

Sisters of Glass

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Sisters of Glass

D.W.St.John

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**To Valerie Renee,
for endurance on the long run.**

With thanks to

Ray Bradbury for encouragement,

B. J. Dart for line editing,

Jack Vance for advice,

"Karl Latte, best man ever worked for me. Unconventional...."

Auri cocks an eyebrow, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Independent as hell. Born five centuries too late, sees himself as a knight in black ostrich hide. Used to be a cop, but doesn't give a rat's hind end about law. Convince him you're the underdog, and he'll never quit—not while he breathes."

"And you think you can sell him?"

"I can sell him."

"Why should I believe you this time?"

"He's saavy, tough, survival instincts of a mink."

She opens the door to go, "He's so damned good, why doesn't he work for you?"

Tate had hoped she wouldn't ask. "Something happened, he walked away."

"What?"

He says nothing.

With an exasperated laugh, she appraises him with a slow shake of her head, eyes industrial diamond. "Little boys and their secrets. Okay, lets try this: Give me a reason to stay or I'm gone."

Heart stone, Tate looks out over the waters of 2030 L.A.. Did Judas feel this way? "He reads minds, that reason enough?"

She shuts the door, sits, leans forward, eager, "So, tell me."

Also by D.W.St.John

A Terrible Beauty
See Night Run

Author's Caveat

This is a story about decent people in difficult situations. Although this book deals with adult topics, it does so while resorting neither to obscenity nor explicit depictions of violence and intimacy. Nevertheless, it is always wise to preview material to which children are granted access.

*En las mentiras, verdad.... En la verdad, mentiras....
(In lies, truth.... In truth, lies....)*

Fernando D'Ortega y Muñoz,
1932-1982

*Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor,
both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand...
so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark,
that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.
This calls for wisdom:
let he who has understanding
know the number of the beast,
for it is a human number...*

Revelation 13.16

ONE

Magnus Tate watches Auri rise on long legs.

With a look that leaves no doubt in his mind how long she will treasure the memory of their first encounter, she wipes away the residue of lovemaking, "Well, what now?"

Tired, as close to throwing in the towel as he's ever been, he hauls himself erect with a groan. It's been nearly twenty years since he's been this foolish, letting a client sucker him into compromising himself. His age, slipping into her dress she looks half his sixty years. Still, there is something about her that turns men to fools.

"Now? I'm going to send somebody else, that's what I'm going to do."

Hands on hips, she looks at him, appalled, "God, but you're hopeless! I thought you were competent! Don't you get it? They're not cutting it! We're no closer now than we were a month ago."

He gets it.

Stepping into trousers, he pours himself a dose of scotch, offers her one. She waves it away. Oh, yes, he gets it. If he doesn't do something right now, he might as well buy some razors and draw himself a good, hot bath. Maybe he should anyway. He's never liked sending men and women to die. "They tried, and they paid for their failure."

"You said they were good."

The pleasant burn of Chivas dulls the edge of panic. He thinks of the dead. For the hundredth time he sees their faces. He won't have her dirtying them. The look he gives her is easy to understand. "They were good."

"Then what good will another one do?" She grabs her bag, heading for the door and out of his life. "I'm out of time."

Desperate, Tate watches her go, and with her his career, his agency. Fear burrows in his stomach. In this instant he understands how a man will betray a friend. "There is someone..."

"Oh, don't bother." Hand on the door she hesitates, "You've had your chance, I'll try somewhere else."

Another second and she'll be gone. He can't let her go. God help him, he can't. Of course she knew he would react this way. If she knows anything, she knows men. Half a century she's spent them like tokens.

"If anyone can do it, Karl can."

Bored, she sighs, "All right, who is he, and why haven't you mentioned him before?"

"He's been...out of circulation."

She sighs, annoyed. "Retirees, now?"

"He's forty, best man ever worked for me. Unconventional..."

She cocks an eyebrow, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Independent as hell. Born five centuries too late, is what I think. Sees himself as some kind of knight in black ostrich hide. Used to be a cop, but doesn't care about the law. Only cares what's right. You

convince him what you want done is to help the underdog, and he'll never quit—not while he's breathing, anyway."

"And you think we can sell him?"

Magnus knows he can. Karl would be a sucker for it, he can feel it. "I can sell him."

She opens the door. "Why should I believe you this time?"

"He's smart, he's tough, survival instincts of a mink, thinks on his feet."

"If he's so damned good, why doesn't he work for you anymore?"

He'd hoped she wouldn't ask. "Something happened, he walked away."

"Something—what?"

Tate doesn't answer.

"Little boys and their secrets. Okay, let's try this: He walked away to do what?"

"Lives alone up in the hills by the sea in Anglo-Cali, raises cattle, sheep, grows his own vegetables, you know, that kind of thing."

"Oh..." With an exasperated laugh, she appraises him with a slow shake of her head, eyes industrial diamond. "A back-to-the-land has-been? You can do better than that."

Heart stone, he drains his glass, pours another. Is there anything he won't do to hold on to the agency, anyone he won't betray? Disgusted with himself, with what he's about to do, he looks out over the waters of 2030 L.A.. "He's the one we want, Auri. Don't ask me why, just trust me when I say he's the one."

"You know I trust no one."

He knows she won't buy it, tries anyway. "I gave my word."

Her eyes, implacable, stay on him. "Give me a reason to stay or I'm gone."

He has to stop her. She goes, it's all done, all over. He can tell her or he can draw his pension, join the netpunks in their Ultimate Reality stupor.

Did Judas feel this way?

"He reads minds." He looks up to see her jaw drop. "That reason enough?"

She shuts the door, comes back to her perch on the couch. Slender legs splayed, elbows on knees, she leans forward, eager, "So, tell me."

And he does.

God help him, he does.

* * *

The smell of straw, of alfalfa, of molasses cob, of lanolin, of wool and dung hang heavy on the air of the shed.

Karl pushes the piston on the tube clamped between the ewe's jaws, forcing the bolus down past where she can spit it up. Its fear comes through his hands. The ewe is afraid, but in a dull, uninterested way. Released, she runs bawling from the shed out onto wet grass as if it's all a game. Worming time. How he hates it. Just one of life's little pains in the ass. Nothing any stupider than a lamb. Birth them, vet them, feed them, and will they take a pill without fighting for their life? They won't. Got to be done, though. He's heard lambs cough, seen them eat and eat, gaining nothing, livers swimming with ray-like flukes. Bad here by the coast. Snails are the vector. Long wet winters and misty summers make it a constant fight.

Bink, a beagle no bigger than his shoe, rolls happily in dung at his feet. His only company, Bink may be a freak—they have that much in common—but he knows how to have a good time. Found him barely weaned, running down the centerline as if he knew where he was going and was in one damned big hurry to get there. Sweeping alongside in his '53 Ford pickup, Karl scooped him up. On his lap, fleas porpoising through short fur, what he read in Bink was longing for someone to love, a need so strong he suspected that somehow he was reading himself reflected back.

Now, when he can help it, animals are all he touches. Bink is simple. A hunger for cats and jackrabbits to chase. A consuming love for him and for hocks of the lambs Karl slaughters. No undercurrents of dark guile, no greed, no envy, no resentment, no regrets—just love. He'll never find that in a woman, never. He knows—he's tried.

Suddenly Bink springs to short legs, black eyes alert. A low rumble rising from his throat, he tears out of the shed, kicking up straw as he goes. Karl steps up on a bale to look out under the roof, shapeless felt hat pressed up against dusty tin. Churning its way up gravel to the house below is an aquamarine Rancho. Karl breathes, relaxing—only Mel.

Relieved, he groans, slapping his drooping hat against a thigh to dust it of cobwebs. No hurry. Digging a pencil stub from the pocket of a worn Pendleton, he makes a note on a post which lambs he's yet to dose. He wipes his hands on clean straw as Mel winds up the drive, Karl scans the sea a mile away down slope.

Though he grew up here, for him Cape Mendocino never palls. Sea, sky, land and trees clap violently together here as they do nowhere else on earth. Here they gnaw at each other, breaking off pieces and carrying them away for their own. Here he feels more alive than he does anywhere else. Here he's home.

Now what can Mel want? Something, that's sure; he wouldn't bother driving up unless he did. With a tired sigh, Karl heads down to meet him.

Mel parks, gets out, polishes the hood with a sleeve. Stands back, judges, nods approval. Under his breath he says it, the incantation, the benediction. Though Karl is still too far away to hear, he knows what he says: "Bitchin'."

It's about the only word his nephew uses now. Cynthia, the cute seventeen year old down the road is bitchin'. So's the aboriginal music he listens to. Chimichangas are. The Net is. So's the fit of a tight pair of jeans on the tourist chicks who stop at the cafe for a soda and directions every summer.

Some things aren't, though. Helping Mary with the dishes isn't. Neither is studying, nor the price of gas, nor his Uncle Karl, come to that. No, Karl muses as he heads down, Mel's much too old to think an uncle is bitchin'. And if that uncle just happens to have spent the last fifteen years wrestling with you and untangling your fishing line and teaching you to shoot when you didn't have a father around, well, that doesn't count for much either—not to a sixteen year old.

Karl stumbles, catching the toe of his boot on a root, reaches down to rub a smarting knee. Mel spots him, waits. Karl smiles as he comes, Bink running ahead. No, Mel won't run to meet him—hasn't for a long time. He just stands, looking bored, piece of paper in one hand.

"Got a letter for you, Unk, came FedEx from L.A.." He holds it up to the sky, straining to make it out.

A chill washes over Karl as he jerks it out of his hand, "Thanks there, Neph."

Mel doesn't flinch. Used to it. They've had this war going so long neither thinks it even sounds funny, now.

He shrugs, "Thought you might want it before next Saturday when you come down, so I brought it up." Mel watches him expectantly, fingers on one hand grooming a pimply forehead, tee shirt with a picture of a python gripping a baby in its mouth, half swallowed, legs splayed. A meaning there somewhere, a band maybe. Karl's given up guessing and doesn't care enough to ask.

How can a kid change so much in only a few years?

"Going to open it, Unc?"

Karl glances at the envelope and despite the sun, slivers of ice slide down his backbone. So he guessed right—it is from Magnus. He slips it into a pocket. "Not now, worming."

"Aw, come on." Mel trims a nail with his teeth, spits the sliver, "Let's see what it says."

"Later."

"Oh, you mean when I'm gone, huh?"

Karl smiles, sure of the risk he's taking, "You're that anxious, you can stay and help me dose the lambs. Shouldn't take more than another hour. Then we'll open it together. You can read it to me."

Mel gathers a ponytail in his fist. "Okay, be that way."

Karl notices the tell-tale shaved patch and scab at the nape of his neck, and a knife spikes his heart. Reaching out to clasp Mel's hair in a fist, he yanks his head around to see. It's there, all right: the bluish puncture left by the implant gun—the stomata of the hive. A spider of revulsion feels its way up Karl's neck.

Mel squirms in his grasp. "Hey, come on, let me go!"

Disgusted, Karl turns him loose. If the letter's bad, this is worse. Mel may be a smart ass, but he's blood, his sister's son, the only kid he's ever cared about. Now he belongs to them. Karl wants to hit something, somebody. If he thought it would help, he'd hit Mel. But it won't. Nothing will.

Karl whips off his hat, slaps his thigh with it, "What the hell you need with an implant, Mel, will you tell me that?"

Mel smiles, looking down at dirty sneakers, spattered with mud, grease, something green, maybe cow shit. Mary keeps a steer out back of the store, and Mel takes it rolled corn, and a flake of alfalfa when she can browbeat him into it.

Mel stands his ground, "Can't get into college without one, can't get a job either, don't you know that? Don't you know anything, Unc?"

Karl feels sick. He didn't.

It's worse than he thought. Five years and it's much worse. There's nowhere to hide, nowhere the sickness doesn't reach. Run—it follows. Hide—it finds you. What right does he have to judge? Mel's got to live out there, got to function. Not like him. Mel needs the world. Wants it. Hungers for it. The way he did once.

Mel waits, head bobbing to a beat Karl doesn't hear, eyes staring out to sea, blind, seeing, listening to something beamed down from a satellite somewhere above an overcast sky. Still he makes no move to go.

Karl hates to admit curiosity, but itches to know. "What you watching?"

"UR feed," Melvin says too loud for the quiet hill, only the breeze souging through spruce, through bunch grass. "Blue Green Algae concert live from Prince Albert in London. I can see them right in front of me, hear them too. I can even smell the place."

The old terror grips Karl hard. The fear of slipping off the inverted bowl of reality and into the abyss, into Auden's borough of the nightmare, has always scoured his soul raw with dread. For that reason alone he's never seriously considered taking the dip into Ultimate Reality.

It revolts him, too, the thought of being somewhere yet not being there, of leaving your body behind, a husk. Unnatural as corn smut, it defies the will of God. Ridiculously rudimentary, it seems to him—men were not meant to do this. Puritanical though this thought seems, there is no doubt in his mind it is so. Though he's left a fundamentalist upbringing thirty years in the past, something of it sticks yet.

There's something else Karl's always wanted to know. "How do you drive?"

Melvin laughs to hear such ignorance, shakes his head, grinning. "No, Unk, no, you can turn it down anytime you want, you don't have to take full feed." He frowns, searching for a way to describe the miracles of modern technology to a three-toed sloth.

"It's like a memory, a daydream, sort of. You can control it, but anytime you want it, it's there. Get it? Just hit the juice and look out, here it comes, bam, and you're there." He lifts an arm, no longer the arm of a boy, beefy, muscular, and points into space. "There, some guys are toking." He breathes, long, deep, "I can smell it, and there's ale spilled all over, and there must be a toilet stopped up, too, I'll bet." He laughs.

"And do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Turn it off."

"Sure."

"Oh, yeah?" Karl doesn't believe him. "When?"

"All the time."

He won't let it lie. "When last?"

Mel frowns, "Don't know...forget...sometime."

Karl nods, repulsed by this kid he's watched grow up, mind linked to some global widow's web. He sees him trailing invisible fibers linking him to low earth orbiting satellites, and thinks of a moth bound and suspended, awaiting a spider.

Why doesn't he leave, what's he waiting for?

"Thanks for bringing this up, Mel," he says, leaning close to his ear, speaking loud enough so he'll be sure and hear over whatever's happening inside his skull. "See you, thanks for the lesson."

"Don't have to yell," Mel says to his back, "Sure is a long way up here, and man is gas getting high."

Understanding, Karl says he'll transfer fifty next time he goes down to the store.

Mel smiles, "See ya," he says, running for his Ford, rolling slowly down the hill, cautious about chipping the paint with flying gravel.

Karl watches him go—first visitor in a year, then lets his eyes rove the hills, spruce falling away to pasture. Wind fresh from the sea rocks him, thermal bringing warmth in the dead of February. From where? Tahiti, maybe.

Petrolia, westernmost town in the continental US. Misnamed for oil that never was. Home to a handful of ranchers, most of whom have lived there for generations. Not an easy club to break into. One family, moved to the cape before Karl was born, is still the new folks in the Walker place.

Though he'd spent fifteen years away, Karl, born into one of the original homestead families, was just "The Kleiner boy." At forty, still a boy, coming home from the big city. They knew him, went to school with him. Used to his ways, they let him be. And that's what it's all about, or so he thinks now—being left alone.

