact, the cloth, the burial shroud, the Shroud—it had many names but few indications of its purpose. It was now that Herb described his own experiences with what he call the Shroud, starting with the heatless glow when entering the healing lodge and progressing on to its healing unfolding over his own emaciated body. From his recollections, the cloth had three primary properties: it gave off a cool glow sufficient for human eyes to see in the dark; it extended human senses by attaching its own to the more limited human ones; and when unfolded and laid over a person, it restored them to health. Herb went on to say that when unfolded it also displayed a stream of strange symbols in a pattern that just escaped human understanding.

Doc accept the book, was dying to try the Shroud, had no use—at least for the moment—of the sketch that had been drawn with an intensity of thought that matched its detailed symbols. Symbols communicate intentions. To understand these symbols adorning all three artifacts would be to understand not only the role of each but the significance of them as a whole. For at some level Doc knew all three artifacts operated to one purpose. It was only when all three were brought into unity that they would know—or at least be in a position to

guess—the intentions and motives of their creators. And from that they just might gain a handle on this dysfunctional “existential distress” that was eating away at all of them.

All, however, except Bellwether. For some unknown reason, he seemed unaffected.

Chapter 10

Rising Storm

They had been at it for days with little if anything to show for it, when news arrived by boat. And the news was not good. Not good at all. The initial trigger point stemming from Pard’s discovery of the empty tomb was known, described by Herb, T-Dog, and ProPost. And it seemed that T-Dogs hypothesis that the three primary groups in effect formed one interactive system of mutual dependency was true. If a medical model was used, this initial point of infection high in the mountains spread down to the plains, a key member of which deliberately passed it on to the NewChristian towners.

But this “existential distress” was now taking on a new dimension. The task of piecing together what was taking place fell to the MED+ team. With Chap at its head and accompanied by R.N., Doc’s personal assistant, the MED+ team not only made daily excursions into New Jerusalem but had set up regular channels of information both from warrior tribes and mountain clans.

The data was building up, but what did it all mean? The team was charting new territory, not sure if their current models were up to the task of describing what was taking place. In all probability, they would not know until the event was over and historians took over the task of making sense of things. But until then, they had to keep their ears open and eyes focused. But both tasks are intentional, and intentions prescreen data, so it was not the large expected features that held their attention but the small anomalies that hinted at deep changes to come.

The first of these was an argument between two captains over food supplies sufficient to last for a month’s voyage away from home port. It turns out the quality and quantity were far less than desired, and both captains were making their displeasure felt. What was odd about the event wasn’t that the food was up to snuff, but that the captains were arguing, out loud, with a great degree of vigor. Still, that was not too strange.

But the argument wasn’t about food. That was only the superficial surface discord. No, the underlying tacit argument was about expectations and assumptions. It became clear to the MED+ team that the real debate, the real conflict, was over two contrary images of what it meant to be human. Innately good or innately flawed? That is what the two captains were

arguing over. It was an important question, for people holding such rank had to deal with people. And the way they understood people would make the people they way they were, a quality that would eventually be known to the MED+ team as reflexivity.

Normally this would not be a problem. Since the founding of New Jerusalem, the NewChristian image of what it meant to be human had become the cultural norm for the entire area. To have two captains fight over what it meant to be human, even when they were unable to understand the deep conflict behind their expressed differences over food supplies, meant that certain cultural assumptions were fragmenting, disintegrating, being made explicit now that such differences were become matters of public debate.

The second anomaly also involved ship captains, but this time it had to do with their proper exercise of authority. Traditionally, captains were powerful figures in full command of their ship crews. But new ideas were circulating, and now the natural acceptance of the captain's power was transformed into resentment by the crew at what was now perceived as taking advantage of those poor people who actually carried out the work.

ProPost found the same evidence of rising distrust among his own business associates. While a certain degree of competition was expected and no businessman ever really trusted his rival, now the very act of conducting a business became suspect. Commercial institutions that once were believed to benefited people through new products and services now took on the veil of slavery in action. Owners were conceived as people who expropriated the wealth of others, who *used* people for their own greedy desires to acquired wealth at all costs, ethical or otherwise.

A spirit of rebellion seemed to be in the works.

We now know that any deep forms of existential distress triggers a response mechanism whereby the individual knows deep down that a meaningful existence is not possible, refuses to accept this belief at any conscious level, and subsequently acts out his or her psychic imbalance by an equally vehement reaction to any attempt on the part of others to reveal their true selves. Furthermore, the rising need to suppress unwanted feelings of dread and hopelessness led to their projection upon others, thus setting up interactions that only added layers of hostility rather than shrink them into the usual complementary relationships traditional to all those living in JesusLand.

In other words, it's easier to attack others than face the abyss within.

The third anomaly lay in the emergence of small bands of vandals who seemed to delight in going around destroying things. It didn't matter what they destroyed, or why they destroyed what they did. The act of destruction was sufficient unto itself, a pleasure unto itself, a twisted joy not expressed in any of the traditional modes of being joyful.

Now any community needs to find ways to control anti-social elements. Small groups use shame and mutual healing circles. Larger more complex societies use religion or systems of morality augmented by physical imprisonment. When conditions are stable, when authority is believed to be legitimate, and when each has meaning according to their role or position in society, dissidents are handled by their peers for the simple reason that everyone agrees on what the proper pattern of behavior should be.

And there lay the problem. The impact of the discovery shook the roots of tradition itself, so that no one could be sure of whom they were or of whom other people really were. All three communities co-existing in JesusLand were or had become traditional societies unused to rapid change, and all now were undergoing rapid transformations. That traditional authorities no longer had a handle on things was rapidly become apparent. The exercise of traditional power-holders was in the process of being delegitimized as class interests made it clear that they no longer carried out traditional roles but instead acted to maintain their own privileges. To make the situation worse, it was becoming quite clear that these powerful elite figures who ruled by natural law were not up to the task now facing all of JesusLand.

They were beginning to be seen as incompetent and arrogant, a deadly combination.

The net result was the rise of alternative power centers led by those who sought to use turmoil to promote their own rise to status and its associated access to resources. The problem was that with traditional order breaking down most people yearned for any strong man to restore order—by force if necessary, guile if that failed, and outright deceit if matters descended to that level. The MED+ team foresaw that before long all of JesusLand would be divided into rival groups run by local strong men who made sure his or her own home-grown troops were ready and willing to fight anyone attempting to intrude upon their turf. The warrior tribes fought against this, or at least the elder warriors did. The up and rising warriors saw opportunities for advancement and formed their own military shock troops organized around charismatic leaders.

Under such circumstance, growing and marketing food became a risky process. Larger schemes among clans, tribes, and towners were breaking down for any number of reasons, while local produces faced their own problems of having to work under trying circumstances. The net result was the rising possibility of famine in a world that had long set aside such prospects as being beneath them.

It wasn't until the MED+ team started visiting the maternity wards that it became clear the loss of faith in traditional modes of existence led to the fact that women were no longer interested in having children. Already there were signs that within a generation the general population in New Jerusalem would be less than half its current size with the new generation facing its own possibility of demise. The loss of traditional faith was linked to a loss in any possibility of having a future. This meant facing an extinction event, a deep existential challenge in its own right.

Now came the time for the MED+ team to leave New Jerusalem and strike out into the hinterlands. It was fairly clear by now that the NewChristian movement had fractured into a number of different sects, each of which were convinced of their own divinely appointed status. As for the commercial class, they didn't fragment as such but instead continued to conduct business although the business themselves were changing as the social and political vicissitudes brought about fluctuations in the underlying flow of matter and energy that supported them all—in other words, scarcity of all sorts accompanied by the threat of famine.

As Chap's team gathered at the west gate of the city/town, they had a surprise visit from Doc concerning their latest discoveries. Addressing the now heavily armed team before the city/town gate, he informed them there was one thing their researches suggested that might help. And that was to encourage the people they met to reflect on the lives of those who had gone before them, focusing on the values their ancestor had held and had bequeathed to them. It was this question of value, Doc said, that lay at the heart of the existential distress now covering most of JesusLand. Get them to think about value, especially about what it is that they consider of true worth, and you may be able to do a bit of good.

With these words lending hope to their steps, Chap, R.N., and the rest of the MED+ team set foot to the road leading up to the mountain pass. Along the way they were sure to meet various warrior tribal leaders, for no doubt they like many others knew of their passage and wanted to make sure that their own voices were heard. This in itself was a bit of an anomaly, for up to now each of the three major groups had their own specialized organizations and institutions and even the multiple channels between them failed to change their roots in any significant way.

Perhaps as they faced the possibility of their immanent demise they needed to make their voices present—if only to convince themselves they were still alive.

For some strange reason, the first group they encountered was not a band of nomadic warriors but a lone family of mountain villagers seeking to escape from their own failing communities and find refuge in New Jerusalem in the belief that conditions in the city/town were better than conditions at home. The story they had to tell was one of despair, of hopelessness, of an odd lethargy that seemed to have grown over the village stripping the villagers of the very will to live. This family fought to escape such dismal conditions.

R.N. noted that this group, while in obvious difficulty, had not given in to despair. They still had a sense of purpose, a sense that while things might be tough they would with hard work and a willing hand those things could be better. They had faith in themselves and their future. But more than that, they were a group that valued their own existence and fought to extend themselves across time. They might not know the future; the future they might hope for might never come; nevertheless, they believed a future was possible.

Perhaps there was something to this “value” thing that Chap downplayed as irrelevant. But R.N. knew the kind of person Chap was, someone deeply resentful of Doc’s success to the point that he would do or say anything to downgrade Doc’s work in people’s eyes. With some success, R.N., had to admit. But not to her. She also had to admit that Chap’s arguments sometimes held truth, for one thing she had observed about Doc was that he tended to jump quickly from one peak to another without taking into consideration the valleys between such elevated thoughts. So Chap had his place in the scheme of things.

It was another day’s travel before they encountered another, this time a solitary individual who was just walking along with no goal in mind and no mind to have a goal. The MED+ team did what they could, but they had no cure for what ailed him. In the end they had to release him to his own fate.

Contact with roving band of warriors was sudden and completely unexpected. With no warning, a band of young men rose from the deep grass keeping pace on both sides, uttering shrill war cries while banishing short spears in one hand and shields in the other. It was too late for any of the armed personnel in the group to bring their weapons to bear, so they had no choice but to lay down their arms and throw themselves at the mercy of these menacing youths.

At least the warriors didn’t kill them, at least outright. They did strip them of all their food and water, throwing the medical supplies into the tall grass when they found them bereft of food, and sorted through their clothing for anything that might be useful. Then, without a word, they strode off into the tall grass and within minutes were gone from sight.

The MED+ team had seen enough, experienced enough. It was clear the warrior tribes were falling apart, losing the cohesion sought by the elder warriors but no longer treasured by their willful and self-absorbed juniors. Gathering what few things they had left, the team turned and retraced their steps back to the city/town gates.

