

Jupiter and Gilgamesh

A Novel of Sumeria and Texas

Chapter One: Jupiter's Hostiae

In the first light of the twenty-fifth of July 1989, Matt Devon rose from his marriage bed, looked at Sheila's small body beneath the sheets her hair tousled oh so faintly by the air conditioning. Hovering over her, he relived the argument from the night before, played the video back in slow motion, and lingered over the ugly words.

Two doors down Jimmy Devereaux burst down off the front porch followed by his mother Estelle. She labored under the weight of four large paper bags full of craft materials. She dropped one, spilling a glue gun, rolls of crepe paper, and bags of plastic gems. She knelt. Jimmy wandered over to their mini-van and began kicking a rock up and down the driveway.

Matt poured coffee into the go-mug as he stood at his kitchen counter. He opened the briefcase on top of the counter and threw in the morning paper. He took the phone off its charger, thumbed the buttons, and checked for messages in the small screen. Yesterday afternoon's call from the fertility clinic was still there. He knew all about that. He deleted it with sharp little stabs on the keys. He clipped the phone to his belt. Reaching into the briefcase, he groped around until he found the antacids.

Estelle Devereaux placed all four bags into the back of the mini-van and slammed the hatch. She jerked the driver's door open and dropped a voluminous purse into the seat.

"Mommy's forgotten her day planner, Jimmy. Stay right here. I'll go get it."

Matt opened the door to the garage. It crawled up, rumbling like a dyspeptic gut. The sprinklers outside had just shut off, and the air in the garage, already in the sixties, soared up into the moist seventies. He felt the first bead of sweat pop out of his forehead. High today in the nineties. The car chimed softly as he slid in.

The boy's bike lay in the grass at the bottom of his driveway. Jimmy shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at the back tire. As he watched, lights flicked on and off in his house. He could track his

mother's progress as she searched. Living room. Den. Now the front bedroom. Dawn came up strong from the east, and he could make out details of the yard. He dropped his schoolbag on the ground, grasped the handlebars of his bike and hopped on. The phone rang inside the house.

Matt's car ticked over quietly, its engine noise buried under the droning of the air conditioning. His coat lay on the leather seat beside him. He unclipped the phone and made the first call of the day, left a message. He turned on the radio, chose local news, and drowned out the internal noise of his life. The weather report claimed it was going to be a windy day and just under a hundred.

Jimmy sped down the sidewalk intent on making at least two laps around the cul-de-sac before his mother appeared on the front steps again.

Matt shifted into reverse and accelerated smoothly out of the garage. The sound of the bicycle as it folded up under his bumper, the clattering, scraping up under the car startled him, frightened him. He slammed on the brake.

Matt Devon had no idea what had happened. Among other sad and hideous things, he had finished off his marriage.

Child Of Sumeria

Chapter Two: Confessions in the Temple

March 25, 2010. Jupiter was alone. He walked in a place where no one could close in on him, touch him, jostle him, or breathe on him. His path took him where there could be no crush, no press, no one in the way, and nobody watching. He strode out into an empty early morning. No dead children here.

He found false spring was its own bitter reward. This morning he struggled. He struggled to keep up the routine walk in this biting season. This weather and time promised a beginning of new life with the stink of melting earth, but withheld it in the whipping breeze. He could tell a norther was on its way. The wind shifted around into his face and pushed thin drifts of snow in brush marks of white across the dirt road. Texas would get another week of freeze and thaw and then more winter—that was the wind he heard keening. He hunched his shoulders tighter.

Jupiter walked past the gates of the McCloskey farm, and the McCloskey dog he called White waited there, lying with his head on his paws. The dog lurched up, sniffed his knee in passing and trotted off ahead wagging his tail. White moved down the road leading the way carrying out their familiar routine. Jupiter could barely see the course ahead through his wind-provoked tears, but he knew it well. Their route arrowed forward out into the farmland, farmland stretched under wire fences and girdled with ditches and culverts. West Texas reached ahead of them clear to the North Pole and reached behind them to Tierra del Fuego. Down here on the ground, Jupiter lost himself on a walk with a dog and with his devils. Up there, on the grain elevator behind him, he ruled as premier of the plains.

