

The Pulse of the Machine

Nina Kiriki Hoffman

for Jay Sheckley, who knows where to cut

Pool balls click against each other like the rattle of dried bones. Cigarette smoke hazes the air, mixing with the less-visible scents of pizza, nachos, lime, alcohol, and humanity. I hear the distant trills and warbles of video games, like the territorial cries of birds. Heat outlines the people in the bar. Their emotion-scent hangs below the ceiling with the smoke. Mostly it is a battling mix of relief, joy, sexual excitement, relaxation; but there is a constant undercurrent of fear and worry because of the Slasher. On the Friday before spring break, all the college students who haven't left Paradise, Idaho, for the week are crowded into the Side Pocket. They feel safe in the bar, but they know that later they will leave this haven and go out into darkness.

I tilt my glass and touch my tongue to the liquid. It bites me, a playful nip, then vanishes before I can taste it back. A cue stick clicks against a ball, then a cascade of clicks, and the muffled thunk of balls hitting cushions, dropping into pockets. I look across the table at Anitra, my best human friend, and say, "Did you play with bones as a child?"

"How do you play with bones?" She sounds distracted. She has ditched her boyfriend, Philip, tonight and I am happy about that. I don't like him. Maybe she no longer likes him either. Our table stands behind a railing on a platform. We sit in darkness, the pool tables green islands of light to one side, the bar dim glimmers of curved light on bottles to the other. In a back corner a large-screen television shows big people in helmets clashing on too-green grass. The bartenders, faces lit from below by work-lights under the lip of the bar, build drinks and murmur to customers. Anitra focuses on the people with the sticks who lean under the lights and tap jewel-colored balls.

I play tag with my drink again and more of it creeps inside me. It is my third drink. I have never tasted alcohol before. The heat in my throat, the flush that raises the hair on my arms, these things remind me of change. I didn't know humans knew what that felt like. I smile at Anitra. "You want to crunch the bones up and lick the marrow out, but some bones are just too big."

She glances at me, her eyebrows up. People behind us cheer because of something they see on television.

"It's the little ones, though, that are fun to play with. My brother Emelya and I had our favorites. We gave the big ones to the younger litter to teach them prey scent, but the little ones..."

"You're making me sick," says Anitra.

I laugh. I lift my glass to toast the memory of my brother, then finish my drink. "My grandmother tosses the little vertebrae and tells fortunes from how they fall."

"You're drunk," says Anitra, reaching for my empty glass.

I consider extending a claw to protect my property, but my territorial imperatives have relaxed with my inhibitions. I let her wrest the glass from me. I lean back, enjoying the chair's cushioned curves, and turn my concentration inward, trying to understand my new transformation. It is like no other I have known. I

glare at my hand. It is human. The form has not changed while I was facing away from a mirror. But inside...

"Terry, I better take you home," Anitra says. "You should have told me you got this way."

"What way?" Can she see the change? I should feel alarm, but I don't.

"Loopy," she says.

I frown. I have heard this term before. People don't apply it to creatures they consider dangerous, so I believe I am all right.

"I didn't know I got that way. I have never tried to drink this before. It smells like poison, but I watched and no one drinking it died. Is this a change that other people don't make?"

"No, a lot of people get loopy when they drink. But you've got your landlady to consider." My landlady is Mormon. I forgot: I promised her I would not drink, though I didn't realize she meant not drink Tom Collinses. I just thought she was saying she didn't want to see me drinking liquid. And I don't, not in front of her.

"Coffee could help," says Anitra. "Come on home with me. I'll make you some." She rises and grasps my wrists, pulling me out of my chair. She is smaller than I am, but determined. I laugh as she pulls my arm across her shoulder. "Try walking," she says.

Balance has fled; up and down are not definite any longer. The bones in my legs have turned liquid.

"One foot in front of the other," she says. We stagger between people and out the door.

The cool night air, with its rich freight of scents, wakes me a little. But I do not wake to my normal knowing. Instead I am aware of a delirious freedom from accustomed restraints. I am not sure why I don't have to think twice about everything I say and do. It is as if the secret part of me walks about without clothes, enjoying the touch of air on its skin. I laugh. Anitra is a blaze of warmth against my side, within my arm, and she smells like wild plants and peppermint and musk. She smells like one of my relatives after a spring run through the forest. Even though these scents are mixed with the nose-stopping, tongue-coating smell of soap, I feel happy to be with her.

She supports me around a corner, into the alley where her tiny yellow car is parked. A sudden wash across my heat sensors, from a nearby shadow: in human form, I am less aware than in lynx form, but I am never heat blind. And I always recognize this scent, a sweat that comes from humans in stalk mode. Everything brightens and amplifies. I hear the breath brushing against damp membranes as it slides in and out of me, Anitra, and the person in the shadow. My arm tightens around Anitra's shoulders before she can shrug me off. Her keys drop from her hand to the pavement. "Terry," she begins, a scolding edge in her voice. A growl spins in my throat as I glance toward the shadow, trying to sharpen focus with eyes that don't respond. I hold out my free hand and watch the buried claws unsheathe.