As they would eventually learn, they were lucky. If they would have continued they would have run into worse conditions than they had experienced up to then. Double lucky, for on their way back to the city they ran into the family they had once helped only a few days ago. And triple lucky spread around, for after helping the MED+ team return to New Jerusalem, the team helped the mountain family to find a degree of safety and security within the city/town walls.

From there it was a short walk through the city and a quick sail across the strait to stand once again in the Great Hall from whence they had started their expedition. Doc was waiting there to greet them, joy written across his face—and the faces of those of Doc’s team who stood behind him.

It seems Doc’s team had been busy while they were away.

Chapter 11

Revelation

For those of the exploratory MED+ team who had experienced firsthand the rising despair and hopelessness of those living on shore, the joy and hope reflected in the eyes of Doc's team came with a shock. They hadn't realized that their own selves had been, were being degraded by their encounter with the conditions of those directly caught up in the effects on an existential distress turned the people of JesusLand suicidal. It seems they themselves needed healing.

And from the looks of things, Doc was ready to provide it.

Gathered around one of the large refectory tables, with Doc standing at one end and Chap at the other, they got down to business.

From what we have been able to work out from the DSM-750, existential distress is an intermediary stage in human development between those who accept traditions as they are and . . . well, be haven't worked out what the next state might be. There are many terms we cannot interpret much less translate and, Doc continued, we may have to reach that existential state of meaning before we can begin to understand it.

Chuckles broke out here and there around the table, rather nervous ones. If they were hearing Doc correctly, they would have to change not only their procedures but who they actually *were*.

Doc left a pause hanging in silence to let this possibility sink.

What we do know is that this sense of dread, of an abyss at the heart of this "existential distress", comes into being when individuals start to ask questions about their own existence. In other words, our existence is no longer taken for granted but becomes a question to be answered. For the first time, we face the question of who we are. We face the question of who we could or should be. But above all, in some strange way we become a mystery to ourselves.

It is that becoming of a mystery that lies at the root of all that is transpiring in JesusLand. Your reports indicate that traditions upon which our lives are given meaning are about as firm as sand along the beach washed to-and-fro by passing waves. What these waves might be we are just beginning to understand. We use it as a metaphor, but the DSM-750 suggests that there might be more to this than we think. It may be *real*.

This collapse of JesusLand into chaos also indicates quite clearly that there are no answers to be found in traditional cultures, otherwise the existential issue would not be a problem. As Chap, indicating his confrere at the other end of the refractory table, R.N., and others on

the investigative MED+ team can verify, traditions for all major cultures in JesusLand are in the process of breaking down and since we have nothing with which to replace them, chaos ensues.

This is where we think the Schematic comes in. The image inscribed on its surface hints at a possible solution, but it is one we frankly at the moment find impossible to accept. It suggests the very act of questioning contains within it a drive, a focus, an intention that leads to a different way of living suitable to an existential world where traditional patterns of authority and power no longer apply. It suggests that the universe is not a static unchanging place but a world on the move—and we are part of that movement.

What role the cloth, the Shroud as some call it, plays we have yet to determine. But it is quite possible that its healing property combined with the way in which it extends human perception has a lot to do with it. We suspect that the answer lies in the Schematic, but as yet we simply don't know.

To any outside observer like myself, dear reader, this was most fascinating. Already they were carrying out the necessary transitions within themselves and they didn't even know what they were doing! The problem was that Doc and his MED+ team, although radical in their own way, still defined themselves in terms of NewChristian healing traditions. The advantage they had was their determination, their adoption of responsibility, their moral courage in exploring new forms of healing. This gave them meaning and purpose when many others were losing their will to live.

Outside the Great Hall the weather was beginning to change. While Doc was talking, the sun dimmed, the sky grew grey, and a rising wind began to rattle the storm windows. By the time he had finished, the sound of heavy rain descended from the roof, the sky had turned black, and low-ranking members of the assembly went about the room lighting lamps and locking storm shutters. By the time they were finished, the hall was a mysterious place of shadows and flickering light where faces loomed out of darkness and an undercurrent of nervous rustling prevailed that underlay equally nervous voices.

Eventually Pree and ProPost retired to their own quarters while T-Dog and Chall sought out their own digs separate from each other. That left Herb, Bellwether, Doc, R.N., and Chap to open the door to the tower and enter the room where the three artifacts were kept.

Much to their surprise, the lamps within the tower room did not need to be lit. Instead, a soft glow permeated the space, its source being the carefully folded cloth lying next to the DSM-750 and Schematic. Only this time it was augmented by a radiating glow of red from the DSM-750 and orange from the Schematic. The latter two cast shadows where the cloth did not, lending an eerie quality to the laboratory. The thick walls of the tower brought down the sounds of the raging storm to little more than a background murmur. In fact, the loudest sound was the rustle of their own cloths as the group carefully slid toward the work-bench.

Close, but not too close, they gathered around the artifacts. It was Doc that made the first move, reaching down to pick up the DSM-750 manual. As his hands closed around it, the light radiating out revealed the bones within his hand as if the flesh itself had gone transparent. Yet there was no pain, no heat, just the feel of the book in his hands.

It was Chap who picked up the Schematic, with much the same result. No one reached over to the Shroud, for in their minds it had taken on a depth of meaning associated with the body that may have once lain within the now empty tomb. At a totally unconscious level, each of them realized that here in this Shroud was the source of power, a pervading somehow eternal glow that energized both book and sketch. It was as if the universe itself had come to life and decided to reduce itself to become a scrap of cloth.

No one wanted to touch the universe.

It was Bellwether who broke the tension. Reaching around Doc he gathered the Cloak in his hands and wrapped it around his body as if it was a shawl. It was an interesting shift in perspective, going from a burial shroud to a storm cloak, but somehow Bellwether made it. As the cloak fell into place around him, both the book and sketch rose of their own will and slipped through the air to find a resting place in Bellwether's hands. And for a moment, standing there in the center of the workshop, Bellwether was transfigured—but only for a moment. For mere seconds after the three artifacts came together around him in a burst of light, the glyphs faded to nothing, the glow that surrounded them all ebbed away into the corners of the room, and the two artifacts held in his hand went back to their normal inert selves.

Shocked, amazed, and scared at the same time, the other members of the team stepped back while Bellwether placed book and sketch back to their former places on the table and unwrapped the would-be cloak from his shoulders. But for some reason Bellwether could not understand, instead of putting it on the workbench next to the others, he draped the cloth over the other artifacts until only their shapes could be seen.

What had happened? No one had any idea, or even any clue of an idea. Yet this was a mile-stone event in its own way, not only bringing all three artifacts together as one but placing that one on the being of Bellwether—which begged the question, why Bellwether?

It was a question that Bellwether was asking himself.

Behind them, the door to the Great Hall opened and as sound of the raging storm stepped into the room each turned to the other with only question marks for eyes.

Then all hell broke loose as each started to speak at the same time, words crossing each other, getting into all sorts of tangles, knots, and snags, never making it across to the

intended target, adding its own violence within to the storm without. The only island of peace lay within Bellwether, who stood unscathed in the center of it all.

It was Doc who raised the question that was in all their minds. What was it about Bellwether with which the artifacts found an affinity? What was so special, among all those exceptional people gather here, about Bellwether who, to all appearances, was a rather simple sort of person with no pretensions to glory, fame, or brilliance? Yet pleasant to be with, almost at act of healing to be with, as if the abyss beneath their feet was an illusion when compared to Bellwether's reality.

Suddenly Doc had an insight. This "existential distress" was an illusion brought about by minds who could conceive nothing else. Everyone believed the abyss was real, but in reality it wasn't. It was an illusion, an artifact of their own minds, created by their own minds, maintained and enhanced by their own minds. It did not exist.

Then Doc had his second great insight. The solution, if it existed, could only come from within, from some realm of one's inner thoughts, perhaps the realm of "interiority" as suggested by the Schematic? For it was clear that the source of this existential problem lay within the human mind and not out there in the world to be observed and dissected according to traditional healing methods. Herb would understand, at least in part, for Herb dealt with these inner dynamics of the human mind in his healing lodge. The warriors could not, for them reality was real out-there-to-be seen and not a projection of their own minds. NewChristians? Perhaps, but Doc knew they had lost the original intensity of their founder, stepped outside of such inner transcendent dynamics, and made real the physical world in a way that the physical world should never have been made real.

Well, it was real in the sense that if you walked off a high cliff like those surrounding *The Magician's Isle* you were likely to die in the ocean below. But the meaning one gave to the cliff, the meaning one gave to life itself, *that* was artificial, *that* was man-made.

By this time Pree, ProPost, T-Dog and Chall, all disturbed by the commotion, had entered the Great Hall and stood at the open door to the workshop. They were too late to see what had happened, but in reading the faces of those within knew that some threshold had been passed and they were about to enter into a most different world indeed.

Gradually the din of cross-talk and pontificating and criticism and expressions of sheer amazement drained away leaving only the sounds of the storm raging outside the tower to seep into their already strained and stretched souls. Doc gestured that they should return to their rooms; they would meet again in the morning once they had time to reflect on what had happened. As they left the workshop, moved through the now empty Great Hall, and entered into their own rooms, Doc put his arm around Bellwether and bid him stay for a moment. Within a few minutes, only the two of them remained, where they stood looking down at the cloth covering the two artifacts.

Doc reached out to touch the cloth, and there was no response. Looking at Bellwether, he indicated that he should do the same. And with Bellwether's touch, the cloth started to glow, strange glyphs slid over its silver-white surface, and from beneath the mix of red and orange shone through to give a kaleidoscope effect to the lavatory.

That was all Doc saw. But to Bellwether, the universe suddenly opened up in a way that it never had before. Almost as if blinders were slowly being drawn back from his senses, he became aware not only of Doc standing next to him, but the length of the lab itself, the condition of the Great Hall as it stood solid and sedate against the great storm, and even the soft rustling of bedsheets as the other members of the team settled into their respective beds.

Not to mention the boat crew huddled in their shelter alongside the wharf, nor their opposites on the mainland piers.

But it was not a drawing out into the universe he was experiencing, but a drawing in. In some way, Bellwether realized, the universe revealed through the odd sensory system embedded or embodied by the cloth, the shroud, the cloak lay within him. He was the source of all that is, was, or would be.

Well, that was a pretty bit of blasphemy.

Chapter 12

Conference Call

No one was in much of a hurry to get up in the morning. Even the two warriors, who normally would rise before the rising of the sun, were still abed even as the rays descended the Great Hall wall and began to creep along the floor. So it was that one by one each member of the MED+ team, closely followed by delegates from the different cultures bound together in JesusLand, gathered in silence around a self-serve table laid out with various break-fast dishes.

Even Doc's entrance didn't break the silence. People looked up, saw it was him, and turned their attention back to their meal before them, all devotion paid to this now sacred act of nourishment as if this was the only important thing in the entire universe.

Doc picked up his own plate from the side buffet, served himself from the available range of foods, and sat down at one of the refractory tables. It was interesting to note, as a few did, that he chose not to sit at the head table but rather among the other diners as if all were

equals. Which of course, they weren't. But still it was a nice gesture, especially so since it seemed to be an unconscious move.

