

On Being a Trusty Sidekick:
My Adventures in Paranormal and
Conspiracy Investigation

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Where Your Shoes May Lead

Although now, I can hardly believe that I haven't always known Zen, we only met a few short years ago. I had collapsed onto a couch in the lobby of the rather grim hotel where I'd been staying and complained out loud, "Women's shoes are just a conspiracy to prevent us from getting anything important done." I'd just finished a long day working our vendor booth, and regretted having worn professional looking shoes (pointy, narrow, with heels) rather than my normal sneakers.

A friendly voice spoke up from a neighboring couch, "It's worse than you think, my dear. I believe that pantyhose are also part of the nefarious plan." At first, I didn't see anyone. But after I sat up to get a good look, I saw a white-haired, tiny man sitting with his head hanging off the couch and his feet propped up over the back. He had a bushy moustache and an unlit pipe in his mouth. He waved his feet in the air and asked, "So what have you been up to today?"

"I've been talking up my latest research projects, looking for more transition customers," I answered. Although I had thoroughly absorbed childhood admonitions to never talk to strangers, this man was

completely non-threatening. Little did I know that within a year, he'd have helped turn my whole life inside-out.

“And how many conspiracies did you observe, other than the subjugation via footwear plan?” he asked, with a chuckle. He pulled out three tangerines from his suit pockets and started juggling, while still sitting upside-down on the couch. I noticed that despite his unorthodox posture, he was wearing a business suit and leather shoes, with one green and one yellow sock.

I was about to answer that I hadn't seen any other conspiracies, but then I remembered. “Now that you mention it, there did seem to be something strange about the latest McDonald's kiddy meal promotion. Those mini-stuffed animals are just plain unsettling. They look like an alien's rendition of animals, and each of them looks a little bit, well, like food. It's almost like they're subconsciously convincing people that it would be a good idea to have an elephant for dessert, or that panda is what's for dinner.” I shrugged, and laughed, more amused than worried. But all at once the man pivoted around and sat up straight.

He looked at me closely, glanced around the room, and said “We should talk more. Come out to the courtyard.” He got up, motioned towards the hotel pool area with his head, and headed outside. Since it had been cold and damp that week, no one was out there. I was intrigued, and since it was still half an hour before I was supposed to meet up with my coworkers for dinner, I figured I'd see what he had to say. I put on my sneakers and threw the other shoes into my backpack, then followed the man into the pool area.

He clapped his hands together and smiled. "I've been looking for an assistant and trusty sidekick, and you're just the right person for the job," he said. I'd been expecting some kind of follow up to my McDonald's observation, so was taken aback by the proposition. Although the idea of being an official trusty sidekick did have some appeal.

"Well, I do already have a job that I like. It doesn't usually involve wearing stupid shoes," I explained. "Besides, we've barely met." Was this some kind of performance art? Were my fellow SF0 players trying to complete some unusual task? My normal urban area suspicion was tingling.

He took my hand and bowed. "And you're a scientist, but you know that sometimes coincidences are meaningful, and you'd like to visit Easter Island." He grinned. "You can call me Zen. And I only need someone on a very occasional basis; it's not a full-time job."

"Wait, how did you guess that stuff?" I asked. "Are you helping one of my friends play some kind of joke?" I figured that since I'd mentioned a research project, being a scientist wasn't a bad guess. But my friends often teased me about seeing patterns in random coincidences, and I had always been fascinated with Easter Island.

"I'll tell you how I knew if you'll just agree to being my assistant for a short trial period. Say two hours sometime this week, during an evening. You'll enjoy it, and eventually, once you sign on for good, the job will get you a free trip to Easter Island." At this point, Zen was so excited that he was bouncing in his pool chair, and it had scooted

dangerously near the edge of the pool. As I started to call out a warning, he jiggled a little harder, and tipped in with a big splash.

As someone from the hotel staff came out to berate him for taking a chair into the pool, he calmly climbed up the ladder. Dripping, but still smiling, he said “My website is at www.tellmewhy.org, and it’s got my contact info. Just come by sometime later this week. Then I can explain more, and you can meet my dust bunnies. Right now, I’ve got to go change into something drier.” He waved vigorously with one hand while holding his now soaked shoes in the other, and squished and squelshed his way to the elevator. I looked at the wet footprints and tried to figure out why his offer was so appealing even though he was clearly a couple stops past eccentric.

Zen Online

After dinner and commiserating with my colleagues about how the difficulty of preparing interesting posters and demonstrations about our research projects evoked bad memories of disastrous science fair experiences, I decided to at least look up Zen's website. Just the title made me laugh: Xenophilus Explains Everything. I'm a semi-crazed Harry Potter fan, and the funny man I'd met did in fact remind me of the famous barmy editor of the Quibbler. I wondered briefly why Zen was using a pseudonym, but figured that it was probably some mixture of blogger convention and conspiracy theory paranoia.

His website had a section for everything; the Loch Ness monster, crop circles, and alien abductions all had extensive entries. But beyond the normal list of paranormal theories, Zen had put together a do-it-yourself guide to exploring odd phenomena. There were instructions for making ley line mapping equipment, decoding algorithms for translating blinking light codes into English, and detailed diagrams and calendars for augury. As if all this wasn't odd enough, he also seemed to have an Ask Zen section where readers could ask for help in explaining mysteries in their own lives. Frankly, I was getting more and more curious. If he

named the site after someone who is portrayed as a bit of a crackpot, was he serious about these subjects? Or was he just joking?

Skimming through the Ask Zen section, I still couldn't tell if everything was tongue-in-cheek or in earnest. In any case, the advice seemed reasonable even when the explanations were far fetched. One reader had asked how to reverse a jinx that constantly caused him to be dealt bad hands during poker, resulting in some large debts. Zen had suggested several harmless sounding remedies (eating 7 mint leaves before breakfast for seven days, burying an unlit candle, or wearing an extra pair of underpants) but also strongly cautioned the man that if none of those worked, the jinx was likely to just be too strong, so he should simply stop betting. Another person had asked whether their teenaged son's odd behavior indicated that he was being mind controlled by nano-robots. Zen had pointed out that while mind controlling nano-robots were an emerging threat, it was unlikely that they'd have any reason to make someone play loud, bad, music and store pizza under their bed.

I was getting more and more intrigued by Zen. But what really convinced me to try being his assistant was his section on Easter Island. Completely uninterested in the cliché mystery of how the statues were moved or whether the statue carvers were from the lost continent of Atlantis or outer space, Zen had his own long term research project. He was trying to decipher the rongorongo tablets. He was using a two pronged approach. One side was an exhaustive study of Pacific Island folklore and mythology, to gain understanding of what stories might be written. The other side was an ambitious experiment, asking people from different cultures what the glyphs reminded them of. He planned to feed the two types of data into some sort of machine learning algorithm.

Apparently, he had been making regular visits to Easter Island for decades, to gain more of a feeling for where the rongo rongo writers had lived.

What's there to lose? I figured, and emailed Zen to tell him that I'd drop by on Thursday. I didn't have anything else planned, and at least I'd find out how he'd intuited my fascination with Easter Island.

The Mystery of the Missing Wheels

Zen's door had an old-fashioned door knocker instead of a doorbell. Instead of a lion or your typical brass ring, his door knocker was a fist sized bust of Einstein sticking out his tongue. He opened the door almost before I finished knocking. "My dear, it's a pleasure to see you again. Do come in." He led the way into a cozy living room with mismatched wallpaper and furniture that looked like it had been picked up off the curb. "Would you care for some pumpkin seed curry biscuits?"

In for a penny, in for a pound. I took a bright yellow biscuit and tentatively nibbled at it. I would soon realize that all of Zen's culinary creations were of a type. They were strangely compelling, but nothing that you'd ever want to eat again after you'd stopped. "Er, thank you. Very unusual combination," I said, unable to come up with a better compliment about the biscuits.

"Oh, it's very important to never use the same pattern of wallpaper on all four walls of a room," he cautioned. "If you do that, it just confuses any ghosts that wander through, and sometimes they end

up trapped in your room because they can't remember the way back out. Just asking for trouble, really."

"Right," I said. "So tell me more about what you'd like me to assist with."

"A bit of this and that, but primarily, I need help with doing the legwork for one of my blog features. Sometimes, the Ask Zen questions are devilishly difficult to answer, and I hate to ignore a mystery just because I don't have enough time to track down the details that would make it all clear," he replied. "For example, right now, I'm looking into some missing wheels."

"You mean, you don't just know the answers?" I blurted. I figured that he'd just been making up interesting replies to everyone's questions.

"Tsk tsk. You should know that one never has all the answers," he admonished. "Even Millie can't tell me everything." Before I could ask him about Millie, he got up and started rummaging through a desk drawer. He held up a brightly colored packet. "I call this deck Millie because she's got a million things to say." Zen tossed me the packet.

I unwrapped a painted silk scarf from a pack of Tarot cards. "You're a fortune teller?" I asked, fanning through the deck and looking at the illustrations. "Neat."

"I am actually one of the few modern haruspices, but that gets a bit messy and is not very portable," he answered proudly. I must have looked confused, because he elaborated. "A haruspex practices hepatomancy, or divination through examining the livers of sacrificed animals."

“Wow, that’s so cool!” I said. “What kind of livers do you use?”

He looked pleased. “I’m too squeamish for animal sacrifice, so it’s usually chicken livers, since they’re about the only kind that you can buy whole at the grocery store. But once in a while I’ll drop by a butcher shop for something larger. You can see more details with the mammal livers.” He gesticulated wildly with his hands, outlining a larger liver. Then he rumbled his hair, which was already standing up in six different directions. “But let me tell you about the wheel situation. I don’t want to keep you too long.” I nodded, and put my feet up on a worn velvet ottoman.

“According to one of my readers, there has been a rash of wheel thefts. In each case, the rear wheel of a bicycle has been removed with no damage to the frame. My reader was only complaining about two thefts, both from bicycles left on her porch. But I dropped by a few bike parking areas around her neighborhood and counted no less than eight other bikes with missing rear wheels. I haven’t scoped out other areas yet.”

“That is strange. Usually, if a wheel gets stolen, it will be a front tire that isn’t locked to the frame,” I observed.

“Exactly. My reader suspects aliens in search of spare parts for their UFO, but I doubt it. No one builds a UFO out of bicycle wheels,” he said, with some exasperation. “Some people just want to blame everything on space aliens. It’s up to us to discover the real reason behind the missing wheels!”

“So what do you want me to do?” I asked.

“I shan’t direct you too closely, my dear. I want your intuition to be working independently of mine before we come together to compare notes. Why don’t you spend a few hours next week looking into the problem, and then we’ll talk again.” He nodded at the biscuit tray. “Would you like to take a little snack home with you?”

I couldn’t stomach another one. Perhaps if he had removed the pumpkin seed shells before mixing them into the biscuits, I thought. “No, but thanks for asking. And by the way, do you ever play a game called SF0? I think you’d really like it because it’s so creative.”

“Not much time for games these days,” Zen said with regret. “But maybe now that I have an assistant, I’ll have a bit more leisure time. Though really, I’m afraid that I’ve got some ley lines to map, which I’ve been putting off for too long.”

“But it’s exactly the sort of game that includes things like mapping ley lines. You complete unusual tasks to broaden your world view and experience new things,” I informed him. “And if there’s something interesting you want to do that isn’t part of the game yet, you can suggest it. Then other players may also give your idea a try. You’d be surprised at all the different interpretations people come up with for seemingly simple instructions.”

Zen tapped his fingers together, thinking. “Why don’t you remind me about SF0 again in a few weeks. Who knows, maybe the time will be ripe.”

Sources and Sinks

On my way home, I thought about how to get more information about the strange thefts. How long had this sort of thing had been going on, and how many wheels had been taken seemed like the first questions to answer. The obvious place to go was the Porter Square Wheelworks, a large bicycle shop. I figured that once someone had their wheel snatched, they'd either abandon their bike in disgust or go ahead and buy a replacement part. A few days later, I headed to the bike store and browsed around the display of horns and bells near the counter, eavesdropping on the other customers.

“You’ve got a lot of options for saddles here. Now, for the kind of cycling you’re talking about, I’d consider one of these...”

“What size tube do you want? Sure, here you go.”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t get your bicycle fixed before next Friday. We’re out of stock for that kind of wheel and we won’t get more until then. Yeah, you can call around, but I know none of the other shops around here have any left either. There’s been a rash of wheel thefts the last two weeks.” I drifted closer and saw that the customer was holding a

bike minus rear wheel, talking to the salesman, and simultaneously talking into his cell phone. When the salesman turned away, I intercepted him.

“That’s crazy, someone’s been stealing wheels?” I asked. “Do you know where it’s been happening? I should be more careful locking up.”

“If you’re going to be parking anywhere in Davis, Porter, or Central Square, you should be extra careful locking both wheels. It’s just been rear wheels getting pinched recently, but people have certainly lost a lot of front wheels over the years too,” he advised.

“Any idea why someone would take a bunch of wheels? I mean, how many would anyone need?” I asked.

“Personally, I don’t think it’s because they want the wheels. My guess is that it’s an anti-cycling vigilante. Probably got bored dooring cyclists and driving in bike lanes and decided to take direct action,” he replied, frowning. “Next thing you know, they’ll be putting speed bumps on the bike path.”

That sure sounded like a conspiracy theory to me. Maybe Zen would like the idea. But I wanted more details. “Do you think it’s some kind of organized group, or just one person with a grudge?” I asked.

“We’ve replaced 20 wheels in the last two weeks. Figure another 20 or so at other stores, and maybe another 20 people who just gave up and didn’t try to fix their bikes. That’s only 4-5 wheels per day, so it could easily be one dedicated nutcase,” he figured. “Maybe we scared him off with the posters, though. We put up of ton of those posters last weekend, and everyone who’s come in this week had their wheels stolen before the weekend.” He pointed at the red posters on the front of the counter. *Warning! Bike thief at work! Lock both your tires. Reward for information*

about the wheel thief — we'll hold them down and let you ride over them. There was a little stick figure illustration of two people holding someone down while another person did a wheelie on their chest.

“Nice graphic,” I said. “I hope you catch them.” He nodded, and turned back to the customer who was ready to leave his bike.

As I was walking back to my apartment, I thought about how hard it would be for someone to hide a pile of 60 wheels. Somerville has a lot of triple-decker houses, with a fair number of them being shared by a group of students or recent grads. And even if you did have an apartment to yourself, there wasn't exactly much storage space.

Then I remembered the last time I'd had to store a bunch of old monitors and computer parts while waiting for the semi-annual hazardous waste drop-off day. One of my friends lived in half of a two-family house with a decrepit freestanding garage. Some of the houses around here did have these garage things that real estate ads would call “carriage houses” but were more like a cross between a shed and a bunker. Unless the thief happened to have access to some kind of storage warehouse, one of these pseudo-garages (most weren't in good enough shape to actually put cars into) seemed a likely place for stashing wheels. Unfortunately, since the buildings tend to be located at the far back corners of properties, I couldn't really stroll around neighborhoods peeking into the garages without looking pretty fishy myself. Plus, it's not that small of a city, so any kind of door-to-door search would just be a haphazard sampling. So I filed away the garage idea, and tried to think of alternatives.

One thing that I'd learned as a chemical engineering major is that unless the material leaving your system was going out at the same rate as stuff was coming in, you either had a source or a sink of material. So either the wheels were being stashed somewhere, or the person taking them was also getting rid of them. If the bike store guy's theory about an anti-cyclist vigilante was correct, perhaps the thief was simply throwing the wheels in the trash. But 60 wheels over less than two weeks would make quite a noticeable trash pile, so that didn't seem likely. And advertising wheel on Craig's List or eBay seemed like a good way to get caught. I just couldn't come up with any way to sneakily dispose of a big pile of bike wheels. Maybe Zen would have some more ideas.

Art for Art's Sake

This time when I knocked on his door, nothing happened for a long time. I was just about to leave when the door was flung open and Zen appeared, gasping for breath and covered in lint. “What’s the matter?” I asked, concerned that something terrible had happened. “Did your clothes dryer explode?”

“Sorry to alarm you, my dear,” he panted. “A bit of a miscalculation. Maybe you could give me a hand...” He staggered into a long hallway painted with a mixture of philosophical graffiti and fantastical flowers. I followed him into a utility room with some trepidation. The room was brightly lit with several overhead lights and filled to knee level with lint. Looking more closely, I noticed that the lint was separated into loose piles of varying colors. In the center of the room was a vaguely figure shaped, eight foot high statue made of lint, a small step ladder, and about a hundred bottles of AquaNet hairspray.

I waited for more explanation, because I couldn’t even begin to think of the right question for this situation. “I’ve been collecting lint from Laundromats for months, and finally got enough yellow and greens to start my sculpture. You know how most lint tends to be shades of

purple or grey,” he said. I nodded, having noticed that phenomena with my own laundry. “At first I thought that I could just mix the lint with some watery paste solution and turn it into a sort of clay, but it was too springy to shape properly. So I had to change to a technique inspired by 3D lithography. I’ve been spraying and sticking layers all day, but once I got to the taller part of the statue, I’ve had to climb up and down the step ladder to reach the right colors of lint.” I could guess where this was going. “It is most fortunate that you appeared. Perhaps you could hand me up batches of lint while we talk over the matter of the missing wheels.” He didn’t wait for my answer, but hopped back up to the top of the stepladder and started spraying. “Pass me some dark blue, if you would.”

I waded into the room and picked out some dark blue lint, handing it up to Zen. “Someone at a bike shop told me that the thefts started about three weeks ago, but that when they put up some slightly threatening posters alerting people to the problem about a week and a half ago, it seemed to discourage further thefts. He was estimating maybe 60 wheels were taken,” I reported.

Zen sprayed and patted more lint onto the statue. “A bit of the light pink, please.” He frowned in concentration. “Yes, and some gray.”

“The bike guy thought it might be the work of a single anti-cycling activist, but that didn’t make complete sense to me,” I continued. “If someone just wanted to disable bikes, they could bend the wheels, steal saddles, or even take front wheels.”

Zen pause in his animated spraying and looked at me with delight. “Yes, very true! I knew you were the right person for the job.”

He looked around the room. “Please pass me an armful of the orange and a new bottle of hairspray.”

“I couldn’t figure out any way someone would be able to get rid of 60 wheels in a short period of time, so I’m leaning towards believing that they must have them stashed somewhere. Maybe in one of those old detached garage buildings in back of a house. But I couldn’t figure out a good way to search for them. What do you think?” I asked.

“I am most pleased with the information you’ve gathered,” he said. “I’ve spent a great deal of time in Laundromats over the last week, and can assure you that wherever the wheels may be, they are not in a Laundromat.” I raised an eyebrow, not sure whether that was supposed to disprove some possible theory. “I’ve also got something to show you. Let’s go take a look while the wings are drying.” He brushed ineffectively at the lint covering his arms and legs, and walked to his living room.

Zen booted up a laptop covered with snarky pagan bumper stickers. “I hate to point the finger of suspicion at a fellow artist,” he said. “But take a look at this video.” A YouTube video entitled “Wheels of Change” showed a scantily clad young woman dancing through a circle of bicycle wheels mounted on posts of varying heights. The circle was about 20 feet in diameter and it looked like there were about 100 wheels. Three men dressed in black with black face paint walked around the perimeter of the circle, spinning the wheels. A close-up of the woman showed that her bikini appeared to be made entirely out of pennies and duct tape.

“But that video was posted last year,” I objected. “Looks like it was made at Burning Man.”

“None of the wheels that have gone missing over the last few weeks were involved in that project,” he agreed. “But since all the wheels in this video are in fact rear wheels, the connection must be investigated.” Zen sighed. “I just hate to think of an artist relying on theft during the creative process. I’d briefly considered doing a piece around missing socks, but didn’t want to give anyone the impression that there might be some artists running around stealing their socks out of dryers.”

“Wise of you. Plus, lint is really an underappreciated medium,” I said. “But do you know if that artist is even local?”

“I believe she is,” he answered. “I found the YouTube video referenced on a blog that also mentioned attending some poetry slams in this area. If we go to open mic night tomorrow at the Middle East, we may be able to spot her.”

“You don’t think that would be too stalker-like?” I asked.

“I’m certainly not proposing that we follow her home and peek into her garage,” he replied, sounding slightly offended. “Just a quick conversation among artists. Plus,” he continued, with a slight smile, “stalking is only as unsavory as the motivation of the seeker. I think it is preferable that we have a chat with the young lady, rather than tip off the police or the bicycle defender squad.”

“Okay, but I’m not reciting any poetry,” I agreed, with some reluctance.

“Of course not,” he agreed brightly. “I’ll take care of that part! Thank you so much for coming by and helping with the sculpture today.

I've got fresh apple, onion, and liver turnovers in the kitchen. Let me wrap one up for you.”

I bowed to the inevitable, and accepted a turnover. It was, as always, a strangely tasty yet simultaneously objectionable pastry.

Fiona Breathes Fire

I met up with Zen in a nearby Starbucks before the poetry slam started. “Know any good conspiracies involving Starbucks?” I asked.

“I think it’s become common knowledge that iced coffee drinks are part of a break-away Chinese Baptist plot to make Americans too fat and happy to notice that they’re being RFID tagged as part of a large experiment in eugenics,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Just kidding,” he said with a grin. “Actually, the point of the Coffee Calorie Conspiracy is to sell more clothes because everyone is always going up sizes as they gain weight.” That made a little more sense, so I moved onto strategic planning for the evening.

“Do you think you’ll recognize the artist if we see her?” I asked. “I doubt that she’d still have green hair like on the video.”

“I never forget a face,” he replied. “Well, except that time that someone mindwiped me. Or maybe it was just too much absinthe.”

“What about those three guys in the video? I think we should try to talk with them, too, if they show up,” I said.

Zen agreed. “But let’s try not to split the party. We can talk to them one at time. Sometimes it’s useful to have extra eyes when you’re having an investigative conversation, and it’s often a good idea to outnumber the person you’re interviewing.”

We crossed the street and entered the club. There were colored lanterns along the walls, and the tables were starting to fill up with patrons sporting goatees, pierced eyebrows, and jewelry made from hardware parts. Zen glanced around the room, and made a beeline for a table at the front where two men were already sitting.

“Mind if we join you?” he asked. “Looks like a fun program for the evening.” One guy nodded, and the other shrugged. We sat down, and I tried to figure out if either of these guys had been in the video. I couldn’t tell, so decided to just follow Zen’s lead.

The guy who had nodded smiled at me. “We came ‘cause one of our friends is a regular at these things. She’s pretty good.” The other man snorted.

“You just like her costumes,” he said. “See, Fiona likes to try out new outfits and new poetry at the same time. She’s been on kind of a bikini theme. Last time it was recycled toothbrushes.”

“Oh, Zen’s an artist too,” I said, trying to sound fascinated rather than suspicious. “I don’t do much myself, but it’s a lot of fun helping with his projects. How about you two?”

The one who had snorted punched the first guy in the shoulder. “Heck, it’s not like we have a choice about helping. When Fiona needs

someone to search Home Depot for ‘something made out of brass that’s about this big and can be strung on fishing line’ she speed dials James here, and then he drags me along.” He imitated her voice, high pitched and excited.

“Well it’s not like you ever say no, you big doofus.” James was blushing. “And she doesn’t always ask me. I think there’s probably a half dozen guys she ropes into running errands and constructing sculptures, and maybe another handful waiting in the wings hoping she’ll need more help.”

“I guess I’m lucky, Zen’s projects don’t usually require any real heavy lifting or too many power tools,” I commented.

“Oh man, do you remember that time we had to paint our faces with shoe polish and run in circles in the desert for an hour?”

“It wasn’t that bad. At least she didn’t go through with the plan of tying 99 pennies to each wheel. I can’t wait until they get rid of pennies completely. They’re so stupid,” said James.

“Pennies are actually a rather clever way to dispose of low level radioactive waste,” said Zen. “But you don’t want to carry around too many of them in your pocket.”

Before anyone could reply, a tall man wearing a bonnet and flowered dress bounced onto the stage. “Let’s get things rolling! Back to defend her title as Cambridge’s spoken word champion, please welcome Fiona!” The audience cheered. Fiona was clearly a favorite. She appeared, wearing two strategically placed pinecone wreathes and an explosion of red ribbons. She blew a large bubble, then took the piece of gum out of her mouth and stuck it on the microphone.

“The world lurches, and I reach out my hands. Catching nothing but sparks left in your wake. Each fragment of flame pierces my eyes and I taste nothing but defeat. Yet I’m still dancing, and I whirl with the strength of a millennium’s tides, rushing back to the seas under a ravening moon.” Fiona put the gum back into her mouth, blew a bubble, and handed the microphone back to the man wearing the bonnet while the audience cheered.

People were lining up at the side of the stage, waiting for their turn at the microphone. It wasn’t as tedious as I’d feared. One overweight balding man delivered a rap-style poem about his favorite programming languages, which got a lot of cheers. Then, a guy dressed in a turquoise spandex exercise outfit recited a sonnet about daffodils that seemed to fall flat. He was followed by an older woman delivered a humorous poem about her children coming back home to live in the basement while they figured out what they wanted to do when they grew up. At that, the audience laughed a little self-consciously, and I wondered how many of them had moved back in with their parents. And then it was Zen’s turn.

“Let us celebrate the unseen!” he began, with an expansive gesture. “Let us welcome the unknown! There are mysteries in every spoonful of breakfast cereal, there are a dozen questions for every answer. Our daily routines should be a framework for interrogating the universe and when we sleep, our dreams should be transportation to realms beyond our waking minds. Join me, my friends, and we shall journey together and flirt with the truth and the purpose underlying our lives!” He stretched out his hands towards the audience, grinned madly, and then looked towards Fiona and winked. The audience greeted this

with some polite applause, and then several more contestants recited to mixed reviews. The guy in the bonnet thanked everyone for coming, and announced that Fiona was still the champion.

The buzz of conversation got louder, and I saw Zen and Fiona heading towards our table. She was still blowing bubbles, which looked like round balls of fire, and looked cheerful. “Hey guys, thanks for coming,” she said, smiling at the two men. She sat down and took James’s beer.

“My compliment on your performance,” said Zen. He indicated her wreaths. “And you’re clearly a master with the glue-gun.”

“Yeah, I probably go through more sticks of glue than your average gal,” she said. “You’re new here, aren’t you.”

“Never too old to try something new,” Zen replied, raising both eyebrows. “I’ve been working on a new kind of sculpture, and needed a break. All the hairspray was starting to make me giddy.”

“I know what you mean. I’m never gonna weld plastic bags again, that’s for sure,” she said, with a laugh.

“Fiona, as I recall, you got James to do most of the welding,” her friend remarked.

“He’s a good man with a soldering iron, what can I say?” she replied, batting her eyelashes. James blushed again.

Another man came up to the table. He had an odd half-moustache on his left side, and a single sideburn on his right side. “Hi Fiona. Good show tonight,” he said, eyes darting around the table.

James narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. “Hi Cary. Didn’t see you here before.”

Cary ignored the other man. “So Fiona, you got any big projects planned? I’ve got a lot of spare time this month, since I’m between jobs, so let me know if you need any help.” He smiled nervously at her. “See you around.”

After Cary left, Fiona sighed. “He’s been bugging me to do another big installation project, but I’m kind of feeling more arts and crafts right now, you know? Plus, it’s hard to find space in the city to put anything up. And I’ve been telling him that bike wheels are like, so last year.”

“He’s just miffed that he missed Fiona’s big project at Burning Man last year. What a dork. It’s his own fault for getting distracted by some workshop about basic port-o-potty usage. Or was it some chicken hypnosis thing. I forget.”

Zen and I looked at each other. Seemed like Cary had just become our leading suspect. “If your friend Cary has an urge to help with an art installation, maybe I could see if he wants to get involved with something a friend of mine is working on. Unless you think that he’s only interested in your stuff,” I said.

“Is your friend a single woman? Cause it would be awesome if you could distract him. I’ll totally be grateful. Lemme give you his email,” Fiona offered. I passed her a pen and piece of paper and then pocketed the info.

“You don’t think he’d think it was weird that a stranger emailed him?” I asked.

“Well, if you want to just accidentally run into him instead, you could always try the Diesel Café in Davis Square,” James offered. “He’s camped out there all the time.”

I shrugged. “Ok, thanks. I might do that.”

“It was a pleasure meeting you,” Zen said, getting up. “But, we’re off. Best wishes for your ongoing creations.” We waved at the three of them, and headed back to Starbucks to formulate a plan.

Fools for Love

Even though I didn't have Zen's photographic memory for faces, I knew it would be easy to recognize a guy with half a moustache and only one sideburn. Sure enough, looking around the Diesel, I spotted Cary at a couch in the back of the cafe. I nudged Zen. "If you want to go on ahead, I'll bring our drinks over when they're ready," I offered. He nodded and proceeded to a chair next to Cary's.

By the time I arrived with our tea, Zen had already gotten him talking. "Fiona's just brilliant! I can't wait to see what she'll come up with next," he gushed. Zen was wearing a knitted hat that looked like a purple pineapple, and a scarf with a handful of hex bolts and jingle bells attached, so I guess he had no trouble striking up a conversation about artsy outfits.

"You know, Fiona was saying how you're always interested in helping out with her projects," I said. "One of my friends is doing a performance art piece and needs someone to help her out. Do you think you might want to meet her?"

He seemed taken aback. “Uh, maybe.” He looked at Zen, and smiled weakly. “I’m not sure if Fiona would mind if I was involved in someone else’s project.”

“When you’ve been around as long as I have, my boy, you’ll have developed a keener sense of what a woman will think.” Zen put down his tea in order to gesticulate more freely. He waved both arms. “Of course she’ll mind! She suggested it herself, but she doesn’t believe you’ll go through with it. Now, you go ahead and meet up with another artist, tell Fiona about how interesting this other project is, and see if she doesn’t pay a little more attention to you afterwards.” Zen chuckled, and looked knowingly at Cary. “Your stunt with the moustache didn’t really make much of an impression, did it.” I had just been assuming that Cary played SF0, and that his strange haircut was part of a task completion, but Zen had him pegged correctly as the sort of guy who tends to do odd things to impress women.