"Terry," says Anitra, a rich thread of terror in her voice. The pulse in her rises, as the heat seeps away; her muscles lock, and her scent strengthens with fear. Suddenly she becomes prey.

The other person steps out of the shadow, and I force myself to shift attention. I release Anitra, turn toward the other.

It is larger than I. The hair on the back of my neck rises. I hunch toward it, my legs tight with restrained pounce. I growl.

It runs, past Anitra's car, on down the alley, brushing against dumpsters and piles of soiled boxes.

The power, the flux, shudders just beneath my skin; it threads through all my muscles. I draw in breath, calming all systems that govern change. I retract my claws and silence my growl, then turn to face Anitra, remembering why I am always careful in company. The glowing mist that fogged my thoughts has gone.

She crouches, her hand closing around the dropped keys on the pavement. "What happened? What was that?" Her words came out on short puffs of breath. She still surrounds herself with the sharp stink of fear.

"I think it was a person," I say, glancing down the alley where the stalker disappeared.

She rises, flattens against the car. "Not that. Your hand. What happened to it?" Keys poke out between the fingers of her fisted hand.

"I think I'm all right to go home now," I say. "I'll walk. It's not far."

"With the Slasher loose in town?" She straightens, leans forward just a little to look into my face. "I drove you here and I'll drive you home." Then she leans back. "Oh, Terry. Oh, Terry." Her keys fall from her fingers again. "Are you the Slasher?"

"No," I say. Inside me a battle begins: she knows something, but not much; she is the best friend I have made since I came down out of the mountains in search of education; no one outside our family must know, ever, ever, ever again. What am I to do with her? To her? About her?

If I kill her, I know I can stay.

"You're sure? You're sure you're not the Slasher?" She steps away from the car. Her systems begin to settle, pulse slowing.

"I'm not." There have been seven murders in our small town over the past year, and I only committed the first one. It satisfied me in some way I do not understand. My brother Emelya died at the hands of humans, but my anger over that has cooled, the appetite it awoke in me satisfied. My landlady feeds me well enough. I don't have to forage.

Anitra takes two more steps toward me. She holds out her hands. Confused, I hold out mine. She grips and examines them, turning them back and forth, touching the narrow nails. I feel calm, human, and cold.

"Come on," she says. Releasing my hands, she fetches her keys, unlocks the passenger's door and holds it open.

I don't want to get into her car. The proximity will force a decision on me. I will have to think about whether she lives or dies. If she will leave without me, I can shrug and say, oh well, too late, she might forget about it in the morning. If I go with her, she will not leave it alone. She will make it into a memory.

"Please, Terry. Please come."

I untense and go to her car. I climb in and close the door.

She starts the car, raising a low thrum that permeates the car's structure. It was hibernating. We sit snug inside it like two meals. It judders into motion.

"All that about bones—that was true, wasn't it?"

I say nothing.

“I thought I knew you so well. The accent, the walk, the smaller sense of personal space. I saw people like you in Europe during the two years when I was traveling. Terry, who are you?”

I lean against the door, letting the car’s pulse go through me. I can smell its metallic breath. Things go by quickly outside, scentless and unreal. She is not taking me to my landlady’s place. “You should let me out,” I say.

“I should never have let you get drunk. It was just the grades. A’s in chemistry, Terry. I was so happy.”

“I was, too.” Tests are fresh phenomena to me, but Anitra’s excitement was contagious. I mimicked it, because I don’t know how to feel yet. I watch a lot of people. Anitra is my favorite model human.

I don’t want to kill her.

“Terry. Please. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

“Talk to me. I swear I won’t tell anybody. I’d like to analyze you.”

Though she’s majoring in history, Anitra is taking psychology courses. She often tells me about human behavior. I am fascinated. I plan to take classes next semester.

The car’s steady purr slows, then stops. She removes the keys and slides out, locking the door.

I sit. Perhaps I can stay in the car.

She opens my door. “Terry?”

I emerge.

I have been to her place before. She lives in half a duplex on the edge of town. I can smell horses and new green wheat and ditch water, cattails, cattle, dust, and a breath of daffodils on the breeze.

She climbs the two cement steps and turns toward me. The porch light splashes yellow on her dark hair and shoulders, leaving her face in shadow. “Terry. Come on.”

I walk toward her, feeling again the shimmer of power under my skin. The change is near the surface. Sometimes it comes without volition—a sound, a scent will trigger it. Tonight it waits. “Do you have anything to drink?” I ask.

“Tequila—and orange juice, I guess. You want to get drunk again?”

“I don’t know.”

She turns, unlocks the front door, walks into darkness. She flicks a switch, and a hanging wicker lamp gives her living room a speckled yellow glow. “Come in,” she says, going to the television and switching it on.

I curl among the cushions on the couch, watching colored blurs and listening to the low voices of unwed teenage mothers. The unscented flatness of the small screen confuses my perception. Anitra comes from the kitchen with tall orange drinks which smell of citrus and poison. She hands one to me. I drink it, trying to reach a stage of inner transformation where I don’t have to care about secrets.