Circling full round, boxing the square mile of his patrol, he shivered his way back into the lot around his grain elevator. The wind pushed on his shoulder, trying to hurry him on, tacking him towards home. He allowed himself the smallest fragment of satisfaction for having made

the four bleak miles.

In charge, White sniffed around an old pickup then nosed along the walls of the grain elevator. He cast about for the field mice that punctuated a dog's day. Jupiter let himself into the old office where the work floor stretched out behind the counter and the desks. He waited at the door and, in a moment, the dog appeared. He fed White out of a large sack of dry dog food. Then he took off the battered muddy boots he reserved for the morning walk and pulled on old trainers. Leaving the dog snuffling and grinding in his bowl, he went across the work floor to the ladder. He ascended the hundred and twenty feet hand over hand, as he did once a day in a ritual, ignoring the easy elevator that would have clanked him up quickly. There against the concrete wall, he clambered up through iron rings. They would supposedly stop a fall from killing him. He wondered if he could count on a preordained fatal plummet, saving him from decrepitude. As he pulled up and up, the concrete smell—the acid of Portland cement—hung in his nose and entered his laboring lungs. He moved quickly for sixty-two years but slower than he wanted.

At the top of the ladder, he entered the distribution floor, where the elevator had once circulated its grain up from truck to bin and from bin to train below. He walked past the chutes, the augers, and the metal strut work punctuating the floor's space until he came to the stairs leading up a flight to the head house above. From here on, he made this his region, a refuge set aside from the decayed industrial history of the grain elevator. He left his coat on as he went into his kitchen and fixed coffee. Then he went through a door and outside again with the coffee in hand as it curled its heat up into the cold of the morning.

Anchored outside on the roof out by the rail, he stood in the wind shelter of the head house above him. He surveyed the southern and western ranges of his world. Amarillo spread rumped across the skyline to the right, waiting for him. His own village of Aniline huddled below him on the south, pulling in on itself and marking time until spring and the life of tractors, seeding, and irrigation promised harvest. The old steel of the railroad split the plain below his grain elevator, covered in patches of snow and showing rust bands where the wind had excavated it. He could see a black figure walking down the tracks away from him, hunched up in the chill. Foreshortened by the great height, the figure was a dark ellipse, an implied human far away. The person threw away some orange wrapper, a snack bag that whipped away to the south.

Gazing down, he felt his aloneness wrapped around him, and he wore it like his old coat. Let the town attempt to dislodge him—he pretended confidence, at least this morning. He was confident he had made himself as fixed and as essential as this building had once been. He flung the dregs of his now cold coffee into the air below. The drops plummeted a hundred and forty feet to the ground. He imagined them freezing before they hit, imagined the drops, shattering out in brown ice fragments.

He strolled back in, pondering eremitic life. Even the hirsute, stinking hermits of the Gnostic desert had their routine, their domestic patterns punctuating their fervor of prayer and their round of abasement. He had his ritual.

He walked into his office, into a room fenestrated in glass on one side. Here he would practice his weekly deception. Flipping on a master switch, he brought the room to life. He waited as computers booted up and the overhead fluorescents popped on in succession, warming the cold blue light that came in through the windows. He used the computer to dial a number in Amarillo, and so started his weekly conference. The number rang, and he plugged in the headset.

The other end picked up. “Matthew Devon Associates, Jerry Douglas speaking.”

Jupiter said, “Jerry? Matt here.”

“Matt, good to hear from you. Where are you calling from?”

“Still up in British Columbia, a little farther north this week.”

“Pretty cool, boss. How do I get your job?”

Jupiter grimaced, “Well, Jerry, a sabbatical is a sabbatical, not a job. How’s the office?”

“Fine as usual, Matt. I have Tina and Art here to talk about a new campaign. She needs to tell you what she has in mind for the new client, and then I need to talk to you about a problem.”

“Sounds good. I hope you have the numbers ready also.”

“Sure. They’re okay, like they have been for the last fifteen months.”