Cary sighed. “I thought she’d at least notice, because she’s always talking about how asymmetry is underutilized. I should probably stop trying to get her to pay attention to me. My ideas seem to backfire,” he said.

“Worse than running around with unusual facial hair?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “What’s the silliest thing you’ve ever done to impress a woman?” I asked Zen.

“My misguided romantic efforts peaked when I dug a personal moat around a lady’s home. She had mentioned in passing that she’d always admired castles, and I thought a moat would be easier to install

than turrets. However, I dislodged a gas line, and initiated a small explosion which collapsed the building,” he admitted.

“Dang!” said Cary. “That’s even dumber than stealing a pile of bike wheels!”

Zen looked offended. “Well, I had actually called the gas company to come mark their lines, but there was a bit of a mix-up,” he harrumphed.

“What’s up with the bike wheels?” I asked, not wanting Zen to get into an argument about whether blowing up a building was a dumb mistake or not.

“Fiona did a big installation with bike wheels last year, but couldn’t bring all the materials back with her, because her van broke down and she had to hitch a ride. I thought that if I got her some replacement wheels, she’d be grateful and let me help with the installation. But I guess she’s not interested in wheels anymore,” he mourned. “Now I’m stuck with a pile of old wheels.”

“How’d you get them in the first place?” I asked.

He pulled his hat over his face. “Ripped them off,” he admitted. “Now I want to return them, but they pretty much all look alike, and I didn’t even keep track of where I got them all.”

Zen looked stern. “Bad karma, my boy. You’ve got to make restitution while you can, lest something dreadful befall you.” Cary just slumped further into his couch.

“Don’t tell me you stole wheel for her last project too,” I said.

“Nothing like that. She’d been collecting them from garage sales and campus bike auctions for years,” he mumbled, somewhat muffled by his hat. I looked at Zen, trying to figure out how one could possibly return a bunch of tires, or make restitution to a lot of strangers across the city.

“Think of it as a piece of performance art,” Zen advised. “Advertise your apology around the places where you stole the wheels, and offer to meet with any of the wronged individuals in order to return their property and make things right with them. I’m sure that in course of winning their forgiveness, you’ll have many an interesting experience.”

“But a bunch of bicyclists will just show up and kick my butt if they find out who I am,” he groaned. “I’ve seen their posters.”

“Buck up your courage, that’s a good fellow. A faint heart never won a fair maiden,” Zen said sympathetically. I had to smile at his collection of helpful hints for the lovelorn. Then he got stern again. “I’ll give you a little extra motivation. If I don’t see your advertisements within two days, I’ll tip off the bike posse myself.”

After Cary agreed to the plan, we wished him good luck and headed home. “Has the job been sufficiently intriguing so far?” Zen asked.

“It’s growing on me,” I laughed. “When do we get to uncover a real conspiracy?”

“You can never rush these things,” he answered. “But I do feel something in the wind,” he said, sniffing the air. “Come around next week, and we’ll see what questions have come up in the column. In the

meantime, I'll write up the story of the missing wheels and let my readers know that this mystery has been resolved.”

Bubble Trouble

After wrapping up my first mystery solving exercise with Zen, I found myself reading through his website and half-believing some of the craziness. In any case, he was one of the most unusual people I'd encountered in quite a while. Being a trusty sidekick was turning out to be decent fun. My friends were dubious, but didn't make too much of a fuss, since they guessed that I'd get tired of playing paranormal and conspiracy detective pretty soon. I wasn't sure how long I'd stick with Zen myself, but that first mystery turned out to be the start of a long-term friendship.

I didn't get together with Zen for a few weeks after the missing wheel episode because he had been called out to upstate New York for an emergency crop circle consultation. Then I got his phone message. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble, I should like to speak with you tomorrow evening. There are one or two matters that have come up which may interest you. Oh, and please don't use any floral or fruit scented shampoos tomorrow."

Easy for him to say, I thought. Just about every single shampoo seems to have jumped onto the fruit flavored bandwagon lately. I had to

resort to using dishwashing soap, since I didn't have time to go out and buy some alternative shampoo. I couldn't wait to find out whether Zen's scent directive was related to the next mystery.

This time, Zen met me at the door wearing a sombrero with pink tulle tacked around the edges. "Here, you might want to wear a hat," he said. I put on the pointed witch's hat he handed me, also with pink tulle sewn around the rim. As we walked into his living room, a background humming noise got louder and became a distinct buzz.

The ceiling lamp in Zen's living room had been replaced by a mauve colored irregular ball about the size of a large watermelon. A steady stream of bees flew in and out of the strange hive. "New project?" I asked, trying not to sound alarmed.

"These recent crop circles were very unusual, and I believe they may be part of a global emergency action alert on the part of the honey bees. They may be trying to communicate with us humans, with other flying insects, or perhaps with an as yet unknown higher insect intelligence. I invited some of the local bees to come stay with me for a while." Zen stopped speaking for a moment, and shuffled along the floor making deliberate patterns under the hive. "My bee dance vocabulary isn't very good, but I do know my crop circles, so perhaps I'll be able to puzzle out their message. That is, if they are trying to tell us something. Wouldn't want to butt in if it turns out to be some intra-insect world issue."

"How long do you think they'll be staying with you?" I asked, carefully inching towards the couch farthest from the hive. I didn't want

to accidentally step on any bees and ruin the rapport Zen had been building with his guests. Plus, I hate getting stung.

“There’s not much blooming around here this week, so I don’t think they’ll want to stay long. I’ll probably FedEx them back to a friend of mine in Ithaca next week, and he’ll drive them back home from there. Well, unless they give me different instructions.” Zen set out several tin cans filled with different colors of sand onto a coffee table and then sat down. “Anyhow, it’s not the bees that I wanted to talk to you about.”

“You know, I ran into Cary the other day, and he asked me to pass along his thanks to you. He’s really getting into the whole making restitution thing, and plans to write a book about his apologizing experiences,” I remarked.

Zen beamed and clapped his hands together. “Excellent! I knew he had it in him.” Then he quickly glanced at the ceiling to see whether he’d startled the bees. “Ah yes. Recently, one of my readers has been plagued by discarded chewing gum. There is some question as to whether the sticky substance is, in fact, chewing gum.”

“What are the other likely candidates?” I wondered.

“Hard to say. Possibly, it could be some sort of fairy excretions, or an undiscovered variety of slime mold,” Zen hypothesized excitedly. “And of course, even if it is gum, there’s the question of why the rate of deposition has increased so much in a small area.”

“I’ve got a few friends who do analytical chemistry, but I’m pretty sure fairy bodily fluids aren’t in the Aldrich reference manual,” I offered. “Slime mold we might be able to ID with just a microscope.”

“Not to worry, my dear. I’ve still got some Irish cobwebs in my closet. We’ll just do a few simple Cat’s Cradle figures near the area in question and that should tell us whether there have been fairies about recently,” he said with a firm nod. Zen gathered up a few supplies and stowed them into a large backpack.

“You’ll need to do a quick run through with me beforehand,” I warned. “I don’t know many Cat’s Cradle figures, certainly none that are diagnostic.” Zen whipped out some string from one of his many pockets and coached me through some figures he called Titania’s Garden, Sun Before Time, and Fisherman’s Line. According to his diagnostic process, we’d just cycle through the figures in a particular sequence, and if Titania’s Garden popped up at the end, it meant that fairies had recently visited the area.

“You don’t get a good reading with just plain string, of course,” Zen elaborated. “Thus, the cobwebs. Works best if you collect them from old standing stones at dawn.” Although I wasn’t completely convinced, I was relieved that he wasn’t going to need me to bug my friends to analyze leprechaun vomit or the like. I mean, sure, someone had done this crazy SF0 publicity stunt about fairy poop, but that was obviously a joke. Zen didn’t seem like he was joking. We paused in the hallway to hang up our hats and then walked over to the scene of the mysterious gum deposits.

Is It Something in the Air?

Zen and I walked around the block and circled the area. He'd brought several enlarged maps of the streets in question so we could mark down visible gum deposits. We only counted 19 instances on the sidewalks around the block, so it didn't seem like the quantities involved really qualified as a plague. Though it was getting dark, the area was extremely well lit with street lights and we were also using industrial strength flashlights to sweep the sidewalks.

"I'd better check with my reader," Zen said, looking perplexed. "He had reported that there was so much gum on the sidewalks that he was afraid small dogs would soon be getting stuck."

I successfully remembered the necessary Cat's Cradle figures, and we did rule out fairy excretions. Zen carefully scraped up a few samples to take back for microscopic examination. Frankly, it looked a lot like bubble gum to me. I didn't think that slime mold divided up into widely spaced little blobs. But, as Zen reminded me, there's still a lot to be learned about slime molds, particularly urban varieties.

"How is your lint sculpture coming along?" I asked as we were walking back to the subway.

“It’s a most pliable medium, but not extremely coherent,” he answered. “I’m having a bit of trouble keeping the arms and wings from detaching at the ends. I may need to use some sort of crocheted infrastructure.” Zen tugged on his moustache. “Or maybe I could include an imbedded static generator to increase the cling factor.”

“I suppose if you didn’t need it to be pure lint, you could try lint stuffed into something sheer and stretchy. Did you ever see those caricatures people made out of stuffed pantyhose?” I offered.

“That’s a thought, but I don’t think it would work for a large sculpture,” Zen replied. “I’ll have to keep thinking about it.” He paused at the turn off towards his house. “Why don’t you ponder possible reasons for gum deposition and I’ll get in touch with the fellow to confirm the actual level of deposition. If it’s just what we saw tonight, I’m not sure it warrants a full scale investigation.”

Walking home, I remembered an epic level gum deposition phenomena that I’d seen once at an amusement park water ride. As people waited in line for their turn at the ride, they passed several signs with warnings about the intensity of the experience. One particular sign instructed people to discard any chewing gum, as it presented a choking hazard during the ride. Next to the sign, several large trees sported huge, multicolored growths that had accumulated as hundreds of people added their discarded gum to the pile. Though I couldn’t think of any reason that passers by would suddenly start spitting out gum in the same area without an external prompt, if enough gum accumulated in one area, that alone might serve as a prompt. There was a distinct possibility for an unpleasant feedback loop in collective action.

However, Zen's next update disproved this theory. After he'd examined the samples under a microscope and eliminated the slime mold possibility, Zen had contacted his reader. He told me about it when I ran into him at the grocery store the next day.

"We're in luck this time," he crowed, bouncing on his feet. "Apparently, about ten days ago, when it was unseasonably warm, a small dog did get stuck in the gum deposits," he continued, waving both arms. Zen lowered his voice and looked around. "It's cruel to laugh, but I'm afraid I'm simply not a fan of those tiny dogs. They just look too much like animatronic puppets. It's not natural," he confided.

"But there's no way something like a dog could have gotten stuck with the gum we saw last night," I objected. "Maybe something really small, like a caterpillar."

"Exactly. After the dog incident, my reader took it upon himself to remove the gum deposit. Since then, he has mapped each day's deposits, and then collected the evidence. He's sending me all the data." Zen bounced a bit more, jingling the bells in his scarf. "His maps sound detailed enough that I'll be able to check for patterns."

"You think the deposits might be some kind of secret code? A little too noticeable for anyone trying to be secretive, don't you think?" I imagined CIA agents furtively spitting out gum to leave a signal for spies, carefully selecting the correct color to indicate that the coast was clear. Seemed slightly undignified, but I couldn't rule it out as being less likely than fairy excretions.

"First of all, patterns do not necessarily reflect a deliberate message," Zen explained patiently. "A close analysis of patterns can often

reveal explanations for unconscious behavior. Additionally, even if the deposits are a rather unorthodox messaging system, that does not mean that they are meant to be a secret communication.” He smiled at me reassuringly. “Don’t worry, you’ve got good instincts. You’ll catch on fast. In any case, do keep thinking about possible explanations, and drop by in a few days after I’ve had a chance to do the pattern analysis.”

I wondered how exactly this fellow was managing to remove each day’s gum accumulation, but then decided not to ask in case it led to a hands-on lesson on the technique. I agreed to meet up with Zen as he’d asked and then finished buying my groceries.

Young Hoodlums

Pondering the question of why people would spit gum on a sidewalk, I could only come up with two basic answers. Either they wanted to leave a sticky mess or they were just taking the easiest route to getting rid of unwanted chewing material. The first reason seemed like deliberate aggression, albeit rather non-violent, and would imply that a number of individuals had all recently developed a grudge against someone near the center of the deposit distribution. Surely nobody would bother to chew 19 pieces of gum themselves in order to leave them on the sidewalk near an arch nemesis. That level of focused aggression would probably have escalated into more extreme methods of revenge.

The explanation of less deliberate action also raised the same question of why this location and why recently. I came up with the possibility that there was some recently relocated activity in the area that discouraged gum chewing, resulting in pre-activity ejection. Briefly, I considered the possibility that there was a new gum source located at a distance such that the average chewer would run out of flavor in their gum once they had reached this area. However, it seemed unlikely that so

many people coming out of a corner store would immediately start chewing their newly acquired gum and coincidentally all walk the same route. Also, surely different types of gum would have disparate flavor half-lives.

So both theories required a bit of neighborhood snooping. Had anyone on the target block recently alienated a lot of people, or perhaps just a lot of gum chewers? Or was there a new attraction nearby that would catalyze the discarding of gum? I walked around the block and noted a dry-cleaners, a nail salon, and an attorney's office. As I was completing my round, I was nearly run over by three boys on skateboards. One of them attempted a jump, missed connecting with his skateboard, and tumbled onto the grass.

"Hey, are you ok?" I asked. "You guys were going pretty fast."

"Nah, I'm good. Sorry about that," he said. Then, he got up, spit out a wad of gum, and rolled off.

"Wait up!" I shouted, jogging after them. The boys stopped and looked at each other, slouching. I caught up after a minute.

"I said I was sorry. What're you on our case about?" muttered the kid who had fallen.

"I was just curious about something. Can I ask you a question?" I asked.

"Dude, she likes your moves," one of his friends said, punching him in the shoulder. I ignored him.

"Why did you spit your gum out back there?" I asked. He shrugged.

“No reason. Didn’t like the flavor anymore, I guess.” One of the other kids burped loudly. The boys all started laughing, then skated off.

I couldn’t remember if there was an SF0 task about confronting low epic level scofflaws, and made a mental note to look through the available tasks list. Then, I briefly fantasized about a world where all children were locked up and not inflicted on others until they’d become sufficiently civilized, and finally returned to the question at hand. It didn’t seem like either of my leading theories fit with this single observation of gum deposition. I decided to call it a day and wait to see what Zen had come up with in his pattern analysis.

Emergency Intervention

Before I had a chance to knock on Zen's door, he threw it open and ushered me into his car. "No time to explain, we've got to head out to Andover," he said, starting the car. He pulled out of the driveway, cutting off a bus. A chorus of honking horns followed him as he made an abrupt lane change. Zen honked back, happily waving.

"Your horn sounds like a duck quacking," I observed.

"Oh, not a duck. But that's a good guess. Actually, it is the warning cry of the Amazonian tarpot beetle. Amplified, of course." Zen accelerated onto the highway. "A long-time reader is in dire need of our assistance. Would you check my glove compartment and make sure there's enough aluminum foil?"

"Didn't know you made house calls," I commented. "Looks like you've got over half a roll in here, if that's enough." Zen nodded, then weaved around a tow truck.

"You'll understand when we get there. Just follow my lead and don't sit on any cats," he cautioned.

We pulled up to a small house. Other than the lime green mailbox, nothing appeared unusual. However, as soon as we arrived, a large floodlight in the yard was illuminated and the garage door opened. A short man in a maroon bathrobe appeared in the garage and gestured at us to drive in. As the door closed behind us, I looked around and noticed a couple of rakes, two bicycles, and a large bag of birdseed. Looked like a typical suburban garage, other than having about a dozen cats lying around.

The man rushed over to Zen's window and wrung his hands together. "Thank you for coming. I'm afraid I can't ask you to come into the house because the signal has gotten too loud in there. I've had to spend most of the last few days here in the garage." There was another car parked next to us, a station wagon, with a sleeping bag in the back.

Zen slowly got out of his car and I imitated his deliberate motions, watching my feet carefully. "I came as soon as I got your message," he said. "Tell me about the signal." I walked around the car in slow motion, almost tiptoeing, to join the two men.

"It's usually a bit stronger this time of the year, but previously, I was able to block most of it with metallic window blinds," he said in a rush. "But this week! Nothing but Pachelbel's Canon and variations, day in and day out. Guitar versions, yodeling versions, even some kind of rap remix. I can't even eat!"

Zen pulled a bag of bright pink scones out of his car. "I happen to have baked a fresh batch of pomegranate garlic scones. Please, help yourself. You know if one person in a party starts eating garlic, it's really

best if the entire group indulges.” The man looked dubious, but took a scone. I tried a cautious nibble and smile reassuringly at him.

“Now, you mostly hear the music when you’re at home?” Zen asked. “Or does it continue when you’re at work or running errands?”

“It seems to be limited to a 20 ft radius around my house,” he replied. “But I can’t leave the cats here by themselves! They already miss me just when I’m at work.”

Zen raised one eyebrow at the man, who grasped his head with both hands. “I know, I should never have bought a house at the intersection of two ley lines! But the kitchen had just been remodeled and the cats love the swimming pool. Please, I’m desperate,” he pleaded.

“If you must live here, you should really consider getting your dental fillings replaced with ceramic ones,” Zen pronounced. “The ceramic ones look nicer, too.”

“But I hate going to the dentist,” the man groaned.

“Do you really want to be listening to Pachelbel’s Canon until the equinox?” Zen asked mildly. “I can get you an appointment with a nice dentist who moonlights as a yoga teacher. She’ll teach you some stretches before starting on your mouth.”

“I’ll think about it,” he promised.

“If we book it now, I’ll leave you a scarf that might interfere with the signal enough to let you sleep in your own house. Otherwise, the cats might get used to having the bed to themselves,” Zen cajoled.

“Alright then. Anytime this week before noon would be fine,” he replied.

Zen quickly booked the man an appointment and then pulled a scarf nearly identical to his own out of a bag. There were bells of different colors, a number of hex bolts, and some washers knitted into the pattern. However, this scarf had some additional cable patterns done in metallic yarn. “I can’t guarantee that this will work for you longer than a few days. A lot of people’s auras get acclimatized rather quickly. So don’t miss your dental appointment, and hopefully this problem will clear right up.” Then Zen grabbed some aluminum foil and wrapped up the rest of the scones. “You’ve got to keep your strength up, my friend. Don’t forget to eat.” He put the package on top of the station wagon and shook the man’s hand vigorously with both of his own. I also shook the man’s hand, and we got back into the car, walking slowly to avoid any cats underfoot.

On the drive back, Zen set a marginally more leisurely pace but the tarpot warning cry duck quacking horn got a bit more of a workout. “Sometimes, people just need a bit of hand holding and a firm nudge in the right direction,” he remarked.

“Zen, how is it that your readers all seem to be from this area? What do you do if someone has a problem out in Idaho or someplace?” I asked.

“My dear, you flatter me if you think that the website is all my own endeavor!” he chuckled. “We have a rather large committee of contributors, each of whom handles any necessary investigations in his own region. I served my apprenticeship in Chicago, and then took over the Boston region when I moved here about ten years ago.” Zen sighed. “Boston has been lovely, but I do regret having to leave Chicago.”

“Mmm,” I agreed. I was hesitant to pry into his personal history, but couldn’t help but wonder what had forced him to relocate. I glanced sideways at him.

“There was a bit of trouble around that gas explosion. The lady that I was trying to impress took out a restraining order,” he admitted. “Seemed better to make a fresh start elsewhere.”

“That’s too bad, Zen. But Chicago’s loss is Boston’s gain,” I replied. “I’m afraid I’ve got to call it a night, but I can come by again tomorrow to talk about the question of the gum deposition.”

Reading Patterns

“Hey, you’ve sent the bees away,” I noticed. The mauve beehive was gone from Zen’s living room ceiling and there was a small, bee-less bouquet of snapdragons on the coffee table.

“Indeed. I concluded that the message was not directed toward we humans. I lean towards the interpretation that they may have been contacting a higher insect intelligence of some sort, but I couldn’t justify keeping them here just to satisfy my curiosity on the issue. I have asked my Cornell colleague to visit the local hives there for further investigations, though.” Zen was weaving evergreen branches into a shaggy wreath. He finished and set it down on a large pile of similar decorations.

He noticed my unspoken query. “Oh, this is just for the local Boy Scout troop. They sell holiday wreaths and I usually lend a hand.”

“Don’t tell me you’re a scout leader,” I said, imagining the boys earning merit badges for Bigfoot tracking and learning what sorts of mushrooms and berries attracted fairies.

“Goodness, no,” Zen laughed. “I have irreconcilable differences with the organization’s politics and policies. But I don’t mind helping with the wreaths. Keeps me in top greenery weaving form, you know.”

“It’s been so warm lately that I can’t believe that it’s almost winter,” I said.

Switching subjects, I dove into the gum issues. “I would have to guess that either a large number of people have recently developed a grudge against someone or some business on that block, or that some kind of activity has recently opened nearby which somehow forbids or discourages people from bringing their gum with them,” I said. “But, when I confronted one gum depositing perpetrator, he didn’t seem to have any specific motivation for spitting gum onto the sidewalk. Said he just got tired of it.”

“Most interesting,” Zen agreed. “No new schools, churches, or dentists on the block? No other evidence of aggression, such as graffiti or landscape vandalism?”

“Not that I saw,” I answered. “Any interesting patterns in the deposition maps or gum samples?”

Zen pulled back a tapestry depicting a unicorn threatening a lion to reveal a large map of the affected neighborhood. A plethora of colored pins marked deposit locations. It was obvious that gum had concentrated at one end of the block. Zen pointed at the area with the most pins. “That’s where the dog got gummed up,” he remarked, pursing his lips.

Then he strode over to the couch and pulled out several baking trays from underneath. Each had about ten clear plastic bags full of used gum. “Deposits seem heavier on weekends, but that probably reflects

increased foot traffic rather than any weekend specific urge to leave gum. But do you notice something strange?” he asked.

Other than the fact that you’ve got a couple hundred pieces of used gum in bags under your couch? “Nothing obvious, I guess.”

“Take a good look,” he urged. “This is really quite odd.”

“Now that you mention it, most of the gum seems to be purple. Isn’t most gum white or maybe pink?” I asked.

“There you go! According to industry statistics, the majority of chewing gum sold is white or pink. Yet nearly all these samples are purple,” he confirmed.

“That really doesn’t fit with my two alternative motivation explanations,” I said, shaking my head. “No reason that hooligans would preferentially deposit particular colors of gum, and no reason that only some colors would be ejected prior to taking part in some activity.”

“It’s been years since I chewed gum myself,” Zen commented. “But sometimes we must sacrifice personal safety in the quest for truth. It’s time to do some experimentation.”

“Are you worried about getting cavities?” I asked, thinking about the guy in Andover.

“Much worse than that, my dear. Spiked chewing gum is probably one of the best methods for delivering estrogenic chemicals to growing boys to reduce fertility. Population control zealots have been trying to infiltrate gum manufacturers for years now, with growing success,” Zen explained. “You can’t trust chewing gum to be just candy these days.”

“Can’t argue with population control, but that does sound invasive,” I agreed. “But if you don’t want to chew gum, maybe I can round up some volunteers to help us out.”

“I couldn’t in good consciousness let someone else risk the consequences in ignorance,” Zen replied. “But I suppose if they were fully informed, that would be quite helpful.”

“Leave it to me. You bring the gum and I’ll round up some extra mouths,” I said.

The Grape Gang

The next day, I tacked up posters around Porter Square advertising an amateur bubble gum bubble blowing contest to take place on Sunday. *We'll provide the gum if you do the chewing!* I had no idea if anyone would show up to participate, but holding a contest seemed less complicated than trying to recruit people for a gum chewing experiment. Plus, there was an SF0 task to stage an unusual competition, and bubble blowing was odd enough to qualify. As usual, the telephone poles were full of yard sale notices, ads for two guys in a van moving, and descriptions of lost cats. Since the city seemed to be in the middle of switching from old to new telephone poles, with the old poles temporarily nailed to the new ones, there was twice as much real estate for posters.

At the agreed upon time, I met Zen at the place that I now thought of as ground zero for gum deposition. Several girls were there as well, along with an older woman and a teen-aged goth boy in black leather, a dog collar, and chains. “Hi, are you all here to blow some bubbles?” I asked enthusiastically.

The boy spoke up first. “Yes ma’am! I was a dab hand at bubble blowing back home, but I’ve gotten out of practice since moving out here.” He had awfully good posture for a teenager, and I wondered briefly if his outfit was actually some kind of traditional corn harvest costume rather than a reflection of adolescent rebellion. But no matter.

“Very good, I’m glad you could come today. And how about all of you?” I asked the group of girls. The older woman spoke up.

“We were just shopping for snacks for a slumber party tonight, and saw your poster. The girls wanted to give it a try, and since we didn’t buy any ice cream, there’s no reason not to let them get some of their giggles out of the way before this evening,” she said.

“Mom!” one of the girls protested, laughing. “You know you wanted to do it too!”

“We’ve got plenty of gum for everyone,” I said, looking at Zen. He handed everyone a piece of grape bubble gum.

“Now, I’m afraid I can’t guarantee that this gum manufacturer hasn’t been infiltrated by population control zealots,” he said anxiously. “Bubble gum already contains quite a few chemicals for color, texture, and flavor but if the Reverse the Slope group has their way, gum will also have a birth control effect on men.”

The older woman looked at me. “Is he kidding? I’ve heard of the aspirin method, but nothing about bubble gum.”

“Well, who can rule out anything these days. One study will say that chocolate has cancer fighting anti-oxidants and then the next will tell you to limit your tuna intake,” I replied. “But if you’re already a regular gum chewer, I’m sure another piece won’t make much of a difference.”

Everyone unwrapped their gum and started chewing. After a minute, one of the girls blew a good sized bubble that nearly obscured her face. Her friends giggled and one of them replied with another large bubble. The boy knit his eyebrows in concentration and then produced a bubble with a small bubble inside of it.

“Ooh, that’s hard to pull off,” the woman said, impressed. Then she blew an enormous bubble which burst and stuck to her glasses. “Darn, I forgot to take off my glasses again.”

The group chewed for a while. Two of the girls turned towards each other and played bubble gum chicken, resulting in their bubbles sticking together. “Eeww, that’s gross,” their friend announced.

Suddenly, the boy made a face, pulled out the gum wrapper he had carefully folded and stashed in a pocket, and put his gum into the wrapper. “This big city gum isn’t the same as the kind we had back home,” he said. “The flavor is just off.”

The woman got some tissues out of her purse and passed each girl a piece before wrapping up her own gum. “It’s not the city, I’ve had hundreds of packs of gum here. But you’re right about this stuff having an odd taste.” The girls also wrapped up their gum.

“So did I win? I think my Mom had a bigger bubble, but she loses points for getting gum stuck to her glasses.”

Zen handed the girl a Pez dispenser with a gorilla on it. “That was indeed a monster bubble,” he said seriously. He gave the other girls Pez dispensers with a cat and dog. “Runners up,” he said with a smile. “Impressive size,” he told the mother with a nod. Zen gave her large

lollipop with rainbow swirls. “Nice stunt bubble blowing,” he told the boy, giving him a box of pop rocks and smiling broadly.

“Thanks for coming,” I said, waving at the girls as they walked back to the parking lot. “Have a good slumber party.”

The boy stayed behind until the other had left. “If you don’t mind my asking, why did that gum taste funny?” he asked. “Are you doing some kind of test market research for a new type of gum? Because I can tell you this is not going to be a big hit.”

“Frankly, I don’t think it’s the gum that’s unusual,” Zen said. “I think there is something wrong with this location and it’s adversely affecting the flavor.”

The boy nodded knowingly. “Oh, you mean like those haunted picnic tables where all your coleslaw tastes too sour.”

Zen and I looked at each other. “It may not be the same root cause, but yes, I believe the phenomenon is similar,” Zen answered. “Are you interested in these sorts of things?”

“No sir, I just need to know where to avoid sitting when I’ve got fried chicken with sides,” he said with a grin. He waved. “Good luck with whatever you’re looking for.”

“Haunted picnic tables?” I asked Zen. “You don’t think there’s a restless spirit who haunts this sidewalk and has something against grape gum, do you?”

“I’ve got some Exorce-Ease we can try, but I doubt this is a haunting,” Zen pulled an aerosol spray can out of his bag and quickly sprayed around us. “Give it a try,” he said, handing me a piece of gum. I

carefully saved the wrapper, having a suspicion that I'd be needing it soon.

I blew a couple little bubbles and chewed away. Gradually, the sugary flavor wore off and was replaced by a sharp, metallic taste. "Oh this is really wrong," I said, after I'd gotten rid of the gum. "I'm feeling sympathetic towards our mysterious gum spitter outers now."

"We'll get to the bottom of this yet," Zen promised. "Come by for dinner on Tuesday, if you like. We can chew over a couple theories while we're eating." I agreed, but made a mental note that it might be wise to grab a substantial snack in case Zen's cooking was like his baking.

Delving into the Records

I picked up a bottle of retsina for dinner at Zen's. He seemed like the sort of person who would appreciate pine resin. Plus, it seemed hopeless to try pairing wine in any traditional way with anything he was likely to cook up.

"Right on time," he said, greeting me with a broad smile. "Punctuality is a delightful characteristic." He tapped his fingers together and looked towards the ceiling. "I'll admit to missing quite a few boats during my harum-scarum youth. Why, one time I was nearly stranded with the Inuit after missing the last boat heading south for the winter." He hummed a snatch of sea-chanty as he escorted me into his kitchen.