Presently I feel the laughter invade me. “Spring is coming,” I tell Anitra. She sits in a wicker chair across

from me, her drink on a table near her. “The earth is moist, cool under your pads; the grass hasn’t toughened yet, and the winter bark sloughs off under your claws. Can you smell it?”

“No,” says Anitra.

“It gets in your blood. It feels like this.” I lick my glass.

“Terry, who are you?”

I run my tongue over my teeth. The human mouth is equipped to deal with vegetation: nippers and grinders. I can make all these smooth-backed teeth retract and change.

I hold out my glass to her. She brings me another drink, waits while I finish it. For a while I feel too tense, too conscious of my restraints, but at last the barriers melt. I stare at Anitra, who sits, throned in a spicy-scented wicker chair with a large round back that haloes her upper body. She has her feet tucked up underneath her, so that the whitened knees of her jeans stick out. Her arms rest on the chair’s arms, her hands lax, not clenched. Her dark hair curls about her head like little drifts of duck down. She has her own wild scent, part herbs, part peppermint, part sweat.

“Talk to me,” she says.

The young voices murmur from the television, speaking of school, babies, diapers. Children who have children, the interviewer calls these girls. Do they regret it? If they could go back and start over, would they have done something different?

“Curiosity kills cats,” I say. I have heard this phrase. I am not sure I completely understand it.

“It gets teenage girls pregnant.”

“Can you live with the consequences of your actions?”

“What consequences? What actions?”

I am not thinking clearly. I want to talk; I want to stop talking. “You ask questions. The answers might kill you.”

She grins. “Oh, no, I don’t think so. I’ve seen a lot of weird things. I’ve known you for a year now, and I know some important things about you. Whoever else you are—I don’t think that will change how I feel about you and our friendship.”

“I am a shapeshifter.”

She cocks her head, frowning so that lines show in her forehead. She blinks. “What?”

“I change from one creature into another.”

Heat flushes her, and her heart beats faster. Her pupils dilate. I feel tense, tuned to her slightest shift of movement. Even without her fear-scent to make her attractive, she has become prey again.

I usually don’t feel like this in human form.

She sips her drink, swallows. “See? That didn’t hurt. What do you turn into?”

“A human.”

She shakes her head, smiling, almost laughing. “So what are you in real life?”

“A forest creature. A carnivore. And I must protect myself and my family.”

“What do you mean?” She loses her smile, sets her drink aside. She clenches her hands in her lap. “Protect them against me? I won’t tell anyone.”

“You probably think this is a grand delusion anyway.”

She takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. The drink she set aside, her first, is only half empty. She doesn’t smell loose, the way I still feel; I feel relaxed and tense at once. “No,” she murmurs. “No. I saw your claws.” And then, a whisper, “I did. I saw them.” She sips from her glass again, looks at it, at me. “I can believe anything if I think I’m dreaming or drunk at the time. None of this makes any sense, of course.” She takes a large swallow of her drink. “Would you show me your claws again?”

“No,” I say. I lift my hand, then let it drop, limp, on the couch beside me. I know this is a serious discussion, but somehow I am losing focus. I look at Anitra and she slowly smiles at me.

“Do you kill things?” she asks after a moment.

“Of course.”

“And play with their bones. It doesn’t bother you?”

I remember the run of the hunt, paws striking ground, nose seeking scent, pushing through bushes, all muscles working together, all abilities directed toward a single goal; the strike and the struggle, the taste; the hot feast at the finish that strengthens me for the next hunt. And then, the start, the stalking... “Bother me? It’s when I know I’m alive.”

In a hushed voice, she says, “Do you kill humans to feel alive?”

“No,” I say, and laugh. “They don’t know how to run away or fight back, and I don’t like the way they taste.”

“How do you know?”

“I did kill one. I killed one a year ago. A person who was going to kill other people. A person who had already killed other people. A person like the one who killed my brother. Once was enough.”

She stares at me. She cocks her head sideways, like a bird examining something it wants to eat, not sure whether it is string or a worm.

After a moment, she says, “You would consider killing me? To protect yourself?”

I watch her. “I don’t want to. And it wouldn’t be the kind of hunt I like. But how can I trust you?”

She frowns again. Her brows draw together. She finishes her drink. “Let’s see. If I was you, would I trust me?” She wrestles with it for a while, until I can no longer restrain my chuckles. I imagine Anitra turning into me. I imagine her turning into a black lynx. I have never seen a black lynx, but with her hair color... my own is frosted silver. Setting my glass on the carpet, I collapse among the cushions, feeling drowsy in an unfamiliar way, as if sleep will pounce on me and take me by force.

The teenagers murmur on. I feel warm inside and out, and my chuckles change to purrs. “I think I’d trust

me,” Anitra says. “Can’t you tell by the way I smell? How do you make that sound?”

I close my eyes.

I wake with a hiss. An unknown sound alerts me, and the scents and resonance of the space are all wrong. I claw my way free of something binding, and of a blanket that smells of somebody else, and land on my hands and knees on a carpet unlike the braided rag rug beside my own bed. My mouth tastes like I licked a puddle of oil. Blood throbs in my head. The room tries to whirl past my eyes, but I recognize Anitra’s living room. Her scent marks everything here.