For the next twenty minutes or so, the only sound that could be heard was the click of cutlery against plates being lightened of their load. Some went for seconds, but soon even that was a diminishing return.

When Bellwether entered, all eyes centered on him before returning to the plates in front of them. Still, his progress was monitored out of the corner of their eyes. It was only Doc who looked up and beckoned him over. And as Bellwether sat next to him, Doc asked in a rather soft voice, well just what happened last night?

The room went completely silent and even though people continued to eat they did so with ears sharply tuned to the softest undertone. What did happen? Did something happen?

Somehow, the universe and I became one, you and I became one, we were all part of a cosmic whole, a flash of eternity, a stillness of time itself, a rainbow of sensations that flowed over and became my own skin.

It was clear that whatever had happen went beyond what was possible for a human to experience much less understand. For a moment I saw deep into reality. I saw the importance of using right words, for wrong words distorted and twisted reality. And I saw how we create reality itself, how we make ourselves, how we make each other, through reflection, through encounters, though you thinking about me and I thinking about you, and together we brought meaning and purpose in the world, or found meaning, meaning and purpose in the world.

It was all very strange, for the universe is not out there to be seen, it is within us, created by us, brought into being by us, seized by us—or rather in some strange way we are seized by it, we encounter the universe and through that it becomes us. I became the universe, and the universe became me, and you and I were not you and I but really one, the only difference, and an insignificant one, was that you had chosen to wear a different set of cloths than I wore, a different persona with which to live in the world.

Then the conference really began.

And it began with noise. It began with questions. And so they went about the task of creating themselves without rhyme or reason, in the attempt to find rhyme and reason, without knowing of the existence of rhyme and reason—and its innate drive intending truth and value, intending meaning and purpose.

It was so much fun to watch, for at this moment when they least expected it they were growing up. At this moment their long childhood was coming to an end and they were becoming adults, as we were once adults but had long since left the world behind. Not

willingly for sure, for its ways were our ways. Yet with joy and hope, for in the end we were transformed, we transformed ourselves within . . .

But of these things I should not speak.

It was Chap who finally restored order in the Great Hall, Chap who didn't yell, didn't whistle, but only tapped gentle on his glass. But the sharp high-pitched sound penetrated the din, eased through the din, and gradually the din dropped off as one by one eyes turned in his direction.

Pree was first into the silence, for did not the NewChristian founder so many years ago laid down the fundamental beliefs of their religion? Did not their very lives depend on following the principles of healing laid down by him? But people heard not truth from his lips, but only the self-deceit of his own assumption of authority over all the citizens of JesusLand.

And so a bit of reality was created.

Restless T-Dog interrupted Pree's inauguration speech with laughs so deep they seem to penetrate the stones themselves, disturbing the food sitting in their stomachs. What nonsense, what craziness, to think that we are nothing but the creation of Bellwether's crazed mind. For how could he and I ever be the same? He's a tame mountain villager lacking courage and fortitude learned through the self-discipline of the warrior's way. To think that he and I are the same turns against reality itself

Before the last of T-Dog's words entered the room, willingly drawn into the minds of those present—for they all knew this to be true—Chall rose to his feet, that very action drawing attention to him.

Attention he both liked and cherished, so he stood for a moment and treasured their gaze upon him. But this instance of self-adoration wasn't going to last for very long, so Chall began a long speech on how he, Chall, could resolve it all—by one-on-one battle among warriors, and generously enough, for clearly Bellwether was not trained in the military arts, he would tie one of his hands behind his back and give the choice of weapons to him.

He was laughed down, shrunken but more determined than ever to put one over on T-Dog, for clearly T-Dog didn't have the nerve to do what must be done. With these thoughts he quietly caressed the handle of the short blade that always hung at his side. For one never knew . . .

ProPost shrugged his head. It was all religious made-up stuff to him, a different strategy for gaining power and authority over others in this game of winning and losing, of competition to see who was the better man. He didn't use the crude methods just put on display by Chall, but the more civilized weapons of business: money.

Of course, he depended on law and order, and that came under Pree's position as high priest with the moral right to insist upon the rule of law. For a brief moment, ProPost caught a glimpse of the reality of things, a deeper cast to the game he and those like him played, a game that he was very, very successful at. How could he give that all away? A self-made man, he gloried in his own success, his own ability to outthink and outplay others, his own intellect that made him superior to all those sitting around him. And money was the counter. The moment passed.

Looking around, he had little but disgust in his heart—well-hidden of course, for one did not want to upset the rubes; but still there for all that.

R.N. was lost deep in thought, a rather puzzled expression on her face, for at some deep level, Bellwether's apparently incoherent words so full of contradictions spoke to her of mysteries and possibilities and birth. For she was sure she was witnessing something being born, something that before this had not existed but now was struggling to be free of its chains. A strange gift from an unimaginable distant past?

What was preventing this mystery seeking to be born, seeking to enter the world? What contained that which obviously could not be contained? The answer was close to hand, but she failed to stumble across it as it reverberated around the room. And so she left her interior reflective space to fall once again into a familiar reality of people she knew and places she dwelt.

It was only R.N. that noticed a soft glow emanating from the slightly ajar door leading to the tower workshop. It was a light that did not flicker, but instead softly, quietly, flowed into the room, unnoticed, unseen, adding its quiet presence.

One by one, members found themselves shocked, or perhaps shocked themselves, as it became clear that no one was going to change their most basic beliefs about themselves, about reality; tradition still ran rampant. Silence draped itself over their "deliberations", if you could call this arena a place of quiet reflection, though quiet reflection took over from these wild assertion of what was, what is, and what was about to be. Very NewChristian of them, were they to pay attention to, become aware of, the roiling unsettling flows emerging within themselves.

It was Doc who made the connection between the turmoil and the Schematic that lay within the tower, for the Schematic was not meant to lie on the table in the workshop but in the hearts of those before him. It reflected not what they should believe, at least as they thought of belief, as in the doctrines and dogmas that ruled their lives. It was as if . . . and Doc paused at the thought that flashed through his mind, a possible insight, a moment of intuition . . . what was needed were not eternal truths but a method, a means of sneaking up on reality, not to bind it in the chains of words but to evoke the words that best fitted what they could directly sense.

The sheet of cloth revealed all that very clearly. Human senses only sensed a small part of reality. By extending for brief moments of time one's senses, one became aware of a greater reality than one fabricated by the mind. Not that such fabrications were in themselves bad. After all, they provided the arena, the stage upon which each of these before him acted out their lives. Without them we could not act, could not live. Understanding was proportional to being human.

But what if Bellwether was right and these fabrications were of our own making? Perhaps then we'd better pay attention to how we make these houses that are our homes, insuring the quality of our work rather than uncritically accepting the traditions of the past.

Was that the true meaning, the true implications brought forth from the empty tomb? If so, the answers must lie within the DSM-750 and the Schematic. The Cloth, the Shroud, the Seer and Healer only pointed the way, given him and Herb and Bellwether the personal knowledge that the world was greater than their own human senses could sense. It seemed human knowing was proportional to what humans could sense, and Doc knew that vision was constrained both in distance and in range, that ears couldn't hear sounds that dogs and birds clearly could, that the lives of their pets were far shorter and perhaps more intense than that of humans . . .

A simple house fly, so hard to catch because its reflexes were so much faster, wore out its life over a span of a few days while we had years. And perhaps there were creatures that would see our own lives as mere flash in the pans, over before they really began? What would such long-lived creatures know of the small world inhabited by humans? Or them to us? Their vast worlds might seem more magic and mystery as our world would be to that fly resting on the plate on the table before him, concerned only about the feast he—the fly—was about to enjoy at the table of his host.

That was a strange thought, a strange double image that wove over and through his mind, leading his gaze to the door leading to the workshop. To his surprise, the door that was always kept closed was ajar. Someone would pay for that negligence. Then to his even greater surprise, he noticed the glow within—and now the glow without. And he began to wonder if there was a greater presence than all of them not only flowing through them but being them. Something beyond the originators of the artifacts, far above their creators? Perhaps they too were responding to something greater than themselves?

Clearly, it was time to go to work.

Chapter 13

Meeting of Minds

As the conference kept on in its merry ways, punctuated by laughter, various calls to combat, riven by egos run wild and various attempts to promote one's own group above all others. In the middle of all this, Doc beckoned to Bellwether and the both slipped through the tower door into the workroom, carefully shutting it behind them. The heavy oak door dimmed the din but couldn't quite eliminate it. The animated beehive of activity continued on behind the closed door, providing the perfect background to the work they were about to undertake.

It was clear to the both of them they had to start with the cloth. From Herb's description with his first encounter with it, it was obvious that not only did it extend human senses into dimensions unperceivable by humans, in doing so it *healed* in some way the human condition that prevented such explorations, not explicitly but by the careful readjustment of attention on this rather than that, on exterior events rather than interior movements, on exterior events that heightened awareness of interior conditions.

The cloth was still surrounded by its now easily recognized glow. This cool light did not stem from the artifact but surrounded the artifact. It was a subtle difference but a real one for all that. This glow, which seems to emanate from reality itself, took in both them as well as the other artifacts before them.

With a start, Doc realized there were actually three presences here in this dim laboratory: himself, Bellwether, and whatever being or beings had created these artifacts and in that creation had infused them with the meaning and intentions.

Well, it was time they got to know one another. And with that, he took Bellwether's hand and placed it beside his own upon the cloth. The universe shifted, or perhaps they shifted and took the universe with them, or perhaps nothing shifted at all only their own perceptions had become that bit clear, that bit closer, that bit deeper into an awareness of consciousness itself.

They didn't know it, but they were about to undergo a radical change in their very being. In fact, they had no way of knowing this, because until this point in time the only examples they had of such transformations were the founders of the NewChristian movement and they were, in most people's minds, not a reality but mythic figures from the distant past that in this enlightened age had little to teach them other than a few ethical standards grounded in tradition.

But that, as they were soon to find out, was the problem. Morality could no longer be grounded in tradition, for the eternal cyclic time of tradition-based societies had been challenged by the possibility that time had a past and was moving to some final point as yet

to be determined. The NewChristian movement affirmed this in its teachings, but few any longer read the works of either the early founders or the Great Book of Revelation they had brought with them to this distant shore. Centuries ago, their meaning and significance had been lost; now they were little more than ancient writings that no longer held such words that would tug at hearts and minds. They were irrelevant to daily NewChristian life. It was not as if those inhabitants of New Jerusalem lacked the potential for transcendence, only that they had turned away from such things, narrowing their horizon and intentions to the sensate world around them and the ever-present human needs for survival and status.

By now the confrontational “conversational” din in the Grand Hall had dropped down to the point where the clink of forks on plates could be heard. But this change in volume, in texture only registered at some subliminal level to the “three” within the tower. There, under Doc and Bellwether’s hands, the cloth gradually unfolded and glyphs once again flowed like water over its surface, though it would have been better to say they flowed through the material itself as if they, like the glow that surrounded them, had their own existence regardless of where they found themselves.