A large plastic turtle sandbox took up most of the floor space. Around the sandbox stood four upturned plastic pails with platters of food balanced on top. "Take off your shoes and dig in your toes," he urged. "Food always tastes better at the beach, but a sandbox was the closest I could manage in the kitchen." He was already barefoot.

I followed Zen's lead and sat down in the sand. "Pickled sea cucumber and garlic shrimp," he said, pointing at the first platter. "Quail

eggs in hot pepper and cheese sauce, lemon cinnamon watercress, and radishes with tripe.”

“Thank you for cooking. It all looks, um, interesting,” I said. “Do you have a favorite cookbook or are these your own inventions?”

“Goodness no, I’m terrible at following recipes,” Zen said with a laugh. “Just things I’ve picked up over the years. Food is a fascinating way to understand different cultures.” He poured the retsina and it actually went well with the dishes.

“So if it’s not a haunting, what might be interfering with chewing gum in that area?” I asked.

“One critical clue is that the gum deposition began rather abruptly last month. Another is that the range of effect is relatively small. We should be able to narrow down the possibilities quite a bit if we can simply identify any significant changes taking place near that location during the time period just prior to observation of the phenomena,” Zen reasoned. “Luckily, I haven’t taken out my recycling for a few weeks.” He pointed to several large stacks of newspapers along one wall.

“A few weeks? How many newspapers do you subscribe to?” I asked.

“These days, none at all,” he replied. “Mostly I read the news online. But for some reason, the Somerville Journal has been dropping off several copies of the paper here. Some days, they leave an entire stack.”

“That’s odd,” I commented.

Zen waved his hand dismissively. "Indeed. But, we must concentrate on the mysteries that concern our readers! We cannot let our own perplexities take precedence." He pulled out a few papers and tossed them towards me. "Let us begin with the police logs."

"Police logs were always the best part of our college paper," I exclaimed. "You know, 'Officer responded to a report of a person driving in circles in the East Parking lot. Person was determined to be learning to drive.' Or 'Twenty three pounds of lead reported missing from a lab in building 6. Last seen propping open a door.' That sort of thing."

Zen chuckled and read from the first paper, "Two geraniums and three marigolds reported missing from Cedar Street. Dog's collar reported missing (not the entire dog) from Highland Ave." He looked up at me. "Do you suppose there is a fellow wearing a dog collar and carrying flowers?"

"I don't think that boy we met blowing bubbles would steal a collar off a dog," I said. "But that's not to say nobody else would." I started flipping through some papers. "Strange noises reported at Francesca Ave. Determined to be squirrels fighting. Wallet reported missing on College Ave. Later found in refrigerator."

"Here's something we should add to our list of items to ponder. Apparently, there have been several reports about poor cell phone reception in the area," Zen noted.

"Wonder whether they reported the problem using their cell phones," I muttered. "Ah, here's something else. Two orange cones were

stolen from in front of the main gum deposition area. There must have been some kind of work going on there.”

“Exactly. Road work, tree trimming, electrical work. I wonder which it was,” Zen said.

“Oh right! That entire area has old utility poles halfway disassembled,” I remembered. “I hate how they cut the old pole off from the ground and then just lean it up on the new pole with a piece of wood nailed across to keep the old pole attached. I always worry about getting crushed by a falling pole.”

“Electrical wiring irregularities,” Zen said with a nod. “And the phenomenon seems to affect only purple gums.” We both thought about this for a minute. “I suspect that the normal taste is being overwhelmed by interactions between some chemical coloring or flavoring component and the disturbed EMF radiation fields resulting from the misaligned electrical lines. The fields are turning some normally innocuous chemical into a bad taste,” Zen pronounced.

“I’ve never heard of electrical fields interacting with flavors,” I said.

“There has been some fascinating research lately into the effect that chewing various flavors of gum can have on a person’s EEG activity. I think it not infeasible that if a taste can affect one’s electric field output, some sort of electric field input could affect a taste,” Zen replied. “If we wished to pin down the specific chemical ingredient or ingredients which are involved, we could do some further experiments with different foods or beverages. It could be something as simple as

ascorbic acid, but I suspect that it might be a complex and proprietary compound that is unspecified on the ingredients list.”

“You’re suggesting an electric Kool-Aid acid test?” I asked.

“Not at all. Our readers would probably be pleased if the gum deposition stopped and they were informed of a plausible theory. I think a rigorous identification of the specific chemical compound involved is not needed. I’ll leave that as an exercise for the reader. But, we should act to reduce the risk that miniature dogs will become stuck to the sidewalk,” Zen decided. “I’ll just contact the electrical company and have them finish properly installing the utility poles.”

“Wow, what strings do you have to pull for that?” I asked.

Zen shook his head and smiled. “I think they’re a bit sensitized to inadvertent dog damage, after those electrocutions during the last big rain storm. I’ll just mention that I’m a member of the press investigating a new type of unusual accident involving a dog and their power lines.”

An Old Haunt

The matter of the gum deposition had occupied us for so long that there were a few puzzles waiting in his Ask Zen (Boston area) queue. So I was surprised when Zen didn't get in touch with me for over a week, but spent the time catching up on doing laundry and reading mystery novels. Then my phone beeped with a text message from Zen. "OK got 1 4 U. C U soon?"

I rubbed Einstein's nose and knocked on the door. "So good to see you again!" he said, hopping on one foot. "Give me just a minute to get this peanut out of my ear."

"So you've started text messaging," I commented, sitting down on the floral couch with large red patches.

"Oh, I learned quite a few useful tricks this week at ConCon," he said, still hopping. I looked at him questioningly. "But not the peanut thing. That's something completely different," he elaborated.

"What's ConCon?" I asked.

"I'm sorry I couldn't take you along this year," Zen apologized. "But attendance is limited to full members of the website committee and

invited guests. It's not the largest conspiracy convention each year, but it is one of the few which does not focus on any particular genre of conspiracy. Government plots, paranormal phenomena, shadow organizations---we don't discriminate."

"That's ok, I'm sure you can pass along any tips you need me to know," I reassured him.

"As a matter of fact, it's high time that we got you started with the basics of hauntings and spiritual residuals. Have you even used Exorce-Ease before?" he asked.

"No," I admitted. "They don't teach you anything in grad school these days."

Zen nodded. "It's never too late to learn. I've got a reader out on Cape Cod who's just bought a haunted house and needs to come to some understanding with the ghosts. Well, technically, they are spiritual residuals and not full ghosts, but we'll leave teaching you the rigorous definitions for another day."

I was intrigued. "How do you communicate enough with a ghost to come to an agreement? Can they talk?"

"It varies, but the lesser residuals have very limited cognitive abilities, so it's not like you can reason with them. Are you good at charades?" Zen asked.

"I'm decent at guessing, but not great at acting out messages," I said.

He smiled. “Luckily, it’s the guessing part that we’ll need. This will be an overnight trip, so pack up a weekend bag and we’ll head out Friday evening. I’ll bring all the supplies and tools.”

I briefly hoped that traffic this time of the year would be minimal, so there wouldn’t be too many incidents requiring the use of his tarpot beetle/duck horn.

Remedial Education

“**M**aybe you should give me a basic run-down on ghosts before we get there,” I suggested. Zen did seem to be a calmer driver when there wasn’t a desperate cat guy in need of dental advice waiting; I assumed the reader with the ghost problem wasn’t in as much of a rush.

“That’s the attitude!” Zen said. “It’s really an interesting field of study. Unlike the movies, a ghost is not really a person’s soul stuck in some kind of half-realized state. Instead, it’s more like an echo.”

“Echo?” I couldn’t help repeating.

“Yes. In some physical circumstances, an echo is a high fidelity delayed reproduction of an auditory utterance. You can actually make out the words or phrase that was originally spoken. In other circumstances, such as a crowd of people making noise in a warehouse, the echoes are detectable but not distinctly recognizable reproductions of the original sounds.”

“So a person could actually cause multiple ghosts? Can you cause one before you actually die?” I asked.

“Certainly. However, just as the loudness of a sound increases the loudness of its echo, the amount of emotion and mental energy one projects will increase the delectability of the spiritual residual. Really, spiritual residual is a misleading term, but it’s too entrenched to properly relabel.” Zen sighed. “Strange how common scientific terms are so often misleading relicts from long-disproved theories.”

“You mentioned that some types of ghosts have some amount of cognitive capability?” I asked. “How does that work if they are just echoes?”

“If your mental state is echoed with enough fidelity, the echo will actually react similarly to the way your mental state would have indicated. It’s a deeper type of echoing,” he explained.

“I’m not sure I understand. I mean, if I was really terrified, I could leave a residual echo of fear. That’s straightforward. But are you saying that if I am really afraid of spiders, I could leave an echo that only becomes a fearful feeling if there is a spider around?” I asked.

“Precisely! Now usually it is much harder to project a more complex mental state than to project a simple, pure emotion. That’s why ghosts, which are the class of spiritual residuals consisting of enough complexity that one can actually communicate with them, are so rare,” Zen replied.

“So why are ghosts commonly associated with dead people?” I asked.

“Three reasons. First, dying is often a very emotional experience, so people tend to leave more residuals of that time of their lives. Thus, if

a person leaves only one strong spiritual residual from during their entire life, there's a good chance that the residual concerns dying," Zen began.

"That makes sense, but surely people experience a lot of non-death related emotion as well," I commented.

"Which brings us to reason number two. Because a residual can have a very long half-life, some spiritual residuals will stick around much longer than that person creating the echo will live. So chances are, if you run into a random spiritual residual, the original person who made the mental projection is likely to have already died."

"What's the third reason?" I asked.

Zen laughed. "The third and most important thing to keep in mind is that people don't often recognize their own mental state in an echo. So even if most of the spiritual residuals you might encounter are actually your own echoes, you tend to attribute them to your predecessors."

"You mean, most people are actually haunted by their own mental echoes?"

"Indeed! For one does not encounter a random sampling of residuals. One encounters residuals most often in the familiar places and circumstances of your own life habits. For example, hardly anyone other than me is ever in my bathroom. If my house has belonged to two previous owners, statistically speaking, a residual I find in the bathroom has about a thirty percent chance of being my own echo," Zen calculated. "Yet, most people will insist on distancing themselves from the residual by blaming it on a previous owner."

“Do you think that your reader may be having trouble with spiritual residuals that they caused?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. The couple has not been in their new house very long, so it’s possible that the residual was from a previous owner. But, moving into a new house can be pretty stressful, so it’s not unlikely that the couple has generated this residual themselves,” Zen replied. “But it doesn’t truly matter whether who originally generated a residual---it’s not like your own echoes recognize you.”

“That’s fascinating! Are you going to explain all this to your readers?”

“Our website has an in-depth online course curriculum on spiritual residuals and handling problematic residuals. But most people who run into problems aren’t interested in learning the theory; they just want the problem to go away,” Zen said, shaking his head. “We’ll soon see how much these folks want to learn.”

Zen abruptly pulled off the highway into a rest stop. “I forgot to bring any diet Coke,” he said. “We’d better get a few bottles.”

“You don’t actually drink that stuff, do you?” I asked.

“Certainly not. It’s worse than bubble gum. But it may come in handy,” Zen said firmly. He dug out a pile of change from the back seats and came back with three bottles of diet Coke.

Seabreeze Cottage

Zen swung his car back onto the road, earning honks from only two other cars. He picked up the pace and soon we were pulling into a gravel driveway next to a small two-storey house. The house was strawberry pink with maroon trim and a mosaic plaque read “Welcome to Seabreeze Cottage.” We walked up the path to the door and rang the bell.

“Sorry, we’re not open for business yet,” said the woman who answered the door. She looked frazzled and was holding a paintbrush and wearing paint splashed overalls. “Hopefully by the end of the month.”

Zen smiled and held out his hand. “We’re here from tellmewhy.org,” said Zen. “I believe you have a problematic haunting?”

The woman looked relieved. “Oh yes, of course. Thank you so much for coming. My name is Cecily, but everyone calls me CeeCee.” We all shook hands and then she brought us into their kitchen. There were dropcloths covering most of the hallway floors. Stepladders, roller brushes, and trays of paint cluttered the halls. I noticed that the paint was mostly shades of pink.

“CeeCee, do we have any more masking tape?” a man yelled.

“The GhostBuster people are here,” she yelled back. “Can you come down to the kitchen?”

Zen pursed his lips and raised an eyebrow. I could tell he didn’t really appreciate being called a GhostBuster. CeeCee was busy clearing cans of paint and plastic bags off of the kitchen chairs. “Have a seat, it’s a long story,” she said.

A tall man with only slightly less paint on his clothes came in and introduced himself. “I’m Antioch, but you can call me Breezy. Glad that CeeCee called in you experts, we’re out of our league with this place. Can’t make heads or tails of what’s been going on, but it’s driving us nuts,” he said, speaking rapidly.

Zen looked at them calmly. “Do tell us more about what’s been happening,” he invited. I tried to look knowledgeable and clasped my hands on the table.

“Started as soon as we moved in last month. Smears in the paint, splashes of paint on the furniture. Room would look fine when we finished, and then we’d come back and things would be messed up,” Breezy said. “Paint brushes switched so you’d pick one up with the wrong color on it, stepladders wobbling.”

“At first, we thought we were just being careless painters,” CeeCee explained. “But then other things started happening. One of the upstairs radiators sprung a leak and made a soggy spot in the living room ceiling. A couple of the windows cracked. And all the bottom electrical outlets in the two outlet sets around the entire house stopped working.”

“I can see how those things would make it tough living here,” I said.

“Yeah, just a little. And we’re trying to get all the rooms in shape so we can open up as a bed and breakfast, but things are breaking faster than we can fix them,” CeeCee groaned.

“What made you suspect a ghost rather than just bad luck or a real estate lemon?” I asked.

CeeCee and Breezy looked at each other. “She saw them first. White things, kind of like dishtowels,” Breezy said. “Then I started seeing them. Never straight ahead, always out of the corner of my eye.”

“And once I actually saw a paint can tip over when we were both standing over on the other side of the room,” CeeCee continued. “It was on the floor, completely level, and it just slowly tipped over.”

“Sounds like the symptoms have been growing stronger,” Zen noted. “Have you tried taking any remedial actions?”

CeeCee tipped her head and smiled wryly. “I started wearing my Saint Christopher medal, but that didn’t seem to have an effect. I’m hoping you two can point us the right way with what to do.”

Zen held his hands up as if he was holding a giant beach ball and turned his head from side to side, as if trying to sense something. “We’ll certainly do our best. First, I would like to do a tarot reading for each of you. CeeCee, let’s start with yours.” Zen pulled out his deck of tarot cards wrapped in a painted silk scarf and turned towards CeeCee.

“This card represents the situation with this house,” he said, turning over a card. “This is the Knight of Clouds, Fighting. The next

card represents a known strength or ally you have in the situation. It is a Major Arcana card, so has a particularly strong influence here, Courage.” Zen had his eyes half-closed and was fingering the cards and shuffling them around. “This card reveals a hidden force working against you. A card from the water suite, Celebration. And this final card shows your path forward. From the fire suite, it is Traveling.”

CeeCee looked at the pictures on the cards. “But what does that mean?” she asked.

“Do not be impatient, for we will delve deeper into the meaning until all are satisfied,” Zen said, gesturing with his right hand. “Now, Breezy’s turn.” CeeCee’s eyes were wide, and she blinked repeatedly.

“Breezy, your situation with this house is shown by this card. It is a Major Arcana card, so particularly significant, Past Lives.”

“Is the ghost from Breezy’s past reinincarnation?” CeeCee interrupted.

Zen shook his head. “The titles of the cards are not necessarily literal descriptions for your situation. Each card has many layers of meaning. For example, Past Lives can suggest something known by your subconscious but unrealized by your waking mind. Or, it may refer to a deeply held feeling for which there is no obvious proximate cause. We will have to consider the entire situation more before I can be more specific about what the card means for Breezy right now.”

I’d never seen this type of tarot cards. The pictures were swirled colors and New Age fantastical scenes rather than medieval woodcut style, and the Major Arcana and suites weren’t the normal set. I didn’t want to ask about the cards in front of an audience, though.

“If I may continue?” Zen said, with a small smile. “Now, your familiar strength or ally here is represented by the card Rebirth, from the cloud suite. Your unrecognized obstacle is from the fire suite, Suppression. And your path forward is shown by the Knight of Water, Trust.”

Breezy shrugged. “What should we do now?”

Zen clapped his hands together once. “You two should get cleaned up and then go out for dinner. You need a break and we need to take a look around here with some instruments. Having extra people around will just make it harder to tune the sensors, so off you go.”

CeeCee grinned. “Sounds good to me. We’ll leave you to it then. Did you want to stay here tonight?” she asked.

“Oh no, we don’t want to impose. After we’ve got some preliminary readings, we’ll head over to my usual bed and breakfast for the night. Tomorrow afternoon, we’ll look around again in the daylight. I hope to have something to tell you by Sunday morning,” Zen said.

“Thanks so much. Talk to you tomorrow, then,” Breezy said. “Drinks in the fridge if you get thirsty. Don’t worry about locking up if you leave before we get back. Nothing to steal here.”

After they left, we sat down in the kitchen to formulate a plan of attack. I remembered something that had been bugging me. “Zen, I forgot to remind you about SF0. You could get points for doing a tarot reading and there have been other tasks involving divination too,” I said.

“But if I’m already doing the sorts of things that I would do to play the game, what would be the point of playing?” Zen asked. His objection made a certain amount of sense. Maybe his life was already

creative and random enough that SF0 wouldn't make a difference. Most people need something to jolt them out of the daily mundane, but not Zen.

“Well, it's also fun to read people's feedback and seeing what they've been creating. Other players can award you extra points for doing something particularly surprising or intriguing,” I said.

“I'm afraid that I'm not the sort of person who keeps score,” Zen said with a smile. “And I certainly get plenty of comments and suggestions from my readers already. But I do appreciate you remembering to remind me about the game again. Now, let's get the gear out of the car.”

Flour and Sugar

We trundled out to Zen's car and he opened the trunk which was filled with about a dozen milk crates full of electrical appliances and unidentifiable parts and pieces. Zen handed me a crate and grabbed an armful of what looked like kindling wood. "This should get us started," he said decisively.

"Did Millie's cards give you a clue about whether the ghost is one of CeeCee or Breezy's own echoes?" I asked. "I've never seen a deck like that, but even I could tell that the two readings were pretty different."

"Tell me what sort of meaning you'd put onto the two readings," Zen urged. "It's a bit like charades, remember?"

"Oh, I thought the charades part was observing ghosts to figure out what they were trying to say," I blurted. "Were you talking about tarot readings?"

"Both, my dear. Consider both the cards and the manifestations that our hosts described."

"Breezy's cards with the situation being Past Lives, a strength as Rebirth, with Trust as the way forward and Suppression as a danger

seemed to be saying that his problem could be not listening to his inner knowledge. Maybe he's trying to ignore an intuition, or do something because of external influences rather than listening to his heart and soul.” I was nervous just making things up based on the pictures and card names, but they did seem to come together into a coherent narrative.

Zen opened both eyes wide and smiled, throwing his arms into the air. “Very good, I would never have guessed that you're not familiar with this deck. Millie is an old friend of mine, but I believe she's glad to make your acquaintance. What do you make of CeeCee's cards?”

“Seeing Fighting as the situation and Traveling as a resolution, with Courage as an ally seems to suggest that she may need to try a completely new direction. I'm not exactly sure what to make of Celebration as the enemy. Maybe she has celebrated reaching a goal that isn't actually meaningful for her life and is distracting from the new path she needs the courage to follow,” I guessed. “Given the antagonistic nature of the spiritual residual, I wouldn't be surprised if it's a reflection of CeeCee.”

“We shall hear more of their story tomorrow, but the cards do suggest a number of questions. How did they decide to buy this house and open a bed and breakfast? What were they doing before? And whose idea was it to use so much pink paint?” Zen pronounced. “But tonight we will dedicate to probing the residual.” Zen rubbed his hands together briskly, and picked up a silvery ball. He rolled it around between his palms and then handed it to me. I mimicked his movements.

“What is this for?” I asked.

“This is some liquid mercury encased in a nickel shell. One of its uses is to discharge the mental equivalent of static electricity before we use the more sensitive probes,” Zen explained. He picked up a branch of wood and showed it to me. “These are different gauge dowsing rods. We’ll start with the larger ones. Come along now.”

Zen held the branch loosely by the two sides of the fork. The broader part of the branch pointed down in front of him. He strode quickly to the front door and stood with the door at his back, closing his eyes and humming. I kept quiet, not wanting to disturb the results of the probe. Zen hummed louder.

“Are you humming the itsy bitsy spider song?” I finally asked. “Do you need a different song for different kinds of ghosts?”

Zen looked at me with surprise. “Was I humming? I guess I didn’t notice. In any case, I don’t think the residual is anchored near the front door.” He walked slowing through the first floor hallways, carefully holding the dowsing rod in front of him and weaving around the cans of paint. I trailed along a few steps behind. As Zen walked past a hall closet, the branch dipped and then jerked upwards.

“Ah, very good. Remember this spot and we’ll come back to it with a smaller gauge dowsing rod,” Zen instructed me. We finished circling through the kitchen and first floor rooms with no other obvious reaction from the dowsing rod. I followed him up the stairs. I got distracted from watching Zen when we entered the first bedroom.

“Here’s another area,” Zen announced. He was standing near the closet.

“This room looks like it caught the brunt of the ghostly manifestations,” I said. There was paint spilled on the floor, splattered on the ceiling, and streaking the windows. Both windows were cracked and the floor near the radiator was darkened with water stains.

“Mmm, yes,” he agreed, looking around. The rest of the second floor looked relatively normal, if poorly painted, and nothing set off the dowsing rod. We went back downstairs and Zen carefully looked over the various different sized branches. He picked them up one at a time and discarded all but three of the smaller ones. “If you wouldn't mind bringing along the flour and sugar?” Zen requested. I looked in the milk crate and found a large canister of each ingredient. I hoped he wasn't planning to do any baking for the ghost.

We proceeded to the first floor hallway closet. Zen opened the door, revealing a stack of somewhat squashed cardboard boxes reaching from floor to ceiling. “I'll try sugar first on this one,” he said. “Try to get some onto all the boxes.” I tossed around sugar with a liberal hand. Most of it ended up on the floor, but the crevices between the boxes also held noticeable traces of sugar.

“That's right,” Zen encouraged me. “Now for the three and two thirds gauge rod.” He held this branch pinched between his thumb and middle finger at the point where the forks split apart. He slowly moved the dowsing rod up and down, left and right, systematically covering the opening of the closet in a tight grid.

“Oh ho,” he chuckled.

I hadn't seen anything happen. “What?” I asked.

“Watch closely. Look at the sugar crystals along the top of that box marked ‘costumes, #3’ as I move the rod nearer,” Zen instructed. I got closer to the box and stared at the sugar.

“They moved!” I exclaimed. “That’s a neat trick.” But I wondered if it was just static electricity.

“It can be a bit of an art picking out the correct gauge dowsing rod for the resonance frequency of a particular spiritual residual,” Zen said. “The largest rods will almost always work to narrow things down to a couple of square meters. But to get better resolution, you need the exact right size tool. Plus, you need to use a compatible indicator.”

“So you can’t really feel the smaller dowsing rods reacting without an indicator?” I asked.

“Precisely. Non-intuitively enough, the smaller the rod, the less it physically reacts to a residual. The theory behind this phenomenon is not well understood, but I can tell you that if you forget the sugar and flour, you might as well go home,” Zen remarked.

“Do you use other types of indicator?” I asked.

“Sand, talcum powder, occasionally lint. But for me, flour and sugar usually give good results, and I always have a good supply of baking ingredients in the house.” With some difficulty, Zen extracted the ‘costumes, #3’ box from the closet and removed the lid. He shook out a green skirt covered in silver sequins. The box also held a matching sequined bikini and several filmy scarves. At the bottom, there was a pair of women’s hiking boots and three Home Depot aprons. Zen and I examined each item and then put them back in the box.

“I’ve gone and forgotten the mini-vac,” Zen said with exasperation. “Do you mind fetching it out of the car?”

“I think I remember seeing a mini-vac. I’ll be back in a minute,” I said. When I’d returned, Zen had put the box back into the closet. He quickly vacuumed up the sugar and we moved upstairs.

I was surprised to find nothing in the closet when we returned to the first bedroom. No boxes, no clothes hanging up, not even painting supplies. “Are you still going to dowse in here? Looks pretty empty,” I said.

Zen just smiled. “Best to be thorough on these jobs,” he replied. He looked around the empty close and said “If you would please apply the flour to this entire area?”

The flour canister had a small sifter inside, so I carefully sifted a light dusting of flour onto the floor of the closet. Then I sprinkled some on the walls, pulling on a chain to turn on the light bulb. “I didn’t notice that before,” I said in surprise. I’d bumped into a mirror tile mounted at about knee height on the left side of the closet.

“Quite a nice dusting,” Zen approved. He pinched the smallest dowsing rod and proceeded to pass it over the floor and then near the walls. “No specific point is activating in this area,” he reported. Zen efficiently cleaned up the flour and we went back down to the kitchen.

“I’ll just leave them a note with where we’ll be staying,” Zen said. “You can go ahead and put the gear back into the car.” I made sure not to leave behind any dowsing rods and also not to accidentally pack up any paint stirrers, and then we were off. Guess the diet coke wasn’t necessary.

On the Beach

I woke up as soon as light started coming through the curtains. Zen's favorite bed and breakfast had turned out to be a comfortable old house run by two older sisters. I could smell something baking, and the seagulls were already squawking outside.

The proprietors greeted me when I came down to the dining room and told me that Zen had gone out for a walk. I decided to wait and have breakfast when he returned, but in the meantime I was curious to hear whether there were any neighborhood ghost stories.

“Someone was telling me that a number of these grand old houses are haunted,” I said. “But I guess maybe people like to encourage those stories to provide some extra local interest?”

Both ladies laughed. “Oh you've got that right,” one said. “I remember that when we went to the bed and breakfast boot camp to pick up tips on how to run one of these businesses, there was an entire workshop on creating the right ghost story. How to make it sound interesting and romantic, but not creepy or depressing.” I nodded and laughed along. “Ooops, I've got to check on the muffins,” she said, getting up and going to the kitchen.

The other sister winked at me. “Shall I tell you about our haunted room?”

“Sure, what's your story?” I replied.

“The original owner of this house was a very absentminded fellow. He was always misplacing his glasses and having the entire household turn out to help him search for them. Even after he died, he would forget that he had passed on and come back looking for his glasses. They say that if you are lucky enough to see him, you can get on his good side by pretending to help him look,” she said. “Isn't that great?”

“Perfect! Amusing and not creepy at all,” I answered with a smile. “But do you think there are ANY real ghost stories in the neighborhood? Surely the idea started from something.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “I've seen a lot of bed and breakfasts come and go. If there were any real ghosts, I would think the stories would stay the same no matter who owned the place. But, everything I've heard is aimed at a particular market. Romantic ghosts, funny ghosts, family ghosts. The tales seem to change whenever the decor does.”

“That's too bad, it might be fun to see something like that,” I said.

“You betcha. That'll be why every house has its own story now.”

“That pink place down at the end of the street looks like it's getting a drastic change of decor,” I said, changing tack to fish for background information about SeaBreeze Cottage. “What did it look like before the new owners came in?”

“Nothing too eye catching. I think the last owners had a mallard ducks and forest theme for the inside. The outside was pine green,” she recollected. “Their ghost story was about a mischievous boy who would try to steal cookies when no one was paying attention.”

Zen came back, looking energetic. Our host excused herself and said she'd be back with breakfast shortly. “Brisk weather for walking,” I said.

“Indeed, but I was not the only one about early this morning,” Zen answered. “CeeCee came by hoping to talk more, so she joined me for a walk along the beach.”

“What did you find out?” I asked eagerly. “What did she want to talk about?”

Zen smiled at my curiosity. “First of all, the color choice was Breezy's. She's more of a beige and earth tones type, but they had a coin toss to decide who picked the paint.”

“It's not a subtle color,” I said. “Maybe she created a spiritual residual due to shock at seeing him come home with purple and strawberry paint.”

“Also, one of CeeCee's major interest is community theater. She recently played the lead role in an adaptation of stories from the Arabian Nights. But it's never been a paying job, so she and Breezy are making a go of the bed and breakfast idea.”

“What did they used to do?” I asked.

Zen laughed. “You'd never guess. They both had jobs at Home Depot,” he said. “But not in the paint department.”

The sisters returned bearing blueberry muffins, oatmeal with dried cherries, and bacon. After pouring some orange juice, they wished us a good day and disappeared. As we were eating, I noticed that Zen was just as enthusiastic about the normal cuisine as he would be for his own peculiar culinary creations. Although I did see him putting pepper in his oatmeal.

I was surprised when Breezy popped into the room. “Hey, hope you don't mind that I dropped by,” he said. “Was curious what you found out last night. Was out for a stroll and figured I'd say hi.”

Zen pulled out a chair. “We don't mind in the least. I did detect some spiritual residuals in your house, so the main question now is how to avoid the annoying and disruptive manifestation,” he explained.

“Annoying is right. We're not going to make our target opening date at this rate. Would be too bad to miss that weekend. Big party,” Breezy said in a rush.

“What's the occasion?” I asked.

“Not as many tourists in the winter, so usually it would be slow. But Valentine's is a big deal. Lots of people looking to get away for the weekend,” he explained.

“I supposed tourism on the Cape is quite seasonal,” Zen remarked. “How did you pick this town to settle down in?”

“Got a good dance studio and a couple theater groups for CeeCee. A good location for a B&B. Close enough to get some P-Town overflow. Get out there pretty frequently for fun,” he replied.

“I know a lot of people who dream about opening up a bed and breakfast,” I said. “It's great that you're getting close to making it happen.”

Breezy smiled and actually seemed to visibly slow down. “Been a dream for a long time,” he said. We sat for a moment, relaxing and listening to the seagulls.

Zen stood up. “We'll drop by your house in a few hours. I want to run a few diagnostics during the day, in case the emanations vary.”