My stomach has gone on a journey of its own. I hope it doesn’t come back.

A knock sounds at the door, the same sound that woke me. “Anitra!” someone yells. I rise on my hind legs, clutching my head.

“Anitra!”

“Oh, God, Philip, what is it?” she yells from another room. I hear her steps, and the movement of smooth fabric against itself. She enters the living room. Her hair sticks out all over her head except it is flattened on one side, and she wears a jewel-blue bathrobe made of something other than animal hair or plant fibers. She notices me, and freezes. Her gaze flicks to the couch, then back to me. I turn and look behind me, see the tatters of a blanket mixed with snippets of rope. She must have tried to confine me while I slept.

“Anitra! I need you!” the voice calls from outside the front door.

Daylight prints a slanted image of the window on the thick green curtain. Anitra stares at me. She smells sour, the way I feel; also a little afraid, but more surprised. I smile and shrug.

She goes to the door. “Philip, go away. I can’t see you just now.”

“Anitra!” He pounds on the door. I hear his body lean against it, slide down the splintery surface. His shoes clatter on the cement steps. He begins to sob.

“We killed that bottle of tequila last night,” Anitra tells me softly. Her voice wobbles. “Have you made up your mind what you’re going to do about me?”

For a moment I don’t know what she’s talking about. I have awakened in a strange place and determined it is not immediately dangerous; I am waiting for more information. Then memory of last night creeps into me, and dark dread follows its trail. “Anitra...”

She stands quietly, hugging herself and looking at me. Her eyes are bloodshot.

“I don’t want to move,” I say.

“What does that mean?”

“I want to get my degree in wildlife and range science here. I can’t do that if you talk about me.”

“I won’t talk about you. I promise.”

I test the scents, the heat, her heartbeat. She believes what she says—for now. But do any of them know what they feel, say what they mean, do what they say? Well... Anitra does more than most. She is my

friend. "All right," I say. What if I'm wrong? What if the information gets away? Can I stop it from traveling? That other time, when we lived in the mountains to the east, there was no stopping the information. Attempting to stop it made everything worse. We had to disappear. It is one of the stories my grandmother tells over and over. She numbers our ancient dead on her crooked fingers. When she speaks of the battles, her claws emerge.

Anitra watches me a moment after I speak, smiles wide, then goes to the door and opens it. A sobbing body collapses inward. "Philip," says Anitra. "You promised not to do this again."

"Anitra," he says, clutching the edge of her robe.

She prods him with a bare toe. "I've got company."

He looks at me and his sobs cease. He is half heat, and smells of Brut, hair oil, sweat, stale coffee, staler wine, tears, and unclean synthetic fibers. He sits up, raising his hand to rake his pale oiled hair into some sort of order, then smooths his mustache. "You could have told me," he says. He slaps dust off his jacket.

"Oh, so now it's my fault you're making an ass of yourself?" She jerks her bathrobe free of him and turns away. "Want some coffee, Terry?"

"Something to clear my mouth," I say. I look down at my self. Somehow my olive coverall has survived unclawed and unspilled-on. I am almost presentable. As Anitra heads for the kitchen, I head for her bathroom. Philip moves around behind me, but I don't turn to look. Lately, every time Anitra learns about a new mental disorder in psychology class she weighs it against her image of Philip and tells me the verdict.

The fan and the light flick on together in the bathroom, where mint toothpaste scent mingles with the odors of sandlewood and soap. I lean toward the mirror. My silver-gilt hair, cropped close to my head, takes only a few licks with a wet comb to settle. I don't know what to do about the red veins in my eyes. I have never seen them there before. Anitra had told me about aspirin. She has a bottle in her cabinet, and I eat two.

In the living room, Anitra hands me a mug with half coffee, half milk in it. She raises her eyebrows and tilts her chin up. I nod, sniff the coffee, and discover she has left the sugar out, which I appreciate. Philip sits on the couch where I slept. He sifts through tatters. "Rope?" he says. "Anitra, what have you been doing?" His pale eyes look from me to Anitra and back.

"I've been telling you and telling you I'm not what you think I am, Philip," says Anitra. She has not offered him coffee. She sits down beside me on the wicker loveseat and leans against me, taking my free hand and lacing her fingers through mine. I can feel the small cold thrill that shakes her, and the hot pulse point at her inner wrist flutters. Her warm thumb traces the creases in my palm. I swallow coffee to drown the purr, an involuntary response I make to being stroked.

"You're disgusting!" cries Philip, leaping up, scattering bits of blanket and rope.

"I've been telling you that, too," says Anitra. She turns her face so that her lips touch my throat, at the base of my jugular. I can feel my claws tense within my fingers and the tips of my ears tingle with nascent ear-tufts. Passion is for lynx form. Anitra doesn't know what she's doing.

Philip's eyes opaque. His heartbeat strengthens. Breath hisses in and out through his clenched teeth. He storms out, slamming the door behind him.