Bink at his heels, Karl slogs slowly back up the hill to the waiting lambs. Absently, he feels in his jeans pocket, counting five of the big pills. Enough to finish. Past bawling lambs, he walks, on up into the spruce—the best place for him to think, the only place. He finds a thirty-year-old Sitka stump, sits, takes out the envelope.

He doesn't have to open it, knows what's in it, knows he doesn't want to read it. He thinks about tearing it up, forgetting it ever came, denying it if it comes to that. Five years is a long time to live alone, cut off—from the world, from friends, from everything. Five long, wet winters Magnus has left him alone. Now what?

Tearing it open, he blows inside to separate thin reactive paper, gets a chemical whiff. Electronically generated, never signed, never touched. He opens it, reads, finds no surprise.

One line is all. Just one:

K.

AUNT CELIA ILL. TICKET WAITING. WILL MEET.

M.

One line, but enough. Karl curses into the wind. Bink sits up, whining, nose working, eyes alert, making sure he doesn't miss anything. The wind flutters the paper in his hand and he sees the cape through the eyes of a man who may never see it again. Unbearably beautiful it seems now. No way around it. He'll have to go. After everything, Tate's just about the only friend he has. If he needs him bad enough to send this, after five years leaving him alone, he's got to go.

Stomach prickling, he thinks about the city. Okay, he misses it—part of him does anyway. But there is at least as much dread in the constriction in his throat as anticipation. He can feel it from here: the festering heat, the malignancy of L.A.

Rain spatters his hat, his jeans. A drop strikes the FAX in his hands, eats through as if it were sulfuric. Karl smiles. Magnus and his caution. Of course he would use water reactive paper. Rising, he leaves it on the stump and heads down to the shed.

He'll leave at dusk.

* * *

Karl lies back, enjoying first class.

First flight in five years and he's got room to stretch. Tate does have his good points. In the carrier on the seat beside him, Bink sighs, nose pressed through mesh. Checking for stewards, Karl unhooks the door and he pushes out, worming his way under his jacket. Karl latches the door and settles back, slipping on the headset he bought on the way to the airport.

Slimmer, less bulky than his old one, it's not much more than a spaghetti thin hoop connecting earpieces with the laser projectors at his temples. Outdated as it is he was lucky to find one at all and is relieved to see that despite the thick layer of dust on the package, it powers up.

Karl's rusty. Hasn't had one on since he left. This one's better, faster, can do more—how much he's not sure. He calls up news archives. So far so good. Each movement of his eyes takes him to another rush of news casts. The arrow floats, a neon defect on a cornea. A flick, a blink, and it plays real time. Another blink zips it forward one day per second. Not too bad. And that's good. Five years is a lot to review.

"The President," says a fawning blonde head with the voice of a blue vid queen, "is intent upon working with the Chinese to foster human rights by a policy of engagement while at the same time insuring continued trade by reaffirming MFN trading status...."

"Uh, huh."

Zip.

"...bisexual goddess, lead singer of Priapic Pump, whose mega hits include, I Want To Be With You When You UR, says she's working on curbing her addictions to group sex, drugs and UR." In full war paint, she speaks: "I'm all turned around, like, it's been over a week now, since I..."

"All for you, babe."

Zip.

"Democrats in Congress are not willing to accept a Republican budget slashed to less than a twenty percent increase as it stands, says House Majority Leader Mann. 'We can not, we will not, stand by and let these mean-hearted...'"

"God, no, man, don't stand for it."

Zip.

"...Rodney and Heather, seventeen and twenty at the time of their alleged torture-mutilation of a five-year-old neighbor, are to undergo rigorous psychiatric counseling as a condition of amnesty..."

"Christ, yes, counsel the hell out of them."

Zip.

"...Education Secretary Linnet says that despite a decline in test scores, the self-esteem of our students is steadily on the rise."

"Thank God for that."

Zip.

"...at the moving dedication today of a monument to gay sacrifice and suffering in the continuing war against the AIDS epidemic was attended by a host of luminaries including..."

"What, and the flu gets nothing?"

Zip.

"...study by UCLA geologists predicts a decline in the rate of descent of the San Andreas subversion fault from more than 10 meters per year to less than two..."

"Oh, yeah, with their track record for accuracy I'll rush right out and pick myself up a seaside lot."

Zip.

"...roundup of all weapons in private hands in Mexicali from Mexico to the Anglo-Cali border is nearing completion. Experts predict a fall in crime when..."

Snarling in disgust, Karl rips the headset over his head into his lap, pressing temples between his hands. Headsets always did give him a headache; after so long, it's worse. In five years nothing's changed anyway. Still, if he's going to be working, he needs to know what he's facing. Resigned, he pushes on.

No sooner does he seat the headset behind his ears, than a Netad assails him, loud and insistent.

"The most beautiful women in the world."

Sisters talk, laugh, pose. The voiceover hovers barely above a whisper, as if not to betray our presence among them.

"They live for one purpose—to entertain you, to fascinate you, to make your evening unforgettable. Is there a more luxurious gift than an evening with a goddess? Is there any better way to show the world that you deserve the best, than to be seen with the embodiment of perfection?"

Karl watches Sisters work out in leotards—svelte, vibrant, demure. It's been twenty years since he's thought about them. Pleasing as the view may be, he hasn't the time to waste on it. His eye moves to cancel the ad, to call up more news. For no reason he can say, he lets it run.

"Each one genetically predisposed to fall in love with one man, just

one, one in a billion. Will you be the one for her?"

A nightclub like any other nightclub. A man, nondescript—might be anybody—sits beside Terese, a short-haired blond, half intellectual, half harlot. They gaze into each other's eyes, fascination evidently requited.

"It happened to this man. It's happened to others. He has found an adorable, physically pure, absolutely devoted life mate in a Sister from Genesystems. Will you?"

Up close, Terese looks directly into Karl's eyes, searching his face, and he feels his vitals slowly drawn from him. It is that kind of look. "I'm waiting to meet you."

When the next ad blares he jumps, blinks, tries the index, scrolling through, flashing works hypnotic. The heading Digitally Mastered Immortals catches his eye and he scrolls back. He calls it up, lets it play. A woman, very old, speaks facing the camera dead on, no actress, the real McCoy.

"I want what everyone wants," she says, voice like a length of chain on a tin roof, "a shot at something that endures, a chance to live, that's all."

The announcer boasting a cleft chin, ice blue pompadour the size of a soufflé, and a voice that wouldn't run off steaming waffles, strains to look contemplative. "This woman has just purchased immortality."

What the hell?

"A trillion and she'll live forever. Genesystems, the leading innovator in digital technology, offers an analysis of every aspect of her personality, myriad tests, behavioral, physiological and psychological, the results of which are used to create a net program that will, with a certainty of 99.762 percent, recreate the woman's own reactions to any given situation. This they guarantee."

Karl smiles. Or what, your money back?

"...will be stored in vaults in three distant countries to insure continuation in the event of terrorism, war or natural disaster."

"So," Karl says, "even if everybody really alive dies, you can still go right on almost living. Where do I sign?"

"Some say it's selfish," Blue Hair says, "that you should spend this much to insure you will survive when there is so much else worthwhile that might be done with such a big chunk of change."

The old woman grins, "Oh, yes," she says, voice quivering with excitement, or senility, it's hard to tell, "Some people think so. My husband wanted to leave it to the kids and grandkids, but he's gone now. It's mine, I can do what I want with it."

"And what is it that you hope to do by outliving your body?"

She looks at the camera, eyes bleary, face grotesquely swollen, skin hanging loose and watery. A reaction to prednasone, Karl guesses—ruined lungs from a life spent sucking smoke.

She smiles, not a nice smile. "Whatever I want, what I've always wanted, I guess. There sure as hell won't be any way to stop me, will there? I don't expect God could even touch me then, could he?"

Suggestive smile a slash on his face, Blue Hair leans close, "And what might that be?"

Coquettishly, she smiles, and the effect is hideous. She says nothing, just smiles, and there above the cloud layer in the spring sunshine, Karl's skin crawls. Head throbbing, he pulls off the headset for the second time, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger to ease the throbbing in his head. He feels dirty, wants a shower. That was no sweet grandma. Maybe it's just sexual antics she plans, but he doesn't think so—not just. Old lady or no, that is one scary bitch.

Thinking, Karl reaches inside his jacket, strokes Bink under his chin, soft whiskers, teeth. Bink moans in sleep. So that's it—everlasting life, of a kind anyway. They've done it, beaten time, whipped the reaper. Though she'll die, she'll leave behind a simulation. To do what?

He sees it. God, but he's stupid—of course—the net. Without a body where else would they go? A mausoleum for ambulatory dead. Why not?

If he could only go home. This world is so nuts, so far over the edge, so far beyond redemption.... He's a foreigner here. He wants no part of this sickness, this insanity. He wonders if anyone else feels the same. Is he the only one who sees it for what it is? He takes a look in to find Bink already asleep in the warmth under his arm.

A good definition of insanity, thinking you're the only one who sees truth. Then he's nuts. The article is five years old. That means she's dead, got to be, and out there somewhere.

Net access? That's it? A trillion dollars and you can spend eternity in UR? An eternity in Disneyland? It's a small world after all, huh? It's never occurred to him hell would charge admission.

He reaches for the set, slips it back on.

He's got a lot to catch up on, after all, it seems.

Welcome back to the real world.

* * *

The bird sets Karl on the roof fifty stories up, thirty over the water. Same old place. Feet hitting cement, he smiles. Just like the old man to stay put through it all. L.A. a reef, half the state gone back to Mexico, why should Tate let any of it bother him? Stubborn SOB, always has been. It's one of the things Karl likes about him.

The bird lifts off, whipping hair in his eyes. He squints, watching it rise into clear sky. Roof door's locked. He tries a pass of his palm over the lock and it hums, opening. So he's still in the system. Unsure whether or not this pleases him, he starts down.

Inside, Rick looks up from his desk, sees him for the first time in half a decade. His face sours, "Oh God...."

Tall, good looking, to Karl he's just another faggot. "How are tricks, Rick?"

With a sigh, Rick rises, "Wouldn't you like to know." He minces to open the door. "Karl's here, Mr. Tate."

Karl smiles, passing inside, "Missed you too, Ricky."

With a venomous look, Rick closes the door silently behind him.

Tate waits behind his desk. "You two still oil and water, I see."

Karl shrugs, "Rick's still Rick. Why have you put up with him all these years?"

Tate shrugs, "If you weren't such a Neanderthal you'd see why—he's good." He motions to a chair.

Tate's office is big, dark, cool—same as he remembers it. Same as he dreams about it. Stupid, dreaming about the office rather than the carport where it happened, but he does. He dreams he's called in to be sent out again. That's the nightmare makes him sweat. Now here he is.

"Cold in here," he says, stalling. Kept the same temperature winter and summer, cool and moist—Tate's skin demands it. That or it dries out, splits, bleeds. Picked it up in a covert op gone sour in some jungle somewhere around the turn of the century. Fungus. Hundreds of species—all bad—always there waiting. Nothing they can do.

Karl doesn't want to sit. He goes to the windows that wrap around the office, stands looking out, wishing he'd never come. Akibia, each leaf a hand, fingers hanging slack, trails down over the glass from planters above, giving the whole scene an underwater feel, as if tendrils are rills of water cascading over them. Then there's the view.

"Jesus...." Taking it all in, he doesn't want to move, to breathe, just wants to look, and keep on looking.

He's always loved the view from here, but he'd forgotten the impact of it, the way it always hit him. Half Venice, half Shanghai, the platform towers hovering over a drowned city, water as far as he can see, it pulses with life, with movement. A city of water and hills since the Big Slip back in 2020, L.A. water surface sells one to one for what the land under it had. L.A. let a little thing a hundred feet of sea water dampen the party? Not likely.

Tate watches from his desk, amused. "Forget what it looks like?"

Thirty stories below, a stalled taxi holds up the file of boats crawling between junks, houseboats, floating restaurants. Raucous air horns drift up on the breeze. Hills gone, the traffic's no better, still just as slow, the air bad as ever.

It's beautiful, sure, staggeringly, even, but only from up here. At sea level it's the same city—the same elaborately decorated cesspool. "I haven't forgotten."

Senses alert, Karl waits as if a tiger squats across the room. He waits for it: the pitch, the hook.

"How was your trip?" Tate says, offhandedly, which is bull. Nothing he does is offhanded, not ever. Ten years working for Tate taught him that.

Karl shrugs, amazed just as he is every time he sees him. To anybody else, Tate would look like just another old man, harmless, bumbling even, everybody's grandpa. Looks lie. "Some turbulence over the bay." Stalling, that's all he's doing, circling, feeling for an opening, a weakness, for something to grab hold of. Then comes the take down.

Old eyes calculating, Tate peers at him over woven hands. "How about the traffic at LAX?"

Tate's aged. Karl wonders if he looks as bad. Stomach tight with anxiety, Karl wishes he would get on with it. "I'm here, what is it you want?"

Tate frowns in that way of his that could wring guilt from a saint. It's the way he works: seeding guilt, then reaping whatever it is he wants. Right now, what he wants is Karl. Under his hawkish gaze, Karl takes his usual place on the couch.

"Hate to bother you, Karl, you know that."

Karl doesn't, but nods anyway, runs a hand over the bronze reclining nude on the glass table next to the couch. Calf, thigh, belly, breast. His hand moves over glacial bronze, not thinking—his habit during these interviews. "I'm not coming back, Magnus."

Tate perches on the front of his desk, pulls trousers up frail legs so as not to break the crease. "I didn't ask you to, did I?"

Motioning him back onto the couch with a hand from across the room, Tate starts his song and dance. Karl knows it, saw it for ten years. The same subtle, polite beginning that slides into something ugly. This feeble looking old man is anything but. Karl has seen him kill effortlessly.

Karl knows he should get up, get up now and go out the door. But here he sits, waiting for the hard push he knows is coming.

What can Tate want of him? Out of circulation five years, rusty, soft, stale—he's a lousy candidate for

anything tougher than babysitting. He must have a new stable to draw from. Why him? It can only be one thing, but he wants to hear it. "Then why am I here?"

"Why?" Tate says, offended. "Isn't it just scarcely possible I might like to chat with an old friend, share a drink?"

Here comes the guilt. Even though Karl knows what he's doing, it still works. It's like watching a magician whose tricks you know inside and out and still being flummoxed by his sleight of hand. He's misjudged him, and he feels lousy about it, which, he knows, is just what Tate wants. "I guess it's possible." Is it, he wonders? "It's also possible the San Andreas will send a tsunami to wipe out the plats." Karl considers: Magnus with no ulterior motive versus the city of angels scoured clean in five circuits of a secondhand. He'll put his money on the wave.

"I was hoping we could sit, talk, you know, things old friends do."

Karl barely resists smiling. Tate wanting to chat, now that's rich. He must have something, something cinched tight as a rope around his neck. He can't feel it yet, but he will, oh, yes, he will. If he'd sent for him, it was there all right. What worries him is he has no idea what it is.

"You look as if you don't believe me, Karl."