Jerry delivered this cloaked dig, voiced to remind the boss profits and margins were perfectly acceptable in Jupiter’s absence.

“Good, just what I expect from brilliant staff.”

They consumed the next few minutes in professional practice; then Jerry ushered out the staff present on his end of the conference call.

Jerry worked around to the real point of the weekly call, the issue requiring Jupiter's intervention.

"We've got a problem with Billy Petersen," Jerry said. "His old man was always happy with our work, but Billy feels we're not doing enough creatively to keep his realty business ahead of the other Amarillo firms. He's making noises about taking his account to Bailey's."

"Well, it would be a real shame to lose the Petersens. They were one of my first accounts. What do you suggest?"

"We're fresh out of ideas here. Art's tired of real estate, kind of burned out, and I don't have anyone else to put on it. What do you think we should do, Boss?"

Jupiter smiled. *Another problem with no suggested solution.* "Hmm. We basically have two cards, and we better play them both. I'll help you with customer relations, and in return, you personally develop a couple of novel ideas to shake up the Petersen ads. I'd suggest you think about how to get some spin going among the media, some chatter about a clever new change in Bill's business. To do that we have to come up with a smart new slogan asserting the basic superiority of our clients over the other realty firms."

"I don't know," Jerry's voice was flat. "A house is a house, a lot is a lot, and a realtor is a realtor."

"Hmph, Jerry, you have a real winning attitude there. You call Mr. Petersen; offer to write him a couple of free radio spots. I'll call his father and take his pulse. In the meantime, get your head around this. I'll e-mail you a couple of basic ideas and maybe a story line over the next couple of days. I expect the same from you."

Jupiter knew his insight was simple—years in the business made it obvious what needed to be done. The right words to say sat easy in his mouth. He yawned at the idea of another round of client massaging.

Jupiter let Jerry recapitulate. Then inevitably they went around again, plowing the ground a third time. Before Jerry could start again, Jupiter rang off, saying he had to "check out and go down to catch the boat."

He had no fear his subordinate would catch his lie. He made the phone call through the Internet, and it could have appeared from anywhere in the world.

Deception committed, he sat and stared out his bank of windows,

facing out to the west. The windows appeared as they had before he had started the restoration. His new rails and stiles mimicked the old form as he mimicked his old advertising behaviors. The moldings laid out a grid, three feet tall and twenty feet long, lining out a geometry superimposed over Amarillo. He interpreted the city as abstracted by the grid, rendered down into a static-bound graphic. He willed this impression to make Amarillo's image less powerful.

Over there, in a metroplex made diminutive by distance, he had made his splash and his money. Jupiter, recluse of the grain elevator, lived outside his own city and as closed up as an abbot in cloisters, not far from the scene of his triumphs and losses. He had run, and now, he hid. Even this place was not safe, and he might lose it.

When she picked up on the other end, he said, "Hello, Marjorie. It's Jupiter."

"Hey, Jupiter. Tell me, why do you use your real name with everyone except me?"

"Ah, you understand myth, now don't you? I admire that in a counselor."

"It's nice to be admired, even if I don't often see you to bask in said admiration. You know this isn't the regular time for our visit. I can only give you a few minutes before I have to lead a meditation session."

"I'll gladly borrow what time I can get."

Marjorie asked, "Where are you this time?"

"Perched in the sky east of Amarillo."

"Oh. I'll take that as poetic license. So, did you have a specific thing you wanted to talk about, or should we start where we left off?"

"I like it when you use technical jargon, like 'thing.'"

Jupiter could hear tinkling bells in the background. He pictured Marjorie sitting in her greenhouse surrounded by her Dao symbols and her incense mixing with the raw earth smell of the seedling trays. She would be round where her voice would have her thin, she would be dark where her words made her light, she would be puzzled where he wanted her to already know.

"Sure then. Where were we?"

"That's right. 'Where' is exactly right. We were working on how you

got to your ‘where.’”

“Why, I was deposed by my own reticence. I was King of Amarillo, or at any rate a Prince. And with my predilection I’ve discovered myself exiled from my own court, a shaken man in exile.”

“That’s what you’re calling it now, a predilection?”