To any outside observer, the moment of contact lasted only a few seconds; by Doc and Bellwether’s standards, it was stately time laid out in centuries.

When they returned to their own time they would never be able to describe what had happened to them, only that now they were in some unfathomable inestimable way different from the two who had entered the room mere moments before. Such a change posed them a new problem, for now they had different selves to know, to understand, to meet and greet than they had before they were changed—healed? They knew the Shroud had once healed Herb back in his village hut, restoring him to health after more than two weeks of neither eating nor sleeping. So as strange as this might be, could this not be healing at a different remedial level of therapy?

Later, when they had exited the room and rejoined the others they seemed to them to be the same, but yet different, perhaps more contented, perhaps more assured. But whatever it was, it became evident over time that the two of them placed a higher value on truth, had developed a capacity to do what is right even at great personal cost, and now seemingly operated “under new management” as one person was known to have muttered, somewhat despairingly. For not only did the Doc and Bellwether have different selves to know, those different selves brought them into a very different world whose meaning and significance they had yet to come to know. For this new world was quite different from the traditional world of their youth, though perhaps different was not the word. This new self/world *transcended* all the traditional regimes not only of NewChristians but warrior tribes and village clans as well.

But the implications of all this was yet to come.

For the moment they were enveloped by the cloth, reborn from the Shroud, emerging from their own now-empty tomb, sharing in the meaning and purpose of the original tomb occupant. Then the cloth slowly turned to dust around them, a dust so fine it didn't even fall to the ground but only dispersed itself throughout the room in pieces so small they soon became invisible. They simply . . . faded out of existence, leaving two new people behind. They were still Doc and Bellwether, but refined, purified, somehow made whole when before they had thought themselves so but only now realized their former fragmentedness, their incompleteness, their lack of unity of purpose.

Human words cannot possibly give witness to such things, for such things lie well beyond the possibility of ever being known by human minds, ever being captured and confined to the limits of human proportionate being. It would be as if one cell of their bodies decided to understand this—person—that gave them life and supported their existence without having the conscious mind that would enable them to do so. And if one had been so transported, the same gap sprang into being between them and those that had no idea, no experience of what they were talking about. What good were words when the experiences that gave rise to them were missing?

As the dust settled, or rather faded into reality itself, they were left with only the DSM-750 and the Schematic, neither of which seemed to have the transforming power of the Cloth, the Shroud, yet turned out to have powers of their own. It was in search such powers, these transformational healing powers so different from that which he had known as a NewChristian, that Doc now turned his attention. As for Bellwether, he remained indifferent to such work. For him, existence itself had meaning; he did not have to discover it in a book or in a highly detailed but abstract image sketched on an ancient tablet. So he retired to a corner of the room where he sat and watched Doc get down to work.

Doc started with the sketch, the Schematic. Having been transformed by the Shroud, he now knew that the Schematic dealt not with absolute truths but with a means of knowing, a method of distinguishing between what was true or false, what was real or myth. For it was now clear to him what Bellwether had intuitively known long before, that we create the world through the words we bring into being only to fall into the trap of believing the world we created had an independent existence outside ourselves. It was that trap that constrained villagers and warriors, townsmen and even the MED+ team from making the necessary shift to a realm of interiority where the real work of creation could be safely carried out.

A heightened awareness not of the outside world but of one's inner world? Was it that, that gave Bellwether immunity to this existential distress plaguing the rest of them? He glanced over at Bellwether sitting quietly in the corner only to meet Bellwether's gaze coming back at him. There was a moment of silence between the two of them, before Doc turned his attention back to the Schematic. What did it have to tell him, now that he was in a place that he could understand what it had to say. What the creators of the object had to say as they sent their message down through time to arrive here on his workbench located on the

ground floor of a great stone tower that sat on an isolated island of rock well out from the city of New Jerusalem?

It would take the MED+ team centuries to understand the message and bring it to fruition in JesusLand. But while the exact meaning of these terms and relationships between them had still to be worked out, the general outline was clear enough. The Schematic laid it all out.

The first thing Doc noticed was that the complex sketch consisted of four distinct layers piled on top of each other. The first, lying at the base of the stack, clearly dealt with the nature of world process, with how things actually worked. E-M-E-R-G-E-N-T . . . P-R-O-B-A-B-I-L-I-T-Y, Emergent Probability. Well, Doc now had a name to give to how the universe brought itself into being, for the name itself suggest that things were contingent upon other things, that nothing was ever totally assured, and that shifts could or would take place that could never be anticipated.

With a bit of a shock, Doc realized that this was exactly what they were going through at this point in the history of JesusLand. Well, that helped him given meaning to the term. Already Doc was mentally reorganizing his team to task them with fleshing out this notion of method as a means of understanding what was taking place in the world. For a new seed, or rather a very old seed was sprouting, provided one provided the necessary nourishment that would help all those suffering from this lack of meaning, this existential distress that was playing havoc.

Well, Doc thought to himself; that would be an improvement.

The next level up in the stack was an obvious one, for what came after an understanding of how the universe itself was to unfold? It was the understanding of that understanding. This level of the Schematic must deal with how we come to know both the universe and ourselves, how in part we come to create the universe through what we do or fail to do. Yet, the Schematic suggested two streams operating at this level. Why two? Doc reflected for a moment before it struck him that there was a difference between what he knew as an individual and what the community came to know. Yes, Doc thought, there must be two distinct methods of coming to know, one personal, the other communal. Was there a relationship between the two? The Schematic seem to say yes, but the exact relationship was unclear.

Another task to assign to the MED+ team.

The third level from the bottom of the stack was a familiar, what with its talk of particular goods. But what of this “good of order”? Something to do with society itself being a good? That made sense, because the lack of order, the mistrust and fragmentation currently running wild across JesusLand was destroying much of what had been built. Yes, yes, social and political order was itself a human good—and restoring order a healing process. The

question though, what constituted healing and what could only be said to be medical malpractice?

Well, one thing was clear: it had to be healing in history.

At any rate, the Schematic suggested a moral imperative to protect and enhance society itself, something that was done through being able to distinguish between progress and decline, reality and myth. That was clearly a second strata enterprise, a combination of something called “transcendental method” crossed with “faction” . . . no, “*functional specialties.*”

More and more questions. But at least these questions were better questions. For it seemed traditional questions of authority and meaning were misleading at best and destructive at worse, at least given the way the universe creates itself in this universe of “emergent probability.”

Doc laughed quietly to himself, something Bellwether observed but on which he did not comment.

Terminal value? Doc understood that very well, for his own attempts to make a radical shift in the methods and modes of NewChristian healing was an example of holding to a value greater than himself, although pride and the need to be recognized as brilliant certainly had something to do with it. Perhaps the vehicle would be flawed but the resulting gain to society—to the “good of order”—would be worth it?

Well, the MED+ team was going to be a busy bunch, this time exploring what was possible on this playing field of the human good upon which all human actors played out their “terminal values” in a series of encounters that would change both. In other words, where healing would actually take place.

The highest strata seemed to deal with the phenomena that he, and to some extent Bellwether, had undergone while under the influence of the Shroud. It was clear by now that such a radical shift in being lay at the center of any cure to this disease of existential distress now laying his people low, reducing the “good of order” to such low levels that nothing could operate anymore.

Such a transformational task couldn’t be assigned to the MED+ team. In fact, if it was to be understood it had to be done in the free witnessing of such a radical internal change that the members of the team would have to work out for themselves in the face of this new experience of another way of being in the world. In short, both he and Bellwether had to become examples that such changes were not only possible but doable if JesusLand was to survive in any meaningful way.

Glancing over at Bellwether sitting quietly in the corner, he wondered if they were up to it.

To Bellwether, the question itself had no meaning. The very effort to “be up to it” was no more important than actually “being up to it.” It was to be a pilgrimage, journeying together, sharing stories of past experiences and present hopes, of wondering what it would be like when they reached their destination.

Yes, a pilgrimage. That would be the true healing process for this disease that plagued his fellows yet left him untouched. For if anything, his whole life had been on a pilgrimage that he was about to share with others. Perhaps it was time to collect a few fellow travelers.

A great din erupted from the Great Hall, a sound loud enough to penetrate the solid oak door and disturb the reflections of both Doc and Bellwether. Together, they rose from their simple chairs to face whatever new conundrum awaited them beyond the door to the dining hall. For the moment this immediate work with the artifacts would have to be set aside, put on the backburner so to speak. But these new questions, these new reflections, would change their understanding of what was transpiring. And with these questions emerged new ways of relating to their confreres, ways that still had to be understood much less applied.

It would be an interesting voyage of discovery that no doubt would contain its own pitfalls, detours, mistaken steps. They would have to be careful, testing things out, seeing what worked and what didn't. And with these thoughts, they opened the door and stepped out into the “real” world.

Chapter 14

The “Real” World

From the very first it was evident to both Doc and Bellwether that the changes they had gone through in the tower were greater than they had expected. The first clue to this was that the great milling of people before them now appeared to their eyes as little more than children having a temper tantrum. This was not to downgrade them in any way, for children will eventually grow up to be adult men and women of standing in the community. In that they had their own intrinsic worth, one that owed them human dignity no matter their current conditions.

But with children, one had to be careful.

The cause of all the commotion was the arrival of a delegation representing the city/town of New Jerusalem. The delegates were made up of the more secular leaning townsmen and women who had arrived on the shores of *The Magician's Isle* to seek help, for it seemed

that the traditional NewChristian modes of healing, degraded over the centuries as both Doc and Bellwether now realized, had failed to stem this mysterious cultural disease that swept over towers and spires with no distinction made among those it sought to destroy—save the tendency for smart people to tie themselves up in knots.

The disease was a very real thing in their eyes, something out there prowling in the darkness beyond the city/town gates, seeking entry in order to play mischief within, to conduct mayhem, to set one against family member against another. All these were the outer symptoms of an inner turmoil.

And that was only on the part of those active participants attempting to hide from, to escape from, to “whistle past the graveyard.”

Suicides were up to levels never seen before among the towners. Warriors and even villagers sought refuge within their gated walls as their own communities floundered, largely stripped of dignity since they were in the process of losing that which defined their very being. Small groups close in kinship were still acting together to procure what they need to survive, but larger operations . . .

Well, food was getting scarce as production dwindled and farmers hoarded whatever there was for their own families. Even the city/town’s water and sewage systems were beginning to degrade, as maintenance declined due to lethargy and a general sense of “why bother.” As production of goods, and even of people—for few now were having children—deteriorated, the future that once extended off into eternity shrank back to a matter of days or weeks or months at best as a sense of hopelessness and despair grew ever deeper in the hearts of men and women.

This was the gist of the report such refugees made, a plea for help brought here to the island because they had nowhere else to go. Or perhaps because the people living on *The Magicians Isle* were truly conjurers who, as far as the delegates could see, were largely immune to mysterious forces sweeping unseen through their own populations.