How much of this can he stand? "I've got Bink waiting in a carrier on the roof and he doesn't like it. Let's just skip the part where we make nice and get to what it is you want."

Tate hoists himself up, sagging arms levering him away from the desk. "I was hoping you'd have a drink with me. I had some nouveau Beaujolais flown in from down under, I know how you appreciate it." He shrugs, lifts a bottle from the rack under the bar. "If you're in a rush, I understand. I can always send it home with Rick."

Karl hasn't tasted it in five years. The memory is stronger than the first dead ripe apricot on a warm June day.

Tate wrings out the cork, takes down two glasses. They ring in his hands.

He takes the glass, "I'm not in that big of a hurry."

Tate smiles, "Thought not." He takes one for himself, fills both as Karl watches, anticipation watering his mouth.

"I brought you in because I heard something and was worried about you, that's all."

Hair prickles on the back of Karl's neck. He should have known. No one leaves the agency, not as long as he has anything left to give. Wrung dry, they're put out to grass. With a niggling GS-7 pension and commissary privileges they mark their days. No one draws it long.

First choice is biting down on a shotgun barrel. A pile of neatly folded clothing on the high tide line of a winter rip tide beach runs a fashionable second.

It's a hard business—one not many can live without. Few have families. The traveling, the secrecy, the temptation all see to that. Turned out to grass, it becomes all too clear the job was all they had.

Karl's out and he'll stay that way, thank you. No one bedroom patio apartment in the valley for him. No damn way. Nothing Tate can say will change his mind.

"I've left you alone for five years, Karl. Don't think I haven't needed you."

Tate is scaring him. For him to be laying it on this thick whatever he wants must be plenty. "The people I get now have no tact, no subtlety. Bulls in a china closet, all, women the worst, and of course," he smiles as if enjoying an inside joke, "none of them have your talent."

He loads the word and Karl squirms uncomfortably on the couch, hand stroking cool bronze. He's never liked discussing it, doesn't want to, now.

If it weren't for his talent he would never have heard of Tate, the Agency, any of it. If it weren't for the talent he might have some sliver of a chance at what most poor slobs call happiness. As it is, no. Never has.

Not liking where this is taking him, he fights the urge to get up, get out. Nerves prickling, he watches Tate ease himself forward in his chair with a long groan. "I heard from a contact at EPA that your little Timbuktu falls inside the border of the new UN wilderness area."

Karl stops breathing, stops thinking. There it is, the sledge between the eyes.

"Oh, oh, I know, you're thinking I finagled this to bring you back in. I didn't."

Like hell he didn't. "So you say, but we both know you're a liar, don't we?"

Tate folds heavily veined hands carefully on spotless walnut that reflects the sheen of freshly manicured nails. He might have been praying. A mirthless up-tick at the corners of his mouth betrays rising ire. Karl sees it and is satisfied he's gotten to him. One for him. He'll take his soon enough. When hurt, Tate always gets his back, gets it in spades.

"They're shooting the line straight up the coast—Russian River Gulch to Cape Mendocino to Crescent City. Foolishly I thought you might want to know. Obviously, I was wrong."

Karl's not listening.

This changes everything. It means moving off, giving up land his family homesteaded more than two hundred years before. Four square kilometers of spruce, alder slope, perennial pasture, reprod timber, not that he'd touch it. Tired, the land is. Over grazed, over cut, overused. It needs rest, and it'll get it. The old cabin is there still. A Duroc sow and eight wieners shelter in it now.

Land held for eight generations. Ponds filled from hillside seeps. Water cold enough to cramp your feet in August. Largemouth bass long as his arm. Coastal deer small enough to slip under the bottom wire of a cattle fence. Rolling hills long overgrazed where Sitka he planted twenty years before are just coming into their own—the ones young deer haven't girdled polishing velvet. Apple orchard planted by his great grandfather, trees that give bushels of tart, crisp, russeted apples. Grimes Golden, Spitzenburg, Cox Orange Pippin, Ashmead's Kernel, they are all there. And others, apples with no name, cultivars forgotten. Apples that hang on until Christmas. Picked of a frosty morning, translucent at the core with sugar. Real apples. Trees that feed deer and porcupine with windfalls. Five acres of trees gnarled and bent with age and sea wind that whips up and over the cliffs with force enough to make flutes of hundred foot spruce.

When they are done, all sign of his family's two century tenure will be erased. With earth movers, with C-4, with a creed that equates man with smut. He's seen their work in Sonoma county. Little wart on the ass of the world: Valley Ford. Whole town, roads, houses, everything wiped away, turned back to nature. As if She wanted it.

Even the ponds will go, drained along with a spring he keeps open for deer during September dry spells. They will thirst or go elsewhere. It's the way of nature.

Last male scion of a family who herded turkeys over the hills to Scottsburg to meet the rail line. Hens and toms roosting nights in trees, gorging on fallen acorns, they made their way to market in San Francisco. The drives went with open range. He won't join them. He won't let them wipe away all he has, all he's done, all he is.

Across the room he watches Tate. He's got him. Tate's always known precisely where to find the artery, the pressure point. He's found his.

"Nice of you to tell me. Why not just put it in the cable, why make me come all the way down here to hear it?"

Tate pauses to take a long, slow sip of wine, swishes, swallows.

Tate's needling him. Karl refuses to take the bait. He must stay cool. Especially here. Especially now.

"I never could see broadcasting what I know from the rooftops. You know that. Besides, I may have a solution for you."

Sickeningly, Karl's heart leaps.

"A client came to see me. Daughter's in some trouble. She wants her kept safe, brought home."

Karl swirls tart new wine on his tongue, not believing. "That's it? Some spoiled brat with a tit in the wringer? I don't care whose poor little rich girl it is, I don't chase runaways, Magnus, you know that. You've sunk pretty low. I mean, come on, hire a dick for Christ's sake."

Tate nods, as if he'd expected this, slips some holograms out of his desk, spreads them over the desktop with wrinkled hands. He motions Karl over, "Come look at these." The reverence with which Tate handles them intrigues him. When he sees, Karl understands.

For Karl, time stalls. Up at him gaze angels. Not publicity shots, these are candid, not posed—angels at rest. Perfection. Women of dreams, of fantasy, they draw him down until fighting, he tears himself away. A fist clenches his guts. "Sisters. When you said a daughter, I thought—"

"I know what you thought." Tate's pleased with himself. "I thought a look would be enough." Old dog's face smiling, creased heavily enough to hurt. "I'll let our client tell you the rest."

Unable to resist, Karl reaches down, but before he can touch them, Tate slides them into a drawer. "I need you frosty on this one, Karl."

"You mean this client is their mother?" He's never thought of Sisters as having mothers, though he can't say why not.

Tate goes to the window. "This one's bad, Karl, bad as they come, maybe impossible. I don't know if I should have called you in. I'm desperate, that's all."

Karl watches his back, trying to decide if he's really struggling with something, or if it's just a performance.

"They're being murdered, Karl, and we can't stop it."

"Why isn't the FBI down there?"

"The plats are privately owned, out of territorial waters, sovereign, you know that—we go by invitation only. On 66 they handle their own security, besides, they're only near-human—that makes what's happening theft, not murder."

All this he knows. What disturbs Karl is that the faces in those holos aren't the faces of things. What they are he doesn't want to think about.

Tate goes back to his desk, falls into the oversize chair, leather moaning. "I didn't want to call you away from your mountain, but I had no choice."

That's a new one—Karl doesn't buy it for a second.

"This client, she has juice, and she's using it all. She's in tight with some senators. Some dirt she has on them from way back, something sexual, I'm sure. With those old goats it usually is."

Tate rubs his temples between thumb and finger, looking tired. "Funding for the agency will be coming up in committee next month, and I've been getting the message that if she's not happy, we won't be either." Tate looks troubled. "I've got to tell you, though, Karl, if you were smart, you'd go out that door right now and never look back."

Tate's scared, and he doesn't scare. Uneasy, Karl glances at the door, refills his glass from the open bottle on the bar, thinking it over. Okay, so maybe he's a little bit pleased Tate called him in. That is pathetic—him needing the old man's approval. Loathing himself for it, Karl sets down his glass, starts for the door. Let them come.

Boy president makes the fringe of the Greens into a law unto themselves, arms them, and sics them on cattle ranchers, loggers, on anybody living on the land, out of the cities. Hard to control, and not on the contributor lists, they're the new kulaks.

Arrogant cultural revolutionaries with ponytails and flachette carbines, semi-official, but not so close their abuses can't be disavowed, Greens are the perfect enforcement arm of an environmental policy reducing men to the status of noxious pests in nature's eden.

Their first attempts meet with fierce resistance as ranchers and farmers fight for their way of life with the single-shot rifles and shotguns the law allows them. The commander-in-chief, a man Voltaire might have called a hero, calls in napalm and whole towns evaporate in jellied flame. Mass graves are left marked by nothing more than earth mover tracks cracking in the heat of the sun.

Losing is a given, but Karl isn't afraid to die for what's his. But there's Mary, Melvin, and everybody else on the cape. Like him, they'll be pushed out. What right does he have to decide for them?

Hand on knob, Karl hesitates. He can go. But then he'll never know why he called him back. Now he can feel it—the rope around his neck. He leans, back to the door, "What do you want from me?"

"I'm going to let her tell you that. I've got Rick making an appointment right now." Tate stalls, examining his hands, which is odd because Tate never stalls. "You know Alandro?"

"Never met him."

"Came after you left, I guess. You would have liked him. Good, very good. Called in from the plat two weeks ago, watch this, now."

A face materializes in the air between them. "So far, I'm not doing much better than the others." Intelligent eyes Alandro has. He seems sincere, worried. Very worried.

"Can't get the subject to talk to me. As for the other thing, I don't like what I'm finding. In the week I've been here I've seen three of them strangled and three perps caught." He shrugs. "Sounds good, I know. It's not. Nothing changes. It just goes on and on." He searches for words, "It's as if they're actors in some vid that just step into the role and take over for the one we bust. And there are the other ones, the netpunks, come out of their trance to do lookout for an hour, then drop back out of sight. It's like some impossible conspiracy. I don't like it. Nothing about it feels right. This whole place gives me the meemies. For some reason I can tell I'm fooling nobody with this cover." He seems to shake off a shudder, "Tomorrow, same time." And he's gone.

Karl waits for Tate to say something else. He doesn't. "Where is he now?"

Tate shakes his head, "Gone."

Karl swallows, draining his glass, savoring its piquancy, bouquet so fresh he imagines he can sense the feet used to crush it, the oak vat, the odd leaf in the mash. He had no idea how much he missed this. It's not like Tate to be so tightlipped. "Come on, this is like pulling teeth, gone where, Tahiti, to pasture, insane, what?"

Tate goes back to examining his nails, "His liver we traced as far as Paris, a kidney to Perth, skin matching his DNA profile surfaced in a burn clinic in Quebec. His chip we found on the continental shelf with whatever else they couldn't use." Tate leans back in his chair, linking hands behind his head. "So, what do you say?"

Karl swallows, sets down his glass. His instincts tell him to run. Far and fast. "You know anybody that's still breathing?"

"I would have thought this was right up your alley, I mean it's got everything: murder, damsels in distress, your fixation with the underdog—"

"Look, Magnus, just because I know this stuff exists doesn't mean I want to roll around in it like a dog in dung."

"I know how you were raised, but I thought knowing Sara you'd gotten over that."

He doesn't like it that he brings her up. "That's not it."

"Well, what is it, then?"

Feeling caged, Karl paces the office. He hates sitting, being still, hates it worse than most everything else about being here. "It's the whole thing, making these things, these dolls, these women, if that's what they are. Raising them to be the ultimate escorts. It's sick, it's lousy, the whole thing is. I want no part of it."

Again Tate lays the images out across his desk one by one, looks them over. He taps his lower lip with a finger, humming tonelessly, not a song. He never hums an actual tune, just kind of a loop, same melody round and round. Tate lifts one for Karl to see. "This one—name's Deena—was found in her apartment. Right in the tower."

To Karl's puzzled look he says, "Oh, that's right, you've never been. Sisters Tower, it's out on 66. They live on the upper floors, security's very tight. She played harpsichord," he says, reading off the back of the holo, "harp, painted—oils, spoke, let's see, six, no, seven languages, worked in the home for kids of UR addicts in L.A.." He sets the picture face down on the desktop, squares it with a fingertip. "Strangled, slowly, must have taken more than an hour is what Alandro said. You know what it must be like to die like that, Karl?"

Karl knows. He knows exactly, but he isn't talking about it—not to Tate, not to anybody.

Tate blinks and she appears in the air between them solid as flesh.

Karl looks closely at him, for the first time getting it. "You did it, you let them do you."

Tate's lost for a second, "Oh, you mean the implant, yeah, sure. Can't live without it, now." He smiles, "You're still out in the cold, huh?" He laughs, rasp on dry oak. "Luddite to the end. Look at her, Karl."

Karl looks, feels the pull of her, a force that in the flesh must have been ten times what he feels now.

"Look at that face. So she was made, was it her fault? Was it, Karl, I'm asking you?"

Karl can't look at those accusing eyes. He goes to the window, opens it, breathes in the stench of saltwater, kelp, sewage. It helps anyway.

Tate blinks and she fades, "Out of the original thousand there aren't sixty left alive. They select them now for compliance. Second and third generations aren't the same, spark's gone out, they say." Tate comes to stand beside him. "There's a fox in the hen house, Karl, and the farmer, he puts out milk."

This gets his attention. "Genesistems?"

Tate nods, "Every one gone weakens Auri's case."

Outraged despite his resolve not to be drawn in, Karl says, "You think they're in on it?"

"In on it, ordering it, looking the other way, what's the difference? They're dying and nothing's being done. Isn't that enough?"

Karl's lost and he knows it. Five years and he's just as much putty in Tate's hands as ever.

At his side, Tate watches him, "In ten years I never knew you to walk away from somebody that needed your help. You can't deny they need you."

Tate reaches to twist off one of the paper-like akibia blossoms, spins it between thumb and forefinger, looks up, face that of an old man. "Oh, I know what you're thinking." He sighs, "I don't know what human is, Karl. I'll leave the philosophy to you. All I know is if they're not, they're a damn good imitation. They're being raped and murdered like clockwork, one, sometimes two a day."

Tate slides wide the 50th story window, "Okay, so they're not first in the pew Sunday morning. They lead the lives they have to. They didn't choose to be born any more than you did. You want to let prejudice get in the way of doing anything about it, that's fine." Tate throws the flower out the window with a vicious flick of the wrist. Karl watches as it sails down and out of view against a sea flat as a table, green as the eyes of the dead Sister.

"I was wrong to drag you down here." Tate turns back to his desk, "A bird will be on the roof powered up by the time you get there. My best to your hogs."

The door beckons. Fifty paces to the stairs, up one flight to the deck and home. Simple as that. Easy. But to what? Tate knows damn well he isn't going anywhere.

Karl fills his lungs with L.A. smog laced with the tang of seaweed, shuts the window on the noise below, sits, "Tell me more."

* * *

Karl rents a car, one of the little golf ball three-wheeler jobs with the door in front made in one of the former Soviet states. Bink riding shotgun, they head south. Every time he takes off from a light, the little two-banger puts off a cloud of blue smoke that earns him dirty looks from drivers roaring around him as the little jitney rockets up to its maximum 58 clicks per hour.