Jupiter countered. “I also call it cultural claustrophobia.”

“And again I ask, where is your ‘where?’”

Jupiter halted briefly. “Literally, I have gone back to the farm to live rurally. It’s a uniquely American story of solitary living. If I could have groceries delivered at the end of the lane, I would, and never see a neighbor.”

“Doing a little myth-making yourself, aren’t you? First you’re a prince, and now you’re a farm boy.”

Jupiter laughed. “I confess, I never grew up on a farm, though I’m a homegrown boy from the great prairie. So what if I’m not the Lincolnesque story? Maybe it’s more European.”

“Europe? I was so hoping for Tibet.”

“No, definitely European, and ancient at that. My tale is flavored by the intrigue, the spices, the politics, and the mud and sewage of medieval times.”

“Jupiter, you use feudal images quite a bit and you blarney a lot.”

“Medieval seems right though.”

“You amateur historians. If I might be bold, I would suggest you feel you’re caught by fate rather than making it, born into your place, foretold to have these troubles. That’s the medieval model.”

“Would be nicer, wouldn’t it? Then my dilemmas wouldn’t be a function of my own actions and my own life. Not my fault. Yes, I quite like that.”

“But it’s not true, you know. You got here step by step, decision by decision.”

“Marjorie, I never planned anything. It wasn’t great strategy—I just blundered from opportunity to opportunity, seizing that one, charming this one, ducking the ones that didn’t smell right. I was lucky.”

“So you see yourself as an unguided fool. Well, how’s that working out for you?”

“Not working well. Sticky and mortifying.”

“Remind me. What decisions have you made lately, and how are you managing them?”

“I committed myself to a book, to writing a book.”

“And I want an autographed copy. When can I have it?”

Fifteen months after walking away from his job and his firm, he still had not started.

He temporized, “I’ve got an old library table here in the office. On the table, I have piles of references and research.”

“And what do you research?”

“The Sumerian, King Gilgamesh, subject of an epic. In fact, the first book about a man rather than a god.”

“And you chose Gilgamesh because?”

What? An interrogation? “He’s fascinated me ever since college. Tragic figure, alone and tormented.”

“Like you.”

She gets it. “Yes, but it works out for him in the end. So I’m researching him for a historical novel.”

“But...”

“Uh-huh, I can hear you thinking. Little scraps of paper marking passages can’t be pieced into a literary triumph or even a manuscript.”

“So, if you’re stalling, maybe you should ask why you committed to a book.”

“Ah.” He hadn’t actually asked himself why. “Perhaps it is only pride to think I can start over with something new at my age. Still, it could be a great jump start, get my feet back under me.”

“So your other decision was about your fear of people?”

He said, “I came to you because of my nervous tic, that nasty little uncomfortableness. How can I be me, the greatest ad man of all time, and get the shakes when I’m doing anything public—knowing everyone who’s anyone but sitting at home alone at night? Somewhere along the way I’ve become more and more crowded and closed in.”

“Last time we talked, you said it was like being packed in a suitcase with your loved ones, somehow expected and yet all wrong.”

“I’ve made up a new image. It goes like this: it’s more a visceral allergy, a hidden shudder and frisson of fear caused by my customers, my ex-wife, my employees, and my friends.”

“Nice. ‘Frisson.’ So what was the decision?”

“You know...to get better.”

“And how do you feel that’s going?”

“Getting a bit worse.”

“We might make more progress if you didn’t insist on doing this all

over the phone.”

As long as he was making confession, “Uh, there was one other decision.”

“Something new?”

“Something I didn’t tell you. I’ve been on sabbatical.”

“Jupiter, you told me about that.”

“Not entirely. It’s a sabbatical with a secret; it’s a solitary life lived in an unconventional place not far away from my previous existence.”

“If it’s that big a secret, don’t tell me. What I truly want to know is why did you choose it?”

“I guess I’m remaking myself in my sixties and also finding a way to hide my condition at the same time. I’ve moved to a village that, despite its potential small town claustrophobia, is more spread out than Amarillo. The sweet touch is my house; I’m turning an industrial site into an eccentric home.”