“See you soon,” I said. Breezy waved and walked out, still smiling.

Once he'd left, I had a question for Zen. “Could Valentine's Day be the celebration that is a negative influence on CeeCee's situation? Or is that too literal?”

“Potentially. I doubt that it is simply that she hates red hearts and lace, but she may well be anxious about them opening this business. We'll know more after we make another visit to the cottage.”

Daylight Reflections

Zen didn't think that we'd need any of the bulky gear so he put a few electronics into a bag and we walked over to SeaBreeze Cottage. CeeCee and Breezy were out front clipping the hedges. They greeted us enthusiastically but didn't stop working the electric hedge clippers. Then CeeCee's trimmer started smoking.

"CeeCee, you might want to turn that off!" I shouted. She turned off the trimmer, put it down on the lawn, and unplugged it. Breezy went over to her and they both stood staring down at the hedge clippers.

"Do you think it's possessed?" CeeCee asked Zen.

Zen patted her arm. "Possibly just overheating from some vibrations that are being amplified by the spiritual residual. Or, maybe your yew hedge is just a bit tougher than it was designed to handle. In either case, why don't you let it cool down for a while."

Breezy put his arm around his wife. "Can finish the hedges later," he said. "Maybe take our guests on the grand tour?"

“An excellent suggestion,” Zen agreed, bouncing forward. “We did examine the space yesterday, but I’d like to walk through again with you both.”

“Can you tell us more about what you found out last night?” CeeCee asked. “Is the ghost really against us being here?” She was frowning and had her arms crossed. She was fingering her Saint Christopher’s medal.

Zen looked at the couple and gestured at the house. “I do not believe there is anything here that means you harm,” he reassured them. “But it is critical to understand why the spiritual residual is manifesting in such troublesome ways. A guided tour will help us get a better feel for what is happening.”

We gathered in front of the door. “First, as we enter, please tell us how you decided to buy the house,” Zen instructed.

Breezy and CeeCee were holding hands. “We met when we were both working at Home Depot,” CeeCee began. “I used to run the weekend learn to do-it-yourself seminars and Breezy operated the hot dog stand.” She smiled at Breezy.

“Everyone likes hot dogs. Or donuts in the morning. Sold a lot of coffee to the early morning contractor crowd,” Breezy chattered happily.

We walked into the front hall and they continued their story. “Got married, didn’t want to live in my parents’ basement. Found a little apartment. Some of our friends were going to bed and breakfast boot camp, asked us to come too,” Breezy explained.

“Our friends didn’t like the weekend workshops, but me and Breezy had a blast,” CeeCee said. “He loved cooking and chatting with

people. I liked learning to run the logistics of an inn, and coming up with publicity ideas.”

As we walked through the first floor, Zen watched CeeCee and Breezy. I noticed he was holding a small beanbag in each hand. I tried to keep an eye out for any ghostly manifestations but didn’t see anything unusual. Well, other than the pink walls.

“Did you have to make a lot of changes in your life once you decided to run a B&B?” I asked. “You don’t still work at Home Depot, do you?”

CeeCee shook her head and sighed. “I didn’t think I’d miss my old job, but I do. Teaching people how to lay tile and spackle walls was actually a lot of fun. A lot of them would come in thinking that they could never fix things themselves. I liked encouraging them and helping them get confidence in their own skills.”

“Do you plan to have a theme for your establishment?” Zen asked.

Breezy shrugged. “Just a normal place. Hard to come up with something that stands out. Didn’t want to do anything outlandish.”

“I was wondering if the unusual colors were part of a theme,” I said, trying to be tactful.

“Was green before, too. Figured we’d just stick to the same color family. Make it easier,” Breezy said with a shrug.

CeeCee grabbed Breezy’s shoulders. “Are you telling me that you didn’t buy strawberry pink paint on purpose?” she shrieked with surprise.

“I kept biting my tongue about how weird it looked because I thought you were doing some art deco meets southwestern thing!”

Breezy’s mouth fell open. “Pink? Way too flaming for me.”

Zen just nodded and gave each of them a beanbag. “Breezy, please describe the object you are holding,” he requested.

“Beanbag. Medium green. Not heavy,” Breezy replied.

“You don’t see the polka dots?” Zen asked. “Have you ever been tested for your color vision?” Breezy shook his head. “I would suggest that you allow CeeCee to pick out colors when you two do any future decorating,” Zen said sympathetically.

CeeCee was tossing her beanbag up and down and giggling. “I can’t believe it. I was going along with these kooky colors because I thought you really liked them.”

“Liked it when I thought it was green,” Breezy said, with a shrug. “Not so sure now.”

“But if we have to repaint in addition to doing all the other repairs, we’ll never be ready in time to open for Valentine’s Day. I’ve been thinking all along that V-Day was way too early a target date,” CeeCee said, pulling on her hair. “And I’m sick to death of doing renovations!”

“Never thought a Home Depot veteran would be saying something like that,” I teased.

CeeCee laughed. “Oh, I like teaching people to do repairs a lot better than doing stuff myself! It’s like Tom Sawyer and painting the fence.”

“My dear, that is a brilliant idea. Why don’t you run weekend learn to do-it-yourself sessions here? The participants could practice on this very house,” Zen said, throwing his arms out and waving his hands.

“As long as you did only one or two rooms at a time, people could still be staying here while they learned,” I said. “Maybe you could even run alternative activities in case someone’s spouse wanted to come along for the weekend but not spend all their time tiling in the bathroom.”

Breezy was grinning. “Cooking classes, maybe. Or quilting!”

“Ah, are you a textile artist as well as a culinary one?” Zen asked, smiling.

“Always do the costumes for CeeCee’s plays. Did a great set of Arabian Nights outfits last time. But quilting’s the best,” Breezy replied. “Never thought that hobby would be good for anything.”

CeeCee grabbed Breezy’s hands and danced in a circle. “You’re a great seamster! I bet that even more people would want to learn to quilt than to hang drywall. Let’s finish this tour, and then I can think about how we’ll advertise our bed, breakfast, and learn-a-skill cottage. Maybe I can go around to Home Depots and put up poster,” she sang out. We followed her upstairs and into the bedroom where the radiator had blown up.

“Yeah, it’s a mess in here, isn’t it,” CeeCee said. “Maybe this should be the first room that we use for teaching.”

“Redo that closet,” Breezy said quickly. “Gave myself a big scare once. Got a mirror in a strange place, thought something was alive in there.” Breezy laughed at the recollection.

“I remember that for sure,” CeeCee said. “I’ve never heard him holler like that before. He’s usually such a tough guy.” She bumped him with her hip and smiled.

We finished walking around the second floor. “Now what?” CeeCee asked.

“I will leave you some votive candles. Light one each evening for the next week and while it is burning, talk to each other about your plans and dreams for this house,” Zen answered.

CeeCee nodded. “Should we put the candle in any particular place?”

Zen thought a moment. “I would recommend setting up a sturdy stepladder in the front hallway near the closet. Oh, and separate from the votives, the two of you should have a picnic in that first bedroom. Leave the closet door open when you do it.”

Breezy asked “Matter what we eat? Trying some new recipes lately.”

“As long as the meal is something that you both enjoy, the exact menu is of no significance,” Zen replied. “Do let me know how this works out for you.”

“If you’ve banished our ghosts, you’ve got yourself a free place to stay on the Cape,” CeeCee said with a smile. “But we’ll come moaning to you right quick again if the haunting doesn’t quiet down.”

Zen put seven small candles on their kitchen table. “You can keep the beanbags if you like,” he offered. “I’ll leave you a third one so you can juggle with them.”

As we walked back to Zen's car at the other B&B, CeeCee and Breezy were starting up the hedge trimmers again. CeeCee's clippers seemed to have benefited from the break and were now working without smoking.

Roadside Assistance

“So you were telling me how spiritual residuals could be created during times of high emotion,” I said. “And you said they have a long half-life. But how can you make them decay more quickly?”

Zen drove almost calmly, with only infrequent spates of weaving between lanes. I guess spending a weekend on the Cape fixing someone’s ghost problem had been a relaxing vacation for him. “Just as an echo can be dampened by the presence of curtains or other soft surfaces, a spiritual residual can be weakened by a change in the mental and emotional environment,” he explained. “However, unlike auditory echoes, which are all the same sort of energy and can all be damped by the same materials, ghosts resonate according to the type of mental energy that created them.”

“And you have to pick an opposing sort of mental or emotional projection to stop the haunting?” I asked.

“Something like that. For example, you will have realized that there were actually two spiritual residuals in that house?” Zen said.

“The dowsing rods picked out two locations,” I replied. “And also, CeeCee and Breezy seemed to be dealing with two different kinds of haunts. The original one was thwarting their painting and renovation efforts, but the second one was just showing up as a floating dishtowel.”

“Indeed. The more energetic residual was created by CeeCee’s anxiety about not being ready in time for their target opening weekend, her dislike of the color scheme. Additionally, she missed her old work at Home Depot,” Zen said.

“I can see how that would combine into a sort of anti-renovation poltergeist,” I agreed.

“And the visually manifesting spiritual residual was simply an echo of Breezy’s alarm when he caught sight of his own legs moving in the closet mirror,” Zen continued. “A pleasant picnic will set up a positive atmosphere to dampen that residual.”

“What about the candles?” I asked.

Zen gestured with both hands, momentarily letting go of the wheel. “The votives were just a way to focus their attention. It is their honest discussion of what they’re hoping to do with their fledgling business and their new enthusiasm for the future that will help dampen the residual.”

I thought about this for a minute. “I guess their B&B will be unusual enough that they won’t need to start any ghost stories to increase interest.”

Zen agreed and then glanced sideways at me. “You haven’t asked how I came to know those charming sisters at my favorite bed and breakfast,” he said.

“Did you help them with a haunting?” I said. “Or give them a good recipe for blueberry muffins?”

“Those were good muffins,” he said. “But my version of blueberry muffins has kale in it. No, I helped them with a serious garden gnome infestation. Gnomes can be delightful as well as useful, but occasionally too many of them will all try to crowd into one little garden patch. The bickering becomes terribly annoying.”

I looked at Zen to see if he was serious or not. He was humming and tapping his feet, causing the car to spurt ahead unevenly. “Are they difficult to get rid of?” I asked, playing along.

“If you were trying to achieve a completely gnome-free state, it would require severe measures. But it’s not terribly difficult to reduce the population to a balanced level. The analogy is with organic gardening. Rather than escalating control measures until you’ve reached a scorched earth situation and killed the last pest, one takes advantage of natural enemies to provide a dynamically adjusting balance.” Zen seemed to be entirely in earnest. He described the philosophy of organic gardening enthusiastically, miming individual insects with pinching gestures and indicating ballooning populations with both hands. I had the urge to reach over and grab the steering wheel. Luckily, we were on a straight stretch of highway.

Up ahead, several people were standing on the side of the road waving at passing traffic. “I wonder what’s going on up there,” I said.

“Surely somebody requires assistance,” Zen guessed. He swung off the road onto the shoulder and came to a stop just beyond the group.

Two young women and a man jogged over. Zen rolled down his window and asked “Do you need some help?”

“Hey, I know you!” the man said. It was our bicycle wheel thief, Cary. He had shaved off his half moustache and all of his other hair as well. “Can you give us a lift into town? We were driving with a friend and stopped here because he couldn’t wait to get to a real bathroom. Everyone else got out for a smoke.”

One of the women interrupted. “And then that bastard snuck back into the car and took off without us! We’ve been calling his cell phone for the last ten minutes but he’s not even answering.”

The other woman said “I don’t know if this is Dribble’s idea of a joke, but it’s not very funny.”

Zen’s gaze moved between the indignant young people and he smiled. “We’re happy to give you a ride into town, if you can crowd into the back. Let me just shift some of our gear into the trunk.” He turned off the engine and we both got out and started moving milk crates into the trunk. I recognized the flour and sugar canisters and the box of dowsing rods.

The young people thanked Zen and then stood around speculating about why Dribble would have left them on the side of the road. When we all got into the car, Cary said “If it had just been me, it probably would have been some kind of karmic justice. You know. Because of my dumb wheel thing.”

The woman who was wearing all black speculated “Maybe he saw a ghost and just ran off.”

The other woman, who was wearing colorfully patched denim overalls laughed. “Oh, I think that if Dribble ever ran into a spiritual residual again, he’d want as much company as he could get while making his escape. More likely he just remembered he was late for a hot date or something.”

“You’ve had experience with spiritual residuals?” I asked.

“Nothing much. Dribble and I used to be housemates in an apartment that was originally a church. We ended up moving because he kept ‘sensing a presence’ and then being too nervous to sleep in his own room.” She made the quotation marks with her fingers. “Finally, my boyfriend got sick of having Dribble camped out in a sleeping bag next to our bed all the time and we got our own place.”

Cary laughed. “You never told that story before,” he said. “You should have warned me that my new housemate might start trying to get into my bed if he hears noises at night.”

We were getting close to Boston and Zen offered to drop everyone off at their house or a T station. They all agreed that a T station would be fine, so we left them in Davis Square on the way back to Zen’s place. I was a little surprised that Zen hadn’t tried to get involved in speculating on Dribble’s odd behavior so I asked him about it as we lugged the milk crated back into his apartment.

“You weren’t curious about why their friend left them on the highway?” I asked.

Zen shrugged. “I would never get anything accomplished if I allowed myself to be distracted by the question of why anyone does anything,” he said. “Though we might eventually learn a great deal about

the world, human behavior will always be puzzling at the individual level.”

He stacked the crates neatly into a closet. “Thank you for your assistance this weekend. I have quite a bit of work to catch up on now. But I’ll let you know when I start my next field investigation.”

A Walk in the Woods

Zen didn't call for a few weeks so I applied my extra leisure time to suggesting more tasks for SF0. Thinking about Zen's example, I submitted task ideas including "Fool for Love: Do something spectacularly ill-advised to impress a potential mate," "Restless Spirit: Diagnose and cure a haunted house," and "Unbaked: Utilize flour and sugar in a way completely unrelated to food." I also wondered about ConCon and what it would be like in a room with dozens of people like Zen. Did they all have different sets of eccentricities, or were there some sort of central guidelines?

I also engaged in a spate of SF0 tasking, wrapping up with an unorthodox bath. Just when I was trying to take some decent photographs of myself in a bathtub of beef bouillon, carrots and potatoes, using my phone's camera, it rang. This has got to be the only time ever when I'll be in the bathtub, already holding my phone when it rings. Let alone surrounded by vegetables.

"Are you game for a bit of camping?" Zen asked. "It's not really related to tellmewhy.org, but there's been some last minute illness among

the scout leaders and they'll have to cancel their big winter camping outing unless we can fill in."

"You're on their short list of people to call as a last minute substitute scout leader?" I asked.

"Oh goodness no. Actually, they had already decided to cancel the outing. But when I chatted with the boys at the wreath drop-off site, they were so disappointed and mentioned that their leaders had already called everyone they knew who could possibly fill in. But if you'd be able to come, I think we could salvage the event for the kids," he replied.

"What about your political objections? I've been disappointed with their treatment of atheist scouts and homosexual leaders. Plus, won't it be kind of cold this time of the year?" I inquired.

"That's the best part!" Zen said happily. "Lots of fresh air, and if there's snow, you can look for tell-tale tracks. But I am certainly sensitive to the closed-mindedness of the national organization. Yet what better way to counter such prejudice than to help expose the boys to an alternative viewpoint?"

"Zen, I'd love to help, but I don't even own a tent or backpack," I pleaded. "And I do like running water."

"It will be good practice for your first visit to Easter Island!" he declared. "When I'm in the field, I usually camp rather than staying in town. And I have plenty of extra gear. For this trip, you won't even need a tent. We're staying in cabins."

I gave in. "Okay. I'll do it, and I'll try not to whine and be a bad example for the boys. Wouldn't want to give them the idea that women can't rough it."

“That’s the spirit, my dear. Come by tomorrow so you can pick out the right size backpack. We’ll be leaving before dawn on Saturday and be back Sunday night,” he said gaily. At least that’s only one night of camping, I thought. How bad can it get?

At 6:00 am Saturday morning, I found myself packed into a minivan with Zen and six boys from 9 to 11 years old. Their assistant scout leader drove another minivan. Between us, we had to keep an eye on a dozen boys who were already bouncing off the walls, despite the early hour.

“Let’s play a game!” suggested Zen. “We can all take turns listing something that we might see in the woods, and each person has to repeat the entire list from the person before them.”

By the time it was my turn, we were up to a bear, a raccoon, an owl, a deer, a squirrel, and a cardinal. I added a woodpecker to the list and then it was Zen’s turn. He rattled off the previous seven animals and then added a chupacabra. This derailed the game as the boys demanded an explanation of what a chupacabra was.

“Well boys, it is not certain whether chupacabra are reptilian or mammalian, or perhaps something completely different. However, it is agreed that they are about the size of a large person and that they hunt livestock and other animals,” Zen said.

“Nuh uh,” objected one boy. “There’s no such thing.”

“Adam, you are certainly correct that many people do not believe that chupacabra are real, preferring to attribute the attacks to bears, mountain lions, or other more well-known animals. But there are still animals being discovered in these modern times!” Zen said.

I looked down at my crib sheet with the kids' names and descriptions, glancing at them through the rear view mirror. Adam, Dave, Dave, Mark, Cyrole, and Will. I figured I'd have plenty of time to memorize the ones in our minivan before we got to the hiking area.

"Maybe we'll see Bigfoot!" said one of the Daves. "My brother saw Bigfoot one time when he went camping. And I brought a camera, too."

"Your brother's a liar," mocked Adam. "There's no such thing as Bigfoot either. Those are just stories for kids."

"I've never seen a Bigfoot or a chupacabra," said Zen. "But I've never seen a bear in the woods either, and I believe that there are such things as bears." This seemed to give the kids pause. Probably none of them had seen a bear in the wild either.

"I bet you'd be afraid of Bigfoot," said the other Dave, punching Adam. "You just hope there's no such thing so we don't all hear you yelling for your Mommy."

I looked at Zen. Since he'd volunteered us, I figured bickering boys were his responsibility. "Now boys, there's nothing wrong with being afraid to run into an animal that could eat you. Really, it's quite healthy and wise," Zen admonished. "It would be a bit silly to be afraid of ghosts, for example, since spiritual residuals can't attack anyone. But chupacabras? They're an entirely different ball of wax."

"I saw a ghost once!" volunteered Cyrole. "It didn't hurt me or anything."

“Not everyone understands that ghosts are essentially harmless,” Zen continued. “So a number of people are afraid of them. But now you know.”

The boys lost interest in ghosts and chupacabras and started arguing about whether to stop at McDonald’s or Burger King for a late breakfast. “Cyrole, weren’t you in charge of the walkie-talkie for our vehicle?” Zen asked. “Please contact the other group and ask whether Mr. Finnegan already has a lunch plan.”

After a brief scuffled between Cyrole and Mark over the walkie-talkie, Cyrole radioed as instructed. Ted Finnegan said that we’d stop at the next rest area, which had a McDonald’s. The boys started singing, with Zen humming along and we cruised along to the rest area.

“Alright boys, buddy up. We’re all going to go to the McDonald’s. You can go to the restroom or walk around the building, but we’re leaving in 30 minutes, and anyone who we have to track down gets extra clean-up duty tonight,” I warned. We all walked into the building together and then the boys started running around between the tables.

Zen and I sat down with the assistant scout leader. “Me and the boys really appreciate you two filling in at the last minute,” he said. “They’ve been looking forward to going out and practicing some of the things we’ve been learning about observing wildlife and cooking camp food.”

“Glad to lend a hand,” said Zen. “I haven’t been camping around here for years. These days, almost all my camping is on Easter Island.”

“Dan and Mikey told me you’ve been camping pretty regularly. That’s one up on the three of us. Other than these annual trips with the boys, we’re not much for the outdoors,” said Ted.

“Me too,” I admitted. “But this is just a little hike, right? Nothing too serious?”

Ted laughed. “Yup. We got ambitious one year and ended up with a bunch of whiney kids who all wanted us to carry their packs. Never again. It’s no fun if everyone gets cranky,” he said with a grin. “It’s a big adventure for the boys, but we’ll never be more than 5 miles from ranger station at the start of the trail.”

Looking for Adventure

The boys, fortified with a solid breakfast, were eager to go by the time we pulled into the park around ten o'clock. Everyone had packed a lunch for each day, since we'd eat on the trail. We distributed supplies for cooking dinner and breakfast among the group, made sure everyone was carrying enough water, and set out along the trail.

"The rule on the trail is that you need to stay within sight of an adult at all times," Ted reminded the boys. "Keep an eye out for animal tracks and maybe we'll see a fox." We decided that since Ted was familiar with the path, he'd walk near the head of the group and Zen and I would bring up the rear.

The boys tramped along excitedly, and even I had to admit that it was nice to get out into the woods. "Zen, were you trying to scare the boys with your chupacabra information?" I teased.

"Of course not! That was merely the first creature that came to mind when I thought about things we might see in the woods," he replied, slightly indignantly. "I used to come up here looking for Sasquatch and chupacabra pretty frequently."

“Did you ever find any traces?” I asked. “I didn’t think either of those were supposed to be native to New England.”

“That’s really why I stopped coming out here,” Zen admitted. “It didn’t make sense to be looking here when the sightings were a lot more concentrated in other regions.”

Ahead of us, the boys were crowding excitedly around Ted. We caught up to the group as he was encouraging the boys to identify some animal tracks. “Look, here’s where the raccoon dug for grubs,” Ted pointed out. “And this looks like raccoon scat.”

The boys mostly looked interested, but one of the Daves wasn’t impressed. “I see dog poop all the time, I don’t need to see that stuff,” he said.

“Oh, but studying what an animal has been eating can be fascinating,” said Zen. “Did you know that coprolites have been used to determine what sorts of plants some types of dinosaurs ate? And similar analysis has been used to detect cannibalism among ancient human tribes?”

“Scientific shit,” snickered one of the boys from Ted’s car. The boys all laughed.

“Guys, remember that using vulgarities is not something a scout can be proud of,” said Ted. We got back on the trail as it started snowing. Zen was catching snowflakes on his tongue.

“One of a kind snacks,” he said, waggling his eyebrows. I smiled at him.

By the time we stopped for lunch, the boys had settled down considerably. They sat and swapped cookies while Ted checked his trail map. “We’re about half way to the camp site,” he said. “We’re making good time.”

Zen had packed some bright green hardboiled eggs and some dark brown biscuits with peanut butter. “What’s that you’ve got there?” asked Ted.

Zen offered him a piece of biscuit. “Blood sausage biscuits with peanut butter, and broccoli flavored eggs. Lots of vitamins in broccoli concentrate, you know.”

“You don’t have to try it if you don’t want to,” I told Ted. He seemed relieved and went back to his own lunch with an apologetic smile. The boys had finished eating and were tossing muddy snowballs at each other. One went wide and landed on Zen’s head.

He looked up. “That must have been quite a large bird!” he said in surprise. The boys all laughed, and Zen winked at me and joined in.

We did spot a cardinal, many squirrels, and a woodpecker on the way to the camp site, but no bears, deer, or chupacabras. Once we got to the camp site, I noted that there was one large cabin with a fireplace and a composting toilet but no running water. Everyone picked out a bunk and dumped their pack.

“Let’s have one squad go out with me and look for more kindling,” Ted instructed. There was a good supply of firewood next to the cabin, but not much kindling. “Remember, only pick up branches that are already on the ground. The other group can get water from the pump and start organizing the dinner ingredients.” I was impressed that

he was letting Zen lead the dinner group after hearing what Zen had brought for lunch.

The boys put all the food they'd carried out on the table near the fireplace. Dinner was basically macaroni and red sauce, nothing complicated. Zen impressed the boys by rigging up a fire-starting bow drill from a whittled branch and some string he had in his pocket. They all took turns with it, achieving a wisp or two of smoke but no flames. Zen grinned, pulled a container out of his other pocket, and said "Matches were an excellent invention!" Soon the boys had a fire going, and we started boiling water for the macaroni.

Then Ted's group came rushing into the cabin. "We saw one! We saw one!" yelled Cyrole and Mark.

"A chupacabra?" Zen asked excitedly.

"Well, that sounds like some kind of burrito, and I'm sure it wasn't Mexican food out there," said Ted. "I think it was a bear, but when we heard something crashing around and grunting, I told the boys to hightail it back here instead of sticking around for a good look."

"Good thinking," I said. "No reason to stick around volunteering to be someone's dinner."

Ted grinned. "I figured with all the noise we were making on the way back, we probably scared it off anyways."

"I would think that most bears would be hibernating by now," Zen said. "Unless something woke it up. Maybe it was a mother bear waking up to have cubs and getting distracted by something interesting outdoors."

The boys couldn't agree on whether the thing had been grunting, growling, howling, or roaring. They took turns imitating the noises they claimed to have heard, but no two of them agreed. Ted's vote was for grunting, but he didn't seem too sure either. Eventually the boys got bored of making animal noises and teasing each other about being scardy-cats and were agitating for dinner. The macaroni was done, and it didn't take long to warm up the sauce. As we were eating, we heated up some water for doing the dishes and the boys played rock-paper-scissors to figure out who had wash-up duty. By the time it had gotten dark, everyone was getting ready for a pajama party and s'mores around the fireplace. Wisely, Ted nixed the idea of telling ghost stories.

Zen Gets a Closer Look

The next morning, Zen was up at the break of dawn. “Shhh,” he said. “I’m going to take a look around outside to see if whatever the boys ran into yesterday left any tracks.”

“You don’t think that could be dangerous if there’s a grumpy bear running around?” I asked. “Wouldn’t want to have to send out a rescue party if it drags you off.”

“Not to worry, my dear. I brought my full chupacabra defense kit along just in case. It will do for bears in a pinch as well,” Zen reassured me. “I’ll be back by the time the boys are starting to stir.”

“Maybe you should take a walk-talkie, just in case,” I suggested. Zen agreed and set off humming happily. I went back to sleep.

Suddenly, there was a crash at the door. Ted and a few of the boys sat up sleepily. When there were several more thundering impacts along with some odd noises, everyone woke up.

“That’s the noise we heard yesterday,” Ted said excitedly. “Now, would you call that a grunt or what?”

“Kind of a snort-roar, I guess,” I replied. The boys were starting to get nervous and piled onto the top bunks. “The door bar looks pretty sturdy, but what do you say we move a table against the door as well?” I suggested.

Ted quickly agreed and we dragged one of the tables over and leaned it against the door. “Wait a minute, where’s Zen?” Ted asked.

“Oh no, I forgot. He went outside to take a look around for tracks!” I said with alarm. “I’d better try getting hold of him with the walkie-talkie.”

I tried not to sound too panicked in front of the boys. “Hello Zen. Where are you now?” I said. After a long silence, broken by more loud noises from outside the door, he replied.

“I’ve been circling around the cabin, but haven’t seen any tracks of a large animal. I doubt I’ll find anything. Is it time to get breakfast started?”

“Zen, uh, I believe the large animal is now at the door of the cabin. We cannot see if from any of the windows, but it is making noises and has been, uh, crashing into the door,” I said.

“My goodness, I do seem to be missing all the excitement,” Zen answered. “I’ll swing around and see if I can get a look at it.”

Then, there was a very loud crash, and the noises stopped. “Hey Zen? The animal has stopped ramming the door. It may be on the move again,” I said.

We jumped when Zen rapped on a window. “You can open the door now,” he said. Ted and I looked at each other and shoved the table

out of the way. The boys were all leaning out off the top bunks trying to get a view of the doorway.

“Merciful Jesus!” exclaimed Ted. “We’ve been attacked by bacon!” An enormous pig was collapsed on the doorstep with a bloodied head.

I stared in disbelief. “Is it dead?” I asked, not wanting to prod it awake if it was just knocked out.

Zen leaned over the pig’s head. “I’m afraid he’s not breathing.” I think I’d be more afraid if he was breathing. The boys had clambered off the beds and were crowding behind us and daring each other to touch the pig.

“Ted, do you think you and Zen could move it so that the door isn’t blocked? We might as well get started on breakfast,” I said and then turned to the boys. “Come on guys, let’s get the fire started up again.”

Poor Ted had to climb over the head to get out the door, but he and Zen manfully wrestled the deceased pig off towards the side of the cabin. When they finished, we all sat down for hot oatmeal and potato chips. “So, do you think you’d want to try some hepatomancy with the pig?” I asked Zen. “Maybe the boys could work towards a divination merit badge.”

“Such a demonstration would be a grand learning experience,” said Zen. He sighed. “But I dare say that would be ill-advised with this particular specimen. My suspicion is that it may have the swine variant of mad cow disease, so we’d best not expose the boys to any risk.”

“Can’t argue with you there,” Ted said. “That thing sure was acting strange. But I haven’t heard anything about mad pig disease. Is it very common?”

“Unfortunately, there’s been a bit of a hush-up, so no one’s sure whether swine transmissible spongiform encephalopathy is a problem,” Zen said, shaking his head. “I’ll make sure that a conclusive necropsy will be performed for this case. The U.S. pork industry could be in big trouble.”

“Surely there isn’t a pig farm around here, though. Where do you think it came from?” I asked.

“You’d be surprised,” Ted interjected. “I believe there are some farms not too far away from this park.”

“In that case, I’d better alert my people right away so that samples can be sent out for testing before the owner is able to conveniently dispose of the evidence,” Zen said, jumping up from his seat. “There’s no time to lose!” Zen pulled out his cell phone and rushed outside.

“Your mom’s a mad cow, moo moo,” said Adam, punching his neighbor.

“Yeah, well your mom’s a mad pig. Snort-roar” the boy replied, jostling Adam’s oatmeal. Not a bad impression of that pig, actually.

“You two just volunteered for clean-up,” Ted said, giving them a look. “Everyone else, start packing up your things. We’ll be hitting the trail in about half an hour.”

Ted pulled me aside. “You don’t believe that pork in this country is contaminated, do you? I’d hate to give up sausage and pork chops.”