Queuing up his headset, words glow neon in the air twenty feet in front of the little car's windscreen as Karl hums down the freeway on ramp dodging his way into the slow lane.

Search Completed: Genesystems: Occurrences: 52.

Jesus, so many?

This Digitally Mastered Immortals thing tugs at his mind. There's something about it, something he doesn't like.

He calls up one at random, gets a vid magazine: Nature: November 2023.

Surprised by the citation, he barks a profanity. Nature's still the big gun in science vids, still respected. Not expecting to understand it, he blinks, lets it run.

"For twenty years we've known of the potential for creating binary switches from complex inorganic molecules as well as various algae and bacteria."

He pauses the readback, consults a map on his thigh, "Speak for yourself."

"Biocom, Genesistem's much heralded next step in personal satcom technology, is the result of exhaustive fetal testing."

There's that name again.

"Effected through manipulation of germ cells, and thus affecting not only the offspring, but all future progeny, this patented gene sequence directs the body to form a microcomputer from its own nutrients in a microfilament structure acting both as satcom link and transceiver."

Karl listens, skin crawling.

"By reducing rejection to nil, Genesistem's Biocom is almost certainly the death knell of implant technology as we know it. Any future modification to the Biocom can be accomplished by genetic therapy, but will not affect offspring unless affected at the germ cell level. Spokespeople for the genetic multinational project distribution by late spring."

Numb, he drives, not seeing the lane in front of him, subconscious steering for him. How have things come so far so fast?

A passing transport honks and he jumps, knocking his head on the roof of the cramped little car. Forcing himself to go on, he cues up the news and one of the perfect hair guys, Karl can't tell any of them apart, pops up sitting in the slow lane, as if perched on the tailgate of the transport ahead.

"The dead are indeed with us, Jane. It seems more and more digitally-mastered personalities are showing up on the net. Recent advances in storage technology have brought a shot at immortality within reach of many of us. Some analysts believe as many as one percent of the avatars one is likely to meet in cyberspace are Digitally Mastered Immortals or DMI as they are called by the pioneers of this technology."

Exasperated, Karl sighs. No help at all. He gets the feeling he's wasting his time. Switching lanes to get a semi off his tail, he lets it run.

"In an unrelated story, today in Los Angeles the tenth victim in as many days was discovered in a state of extreme catatonia. Pathological analysis of brain tissue and tests for implant function have turned up no clues as to the cause for the malady, which has become commonplace in most of the world's major metropolitan centers.

Although the victims seem aware, they have lost the ability to move, speak or even eat, baffling doctors and implant technicians alike. While some believe it is just a temporary withdrawal from reality after too long in UR, others suggest it stems from a chemical imbalance in the brain, and liken it to the so called sleeping sickness prevalent over a century ago."

Karl cuts it off, tosses the headset onto the floor as the little car bounds like a jackrabbit over tracks and he struggles to keep it on the road. Winding up the drive to Auri's, it grinds its heart out at a breathtaking 37 kph. Looking out the window down at the macadam crawling by, he's sure he could use it for a scooter and do better.

Auri's house hovers at the edge of a rock-faced cliff near Laguna Nigel overlooking what is now oceanfront. Money—lots of it.

Rounding a curve, he's surprised to see a security station half hidden in the shade of a grove of Buddha

Belly bamboo at the base of the hill. Standing on the brakes, he stops, jagged teeth of the tire rippers prodding the single front tire. God, he hates Russian cars. If there had been a nuclear OK Corral over the Cuba thing in the sixties, he's sure they would have missed.

Squinting as sun glints off sea at the base of the cliffs, Karl shades his eyes as a rent-a-jerk in dark blue comes to his window. "Nice car."

Smart ass. Karl shrugs, looking past him, taking in the view up the hill, "Gets me there." Oh, yes, money, an ocean of it. For landscaping, for this dick here, for all of it. Karl looks on up the hill, impressed. Nothing in plain sight. No heat, just polite orangutans in crisp blue, hands out of sight. Very high class.

"Name please?" He says it like he's bored, saving the charm for the next Mercedes.

"Latte."

He punches it into his tablet, "To see?"

"Auri Zerai."

Blue Shirt backs off a little like he thinks Karl might take out a pea shooter and start spraying. Sure. The guy still in the office smiles, hands out of sight. Karl smiles back, nods. He'd have maybe a couple seconds to live before smiley came out and settled his bill with whatever he's got under the counter. Something heavy, he guesses. Something that'd chew its way through the little dung beetle car and him and out the back without deforming.

The guy at his window talks into the air, holds out the tablet. Karl passes his hand over it wondering if the chip he hasn't used in five years will come up clean.

The tablet chirps contentedly. "Thank you, Mr. Latte. Number 20 on up ahead on the left."

Smiley sheaths the spikes and Karl chugs on in, leaving them choking behind him in his very own James Bond smoke screen—from Russia with love. Take that, rent-a-cops.

He flogged the jitney up the long hill, past lawns smooth enough to prop a wine glass and not spill a sip, along a street perfect as money can make it. Not a place he'd want to live, but nice, he's got to admit that. Real nice.

For the second time he parks, then struggles out the door, which falls back on his shin. Kicking it open, he nearly trips scrambling out. He cracks the windows for Bink and slams the door, draws back a boot to kick in the door panel, but thinks better of it. No way's he paying a grand to punch out one of these lemons. Russia's revenge. What they couldn't do with ICBM's, they do with rolling cockroaches.

Up the walk to number 20. Along the way he ducks under eucalyptus hanging pendulous with crimson flowers big as dinner plates. Weird, the stuff they come up with. Say what you will about the geeks in rDNA, they've got imagination.

The front door, plate glass, opens before he gets there, and a guy with shoulders that must give him trouble with standard door frames blocks his way, right hand out of sight.

"Mr. Latte," he says, voice casehardened steel—that shiny, that hard. A second guy, this one a thin, cold fish type with black shades, leans behind a high teak counter, covering him with something. A twelve, he

guesses. Perennial favorite, twelves, never go out of style—the most spatter for your buck at room range. Karl stops, feeling the tension, making sure they can see his hands.

"Hey," he says, smiling his best I'm-just-a-regular-Joe-like-you smile, doing his best to put them at their ease. "Relax, will you?"

He fails. If anything, this seems to wind them up more. What's got them so keyed?

"I need you to verify your ID for us, please," the big one says. Karl waves his left hand at the screen and it comes up with his ID. One of his old ones, comfortable as a worn tennis shoe, as harmless, as mundane. He steps forward and they both tense up, the big one brings up an MP-5K, thick finger heavy on the trigger.

A boundary crossed: weapons out. Not good.

Karl raises his hands, gives the smile a few more watts, "What's the problem? You brought me up, your chums down the road liked me fine. I have an appointment, you know that."

The one behind the desk subvocalizes, talking to someone upstairs, Karl guesses. For ten seconds nobody moves.

"Will one of you guys talk to me, or are we posing for a still life here?"

Nothing. So much for humor. They're waiting. He's being chipped, recorded from all sides. He's got the uncomfortable feeling he's very close to dying. "So very sorry, but while we were checking him out he went for his gun." Work just fine with him room temperature. Need some vid to back them up, that's no problem either—simple as the push of a key. The blessings of digital technology.

"Karl Latte to see Zerai," Shades says, not looking at the screen, not needing to, taking it off the implant in his head.

Karl raises two fingers, "Two o'clock, that's PM." Impatient, now, the novelty wearing off, he thinks maybe getting shot would be worth it to be out of here. How he hates L.A.

The lineman's eyes snap back, body tense, "You're heavy."

Karl shrugs, "It's licensed."

Was five years ago. It's not now. Karl's sure they won't check that deep.

"You can't go up hot," Shades says, then mumbles under his breath. The big one steps forward, short snout of the 10mm visible under his jacket, pit bull nosing out from under a silk sheet. "Hands out still," he says, reaching.

Biting his cheek, Karl does as he's told. The big guy takes his gun, leaving the speed strips hanging impotent as extra teats under his right arm.

The big man sets the cut down .44 on the counter like it's a dead mouse, butt dangling between sausage fingers, unimpressed. "That it?"

"That's it."

He grunts, cocks an ear. Karl's scanned again, comes up clean. Now they both relax. The snout of the MP-5 disappears. He even tries on a smile. "Sorry for the inconvenience Mr. Lotto," he says as the elevator vomits heavy artillery. Two file out trying to look as if they haven't been waiting. Taking no chances, it seems. Somebody's nervous. He still doesn't know why.

On the way up with the big man, Karl decides to see what he can find out. "What are you guys expecting here?"

He looks down at Karl, considering.

Karl has always been able to talk to people, put them at their ease. It's his ordinary face, his way of talking to people in their own language. He's been alone so long, he wonders if he's lost it. He hopes not.

The big man's face relaxes. "Hey, man, sorry about that down there, but we've been shot at a couple times on the way to her health club. Van tears out, lights off, pulls alongside. I stand on the brakes, do a bootlegger turn. We're having a good laugh about it when I look up and, hell if there isn't another one." He shakes a bulldog head, "We counted 528 pocks in the limo. Somebody's pretty damn serious about ventilating the old frail."

With protection like this, Karl's sure she'll live to get frailer still.

"You're another PI she's hiring to step-n-fetch it on that big court case of hers, am I right?"

Karl shrugs, "You got it. Bill's got to be paid. Guy can't be too choosy."

He snorts triumphantly with an uncanny similarity to one of Karl's hogs, "Knew it."

The door slides open, and looking forward to meeting the woman somebody's so eager to kill, Karl steps out.

* * *

A small, dark woman waits, hands clasped over flat chest. Greeting him with worried eyes and a nervous smile, she leads him through a maze of elegant rooms. Following her, Karl thinks of a mouse scurrying in its burrow.

On a balcony overlooking the sea, Auri waits, arm slung over the back of her chair. Shoulders bare by a clinging shimmer of a dress, her gaze reaches out over the sea. Eyes vacant, she caresses the underside of a hanging branch of Myrciaria with a long index finger. Hair the color of the heavy platinum bracelet on her wrist, she waits. Does he see silver in that perfection of disarray? He can't be sure. It might be reassuring to find flaw amid such icy perfection.

Without turning, she says, "Sit." Her voice is dark, husky, at shocking odds with the delicate beauty of the woman before him. It carries with it the musk of sex, the sound of age.

At the door, the wren-like woman waits, eyes on her master, hands wrung before her.

"Bring us something cold, Carmen," Auri says, and for an instant the dark woman meets his gaze. Her lips part, lines forming at the corners of wary eyes. For an instant he thinks he sees something there—hate? concern? He gets the feeling she wants to say something to him, but then diffidently, her eyes drop and she goes inside, taking her sense of unease with her.

If he could have thought of an excuse he might have touched her. Dismissing the puzzle of her gaze from his mind, he examines Auri, figuring her age. Thirty, thirty-five, no more. Beauty fading, but still very much there, potent, high amperage. A hyacinth past its prime, perfume still exquisite.

Neither of them speak as they wait for the small woman to return. Is this silence an attempt to make him uncomfortable? If so, it fails. She may have more juice than an overripe valencia and the climactic oral ejaculations of every senator on the hill on chip—what of it?

If she has anything to say, she'll say it.

Fascinated, he watches her stare out to sea three quarters turned away. He's seen her before. What he doesn't know is where.

A dark zephyr, the woman slips in, sets tall glasses before them, avoiding his eye. Gliding out, she shuts the glass door tight behind her, and for a fragment of a second glances up. The look in her eye leaves Karl disturbed.

Auri turns, lifts a glass with an elegant arm. A doe is what she reminds him of. A doe with the eyes of a panther.

She sips. "Try it, I think you'll enjoy it."

He drinks, and a succession of flavors hits him one upon the next. Lemon, papaya, mango, kiwi, jelly melon, finally apricot. Unable to keep up, he can't be sure. It leaves him craving more. "What is it?"

She smiles, a tired smile. He notices her eyes. Sad, jaded, with gravities of their own, they tug at him. She watches to see their effect. Immune, he stares back. Nice eyes, if he cared about women's eyes—he doesn't.

When she sees he's out of her reach, a frown crosses her face, bringing a gaggle of lines out of hiding. With an incline of her head, she smiles, "How old would you say I am?"

Okay, here we go—the question. Why lie, who is she to him, anyway? Just the only chance he's got, that's all. He doesn't like tests. He knows how hard women like Auri work to look the way they do. Money no object, time no object, suffering, denial, pain—they'll endure it all. Any sins they could ever possibly commit are more than atoned for by the years of hell they endure watching themselves fade. He pities them. Because he resents being tested he adds ten years. "Forty."

Head back, she laughs in triumph. "Sixty," she says, savoring the look on his face. "I'm going to be the sexiest damn corpse this city's ever seen."

He watches her, feeling an overwhelming sadness—for her, for any woman who fears aging as much as she must to endure what she has. Revulsion, too, for the vanity, the self-absorption. There's something ludicrous about a woman, even this one, trying to look half her age.

"You don't know who I am, do you?"

He gets the idea she expects him to. "Should I?"

She shrugs. "Forget it."

Karl sets his glass down. He's had enough. Of her and the overly sweet drink. "You going to tell me why I'm here?"

"Tate told me we might be able to help each other."

How much more did he tell? "And?"

"We discussed your problem, I've spoken with some people." She sips her drink, swallows, slender throat moving. "Consider it solved."

Too easy. When things are too easy he gets nervous. "That's it?"

She shrugs, supple arms, "Sure. I see a barely noticeable little island in the midst of the wilderness, for safety's sake. Somewhere to see the land as it once was, still in the hands of the original homestead family, bla, bla, you can fill in the rest."

"The hell, you say."

"I can sell it."

"Look, I'm not some freak to be gawked at by a bunch of New Agers. I'd rather blow the place myself than live in a fish bowl."

She continues, unperturbed, "I think perhaps bed and breakfast in an original log cabin would be worth a thousand a night. Of course, they would have to hike in from Scottsburg, what, a good two days, three, maybe, or south from Ferndale about the same distance. No, I don't suspect they'd be lined up around the block, do you?"

Karl smiles, picturing the ten by twelve cabin turned from sty into historical hotel of one cramped room, outhouse in back. The money wouldn't hurt, assuming there were anyone foolish enough to pay it. It would more than make up for the inconvenience.

"You don't know yet if I can help you."

She smiles again, and he can see the years in the hollows of her cheeks. Lifts, tucks, acid washes can only do so much. The temples, the backs of their hands gave them away. A fragile look to them, the look of an apple kept too long.

She reaches for a joint in natural wrapper. One of the expensive ones grown without pesticides in one rain forest or other. She lights it, slides the pack along with the lighter across the glass table top for him, inhales deep, holding it. "Oh," she speaks soto voce, "he told me about your talent, and if anyone can, it's you." Long and slow, she exhales, eyes closed, waiting for the surge of THC. She notices the pack, untouched on the glass, "Too early for you?"

Brooding about Tate, he waves them away. That's the first time Tate has told anyone as far as he knows. The first time he's betrayed Karl's trust. He wants to know why.