One by one they told their stories.

One woman described how her husband has just walked out the door one morning as if everything was normal only never to return. After days of searching for him and eventually finding him stretched out in a tavern located just outside the gates of New Jerusalem, she had to face the fact he just didn’t care about her or their kids. They were no longer of any concern to him. And now he didn’t even care about himself, using the sweet call of liquor to dull whatever conscience might remain. But she still had children to tend to, a task that gave meaning and purpose to her existence. It was for them she stood before them now, telling a story she would rather have kept to herself. For having her husband run off as he did, did not reflect badly on him but on her as well. As if she was of little value in the eyes of the world.

Another rose to take her place. Before a silent hall, he told the story of how his own business, once the center of his life and the source of all his wealth and prestige, had slipped away from him. One by one he described how first this employee and then that seemed to take little pride in their work, no longer paid attention to the minute details that made the business what it was. More and more they came in late and wandered out before the day's tasks were accomplished. And nothing he said, no plea, no appeal, made any difference. It was as if their eyes had gone blank, listless, no longer seeing the world before them but only turned inward engulfed in an inner pain that couldn't be shed by sharing it with others.

Doomed was the impression they gave; walking zombies.

The third member of the delegation could barely rise to her feet, her very limbs written black and blue by rods drawing designs upon her bones. With a voice full of pain and incomprehension, she told the story so graphically displayed upon her body, a tale of neighbors known since childhood, friends for so long she had lost count of the years, turning on her in not in rage or malice but simply out of curiosity at another being brought into depths of pain at their own hands. It was if they didn't care, as if she wasn't even human, she related before the silent men and women of the MED+ team, before Doc and Bellwether and all the others gather in this Great Hall to witness both the despair and hope of those who had experienced the consequences of others facing the abyss within, that existential distress whose symptoms with which the team was by now very familiar.

No, to her torturers she was less than human, less than animal, only a toy to be played with and then discarded when no longer entertaining.

When she sat down there were murmurs and nods among the men and women of this ragged and forlorn delegation. They too had experienced such people in their own rounds, quickly learning to avoid them at every opportunity, hiding in the shadows lest they be found and suffer the same fate as the women who stood now before them.

The funny thing about it all, if any of this could be said to be funny, was that the pain and distress they felt was not due to the pain and suffering that they had endured, but to the fact that what they had endured was incomprehensible to them. There was no meaning to these events; no way of understanding them; no way of making sense of what had happened. So the only recourse they had was to tell their stories in the hope that others might share in the same incomprehension and so gain some degree of meaning through such shared experiences. It was a strategy driven equally by hope as it was by despair, one that emerged not from thought but from the depths of the experience itself that could only be understood in the act of communicating it to another, could only begin to be dealt with in this act of communication—or perhaps the better word was encounter. For in this act of sharing they also encountered the reality of the other, the mystery of another.

While they could not possibly understand what was taking place, Doc and Bellwether did. For out of this distress, as painful as it might be and certainly is, was a space opening up for something greater to emerge. This apparently meaningless suffering at the hands of malicious spirits and spiteful gods and goddesses had meaning, if only they had the ears to hear and the eyes to see. Behind the meaningless lay meaning. Did the very existence of meaningless imply the existence of meaning?

A most interesting question.

And answering this—opening eyes and unblocking ears—lay at the core of the healing process revealed through the remaining two artifacts that once lay in an empty tomb, even though both DSM-750 and Schematic still had to reveal their secrets. This would not be an easy task, given that pain brought people even deeper into their own identity, the loss of their own sense of being. For the paradox was that opening of eyes and unblocking of ears could only occur when an individual slipped loose of the easy and comfortable shackles of traditional beliefs to confront other possibilities set by themselves and not others. Becoming an individual in a communal society was not an easy shift to make. Tradition dictated who they were, and to set aside tradition meant a fundamental disorientation in their lives: they no longer knew who they were. No wonder such a shift had to be resisted at any cost, through it was also obvious that the costs of not doing so were rapidly rising.

Oh well, Bellwether sighed, good luck with that. A sentiment shared equally by Doc. As for the other members of the MED+ team, they would only understand such sighs as expressions of pity for those standing before them telling stories of doom and gloom to those who might rescue them from the chaos threatening to fall upon them. But the two of them knew otherwise.

Perhaps like them, we need to tell our own story. Perhaps that was the meaning behind the quick glance between Doc and Bellwether observed by R.N. and Herb. No doubt there would be resistance, incomprehension, fear and pain for those who sought to understand their words, and active flight or fight for those who sought to avoid them. As Doc and Bellwether looked out over the vast room of the Great Hall, they could perceive all this playing out before their eyes.

Clearly pain and distress would continue for some time, even after the MED+ team went out into JesusLand to attempt to apply their healing cures to people who would or could not understand them, or those who simply enjoyed the freedom from responsibility and would object strenuously to returning to more civilized ways.

What was it that the NewChristian Book said? Some story about a seed falling on the ground, some on stones where it could not grow, some on poor soil where it struggled to meet and greet the sun while putting down roots to find what little nourishment it could, or the good soil where the plant could flourish? Not a bad image, Doc thought, having been raised in the NewChristian tradition. Perhaps there was more there than he thought, now

that he had a new set of tools to understanding not only himself but the world around him. He would have to delve deeper into that body of knowledge he once considered the creation of disturbed minds and misbegotten intentions.

However, the current prognosis was not good. Any “cure” was not yet fully understood, and any steps to reverse such decline had to play out within such chaotic conditions that reason stood little chance of raising its head above the swamp. For the first time, Doc experienced a sense of self-doubt, that as good as he knew himself to be he was still inadequate to meet the conditions of the time. Ruefully glancing over to Bellwether, he knew this to be true. But he also knew that in the here and now he himself was little more than a seed. The ground may lack nutrients, the wind may twist and turn, the sun may burn, yet still the seed existed. With patience and a little faiths things might change, the situation turn itself around, and while conditions would never be as they were they may well turn out to be far better than one could ever imagine.

As the hall split into different groups, different clusters of mixed team and delegates, the atmosphere shed some of its heavy depressing load and took up levels of normal conversation as different people came to know each other as individuals. Among them, Bellwether traveled to and fro, shaking hands here and there, having a small conversation with this group or that, explaining to whoever would listen what the MED+ team was up to, where they were making progress, and where they still had much to learn.

After a while, R.N. joined in this task of creating community where none existed before.

As for Doc, he looked around the Great Hall, observed that for a brief moment all seemed to be normal, recognized what Bellwether and R.N. were up to, and quietly, unnoticed, retired to the workshop knowing all was in good hands. Perhaps better hands than he knew.

As for him, he still had to delve into the last of the three great mysteries. The Shroud had revealed to him a new plain of existence. The Schematic hinted at the deep mysteries of the universe. And now, perhaps, the DSM-750 would reveal its cure to what only could be described as a spiritual crisis. He hoped the authors of such a work, for authors it had to be—no one individual could have acquired all the wisdom contained therein—had the same advantages he had acquired through the two other Artifacts. If so, they might be on the right track.

And with that thought in mind, he sat at his work station, pulled both book and notebook to him, carefully picked up his pen, and turned the cover to the first page of the manual. It took him awhile to decipher the words written there, but in the end they turned out to be simple enough.

“To all those who came before and those who will come after.”

Chapter 15

The Case Trial

Although those delegates from the mainland were relatively free of the existential distress that so disturbed their fellows, they were not immune to it. Accordingly, it seemed the reasonable and natural thing to do to use them as test subjects. Given their already partial immunity to the disease, Doc and his MED+ team focused on developing ways to enhance their “patient’s” natural resistance while cleansing their systems of the inner doubts and existential questions that were threatening to tear them apart.

These tasks would not be easy. No doubt the team would make many errors, try any number of false and misleading paths before a successful strategy could be found. But Doc knew they had one great advantage. It was highly likely the DSM-750 contained answers to these questions, if only he and those close to him could figure it out. So it would be a two pronged very science orientated attempt: learn what they could from the book, apply it to the patient at hand, learn from the results, go back to the book with this experience, and use that to delve deeper into its mysteries.

From the very first it was obvious that the authors of the DSM-750 had faced this kind of communal disease. Moreover they considered it to be a spiritual sickness with its secondary symptoms felt in the body, although in reality there could never be any split between “spiritual” and “physical.” In fact, according to the manual’s writers such a distinction was quite artificial in nature, a consequence of desiring a better world or perhaps the natural outcome of an innate drive toward something greater than themselves divorced from its physical reality. They knew that such a drive to meet the imperative of consciousness for wisdom was only the natural consequences of the physical reality of being human. Attributing this to a “spirit” side only deepened the existential problem, isolating it from its true roots within human understanding and valuing.

Valuing seemed to be a key concept. Doc and other like him had always understood that values were something real existing independently of any human being. But his recent experiences with the Shroud combined with what he could understand of the text, implied that he himself created and ranked values. He chose what was or was not real?

No, that was not quite it. What the text said, as far as Doc could tell, is that human beings encounter values held by others and in that encounter decided on what was truly important for them. If Doc read the material correctly, then it seem that the key to “curing” this “disease” of “existential distress” was a matter of deciding upon a new set of values, of what the Schematic called “terminal value” that would make such an existential dread disappear, making it an artifact of an individual’s poor decision of what was to be for them of ultimate value.

But what was value? That was left unclear; it was almost as if the writers considered value as something intended rather than something real in itself. Value was the result of asking certain questions, questions that had to do with making a choice. And such choices were existential in nature.

Up to now, those living in JesusLand could appeal to cultural traditions when it came to making personal choices. But it seemed that in valuing these cultural conditions as the source of personal meaning was in itself a bad decision. The only real solution, if the artifacts were to be believed, would be to value the method of creating meaning, both at the individual and collective level, rather than rely on culturally normative demands. It would mean heightening one's awareness of one's own creation of reality, what the Schematic called "worlds mediated by meaning" and the DSM-750 identified as "transcendental method" for individuals and "functional specialization" for communities.

More things to understand.

The first test would be to observe the result when each individual was encourage to make real to themselves—"objectify" was the term used in the DSM-750—their own foundational stance in order to become aware of what they truly valued. This could be affirmed by observing their actions, for whatever they decided would be of value in their lives would determine their intentions, and intentions would play themselves out in action as the individual became the mediator of that value they held to be "terminal." Doc supposed that terminal referred to what any individual or community considered to be of ultimate value, something that could be determined when an organization came under threat. If the collective moved in to protect that organization, than that organization was elevated to the status of institution. This made institutions a key indicator of what any culture or civilization considered to be of terminal value.

No warrior tribe cared one whit whether a band of warriors was wiped out; they could be replaced with ease. But it was not the same if NewChristians threated their war counsels, for being a strong warrior was held to be of high value indeed. The community would step in to protect this cultural institution. Something similar held for mountain villagers. Families came and went, but threaten the existence of the healing lodge and all hell would break loose.

