

# TONGUES

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“All the astrologers will be castrated.”

Leonardo da Vinci

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Prophecy as Pathology

When one half of the team descended into dark depression, there was nothing for the other half to do but go along for the ride. But even if the outcome was known, the process had to be respected. Shelly needed to be talked into it.

“I predict,” she said, “that if we run off to Borneo on this wild goose chase of yours, we will come to grief.”

“And what do you base this prediction on?” Marc asked.

“Common sense?”

“Look, I’ve totally lost it, Shell,” he said. “If we don’t do this, what will we do instead? And if we don’t do it now, then when?”

“You’re channeling some kind of political speech from the past, aren’t you?”

“Maybe from the future,” he said. “I don’t know. I can no longer predict what I can predict. There is a strange spiritual sickness eating away at my brain.”

She put a cup of tea down in front of him. “What do you want to do?”

“Thanks,” he said. “I see us in an exotic seaside grotto kissing the starfish on the smooth wet stone walls.”

“I see that, too,” she said, “but I don’t like it.”

“Borneo,” he said.

“I’m not entirely sure where Borneo is,” Shelly said, “A long long way from Chicago, no doubt, and I predict we can’t afford to go there.”

Symptoms and Events

“Leonardo is making fun of me,” Marc said.

“Who?”

“Leonardo da Vinci,” he said. “Look here.”

Shelly threw down her pencil and got up from her desk where she had been preparing a chart for one of their regular clients. She came over to his desk where he was supposed to be working, too, instead of acting like a big baby.

“Don’t give me that look,” he said. “I am not acting like a baby.”

He showed her the prediction.

“But maybe more than half of all astrologers are women.” She sounded exasperated. “It doesn’t even make sense.”

“He’s probably speaking metaphorically,” Marc said. “In which case women astrologers could also be castrated.”

“You may be losing it, Sweetie,” she said.

“That’s what I’ve been saying.”

“We still can’t afford Borneo.”

“I’ve been thinking about that.” Marc poked around in the papers on his desk, picking them up and putting them down. “Just as Leonardo may have been speaking obliquely, my vision of Borneo may also be couched in a kind of code.”

He put another piece of paper on top of the Leonardo prophecy. It was covered with letters and numbers. “I started by rearranging the letters in ‘Borneo’. I was hoping for something obvious, but I should have known better.”

“What did you come up with?” She came around and put her hands on his shoulders and leaned down to look at the paper.

“I don’t think I tried all the combinations,” he said. “That would have taken too long. I stopped when I found something that looked promising.”

“Which was?”

He flipped the paper over. On the other side were two words.

Borneo

Orebon

“Orebon?”

“I know,” he said. “It’s not quite right yet, but it looked strangely familiar and then it hit me that someone was pointing me at Oregon.”

“But it says ‘Orebon’.”

“Yes, but there is a simple transformation,” he said. “Consider the letters in question. They are B and G. That is, the B should have been a G. So how do we get a G from what we have? Well, first notice that B is the second letter of the alphabet and that G is the seventh letter.”

“Consider those facts noticed,” Shelly said.

“So what is the difference?”

“Between seven and two?”

“Yes.”

“Well, five.”

“Bingo,” he said. “And how do we get five from the other evidence?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, notice that the offending B is the first letter in ‘Borneo’ and the target G is the fourth letter in ‘Oregon’ and what do you get when you add one and four?”

“Oh, okay,” she said. “I see it. You get five. And two plus five is seven, and the seventh letter of the alphabet is G so you can substitute the G for the B in Orebon and get Oregon.”

“Exactly!” he said. “And anyone can afford to go to Oregon these days.”

“But what about the starfish?”

“They must be in Oregon, too.”

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## Kissing Fish

They fought about it. They stopped speaking for a while. The cohesion of the team was seriously threatened, but then one thing led to another, and in the end, the Chicago based astrologers, Marc and Shelly Bowman, followed the Borneo/Oregon code to Portland where they had expected cool weather even in August. They had expected rain. No one is right all of the time. It was over 100 degrees and dry, the sky so blue, you might think clouds hadn’t yet been invented. If the sun were god’s thumb, these two astrologers were the thumbtacks. The heat drove them toward the sea where they learned of the Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport, a couple of hours to the south. Things were coming together. Once they reached Newport, another piece fell into place when they spotted the Brunei Bar and Grill on the main drag.