She leans forward, eyes intent, "Is it true you read minds?"

First time in twenty years he's had to answer that, and he's not happy about it. The freak show he's spent his whole life running from. She has no idea how it feels. He knows that, but it doesn't help. He's close to walking out—skin close. "It's true."

She holds out her hand, palm up, "Do me, please, I want you to."

Rage surging, he stands, hands fists to stop them trembling, "Want your palm read, go to a carnival."

Slowly, she draws back her hand, "Sensitive, are we?" Hard eyes appraising, she leans back, takes a long hit. "Sit down." Not a request.

He looks at the door, finds it closed, curtains drawn. He can go, get away from her right now and lose everything he's got, or he can sit and listen. What he can't do, won't do, is put up with any more sideshow crap. He wants to leave, wants it so bad the soles of his feet itch.

He sits. "I don't do that, I never do that. Not for you, not for anybody."

She waves away smoke, "No need to be touchy, I meant no insult."

Nerves ratcheting down a notch, he breathes. She can't know how it makes him feel. "So," he says, "you know all about me, what I need, what I do. What is it you think I can do for you? It isn't like you don't have enough hired help."

She laughs, a handful of pebbles tossed into a pool. The water's cool, he can tell. She coughs long and desperate, coughs as if she'll never stop. He sits up, wondering what he can do to help, but she motions him back, gasping. "I'll be fine." She chokes it out, flicks her joint away over the balcony down to the sea—a butt a netpunk downtown would take a chance getting run over for. "All the beef," she goes on, voice raw as if she'd gulped sulfuric, "Tate's idea. Last week on the way back from the gym some kid took a shot at us. Just boredom, I'm sure, just L.A.. I'm nobody any more."

She moves to stand at the rail, back to him. She's tall, taller than he is by a hand. In spite of himself, he's impressed.

"That's right, you don't know, I have to keep reminding myself. You don't know anything about me." She says it like it's a miracle.

The sun sags dangerously close to the sea. Through the thin dress he sees her silhouette. She must be lying about her age. Must be—no woman looks like that at sixty. "Okay, so I'm ignorant, so tell me something."

She takes a long breath, lets it go. "Forty years ago I was the highest paid model in the world—for a while."

Now he remembers her.

She shrugs, "Life was fast. New love every other week, more money than I could spend—not that I didn't try. We had to be thin, thin, thin. Look at the magazines sometime from right around the turn. W, Vogue, Glamour, Bazaar—they made us up like we were beat up. We all had huge bags under our eyes

from the drugs, the dieting, the way we lived—like alley cats."

She laughs. "Why? I don't think I knew, except that it was expected. And we were all so desperate never to disappoint anyone. Oh, I know, it doesn't make any sense to you. You can't see how it was."

She turns, eyes intense, "Imagine yourself, twenty, knowing nothing, practically illiterate I was, making more in a month than most people make in their lives. I'm suddenly rich. Rich, and I don't deserve any of it. I see the other girls. They're better looking, their boobs are bigger, their legs better, hair better, none of these damned freckles. And here I am making as much as all the rest of them put together. The agency's making its payroll off me—I'm keeping them afloat. It's all on my shoulders.

"Every girl I meet would cut my throat with a smile if she thought it would get her a job, just one job. Every man wants to do me, and when I let them, they can't wait to talk about it. Even the ones I don't say I did. And every time I find one I can talk to, one who's not always trying to handle me, he's gay! Never fails, every damned time!"

She laughs, taking the rail in her hands and falling forward, hair skimming tile.

"We were young, we could survive anything. We became as bad as they were, used them so they wouldn't use us first. It was a race to see who could be the biggest bastard." She laughs, a despairing sound, "I usually won. But the eyes.... I look at us now, and even with the makeup we looked so sad, so tired."

Across from him she sits, leans forward at the waist, arms reaching across the table. "Do you have any idea what it was like to be so popular, so sought after, and the whole time knowing you're a fake? Knowing that everything about you, everything they adore, desire, isn't really you? Do you know what that does to you? Do you?"

He can guess.

"Nothing anyone can say helps. The most sincere compliments are insults. You can trust no one. Agencies, boyfriends, agents, brokers—all pigs. They all stole from me. All of them."

He wonders where this is taking them.

"I'm coming to it, getting that?"

Confused, he looks around the veranda, "What?"

She stares, then smiles, shaking her head at the absurdity. "Tate wasn't lying, you really aren't wired."

"Just a minute, I've got it off." Embarrassed, he reaches back to switch on his set, fumbling clumsily as she watches, wearing a condescending smile. "Okay, I'm ready."

The glasses come alive, the sea, sun, sky, fading. Several blonds and a brunette lounge on a bed in garters, stockings, heels, teddies. They move as they're directed from someone off scene. Silk rustles. "Tabby," a man says, voice unctuous, "lie back, there. Now Neena, up, up, no, back. There, now, pout, more pout, baby. You're unhappy, but seductive. I want more, Auri, give me more, uh huh, oh, good, good."

The girls look weary, youth squandered, like women twice their age. Cheeks hollow, they seem used up.

So lovely, yet what he sees in their eyes is what he's seen in stills of Dachau. Impossibly slender hips and legs, breasts swollen out of all proportion, they pose, looking more like painted children than women, exuding the razor-sharp tang of sex.

Auri cuts the sound, stills the women, snaps long fingers in the air for attention. "There I am, the one on her knees. Can you tell?" Her eyes search his face, gauging his response to an image of her from the year he was born.

He can.

"The one in black stockings," she says.

He sees a painfully slender girl with long straight hair, a girl with excruciating eyes.

"The others—all dead," she says, "Neena, the one in the heels, starved herself. The blond on the edge of the bed, Tabby—Gibley's and Seconal. The auburn haired girl, Tatia, on her yacht after a party, took a swim alone at dawn. So they said. They never found her. The last, the prettiest of all of us, Morgan, did a swan dive off a rooftop helipad eight, no," she looks up, figuring, "nine years ago, now." She blanks the image.

Stomach still burning from the ghosts on the bed, he's once more on the terrace, Auri across the table, breeze carrying the scent of the sea.

Unsmiling, she looks hard into his face.

"I'm the last."

TWO

Jacaranda overhead perfumes the air with pendulous blossom.

Leaves sway in the 70 degree breeze as Auri tells her story. It nettles Karl to hear it. So much beauty, so many lives, so much youth—wasted. He watches washboard cirrus meander across a sky too blue for Mexi-Cali. That's when he spots it.

A speck at first just above the horizon, growing into a shape he recognizes. A helicopter, no, two, sweep in from the sea. Two-man jobs, very light, very fast. Traffic reporters use them. Red and white. From where Karl sits they look like mating dragon flies. Funny to see two so close together.

He watches, pretending to listen as she recounts the seductions, the blackmail, the loneliness—all of what passes for glamour. He prefers not to hear any more. He doesn't want to be drawn in, to sympathize with this woman. What he wants is to stay apart, alone. Easier that way.

Coming in low and fast, the birds skim the waves, heading directly for the cliff below them. Something's not right. Karl feels naked, exposed.

Time drips slow as honey running down frosty glass, and the voice inside his head, the one that's saved his life more than once, screams. Not knowing why, he glances over his shoulder just as the maid pulls back the curtain to look out at them, mouth twisted, face closed, the face of one getting her own

back. Then she's gone and the curtain dances back.

Rusty. He's so damned rusty, he would never have fallen for a set up like this five years ago. Like a tourist he sits waiting for it. Face flushed hot with shame, he stands sending his chair skidding across tile. When they sweep up and over the cliff, there won't be time.

Hand reaching instinctively to the empty holster under his arm, he stands frozen. Every word he can think of he spits, cursing her, himself, their lack of hard cover on the exposed terrace. They don't get inside they're dead. He remembers, now, the woman locked them out. Snatching up his heavy glass, still full, he hurls it through the tempered door. Instantly, it opaques, peanut size chunks of glass skittering over tile.

Eyes frightened, Auri watches, drawing back. By an arm, he drags her to the door, but he's too slow. Over his shoulder, he sees the first bird sweep up and over their heads. The second comes dead on, the passenger leaning out the door, raising something black. It gives Karl no pleasure to know he's right, that they are going to die. Frustrated by his sluggishness, he drags her inside, shoes skidding on glass.

She screams, clawing, "What, what?" Auri holds him back for all she's worth, all the hours in the gym helping to get them both sawn in half out here in the open. She catches at the door frame, and he considers going on, getting to the elevator, down and out, leaving her to them. That's what he should do, what he wants to do. One thing he does know—he won't die here.

Hard on the face he slaps her, raises his hand again. Her hands loosen and he drags her inside. Through the living room he hauls her, hearing the gun roar, one long din blotting out the chop of the blades, white noise as window glass sprays inward, raising curtains on projectile wind.

Carmen, waiting by the kitchen doorway, falls, hit, shrieking on broken glass, dark legs bloodied. Hauling Auri past her, Karl thinks. Of course she won't be spared. Ten minutes and there won't be anyone breathing in the building, not neighbors, not security, not him, not her. These guys are here chasing a buck. And from what he's seen so far—the birds, the woman inside—they're serious about it.

Through the cool, dark interior at the back of the house to the elevator he drags her, neither of them hit as far as he knows, as far as he can feel. Not that he feels much. At the elevator door, he stops, listens, the gun roaring five walls away, a few odd rounds sputtering through sheet rock, trailing clouds of gypsum dust and insulation. This is as far as they go. With no choice, Karl passes his hand in front of the elevator sensor.

A serene female voice responds. "The elevator is on its way. ETA thirty seconds."

He'll lay odds it won't be empty.

Suddenly Auri gasps, covers her arm. He pries away her hand and plucks out the needle thin flchette embedded in flesh to the fins. Bundling the fabric of her shirt, he presses it tight against the oozing puncture. She watches him as he does it, eyes dry. Gutsy.

"Hold this, it's nothing to worry about."

Ain't that the truth. Odds are they'll both be dead in less than a minute.

Nervous sweat running icy down his back, he backs away. That's it then. A team's on the way. Thirty seconds, that's how long they have.

He's not up to this, not anymore. He doesn't want to be here, doesn't want any part of it, this woman or the squad after her. If there were only some way out, somewhere to run, some way to fight. He never should have given up his piece. Never.

His mind stutters. It may be security. Sure, it's got to be security. Heard the noise and come to get them.

He knows better.

"ETA twenty seconds."

Twenty seconds and they'll be here.

Could be good.

Could be not so good.

Paralyzed, mind spinning like he's on the teacup ride at the Humboldt County Fair, he waits.

* * *

Overcoat flapping in the wash, Villar leaps easily from the hovering chopper, heads for the entry not more than a hundred meters away, leaving the door wagging open behind him.

Being late he can't stand. It's sloppy. It's lazy. He is neither. Then why does he have to work with idiots? Damned pilot, kid fresh off the boat, probably never done a fast drop in his life. He told him he wanted to be down when the shooting started, and he sets him down like he's delivering eggs. When this is over he's done. He can get a job slicing gyros on a catering boat working the Miracle Mile.

He stops, forces himself to slow, to relax. After this one he's done himself. This gives him enough to start again in Mexico with a place of his own.

Dark tranquil eyes on eucalypt overhead, he strides up the incline to the entry, breathing deep their medicinal scent as he passes.

"Twas brillig..." he says in a quiet voice, beginning the ritual, clearing his mind. "...and the slithey toves did gyre and gimbol in the wabe..."

Over netcom he hears Alfredo firing, cursing as he loses sight of the target inside, raking the line of windows from the balcony, burning up ammunition. Idiot. What happened to catching her on the terrace?

"All mimsy were the borogroves, and the mome raths outgrabe..."

His strides eating up the meters to the entrance, Villar speaks into the air, headset picking it up through bone conduction at the back of his skull, "Get them?"

Flustered, stuttering, grunting with the effort of birthing words through a mouth not big enough for them, Alfredo—the moron—says he doesn't know, but that there's a guy with her, and somehow they got inside. On the walk barely twenty meters from the front door, Villar stops, shaking his head in disgust.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!"

From his pocket he takes foam plugs, pressing them into his ears, working his jaw to seat first one...

"The jaws that bite..."

Then the other.

"...the claws that catch!"

How boring the screw ups are, how predictable. He knew it, he knew this would happen. Why, oh why can life never be simple, he asks himself, feeling put out, ill used by fate. Send Alfredo to shoot a fish in a toilet bowl and he misses two—incredible. Must he do everything himself? They could be on their way out right now.

"He took his vorpal sword in hand: Long time the manxome foe he sought—"

Impossible to get competent help, that's what it is.

Up the walk to the glass doors. Inside he sees the two men Carmen said would be there, obviously panicked by the shots from overhead. Amateurs, all lousy amateurs. From his vest he takes a small, brown cigar. Wetting it between his lips, he slips it between his teeth as they watch him from inside.

"So rested he by the Tum Tum tree, and stood awhile in thought."

Reaching back, he draws the carbine from under his coat, slaps the rounded knob with the heel of his hand, sending the roller bolt clacking forward, chambering a round. Not Villar. Villar doesn't play.

"And, as in uffish thought he stood..."

Almost he pities them, stupid bastards, imagining he's no threat until he's inside the office.

"The Jaberwock, with eyes of flame, came whiffling through the tulgey wood, and burbled as it came!"

Wrapping the sling tight over his arm, he shoulders the carbine, fires as he goes, a burst for each, then a second serving.

"One two one two and through and through, his vorpal blade goes snicker-snack."

The guards go down, penetrator rounds zipping through plate glass and soft armor like grass through a goose. Gingerly Villar steps through the empty door frame, shoes crunching crumbled glass.

"And with his head..."

Letting the carbine drop to hang by its sling, he draws a suppressed pistol, presses it behind the big man's ear, turning his head to avoid spattered blood, bone, gray matter. One can't be too careful. An intimate act, killing. Like sex, best done with care.

The pistol sounds, open hand on leather.

"...he went galumphing back."

He does the second. What no one sees never happens. He dusts immaculate hands, checks himself for splatter, slips away the pistol. No game for amateurs. Looking down at the men on the floor, he shakes his head. It's like sausage, like clothes: you get what you pay for. Sad.

The elevator hisses, hydraulics venting as the car descends on its ram. Gingerly he steps over the two dead men into the door jamb. He waits for the doors to open, five seconds, ten, chewing the end of the slender cigar, sure of what's coming, expecting no surprises. Carmen's kept her stupid brown eyes open for once. All except for the man upstairs, for that she'll get the back of his hand.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock? Come to my arms, my beamish boy!"

The doors slide open, fire and noise erupting from inside. Amid the roar of the two tens firing at 900 rpm, Villar laughs out loud. Special forces has been. Too old, too thick in the belly, not hungry enough, they forget how to think like a hunted animal. House cats, lazy, content—eventually, dead.

Muzzles sweep the room, corner to corner searching, finding nothing. From inside the lift, from safety, they spray like fools, stopping to snap in new magazines. Villar presses himself back in the recessed doorway of the stairwell, only eight inches deep, but enough—just enough.

A round bites a button off his London Fog, chews it in half. New stinking coat, not cheap, now he's got a broken button to replace. "Son and heir of a mongrel bitch," he says through clenched teeth white as his eyes.