“You like eccentric?”

“I like you.”

“Thanks.” Her voice sounded dry, noncommittal.

“No, really, I was getting dull. Now I’m quirky and interesting.”

“...and all grown up. How is the move working out, then, as a decision?”

“Basically not as well as I hoped. The local authorities don’t appear to enjoy quirky and interesting.”

“Three decisions that are taking you to your current ‘where.’ We’ll have to talk more about this.”

“Now? I’ve got the time. I’m on sabbatical.”

“Listen, Jupiter, I’ve got to go. My people are coming in, and I should be laying out the rugs and the singing bowl. Let me leave you with something to think about. If you’re going to beat this problem, you have to go to the cause, not mess around with the latest side effects. You have to take responsibility for who you are.”

“Ah, the hard advice. Well, I’ll call again in a couple of days when we’re regularly scheduled.”

“Not so fast. Here’s your assignment for the week. I want you to go into a crowded place with someone you know. I want you to focus on that person rather than on the people around you. I want you to ask yourself how you feel about it before you leave, and I want you to write it all down to read to me when we next talk.”

“Marjorie, I don’t need to feel like I’m back in grade school getting

assignments.”

“Sure you do. Otherwise you’d stop calling.” She hung up.

Sighing, he did her bidding and made a phone call. Jupiter called the one man in Aniline who made it all easy and smooth for him. He called his general contractor.

Jupiter enjoyed talking to Marjorie, especially when he felt well. Not seeing anyone in three days made him cheerful and largely happy. Or maybe, he reflected, the word should be un-anxious. He sipped coffee, smelling an echo of Marjorie’s imagined incense. He gazed out over the prairie, turning the conversation over in his mind. He did much of nothing. He hoped his subconscious was at work on the big issues.

In all his heady mix of trouble, he prioritized his problems with the Aniline town councilmen at the top. He suspected they viewed him as a carpetbagger arrived from the big city, bringing a way of life that fought the balance of a small farming community. Aniline preferred not to change; those who wanted something different normally moved away. He couldn’t resolve his problems by this piercing insight into the community. He needed to talk to Marjorie about it. He needed the town elders off his back.

As he sat there, the sky turned black and rolled past the tower, carrying winter back into the plains. He turned off the lights and went to stand at the windows. He watched God brew up a bitch of a day. A storm was just about right, a stand-in for his battle with Aniline.

As a young man he had appreciated black skies and trouble. He had experienced that extra pulse of life if he caught himself up in a bind. Now times had changed. Now he waited for inspiration to bail him out and for apathy to wane. He suffered from a missing invigoration. He wanted energy and inspiration. What he got was the sound of a car horn echoing against the concrete of his tower. He went through the office door to the roof and gazed below. A white truck was parked by his old blue pickup. A man in a coat and a ball cap stood there. He waved up. Jupiter cupped his hands into a megaphone and shouted down, “Hey, Dan! Give me a minute.”

The man below cupped his hands and also shouted, but through the wind noise Jupiter only heard, “Lunch.” He held up one finger, saw the

man nod, and turned to go down below.

Dan Heldritch waited in his truck. Dan's business had improved because of Jupiter, so in contrast to Aniline's elected officials and their hostility, Dan liked him. In fact, quite a few workmen saw Jupiter, if not as a friend, then as a steady cash flow.

Jupiter hopped up into the passenger seat to escape the buffeting wind and said, "Hey, Dan. What's up?" He slammed the door.

"Too frickin' cold to work, especially outside. I got your message about lunch in town. Good chance to catch up on your projects. I have something to talk to you about anyway."

Jupiter perceived a hint of trouble, a sense it wouldn't all be smooth and easy. "Sure, whatever it takes. I need to go by the Post Office. Maybe you could stop there on the way to the café?"

"Can do. How you been?"

"All right. Getting some work done around the place."

They filled the time with small talk while Dan drove out of the yard and immediately into the outskirts of Aniline. They rolled past 1930s houses, porched and gable-hipped against the prairie's gales. There were '50s ranches sitting beside these older houses, pierced with ribbon windows, faced with cheap brick, and festooned with aluminum carports. There hadn't been much building in Aniline since the 1950s, but one or two Amarillo-like new houses were sprinkled here and there. Dan's unspoken business sat in the cab of the truck with the two men, waiting.