Inside it wasn’t Borneo but it was some place far away like Borneo or Bombay

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or Bora Bora but not Bermuda because it was not the kind of place you expected to see tourists in straw hats and flowery shorts. No cameras please! It was dark and cold and the beer neons were too bright but didn't penetrate far into the darkness, the kind of place someone might creep up behind you and get too close and whisper garlic in your ear, "So, you've come to kiss the fish?"

"At the aquarium," Marc said.

"Forget the aquarium," the man in the dark said. "What makes you think you'll find fish at the aquarium?"

"No fish at the aquarium?"

"Hey, this dude thinks they'll let him kiss the fish down at the aquarium," the man in the dark spoke loudly and there was laughter all around, and Marc could see that the place was not so empty after all. He could make out the faces of the men and woman at the bar now. They must have been sitting very quietly when he and Shelly had come in. There was a bartender now, too, and he was moving in on them. He was a young man with a very short haircut. He wore a white t-shirt and there were tattoos of birds and snakes on his upper arms. He tossed down a couple of coasters and asked them what they wanted to drink.

Marc wondered what they had on tap. Shelly asked for a cola.

The man in the dark moved in and took the stool between them. His hair was thick and totally white. His skin was very pale, but his lips were purple. He wore a red and green flannel shirt and some kind of gray canvas pants. Glasses with very small rimless lenses. Marc guessed he was probably in his mid seventies. He rapped on the bar, and the bartender nodded at him. A moment later, the drinks appeared. The man picked his up and toasted Marc and Shelly silently and drank deeply before speaking again.

"There is a parasitic crustacean in the jungles of Borneo," he said. "In the waters. What it does is it crawls into the mouths of fish and eats their tongues. Then it attaches itself firmly and takes the place of the missing tongue. Half the time the fish eats something it goes no farther than its new tongue, but the fish can move it around and do other tongue-like things with it and pretty soon, the fish forgets it ever had some other kind of tongue. It just has to work a little harder."

"That's horrible," Shelly said.

"And these are the fish we've come for?" Marc asked.

"No," the man said. "These fish I'm talking about are in Borneo."

“So, why tell us about those creepy fish and their tongues, then?” Shelly asked. “If they’re not even the ones we came to see?”

“Those are out back,” he said. “Drink up and I’ll show you.”

He slipped off the stool and disappeared back into the gloom.

Marc and Shelly got off their stools. Marc tossed some money down on the bar and took her hand. He peered around hoping for a clue on what to do next. He had no intuitions. He figured Shelly had none either since she was never shy about telling him what she saw and felt.

Someone slashed open the darkness by opening a door to one side of the bar. “Come on, then,” the same man called to them. Mark saw him step out of the door and hold it waiting for them to follow.

“You got any feelings about this?” he asked Shelly.

“Nothing specific,” she said. “You don’t have to have paranormal powers to guess this might be a mistake, though.”

“You’re probably right,” he said. “Let’s just take a quick peek, and if it doesn’t seem right, we’ll take off.”

The man had left the door open for them and had moved off into what turned out to be a kind of backyard that reminded Marc of his childhood. There were a few untrimmed trees sprawling over the fence in back and junk—lots of junk—machines of indeterminate function, buckets of bolts, tin cans in piles, mysterious parts.

The man stood beside a big metal washtub. There was a piece of plywood on top of the tub.

“Come on,” he said.

Mark and Shelly walked up to him. When they got there, he leaned down and pulled the plywood off of the washtub. Marc stepped in a little closer to look. The water was not clear, but he could see bright figures moving slowly under the surface, flashes of red, green, and blue.

Fish. Just fish with fins and tails and gills.

“But where are the starfish?” Marc asked.