Suddenly it's quiet, and the two step out like they own the world. Carbine held high, sling taut over forearm, Villar gives the closest a three round burst behind the ear. He drops. The bigger man turns, whines, a little shriek, one endless second, face a mask of fear and surprise as he sees he's about to die.

Sad, very sad, to be that unprepared. Villar puts a burst through his open mouth, giving him no time to think, to move, to recover. Dindindin, three sounds one, conducted through folding stock to jaw. The dead man joins his friend on the carpet.

Villar watches them jerk like hogs with throats slit, bleeding out for Quinceañera. Closely, he examines the raveling thread where the button on his coat should be. Hundred bucks at least, that's what they'll want to sew on another one. In disgust he looks at the men at his feet.

No respect for property any more. No courtesy. Not even competence. This city is not what it once was.

Behind him a gong sounds as someone calls the car. Villar's head whips around and a slow smile spreads over a hard face.

"Oh, frabjous day, 'Callooh! Callay!" he chortled in his joy."

It's time his luck turned.

* * *

Feeling like a rabbit in a snare, Karl steps back and onto Auri's foot.

"Ow," she says, shoving him off.

"Are there stairs?"

She smiles at his stupidity. "It'll be security."

"Will it?" He knows the answer, knows what they'll see when the doors open, knows how it'll feel—the numbing blows as the slugs tear through them, the spreading cold. That's what he hopes for anyway. That's if they work clean. If they're being paid to make an example of her it won't be that easy.

He remembers a family in Fresno. Father got careless with drug money. That was the consensus. Two days in the scorching summer heat before neighbors smelled them. Daughter home for the weekend from UC Santa Cruz. Beautiful kid. They made him watch what they did to the girl, then the wife. He was last. Karl had been called in on that one. House out in Sunnyside knee deep in gore. Pros. No prints, no witnesses, no car, no nothing. Just three bodies.

Karl arranged to be alone with them for ten minutes. Thought that was weird, but they cleared out for him. Worst one he ever did. And useless. Pain and terror ripe as three-week-old tuna choked out everything else. A waste—he got nothing. The victims had no idea who the killers were, never even saw their faces. The memory he'll carry with him.

What they did to the girl—twenty, knowing nothing about what her father had done, just a beautiful kid—was done for show, to get to the old man. Karl never saw the world quite the same way after that. He still dreams about that house under the shade of big eucalypt. Though he's heard there are no smells in dreams, there are in these.

Auri opens her mouth to protest, but instead brings a hand to her throat. Now he can see she gets it, sees all bets are off.

"Are there stairs?" he says again, knowing there won't be, knowing he's wasting his breath.

"Over here." She leads him to stairs. As the elevator announces its arrival, they shut the door behind them. One floor down he stops her. Head cocked, he looks up, willing himself hear through a meter of steel and concrete. He thinks he may hear men talking. Panic drives up through his spine. Time to go.

Inside the door to the entry, he stops, afraid of what he'll find on the other side. Pressing an ear to cold metal, he listens. Nothing. He can picture someone on the other side, waiting, listening. He pushes the thought away. No use worrying about it. It's the only way out. It's where they have to go.

Auri starts to open her mouth and Karl covers it with a hand. >From over their heads, one shot, two more in rapid succession, suppressed, but far from silent. The maid gets hers. Thanks, honey, for your help. Did she imagine this would be her kiss off?

Karl strains to hear footsteps on the stairs, hears none—yet.

* * *

Villar catches hold of one of the elevator doors, causing it to spring back with a warning to stand clear.

Stepping over the men on the carpet, he releases a spent magazine, tossing it easily on the big one's back, a memento. His gloves bear the prints of a man who drowned off the coast ten months ago. Let them figure that one out.

He rips up the velcro on his leg pack and slips in another thirty rounder, tilting it forward, up, and back until it locks in place with a satisfying click. German craftsmanship.

He turns away, steps inside, presses the button for the top floor with the muzzle of the carbine. It takes him up. Hey, maybe he could just sew a new button on himself. This makes him smile. He used to be pretty handy with a needle and thread back in college—why not? Be damned if he'll pay some wetback to do it. He'll save money doing the repair himself, use that extra button they sew on the side seam lining.

He wipes his face with the back of his hand. It comes away smeared crimson, white clots of brain rolling against his face. He panics, letting the gun drop to its sling. A whine rises from his throat as he rubs furiously at his face with one sleeve, then another. He can't stand getting it on him. There's no telling where they've been, what they've got. He's not some indio working in a slaughterhouse, arms deep in steaming cavities. He doesn't want their filthy blood on him, on his skin for chrissake!

Finding a mirror in a pocket of his jacket, he raises it with a trembling hand, looking himself over. Gone. Breathing hard, he stares at himself in the empty car, thankful he's alone.

Needing suddenly to speak to someone alive, he opens a line, hears Alfredo go into the apartment overhead, tells him he's coming. No use getting shot by the idiot, too.

Villar reaches up to turn out the light. As the car rises slowly the three stories on its hydraulic ram, he squats, waits for his eyes to adjust to the dark, the second target worrying him.

You never know. This guy could be anybody, anybody at all. There are some out there, he's heard of them, guys he'd rather not meet up there with only Alfredo to watch his back.

He adjusts his grip on the carbine, smiling into the dark, savoring the reek of burnt powder. Reminds him of good times, times he'd conquered his fear, faced it, come away alive. It's what life is for—leaving fear behind, rising from it.

* * *

Before Villar the door opens on a silent apartment.

On blood-soaked carpet Carmen lies, legs drawn up as if napping. Seeing her, he feels cheated. He won't be able to slap her after all. Furious, Alfredo following, he searches for them, flinging open doors, raging through the penthouse. A closet he finds locked, and fires twice through the door. Listening, he hears water, sees it soak under the door. Now he's whacking water heaters.

Panic clawing, he backtracks to the living room, stalls in the middle of the floor, tick spasming his right eye. Where are they?

Alfredo, he sends to search the kitchen, knowing they aren't there. At least he'll be out of the way.

Senses prickling, he freezes. He knows—the stairs.

* * *

Desperately Karl works to keep his mind from seizing. There might be someone on the other side of the door. There might not. Thinking he might have heard a door open above their heads, he cranes his neck, sees nothing. They stay where they are, they're dead.

Nerves prickling, he cracks the door. The big man, looking deflated, lies face down on carpet newly incarnadine. Skin's on his knees behind the counter. At first Karl thinks he may be looking for something. A quick look tells him he's not. The air hangs acrid with burned powder, gamy with the tang of blood, lung, brain.

From the size of the craters in the big man's back—gaping wounds he could stick a fist in—he'd say penetrator, high velocity 5.56, under-stabilized. Frantically, he rifles drawers. In the third he finds the Smith, opens, checks the cylinder and nearly laughs with relief. He's hot.

Going back for Auri, it's good to have something in his hand. Outgunned, at least he won't die like an animal. He's seen lambs harried by dogs. They stand, they run, they bleat. All they're really doing is waiting to die. He won't live that way, won't die that way. Now, if he's smart, he can make it costly. As for getting away.... He's heard of miracles. He doesn't expect to see one.

Auri he finds racked by tremors, clinging to the rail with both hands, "Oh, God." She sobs. "Oh, God."

Gently as he can, he pries loose her hands. Old woman's hands, veins standing out, blue cords, hands that might have been his mother's.

No matter what they do, these poor vain children, the hands don't lie.

Arm about her waist, he takes her. She's light. It's like lifting a starving pelican—all plumage, no meat. Her eyes squeezed shut, he guides her over the dead men, over broken glass, out the shattered front door.

Fifty yards away the second bird idles, blades winding down. Across the lot, his car waits. Bink's going nuts behind the driver's window. Seeing Karl, he tries to bite his way through glass, barking, whining. No good, too slow, they'd have no chance at all in the car.

Unsure, he stands in the middle of the lot, pea shooter clenched in his fist, wanting to scream, Auri in his arms vibrating like a harp, whining deep in her throat.

Deciding, Karl guides her to the helicopter. The pilot's lips move, talking via com to somebody inside. One man—nobody else, just the pilot. Dark eyes watch them as they come. A kid. His eyes widen as

Karl leads her right up to him. Should he be a hero, he seems to wonder, right hand sliding down his leg. He sees the gun in Karl's hand and sits still. Gun up, Karl opens the door, shoves her in, follows, tells him to go. Seeing he means it, the kid, Greek, maybe, not more than twenty, throttles up,

"Too many, too heavy!" he says, accent strong as cloves, looking down at the ground as if he might jump, run for it.

Leaning over Auri, Karl takes a fist full of black tunic, thrusts the gun forward, pressing the muzzle of the .44 hard against his right knee, "Go, now, right now."

The rotors whine higher. Still nobody comes out the door. They do while they're on the ground and it's over—plexi won't stop a day old wad of chewing gum.

And who the hell would let Bink out of the car?

The pilot shakes so, Karl worries about his flying. "They shoot us down!" he says, pleading, as they leave the pavement. They rise. Ten, twenty, thirty, a hundred meters. A figure in black, quick as a coyote, lopes out through the shattered front door, looks up, raises a carbine.

Karl sees the muzzle flash, ducks away from the window, hearing sonic cracks as rounds pass near. One clips the bubble, sounding like a good solid swing with a Louisville Slugger. The pilot hisses something in Greek, swings the bird about, checking gauges.

The man below runs a hand over a short cropped head, throws short, powerful arms up in disgust, kicking at nothing. Watching him recede, Karl smiles, throws him a wave. Better luck next time. Dizzy with relief, legs shaking, muscles spasming from fear, from fatigue, Karl leans back, scents garlic in the pilot's sweat.

The kid cocks his head, listens to the man below, looks over at Karl, worry in his eyes. Being threatened, Karl suspects, which is bad. Karl doesn't want him forgetting he's his biggest threat. Karl shakes his head no, "I see your lips move you'll be spitting teeth."

"They come," he says, craning his neck to look behind. "They catch me, they kill me."

Taking the Greek's gun from the holster on his right ankle, Karl dumps the cylinder out the window, tosses it behind the seats. "You try taking us back I'll kneecap you, and I'm a lot closer than your friend down there." Karl works the muzzle of the .44 into the meniscus of his knee. Seeing him wince, Karl tries a bluff. "You'll take us. Want to do it with one leg or two?"

"Two." His adam's apple bobs. "Two, two."

"Then you might want to hurry," Karl says, releasing him. Settling back, he shifts his weight off Auri, afraid he might have hurt her with his elbow, so frail does she seem.

The kid takes them down low and fast over the sea, past sandstone cliffs at 120, scrub trees stunted as bonsai whipping past.

To Auri, Karl says, "Better than Disneyland," but she only stares, looking every day of her age. "You okay?"

She nods.

The pilot leans forward to be heard over the wash, "Where you go?"

Feet braced, Karl relaxes, enjoying the ride. Slipping the revolver away under his arm, he smiles, heart slowing. Close. He's just had the luckiest day of his life and he's feeling good about it. They should both be dead. From here on in, everything's a bonus. To the kid he says, "I'll tell you when I decide. For now, follow the coast."

Thinking of Bink, he smiles. He won't have long to wait. Two, maybe three hours. Nobody'll bother him. Karl directs the kid to the city. Dark eyes sullen, he whips them up and away from the coast, heading in.

Euphoria fading as he watches the sprawling malignancy of L.A. roll out under them, Karl leans back, easing an aching knee. So he's kept her alive. Now all he has to do is get her what she wants.

After the last few minutes, how hard can that be?

* * *

Villar comes out fast.

Runaway helicopter rising over the roof of the Spanish style next door, he squeezes off three fast bursts without hoping to hit it, just out of frustration, too fast to aim, sighting over the front hood.

Regaining self-control, he watches it rise, casings raining over pavement, tinkling wind chimes. She's gone.

Never before has he blown a job. Never. Hurling his arms in the air, he curses elaborately. Then he sees it, the wave from the window of the chopper. He laughs, rage molten salt running in his veins. The curly-headed bastard is dead. Dead. And the other one.... He screams at the barking dog to shut up, raises his carbine to make it, hears a siren seesaw, hesitates, ear cocked. One...no, two...three... He sees a young woman at her window gawking, and feels suddenly the need to be gone.

Screaming at Fredo to get his bird over the house, he turns away, drawing the trench coat over the carbine. Below, he hears tires blow, hitting spikes at the gate. He smiles. Nobody left to drop it for them.

Over the roof the bird swoops, dipping long enough for Villar to climb onto a strut. The bird rises, then vaults out over a steep gulch, thick with scrub, and away as cruisers grate up the hill on sparking rims.

He stays out as the helicopter takes them home. Eyes tearing in hundred kilometer wind, he spends his wrath in obscenity. As the plat comes into view below them, he calms.

He'll have his chance at this guy again.

Oh, yes.

And next time it'll end differently.

"All mimsy were the borogroves, and the mome raths outgrabe."

* * *

Karl has him drop them on a floating seaway median.

Letting Auri out over his lap, he lowers her to the grid, reminding himself she was twenty the day he was born. He drops down after her. All the while the kid talks a Greek storm.

Though Karl doesn't understand a word, he knows a man begging for his life. Hand shaking, he holds out a wallet with a picture of his family: Mama, little sisters, fleabag dog looks like it hasn't eaten in a month. For that matter, neither do any of them. Fear in his dark eyes, he flinches for a slug he knows is coming, turning away, lifting a hand to block a bullet, saying what, a prayer?

"I'm not going to kill you," Karl says, thinking he should tell him not to go back, that he's dead if he does. Instead he slams the door, motioning him up, "Take off!"

Mouth open, the kid stares.

He waves his arms, "Go on, fly away home!" His voice drops as he thinks out loud. "For all the good it'll do you."

The kid guns it, and Karl backs off as it winds up. Why waste his breath? The kid won't listen. He watches him lift, headed right back to them. Won't be around tomorrow, is Karl's guess.

As he flags a taxi, Auri gives him an indignant look. Karl helps her in and they pull out into traffic, wind in their faces heavy with two-stroke oil.

"I can't believe you let him go. He knows who tried to kill me."

The hack casts a look over her shoulder when she hears this. Karl gives her a look and she turns.

Auri must think he's an idiot. "You telling me you don't?"

She looks away, and he has his answer.

* * *

At the office Tate hears what happened, makes a few calls, joins Auri on the couch. To Karl he says, "I've sent someone for Binks," and to Auri, in the arrogant voice Karl can't stand, says, "You can see what I mean—six of the best and even unarmed, he got you out."

Working on keeping his hands steady, Karl pours himself wine, "They'd thought to send somebody up the stairs we wouldn't be here."

Magnus, eager to reassure Auri, pats her knee with a proprietary gesture. Karl notices and it's as if he's just seen water run uphill. Tate and a client?

"You'll be safe here, even if they know where you are, which is unlikely. I've had the place swept just this morning."

She ignores him and he tries again. "You must be shaken up, would you like to rest?"

Karl begins to be embarrassed for him. Why can't he just shut up?

Sipping her scotch, she watches Karl as he paces the rug. "Aren't you the caged tiger? I guess I should thank you. If you hadn't been there I'd be just like poor Carmen."