ProPost valued . . . what? Money? But his actions suggested his ultimate value was himself, his own comfort and satisfaction, building the capability of achieving these ends through business where the only counter of significance, at least in New Jerusalem, was money. As for Pree, his other fellow NewChristian, Pree's words, sermons, pronouncements, all had to do with preserving the NewChristian faith among a populace that was less and less attracted to what he had to offer. What he had to offer was little more than comforting platitudes and social value-signaling useful in a communal game of saving face, enhancing personal dignity, and being a "strong man" like ProPost. Doc had long suspected that Pree was far more interested in playing the role of High Priest before an adoring crowd whose

members would hang on his every word than he was in understanding and interpretation the words not only of the founder of their movement but the by now mythical figure of the origin Redeemer whose name graced this land of theirs.

So it could be done, this “objectification” of values among those willing to participate in such an endeavor. It might be an uncomfortable process and it would be very important to not offend anyone’s dignity during this process—and that meant working out a way to respect them all as individuals while still conveying the possibility that they might be wrong in valuing what they were in fact valuing.

This would mean a free encounter among free individuals, something the Schematic laid out as “3rd Level Reflective Work.” Doc would have to give that area of the Schematic greater consideration. And this notion of “individual”? No doubt this had something to do with the mess they were in.

In the meantime, it would be important to hint to all participants that whatever they considered of value was not as valuable as the manner in which they decided what was of value for them. That shift seemed to be at the center of the DSC-7500 suggested remedial course of action, for once attention shifted to how the individual and later the community, decided on what was of true value, then attention could be drawn to ways in which this process could be improved. Progress was possible.

This meant that any decision concerning value was always tentative, conditional in part upon the consequences of such a decision. This suggested that a person could at some level undergo a radical change without the dislocation and distress associated with such a change would incur. True, there would be tensions involved before a new reality could be adopted, and there would certainly be a period of assimilation to follow, but the process itself would not be terminal. What it meant to be a mountain villager or a tribal warrior or a New Jerusalem NewChristian might change, but self-identity would remain. In fact, Doc thought, it might be that this existential disease existed only because traditional ethical norms were engaged in protecting themselves, even at the cost of their own institutional well-being. It may well be the case that current traditional society were the cause of the declining “good of order” led to the debilitating existential distress that currently brought such misery into JesusLand.

Nagging in the back of Doc’s mind lay a new and particularly unsettling question: did there exist a high level value that could not be transcended, a true “terminal” value? That assumed such a terminal value was “out there to be seen”, which was in fact not the case. So the question really had to do with the individual’s own search for meaning and whether that search had a final resting place where the person found peace and stability even in the midst of a world in turmoil.

In any case, it was an entirely new way of being in the world that for many if not most would be hard if not impossible. But Doc also realized that wasn’t the point. As long a core

group held to this manner of existence then they rest would follow by example. It's quite likely, Doc thought, that Bellwether provided that kind of anchor point, something that would explain people's natural attraction to him and the apparent rather great influence he had on those around him.

Including himself, Doc realized.

Now who else could or should be part of this inner team? R.N., of course. Not because she was his closest assistant without whom he could never do the work he did, but because she had immediately picked up on what Bellwether had started, namely the task of building a community from among a diverse group who up until now barely knew of each other's existence.

Now that was a thought. The DSM-750 clearly stated that there were two similar and yet distinct processes involved in coming to know, to be. The first applied to the individual; the second to the collective. It was quite possible that the normal course of treatment laid out in the manual started with the heightened awareness of the way each person created the world of meaning in which they lived only to extend that process into a collective movement where individuals would band together in different things called "functional specialties" to undertake the long and difficult task of determining for the community what the community should truly stand for. That is, the collective culture's decision of what was of terminal value. Such a collective decision would work itself down through society, healing that society by establishing a common "world mediated by meaning" that people could enjoy without necessarily understanding.

Very idealistic I know; yet if it could be done?

So, the three of them would make up the core of the MED+ team. Yet . . . there was always the danger that they could go off the deep end, being misled by their own impulse to avoid dissent. That would mean Pal should be part of this inner team, not because he would contribute directly to their enterprise but because he could be relied to point out the flaws in their argument, the mistakes in their thinking, the assumptions they were making that they shouldn't make. As discomfoting a critic as he may be, Pal would be an absolutely essential component to their communal work.

But somehow four was itself an incomplete number, a number that could easily lead to deadlock should two be against two at any point in a discussion. A fifth person could help avoid such a pitched battle that if it occurred could fracture the group beyond any possibility of reuniting them.

Herb. Herb had the traditional background of a healer, a shaman and Sage for his own mountain clan. He had the necessary healing skills to successfully run the healing lodge ceremony and even if he had lost the capacity to do so still retained the skill he had learned over many years. So Herb it would be.

The decision made, Doc opened the door to the Great Hall, called the four of them into the tower, explained his proposition to them as well as the general nature of the remedial strategy he had picked up from the diagnostic manual. Leaving their training to another time, they re-entered the Great Hall where Doc took his place at the head of the table flanked the other four members of the research team.

Now he had to prep the patient.

Well, patients of a sort; more like his fellow citizens than patients. Yet the situation demanded a doctor/patient relationship of mutual trust and expectations so necessary to initiate patient's self-healing. For in work like this, the "expert" could only lay things out; it is the "patient" who would actually have to do the work. Building trust was essential.

This in itself was a novel approach, not quite based on traditional status and its associated authority but one that mirrored the healing strategy being tested. If people were to work through this existential distress, if they were to change their sense of self from the role they played to the player who created the role, then the most he could do was only point the way and lead by example. He could neither compel nor dictate such a change; it could only come from within. There were no legions of warriors to enforce his laws, nor even in the end his authority as founder of the MED+ team. The only way was through influence, and that came from who he was and now is.

At this moment he was asking for their trust, their faith; understanding could come later. And while he would have to start by establishing his authority, it would not end there. The goal was to encourage the emergence of a specialized group whose members would share a common set of values through mutual respect and a willingness to improve their own capacity for living truly free lives not of self-directed willfulness but of being able to follow the good in any situation.

With that in mind he started with the history of the MED+ team. He reminded them of NewChristian ways of healing and that while he and his team did not want to overturn or degrade them in any way they also sought to go beyond current practices. And it was quite possible that this new disease, this existential distress, provided the necessary motivation to take such a step.

This applies to both the warrior tribes and the mountain clans, for their traditional forms of healing, as different as they are, still failed either to identify the illness that fell upon their community, work out a successful way of containing its spread, or even restoring to health those who were affected by its passing.

At that moment, Doc looked at T-Dog. And T-Dog realized that Doc knew what he had done, in transmitting the disease to New Jerusalem and its NewChristian inhabitants. T-Dog shrugged. What had been done had been done, and we were now all in the same boat,

even his own warrior tribes he once thought immune to such thoughts were struggling to meet this new reality.

Chall was simply pissed off.

Herb, Pal, and R.N., sitting at the head table next to Doc, tried to look professional. It was demanded by the situation that they appear so. Bellwether looked bored, as if it was all for show, he knew it, they knew it, and let's get down to business.

In this he was wrong. Drama was as much an important dimension in human living as the individual's pursuit of whatever the individual decided to pursue. The thing about drama is that it not only provides a common experience for others to understand but conveys a pattern of power and authority in a public manner for all to see. Hence, dramas help build communities.

After Doc finished and sat down in his place at the head of the table, the meeting broke into groups, the members of which were in constant flux. As the day was fading, the light dimming, and lamps lit, the animated discussion died down as people returned to their seats at the great dining tables that stretched the entire length of the hall. The eyes of the assembly turned to one woman, who under their gaze rose to her feet and turned to face the head table. Silence descended upon them all while she addressed Doc, the other members at the head table, and even the assembly at large. For what she said and how she said it would affect them all.

She opened with a declaration that she didn't want to act as the representative of the delegates who were being asked to be the "patient" in a "spiritual" medical procedure she did not understand, still those around her urged her to convey their feelings to him, Doc. This was closely followed by her belief that a consensus had arisen among them. But before she laid out the collective decision they had made, she reminded all present of the gradual disintegration of New Jerusalem, the despair that held so many of its citizens in its grasp, and the reason they came to this island in the first place in the hope that salvation might be found among the newly formed MED+ team.

That the MED+ team might be their only hope went unsaid.

At that she sat down, tears welling up in her eyes. The collective decision had not been stated, yet even so it was obvious. The delegates would put their trust in the MED+ team, put their faith in the team, if only because Doc himself seemed to have some grasp of the problem.

But that was not the real reason. The real reason lay in the recognition on the part of the delegates from New Jerusalem that those sitting at the head table were not afflicted with the same existential distress that plagued the rest of them. There must be a reason for that, and they meant to find that reason out. In the end, it was not Doc's authority as head of the

MED+ team that persuaded them to “become patients”, but his personal influence as someone who possessed a personal integrity, honesty, and openness plus the necessary practical skills to guide them across the abyss to whatever shores might lie on the other side.

Sooner than Doc had thought, the healing had started.

Chapter 16

Test Results

It had been three months since the agreement to start this medical experiment had been taken up by the massed assembly of MED+ members, invited personages such as T-Dog, and recent delegates from New Jerusalem. It had been twelve-and-a-half weeks of non-stop confusion, arguments, total incomprehension, here and there a glimmer of hope, dashed hopes, despair, laughter, and all the other features that spring into play when people live and work together for long stretches of time.

Much of this time and effort was spent of building some sense of community, but not the kind of community most of them were familiar with. This was not a cultural community as such, whose norms would set roles and tasks for members to play out in their lives, but a community built around self-awareness, a community that built its sense of identity in the realm of interiority, that inner heightened sense of what one was doing when creating meaning now understood—at least in part—as not being “real out there in the world to be seen” but within, a mind projecting meaning out upon the sensate world.

Such a shift could never have taken place under normal conditions. True, a few individuals like Bellwether may have made the change or were simply born with a natural tendency to that way of being in the world. But for the vast remainder, such changes only became possible under existential stress of the type that raised motivation, the willingness to not only change but change for the better.

That was one thing they were all learning. Without willingness, such an innate potential could not be released. This was born out in the dynamics of the emerging—emergent?— island community, for the willing among them found themselves at peace without knowing how or why the MED-5 team did what they did, or even indeed what they were doing. To the unconverted, the actions of the converted remained a mystery. To the converted everything seemed simple indeed.

Mind you, it took a while before the MED-5 team consisting of Herb, R.N., Pal, and Bellwether under the direction of Doc reached that point. But the more they learned, the

more they tested what they had learned through interacting with the assembly, the more they verified the general concepts set out in both the DSM-750 and Schematic through personal experience, direct experiential knowledge. They knew because they directly verified what they knew, something Doc called the “transcendental method” in action. They learned to judge the quality of their insights by the results they produced. But more important than that, they learned to pay attention to the process that not only generated such insights but collected and weighed the evidence that determined whether or not the insight was true, was reliable.