“You’re looking at them,” the man said. “Fish from the stars.”

“Oh, so they never were starfish,” Marc said.

“You got it,” the man said. “You ready?”

“Ready for what?” Shelly asked.

“Get down on your knees and just pucker up and put your face in the water, Missy, make smooch smooch sounds.” He demonstrated. “And blow a few

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bubbles to attract these big fellows.”

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“Me either,” Marc said. “Sorry to have wasted your time.”

He took Shelly’s hand and turned to walk back into the bar.

There were three men blocking the way.

“Oh, you haven’t wasted our time,” the man by the washtub said.

The three men by the door smiled or chuckled or both and advanced on them.

Shelly clutched at his sleeve. “Marc?”

He didn’t know what to do. Why hadn’t he seen this coming? Maybe Leonardo had been right on the money and he’d already been psychically castrated.

Marc often dreamed something horrible was out to get him, jumping out of the shadows, chasing and howling, something big and hairy with a lot of sharp teeth. Sometimes he ran, but he never got away, and when he ran, he knew the waking day would suck.

Sometimes he turned and attacked, and when he did that, he always woke feeling like he could handle anything.

Was this going to be one of those days?

He shook Shelly off and charged the three men. Sometimes fear pushed people into doing superhuman things when protecting the people they loved.

Right?

When he got to the men, two of them stepped aside and let him run headlong into the middle one. Then the other two grabbed his arms, and the guy he’d bounced off of hit him hard in the stomach. Marc doubled over the man’s fist. The other two dragged him back to the tub where the old guy was struggling with Shelly. The guy who had hit Marc now hit Shelly—a ringing open handed slap that dropped her to her knees. The men holding Marc forced him down beside her.

“Okay,” the old guy said. “Kiss kiss.”

Marc felt fingers in his hair and then his head was jerked up and over the rim of the washtub and plunged into the water.

He couldn’t see anything clearly. He struggled but couldn’t free himself. He was drowning. He felt tentative touches to his face like curious fingers, lightly over his cheeks and nose and then more forcefully between his lips.

Something knocked hard against his teeth, and he gasped and swallowed water and coughed and felt water in his lungs and something big in his mouth. There was a slicing crunch and pain exploded in the back of his mouth. He could see his own

blood flowing into the water. Something forced its way down his throat, and when it got where it wanted to be, it stopped with a decisive clap and was still.

Marc realized there was no one holding him under the water now, and he lunged upward to his feet and shook his head back and forth producing a wide spray of water and blood. Shelly rose up, too, and the two of them looked at each other and then looked quickly around for their attackers, but they were alone in the backyard now.

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No one tried to stop them when they moved back into the bar. In fact no one paid them any attention at all. Everything was strangely ordinary. The room was brighter now like someone had turned on more lights after he and Shelly had gone out to kiss the fish from the stars. Marc didn't see the old guy and his three assistants.

He looked at Shelly. She might be in shock. Shelly shocked, he thought wildly and chuckled but he couldn't push the sound up out of his chest. He opened his mouth to ask her if she was okay.

He said, "Are you firmly lodged?"

"Quite firmly," she said.

"Me, too," he heard himself say, and when he said it, he could feel his tongue and lips and lungs and they didn't feel like they were part of him. There was an overlay, something on top of him, doing the talking. He could see from the wild fright in Shelly's eyes that she was experiencing something similar.

"Shall we proceed then?" she asked.

Her lipstick had turned to a liverish shade of purple. No, there was a fine line around her lips and the skin was red where it met her purple lips. He didn't really think those were her lips at all. You could grab those lips and pull the tongue parasite out of her head and lungs whole like a bird picking apart a grasshopper.

He ignored her words and lips and took both her hands in his and looked into her eyes. "This is a total waste of time," he said.

"We are in agreement about that," she said, but he could see that she wasn't saying that at all. Shelly was telling him they were not totally cut off. They were both astrologers, for crying out loud. They trafficked in the paranormal all the time. So what if aliens from outer space had come down and eaten their tongues and

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maybe their lungs and lips and the rest of their vocal apparatus? That didn't mean they were out of the game. Notice, her eyes said, that while they have the voice, we seem to still have everything else.