Still thrumming, Karl takes another look out the window, finds nothing to see. A revved engine, he can't throttle back. Hands trembling, feeling trapped, he paces. Nine out of ten they know exactly where she is, where he is. He's not waiting for them. He goes to a counter lining the far wall, where over black walnut paneling, recessed lighting illuminate a trio of Van Gogh's. Copies, true, but good ones. What does he care whether or not she thanks him? She's a client, an asset, for chrissake. She's nothing to him. The question is, what is she to Magnus?

He slides out a long drawer, runs his hand over knives. Folders, stilettos, throwers, spikes, fighters arrayed in long rows on a bed of black velvet. Tate's collection—the best of the best. Taking a wickedly beaked folder in his hand, one he knows is Tate's favorite, he opens it with a flick of his thumb, judges it good, clips it inside his waistband. He looks up to see Tate frown and smiles with satisfaction. Too bad. He wants him here so much, he can loan him tools.

With a bitter look at Karl, Tate says to Auri, "As I said, he's the best."

Still she stares, "How did you know?"

"Karl is quite perceptive when he cares to be."

Not seeming to hear Tate, she keeps on. "But why break the glass? I thought you'd gone insane."

Karl swings open double cabinet doors, revealing rifles, shotguns, smg's, racked muzzles up along the wall. He runs a hand down the line and feels better right away, breathing deep, enjoying the smell of gun oil. "Poor Carmen...." He understands, now, the feeling he got from her, the look he saw in her eyes. "Poor Carmen locked you out on the balcony to give them an easier target."

Auri exhales, looking as if he'd slapped her, "Carmen, no." She shakes her head, "Not Carmen."

What does he care whether she believes him?

Tate lays a hand on her, "If he says she did, she did."

"God," she says, "if she were working for them I can't believe they'd kill her like that."

Karl takes down a short ugly carbine, caseless, electronic ignition flchette. "Believe it."

"No better reason," Tate says.

Karl looks it over, opens the action, brings it to his shoulder, sighting at the windows. Uh, uh. He sets it back, moves down the line. "Somebody finds it inconvenient to have you breathing. Why is that?"

"That's what I..." She takes a long breath, starting over. "I was going to tell you, they came to see me a few months after the photo shoot you saw. Found me in the Mediterranean. Man with white hair, not old, but his hair, white like an albino. His name was Vici." She says it so it rhymes with Lichee. "Maybe you've heard of him."

He has.

"Said he represented Genesystems. Said they would pay a billion dollars for a few thousand of my ova."

Karl begins to see. And what he sees he doesn't like. Is there ever going to be a bottom to this? Will it ever get as dirty as it can get? It's like diving for the bottom of a murky pond, kicking deeper and deeper, and there's never any bottom. "Ova, you sold your ova?"

She nods, looking ashamed. "This was when a bill was real money. I needed the money, my health wasn't good. Too many drugs. Too much catting around. Too much...everything. The agency had a new name now, new girls. I was down to a call or two a month. The money wasn't so good any more."

Karl picks out a folding stocked 870 magnum twelve cut down to arm's length, cycles the action.

Auri jumps, "What are you doing over there? That won't go off, will it?"

"If I want it to it will." Karl closes the action, folds the stock. "Don't like guns?" He knows the answer as he asks.

"There a reason I should?"

Karl smiles. It doesn't surprise him. It goes with the whole outlook, the whole view on life. What she needs, she buys. She needs security, she hires guns. Wants a steak, she hires a butcher. So much neater that way. "Not that I know of."

She turns away, "Good, because I don't."

Tate gives him a quick frown, telling him to back off, not queer the deal. Karl stuffs the 870 in a duffel he finds in a drawer. His hand snags on a rappelling harness and he tosses it into a drawer, then on second thought, tosses it back into the bag. Will he need it? Probably not, but then again, it will take up little space. After it he drops in a coil of climbing rope. "They dropped you. Why?"

"Oh, the tabloid vultures.... Remember tabloids? Caught me in some foolishness with a band, very hot at the time. You wouldn't know them—spit in hot oil, but very big then. A little foolishness with the six of us at La Crillon. They set up the room before we ever got there. Got vid, stills, everything. One of the bastards set the whole thing up, got paid well for it, too. Bad medicine for an ad agency to have its top model spread eagled across the rags like that."

She shrugs, draining her glass. "That was what started me down. They just dropped me," she says, snapping long fingers, "like that. After five years with me paying their salaries...they flushed me." She says

it like she still doesn't believe it. "Bastards, God damn them all to hell!" She takes a breath, eyes shut, "They're gone now, gobbled up by the cartel, but they were big then, very big."

He's not sure what she wants him to feel. What he doesn't is sympathy. Karl looks for twelve gauge shells, finds them. "Tough."

She aims hard green eyes at him, "So, are you shocked, a woman selling her unborn babies?"

"Not me," he lies, dropping a box of buckshot into the bag at his feet, bouncing them off his toe to cushion their fall. She disgusts him. She and all she represents. The drifting, the aimlessness, the chasing the buck. He isn't a part of this world. Doesn't want to be. None of it interests him. None of it affects him. It's as if he's another species.

Her gaze pierces him, the wall, a thousand meters of space, forty years. "At the time I didn't give it a thought. The money they offered was too good to miss. I mean what's to think about, you know? It wasn't really even an abortion and I'd had more of those than I care to remember. Since then I've had a lot of time for thought, for regrets—a lot of time. We all did."

Had he heard right? He cocks an eyebrow, and even from across the room, she responds. "Yes, oh, yes, we all did it, all five of us. We were in and out in a couple hours. Sitting on the table in panties, room cold, they're always cold, I watched as they slipped the tube into me, watched on the monitor as it snaked its way in, watched as they took what they wanted. They looked like strings of pearls," she says, voice filled with wonder. "Up the tube and gone. The nurse ran with them. As if they were precious. I remember thinking that—as if they were worth more than I was. I slipped on my jeans and went out with the others to drink myself into oblivion."

She laughs, a harsh sound. "I remember, we went across the street to split a magnum of Perignon, celebrating, rejoicing our coup, ignorant bitches that we were."

She refills her glass with Pinch, sets it down hard as she loses hold of it for a second, glass thumping granite, "We signed the papers in our attorney's office, contracts fifty pages long all in gobbledygook—none of us read a word. Still lightheaded from champagne, we signed away our rights to our progeny, to our souls. I was high at the time. In the toilet I puked, washed my mouth out, dusted my gums with coke.

"Even then we frightened me. Of course we could still have babies, they left us with all the eggs we would ever need." She shakes her head, "None of us ever did...blessing probably."

She sighs, eyes on the carpet in front of her, "Of course, the money didn't change a thing, we were still as lost as we ever were."

Numb, Karl drops a box of armor piercing ammunition for the .44 off his toe and into his bag. On impulse, he tosses in a handful of light sticks, zips the duffel. "Why?"

She looks up, as if surprised he's spoken. "I told you about the billion."

Of course she would think he was talking about the money. What else but the money? "The ova, why'd they want them?"

She frowns, looks at him as if he's asked something profound. "I never asked. They said they were for genetic experimentation, but I never asked them why they should want ours—too stupid, I guess." She

looks up, and Karl sees that though her mouth is hard as ever, her eyes brim. "I never even asked."

Karl comes to lean against Tate's desk, dropping the heavy duffel on the desktop. He might not like her much, but she's putting herself through hell remembering whatever it is she's trying to tell him. It's hard to be contemptuous of someone willing to do that.

Wiping her face with the back of a hand, she looks up with diamond hard hazel eyes, and Karl gets the feeling she could be dangerous. Gets the feeling that if she wanted to be, she could be as cold, as unforgiving as those eyes.

"Twenty years later," she says, "I found out why—I met Romy."

* * *

Twenty kilometers out, Platform 66 rises before the rushing hovercraft.

A shimmering oasis on the waste of the sea, it's more impressive than Karl imagined. A glittering mass of dodecagonal units, some hover low, others tower hundreds of meters above the sea. A feather of misgiving traces its way up his spine as they close on it.

Lit blue and green by the glow of solar tubes, ebbing low, now, so close to dawn, 66 hovers just past relaxed territorial limits. Independent, but not. Tied to the mainland by service conduits, by Genesystems' ties of influence, wealth, coercion, by the incoming tide of tourists on the make for thrills, it's everything Karl fears, everything he hates.

Knuckles burning from cold spray, he clings to the rail. Bink presses against his calf as the hovercraft plows through chop toward the mass of glass and alloy hanging suspended above a network of docks, a bloated mother spider protecting her egg. Bink trembles against him, a low rattling growl rising from his throat. At the rail, Karl squats to scratch his neck. Poor Bink doesn't like it here. Looking up at the complex looming larger with each lurch of the craft, Karl agrees.

Standing, he wonders what the other agents thought of it—the ones who never came back. It all seems so easy now, looking at it from this far out, so easy not to end up like them, nourishing bottom feeders. But as the humming craft slides closer, columns rising until they seem to descend from heaven, he wonders if they expected to go home just as he does now. His guess is they did.

Karl ducks as they skim inches below a girder web-work frosted with gull droppings. Skimming in, they come to rest with a jar against a metal grid that pivots on hydraulics to grasp them. With a clanging lurch, the ride's over.

Through milling passengers, Karl spots a woman waiting in the harsh green glow of the tubes and is sure she's come for him. Through perpetual twilight Karl follows blasted tourists, morose workers reporting for shift, a pair of grid walkers can't be more than thirteen. Together they plod out and up the ramp.

The woman waiting there lets them pass, eyes on Karl. Nice eyes, in a hard sort of way. Doll's face, hair a shining copper that only gene therapy could account for, she stoops to make over Bink, hem sliding up taut thighs. Bink trembles under the attention, whining with pleasure.

"Mr. Swindlehurst expects you, follow me, if you will."

Up the stairs he follows, eyes on the pleasant adjustment of muscle and adipose under the slick synthetic of her dress as she walks. If he missed anything about L.A., it was the view.

Under his breath he recites as he takes her in. "When in silks my Julia goes / Then, then methinks how sweetly flows / The liquae-faction of her clothes."

At a landing, she hesitates, "You say something?"

"Read any Herrick?"

Already bored, she shakes her head, turns away.

Of course she hasn't. Probably doesn't read, period.

The office is bright, warm. At her desk she sits, speaks into air, then to Karl, smile warm as the foul smelling mist outside. "Be a sec."

He sits. This is good. At least Tate got him a shot. The door swings wide. Karl has Bink sit along the wall and goes in. Now he'll see how much of a shot he's got.

Swindlehurst looks up from his desk, eyes flaying him. "Sit down, Mr. Latte."

Already not liking him, Karl sits, waits for him to go on, certain this man knows he's not what he says he is, and doesn't care.

"So, x-cop, Frisco, that right?" he says, flipping a satcom token over his knuckles.

"That's right." Karl leans forward in his chair, hoping he sounds more enthusiastic than he feels. Been too long himself to want to dance the two-step with a narrow-eyed moron like this one.

"I don't like cops," he says, like it's an original sentiment, like it's supposed to crush him.

Karl smiles a nervous smile, doing the part, a smile that says he's ready to talk about it. "Sorry to hear that."

"Mr. Latte," Swindlehurst says, musing, keen eyes on him, "Karl, may I call you Karl?"

Karl doesn't like his tone, doesn't like his voice, doesn't like him. He nods. Call me Adam, just get this over with and get out of my way.

"Okay, Karl, I'd like to know why you're here."

Bam, the jerk doesn't fool around. That he respects. He's willing to find it enchanting if it'll get him out of here any faster. Swindlehurst is running his file over his implant right now, Karl can tell. Go right ahead and run it.

The Latte persona is one he knows like an old friend. Comfortable in it, rough corners worn soft as frayed flannel long ago, he can be the man drunk, drugged, asleep—at times he thinks he is.

Cop fired for a little something dirty, but not too. Fibrillating heart, bad knees from college ball slowing his gait, superstitiously reluctant about implants—all true and medically verifiable. Always salt your lies with truth. Also in his bio, a weakness for alcohol, for pneumatic women, for Lotto—lies, all of them.

Himself, Karl can't talk about, won't talk about. About Latte he will—has for hours at a stretch. Maybe they are the same man after all. Stomach tightening, he forces himself to smile, "I've had my problems, I'm here to make a new start."

This is it, he'll either get in or he won't, based on what happens the next few seconds.

Swindlehurst shakes his head, tosses the coin onto the top of the desk. "Why should I take a chance on you?"

Karl gets the feeling he's about to get the boot. "Because I'm good. Because I'm discreet." Karl knows they have a hard time filling the job. Liaison officer between L.A. jurisdiction and the offshore plats is a swamp. Anything goes wrong, the LO's head rolls. Scapegoat on a short tether. Whipping boy on twenty-four hour call. Pays a joke, too. That's why Tate picked this for him to get him on the inside fast.

Swindlehurst seems unimpressed. "Why should I care if you're either?"

"I give up, why?" Karl's had enough, goes to the door. "Thanks for the ride out." He won't beg.

"Sit down, Karl."

He pretends to think about it, returns to his chair.

For a long moment Swindlehurst gazes steadily at him, putty face revealing nothing. He reaches for the token. "You'll do."

Karl doesn't like those eyes, doesn't like the man behind them.

"Welcome to 66." He raises a finger to his lips. "But let me offer you a piece of valuable advice, Karl. Don't make waves. We've got enough waves out here. Sixty-six is Genesistems' property, and we take property rights very seriously." He takes a vial from a small, mother-of-pearl box on the desk, offers the box to Karl. When he refuses, Swindlehurst snaps a vial under his nose, breathing deeply the gas released, eyes closed.

Karl isn't sure what he's using, hasn't kept up. Five years is eons in designer drugs. Smelling geranium, Karl watches, repulsed, keeping his face tightly under control as the small man's mouth twitches, convulsed in pleasure as the chemical clamps down.

"Security is very important to us here. This is a recreational island. We get ten million visitors every year. They come for fantasy, for sex, for love, for excitement, romance. We're Coney Island, Disneyland, Vegas, flesh pots of Thailand all in one—and only eighteen minutes from L.A.. We're fantasy, Karl, magic. Don't try to change us, and you'll do fine. "

What an ass. Karl nods, knowing he's made it, passed whatever test he'd been brought here to take. He's in.

Swindlehurst shrugs, mumbling into his lap. Too long away from the hive, Karl feels the urge to look to see if there's somebody there under the desk. He keeps his eyes on the nude on the wall. He recognizes

the secretary. It's this city. It rots everything it touches. The more beautiful, the quicker to taint.

"I'll send you down to see Villar. He'll show you your office, set you up with ID's, get you on your way. I'll be keeping my eye on you, Karl, oh, yes I will."

Interview over, he turns in his chair to the window, greeting someone only he can see, laughing, mumbling into vacant air.

Karl can't wait to get away. The door opens and the secretary waits, smile cold as hoarfrost. It's she on the wall, all right—all of her.

Not bothering to smile back, Karl shakes off a chill, passes her and out.

So, he's in, good for him.

Now if he can just stay alive long enough to get out.

* * *

"She was beautiful."

Auri says it wistfully.