“I can’t say for sure, but there have been some unsettling news reports about correlations between pork consumption and human CJD,” I replied. “Zen doesn’t make this stuff up.”

Ted looked uneasy. Zen hustled back inside, bouncing on his feet. “Good news, friends. I’ve got a veterinarian on her way in a snowmobile. She might get here before we even head out.”

“There isn’t enough snow for a snowmobile, is there?” I said.

“You haven’t been outside yet,” said Zen with a grin. “The new snow’s why I couldn’t find any track from last night. We’ve got at least a foot of accumulation.”

I looked at Ted. “That’ll make it harder to hike out of here,” I observed.

“This would be a great opportunity to teach the boys how to make emergency snow shoes!” Zen said, clapping. “It’s not too different from making wreaths.” He rubbed his hands together. “If any of the boys are done packing, I can take them out now and gather the necessary materials.”

“Sure, just watch out for more pigs,” I said. Ted inspected the boys’ packs and agreed that eight of them were all set and could go out with Zen. Everyone else finished cleaning up and packing by the time Zen’s group returned. We were up to our elbows in evergreen boughs and twine by the time two women knocked on the window.

“Carry on,” Zen urged. “I’ll just be a minute with the good animal doctors here.”

He was back in time to advise everyone on final snow shoe adjustments. Then we practiced walking around indoors for a while, and were ready to hit the trail.

“Hey, this actually works!” Ted observed. “I’ve never been able to get half the things in the scout guide to really work.” The boys laughed.

“I think it’s usually best if someone can show you in person,” Zen said with a smile. “I’ll admit that I couldn’t get the fire started last night with a bow drill.”

“But that’s what matches are for, eh?” Ted remarked.

We tramped along with occasional snow shoe malfunctions and people falling over, but made enough progress that we returned to the cars well before dark. Still no bears and no chupacabras, but a memorable weekend nevertheless.

Abducted by Aliens

I was completely tired out after our weekend in woods, but hurried over to Zen's after dinner on Tuesday after his urgent phone message. "It's potentially a matter of galactic importance! We must act at once!" he'd said breathlessly.

Zen opened the door and quickly ushered me into the living room. "Mrs. Farsby should be here any minute," he said. "She believes that space aliens have taken her husband. In any case, he's been missing for 24 hours, and she's afraid the police won't follow up on some of the more unusual leads."

"I guess they don't have much experience handling galactic visitors, let alone kidnappers," I said.

"As I've said before, a lot of people blame space aliens for everything, so it does make sense to be skeptical. But, we shall hear her out, and hopefully be of some assistance in locating Mr. Farsby, regardless," Zen said firmly. "Ah, that must be her now."

He soon returned with a tall woman wearing a flowery woolen skirt and yellow sweater. "Please, come right in and tell us what's been happening," he said.

“When Harvey was late coming home from work yesterday, I called his cell phone and then his office. I got really worried after he wasn’t home in time for our weekly bridge game. The other couple helped me call around to hospitals to see if he’d been in an accident. Then I thought of calling his coworker’s daughter who sometimes babysits for us and having her check with her Dad,” she explained anxiously. She was on the edge of her seat and clasped her knees with her hands.

“That was good thinking,” I said.

She nodded and continued. “Turns out he had never made it to work at all, even though he left for the subway at his normal time. I called the police and they said that for an adult with no cognitive problems, they wouldn’t activate a full scale search effort until more time had passed.”

Zen nodded. “Did you tell them about your specific worries about what might have happened?”

“I thought about it, but decided that they’d just think I was crazy,” Mrs. Farsby said, pursing her lips. “This isn’t totally unexpected. He had a history of being an individual of interest to galactic samplers.”

“What sorts of things happened before yesterday?” I asked.

She listed them on her fingers. “The first two times were before we’d met. When he was a kid, he woke up one night and there was a bright light shining into his window. He couldn’t see who was holding the light, but they aimed it right at him for minutes. After it went dark, he rushed to the window but didn’t see anything out there. Then when he was in college, he got a series of messages in fortune cookies that he

figures were communications from alien intelligences.” Zen jotted down this history and inclined his head towards Mrs. Farsby to indicate that she should continue.

“Then just a few years ago, one night our trash bag was taken right out of the can. He’d put it out in the evening, but when I was up to get the paper, I noticed that the can had been tipped over and the entire bag was missing,” she said. Mrs. Farsby started sniffing. “I can’t believe he’s just gone!”

“Now, do you recall anything happening recently to indicate that Mr. Farsby might have been under observation or otherwise being targeted by aliens? Any unusual behavior or strange coincidences?” Zen asked, passing her a large, red handkerchief.

Mrs. Farsby looked at us over the top of the handkerchief. “He did remember our anniversary last month. Usually he forgets.”

Zen made a note of that. “Anything else? Changes in eating or sleeping habits, strange emails or phone messages, misplacing items, personality differences?” he inquired.

“He did lose two different sweaters and a belt!” she said in surprise. “Maybe the aliens were nabbing some of his things before going after the big prize.”

Zen scratched his head and looked grim. “I must warn you that if your husband has been taken off planet, there is not much I can do to get him back. I’ll arrange for a crop circle pattern that makes it clear that he’s been missed, but we may be at their mercy.”

At that, Mrs. Farsby teared up again. Zen continued, “However, if they were just after data, they may return him when they are finished.”

Unfortunately, your husband may be too disoriented to find his way home. It would be helpful if you could make a list of all the possible locations that would be emotionally significant to Mr. Farsby, in case they simply read his mind and pick the first place they are able to identify as a drop-off point.”

“I’ll do that right away,” she said. “What else can I do?”

“We’ll need several photos, in case your husband is too temporarily confused to identify himself. Also, I’m sure you know him best, but perhaps there are a few old friends or coworkers we should check with, in case they know of any other likely locations,” Zen offered.

“He hasn’t been at this job very long, but one of the people we play bridge with is an old friend of his from college. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind helping,” she said. She set Zen’s handkerchief down on the coffee table and stood up. “I feel like I should be at home as much as possible, in case he tries to contact me.”

“That makes sense,” I said.

“Let us know if you’d like us to come by your house to examine any evidence, or to talk further,” Zen offered. “I’ll get the crop circle pattern started immediately.”

Zen walked Mrs. Farsby out and then quickly phoned his emergency alien abduction network. “This is Zen in Boston. We’ve got another missing male, last name Farsby, disappeared yesterday. Please put out the standard message that his absence has been noticed and we would appreciate it if they would return him soon.”

“Does that ever work?” I asked.

Zen nodded, and then hesitated. “We have never had a communication confirming that our message influenced the outcome of an abduction. While many missing persons turned up after such a message was posted, the correlation does not prove causation. But as I explained to Mrs. Farsby, other than asking nicely, there’s really nothing we can do to coerce aliens to cooperate.”

“Fair enough, I guess. It wouldn’t be fair to do some kind of double blind clinical trial when there’s so much at stake,” I agreed.

“Most alien abduction groups do agree that sending a polite request is the gold standard procedure. A few fringe groups advocate a more threatening message, but that seems unwise,” Zen said. “Now, we must also consider alternative possibilities in this sort of situation.”

“You mean explanations like he’s just run off for some reason?” I asked.

Zen waved his hands. “Running off for ‘some reason’ is no explanation at all. Running off because the nano robots have taken over his bodily control is a reason. Running off with his long-time mistress is a reason. Running off because he was actually a time traveler whose allotted visiting hours came to an end is a reason,” he said emphatically. I nodded meekly.

“There is also the possibility of foul play involving only earthlings,” Zen continued. “It is not inconceivable that Mrs. Farsby has done away with her husband and wishes to deflect suspicion onto aliens. Or he may have been embroiled in the criminal underworld. However, the police generally do alright investigating earthling on earthling violence, so we will concentrate our investigations on other possibilities.”

“How often does this kind of thing happen? I mean, you have a whole crisis action system in place and all,” I asked.

Zen sighed and shook his head sadly. “Too often, my dear. Why, there are probably thousands of missing people from Massachusetts alone. Child abduction garners much more publicity, but aliens concentrate on adults. A lot more to extract from their minds, you see, and then there’s the potential for breeding.”

“What do you make of Mr. Farsby misplacing clothes but being better at remembering an anniversary? That could fit with the theory of having some kind of love affair,” I said.

Zen nodded and held up three fingers. “Yes. In addition to alien abduction, a simple love affair or nano robots in the brain cannot be ruled out. Generally in the time traveler scenario, the individual affected will plan their exit more carefully so as not to leave loved-ones in the lurch.”

“Um, you don’t think it’s one of those fairy encounter situations where someone spends a day in the fairy kingdom and finds out that twenty years have passed in our time?” I suggested.

Zen beamed. “You’ve read the stories. Good. We’re not at all near any fairy strongholds, and yesterday wasn’t astrologically significant, but I shouldn’t discount that possibility. I’ll contact Mr. Farsby’s old friend and set up a meeting. Why don’t you go home and get some sleep, though. It looks like you found our little camping excursion a bit tiring.”

Obsessions and Aversions

Mr. Farsby's friend was quite eager to help and agreed to meet us the next morning for breakfast. "You must be the investigators that Annie's got on the case. I'm Paula. I've known Harvey since we were in college, oh, so about 30 years now," she said, shaking our hands. "This whole thing is crazy. I don't know why he'd just disappear."

"Yes, I think Mrs. Farsby doesn't want to leave it just to the police," I said.

"Yeah, she said something about not wanting to waste any time waiting to see if he'd just turn up or get in touch," Paula said. "So how can I help?"

"Can you think of any reason, no matter how far fetched, that would have caused him to deliberately drop out of sight?" Zen asked.

Paula frowned and pulled on her hair. "Nope, not at all. I think he liked his new job, and he and Annie seemed happy."

"I know you all are friends, so I hope you won't be offended, but could you ever imagine there being another woman involved?" I asked. It

seemed like Mrs. Farsby hadn't brought up the alien abduction theory with her friend, so I was hesitant to mention nano robots or fairies right off the bat.

Paula laughed. "I like Harvey a lot, but I have to admit that there aren't so many women who'd put up with him. I always thought he'd hit the lottery finding Annie. I mean, how many people would take you seriously if you told them you were getting messages from aliens in your fortune cookies?"

I raised one eyebrow at Zen. "Other than the fortune cookie theory, was there something about his habits or personality that would be a problem for most women?" Zen asked.

"He's got a heart of gold, but you have to get over the boring obsessive conversations and odd set of aversions," she replied. "Like, he'd get interested in geology or something, and then for the next three months you wouldn't hear about anything except rocks."

"And the aversions?" I asked.

"There's about ten things total that he'll eat. He won't sit on the subway between two other people. He replaces both shoelaces if one of a pair breaks. Curtains of all kinds make him really nervous," she listed. "It really goes on and on. Annie's the first woman who stuck around for more than one or two dates."

"She does seem very devoted to him," I commented. "I hope we can help find him."

"One thing we were hoping you could tell us is a list of places that might be personally significant for him. Sometimes people who have had some kind of mental breakdown will return to some particular place

that they used to frequent, or a place that they have strong associations with. Mrs. Farsby has sent me a list of places she knows about, but perhaps there might be some from his earlier life that you can recall,” Zen explained.

“It’s not impossible that Harvey’s had a nervous breakdown or something,” Paula said, nodding reluctantly. “He’s kind of high-strung. Let me see. Maybe the lounge where the chess club used to meet. The cemetery where his mom was buried. The ice cream shop where he had his first kiss. I guess that’s what comes to mind.”

Zen asked for more details and then jotted down the information.

“And finally,” Zen asked, “do you think there is any possibility that Mrs. Farsby actually knows what happened to him and is covering it up? Could she be helping him stage a disappearance?”

“No chance of that. Annie’s a blurter and has just the worst poker face. I remember once when she threw this surprise party for Harvey. She got so nervous keeping a secret and let so many things slip that even Harvey, who is not the most observant guy, guessed what was going on. I wouldn’t tell her something if I wanted to keep it a secret,” Paula laughed.

Zen raised an eyebrow at me. “So she didn’t keep quiet about the details of why she asked me in particular to get involved?” he asked Paula.

Paula grinned and pointed at Zen. “Bingo. Just thought it might sound rude to call you the Scooby Doo Gang when we’ve just met. Annie tried to omit the details, but folded after less than a couple

sentences. She admitted that she thinks this is some kind of alien abduction and says that you're a major expert on that kind of thing. To me, that's totally a crackpot theory, but you seem like a good guy."

"We are considering other explanations as well," I said.

"Hey, don't mind me. I don't believe in the Bermuda Triangle or any of that stuff. But when you're looking for something, the more eyes the better, right?" Paula said. "That reminds me, I have to tell Paula that I've got two of Harvey's sweaters. He keeps leaving them at my place every time it's my turn to host bridge." She rolled her eyes. "Maybe he just got distracted and forgot to go home, you know? I swear he'd forget his own birthday if it wasn't on his calendar."

Suddenly, she turned serious. "I really am worried about Harvey. Let me know if you think of anything else I can help with," she said. We thanked her and then I had to head in to my real job for the day. I didn't get much accomplished at work that day, since I was puzzling over what could possibly have happened to Harvey Farsby. Around four o'clock, Zen called and asked whether I'd like to come along to examine the Farsby residence.

Consulting the Cards

The house was a typical two family near Porter Square. The front yard was paved with asphalt decorated with a spiral pattern made with clam shells set into the blacktop. A holiday wreath very similar to the ones that Zen had been making hung on the front door. Now, evergreen wreaths made me think of snowshoes.

Mrs. Farsby answered the door looking even more worried than she had the day before. “He still hasn’t called or anything. I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she said. “What if he never comes back?” She held a box of tissues in one hand and a flashlight in the other. “I’ve tried Morse Code with a flashlight pointing up, in case he’s being held above us and can look out a window. But I haven’t seen a reply,” she said, crying.

“This must be very upsetting. I’ll tell you what we know so far,” Zen said. “The crop circle pattern was implemented this morning, and we had a chance to speak with Paula. She mentioned a few places that Mr. Farsby might remember particularly clearly, but also said that the missing sweaters were at her house.”

“Is there anything else I can do to find him?” she asked. “Just waiting around and hoping that the phone rings is making me jumpy.”

Zen thought a moment and then asked “Have the two of you ever experienced anything like mental telepathy with each other?”

She nodded. “One time he got lost walking home and when he called me on his cell phone, I was able to tell him which way to turn even though I didn’t know where he was. An occasionally, he’ll pick up take-out before I’ve even suggested it. Do you think I could make some kind of connection?” she asked eagerly.

“We can assume that if he has been abducted, he will have little or no control over whether he is taken out of Earth orbit,” Zen said solemnly. “However, if something else has happened, such as an encounter with a rogue fairy or a nano robot infestation, we might be able to help him extricate himself from the situation once we have some better indication of what has happened.”

“We might use telepathy to send him instructions?” Mrs. Farsby asked.

“Precisely. And we might do a telepathic Tarot card reading to study his situation,” Zen replied.

“I’m willing to try anything at this point,” she said. “The police were actually questioning me today, asking all these question about whether we’d been arguing and whether he had any outstanding debts.” She sniffed. “At least they’re looking into his disappearance now.”

Zen took out his cards and asked Mrs. Farsby to draw four while thinking of her husband. “The first card is the Outsider from the suite of

rainbows. Does the illustration or card remind you of anything about Mr. Farsby?" he asked.

"The child standing there, thinking he can't get through the gate because he hasn't tried removing the unlocked chain, makes me think of how Harvey seems to regret not having made an effort to ask his mother about his father. She never told him who his biological father was, and since she died, he's been worried that he'll never find out or that his father might also have passed away," she said immediately. "I don't know why he never asked and she never volunteered the information, but somehow they never talked about it. I think growing up without a dad made him feel like an outsider."

"Alright, the next card is the Queen of Fire, Sharing. What does it make you think of?" Zen asked.

"The picture is a woman, but I think that my husband is one of the most sharing people I've ever met. He's always willing to help someone," Mrs. Farsby said.

"Then we have Exhaustion, also from the suite of Fire," he prompted.

Mrs. Farsby shook her head. "I have to worry that he may be uncomfortable or tired right now, if the aliens have been running experiments on him. But other than that, I can't think of anything."

"Finally, the King of Water, which is Healing," Zen said.

"The picture makes me think of the eyes, heart, and liver," she said. "But I don't think that Harvey is in the hospital. I've called around everywhere. What do you think this all means?" I had carefully noted all

her observations. It seemed like Zen had wanted to hear her associations before doing any interpretations himself.

“The first card, the one that jogged your memory the most, represents Mr. Farsby’s situation. This is important, because we are trying to guess what has been happening to him so that we can try sending useful advice,” Zen said. “Now, possibly his situation has to do with wanting to find his father. Do you know whether he was trying to do some investigations into that subject?”

Mrs. Farsby shook her head. “I’m not sure. I know he’d been thinking about trying to contact old friends of his mother’s, but I don’t know whether he actually spoke to anyone.”

“Did he ever suspect that his father might have been a non-human, or that there was any alien interference with his conception?” Zen asked. “That could be why he had been of particular interest to aliens wanting to follow up on his case.”

She gasped. “I never thought of that,” she said. “But it could be possible. But what about the other cards?”

“The second card represents Mr. Farsby’s ally or strength in the situation. As sharing is voluntary, it could mean that he is improving the situation by helping the other party or giving them something,” Zen said. He smiled slightly. “This may be a good sign, because it may indicate that he is not being held against his will.”

“Oh, I hope you’re right,” Mrs. Farsby said, wringing her hands. “And the Exhaustion and Healing cards?”

Zen looked serious. “Exhaustion is in the position of a danger, so it may mean that your husband found himself more depleted than he

expected after helping someone else. And Healing indicates the way forward, suggesting that Mr. Farsby will recover from his exhaustion and that the other party will benefit from the assistance he has provided.”

“So what sort of message would be helpful to communicate telepathically?” I asked.

Zen took a deep breath and considered the question. “My suggestion would be to convey a sense of support for his sharing actions, a bit of concern that he should be careful not to try doing too much, along with confidence that all will end well,” he said. “Mrs. Farsby, could you try transmitting those thoughts this evening? You may have to try several sessions.”

“I’ll try,” she said. “Anything else?”

“You’ve listed a park where he liked to eat lunch and a lake house that you have in New Hampshire as places that Mr. Farsby would remember strongly. We must alert someone who can monitor each of these locations, as well as the places that Paula listed, in case he is dropped off in a disoriented mental state,” Zen said.

“The park is very near where he works, so one of his coworkers could easily check there each day,” Mrs. Farsby said. “But the lake house is hardly used in the winter, and no one would usually be around.”

Zen nodded. “It won’t be hard to find someone who frequents the campus ice cream shop and chess club lounge that Paula mentioned. And the cemetery staff can help monitor that location. But you’re right, the lake house is more challenging. I’ll drive out there tomorrow and see if I can’t recruit some assistance.”

I glanced at Mrs. Farsby, who was looking pretty exhausted herself. “Since Zen is arranging the lake house location, you can just contact his coworker, and I’ll phone the cemetery and ask Paula to handle lining up someone on campus,” I said, noting our action items. “Plus, you’ll be sending the telepathic messages tonight.”

“If you don’t sense that the message got through tonight, keep trying tomorrow,” Zen added. As we were leaving, Zen left a package on Mrs. Farsby’s kitchen table. “I’m sure you’ve been too busy to worry about food, so I brought you some almond anchovy paste donuts. They’re lovely dipped in milk or coffee.” She nodded and thanked him.

Waiting is the Hardest Part

The next day, Zen phoned from New Hampshire. “Mrs. Farsby was right, the whole neighborhood is deserted. But I’ve got it covered now.”

“I’m glad you called, because she wants us to come by this evening. She may have found a nano robot and wants you to examine it,” I informed him.

“That should be fascinating. I haven’t seen many of these devices, but there was an entire workshop track last ConCon about detecting and defeating rogue nano robots!” Zen said. I could hear him bouncing in anticipation.

Another call was coming in, so I told Zen I’d meet him later and switched lines. “Paula here. Got a tip for you, but I don’t know if it means anything,” she said.

“Sure, what did you turn up?” I asked.

“The woman who was checking on the chess club lounge told me that an older nerdy looking guy has been there a few times in the last couple days. She didn’t have a good description but when I sent her a

picture of Harvey, she said it might have been him,” Paula reported. “She didn’t want to get involved, but maybe you can arrange for someone to get to Chicago and see it’s really Harvey.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely worth checking out,” I said. “We’ll get right on it.”

I called Zen back. I could hear his tarpot beetle duck horn quacking in the background. “Zen, someone at the University of Chicago saw a guy hanging around the chess club who might have been Mr. Farsby. What should we do?” I asked.

“Chicago! That’s a lucky break. Some of the crowd I used to work with are still in the area. I’m sure one of them would be willing to help welcome Mr. Farsby back to Earth, if the mysterious stranger is indeed our missing traveler,” Zen replied. “I’ll make some phone calls.”

I spent the rest of the afternoon drafting monthly reports and project plans while wondering about nano robots. Could Mrs. Farsby really have found one? Weren’t nano robots too small to be seen by the naked eye?

When we arrived at the Farsby residence that evening, Mrs. Farsby met us at the door and nearly dragged us down to the basement. “I found a deactivated nano robot in the lint filter after this last load of laundry!” she said. “But I’m not sure how that fits in with the possibility that Harvey’s long-lost father might be an alien.”

Zen stroked his moustache and nodded solemnly. “Let’s take a look.”

She pulled out a slightly linty crumpled up ball of aluminum foil and gave it to Zen. He carefully rolled it between his thumb and first

finger, and then tugged at it. Mrs. Farsby watched nervously as he slowly unrolled the ball.

“Ah yes,” Zen said slowly. “I cannot rule out this being a deactivated robot, but I must ask you, Mrs. Farsby. Does your husband like chocolate?”

“He does! How did you know? At the last bridge night, he ate more Hershey’s Kisses than anyone else,” she replied.

“There does seem to be a thin strip of paper enclosed in this object, and the paper does say Hershey’s. Now, it may be a cleverly disguised robot, but if you remember Mr. Farsby eating these candies, perhaps he left a wrapper in one of his pockets,” Zen suggested tactfully.

Mrs. Farsby shook her head. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice that it was a candy wrapper. I just haven’t been myself since my husband disappeared.”

“But tell us, how have your telepathy sessions been going? Have you felt him at all?” Zen inquired.

“I don’t know, sometimes I think he’s getting the messages, but we never really practiced mind-to-mind speaking,” she said. “But even if he doesn’t hear me, the positive thoughts are creating good energy.”

“I commend you on all your efforts, Mrs. Farsby. Your husband is lucky to have such support. We’ll let you know if we discover any more information,” Zen said.

“And please do call if you notice anything else,” I said. She let us out the basement and we walked back to the subway.

“How did you arrange for monitoring that lake house?” I asked him.

“I brought up my Sasquatch kit and set up the triggered camera near the front door. If anyone visits, footage will be automatically sent to tellmewhy.org and posted on the front page with explanatory notes about what we are looking for. If our readers notice that the detection footage matches our target, which is a photo of Mr. Farsby, they will immediately contact me,” he explained.

“So you normally have your readers help filter out false detections when you’re staking out a spot in the woods looking for unusual creatures? That’s a great way to harness the power of the Internet,” I said. “And the Chicago chess club intervention?”

“I’ve got two colleagues taking turns lurking around that lounge. If our mystery man is indeed Mr. Farsby, they will ascertain his level of memory loss and help him return home. We’ll have to wait and see,” Zen said.

I laughed. “Now Paula’s source is going to be confused because there will be multiple strange people hanging around the chess club.”

“I have instructed them to engage in an occasional game of chess with the members so as to not appear too conspicuous,” Zen replied. “Now we’ll just have to wait and see.” It was a long three days until one of his readers reported a strange coincidence.

Another Day, Another Deer

Zen had gotten email from an alert reader.

Dear Zen,

I saw that your Sasquatch cam had another video of a deer. But when I went to mark it as a false alarm, I noticed that the instructions weren't about any of your standard cryptozoology suspects and that you were looking for a man named Harvey Farsby. I don't know if this is related but someone in my building has been getting a lot of strange crank call messages from someone named Harvey. Thought I'd pass along their phone number in case you wanted to interview them.

Bigglesfoot Smith

"Well, Harvey's not nearly as unusual a name as Bigglesfoot," I said. "But maybe it's a connection."

"My dear, this is exactly the break we've been waiting for!" Zen shouted, clapping his hands and jumping up and down. "This person's phone number is just one digit apart from the Farsby phone number. We

must collect Mrs. Farsby and immediately pay a visit to Bigglesfoot's neighbor."

Zen dialed the stranger's phone number. "Ah, an answering machine," he said. "Hello, my name is Zen and I'm one of Bigglesfoot's friends. I need to speak to you about..." He put his hand over the phone and whispered "They've picked up."

He continued the conversation and I listened to his half as we headed quickly to the Farsby residence. "Hello, I'm one of Bigglesfoot's friends." Pause. "Yes, Bigglesfoot Smith. Goodness, you've got a different Bigglesfoot in that same apartment building? How unusual." Pause. "I believe I know what is going on with your crank phone calls." Long pause. "Yes, I know who Harvey is." Pause. "It's a bit lengthy to explain just now, but this is really very important. Could I drop by and chat with you right away?" Pause. "I'm going to bring Harvey's wife and I'm sure the calls will cease after we've straightened things out." Pause. "Thank you very much, Janice, we'll be there in a few minutes."

Zen bounded the rest of the way and then rang the doorbell twice. "Mrs. Farsby, you must come at once. We have located someone who may have heard from your husband," he said urgently.

She fell back against the doorway and then recovered. "Let's hurry," she said. We all hustled down the block to a brick apartment complex and rang the buzzer for Janice.

"We're here about Harvey," Zen announced. We trooped up the stairs to the top floor where Janice was waiting.

"You're really lucky I got home and picked up the phone when you were calling. Work has been so crazy that I've been at the hospital almost

all my waking hours,” she said. Janice was wearing blue scrubs and bright yellow rubber clogs. “Come on in, you said you could explain about the phone calls. But I have to leave for work again in about ten minutes.”

“Harvey’s not in the hospital, is he?” Mrs. Farsby asked anxiously.

Janice looked at Zen. “This is Mrs. Farsby, Harvey’s wife,” Zen said. “Mr. Farsby has been missing for nearly a week. He disappeared abruptly and hasn’t contacted his wife at all. But, I’m sure he thinks he has left a number of messages for his wife. You see, your phone number is almost identical to theirs.”

Mrs. Farsby clenched her hands and brought them up to her mouth. “Please, tell me what’s happened to Harvey!”

Janice nodded. “I’m terribly sorry, the first few messages I didn’t pay any attention to at all because they seemed like normal wrong numbers. Just ordinary things, like saying he was going to be late to dinner because he ran into his father. Then there were a bunch of messages about how his father was sick and they had to go someplace to see a specialist, and they started getting all demanding about why I wasn’t calling back.”

“Oh, my poor Harvey! He must have thought I was ignoring him on purpose,” Mrs. Farsby cried.

“But the thing is,” Janice said. “I would have phoned to tell him he had the wrong number, but he never left a number to call.”

“Well, he probably assumed he didn’t have to leave his cell phone number for his wife,” I said.

“But I’ve called his cell phone constantly,” Mrs. Farsby said. “It’s been going straight to voice mail.”

Zen interrupted. “I would imagine that in all the excitement, Mr. Farsby’s phone ran out of charge. He’s probably been using other phones to place the calls, but overlooked the problem that his wife would be unable to reach him with his own phone dead.”

Mrs. Farsby agreed. “Yes, Harvey does sometimes miss some obvious conclusions.” I looked at Zen, thinking of the Hershey’s Kiss wrapper. The Farsby household must be an unusual place, what with messages from aliens in the fortune cookies, flashlight Morse Code, and people expecting to receive calls on non-functional phones.

“Anyhow, it sounds like your husband and his father both came through the kidney transplant surgery really well, and they should be back home in a week or two. Although he really is upset about you not calling him,” Janice finished.

“Kidney transplant! He’s never even met his father!” Mrs. Farsby said in surprise. After a moment she turned to Zen and said “Oh, that card didn’t mean heart or liver! It meant kidney!” Janice just looked confused.

“Do you remember the name of the hospital or what city they were in?” I asked.

Janice shook her head. “I think he said City Hospital, but that’s no help. Almost every place in the country has a local hospital they call City. All I know is that they had to fly out there because the place had a good transplant team. Hey, look, I’m sorry, but I’ve really got to leave now.”

“I think the best thing to do, if you don’t mind Janice, is for Mrs. Farsby to stay in your apartment while you’re away. If we are in luck, Mr. Farsby will call again this evening,” Zen suggested. “If he doesn’t phone tonight, we’ll start contacting all the large transplant centers and try to locate him that way.”

“That’s fine. Just shut the door when you leave. I won’t be back for probably 18 hours,” she said. “Glad this all worked out. I was started to get freaked out about those messages.”

We kept Mrs. Farsby company while she fretted about her husband thinking she’d been deliberately ignoring his messages, worried about his surgery, and wondered what his father turned out to be like. Around midnight, the phone rang. Zen and I stepped into the hallway to give the Farsby’s some privacy.

“Donating a kidney to a father you’ve hardly met is pretty unusual,” I observed. “Probably more unusual than alien abductions.”

Zen shrugged. “He might really have met his father, or it might be an elaborate cover story. I wouldn’t put it past the aliens to have just staged the whole thing. The previous messages might have all been faked by aliens who then impersonated one of my readers to lead us to this address. Then, they could just implant memories into Mr. Farsby’s head and set him loose. It’s hard to say for certain.”

“But what about Millie?” I said.

“Well, this type of Tarot deck depends on one’s own intuition, perceptions, and knowledge. Since we did the reading while Mrs. Farsby focused on her husband, it was attuned to his point of view. If the aliens fooled him, they’d fool his cards,” Zen explained.