Anitra straightens, moving away from me, and my purr erupts, full-bodied bass, much lower than my speaking voice. She untangles our hands and stares at me. My purr stutters and dies.

She bites her lower lip and glances toward the door. "I'm sorry," she says, and rubs her eyes. "I kept thinking I was the only thing holding him together. Every time I tried to break it off, he'd cry, and beg, and stop taking care of himself. I woke up a couple of weeks ago with the words 'I am not his mother' in my head. But I haven't been able to convince him I'm not going to take care of him anymore... , Terry, did last night happen?"

"Suppose I said no?"

She rises, walks to the television, flicks it on. Live coverage of a rape trial. She turns it off, then wanders to the couch and picks up shredded rope. "What did this? Not scissors. I do remember tying you up." She takes a piece of rope with her to the wicker chair, sits facing me. "Terry?"

"What?"

"Can you talk about it without being drunk?"

"I don't know. I never have before. The defenses are very deep."

"Let's try" Her hands ringer the rope. She is calm, with no fear-scent. "Where did you come from?"

I sip coffee. So many systems in revolt; aspirin and coffee and milk make a strange breakfast. I am not comfortable inside my self, not the way I was last night. My automatic evasions have switched on. But after a moment, I answer. "My family came from what is now Czechoslovakia in the 1800s. Most ended up in Canada, but a few of us live in the Idaho outback. It's not far from here, but you can't get there by road."

"Then you're—you're—oh, this sounds so stupid. An Earth creature?" One side of her mouth smiles. Her gaze drops. She twists the rope and closes her eyes.

I have been to the movies, though I don't process them like most humans do. Sound and sight without scent don't carry enough weight to convince me what I'm seeing is real enough to fall into. Still, I know what she is talking about. Aliens. Extraterrestrials. I laugh, surprising myself.

She peeks up at me, looks down again, sighs. She stares down at her hands. "Last night you told me you killed one person.

You're not the Slasher? I mean, what do I expect? You wouldn't tell me if you were, would you? But—"

I pull my knees up on the loveseat and hug my legs. "You asked me if I would trust you, and I have trusted you. Do you trust me?" I offer her a quick grin. "Can't you tell by how I smell?"

"No," she says, laughing, then stops, startled, putting a hand over her mouth.

"You told me you know me."

She looks at me. Her lips pinch shut. Then she says, "Yes. I did. I didn't know a lot of things about you, but I think the things I did know, I still believe. So yes, I trust you. Okay. You're not the Slasher." She frowns down at the rope in her hands, then tosses it on the floor. "Six other people have died by violence—by claws—in the last year. Is there another... shapeshifter in town?"

"I don't think so. Not one of my family; I would have gotten a letter. But I haven't taken time to

investigate. Now, with spring break . . .” On most of the long breaks I go back to the mountains. This time I had planned to stay in town, see what it’s like with most of the student population gone. From observing my landfamily, I know that the people who live here but aren’t connected to the university have a whole other kind of life, and I have wanted to study it ever since I arrived. Like all human things, it fascinates me.

Anitra nips her lower lip, then says: “There’s a murderer in town. If you found that person, what would you do?”

I reach for my response, and in my mind see two creatures fleeing, too far away for me to catch. I know that one creature is my old response, what my family would do: fight the competition if I feel it is hunting my prey in my territory, or just watch its technique if it doesn’t threaten my supply. The other creature is the response I would make if I understood—if I understood my human half. During the night, something in me has changed; I have moved several steps away from the self I knew. “What would you do?” I ask Anitra.

“Tell the police.”

“Why didn’t you call the police last night?”

“I believed I could trust you. I thought I could control you. Besides, what could I tell them? That you have claws and growl? Anyway, you’re my friend.”

I remember when I first noticed Anitra. Not in first semester chemistry, though we both took the same section. There were two hundred people in that class, filling the air with so many different breaths I became confused and drowsy. I noticed Anitra in algebra. We both sat in the back row. She asked the best questions. And she talked to me when everyone else was still trying to decide who or what I was. I hadn’t learned to copy the walk, to drop my eyes and dodge glances, to meet eyes at the right moments. I always stood too close, trying to sense the shifts in skin temperature, scent, and hair arousal, information I consider vital. Anitra decided I was from another country. She gave me lessons in interactions. She taught me to trust visual and aural clues, to stand farther away, to live in a world of more limited information; and people stopped backing away from me.

I look at her. Something has changed. I know I can never kill her, no matter how necessary it might become. “You’re my friend,” I say. The word means something new to me, different from anything I thought it meant when I heard it or read it. I hold out my hand. She looks at it, then places her hand in mine. She watches as I raise her hand to sniff it, then copies my action. She offers me a shaky smile and says: “What do you eat? I could make toast.”

“Thought you’d already left on vacation,” says Mrs. Henderson, my landlady.

“I was sick last night, and stayed at a friend’s.”