"Are we going to just stand here like a couple of idiots?" he said, but what he meant and hoped he conveyed with his eyes and a light squeeze to her hands was that he agreed they were not defeated. There were people they could consult about this. There were experts in the occult arts who might think this infestation was trivial. A walk in the park. Tongue parasites! Ha ha. We'll just give you a good dose of stinging Jalapeno Jell-O and the intruders will knock your teeth out they'll be leaving so quick. Well, maybe we should keep the teeth.

He didn't think she was getting his message. She looked so frightened.

A woman sitting at the bar twisted around on her stool and said, "They want to go now."

A man to her left said without turning his head, "Yes, you two go now."

Then they were all saying it. Up and down the bar and in the shadowy booths. Go now. Louder and louder. Shelly was saying it, too, and so was he. The two of them almost nose to nose shouting in one another's face, "Go now! Go now!"

He was suddenly afraid she would panic and run away from him. He pulled at her hands, and they hurried out of the bar. When they got outside, everyone stopped shouting.

He pulled her close and they clung together trembling.

"There must be a car," she said over his shoulder.

"No doubt," he said.

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The Limits of Time

They got a motel. Marc suspected his tongue parasite was little by little gaining access to his mind. The things they were saying to one another contained more and more details from Marc and Shelly's lives. The parasites knew they were far from home on a foolish errand to reinvigorate Marc's failing psychic powers. They had picked up on her smoldering resentment and on his resentment in return at her lack of sympathy for his predicament. He wondered how long they would have any control at all.

"Are you ready to go home?" she asked.



“I’ve been thinking about that,” he said. “Maybe I’ll let you go on by yourself while I look into a few things here.”

They were sitting side by side on the end of the motel bed. Shelly had turned on the TV, but he had turned down the sound, and no one had objected.

He put his arm around her shoulder. It was getting harder to move.

“We’ll need to eat soon,” she said without looking at him.

He moved in closer, and a sudden scene flashed into his mind where the parasite in his mouth leaped out and wrapped around her head with a wet splat, and he pulled back a little until the picture passed. Then he moved in again until he could touch his forehead to the side of her head. He felt her lean her head into his.

Time, he told her, and felt her shudder when his message passed through his head and into hers. If you’re thinking about prophecy, you can’t help but think about the nature of time.

“I suppose I could go spend a few days with my mother,” she said.

And if you’re thinking about the nature of time, you will soon come to the realization that it began some time after you were born. Exactly when is a little blurry, because the more you look back, the less you remember, and it will end when you die. That’s it. There is no other time. You cannot think outside of time.

“You haven’t seen your mother in ages,” he said.

But if he had been doing his own talking, his words would have matched the thoughts now moving the few small inches from him to her. I understand what Leonardo was trying to tell me now. We have always been ineffectual, unproductive, castrated in our prophecy. How could it be otherwise? That’s Leonardo’s joke. We are chickens trapped in our own times. A prophecy does not exist until you learn of it, and then if it comes to pass, it comes to pass in your life. That means if a prophecy is about anything at all, it must be about you. Any prediction applies only to the time of the astrologer. That is, the time between conscious awakening and death. It makes no sense to even think about what came ‘before’ or what will come ‘after.’ Or what might be ‘apart.’ Nothing came before. Nothing comes after. Each of us is closed away in a private cosmos.

“And you’ll be looking for Leonardo in Oregon,” she said.

I have all time, he told her. You have all time, too. But it’s not the same time.

“I think we should go our separate ways now,” he said.

She pulled away from him and twisted around, and they looked long and hard at each other.

Was this really the end of them? Would they simply go their separate ways

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now? Maybe exchange holiday cards and birthday greetings after a few years?

She grabbed him, and there was a cosmic spark bridging universes.

He pulled her in tight and struggled to push words past his lips.

“No,” he said. “We won’t.”

“Yes,” she said into his chest. “We refuse.”