“So why didn’t we try to do a reading from the aliens’ point of view, to get the real story?” I asked.

“My dear, it’s a tricky enough proposition to understand what the cards are saying when they reflect a human awareness. Our understanding of alien psychology is completely lacking. It would take a greater expert than I to do a reading for extra-terrestrials,” Zen replied.

Mrs. Farsby came out into the hallway. She was beaming. “He’s doing just fine. I’m going to catch the first plane out to Dallas tomorrow, and I’ll stay with him until he’s recovered enough to come home.” She grasped Zen’s hands. “Thank you so much for finding him. It would have been terrible waiting for another week or two, not knowing. And who knows, maybe his anxiety about not reaching me would have hindered his recovery.”

Zen didn’t mention his speculations about alien memory implantation. He just wished her good luck. Then, out of his backpack, he produced another small bag of cookies and gave them to her before we parted way. The cookies were bright green with small black bits, and I didn’t even ask what kind they were.

As we left, I realized that we’d never heard back from the Chicago crew. “Zen, I guess that mystery chess club groupie probably wasn’t Mr. Farsby,” I reminded him. “I wonder who it turned out to be.”

“I’ll let my colleague know that they can call off the stake-out,” he said. “We may never know who that fellow is. They saw neither hide nor hair of him these last few days. But at least they both got some chess practice in.”

Barthel Doubted

Less than a week later, Zen asked me to meet him at the Harvard Peabody Museum. I found him lingering near the display case showing a cast of one of the Easter Island rongō rongō tablets. We were the only visitors in the Oceanic artifacts room.

“It’s a pity that of the few surviving tablets, even fewer are publicly viewable,” Zen said, shaking his head. “Even casts such as this are far and few between.”

“Why is that?” I asked. “Surely it wouldn’t be so difficult to make enough reproductions so that any interested museum could have a complete set? After all, there are fewer than 30 tablets, and none are very large. It’s not like the moai.”

Zen stared at me. “Why, I never thought of that. I couldn’t really say why more reproductions haven’t been made. There isn’t even a complete collection of good quality photographs. I shall have to add that to my list of questions,” he said. “But let me tell you what I found out this morning.”

“Did another Ask Zen mystery come up?” I asked.

Zen shook his head and tapped his fingers together. “It turned out that my Chicago colleagues enjoyed their time at the chess club so much that they continued attending even after Mr. Farsby was located. Yesterday, they met an interesting gentleman, possibly our original mystery man.” I had knelt down to inspect an Easter Island birdman petroglyph, but looked up at Zen and nodded for him to continue.

“Mr. Oliver Pukao is one of the leading scholars of our generation studying the rongo rongo writing system. He was in Chicago to investigate a rumor that the University had a little seen tablet stored in its archives,” Zen said. “He mentioned to my colleagues that he could use some help with a truly iconoclastic hypothesis that needs testing, and they knew I’d be interested. So they gave him my number.”

“A ground-breaking theory about rongo rongo?” I said, jumping up. “Are we going to help with his research?”

Zen laughed and leapt into the air, clicking his heels together. “Indeed, indeed! We’ll start today.” He pointed at the display case. “We will begin by practicing drawing copies of rongo rongo.” Zen took two drawing tablets and some charcoal pencils out of his backpack.

“Did you already talk with Mr. Pukao?” I asked, starting to sketch.

“I did. He didn’t have time to fully explain the details, but the gist of the matter is that he believes that Barthel purposely introduced certain errors into his drawings of the tablets. Now, nearly all rongo rongo scholars study Barthel’s drawings, as well as later published corrections to them, because access to the original artifacts or even copies such as this cast is so limited,” Zen said. Then he dropped his voice to a dramatic

whisper. "Oliver believes that in many cases, Barthel's deliberate obfuscations have been preserved!"

Taking my cue from Zen, I glanced around the empty room. "But why?" I whispered.

Zen frowned and shrugged. "We'll meet Oliver this weekend in New York, and he's promised to tell us more. Until then, you'll need to practice copying the script. I could use some more practice myself," he said kindly. "There are two rongo rongo objects in New York and two more in Washington D.C, all in good condition. Oliver has obtained permission to view the New York artifacts and we will have the opportunity to assist him!" His eyes glowed and he bounced in excitement. "You'll need to take some time off work," he added as an afterthought. "We'll be back on Wednesday."

"The actual artifacts!" I gasped. "I never thought I'd get a chance to see any of those. I can definitely take a few days off for that."

"We hope that examination of these objects in the continental United States will provide preliminary indication of whether his hypothesis is correct. The Honolulu objects are probably too small and worn to be useful to us. The other existing artifacts are in Chile, Europe, or Russia," Zen explained.

"That would be a longer trip," I observed.

"It's not so much the travel that would present a problem. However, it is notoriously difficult to obtain visiting researcher permits in those museums. One time, I waited for months in St. Petersburg. Each day, they said that perhaps tomorrow I could examine the tablets, but finally I had to leave because my visa was going to expire," Zen sighed.

Then he immediately brightened. “Let us leave that bridge until it must be crossed. For now, we will work on developing a good eye for the hieroglyphs.”

I had seen pictures and drawings of rongo rongo before, but never really studied the corpus. The little signs are all relatively simple line drawings, but it was harder to copy them than I would have guessed. I kept losing my place and skipping some signs. “How many unique signs are there?” I asked.

“It’s a bit difficult to say,” Zen replied. “Commonly, at least a hundred of different glyphs are identified, but researchers have not agreed on the tally. It is something of a judgment call whether there are hundreds of unique signs or whether some of them are merely different styles of the same sign. Additionally, one might debate whether each of the signs is a single unit, or whether they are combinations of smaller units.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Imagine if every English word, instead of being a group of linearly arranged letters, was a grouping of the letters. Each letter might appear inside another letter, and the letters could be reversed, stacked, shrunk, or linked together. Someone unfamiliar with our alphabet might imagine that each word was a glyph rather than recognizing that each word is made of letters,” Zen explained. “Then, imagine that you only had 26 scraps of writing, written by individuals who had their own unique handwriting flourishes.”

I copied a few more glyphs. “Yeah, I can see how that would be confusing.” After two hours, my eyes were starting to cross. The gallery

was dimly lit to preserve the artifacts and it was hard to stand at a good angle to closely examine the rongo rongo tablet. “Will we be able to photograph the artifacts, do you think?” I asked. “It would be easier to take a picture, enlarge it, and then make tracings.”

Zen agreed. “My guess is that photographs would not be permitted; otherwise there would be more published pictures of the tablets. They must be very delicate and probably require strict environmental control.”

“You know, for a stationary object, it’s possible to use a long time exposure to produce a photograph at very low light levels,” I said. “I don’t think there is any technological limitation here, just bureaucratic limitations.”

“That may very well be true,” Zen said. “Bureaucratic navigation turns out to be a large part of a researcher’s job. But don’t count on being able to photograph these objects. My guess is that all three of us will be drawing as fast as we can to make use of our limited access time.”

A Hat and Mr. Pukao

I eagerly anticipated our trip to New York for the rest of the week. Each day, I practiced drawing rongo rongo. I also took the liberty of asking around my technophilic friends to see if anyone had a low light photography set-up that could be disguised. The difficulty seemed to be that long exposures required the use of a tripod, so there would be no point in hiding this type of camera in a handheld object.

As I was packing up a few things on Friday morning, my phone rang. “I don’t know if this will work for you, but it might be worth a try,” said my favorite mad engineer, Walter. “The digital data will have to be processed through a new image sharpening algorithm I’m still coding up, but I think I’ve gotten around the tripod problem.”

“You’re the best!” I said. “I’ll drop by your lab before lunch and you can show me how to work it.”

Walter’s laboratory always looked like a gang of giant robots had beaten each other into small pieces. I picked my way around circuit boards and piles of steel plate to his bench in the back of the room. “Hallo in there!” I hollered.

I saw an arm waving from behind a table stacked high with partially disassembled shop vacuums. “Just a sec, I’ve got to...” Walter’s words were drowned out when all the shop vacs turned on. They stopped one by one. “Oh that didn’t work, I’ve got to...” The noise started up again. Then Walter emerged and gestured towards his desk.

“I’ve got your little project right over here,” he said, putting on a MIT baseball cap. I looked at his desk, but none of the bits and pieces of machinery looked like a camera. “No, here,” he said, pointing at his head.

“You put a camera in that hat?” I asked.

“It’s only sort of a camera,” he said. “If you don’t run the post-processor, the data won’t look anything like a picture.”

“I’m impressed! That hat looks totally normal,” I said.

“So here’s what you do,” Walter said, smiling. “It works best if you can lean your head back on a wall or something when you’re taking the exposure. Cuts down on some of the movement. Just push the button on the top of the hat. You’ll have two seconds to brace your head on a wall and look directly at the target. Count to five and you’re all done.”

“But how far should I be from the object? And how many tries do I get?” I asked.

“It’s only good for eight exposures,” he said. “You’re collecting about 1 gigabyte of data each time. And it works for something two to four feet away.”

“Thanks a million,” I said. “I think this will really help me out.”

Walter waved off my thanks. “Heck, I don’t actually know for sure that this will work. I’m still programming the post-processing script, so I haven’t actually gotten any recognizable images out of it.”

“That’s ok. If it doesn’t work, I’m no worse off. Unless I get arrested trying to take this on the plane,” I replied.

“Not a problem,” Walter said. “Take this and put them both in your bag.” He handed me a small plush owl and poked its stomach. The owl rolled its eyes, hooted, and played a lullaby. “If you put the hat right next to this owl, people will just attribute any wires they see in the x-ray to the animatronics.”

“You always think of everything,” I said with a grin.

Sure enough, Walter’s advice proved completely correct. The airport screener patted the owl and smiled at its robotic antics. I put the hat on after I got through the screening area. Once we were on the plane, I thought I’d better let Zen in on the secret.

“You know how I was saying there’s no preservation based reason to disallow photography, since it could be done at low light levels?” I asked quietly. Zen raised an eyebrow. “How would you feel about taking a picture surreptitiously?”

“That depends,” Zen said under his breath. “If we got caught, we’d get blacklisted with every museum in the country and probably most international museums as well.”

“What kind of security measures do they take? I assume someone from the museum stays in the room with you. But do they x-ray you when you go in?” I asked.

“Oh no, no, not that I’ve noticed. There’s a fair amount of trust between researchers. Once you’re on the approved list, they trust you to follow the rules,” Zen replied. He raised both eyebrows and glanced at my hat with a questioning look.

“So I shouldn’t try to sneak some data,” I said. Zen hesitated.

“Under normal circumstances, there’d be no question at all. But, let’s see what Oliver Pukao has to say. If there is indeed a conspiracy of obfuscation which has stood for decades and is impeding progress towards deciphering rongo rongo...well, we may have to strike a blow for truth,” Zen said.

I nodded. That seemed reasonable enough. I couldn’t imagine any reason that multiple researchers would have collaborated to hide critical information from the world, so I was getting more and more curious about what Mr. Pukao would tell us.

“I don’t know if my equipment will work or not,” I said, pointing to my hat. “But I’m ready to try, if we decide it’s justified.”

“I’d wondered when you became a baseball fan,” Zen said with a laugh. “But anyone who was unfamiliar with your normal mode of dress wouldn’t look twice.”

Hit by the Tip of the Bureaucracy Iceberg

“**T**his is a hotel?’ I asked when the taxi pulled up in front of a concrete multi-story building.

“No, no. Whenever I visit New York, I stay in one of the guest rooms that the Unification Church runs for scholars,” Zen replied, walking up to a side door and knocking.

“What’s your connection with the Moonies?” I asked in surprise.

Zen held his finger up to his lips. “Shhh, that’s not considered a polite way to refer to the congregation. You can call them Unificationists.” I nodded. “I helped them with a problem they were having in their fishery and sushi business some years back, and they’ve put me on list of respected non-believers.”

“All I can say is that when starting an organization, it’s probably a good idea to pick a good catchy nickname before you get stuck with one you don’t like,” I commented.

The door opened and a diminutive blonde woman in a sari squealed and pinched both of Zen’s cheeks. “It’s so good to see you again! You stayed away too long this time!” Then she turned to me and

patted my shoulder. “Wonderful! The professor finally has a new assistant. He works too hard!” She ushered us into the building and into a chapel hung with paintings, mostly of Reverend Moon.

Our ebullient guide walked quickly down the aisle, pressed her hands together in front of her heart, and bowed towards the front of the room. “I pray that the professor will have a peaceful visit with us and a good journey towards true enlightenment,” she said. Then she swept back to where we were waiting and took us to our rooms before disappearing with a wave and flurry of blown kisses.

The rooms were small and simple, but each had a picture of the Unificationist leader and a small pot of chrysanthemums. “You can leave your gear here. We’ll be meeting Oliver Pukao in Chinatown for lunch today but our appointment at the first museum isn’t until Monday,” Zen told me.

As we walked towards the subway, I started speculating about reasons for the rongo rongo conspiracy. “I guess there are a couple classic reasons that people would do a cover-up,” I said. “Either it’s a case where they want to keep some benefit or potential benefit only for themselves, like having a treasure map. Or, the truth would lead to public alarm or other adverse reaction, like aliens crash landing in the desert. Alternatively, the information might be detrimental to their personal interests, like Baby Einstein videos turning out to impede language learning.”

Zen added another possibility. “And we must always consider the null hypothesis,” he cautioned. “That simple carelessness, stupidity, or apathy has stood in the way of progress, with no coherent motivation.”

I stopped walking and looked at Zen. “Are you telling me you think there is no conspiracy?”

“Not at all, my dear. Oliver Pukao is a credible researcher, and I wouldn’t have bothered coming here if I didn’t think he might be onto something important.” Zen opened his eyes wide and gestured emphatically. “But as an atheist or agnostic, one must always remind the world that sometimes things do happen for absolutely no reason whatsoever. Otherwise, we’re just looking for God in disguise.”

I thought about this for a while. “You know, I think you’ve put your finger on it. That’s why the mainstream public laughs at most conspiracy theorists and paranormal investigators but won’t elect atheists to public office. Because unthinking belief seems silly, except when you’re talking about the beliefs that you’re already used to.”

The subway took us to Chinatown and Zen led the way to a little restaurant in a basement. It was decorated with red Christmas lights and had the standard Chinese zodiac paper placemats. As soon as Zen walked into the dining room, he laughed and nudged me. “Mr. Pukao’s got a hat, too,” he said.

And in fact, Mr. Pukao’s headgear was appropriately eponymous. He was wearing a brick red cylindrical hat with a protuberance on the top. The man turned around and waved. “You must be the folks from tellmewhy.org. Come on and sit down,” he said. “Please, call me Oliver.”

After quick introductions, we ordered fungus and fish tripe soup, sea cucumber with vegetables, marinated pigs’ ears, and stir-fry duck’s tongue. Apparently, Oliver’s culinary inclinations were compatible with Zen’s.

“First thing I’ve got to tell you is that the Arman collection has put us off until Tuesday,” he said with a sigh. “There’s only one person on their staff who takes people to see the artifacts, and they’ve got to stay home and wait for the cable guy.”

“But that will put both visits on Tuesday,” I said.

Oliver grimaced and shook his head. “The second thing I’ve got to tell you is that the Museum of Natural History isn’t going to be ready for us on Tuesday. There’s been some kind of mix-up with the current electronic catalogue, and no one’s sure which storage container has the rongo rongo tablet. Since all the artifacts are delicate, they don’t want to just open them all up and check. So they’re looking for the original card catalogue to see if that has more definitive information,” he said. “And the worst part is that no one thought they’d need the old catalogue anymore, so they’ve been using the cards as bookmarks and scrap paper for years. The remaining cards are all jumbled together in a big pile of boxes.”

“Did they indicate an estimated timeframe for searching through the old cards?” Zen asked.

“They’ve put their student intern on the job of looking through the cards. Of course, she only works two hours a day on weekdays. Except for Mondays when she doesn’t work at all,” Oliver said with a groan.

“What if we offer to help them with the card sorting?” I asked. “We could work on it pretty much all of tomorrow and Monday. With the three of us, that would be 48 person hours. Which would be the equivalent of six weeks worth of card sorting work by their intern,

assuming that this person wouldn't be doing other tasks during that time."

Oliver nodded. "You've got a point there. Don't know if they'd object, but since the cards are serving as note paper in their public reading room, there shouldn't be any reason that they'd be touchy about us helping to look through them. I'll call them right after lunch."

Our soup arrived and Oliver expertly filled the bowls. "This is one of my favorites," he said.

"Mundane obstacles aside, I'm eager to hear more about your research," Zen said. "I myself have not studied the original tablets. Like so many others, I have relied on Barthel's transliterations and drawings as a starting point." Zen sat up straight and crossed his arms. "Why, I would take deliberate obfuscation as a personal affront. Such dastardly actions on the part of a few would be responsible for wasting thousands of hours of colleagues' effort over the decades."

Oliver leaned towards Zen and looked at him intently. "Exactly! I'm hacked off too." Both men narrowed their eyes, nodded, and then sat back and slurped their soup. I had to suppress the urge to giggle at their synchronous behavior, which reminded me of a secret handshake ritual.

"How did you first notice the problem, Oliver?" I asked. "It's not easy to get hold of any original tablets to compare against."

"Well, my nieces and nephews know my work's related to Easter Island. Last Christmas, one of them sent me this Kleenex holder that's an imitation rongo rongo tablet. Specifically, it's an imitation of the Aruku-Kurenga tablet," he said.

"The tablets are named?" I asked.

“Barthel actually assigned each item a letter, but they’ve mostly all got names too. The Aruku-Kurenga is letter B. I guess it’s more or less the right shape for a Kleenex holder,” Oliver explained. I nodded. “So one day I was looking at Barthel’s drawings of the Aruku-Kurenga, and realized that that my plastic Kleenex holder had a whole extra line on one side, plus it was missing bunch of glyphs from the other lines.”

“But it’s just a novelty item, isn’t it?” I asked. “Not necessarily an accurate copy? I mean, I’m a little surprised it’s actually modeled after a real artifact instead of being completely made-up.”

Oliver held up a hand. “Ah, of course. That’s what I assumed too. I figured that whoever came up with the design had seen a picture of the tablet and then just thrown in some of their own glyphs for fun. So I didn’t think much about it until I was having dinner with the family and someone asked where Betsy had gotten the gift.”

Zen peppered his pigs’ ears and passed me the sea cucumber dish. “That does sound like an unusual item. The moai images are much more marketed than the rongo rongo. I don’t think I’ve ever come across any home décor items with Easter Island hieroglyphs. Even that series of petroglyph refrigerator magnets was discontinued,” he commented.

“I was amazed to learn that Betsy had ordered the Kleenex holder from an organization that markets handicraft made by poor women in slums or rural areas. You see, it doesn’t serve Chile or Easter Island. It’s primarily focused on Eastern Europe and Russia,” Oliver continued. “I’d expect nesting wooden dolls, hand knotted rosaries, things like that.”

“Indeed. Kleenex holders seem like such an American thing,” Zen agreed.

“And rongo rongo isn’t that popular in Russia, is it?” I asked.

Oliver put both hands on the table and pushed his chair back. “Right! I was so surprised that I looked up that crafts organization and asked if I could get in touch with the woman who’d made my Kleenex holder. They don’t let you contact their crafters, but after I called them every day for a couple weeks, they did agree to pass my name along,” he said.

“But how very odd! The Aruku-Kurenga is in Rome, not St. Petersburg,” Zen said. “And surely women in Rome make Catholic handicraft, or faux Roman items, not Rapa Nui reproductions?”

Oliver twirled his chopsticks. “So her name’s Amilda, and she’s Romani rather than Roman. When she was younger, she was married to a fellow who was a janitor at a church museum archive in Rome. Well, you can almost guess the rest---she helped out with his work in the evenings, and the Aruku-Kurenga tablet is one of the many items in basement storage.”

Zen and Oliver looked at each other and sighed. “They don’t let heathens into their collections,” Zen said. “Several of us researchers almost drew straws one year to see who’d have to convert to Catholicism in order to apply for a visiting scholar’s permit. But we never got around to it.”

“Amilda said that many evenings, she waited for her husband to finish cleaning the upstairs of the building. She would sit with her embroidery and copy the stained glass designs, but eventually she got

tired of them and started on the ancient artifacts collection. She never even knew that the wooden tablet was from Easter Island. But, she liked the look of it, and embroidered several copies of the hieroglyphs over the years,” Oliver said.

“Where is she now?” I asked.

“Her husband died quite some time ago and she’s gone back to her Gypsy clan in Poland. Watches a fair bit of American TV these days. When she started doing work for the crafts organization, she decided to do Kleenex holders because no one else was doing anything like that. All the designs are based on the embroideries she did at the church,” he said.

“But were they even accurate to start out with?” I asked. “It’s not like she had a picture or something.”

Oliver put down his chopsticks and looked at me intently. “Pictures can be faked too!” he said. “If Amilda’s right, the pictures that have been published of the Aruku-Kurenga tablets were altered! Her copies have noticeable blank spaces between some of the glyphs. While an amateur might not have noticed if they accidentally copied a particular glyph wrong, surely she would have noticed her error if the real tablet had no blank spaces at all.”

“The big question is why,” Zen said. “Why would Barthel and others hide some parts of the tablets from the rest of the world?”

“Let’s go back to my hotel room,” Oliver suggested. “Looks like there are people waiting for a table.”

Whatever It Takes to Get Ahead

Oliver's room had stacks of paper and books on every surface except the bed, even though he'd arrived in town only a day ago. He gestured at the bed and sat cross-legged on the floor. "You must understand that even implying any sort of academic dishonesty in association with Thomas Barthel is anathema to the rongo rongo community. His work is a foundation for the rest of us, and just suggesting that he might have purposefully hidden something is like, I don't know, saying the Jesus cheated at poker," he said.

"Of course not at poker," Zen interjected. "But some of the Dead Sea Scrolls do suggest that..."

Oliver cut him off. "Yes, of course. Anyhow, since I couldn't check the accuracy of Amilda's embroidery against the rongo rongo collection in Rome, I decided that it would be reasonable to simply check Barthel's drawings and the published photograph of one side of the Stephen-Chavet fragment against the actual artifact. And although I can't locate any published photographs or the drawings for the hieroglyphs on the Tangata Manu, if we make a good copy, I can at least compare that against the transliteration."

“That sounds like a great way to at least check for significant omissions or alterations for these two pieces of writing,” I said. “But tell us more about your suspicions.”

Oliver twitched a little. “Please don’t tell anyone else. I don’t want to get shunned by the community if I’m just wrong about this,” he said.

“Steel your resolve, my good fellow,” Zen said encouragingly. “You called us in because you needed some help doing the artifact examinations. Let us also help you refine your theories. We’ll keep all these conversations completely confidential.”

After swallowing a few times, Oliver continued. “I believe that there must be a number of missing lines in more than one of the tablets. All the rongo rongo writing may well have had blank spaces to mark sentence breaks, if Amilda’s copy is right. Omitting lines and filling in fake hieroglyphs into blank spaces are not the sort of mistakes anyone could make accidentally, especially not a trained epigrapher. So, if it happened, Barthel must have done it deliberately. And, no serious scholar who examined a real artifact could possibly have missed noticing blank spaces. Thus, a number of other early researchers must also be in on the plot.”

Zen nodded. “Yes, those conclusions seem reasonable,” he said. “Now, when we spoke on the phone, you implied that you had a theory about what was being hidden and why.”

Oliver leaned against the wall and looked uncomfortable. “The public’s fascination with Easter Island is both a plus and a minus for us researchers. On one hand, people care a lot about the moai and rongo

rongo, much more than they care about less iconic civilizations. But, serious scholars run the risk of getting lumped in with New Agers looking for Atlantis or people who believe in UFOs,” he began. I nodded, pointedly avoiding looking at Zen. “I think Barthel and the others were trying to preserve the mystique of Easter Island by making it impossible to decipher the rongo rongo.”

“But surely at least one researcher would have opted for the glory of being the one to solve the mystery rather than colluding to maintain the mystique?” Zen asked.

“Maybe some researchers discovered the inaccuracies in the Barthel transliterations and kept that information to themselves so that they could have an advantage in trying to decipher the meanings,” I suggested. “Maybe even once they saw the real artifacts, they still got stuck decoding the rongo rongo but didn’t want to help anyone else get ahead, so none of them have publicized the mistakes.”

“I’m afraid sometimes epigraphers can be a rather competitive and cut-throat bunch,” Zen said. “I supposed even Barthel might have been deliberately holding back information so that he could simultaneously become famous for publishing drawings of the rongo rongo tablets and yet maintain an unfair advantage over researchers who did not have access to the artifacts.”

Oliver sighed. “So you can see why I’m a bit nervous about pointing the finger at Barthel. Not only would I be insulting the father of rongo rongo study, I’d be accusing a bevy of later researchers who haven’t publicized the truth about the tablets.”

Zen hopped off the bed and stood on his head, leaning up against the same wall that Oliver had his back against. “You are wise to be cautious in this matter. But take heart, if what we learn in New York confirms that the published drawings, photographs, and transliterations have omissions and bogus insertions, it will not be necessary to publicly denounce Barthel. Why, you can release a press statement where you praise his work as groundbreaking for his time and avoid any implication that the mistakes were deliberate obfuscations,” Zen said reassuringly.

“But you two wanted to know all about my theories of why Barthel would lie to the world,” Oliver said. “How can I possibly avoid that question?”

Zen tumbled over, narrowly missing kicking Oliver in the head. “Ah, but we were curious because your hypothesis is still conjectural, and we must evaluate whether the proposed motive for the crime makes enough sense to justify performing an investigation. Additionally, we’re rather nosy. I think you will find that if you demonstrate that there are mistakes in the published literature, others will not ask you quite so many questions about why those mistakes might have been made,” Zen answered.

“You could always just say that you came to look the artifacts due to deep personal and professional interest, noticed the mistake, and have no idea why no one else noticed it before,” I said. “But for now, maybe we should concentrate on finding out whether these two artifacts fit the pattern of missing lines and inserted glyphs. Worry about what you’ll say to the press after we confirm that there’s something to say.”

Oliver smiled weakly. “You’re right, I’m just pre-worrying. I need to stop doing that,” he said.

“By the way,” said Zen. “Did you find a previously unknown sample of rongo rongo in Chicago?”

Oliver shook his head. “No, I didn’t. But I really think there are more of them out there, possibly hidden on Easter Island itself, buried away in private curio collections, or even mislabeled and misplaced in museums.”

“I, too, believe that there must be more rongo rongo. It is particularly probable that there are undiscovered examples on the island,” Zen agreed.

Oliver jumped up. “I almost forgot to call the museum and see if they’ll accept our help for sorting out the old card catalogue,” he said. He quickly dialed and managed to get transferred to the right department. After waiting on hold for about ten minutes, he spoke to the person in charge of the reading room who didn’t know anything about the little problem with the mis-archived storage containers, but said we were free to come look through the old cards if we wanted.

“You know, there’s an even chance that if we show up tomorrow, the person who just agreed to let us help arrange the cards won’t be around, and we’ll just have to convince someone else,” Oliver remarked.

“Nothing to lose,” I said, shrugging. “See you tomorrow.”

Cards and Cards

When Zen and I returned to the Moonie guest house, the woman who had let us in the first time had been replaced by a man who looked a lot like Santa Claus. “Welcome back, our friends,” he said. “There will be a communal meal and devotional meditation starting at six o’clock in the large meeting room. You are warmly invited to attend, but of course it is not required.”

Zen smiled and bowed slightly. “Thank you for your kind offer, but we plan to spend this evening in private study.” The man nodded and left us at our rooms.

“I think after that much lunch, I’m not even going to need dinner,” I said. Zen handed me a small box tied with twine.

“Just in case you get peckish,” he said. “I usually bring something along for dinner when I stay here, since the Unificationists don’t like to be disturbed by guests returning during the evening devotional meeting. It’s just a few salami raisin pies I baked yesterday. That reminds me, we’ll have to remember to pick up a little something for dinner tomorrow before we return.” I took the box and thanked him.

“You’ll hear the bells around seven tomorrow morning. Let’s plan to meet at eight. Oh, and don’t forget to wear your slippers when you walk to the shared bathrooms down the hallway. They’re a little uncomfortable with bare feet or shoes in the bathroom,” Zen advised.

Sure enough, sometime after nine in the evening, I was tired from practicing writing rongo rongo and Zen’s salami raisin snack pies were strangely tasty. It made me wonder whether I was absorbing Zen’s culinary tastes as I became more and more inured to the improbabilities of space aliens, nano robots, and large scale conspiracy theories. I turned in early and dreamed about space aliens that looked like rongo rongo hieroglyphs.

The next day, we met Oliver at the museum as soon as it opened. He led us straight to the reading room where we saw several small stacks of old catalogue cards left on the tables along with tiny golf pencils.

Oliver approached the sole staff person attending the room who was noisily cracking her chewing gum. He smiled winningly. “Hello, I’m Mr. Pukao. I’m a visiting researcher, and my sponsor, Dr. Legerman, mentioned that it might be necessary to look through the remains of the former card catalogue in order to locate some information. Would you mind if we got started on that job today?”

She shrugged. “Okay, as long as you don’t leave things in a mess or disturb anyone else using the room. Some of the cards are out on the tables. The rest are in those boxes under the back table. Knock yourself out,” she said.

“Oliver, what sort of thing are we looking for on the cards?” I asked quietly.

“So, we might not be able to find the card that actually references the Tangata Manu,” he said. “But, possibly we can use the process of elimination to at least narrow down which storage containers might be the right one. So let’s collect any card that has to do with a climate controlled storage container. They might be marked ‘ccsc’ or ‘AR 212’, since archive room 212 is the only one that used to be climate controlled.”

We got to work. When we’d worked through all the cards stacked on the tables, we’d found a single ccsc card. Oliver pulled a box out from the back table and gave us each a large stack of cards. “Gotta love research,” he said, winking. He carefully pulled the rest of the cards out of the box and piled them on the table we were sharing.