“Celebrating, huh?” She gives me a little grin as I kneel to hug Lionel, the German shepherd. Mrs. Henderson wasn’t always Mormon. She had two children and Mr. Henderson had one when they met and married and she converted. Mr. Henderson isn’t a strict church-goer either, sleeps Sundays away in the recliner, awakening just long enough to smoke a forbidden cigarette and catch a few instant replays. The Hendersons live with the constant company of the TV. The two high school boys still at home, one his, one hers, argue over what to watch until Mr. Henderson takes the remote control away from them.

“I didn’t think you’d like it,” I tell Mrs. Henderson.

“Shh.” She holds an index finger before her smile. “Just don’t tell the old man. He’d want to go with you.”

The moon has been up two hours when I lean out my upstairs window toward the big oak. I have never climbed down it in human form before, but it proves simple, now that I have had time to get comfortable inside my self again. Cows low in the pasture behind the house, and I can smell distant rain, raspberry canes, asphalt, and a trace of hyacinth. I drop quietly to the ground. Spring has almost chased the frost away; soon the Henderson boys will bring out their buckets and flashlights and hunt night-crawlers in the front lawn, spotting, stooping, and pulling like large midnight robins. I’ll have to cut back on my activities then.

Loose gravel on the asphalt slips beneath my moccasins as I trot along the road. I round a curve and spy Anitra’s car, dark and silent between two farm driveways that lead over spring-wheat-furred hills and away. The ticking of the engine glows with heat, and the thumbprint of Anitra’s heat signature, though muted by the car, is still strong. I approach and rap on the window. She lifts a dark shawl to look up at me, then unlocks the passenger door.

As I round the car, I notice another car up the road, also parked. Its engine, too, retains a faint blur of heat. I study it, then climb into Anitra’s car.

“You don’t think we’re going to find anything, do you?” she asks as she starts the car.

“I don’t know if I want to,” I say. “It’s a nice night for a hunt.” The air is rich with spring damp and new green smells. I roll my window down a little as Anitra drives west, the moon throwing the car’s shadow ahead of us. The car up the hill starts and follows.

“We’re safe, aren’t we? The murderer doesn’t use a gun. There are two of us, and one of us is you.”

I answer with a drowsy purr, matching the car’s purr. Emelya and I used to stalk together, and not always to kill. Sometimes the spring or fall just infected us, tracks clear in the moist earth. Sometimes the tingle of the air after summer thundershowers triggered change and stung us into forest-wide runs that ended in mock-fights. I touch a thin white welt on the back of my left hand. Emelya had been a few minutes younger than I. I had teased him that he didn’t have as good control of his claws.

Anitra is not Emelya; she does not have even one scent in common with him. But she wishes to hunt with me. I have longed to hunt with someone.

The vagrants who drift through town stay mostly close to the train tracks. At the place where men load the grain cars, there are sheltered overhangs. I scouted the area when I first came to town. The murderer killed someone there. The murderer strikes at the helpless, almost as if the murderer is hunting for food; the victims are clawed, but not eaten.

Anitra wants to start looking where the grain cars are loaded.

“Someone is following us,” I say.

Anitra glances in her rearview mirror. Reflected headlight glare touches her eyes, pinches her pupils. She flips the mirror to night mode. “Damn,” she says. “Can’t see it.”

“I saw it, but I don’t know cars. It was parked behind you near my place.”

“Did it have a big front? Was it white?”

“I think so.”

“Oh, it’s Philip. He has a white Corvette.” Her lips tighten. “What a nuisance. What do we do now?”

“What do you think he thinks we’re doing?”

She glances at me, then at the road. A chuckle escapes her. “We’re going someplace kinky, maybe to do things with other kinky people.” She laughs. She looks in the now-muted mirror, then squints at our surroundings. We have passed the supermarket-drugstore complex. We are now on the one-way couplet heading south; to our left lurks a string of closed-for-the-evening fast food places. On the right, acres of harvesters and combines loom, blades upraised, like giant metal insects waiting their season to emerge from hibernation. Anitra pulls over and parks next to the field. “People come here to neck—there’s no night watchman, just a light, and it’s easy to find shadows,” she says, “but doesn’t it look like the perfect place for a Satanic rite?”

No one could walk away with these machines. Their enormity renders them safe from thievery. They stand twice as tall as I, their window-cased cabs riding like bubbles on top of them. Streetlights give their upraised ranks of disks and harrows long, spidery shadows.

“He pulled over,” Anitra says, watching the rearview mirror. “Let’s get out.”

I hesitate. I can smell the chill, dewed metal, and the weeds that try to grow, stunted and sunless, beneath the machines. These metal forests have always disturbed me.

“Come on, Terry,” Anitra says, climbing out. She wears what she probably considers a hunting outfit—jeans, black turtleneck, a jean jacket, and heavy-soled hiking boots. She has twisted her hair into a knot at the nape of her neck. Things clink in her pockets as she moves.

I get out. I am wearing a loose, cheap coverall, in case change overtakes me and I have to rip free of it. Somehow, with moonlight snagging on the edges of the machines, change feels distant.