For that was one of the major flaws of a traditional culture: all judgments were premade by generations of ancestors that came before them. So not only was reality, when conceived as being out there having an independent existence from any human being, now revealed as myth, so too was the belief that an insight into reality automatically made it true. Always, always, it was necessary to step back, shuck off the detective’s garb, and don the robes of a judge. Only then might a dispassionately judgement be made, although egotism and a tendency to support one’s own group over all others could still be in play. For that was the other thing discovered through personal experience. As the days passed, it became clear that many of their judgments were not dispassionate at all but deeply affected by their own interests or at times the interest and well-being of their own city/town guild, warrior tribe, or mountain clan.

But they soon realized that there was another problem than ran far deeper than that caused by any sociopathic egotist (Chall?) or a group collective (for example, warrior tribes). You see, most of the people now living on *The Magician’s Isle* were men and women of action. T-Dog and Chall were warriors, and although T-Dog had developed a degree of wisdom, still he was constrained by the need to meet the seasonal needs of his people. So in one situation, he would use a certain logic; in another, a different argument. Furthermore, Chall offered his own interpretation of events, adding rather than resolving the confusion. After centuries of such ad hoc plans and policies, a certain element of confusion if not outright contradiction became inbuilt into the tribe’s collective consciousness. Gradually the “good of order” declined as multiple orientations leading to conflicting evaluations resulted in the fact that it was only the powerful that could dictate what was or was not real. Such an application of naked power simply added to the downward trend as people could no longer be relied upon to “do the right thing” but had to be monitored and punished when necessary.

Chall was a good case in point. At least T-Dog was guided in part by an inner wisdom, but Chall saw the world around him only in terms of what advantages or disadvantages it offered in advancing his own interests. Now this was sociopathic egotism at its best, or worse, but as damaging as it was it was not the real damage taking place. When with his close warriors, he would use one set of meanings; with his peers, quite another justification for what he wanted to do; for family and slaves, quite another. He was simply being an intelligent person of common sense who knew what could or couldn’t be done in any situation. The trouble was, long after he was removed from any position of power due to

the innate social and political corrective mechanism that exists to counter egotism, the multiple reference frames of meaning he left behind continue to confuse and disorientate

It was around then that Doc realized the “good of order” was more than just providing a steady stream of goods, where goods were defined according to the chosen terminal value combined with the practical needs of the community. It also included the potential for further improvements. Traditional societies lack such a potential, trapped as they were in an unchanging cycle. Such a strategy worked very well, at least up to the point when sudden changes in climate, in collective delusions, or in contacts with other cultural traditions demanded new responses. Any institution unable or unwilling to tackle key issues or new problems was bound to fail as they became irrelevant to those that once supported them and who now withheld resources. At that point, creative elites become necessary not only to conceive possible solutions to practical problems but to be in a position to actualize them.

It was entirely possible that Doc’s MED+ team was exactly that elite.

Over the last three weeks this desire to get on with things, to determine the problem and then work out a solution, to “get on with it” became acute until Pal had the key insight into the problem. It was what the DSM-750 called “common sense bias”, that tendency for intelligent people of common sense to cleave off their own area of interest and concern from any large issue that might arise should long-term consequences, philosophical positions, or theological insights were ignored. When that happen, as it threatened to happen with the assembly, then the comprehensive perspective of Doc and his immediate team encountered the less comprehensive worlds mediated by meaning of the participants who came with their own rational explanations for what they were doing or wanted other to do.

No longer was it a question of heightening self-aware into the realm of interiority, it was a question of group cohesion around those fragments of a normative culture that still resided within their psyches.

It was Doc that made the connection between this “common sense bias” and “functional specialization”, for it became clear that the only way to counter this tendency of practical people to conceive themselves as the final authority when it came to dealing with the practical affairs of the world was to build a cohesive group with sufficient authority and influence, but no coercive power whatsoever, whose sole purpose was to deal with the long-term historical consequences of such a bias. This would require a common image of such a specialized team to be brought into existence across JesusLand. This would be a commonly known, identifiable, and meaningful “organization” that would allow various people of great common sense to take this wide-based common cultural understanding into account.

New Jerusalem already had many examples of such specialized well-known entities. One of the best involved music, where the notion of an “orchestra” allowed for and gave meaning to the musical training on different musical instruments, a conductor to lead that all, a musical tradition to present and enhance, an paying audience to play to, and a behind the scenes staff to make sure everything from booking halls to paying staff worked.

All these insights helped them in their work. But there was one strange observation when the MED-5 team reflected on the results of their test case, and that was the existential distress almost all of them had experienced over the last few months had disappeared. That sense of dread, of an abyss opening between their feet, of everything being meaningless in the vanity of men and women—all that was simply *gone* as if it had never existed.

Now that was rather interesting.

Epilogue

That's all the time we have for today, boys and girls. There you have it, the great tale of the JesusLand Crisis of 3013-15. Here at *The Magician's Isle* we keep the story alive for future generations.

The solution Doc and his MED+ team eventually worked out was refined by the entire assembly before selected missionary teams spread out over the land, from the shores of New Jerusalem to the foot-hill forests of the warrior tribes and on up to the high mountain clans. We still continue the work as we come understand what the DSM-750 and Schematic have to teach us. The current MED-5 research team is even thinking of producing a DSM-751 based on their experiences!

We have no record of what happen to Pal, Doc's arch-foe who played such a valuable role in the end, for without his constant criticism the team would surely have slipped and failed, and you and I would not be standing here today

Pard went back to herding his sheep, or to be more precise he never left tending the village's flock. Brief contact with Bellwether seems to have built a degree of resistance, for he was always content with reality as it came, demanding neither more nor seeking less. R.N. stayed by Doc's side until the end, when Doc could work no more and passed the reins on to another. You passed his tomb on the way up from the wharf—and I can assure you than his is *not* empty despite the rumors that float around. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise.

Perhaps Herb took the strangest path. You may remember he was the Mountain villager's shaman, a healer—now not the kind you are familiar with today but a more primitive type using the clan's "healing lodge" method. He and Doc became close friends. And when Doc took it upon himself to study the sacred NewChristian texts, so too did Herb. I think to everyone's surprise, he converted to the faith and eventually, due to a combination of his healing experiences within the lodge and the material he mastered as part of the research MED-5 team, became High Priest.

This, of course, was long after Pree had left the post and indeed NewChristianity itself. It turns out his faith was shallow, a simple covering holding his own drive for power and prestige. When the ground of NewChristianity shifted under his feet he simply could not adapt.

What about the warrior Chall? Well, he could never free himself from this existential distress and faded from the scene. There are no records of how his life came to an end. As for T-Dog, you all know he rose again to be chief of all the tribes. And no one has done more to take a culture's core beliefs and ground them not in tradition but in the best of their core values. Warriors now express the peak of personal discipline, a total commitment to the

non-violent use of their powers, and embrace a tradition of protecting the weak against any predators—human or otherwise.

Their dedication and devotion stands as a challenge to us all.

On your way out, take a look in the alcove located just to the right of this side of the exit. There you can see the two surviving artifacts from the empty tomb. Touch them if you will. They are impervious to the passage of time and will likely outlast us all.

Now off you go. The sun is setting, your teachers are calling. And who knows, I may see one or more of you again, should you decide to join in our little gang. In the meantime, remember that each one of you holds a universe in your head. Make it a good one, for that is the one task that gives meaning, purpose, and direction in life.

Until we meet again,

Ulam, 23rd in the line of Docs, Master of the Tower, Lord of *The Magician's Isle*, and Guardian of the Sacred Objects.

And with a faint smile tugging at his lips, he winked at them.

Appendix I

Intro to the JesusLand Series

This narrative is only one of a number of teaching stories provided by the NewChristian Cosmopolis Institute, the successor to the great MED+ research institution that has guided us all here across JesusLand long after the 3013-15 crisis had passed. The discovery of an ancient text whose title and author have been lost over the untold centuries since it was first written make it clear that the original work of the MED+ team was actually a subset of a far greater task named by the unknown author as “cosmopolis.” We here at *The Magician’s Isle* have taken up that challenge and like the MED-5 team before us seek not only to fully understand what this task entails but to spread this knowledge out into the world.

The story of the 3013-15 Existential Crisis related by the 23rd successor to the line of Docs is a good example of what was known at that time. His description of the course of the “disease” is one of the best that we currently have; his knowledge of the key players and their true selves is particularly astute; and the dramatic quality he gives to the search for a “cure” well illustrates the courage and tenacity of those caught up in such turbulent and uncertain times.

But our primary reason for republishing his comments is that Ulam had a keen knowledge not only of the working of traditional cultures but of the impact evidence of such a truly advanced and transcendent culture would have on any traditional society that should encounter one. Furthermore, he stressed the fact that such a culture not only had existed but in some way carried the most important part of them down through time to make in impact when such an impact became possible. Perhaps at some point in our own culture, we too will be faced with the same task. In fact, there are some that speculate we have already done so and that the artifacts described by Ulam are of our own creation.

Clearly that possibility is more fiction than reality.

But Ulam’s story raises a very real question: How is it possible for a traditional society to make a collective shift to a higher perspective on what it means to be human? By a combination of luck, skill, and perseverance our ancestors did just that. But we at the NCCI suspect that the real presence that brought our forefathers through this crisis was the actions of a Divine Mystery, a transcendental reality that still pervades our lives.

If so, are we but mid-wives?