Zen nodded. “If we put the piles that we’ve scanned already back into the box, it should be easier to keep track of which still need to be searched,” he said. “I don’t think it will take longer than half an hour per box.” Zen was right. After three hours, we’d gone through six boxes and had pulled out about 100 ccsc cards. No one else had even come into the reading room the entire morning. We took a break to get some lunch at the museum cafeteria.

“So how many of the cards do you think the public used for writing notes already?” I asked.

Oliver considered. “They switched away from the card catalogue system about three years ago,” he said. “But you know, there’s not really that much traffic through the reading room. I wouldn’t be surprised if the majority of the old cards are still in those boxes.”

Zen looked at his half-eaten cafeteria sandwich. “Tuna fish without peanut butter,” he complained.

Oliver rolled his eyes. “That’s just weird that they’ve left out the peanut butter. But maybe it’s because so many kids these days have peanut allergies,” he said.

“We’re meant to think that a lot more kids have peanut allergies,” Zen corrected. “But maybe the peanuts themselves have mutated and we’re no longer eating the same food.”

Oliver was the last to finish his sandwich. “Back to work,” he said, cheerfully. “I’m so glad you two could come out and help with this investigation.”

“Not at all, it’s really our pleasure,” Zen said. “You already did the pre-work of applying for a visiting researcher permit and have kindly allowed us to come along for the ride.”

We went through another eight boxes before the woman staffing the reading room asked us to wrap it up for the day. Oliver glanced under the table. “So that’s 14 down and only 20 to go,” he said.

“Maybe we’ll actually find the Tangata Manu card. Then we wouldn’t need to look for all the ccsc cards,” I said hopefully. Oliver and Zen both crossed their fingers and held them up over their heads.

Feeling Lucky?

After a good night's sleep, we were all ready to dig into the other boxes of cards on Monday. Arriving at the reading room, we found the same woman staffing the desk. I couldn't be sure if she was chewing the same piece of gum or not, but when she blew a bubble, I noted that it was the same purple color as yesterday's. Luckily for her, the reading room is free of rogue electrical fields, I thought.

As we finished the third box of the day, a woman with two pairs of glasses around her neck came into the reading room. She gave our party a brief glance, and then sat down with a huge coffee table book about butterflies and started taking notes. Oliver, who had been facing away from the new visitor, passed by her table on his way to get the next box. He quickly snatched the box and scurried back to our table looking shaken.

I looked inquiringly at Oliver. His eyes were wide and he hunched over the table to write a note. *That's Thomas Barthel's granddaughter!!!* I passed the note to Zen, who wrote a note back. *Would she recognize you?* Oliver nodded and shrugged at the same time, and then shook his head as if he wasn't really sure.

I wrote to Oliver. *You can't sneak out now. We might as well keep going.* Zen and I started looking through the new stacks of cards, and after a few minutes, Oliver also resumed. We'd just about gotten to the end of the box when Oliver hissed loudly and reached over to put his hands over ours. Zen and I looked up to see him smiling triumphantly. Oliver had found the card with the Tangata Manu information! We had a quiet mini-celebration with a bit of chair dancing and Zen put away the rest of the cards.

The woman did not look up as we got up. Zen led us towards the door, swinging around as far away from her table as the space would allow. As soon as we got out of the room, Oliver jumped up and down.

"This is great! I can call my museum host right now, and maybe we can get rescheduled for a visit as early as tomorrow afternoon, since we're going to the Arman collection in the morning," Oliver said. "Just give me a minute to duck into the foyer and make the call and I'll be right back."

Zen and I waited near the museum exit. When Oliver approached, he was practically dancing. "We're on for tomorrow at two o'clock! Let's go get hot dogs for lunch!" he sang. We walked down the street with Oliver occasionally breaking into a jig.

I was still wondering about the woman in the reading room. "I'm surprised you recognized Barthel's descendent," I said. "Is it because she's well known for her own work, or do you just know the families of all the big rongo rongo researchers?"

"Gerta Barthel is an amateur entomologist of some fame," Oliver said. "She had an article in National Geographic last year. One of my

nephews mailed me the article because her biographical note mentioned that her grandfather was one of the early pioneers in examining rongo rongo script.”

Zen glanced behind us, looking back at the museum. “You seemed rather apprehensive about her,” he remarked. “Any particular worry?”

“I assumed that since she mentioned her grandfather in a short bio, she must be at least somewhat interested in his work. Also, I was the keynote speaker last month at an epigrapher convention where Barthel’s achievements were honored. Now, I remember that Gerta was there to accept the award on his behalf, but I don’t know if she stuck around for the lecture, or if she’d recognize me,” Oliver explained.

“But why would it be a problem if she saw you here?” I asked. “I mean, you haven’t publicized any of your theories yet. She can’t know what you’re suspecting about her grandfather’s work.”

Oliver looked embarrassed. “You’re right. I was being silly. I guess I just feel so guilty about possibly sullyng the reputation of a hero that I overreacted,” he said.

We stopped at a hot-dog cart on the sidewalk. “What do you want on it?” the man asked Zen.

“Pickle relish, wasabi, and honey, please,” Zen answered. The man handed him a handful of condiment packets without further comment. Oliver and I went with just ketchup and mustard.

“Oliver,” Zen said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “A bit of friendly advice. Let’s all try to go into our research sessions on tomorrow with calm nerves, shall we? It really wouldn’t do to have gone to all the

trouble of arranging these visits and then to waste it all by fainting at the last minute. I know you are very upset about the possibility that scholars may have colluded to keep valuable information hidden from the public, but it won't help if your hand shakes too much to hold a pencil."

"Yes. Must remain calm," Oliver said, breathing deeply. "I appreciate your support, Zen. I might have panicked and hid under the table back in the reading room if the two of you weren't there."

"This is so exciting," I said. "We're glad to help. I just hope my eye for the hieroglyphs is good enough for what we're doing tomorrow. What should we do when we're viewing the artifacts? Do you want us all to make a copy independently or should we bring a copy of the published drawings with us and just check it against the original?"

"The first piece that we'll be looking at is a small fragment with only a few lines on each side. I think we'll have enough time with it that we should all make our own copies first. Then, we should each compare a copy of the published photos with the item, marking any differences," Oliver answered. "I know that sometimes the hieroglyphs are not very easy to make out, and I'm afraid if we all conferred over the piece, we'd plant suggestions into each others' heads."

Zen nodded. "That seems like a sound approach. If we have more time, we can compare our drawings and mark-ups afterwards and reconcile any differences. Now, do you know whether the display allows us to view both sides of the tablet?" he asked.

Oliver nodded. "I asked the collection staff, and they tell me that it is in a specially designed display case, though the windows of the case are usually shut to prevent any cumulative damage from light."

“And what about the Tangata Manu?” I asked. “That seems more complicated. Since it’s a statuette with some incised writing, it might be hard to get a good look at all the lines.”

“You’re right,” Oliver answered. “That one will be more challenging. I believe that some of the writing might not be visible from the viewing window of the container but that the other sides of the container have mirrors mounted. So, we will have to copy those segments of script from the mirror, and then reverse them later.”

“And since neither drawings nor pictures are published, we can’t compare those against the original. But, we can compare the transliterations,” Zen said.

“I haven’t memorized the codes well enough to do that reliably,” I said. “Especially not when half of it will be looking at mirror images. But I can at least verify whether the number of signs matches with the transliterations.”

Oliver smiled at us both. “So we have a plan. I’ll meet you at the Arman residence tomorrow at nine. I’ll bring the magnifying glasses.”

Zen and I walked back to the Moonie guest house. “What do you think about trying to take a picture?” I asked. “Do you think the rule breaking would be justified?”

“It’s a difficult decision,” Zen said. “I do want to respect the museums’ research guidelines. And we don’t have very strong evidence that there really has been any deliberate misconduct or conspiracy.” He sighed. “Yet, if we wait until we’ve seen for ourselves, we probably won’t be allowed another visit in order to capture a photograph. Let’s keep our

options open. Bring your gear, but don't use it unless we detect obvious mistakes in the published sources compared to the original artifacts.”

The First Fragment

The Arman collection was housed in a combination personal mansion and private museum. We were met at the door by a uniformed staff person who brought us into a small conference room for a pre-viewing briefing. Basically, the ground rules were absolutely no flash photography, a four hour maximum supervised visit with no individual coming more than once a year, and an agreement that their organization had to approve any articles, reports, or papers that referred to artifacts in their collection. They didn't mention it, but I knew that Oliver Pukao had already sent in a detailed application to establish his research qualifications. We agreed to the conditions and were led into a small room of Easter Island artifacts.

Near the center of the room was a two-sided display case with metal covers fastened over the windows. Our guide removed the covers and the three of us all sighed in unison at the sight of a genuine rongorongo tablet fragment.

"Why don't you two start on side A, and I'll start on side B," Oliver suggested. We got out our sketch pads and drew intently with no further discussion, occasionally using the magnifying glasses to focus in

on some nearly worn away detail. Zen and Oliver finished before I did, so they switched sides. By the time I was done with copying both sides, they had already finished marking up the photographs.

“Go ahead and mark up your copy of the pictures. We’ll get started comparing our drawings,” Oliver said quietly. The staff person who was supervising us had taken a seat in the corner of the room and was reading a romance novel, but Oliver clearly didn’t want to risk catching her attention. I tuned out Zen and Oliver murmuring together over the drawings to concentrate on comparing the picture to the tablet.

When I noticed the first significant difference, a distinct blank spot on side A of the artifact that corresponded to a glyph on the picture, I scrutinized the tablet further with Oliver’s magnifying glass. However hard I looked, no glyph appeared in that spot on the artifact. Side B looked fine to me at first, but once I got to the last line of the photograph, it was obvious that the tablet itself had several more partial glyphs that had been removed from the picture. I could barely restrain myself from asking the others whether they had noticed the same thing, but I didn’t want to deviate from Oliver’s investigation plan. This is sure blatant enough to justify taking a picture, I thought.

I leaned my head against a nearby pillar and pressed the button on the hat. After counting to five, I went around to the other side of the display case. There was no convenient pillar, so I just stood as still as I could and hoped for the best. I decided to save the other six exposures for the Tangata Manu, since the writing on different parts of that statuette would probably require standing at a bunch of different angles. Then I went over to where Zen and Oliver were still conferring in another corner of the room.

“How are you doing with our drawings?” I whispered. “Are there any differences we need to resolve? I’m done marking up the picture.”

“There were two instances where your copy differed from mine, but in both places Zen’s agreed with mine,” Oliver said. “Let’s go take a close look at those spots.”

We all studied the tablet and agreed that I’d missed a faint protuberance in one case and drawn three lines instead of two in another case. “Sorry,” I said, embarrassed.

Zen patted me on the shoulder. “Not to worry, my dear. When you’ve been studying these glyphs for a few more years, I’m sure your eye will improve. You’ve really done very well here.”

We huddled around the marked up pictures. We’d all circled the same missing blank spot and missing partial glyphs, but both Zen and Oliver had also flagged several other signs as being altered. Zen turned to me and gave me my copy of the picture again. “Look closely at the fourth glyph in the third row,” he instructed.

I stared at the tablet, holding the picture up next to the display case. “Now I see,” I said. “The hand is turning out instead of in.” I marked the picture.

Oliver nodded. “And what do you think about that last glyph on the first row?” he said.

“I don’t know how I missed that,” I said. “There’s an entire extra circle at the top left that isn’t shown on the picture.” I marked that difference.

The collection staff person got up and stretched. “Are you folks nearly finished? You’ve got another twenty minutes here,” she said.

I looked at Oliver. “We’re almost set,” he said. “Thank you for your help, we’ll wrap it up now.” Oliver collected all our drawings and mark ups.

Zen looked at us and smiled. “Let’s just enjoy a few moments with this tablet,” he said. “It’s amazing seeing the original at last.” I took a good look and daydreamed about rongo rongo. Who carved this piece of talking wood, I wondered. Were they recording the adventures of kings or tales of the earth’s creation? Or might it be something more personal, a love letter, or even a grocery list?

“Okay, time to close up,” the staff person announced. “Thanks for visiting. Let us know if you’ll be publishing anything that references the collection.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Oliver replied. “Amazing collection you’ve got here.”

“Oh yeah, I guess Mr. Arman was really into native African carvings and stuff,” she said. “I have to admit I think his collection is more interesting than his own art. I don’t so much get modern art.” She led us to the exit and let us out.

The Statuette Surprises

“Can you believe what we saw?” I asked, once we were safely outside the building. “This fragment has much less writing than the pieces in Rome, but the differences are the same type that you noticed with your Kleenex holder.”

Oliver looked stunned. “I just feel sick. What was Barthel thinking, and why has everyone else been keeping this a secret so long?” he asked.

“Momentous discoveries call for a solid meal, but we don’t have enough time for a leisurely lunch,” Zen answered. “We do need to keep up our strength for the next visit and clear our minds of any preconceptions. It’s important that we don’t allow what we just saw to influence our judgment when we look at the next piece. How about another hot dog?” I agreed, and we steered Oliver along with us.

“Hey, at least you didn’t run into another Barthel descendant at the collection,” I joked. Oliver just looked at his feet and mumbled about butterflies.

We all got our hot dogs and headed towards the Natural History Museum. Suddenly, Oliver hissed and dodged into an alley. Zen didn't seem to notice his disappearance.

"Hey, wait up a minute," I said. "I've got something in my shoe." Zen stopped and then looked around, puzzled. I gestured towards the alley. We waited a few minutes while I fiddled with my shoe. Oliver peered out at us.

"Is she gone?" he whispered. I looked around and didn't recognize anyone.

"I think so," I answered. "No one else stopped."

"It was Gerta Barthel again," Oliver insisted. "I think she was right in front of us." Guess I shouldn't have joked about it, I thought.

"Perhaps she is visiting the reading room again," Zen said. "It's not likely that she'd also be visiting the climate controlled storage room."

Oliver took a breath and nodded. "You're right, of course. I know they only make one appointment each day to show people into the archive rooms. And she probably wouldn't even recognize me. It's just that the guilt is making me crazy."

"Try to concentrate on the remarkable privilege we are about to enjoy," Zen said. "The Tangata Manu!" Zen grinned broadly. Oliver did his best to smile back.

We went in to the museum and met up with our guide for the afternoon. He looked to be no older than twenty and seemed bored. "So you're here to see something in the special archive room? You know the rules, right? No video, no cameras, no food or drink, yadda yadda."

Zen and Oliver nodded. I smiled non-committally and tried to look innocent. Our guide didn't wait for a response but grabbed a big ring of keys and led us into the basement. We went through a hallway lined with cabinets, bins, and haphazardly stacked cardboard boxes. "I'm supposed to stay with you the entire three hours," said our guide. "But don't tell anyone if I step out for a smoke, you know? Just don't steal anything while I'm gone. Ha ha."

"No problem," I said. "I'll keep these two in line while you're gone."

The teenager unlocked the door to the climate controlled special storage room and we stepped inside. He turned on the lights and pulled out a large drawer. "You were looking for container 20M-3, weren't you?" he said.

"Actually, it's 201M-3," replied Oliver.

"Got it," said the guide. "Just a minute." He walked over to a big crank in the floor and moved the rows of drawers until there was a pathway to the next to last row. He got out a large box, opened the lid, and removed a display case with a window on the top and front side. Placing the display case onto the single table in the room, he looked curiously at the artifact. "Looks like this guy's been starving to death in there," he said. Then he pulled one of chair into a corner and took an iPod out of his pocket.

We three looked at each other and slowly approached the table. The statuette was mounted on its back facing upwards. The bottom and three sides of the display case were mirrored. It was a dark brown figure of a skinny man with a bird's head and large beak.

“Don’t worry about drawing the entire statuette,” Oliver said under his breath. “Just copy the inscriptions and add a note about their locations on the figure.”

I started copying the inscription from the beak, abdomen, rib cage and thigh. These were the areas directly visible through the top of the display case. We all stood up, leaning over the table to draw. Once or twice Zen and I nearly poked each other in the eye with our pencils, but no damage was done. After about an hour, I’d finished with the front surfaces and took a quick stretch break before starting in on the back surfaces.

Zen and Oliver had been faster than me again and were a good way into their copies of the mirrored inscriptions when I returned to the table. We had to peer into the box from near the sides in order to see the inscriptions on the back of the head, neck, and back. I tried to be extra careful since I’d made some mistakes in my drawing this morning. Since only Zen and Oliver were going to be checking the numerically coded transliterations against the statuette, I could really take my time with the drawing. Although there were no pictures to compare against for missing glyphs, I did notice that there were no blank spaces in these few lines of inscription.

Our guide had stepped outside for the second time already, so I figured this would be a good time to steal some data. I sat down in a chair and braced my chin with both hands. I took two scans of the front surface, one from the head end and one from the feet end. Then I took another scan of each of the areas of inscription visible with the mirror. Oliver was so absorbed in his transliteration comparison that he didn’t seem to notice anything, but Zen looked at me and nodded.

By the time our guide returned, the three of us were comparing our freehand drawings. I was pleased that there were no discrepancies among the copies. Then Zen and Oliver compared their corrections to the transliterations. Zen had found two mistakes and Oliver had found those two plus one other. They quickly determined that Oliver's extra correction was accurate.

We still had another half hour left, so I made a few quick sketches of the statuette while Zen gazed dreamily at the artifact and Oliver just stared at it. "Time to get going," our guide said, without taking his earbuds out. As he was putting the display case back into the box, he banged it against the side of the table. I gasped and Zen jumped towards him.

"Hey, no harm no foul," he said. "Nothing came loose in the box. Well, come on back upstairs."

We looked through the doors of the reading room on our way out of the museum. I saw Gerta at the same table as she was yesterday, looking at several large books. "Looks like she's still in there," I said.

"I'm not sure what to think," Oliver said when we were back on the street. "Those were just minor mistakes, not extra inserted signs or omitted lines. Was that fragment just a fluke?"

"There's no reason to believe that every artifact's published rongo rongo would be similarly altered," Zen said. "But you know, there might be no reason for any empty space within these lines."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The spaces in the Kleenex box version of the Aruku-Kurenga are fairly frequent. If each sign is a word, the spaces come at a frequency

and distribution that suggests sentence breaks,” Zen explained. “The fragment we saw this morning is a piece from a larger tablet, so having a sentence break visible makes sense. However, each of the inscription locations on the birdman statuette may contain just one sentence, so there would be no need for spaces between sentences.”

I grabbed Zen’s arm in excitement. “And, if there was a line of text on the statuette which was not published, we probably wouldn’t have been able to see it. The mirrors were placed especially to let you see the known inscription locations. I mean, if there were some signs on the bottom of the feet or something, without a mirror in the right place, we wouldn’t have noticed.”

Oliver nodded. “There’s no way anyone would get permission to actually pick it up for a good look at all the sides,” he said. “You make a good point, Zen. Though at least one of those lines of inscription seems long enough that it might be two sentences.”

“So we’ve got one piece of evidence supporting the theory of deliberate obfuscation, and one piece of evidence that doesn’t support it, but with a reasonable explanation for why this object might be unusual,” I summarized.

“The two tablets in DC both have quite a bit more writing on them than these two artifacts,” Oliver said. “I think it makes sense to go there. Since both are in the Smithsonian archives, it should involve only one permitting process.”

“Yet, we barely had enough time to copy these smaller sets of scripts in the allotted time,” Zen objected. “This approach might not work for the Smithsonian tablets. Perhaps we should just do a quick scan

for blank spaces. Comparing against the published photos, we could easily identify the signs on the pictures which had been falsely inserted.”

“Or, we could try to get permission to do some low light photography,” I said.

“It couldn’t hurt to ask,” Oliver replied. “The Smithsonian takes a really long time to process applications, but I’ve heard that they are more open to new ways of examining artifacts. They did a bunch of high tech medical imaging on some of their mummies.”

“I’ll get you a short write up of some new low-light photography techniques that might work, to include in the application,” I said.

“I’ve got to go pack up, my flight’s in a few hours,” Oliver said. “It’s been great working with you.”

Zen and I shook his hand. “You have our assistance whenever it may be useful,” Zen told him. “Let us know how the application process proceeds.”

Tea with Gerta

After Oliver had gone off, Zen turned back towards the museum. “There is someone here we need to speak with,” he said cheerfully.

“Not that bored teenager?” I asked. “He didn’t seem very knowledgeable about the collection.”

“No, no. Come along,” Zen said. “We must speak to one of the few people who know Thomas Bartell as a person rather than as a famous name.” Zen walked quickly and I scurried along in his wake. This man should get into race walking, I thought.

We reached the museum just as Gerta was walking out. Zen stopped and bowed. “We haven’t been introduced, but I recognized you from the reading room yesterday,” he said. “Would you do us the honor of joining us for afternoon tea? There is quite a nice tea at a hotel around the corner.”

Gerta blinked and looked at Zen. “Do I know you from somewhere?” she asked.

Zen shook his head and smiled. "I'm afraid that your fame most certainly eclipses mine. If I am not mistaken, you are Gerta Barthel, granddaughter of Thomas Barthel?"

"That's right," she said, with a small smile. "I'll join you for tea if you tell me about yourselves."

"We're from the Boston area and just came to New York to visit some museums," I said.

"One of my little hobbies is the study of rongo rongo," Zen said brightly. "So of course your grandfather is something of a legend among researchers. When someone else pointed out who you were, I resolved to make your acquaintance, if you were amenable."

"It's so strange that so many people are in awe of Grandfather's work," Gerta said. "Growing up, it was just normal to have a grandfather who studied artifacts."

"Indeed," Zen said. "So it wasn't until you were older that you found out that he was so famous."

We reached a swank hotel, and Zen gestured for us to enter. There was a man playing a grand piano in the lobby and a large water fountain near the elevators. We went up to the restaurant and were quickly seated near a window.

Gerta continued. "Well, we did always know that his work was important." She laughed. "Actually, I remember a time when my little brother was fooling around with one of Grandfather's pieces of wood. None of us would ever forget how much trouble he got into over that!"

“I can imagine,” I said. “I did some coloring on my parents’ tax returns one year, and they weren’t so happy about that.”

Gerta smiled. “Grandfather always let us sit with him when he was working in his office, as long as we kept quiet. But when he caught my brother scratching little scribbles on one of his priceless artifacts he just about went through the roof!”

Zen and I looked at each other. “You don’t mean he actually damaged one of the rongo rongo tablets?” I asked.

“Yeah, now looking back, I’m just horrified that Grandfather wasn’t more careful about leaving something like that where a kid could pick it up. Especially because that particular tablet looked like a toy, some kind of bird figurine,” Greta said, shaking her head. “I think I’ll have the standard afternoon tea. I’ve worked up an appetite holed up in the reading room all day.”

“The linden tea is quite delicate here, if you like a slightly sweet tea. I may have the Lapsang Souchong,” Zen said calmly, as if Gerta hadn’t just casually mentioned a rongo rongo defacement.

“Did any of your family follow your Grandfather’s area of research? I think someone mentioned that your specialty is insects?” I asked.

“I mainly concentrate on butterflies,” she replied. “Ironically, my same brother who defaced the artifact did study archaeology in college, but he ended up becoming a lawyer. Most of our cousins went into the family restaurant business.”

“I’ve never seen a biography of your Grandfather,” Zen said. “Perhaps there was one written in German? I’d enjoy reading more about his life outside of the research.”

Gerta shook her head. “There were a few people who were interested in writing his biography, but no one really followed through. I suppose that while his work was important, he just didn’t have a particularly dramatic life story. Compared to the archaeologists who sailed the ocean in homemade rafts or lived among isolated tribes, a methodical scholar and family man probably didn’t seem exciting.”

A lavish tea was served, and Zen kept the conversation rolling along merrily. At the end, he urged Gerta to let us know if she would be visiting Boston, and we parted with a spate of good wishes. We hustled back to the Moonie guest house where Zen promised to come back and see everyone sometime soon and then escaped to the airport just in time to catch our plane back to Boston.

“It sounds like the Tangata Manu was probably the artifact that Barthel’s grandson scribbled on. But if his grandson altered just one tablet, why do you think Barthel would have obfuscated all the other records?” I asked. “And how did he manage to convince other researchers to keep the secret?”

“Possibly Barthel was so horrified by his grandson’s scribbles on the blank spots of the birdman statuette that he tried to hide the damage by altering the scribbles to look like hieroglyphs. It may have been done in the heat of the moment, perhaps to cover up his negligence in safeguarding the item,” Zen said. “Then once that artifact had no more blank spaces, Barthel might have been tempted to change his drawings

and photographs of the other rongo rongo tablets to match. It would have been obvious that something was amiss if only one tablet was missing spaces in the text.”

I shook my head. “But you said yourself that the inscription lines on the Tangata Manu were short enough that there might not be any sentence breaks,” I objected.

“That’s true, my dear. We cannot rule out the possibility that the incident with the first artifact inspired Barthel to alter the other records for some other reason than fear of discovery. He may have wanted to keep the true versions of the inscriptions to himself, to disadvantage other researchers.”

“And then the other researchers who saw the original object were also tempted by the possibility of getting ahead of their rivals who had to depend on the published records, so they kept the secret,” I said. “But why the deleted lines at the end?”

“I would surmise that Barthel wished to keep the total number of signs consistent between the publish records and the real objects. Thus, he may have omitted however many signs from the last line as there were filled blank spaces,” Zen explained.

“It’s ridiculous that a child’s momentary impulse may have set off a chain of events setting back rongo rongo research for decades,” I huffed.

“A child’s impulse, but then pride, jealousy, and unhealthy competitiveness among adults,” Zen said, shaking his head. “If Oliver secures permission to photograph the Smithsonian tablets and publishes their discrepancies compared to existing pictures, it should lead to some

serious scrutiny of every tablet in any museum. Perhaps it may even catalyze the creation of more copies of these important objects so that more people can see something close to an original with their own eyes.”

“At least Oliver should be relieved to find out that it wasn’t premeditated deception on the part of his hero,” I said. “Although people will surely realize that the previously published pictures must have all been doctored.”

“It’s time for the truth,” Zen said. “But we may be able to save Barthel’s reputation by telling the press some techno mumbo jumbo about how today’s newest generation of sensors was able to produce a much more accurate picture of the surface of the tablets than old fashioned cameras or freehand drawings. People always like to hear that technology is enabling us to better our ancestors.” Zen broke out into a short tap dance routine, ending with a bow to the imaginary audience.

He held up one hand. “Yet, we must not completely dismiss the possibility that Barthel actually succeeded in deciphering the rongo rongo. In that case, his fabrications may have been inspired by the accident with the Tangata Manu, but motivated by something deeper than professional competitiveness.”

“If he solved the code, probably someone else will solve it again, once the corrected versions of the inscriptions are made public,” I said.

Zen agreed. “You have begun your studies of these hieroglyphs at a very interesting time. Why, with these new developments, I shouldn’t be surprised if great progress is made in the next few years!” he said excitedly, waving both arms.

Bootleg Photographs and Pork

I had a ton of work to catch up on when we got back home, but a few days later I managed to drop off the photographic hat device with Walter.

“Good news!” he said, looking up from soldering a mess of little wires together. “I’ve made some rapid progress on the data processing algorithms.” He pulled a folder out from under a stack of bolts and braces. “Look at this one.”

“That just looks like a Xerox of a newspaper,” I said.

“But it’s not!” said Walter triumphantly. “That’s a print out of a low light image capture picture of a newspaper, after data processing. Here’s what it looked like before I ran the correction and focusing program.”

“Walter, you’re kidding. That’s not just a piece of light gray paper?” I said, examining the page. “Amazing!”

“I aim to please,” he said. “And, I’ve already gotten some feelers from big companies hoping to buy the rights to the technology. I patented these software algorithms years ago, but never got around to

building a prototype. Your little field trip was just the reminder I needed to get back into it.”

“I hope my pictures come out too,” I said. “I couldn’t find any appropriately located walls for some of the shots, so I might have jiggled the camera too much during the exposures.”

“I can’t promise anything, since the algorithms only work for a pretty narrow range of motion. But we’ll see,” Walter said. “Come back next week and I should have something for you.”

That night, Zen called to tell me he’d be out of touch for a few days or a week. “I completely forgot to take down that web cam I had installed to watch for Harvey Farsby’s appearance at their lake house,” he explained. “But today, one of my readers reported that a segment of video seemed to show a bipedal, heavily furred creature. The lighting wasn’t bright enough to positively identify it, but it could be a Sasquatch! I’m going to go there and look for tracks.”

“Have fun,” I said. Cold snowy weather, woodland monsters, what could be better?

Since things were quiet with Zen out of town, I sat down to submit a few more SF0 tasks for consideration. I came up with “Crack the code: decipher a previously unintelligible form of writing” and “For posterity: invent a mysterious form of writing and use it to leave a series of public inscriptions around a city.” I also submitted “Second order celebrity: introduce yourself to someone whose parent or grandparent is famous among a small subculture.

Indulging in a bit of web surfing, I looked through the breaking news section of tellmewhy.org to see if there were any conspiracy

theories brewing that I should know about. Under the “What were they thinking?” category there were several theories listed about the MIT Stata Center, Frank Gehry’s bizarre building that looked like a cross between an implementation of some Dr. Seuss illustrations and a projection from a Salvador Dali painting. Readers seemed to be split between three leading theories. Either Gehry had been paid off by some rival of the university to deliberately design something that would cost a lot and require constant repairs, or he had been influenced by secret documents about architecture of another world or age, or his work was directed by mind controlling nano robots with a sense of humor. Interesting, but nothing that needs to be investigated, I concluded.

Then my phone rang. “Hello, this is Vivian from BTR Labs. I really need to get in touch with Zen, and his answering machine listed you as an emergency contact.”

“Err, that’s okay, I guess. What can I do for you?” I asked. With the number of projects that Zen was involved with, this could be anything from pollination failure in the Midwest to stolen artifact from the Middle East.

“Are you familiar with his investigations into swine transmissible spongiform encephalopathy?” Vivian asked.