With a careless glance toward Philip’s car, Anitra takes my hand and pulls me in among the farm machinery. Heat sense does me little good among things colder than trees, rocks, and earth. Anitra leads me farther in, wending away so that my sense of the street as a broad open space behind me fades. Trucks rumble by, shifting the block-laid concrete, so I don’t lose the direction.

Anitra ducks down next to the shoulder-high rear wheel of a combine. She tugs me down beside her. We listen to our breathing. Then to Philip’s footsteps, each set with the furtive care of an inept stalker. I can see the edge of Anitra’s grin, sense the building excitement in her spectrum. Philip’s heat signature approaches. Anitra’s hand tightens on mine. I hear another, slithery noise not connected with Philip...

Anitra leaps up as Philip rounds a machine. “Boo!” she yells, and he jumps, all muscles loose, then tense.

“Great suffering God,” Philip yells. “Are you out of your mind, Anitra?” He has been eating onion soup.

“Why are you following us?” Anitra asks.

“I won’t give up on you. I know there’s something in you worth saving. I can’t just stand by and watch you—”

It moves up over the machinery, pressing silent rubber linings to steel surfaces, brushing past paint. It is drawn by our heat and noise. My hand grips Anitra’s shoulder. I stare, waiting for a sight by moonlight

and vagrant streetlight of what I can already sense. It is down-breeze of us—it is a true hunter—but its heat signature comes, dead calm, none of the feverish excitement I usually sense in humans who have broken their conditioning against killing.

“—throw your life away,” Philip finishes. “It’s not too late.”

Anitra glances at me, then looks where I look. “What is it?”

“It’s coming.” My voice sounds thin to me. I search my self for the power of change, but I don’t feel powerful. I don’t feel the animal in me, waiting for a cue to take over. Instead I feel something unknown, a creeping paralysis. The thing’s heat signature is so odd. Its position is so advantageous.

“What’s the matter, Terry?” Anitra asks, glancing at me.

“I’m scared.”

Anitra’s eyes widen, pupils swallowing irises. She shudders, her spectrum flaring. Then she faces forward. “Philip, get out of here. You can’t save me, and Lord knows, I don’t want to try to save you anymore. Go home. Look for someone nice who’ll appreciate you.”

“But Anitra—”

Her shoulder muscles shift under my hand as she rummages in her pocket. She pulls out a Buck knife and opens it. “Go away,” she says, her voice shrill. She waves the knife.

“Anitra..”

“Can’t you see I’m someone else now?” she cries.

It pauses, hidden, on the machine across from us. It is listening. I can’t even hear it breathe.

“Anitra,” Philip says. He sighs. “Maybe tomorrow. Please don’t do anything tonight you’ll regret later.” He turns and walks away.

Anitra whirls to face me. “You can’t be scared,” she says, showing her teeth with each word. “Where do you come from?”

“The mountains.”

“What do you do with the—the bones of your—your prey?”

“Play with them.”

She takes my hand, holds it up. “What’s hidden inside here?”

“Claws,” I say, then glance at the knife in her other hand. Her grip tightens on it. Her face looks fierce. I can feel knowledge of my self reawakening. Anitra has an animal inside her, and so do I. The power of choice slips back, fortifying me. She lets go of my hand.

I look up toward where it waits. Anitra looks too. Her heart beats faster, and a light masking of sweat adds to her hair and body, soap and Bounce scents.

It rises from behind a sheet of metal.

“Can you see it?” I ask Anitra.

“That? It’s some college football player, Terry. Some young frat rat.” She steps forward. “Hey, you!” she yells.

“No,” I whisper, coming up behind her. Now that she has described him, I can almost see him through the haze of strange sense impressions he makes. He is like nothing I have ever sensed.

He raises a hand. His fist clenches around a bar that supports a row of claws poised over his knuckles, metal like the harrows on the machinery around us.

“The Slasher,” Anitra whispers.

He smiles.

The breeze shifts, and I scent him, and suddenly know: despite his odd heat signature, he is just another animal, not some strange machine. He is a large, graceful, well-clawed animal, but he is just another animal. Power fills me. Systems wait for my signal. I am ready.

“Go call the police,” I tell Anitra. “I’ll try not to hurt him.”

She touches my cheek, then runs toward the street.

His glance tracks her, then comes back to me. “I’ll get you,” he says. His voice is low and smooth. “Then I’ll get her. Maybe even the boy.”

I raise my hands and unsheathe my claws.

He gasps. I can sense the heat blossoming in him, as his signature shifts a little closer to the temperature of life. “You,” he whispers. “I saw your work. You did that first one, didn’t you? I saw it in the morgue. I thought about it a lot. How it feels to sculpt a human to death. To make a whole town run scared. I made these claws.” He brandishes them. He wears them on both hands.

I drift nearer to him. The body is just another animal. The mind is some sort of human; Anitra has probably read a case history. I ought to be able to jump him, especially if he keeps talking.

“I dreamed about you. Not the way you look. Those kids who saw you kill him said you looked like a white lion. I dreamed you came to me, and initiated me into the mysteries of the kill.”

A truck rumbles by. I stand just below him. A car slows on the street. Since the Slasher murders, the police have increased night patrols.