Aniline's founders had laid out a main street two blocks long, leading off the square. It ended at the old highway, a road crumbled and pot-holed with neglect. The Post Office sat at the end of a strip shopping center, fronting the highway—the major sign of life for that eroded two-lane. Dan parked in a rank of trucks there and they hopped out leaving the motor running. Jupiter walked down the back of the vehicles, noting the plumes of smoke and the stink of exhaust. Going inside, the two men split apart and went to their respective mailboxes. In his, Jupiter discovered a yellow card with the date and his box number. He took it to the desk to collect his package.

The postal guy, cracking open his moon-shaped face in a grin, said, "Morning, Mr. Devon. How's it going?"

"Hi, Mike. Going fine for me. How about you?"

Jupiter handed over the card, and Mike, not replying to the pleasantries, went to the back. He returned with a nine by three envelope.

"Whoops, Mr. Devon, it's a letter from the Council. You gotta sign;

they want to certify you received it. Hope it's not trouble."

There was not a lot of privacy in the Post Office; all was fair for the staff to comment on. Jupiter scribbled, "Devon," on the form, saying, "No, it's probably the zoning thing."

He stepped back getting some distance away from Mike.

Dan leaned over Jupiter's shoulder, peeking at the letter in his hand, "Town chasing you, Matt?"

Jupiter turned to face Dan.

"Well, not for years of back taxes like you. I guess they want me to hire you to turn the grain elevator back into a ruin."

Dan laughed and answered, "I wouldn't complain about the restoration business, but I'd rather install a Jacuzzi and a pool for you."

They both glanced up to see the postal employee watching intently. Mike said, making a clear implication, "I thought you were living up there before the zoning laws got passed last year." By this nosiness, Mike let them know he understood what the town was up to.

"It was a close-run thing. I don't think I had my certificate of occupancy yet."

Dan said, "Time to get a lawyer I think. My brother's wife works in a law office in Amarillo if you need a number."

"Thanks for the offer. I'll wait a little longer before I panic."

"You've waited too long now."

The café carried the name 'Angie's', and it sat at the other end of Aniline's main street backed up to the town hall and on a corner of the square. Its windows were thick with steam, and on the outside, streaming with condensation. There was blue tile from sidewalk to the bottom of the windows, stucco up to the awnings, and board and batten faded to black from there up to the roof edge. Angie's had existed all through Aniline's middle age, and it had picked up patinas of style from each decade. It wasn't the woman you would marry; it was the comfortable older sister you went to visit.

Dan and Jupiter located a booth, sat down, and ordered coffee. Jupiter appreciated the booth—he had his back against something substantial, and anyone approaching him was held at bay by the table. He didn't see many people, and he liked that also. He enjoyed the smell of

fried food, the noise of cutlery and banging plates coming from the back, and the voices punctuating the general hum. Angie's Café made him think he belonged in Aniline.

People wandered by as they sat there, saying hello to Dan and talking about the weather.

Both men were contemplating the menu when Jupiter asked, "So Dan, who is Angie? I've been coming here for months, and I've never met anyone named Angie."

Dan glanced up and answered, "Angie was Fredo's wife. You know Alfredo. He still drops in to see how his son is doing running the business. You've seen him—the fat swarthy guy who sits down at the end of the counter."

"What, did she pass away?"

Dan glanced around and then leaned across the table. "Nah, see she ran off. We don't talk about it much because Fredo gets upset. Doesn't think it's our business, and it isn't."

"How many years ago did this happen?"

Dan said, "Oh, years. Must have been in the late sixties. I remember I was in high school. Fredo was too cheap to change the name and the sign, or maybe he believed she'd come back."

"Long time to still be waiting. Long time to be upset," Jupiter said.

"But you see, Angie ran off with a woman. That would hurt a guy's feelings. Amarillo isn't the only town with some strange goings-on. We get it all at one time or another."