“Somewhat, yes. I was with him when he came across a pig behaving oddly a few weeks ago, and I know he had some samples collected for analysis,” I replied. “Are you calling with the results?”

“That’s right,” she said. “I’m sorry it took so long, but since our collaboration with Zen is part of a pro bono diagnostics program, the

analysis kept getting delayed by high priority commercial work. In any case, we're now certain that the animal in question had a prion disease."

"Well, that's bad news. Now what?" I asked. "Are you going to report this to the FDA or something?"

"Oh no, our lab isn't a mandated reporter. We'll send Zen the results and it's up to him to forward it to the appropriate authorities," Vivian said. "The last thing we want is to be in the middle of a public firestorm around pork safety."

"I can see that," I said. "But unofficially speaking, why didn't you just mail him the results? Do you normally call with results from the pro bono analysis?"

"Unofficially speaking, I'm completely upset about this myself," Vivian admitted. "That pig was unusual because it was being raised on a little farm, and so was almost three years old. Commercial pigs are almost always slaughtered well before they're even a year old, when TSE wouldn't be easily detectible. Who knows how common it really is?"

"I know what you mean. It hits close to home. I mean, I just had a ham sandwich yesterday. What do you think Zen should do with the results?" I asked.

Vivian considered a moment. "I guess I was hoping you'd tell me that he's going to do something to make sure that these results don't get swept under the rug. If the FDA was really serious about protecting people from prion diseases, they'd have been doing more of this kind of testing themselves."

I agreed. “Plus, they’d be regulating animal feed a lot more. Sick cows can still be processed into pig food these days. But the weird thing is, even knowing that, I haven’t stopped eating pork myself.”

“Do you think Zen could lead some kind of publicity stunt about the problem?” she asked.

I laughed. “I’m not going to try and predict what Zen could do, but I’ll talk to him about it when he gets back to town,” I promised. Then I went to the refrigerator and tossed out the rest of the ham.

Now What?

As usual, when I got to Walter's lab the next day, he was nowhere to be seen among the piles of electronics and hardware. "Hello, is there a genius in the house?" I called.

"Hello yourself," Walter replied. "I'm back here in the Oceanic art photo gallery." I headed towards his voice and found a corner of the room with the walls covered in enlarged photos of the rongo rongo tablets.

"Those look great!" I said. "It's clearer than real life." I looked at the series of pictures of the Tangata Manu. "Look here," I said, pointing to one glyph. "I'd bet that's the one old Barthel and his grandson faked. You can totally see the difference in depth of inscription and the lines are sharper, too."

Walter looked at me. "So that's what this was all about? You think the inscriptions have been altered?"

"Not exactly," I said. "Just this one. But, these results are enough to suggest that some of the published pictures and drawings of other tablets have been altered. We're trying to get the Smithsonian to issue a permit for taking some low-light photos of their tablets. Could we use

your equipment if they agree? It would maybe be good publicity for your invention.”

“Sure, I’ll put together another unit that isn’t hidden in a hat,” Walter said with a laugh. “Don’t want to publicize the fact that you snuck a few pictures before you got permission.”

“Yeah, these were just to convince ourselves that there’s really something going on, and that it’s worth going through negotiations with a museum to be allowed to take some new pictures that could be published,” I said. “I really appreciate your help. It’s going to make a big difference in the study of this writing system.”

Walter smiled and shrugged. “That sounds good to me. Even though I’m just in it for the fame and fortune and algorithmic challenge,” he said with a smile. “I’ll let you know when the non-spy version is ready.” He took the photos off the wall, put them in a folder, and handed it to me. “I won’t make any more prints, but I’ll save the data files in case you need them later.”

“Thanks. The Smithsonian pictures will be the ones we publish first, but maybe these can be released someday if their museums cooperate,” I said.

That evening, Zen called. “I’m afraid that was another false alarm. It wasn’t a Sasquatch at all. But I’ve left the web cam running and relocated it to a location deeper in the woods. So perhaps we’ll be in luck next time.”

“Mmm, yeah, better luck next time,” I said. “Zen, I talked to Vivian from BTR Labs the other day. Did you see her analysis report?”

“Indeed! Our fears are confirmed,” he said. “It’s a good thing I didn’t mess about with the entrails of that pig for a Boy Scout demonstration.”

“What ever happened to the carcass?” I asked. “Did we just leave it near the cabin?” I’d been distracted learning to snowshoe and hadn’t given the pig a second thought while we were hiking down to the parking lot.

“I had the veterinarians haul it out with their snowmobiles,” Zen replied. “They probably put it in with their other biowaste. I didn’t want to leave it out there and potentially transmit a disease to roving bears or chupacabras.”

“Yeah, that would be no good. Mad chupacabras,” I agreed. “What now? I think Vivian was hoping you’d be able to use the results to increase public pressure on the FDA or something.”

“First, I’m going to call a meeting of the tellmewhy.org committee,” Zen replied. “A few of my colleagues have been much more involved in the food safety issues than I am, so they’ll be in a better position to recommend a course of action. In addition to notifying the FDA, we may need to take more direct steps.”

“So you’re the head rongo rongo guy,” I said. “But pigs are someone else’s specialty?”

“We find that it makes sense to specialize,” Zen said. “These days, it’s hard for one person to keep on top of all the necessary fields in order to properly investigate a range of paranormal phenomena and conspiracies. Speaking of rongo rongo, I’ve had a letter from Oliver Pukao. He’s had some very encouraging discussions with the

Smithsonian and is hopeful that he'll be allowed to do a series of new photographs of their tablets."

"This new kind of low-light camera is really good," I said. "The pictures of the Tangata Manu inscriptions show some detail that I couldn't make out when we were looking at it. You can see that Barthel's added hieroglyph is visibly different from the rest of the signs."

"Marvelous, you'll have to show me the pictures next time you come by. I'll let Oliver know that we can send him the necessary equipment if he obtains permission for a photo session in DC," Zen said.

A Plan for Action

I wasn't sure how long it would take the committee to agree on a plan for handling the mad pig disease outbreak, but apparently the group as a whole was just as decisive as Zen. He asked me to come by his place the next evening and to bring the rongo rongo photos.

"These really are wonderful," he said, looking at the enlargements. "The level of detail is astonishing. We spent several hours examining these objects in person, but these pictures reveal even more than I could see with my own eyes."

"I feel a bit bad about sneaking the data, but at least we know that the technology works," I said.

"I feel certain that once the Smithsonian results are publicized, many if not all the institutions holding rongo rongo tablets will permit re-examination of the artifacts," Zen said. "Although we must assume that some number of rongo rongo scholars have been involved in the continuing obfuscation, it is likely that the museum staff entrusted with the preservation and caretaking of these items never realized that their policies helped perpetuate an archaeological hoax."

“That last staff member from the Natural History museum might have welcomed a hoax as a break from the monotony of his job,” I commented.

“Oh no,” said Zen. “Teenagers these days could never keep a secret like that. It would be all over the blogosphere within days.”

“You’re probably right,” I said. “So how did your committee meeting go? Did everyone come out here in person?”

“Our travel budget has to be reserved for actual investigations,” Zen answered. “Our meetings, other than the annual ConCon, are all held virtually through computer teleconferencing. In any event, we decided to simultaneously notify the FDA, send press releases to consumer advocacy groups who have been monitoring this situation, and stage a small publicity event.”

“What sort of publicity event did they have in mind?” I asked.

“There was some disagreement whether an event involving large numbers of actual pigs would be best, or whether we should instead use human volunteers wearing pig costumes,” Zen said. “On one hand, swine can be hard to control in large groups, and they aren’t particularly photogenic. On the other hand, it’s difficult to come up with a really good pig costume and enough volunteers to make a scene.”

“I can see the dilemma,” I said, thinking hard about pig costumes. “But maybe you wouldn’t need a full body costume, just something for the nose, ears, and tail?”

Zen nodded. “Yes, I think that as long as the event included enough posters and handouts with pig related paraphernalia, the costumes could be minimal. Although another difficulty is the cognitive

dissonance between images of cute pink pigs with curly tails and the realities of commercial pork farming or the actual eating of animals.”

“You don’t think maybe people could dress up like prions instead of pigs?” I asked.

“I can’t imagine it,” Zen said, shaking his head. “It’s really hard to dress up like a protein.”

“Maybe not prions. But what about pork foods, like hot dogs or bacon?” I persisted. “Keep the prions out of my pork?”

“That has potential,” he said with a laugh. “Humorous, yet the message is short and to the point. Now if we could come up with some simple instructions for good bacon costumes and a supply of people willing to dress up as pork products...”

“You’re the one who can make snowshoes out of twine and pine branches,” I reminded him. “How about if you figure out the costume angle and I’ll start recruiting for volunteers? Where, when, and how many people would we need?”

Zen tapped his fingers together. “The part of the FDA that handles mad cow disease is located in Maryland. The National Pork Council is in DC. Those are two possible locations.” He twirled his moustache and considered the other questions. “My committee will be sending an official communication to the FDA tomorrow, and alerting several consumer groups in the next few days. If we held the event in a few weeks, that would give the consumer groups enough time to do some publicity of their own.”

I nodded. “Then sometime next month. That would give us enough time to handle the costume making and volunteer recruitment.” I

couldn't quite believe what I was hearing come out of my own mouth. Did I just agree to organize a lot of people to dress up as bacon? And to help make the costumes?

"Perhaps we should stick to a single iconic food, such as the hot dog. Sausage patties or hams might be more difficult to recognize," Zen suggested. "It would also be easier to make the costumes if there was only one variety."

"Do you think that about fifty people dressed as pork, along with approximately the same number of normally clothed supporters would be enough to cause a scene?" I asked.

"With the right sort of media coverage, that should be an adequate spectacle," Zen replied. "I'll start working on the costume design immediately. Let's aim for the last Friday of the month at the National Pork Council." He drew himself up resolutely and waved both arms over his head. "It's a matter of public safety! Keep prions out of our pork!"

As soon as I got home, I started contacting everyone I knew in the DC area to see whether they'd be willing to participate in the demonstration. One of my friends suggested that I get in touch with Improv Everywhere, the group that has orchestrated events such as a hundred shirtless men shopping at Abercrombie & Fitch, or a red-headed person's protest of the Wendy's logo. Although both SF0 and Improv Everywhere normally steer clear of real demonstrations, preferring more ludicrous faux issues, I figured that regular participants in these groups might not be able to resist the chance to run around dressed as a hot dog.

I submitted an SF0 event, inviting all the players to Save Your Bacon. In the event description, I noted that participants would be dressing up as hot dogs in order to help convince the FDA and National Pork Council that mad pig disease was really happening and that precautions should be taken to reduce the spread of infection. I also invited players in other cities to stage their own simultaneous Save Your Bacon events, should they be unable or unwilling to travel to DC.

Boy Scouts to the Rescue

After two weeks, I'd had some positive responses from the SF0 and Improve Everywhere crowd, but nothing near the target of 100 participants. My own friends had also been less than enthusiastic about the idea of marching on the Pork Council. Meanwhile, Zen had perfected a hot dog costume design and ordered several large rolls of brown and red foam sheeting. We were both spending most evenings in his living room with a glue gun, assembling costumes.

"Zen, I'm not sure I can get enough people for the event," I admitted. "I just can never predict what sorts of activities people will go for. I thought for sure that there'd be more folks out there who were just looking for an excuse to dress up like food. And you'd think everyone would care about better pork safety regulations. Well, except maybe vegetarians, Jews, or Muslims."

"It's true that public reactions can be difficult to anticipate," Zen agreed. "For example, there has been very little public concern over rogue nano robots, yet there was a huge outcry over a government data mining research project."

“Do you have any other ideas for who might support this event?” I asked. “We’re over half-way there on the costumes, but I’ve only got 10 people who have said they can come.”

“I have very few colleagues in the DC area,” Zen said. “Something about Washington is not appealing to the paranormal and conspiracy crowd. But maybe the Boy Scouts could help.”

“Huh? You mean the group we took out camping?” I asked.

“Ted Finnegan is organizing the New England scouting expedition to DC,” Zen said. “It just so happens that he will be in Washington with about 200 boys and scout leaders during the time we’ve scheduled our pork publicity event. I’ll ask him whether some of the group might want to assist our worthy cause.”

“A nice hands-on lesson in civic engagement for the boys,” I remarked. “That’s a great idea. We can make the rest of these costumes kid sized, if Ted agrees.”

Zen stood up and stretched. “Time for a break,” he said. “Come into the kitchen for a snack. I don’t want to accidentally mix up real food and foam rubber food by eating in the middle of all these costumes.”

“Have you heard more from Oliver?” I asked. “You never told me about his reaction to our conversation with Gerta Barthel.”

Zen took some aluminum foil off a platter and walked over to his turtle sandbox. “Oh yes,” he said. “I’m afraid I got so caught up in the possible Sasquatch sighting and then this mad pig situation that I forgot to update you on that.”

I sat down at the other end of the sandbox and Zen passed me the platter, which had a bowl of dark, shiny blobs. “Tapioca pudding with smoked oysters and squid ink,” he said. Then he handed me a large mug of a steaming brown beverage. “Hot chocolate with chile and ginger.”

“Thanks,” I said, cautiously sipping the hot chocolate. “Nicely spicy.” I smiled at Zen.

Zen leaned back in the sand and idly dug a hole with his left hand. “Oliver is still upset about revealing Thomas Bartel’s deceptions to the rongo rongo community. But, he was glad that we spoke to Gerta and heard the story about her brother’s childhood defacement of the birdman statuette. He’s still working on finalizing a visit to the Smithsonian archives.”

“Do you think he’ll want our help this time?” I asked. “Since it’s photography instead of freehand drawing, he might not need several independent hands.” I sighed. “I’d really like to see the DC tablets, though.”

Zen wiped hot chocolate off his moustache. “Logistically and technologically, Oliver could certainly handle the photography session himself. However, he may need some moral support in order to go through with what he thinks of as defiling the memory of a great but flawed hero,” he said.

I spooned up a bit of the tapioca and oysters, and chewed thoughtfully. “Gerta didn’t seem to know that her grandfather hadn’t reported the incident with the Tangata Manu. I doubt she was aware of the other falsifications,” I said. “Now that we’ve had tea with her, I

almost feel like we owe her some warning before the story hits the press.”

“You may be overestimating how much attention this will attract,” Zen said. He raised his eyebrows and huffed impatiently. “These days, the media will go crazy about any artifact rumored to have biblical connections. But the correction of some published rongo rongo transliterations? Gerta might never even hear about that unless she’s invited to another research conference.”

“Still,” I said. “If I were in her position, I’d want to know.”

Zen chewed on his tapioca. “Perhaps you’re right. Assuming that the DC tablets display the same pattern of blank spaces and extra hieroglyphs at the end that we expect, we can do her the courtesy of informing her before publishing the photographs.”

We finished off another costume, and I managed to demur when Zen tried to send me home with leftover tapioca oyster pudding.

The Zoo

Sure enough, Ted remembered the attack of the crazy pig, and agreed to include our Pork Council protest on the list of optional activities for the Boy Scouts. Zen and I made two dozen kid-sized hot dog costumes, packed everything into large boxes, and shipped them ahead. I didn't recognize the address.

"Where do you stay in DC?" I asked. "Is there a Unificationist guest house there, too?"

"Oh, I usually stay at the National Zoo," Zen said.

"The zoo? With the pandas?" I said. "I didn't know you could stay at the zoo."

"It's not really open to the public, but there are a few basement rooms that can accommodate visiting researchers for short stints," Zen explained. "I was able to help them with a little orangutan problem some years back, and they have very kindly let me drop in whenever I am in town."

"What did you do with the orangutans?" I asked.

“Nothing much,” Zen said, waving a hand. “It was just a matter of understanding why the enrichment activities weren’t working quite as planned. As I’ve mentioned before, a talent at charades often comes in handy. Ghosts, non-verbal primates, infants---they’re remarkably similar.”

“But it must have really helped, if they’ve been letting you stay at the zoo,” I persisted.

“They’d been having some mysterious thefts,” Zen elaborated. “Hats, bags, cameras. At first, they suspected some kind of crime ring. As it turns out, the orangutans had gotten bored and were training squirrels to steal small objects. They had amassed quite a stash of various items by the time we finally tracked down what was happening. Anyhow, I believe that the zoo was relieved to put a stop to the thefts and also rather grateful that the press did not get hold of the story about orangutans outsmarting humans.”

Our flight to DC was uneventful. When we arrived at the zoo, Zen led us through the back staff entrance where we were met by a burly man wearing a panda hat. “Zen! Great to see you,” he said. “Your boxes arrived yesterday. No one else is staying here this week, so you’re in your usual room and your friend is just down the hall. Drop by the panda area later if you have a chance. I’m going to be there all day.”

Zen agreed that we’d come visit later and we settled into our rooms. “I’m really glad that everyone is meeting us here,” I said. “These costumes are really bulky. I don’t think we could get them all to the Pork Council ourselves.”

“It’s usually best to get all the participants organized off-site for this sort of event,” Zen said. “That way, you can get all the bumbling out of the way before arriving. Now, since the event isn’t until tomorrow, we’ve got the rest of the day to just enjoy the zoo.”

“I do enjoy the pandas,” I said with a smile. “And the giraffes are interesting too.”

Zen twirled on one foot. “They’ve got a baby giant octopus this year,” he said. “I believe one of the daily feedings is in a few minutes!” He held his hand up to his mouth and wiggled his fingers like a hungry squid.

“Doesn’t it make you kind of hungry looking at the seafood?” I asked as we walked to the invertebrate house. “Maybe we should stop for a hotdog after the octopus feeding. Although the whole mad pig thing’s got me kind of nervous about eating pork now.”

“The penetration of prion disease among commercial swine could be reduced by the feed regulations we’ll be advocating for,” Zen replied. “But it’s never going to be zero, since spontaneous cases seem to arise in many species of mammals. Like so many daily decisions, you’re always taking your chances.”

“Have you been cutting back on eating pork?” I asked.

“Oh, I still indulge in the occasional pickled pigs’ ears or bacon,” Zen said. “But I do try to eat as locally as possible, and one of my neighbors raises Peruvian guinea pigs.” He looked at me and winked. “Of course, you know that guinea pigs aren’t really swine.”

“Yeah, just like hot dogs don’t have a lot of canine,” I said.

“Exactly!” Zen said, bouncing into the invertebrate house. “Ah, we’re just in time for the baby giant octopus feeding.” We gathered around the octopus tank along with a few families with children. The star attraction was reluctant, but the handler managed to entice him into grabbing a chunk of shrimp. The children squealed and Zen whistled.

We took our time strolling over to the panda viewing area. “Did the squirrels stop snatching things once the orangutans stopped supervising them?” I asked.

“No, not at all. The zoo staff had to untrain the squirrels. Actually, they killed two birds with one stone. It’s a little known fact that the squirrels at the National Zoo handle much of the daily clean-up of litter,” Zen said.

“Can we watch them do it?” I asked. “That’s almost like Willy Wonka’s nut-picking squirrels.”

Zen looked around and spotted a squirrel eyeing us from a nearby tree. “That one’s paying attention. Watch this.” He casually dropped a piece of paper and then bent as if tying his shoe. I stopped slightly ahead of him and watched over my shoulder as the squirrel darted out of the tree, grabbed the paper, and dropped it into a trash bin.

“Impressive!” I said. We continued to the panda area where a large crowd was gathered. One of the pandas was loafing while the other one walked around. We watched them dally for a while and then went to chat with Zen’s friend who was standing near the informational signs. They chatted briefly about the latest goings on at the zoo and then a crowd of children arrived with a list of panda questions.

“Shall we see the giraffes?” Zen asked. I agreed and we walked short distance to see the giraffes eating hay out of elevated feeding bins. “Now that you’ve assisted with a number of investigations, how do you feel about continuing your involvement with tellmewhy.org?” Zen asked, looking at me.

“I haven’t thought too much about that,” I admitted. “It’s been really interesting being your trusty sidekick. And I’d definitely like to come along the next time you go to Easter Island.”

“You’ve come along remarkably quickly with the rongo rongo,” he said, with a smile.

“I’m still learning the modified Barthel transliteration system,” I said. “And I haven’t learned nearly enough of the Rapanui language.”

“I have no doubt that spending some time on the island will help with your language studies,” Zen reassured me. “But what do you think about the other aspects of paranormal and conspiracy investigation? Have you enjoyed looking for chupacabra, nano robots, spiritual residuals, and fairies?”

I considered the question. “Zen, you know how you said that you probably didn’t need to play SF0 because your life already included so many perspective changing experiences? I know what you mean. Helping out with your investigations is like living SF0 instead of just playing it.” He grinned. “I’m still skeptical about whether some of these things are real, but it’s starting to seem like it doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean?” Zen asked, looking surprised.

“I mean, assuming something like alien abduction exists but investigating specific instances carefully seems just as reasonable as

assuming that it doesn't exist and investigating. It just means you consider a few more possibilities and look at the problem from different angles," I explained. "Maybe that guy with the cats was affected by ley lines, or maybe he just needed more regular dental checkups, but as long as we helped him, it doesn't matter."

"My dear, you're the right sort of agnostic to do quite well in this line of work," Zen said. "And it's been a tremendous boon to have your assistance." Then he pointed towards a brightly colored pushcart. "Now is a great time for the tofu cart! Do you feel more like a tofu pup or some tofu ice cream?"

Showdown in DC

By noon the next day, a crowd had gathered just outside the zoo entrance at the designated pig protest preparation site. It looked like about a dozen SF0 or Improv Everywhere players, along with ten scout leaders and nearly a hundred boys. Luckily, Zen had brought several bullhorns.

“Adult hot dog costumes on the right, kid dogs on the left, and signs in the middle. Come on up and get what you need for the event,” Zen instructed. There was one adult costume left after everyone had gone through, so Zen asked me to put it on. He was already wearing a conservative suit and a tie with a picture of a hot dog, ready to serve as the group spokesman.

As people started moving, Ted Finnegan grabbed the bullhorn. “Remember, anyone who hits someone else with a sign has just volunteered for clean-up duty. I’m taking names,” he announced.

“Good to see you again,” I greeted him. “Thanks so much for bringing the manpower.”

Ted smiled proudly at the sight of the uniformed scouts hoisting signs. “After seeing that pig with my own eyes, I’ve been talking about

mad pig disease with the boys. They're 100 percent in favor of brain-safe hot dogs," he said.

Two empty tour buses pulled up and Zen directed everyone on board. "How'd you arrange the buses?" I asked Zen and Ted.

"Oh, the scouts had chartered a fleet of buses to get down here, and a few of the drivers volunteered to help out today," Ted answered. "I'll tell you what, after a ten hour drive in a bus full of boys, these drivers are saints to sign on for more." Remembering our short trip in a minivan, I had to agree.

When we reached the headquarters of the National Pork Council, I saw a small crowd already gathered. "Hey, the press is here," I said, pointing out the window.

Zen nodded. "The committee did a good job sending out press releases about the event," he said. "Since the scouts are involved, it's a story about people in funny costumes plus a food scare plus an inspiring example of young citizenship. A lovely choice of news angles."

Everyone disembarked and Zen lead us towards the building chanting, "Keep prions out of pork! Brain safety now!" We formed a picket line in front of the main doors, providing a colorful backdrop for Zen's interviews with the press. The boys were on their best behavior with Ted kept an eagle eye on everybody. One of the SF0 players had brought an enormous bunch of gray helium balloons, each printed with a cerebellum pattern. She tied them onto the signs that everyone was holding.

After about fifteen minutes, two men and a woman came out of the National Pork Council building and started talking with Zen. The

press was crowding around them, and I couldn't really tell what was happening. They all stood around for a while with Zen waving his hands excitedly, gesturing at the building and the crowd of people wearing hot dog costumes. After a while, I saw him pose for a picture shaking the woman's hand.

The press left soon, and Zen made an announcement. "My fellow fans of brain safety and prion-free pork! The president of the National Pork Council has agreed to support the FDA's proposed regulation prohibiting the use of beef, pork, and other mammal products in animal feed. Public awareness is growing and the public wants to keep prions out of pork! Thank you for your efforts today, and be sure to watch the news tonight." Everyone cheered.

"You all can now de-costume and board the buses," Ted instructed. "We'll drop our friends off at the zoo and then take all the scouts back to our hotel."

We rolled up the foam costumes and stacked the signs. "Zen, what are we going to do with all these hot dog costumes?" I asked.

"Not a problem, my dear. You can sell nearly anything on e-Bay," he said.

We said goodbye to Ted and the scouts and thanked all the SF0 and Improv Everywhere players again before returning to our rooms in the zoo. There was a note tacked to Zen's door. "Hmm," he said. "It sounds like Oliver Pukao needs some moral support. We'd better be on our way." Zen folded up the note and strode purposefully towards the subway station.

"I didn't know his DC trip was this week," I said.

“It’s strange how everything always happens at the same time, isn’t it,” Zen replied. “Just before we came, the Smithsonian told him that another researcher had cancelled an appointment at the last minute, so they would fit him into the archive visit schedule if he could come immediately and dispense with bringing the assistants that he had requested.”

“It’s a good thing we already sent him Walter’s new camera,” I said, sighing. “But I am disappointed to miss seeing the tablets.”

“Yes, I had also been looking forward to seeing the artifacts,” Zen said. “But Oliver couldn’t turn down a chance to get in months earlier than expected. And the museum was unable to accommodate more than one visitor for this time-slot.”

“Anyhow, I guess we’ll hear how it went,” I said. “Where are we going to meet him?”

“He’s asked us to come by his hotel, as he’s feeling too ill to go out,” Zen said.

We arrived at the hotel near Du Pont Circle and went up to Oliver’s room. Zen knocked and called out, “Rongo rongo rongo!”

Oliver answered the door looked nervous. “Come in, I’ve already had room service send up some food,” he said. “I don’t know what I’m going to do!”

Zen looked around and lifted a few of the plate covers. “I believe that what we should do now is to eat before the food gets cold,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “You can tell us about your visit while we’re eating.”

We all sat on the floor and leaned against the walls while eating egg salad sandwiches. Oliver passed around a bag of squid jerky and another bag of tiny marshmallows to go with the sandwiches. Zen added both, but I stuck to just the squid.

Oliver took a deep breath, but he was still twitching his feet and tapping his fingers. “Just as we suspected, both DC tablets had many blank spaces and hieroglyphs at the end of the inscription that were not included in the previously published picture, drawings, or transliteration.”

“So the pattern was similar to what you observed with your Kleenex box,” I said.

“Yes. I stood there staring at the tablets for a long time, and then I photographed them from a few different distances,” Oliver replied. “It was exactly what I thought I would see, but I still couldn’t believe my eyes. Incontrovertible proof of Barthel’s deception!”

Zen patted the man’s arm. “It’s difficult to lose a hero. But think of bringing the truth to the rongo rongo scholars of today! Imagine the progress we can make once everyone has access to the real inscriptions.”

“I can’t do it!” Oliver said. He turned to Zen and grabbed his hand. “Zen, I can’t be the one who reveals the forgeries. Will you do it? Will you take the credit?”

Zen’s mouth dropped open. “Why, Oliver, I couldn’t take credit for the fruits of your investigations. Who knows how long the obfuscation would have stood if you hadn’t followed up on that Kleenex box? You’ve performed an admirable service to the field of rongo rongo study.”

Oliver shook his head. “The truth has to get out, I can see that. But I just don’t want my name associated with all this.”

“But surely you are not proposing that we shine the light of truth while telling a lie?” Zen asked. Oliver groaned.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” he said. “What if we tell the entire truth about what happened, but you just do the talking? I mean, you were with me in New York looking at those pieces, and you two got hold of the camera that I’m using to document the DC tablets.”

Zen looked at me and I shrugged. “If you don’t mind doing the talking, Zen, I don’t see anything wrong with that. We can call Gerta and break the news to her while Walter is processing the image data. It’ll probably take a week to produce the pictures,” I said.

“So you’ll do it?” Oliver asked. “You can be a co-author when we report this to the scholarly community, and we’ll just direct any press inquiries to you?”

Zen nodded slowly. “I’ll assist in whatever way you wish,” he said. He looked at me. “I think my cover’s blown anyways, with this pork publicity stunt, so it’s good timing. And you’re ready to take the helm; the committee’s already approved you as my successor.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, completely confused. “Your cover? Everyone we’ve met seems to know you.”

Zen laughed. “You knew the name Zen is just a pseudonym. And have you never wondered why we’ve been working together for months but I never asked your name?”

“I guess I thought you knew,” I said. “I didn’t really think about it.”

“One’s real identity is kept confidential while one serves on the tellmewhy.org committee. Everyone just goes by ‘Zen’ during investigations,” he said. “It is often detrimental to one’s day job if one’s association with a paranormal and conspiracy investigation organization is discovered.”

“Wait, you have a day job? I thought this was your job,” I asked.

“It’s fascinating work, my dear, but it doesn’t really pay anything,” he chuckled. “Anyhow, I’ve given my real name to the press today, and you’ll find out all about my day job soon.”

“So now you have to quit the committee?” I asked. “But you’re so good at investigations.”

“I’ll remain available to you in an advisory capacity,” Zen said. “And I’ll come along if you need help. But, you’ll take over my committee position, and perhaps you’ll take on a trusty sidekick of your own.”

“Umm, do I have a choice about it?” I asked.

Zen smiled. “Certainly! But I believe that you’ve already made a decision.” He stood up and offered Oliver a hand. “I’ll phone you when we have the pictures ready,” he said.

Zen reached out and shook my hand as well. “My dear, henceforth you should probably start calling me by my actual name, Charles. Otherwise, it will become too confusing if we’re both calling each other Zen! After all, there’s no point in having a name if everyone

has the same name.” I nodded and wondered how that worked during the annual ConCon, since every participant would be using the same name.

I was dazed as we returned to the zoo and got ready to fly home, but I realized that Zen was as usual, right. I’d already made my decision. To celebrate, I submitted one more SF0 task, “Chrysalis: take a new name as you emerge from your mundane cocoon into a strange new life with your glittering wings.”