“Every living body pumps blood,” he says, his voice gaining volume, “and I can make that machine run faster, or break it open and watch the blood spill out. I can control the machines because I know fear motivates them. I keep them inside at night, or if they come out, I play with them. I learned that from you.” He kneels on his height, lowering his face.

My teeth have changed. The shifts have started, slowly.

“Teach me more,” he whispers.

I stare at him. My ears tingle.

“It’s not enough anymore. The good feeling from the kill goes away too fast. What’s the next mystery?”

Footsteps behind me.

“I thought maybe younger victims,” he says. “When it’s just bums and rummies it’s not like it makes a dent in anybody else’s life. You get some kid and people really get upset. I was looking for kids necking tonight.”

I lift my hands. Just another animal. I grasp his shoulders. What’s the next mystery?

“Hey! What are you doing?”

I pull him down off the combine, and we roll together on the hard-packed earth. His claws rake my ribs, as he awakens from his strange passive killing trance and begins to struggle. I hold one half of him in my upper arms and kick with my feet at the other half, baring my teeth, growling. This is the spine-breaker move, and inside the heat of change and pulse and fight, I realize this and restrain myself. I taste blood and recognize the rust in it. I am not a machine. People are not interchangeable parts. Even though he has tried to become me, I am not him.

“Terry!” Anitra cries, and I sense the others, two of them, as they close in on us. I am human. Humans don’t growl or have claws. People are pulling him away from me. I can feel the cool air across the bleeding scratches on my ribs. I hold my hands above me where I can see them. They are wholly human.

The Slasher struggles and growls in the arms of the police. He still wears his claws. “Are you all right?” Anitra asks, kneeling beside me.

“I think so,” I say. I sit up, resist the impulse to lick my wounds. It’s physically impossible this form, anyway. “I feel confused.”

In Idaho, hard liquor is sold in state stores, which close at seven P.M. The bars close at one in the morning.

Anitra gives me coffee with lots of milk.

The visit to the police station raised my hackles. They had someone bandage my scratches. Strangers should not touch me. They fingerprinted me, because the Slasher kept saying I was guilty. I can’t remember if any of my family got caught this way before, locked into records.

They asked questions: What were Anitra and I doing out there?

Playing a practical joke on a friend.

Didn’t we know it was dangerous?

“We were only going to be there a minute,” Anitra said, sounding injured.

Anitra gave them her phone number. I had to give them my address, but I didn’t want them waking up my Hendersons, so I told them I’d spend the night at Anitra’s.

She closes her hands around her mug of coffee and watches me sip mine. “What happened?”

“I want to go home.”

“Why?”

“I don’t understand it myself. After you left, he talked to me. He saw my human kill, and he—he turned it into a religion. At home, there are things you like to do and things you don’t like, but you do them;

they're just part of the day, that's all. At home I understand what everyone does and why. But he—but he—the death took over his life. How could he take something I did and make it his reason for... I don't feel safe here. I don't understand why you people do things. I—" I look at my human hand and it seems alien. I want to see faces furred and whiskered, ears pointed and tufted. I want to speak in scents.

"That guy is psychotic. Christ, Terry, don't leave because of him. I'd miss you. And I don't even know you yet."

Her face is smooth. She has hands and sits upright. I stare at her for a while and finally she looks like a normal creature.

"There are more like him out here?" I ask.

"Yes," she says. She looks upset. "They're not very common, but they're here." After a minute she says, "He looked different to you, didn't he? When I thought he was just some normal guy, you saw something else."

"Yes," I said. "He was half dead but still moving."

"So you can tell when you meet them. You don't have to live in ignorance like the rest of us."

I look away from her, at the dark television screen. They live with only sound and color. Anitra is right: I still don't understand why they do things, but I can understand things about them they don't know themselves. Face to face, I have an advantage. "But," I say, "I did something, and then he—he wanted to be me. I don't want people to want to be me."

She blows a breath out through her nose. "Didn't you ever have a relative who did something you admired?"

"Of course, all the time."

"Didn't you try to get them to teach you what they were doing?"

"Of course."

"So?" She holds her hands out, palms up.

I push back against the couch, squashing into the cushions. I feel frustrated. She is right. Still, I just want to run away.

She sighs. "If you leave, you'll never understand us," she says.

I sip coffee. I remember something else. "Anitra, in the metal forest—"

"Yes?" She gives me a fleeting smile.

"When I was scared, you said things to me. I remembered who I was. How did you know what to say to me?"

"I think I understand you—a little, anyway." She leans toward me, her eyes bright. "If you stay till the end of the semester, I'll teach you as much as I can about human behavior."

She has always been my best teacher.

"Just another three months," she says. "After that you can decide again."

And besides, she is my friend, and I haven't figured out what that means yet.

She says: "We can go on field trips. I could take you to Seattle."

"Oh, no. No. Paradise has enough people for me." She is my friend, and we went hunting together, the way Emelya and I used to. I wonder if this is what I came down out of the mountains to find. "All right," I say.

She grins very wide, holds out her mug. I click mine against it, like the rattle of bones.