"A woman?"

"Yeah, you'd have to ask my wife Sarah about it. She knew both women when she was a little girl, and liked them. According to Sarah's mother, Fredo had it coming."

Jupiter allowed a couple of beats then said, "I never knew, Aniline with its own counter-culture. Next thing, you'll have a rock band."

"You ain't the only one a bubble off ordinary, Matt." There wasn't anything to say about that, so Jupiter let it drop.

Lunch proceeded through ordering, frying, and delivery. None of the food they chose had any pretense of being healthy. Heldritch waited till the food hit the table to get around to what he wanted—with a fry in hand he eased into his topic.

"You know that pump and the tanks you want us to put in?"

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it."

Jupiter didn't have town water pressure at the top of his tower. For

half a year he had lived with a small pump, running on regular one-twenty volt current. It delivered an unconvincing amount of water on demand to the top. At first they tried to re-use the old fire system in the elevator to move water. That turned out to be fanciful. Heldritch had recommended a subcontractor who signed up to install tanks up on top and a powerhouse of a pump to move water up the hundred and forty feet.

“You know your plumber, Gary Hammet?”

“Sure. Haven’t heard from him in awhile. He was supposed to be ready in the spring. Said he was working in Amarillo till then.”

“Gary asked me to talk to you.” Dan took a long pause. “Gary, he’s got a bit of a cash problem. He needs to have the money for your equipment advanced to him. He also asked me if he could get half the labor cost up front.”

“Times must be tough.” Jupiter left a hole in the conversation to see what Dan would do to fill it.

“They’d be tougher if we hadn’t had your elevator projects going. So how ‘bout it? What should I tell Gary?”

“Hmm. I’ll make him a deal. Have him order the equipment COD and have it delivered directly to the grain elevator. That way I pay the supplier myself.”

Dan nodded, hearing the subtext. Then he asked, “Would Gary still get ten percent handling on it?”

“Sure. He has to do the paperwork, and it’s his connections, his supplier.”

“What about the labor? Can you front him?”

“His family lives here in Aniline don’t they? His mom and dad?” Dan nodded yes. “Yeah, tell him I’ll take the chance. Half up front. We can also do it time and materials so he’s not so exposed. Tell him to estimate what time and materials will be plus a percent he names rather than the fixed bid. Then I’ll write a check for half.”

Both men knew Jupiter would pay less this way, and Hammet would run no risk of losing money. It went to fixed price.

Jupiter wanted to sound hard, so he added, “And he should start as soon as he can. I’d like a shower that doesn’t just spit at me.”

“Thanks, Mr. Devon.”

Jupiter noticed Heldritch used his surname. The contractor acknowledged the favor and the relationship with a bit of formality.

Dan dropped him off at the base of the elevator. Jupiter re-entered the building through the old office and saw White had gone out as usual through the broken window, rather than hanging around. He walked back into the old tool room past a standard old-fashioned freight elevator and onto the work floor behind. A pile of burlap bags had blown out from where he had piled them and were nested up in a corner. He returned them to where he had stacked them. He piled an old paint can back on top again. Then he went further into the dark.

Here one of the attractions of the grain elevator, one of its toys, waited for him. He owned a man lift. He snapped an ugly electric switch, and it started up. The man lift was a belt with footboards attached twenty feet apart, set into a vertical wooden shaft. The shaft occupied the star-shaped space between four of the round elevator bins. Boards made flapping sounds down in the shaft below, swished past him heading up, and returned from the dark above into the pit below. The loose belt slapped away on the rollers.

He stepped onto one of the boards coming up at him and grabbed a wooden handrail fastened to the belt. The man-lift jerked him into motion, hurtling up at a speed he estimated over a hundred feet a minute. Within ten feet, it went dark, and he traveled up the shaft smelling the dust that always hung waiting. At the top, he stepped out onto the floor of the distribution shed without stumbling and turned off the lift using the antique sister-switch to the one below. The belt coasted to a stop. Almost certainly, sooner or later, he would strike his head on the coaming of the shaft. He would be badly hurt. Let them come up with something this eccentric in New York. He dared them.