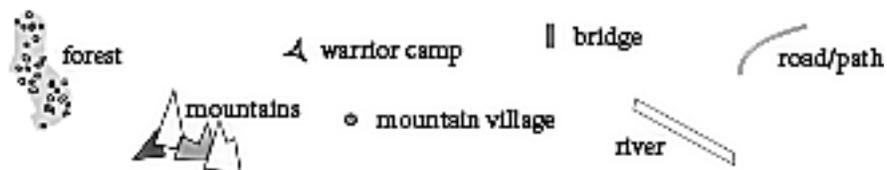
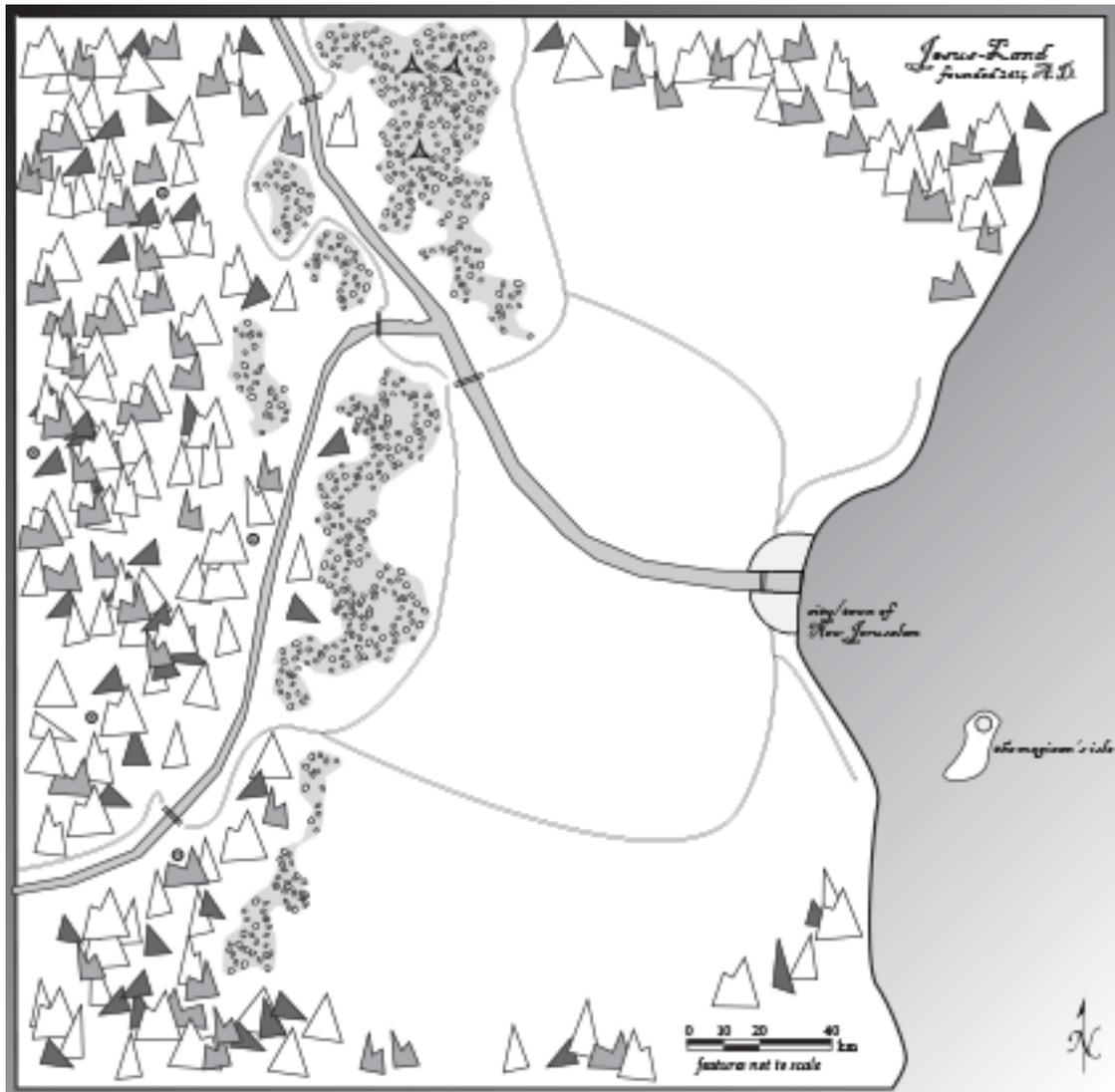


Russell C. Baker
The Magician’s Isle
Posted in the NC year of 3894

Appendix II

All About 3013 JesusLand

Geography



Geography

- “Jesus-Land” is a coastal area that once had “international” trade via the ocean; now the potential remains although traffic is sparse.
- There is a river that provides easy transport from the hinterland into the coastal plain, along with a rudimentary network of roads and paths.
- The plains consist of very fertile land capable of sustain large populations with minimal work.
- The area is bounded by mountains, and even though there are roads the region is largely free from the effects of the destruction of Western society.
- The mountains also provide easy access to rare minerals such as copper, tin, flint, and iron.
- The climate is a temperate one, which means there is an insect die-off each winter, no or few droughts, associated flora and fauna, and regular seasons with predictable water cycles.
- The roads, bridges, and parts of the towns are artifacts from a more prosperous age, yet knowledge of them is rudimentary.
- Even so there are threats of flooding and even tidal waves.
- The land is understood differently by different groups.

History

- Two types of native populations: mountain villages and plain warriors.
- In 2614 “A.D.”, a deeply devoted Christian sect landed seeking sanctuary from hostile conditions in their own native land; they were fleeing the self-destruction of Western civilization.
- This NewChristian group founded the city of New Jerusalem and gave the name JesusLand to the land.
- Both indigenous groups had prior contacts with Christianity, something that colored their own reception of the New Christians.
- Both indigenous groups are long lived, reaching 150 years or more; the NCs have an attitude towards death based on the idea that life continues (resurrection).
- The New Christians themselves needed the indigenous people to teach them how to survive in their new home.
- In this process, children become teachers.
- Cooperation among these various groups brought with it a number of social and political tensions stemming from the different world views of various participants.
- In 3013 A.D., these tensions come to a head, and things exploded.
- The trigger that ignited these conflicts was the discovery of an empty tomb.
- This tomb was found to contain artifacts from an ancient possibly “Westernized” age.
- During the breakdown a creative and articular person was given two of these artifacts, a “sacred text” named DSM-750 and an icon titled Schematic.
- This “prophet” builds around him a “medical” team with the title MED^t, with the “t” representing the cross.

- This title was later simplified to MED+
- This group's existence provided a counter to the "bad medicine" destroying their society.

Major Groups

Mountain Villagers

- Worship pagan Mountain Gods.
- Peaceful, largely self-contained communities.
- Organized into different clans.
- Welcoming, hospitable (harsh environment, survival, limited resources).
- Accessed through mountain paths, trails; rugged terrain.
- Dignity, responsible: aspects of surviving tough conditions.
- Community above all (little individuality).
- Non-productive elders "ascend the mountain."
- Cyclic view of time: past and future both unchanging.
- Traditions rule: oral history contains the only real wisdom.
- The villagers have their own ways of dealing with dissidents.

Warrior Tribes

- Warrior castes, status through warfare, honor system.
- Plain warriors, used to wide spaces and local forests.
- Free-range hunter/gatherer groups.
- Group bias: one's family, one's clan, comes first.
- Pride, status, honor, merit system around military might.
- Fixed identities, as member of a tribe.
- Wealth hierarchy as tribe or clan chief and/or elder.
- Don't accept the intrusion of the NC on "their" land.
- Dissidents dealt with through military discipline.

New Christians

- Founder: true conversion, now fading in the culture as generations have passed and the original fervor faded.
- The founder as the "ideal" man.
- Things haven't panned out as the original settlers expected, and people are now wavering from their traditional beliefs.
- Looking for something else? Eternal life? Reverse aging?
- Had to sustain a conversion generation after generation (less and less of the transcendent).
- They also live with the remnants of a "great" past all around them, i.e., the artifacts of a Western civilization (in the shadows of giants).
- "Urban" and "trade", not quite so tied to the land.

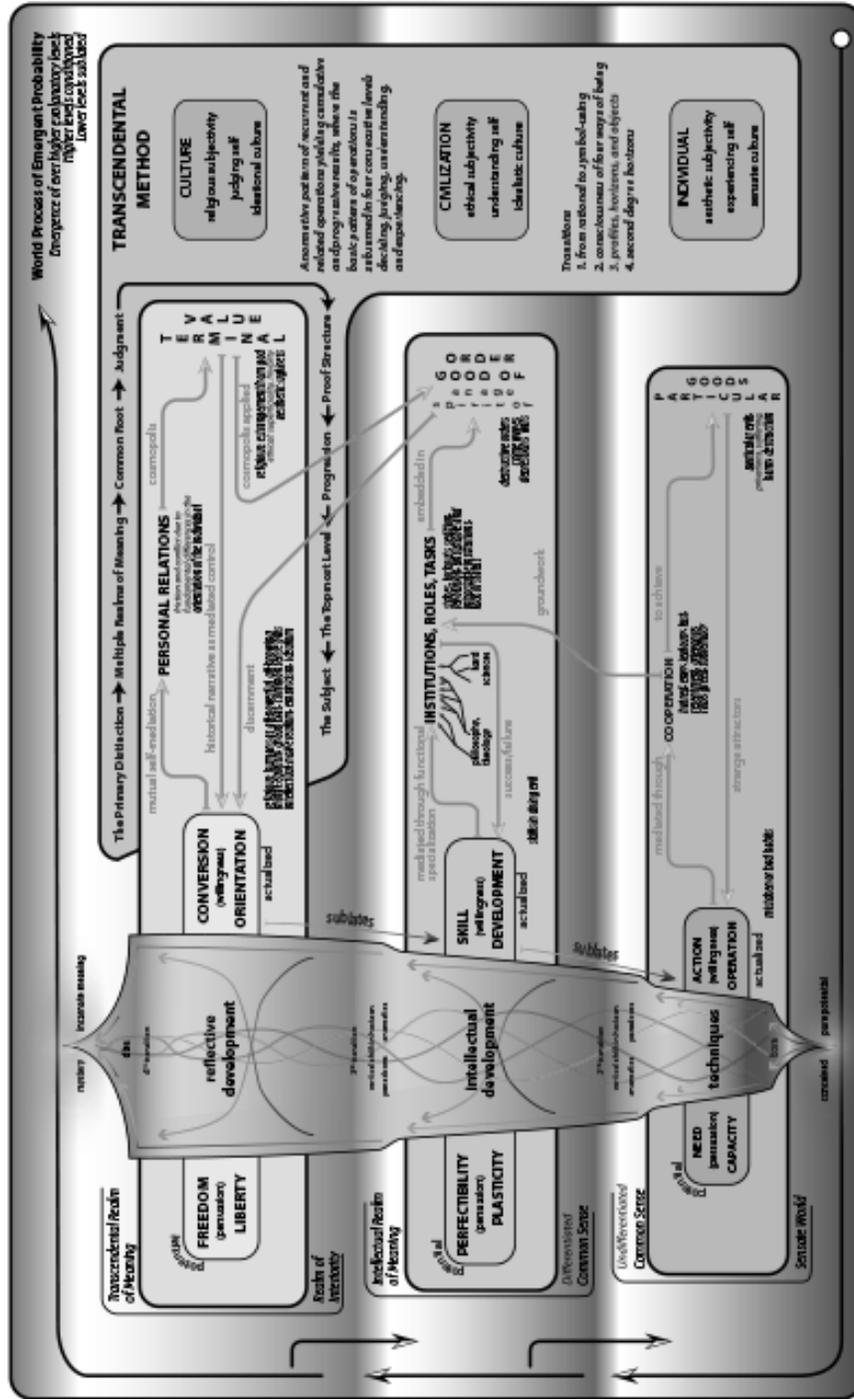
- Wealth creating rather than wealth distributing economy.
- Bible/Natural Law (Jefferson); life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- Live according to the rules and regulations, the laws and/or traditions of the founder and those who followed him.
- Property (owning happiness?).
- Legal system and prisons for dissidents.
- They are a resurrected people.

MED+

- Emergence of a “medical prophet” from the NewChristian movement, who meets in some way the needs of a declining faithful.
- An illusionary transcendence?
- Promise of a “quality” human life.
- A society in which everyone is expected to get along, to fit in, to not stray too far from the norm.
- Search for the transcendental.

Appendix III

The Schematic



An enlarged and annotated copy of the Schematic may be ordered from the Cosmopolis Institute, *The Magician's Isle*, JesusLand, attn. Russell C. Baker, Dir.