"She looked the way I might have looked if I hadn't been in such a hurry to kill myself. No black under her eyes, not bulimic, I could tell. She told me she wanted to know about me, because I'm her mother. It was I who needed to know"

She has his attention. How this comes out he's got to know. "What, they fertilized them, in vitro?"

She nods, falling back into her trance, eyes dull.

"They were Vici's brainchild. He wanted to design the perfect woman, the perfect fantasy. Perfect, more than perfect, sublime. Funny little man, mad as a hatter, I thought at the time."

"So, you were the raw material," he says, all of it making sense, all of it coming together. "Quite an honor."

Bitterly, she looks up, eyes cold sapphires in the dim room. "I used to think so."

"Change your mind?"

She takes a long, slow breath, eyes squeezed shut, "How much do you know about them?"

"What everyone knows, what's in the vids, the ads."

She smiles, "Nothing, you mean. Okay, let me tell you. First, they fertilized the ova, then they went to work finding out just what they had. Out of a thousand blastomere, ten had the genotype they wanted: IQ 150 plus, body type close to perfection as they knew how to make it."

"Meaning you," Karl says.

Eyes guileless, she answers. "Meaning me. Then they started fiddling. Longevity, memory retention, linguistic ability—they made what they wanted. The last thing they did was to cut out a section of intron, the part of the code they used to think was junk, splicing in wildcats: intron loading they call it."

"Wait, wait, wait." He holds up a hand to stop her. Tate seems to know all this, to have heard it all before, but he's in way over his head. "Wildcats?"

She nods, "Nonhuman alleles."

"Nonhuman?" This is getting very weird very fast. "What are we talking about, here?"

"Orchid, ocelot, eel—oh yeah, they had a ball."

He stops her again, "Look, I know I'm dense.... Eel?"

She sighs, "We're talking about just one allele out of hundreds of thousands, it's not going to make them long and slippery. Most, they found had no effect on the phenotype—what they look like, act like—at all. But they weren't done yet. They imported sequences they were curious about from certain talented people: psychokinetics, clairvoyants, idiot savant, people like that. Just to see, just to tinker."

It's as if he's out on pond ice and underfoot there comes metallic pinging. "And?"

She shakes her head, "Nothing too far off the curve. When they were done, they patented the genotypes they came up with."

"Just hold on." This he knows. "You can't patent a human being."

"Ah," she says, apparently delighted he should say it. "But they weren't human. Remember the alleles? It was there in the code, in the DNA, they could prove it. The courts came down hard on Genie's side, saying humans don't have non-human alleles in their code."

She snags a joint from the holder on Tate's desk, taps it hard on polished teak to clear bud from butt, hangs it from her lip, "Now those same judges control hefty blocks of Genesystems series A common stock."

Moving to the window, she reaches out to the west, toward the haze, lays her hand flat against the glass. "In ten days they'll turn thirty."

He's lost again. "So drop them a card."

She flashes him a look. "I mentioned my suit. I'm suing for my daughters' freedom from age thirty. It looks as if I may prevail. I do, they'll lose big. Do you know what a Sister's organs are worth? They can't take the chance, they'll butcher them first, every one of them. They're worth more dead than alive, now."

Seeing again the faces in the holos, he looks up, doubting he heard right. "How can they do that? They'd be out of business."

"Second generation Sisters will take over."

Deeper, it keeps getting deeper. "They've made more?"

"Thousands more, they're being thawed, conceived, born—if you want to call it that—somewhere right now. Fifteenth generation I think it is they're on."

"Your daughter, the one you met...."

"Romy?"

Odd name. Odd pronunciation—row-me. If he's heard it before he doesn't remember when. "Where is she now?"

She points to sea, "Out there."

She drops opposite him, elbows propped on knees as she leans forward, intent on her story. "We made a pact that day in the lawyer's office, set up a trust. We made each other mutual beneficiaries. I have their money, now, too. Since I met Romy I've brought suit for all of us, for Neena, Tatia, Tabby, Morgan—all of us. I think they would have wanted me to, if they had lived to grow up, to think about anything but themselves. I like to think so, anyway.

"At fifty I began to learn what it was I'd done. Then I saw what I needed to do. They didn't count on any of us growing up, you see, and they were just about right. But I did, forty years too late, okay, but I did, and I've got the money to do it. I've been a carbuncle on their ass ever since."

That, Karl can believe.

Gingerly, she fingers the wound on her arm. "I must be getting to them, huh?"

* * *

Karl finds Villar in his office off the Sisters lobby. Feet propped up on his desk, hands linked behind shaved head, he watches Karl come in. Two security officers drink coffee. To them Villar snarls profanity. "Here comes another one."

Conscious of their eyes on him, Karl waits just inside the door, "I'm—"

"I know who you are," Villar says, "another loser from L.A.."

"Karl Latte, a pleasure." There's something familiar about the little Spic with his feet up in his face. "I'm going to need some ID."

Villar blows air through white teeth, "You don't need ID. Last one was gone before the plastic was cool."

Karl sees an empty desk with a name plate Liaison Officer and drops the duffel hard. "Swindlehurst seems to think I do, and he seems to think you might be willing to get them for me."

For a moment Villar says nothing, just does his best to intimidate him with vato loco eyes.

Karl watches him, smiling. He knows the stare, has had it worked on him by experts. "Maybe I got that wrong, maybe I need to go back up there and tell him he made a mistake, that you're too busy."

Villar kicks away from the desk and is on his feet. "You want ID, here, have some ID." From a file he takes a wallet, spinning it hard at him.

Karl slaps it down before it hits him in the face, traps it on the desktop.

"And let me give you some advice along with it. You want to keep your job, you stay out of our way. Don't play detective. Don't think you're out here to straighten us all out. You're not. Just plant your ass right there in that chair and keep it there." He goes to the door. "You do and you might last more than a week." He flings the door back against the wall, rattling glass. "Oh, yeah, almost forgot.... Welcome to the plat." The door bangs shut behind him.

Karl smiles, "Thanks." He checks the ID, slips the badge into his pocket, looks over at the two waiting at the coffee urn to see his reaction. Villar he's not worried about. Not at all. Taking his time, Karl searches through desk drawers, finds a chipped mug. Through his teeth he whistles *If I Only Had a Brain*. What worries Karl is what's worried him since he heard Auri's proposition—how will he get Romy out? With a worry like that crossways in his gut, there's no room left for a little spic with a big mouth. "Hey, guys, tell me something, will you?"

They shrug, exchange glances, shrug.

In the sink, he rinses the mug, frees a glob of sludge from the bottom with a nail, "This coffee any good or what?"

* * *

Karl's headset chirps and he bolts awake, hand on his gun, heart pounding.

First night on the plat and it's starting. Holographic digits glowing at arms length in the dark room: 03:07. Glad to be moving, he rises in the dark, slipping boots on over the trousers he slept in. If he wants to beat Villar there, he'll have to move.

On the way out, he slams his knee into the corner of a table in the still unfamiliar room. Headset riding as easily as a pair of shades, he learns only one other man is on the way—Villar. His luck.

Trotting down the walk as it moves him past a few dozing netpunks, he calls up an overlay of the plat. He's closer than Villar. He can make it there first.

Coming off the walk at a run, he checks the Smith, opening the cylinder. Seeing six unpocketed primers, he shuts it. A habit with him, has been for twenty years since a home invasion out in Escondido. Came up behind one of them, finger electric on the trigger, got him to drop his shotgun. Later, he opens the chamber and his stomach hits the floor. Had the light shone from a different angle, the punk with the sawed off would have seen a gaping cylinder, and Karl would have been dead. Now he checks. Every time.

Every step he takes moves the blue dot—him—on the overlay closer to the red circle—the murder

scene. Villar hasn't moved, still in the lobby. No big deal to him, just another one, why scramble? This is Karl's first and he wants to be there without Villar looking over his shoulder.

Sliding down steep stairs, he hits the grill running. Very close, now, blue almost on top of red, he can see the crowd. He runs, pacing himself, elbowing his way between a fat man in bermudas, legs white enough to glow in the dim light, and a small woman, pinched face pressed to glass. Following their line of sight, he sees her, and in that instant wants more than anything else to shield her from them.

Passing his hand in front of the sensor, he overrides the lock. Edging inside, he kicks the door shut behind him, opaques the glass. Disappointed, they groan.

Tension electric, he turns to face her and hesitates, afraid he's walked in on a woman asleep. So lifelike is she, he nearly calls out. A closer look and a familiar sinking in his stomach tells him he's got it right.

Just like the others. He depends on Tate for this—no one thought to keep notes or records, bodies were gathered up, taken away, organs harvested, any evidence ruined, discarded like trash. That will stop now. Right now.

Nude, eyes open, mouth slack, neck tilted back, this time, too, she's on her knees. Sitting on her feet, ear down over leather ottoman, it's almost as if she's straining to see behind her. Careful to obliterate nothing, Karl moves closer, doubting his eyes.

Can there be such perfection?

That it can be at all stretches his faith. That it can be in death is too much. At least he got here first, at least he'll have time to look the scene over alone, without the Mexican's eyes boring into him. At least he won't have to put up with that.

Preparing himself for what he must do, he takes an aching knee, desolation rising up and over him like water, shutting out light, air, warmth. He lets his breath go. His eyes he can't take off her. Hair liquid teak, finest he's ever seen, a magnificent bundle at the nape of her neck. Ear small and delicate as a sprite's.

Tourists gone, room still, he fights an incoming tide of depression. She may not have been human—that he doesn't know—but right now, the loss, the anger, the sense of rage he feels is as strong as he's ever felt. Whatever she was, whoever she was, the world is less robbed of her grace.

The door clicks open behind him. He turns to tell whoever it is to get the hell out.

"Well, I'll be damned, look who's here," Villar says, kicking the door shut behind him. "If it isn't Dick Tracy."

* * *

Seven years old, Karl works at the sink, scrubbing softball size roots for a batch of pickled beets.

He turns to his mother as she slices an onion, wiping away tears with the back of her hand, and out of the blue, tells her he knows what other people are thinking.

He remembers the day vividly. The weather, rain—on the cape what else? The feel of the big rough beets in his hands as he scrubs away sticky black gumbo with a brush. His mother's skirt, the one with all the big apples, pears, tomatoes, and celery with smiling faces dancing around on a black background. He remembers everything. Most of all, he remembers her laugh.

"Sure you can, Sugar."

This makes him mad. The more he insists, the more she laughs. Any other time he loves her laugh. On the phone to her friends or down at the store, she would try to tell a joke she'd heard, and forget a detail, or botch the punch line, or just screw it up somehow. And she would laugh. Thinking back, he wasn't sure if it was from embarrassment at her having blown another one or just from remembering how funny it had been when it was told right, but laugh she did.

And laugh—God, she could laugh. Not especially loud or especially odd or braying or anything—just a laugh that would overwhelm her, make her lose control, leave her giggling and squealing and everybody within earshot laughing with her.

His father used to say that was why she never lacked for an audience. Not that they wanted to hear the joke. That they put up with to hear her laugh. Karl never doubted it.

But now her laugh mocks. Had he been older, he might have offered to prove his claim. But he is seven, and his feelings are hurt. So instead he swears never to tell anyone again. But he does.

Nineteen, a sophomore at Humboldt, where the women, uncombed, unshaven, mamaries bobbing in Indian prints and sandals, make statements about global warming by refusing to eat meat unless prepared in little unrecognizable chunks in fish and pepper sauce. There he meets his own flaxen-haired, if hirsute, Guenevere, and, because their love is worthy of an epic, deems it worthy of absolute honesty as well. Late one night in her room, he bares his soul.

Her reaction, remarkably similar to his mother's, infuriates him. Stubbornly, he quotes her thoughts for her, right out of her mind, speaking them before she can, leaving her sputtering and stuttering beneath him. The scene that follows, her screaming loud enough to wake the entire floor, is hardly the mating of souls he imagined. Gathering his clothes, he slinks down the back stairs and out into Humboldt Bay fog. Next day she won't speak to him, walks past as if he's invisible, turning the knife in his guts by hanging on whatever boy she happens to be with.

From her he learns honesty is for others.

Mid-quarter he drops out, catches a ride east, writes his mom, tells her not to worry. Ends up in Vegas. Spends a year living in a seventy-year-old Silver Streak in a little park on the edge of the desert. Truck tires buried on end in the sand curb spreading nopal, finger-long spikes bristling. Days he spends in the public library, one of the few still open, its single remaining librarian a blind woman with a sour face. Psychology, telepathy, parapsychology—he reads everything he can find. From the Skeptical Inquirer he learns that what he does is impossible, that he's a fake. At first he wants to find them, show them, make them see, make them admit they don't know everything. The urge passes.

When rent comes due, he plays poker. Kicks off his boots, plays barefooted, has trouble keeping his feet on his own side of the table. The other players bitch, think he does it to distract them. Barely able to stand these overly serious amateurs and their concern for concentration in a game that demands none, he endures them only long enough to make rent and food. Though the casino suspects him, their best cheats can't name his grift. As he seldom plays, and never wins big, they kiss him off as a fluke or a fool, move

on to bigger fish.

When he's read all there is to read about psychology, most of which he decides is wasted ink, and tires of fleecing tourists from Fresno at the card table, he stuffs his duffel and moves on. North on 101. No idea where he's headed. Just wants to move, to watch the white lines fly by. Sleeps through Frisco. Around Weott, he sits up in the cab of a transport, guilt and homesickness panging in his gut, and watches as the exit slides by in the mist—home only an hour away. Punching his damp jean jacket into a pillow against cold glass, he goes back to sleep.

At the Canadian border he decides he's come far enough. He's an American, that he knows. What he's heard about Canadians he doesn't like. He's not willing to give up the pistol in his bag, either, so as the transport waits in a line a quarter mile long to pass over the inspection grid, he climbs down. Five minutes later he's climbing a ride south.

Makes San Francisco by dawn. First day in a tenderloin boarding house, on his last C note, he spends a drizzly day flat on his back in bed in a room crowded with half a dozen beds. Under lines hung with hand-washed socks, he cruises the net. In the middle of a soap he hears it: SFPD's taking aps. It's like he's got a hand on a live wire.

Why not? It isn't like he's got anything else going on. It may even give him a chance to use what he hides, what he spends his time running from.

Why the hell not?

* * *

From the first step inside SFPD Karl knows it's for him.

He feels like a jerk for not finding it out before. At personnel, he signs up and is cleared for the test. Gets a job dockside unloading containers alongside Mexicans and Chinese, none of whom speak much English. Waits out the weeks till the written, then breezes through it an hour before the time limit.

Not exactly brain surgery. Question 44: "If you were to see a naked woman walking down the street, you would:

- A: Keep driving.
- B: Stop to ask if you could be of assistance.
- C: call for backup.
- D: Get her to pose for a holo by the cruiser.
- E: Both B and C.

Karl picks E and scores a 99%.

Physical's a cinch, too. Doesn't smoke, doesn't drink, and for years he's dealt with long nights alone by

running himself exhausted in the desert. Then comes the academy.

He has no talent for the unarmed stuff—doesn't like hitting much better than being hit. Hurts. Hands aren't made for it. Wrists, fingers are too slender. Eyes tend to tear when he's hit. Takes it personally. With firearms he does better than most. Raised with them, they're nothing new. Graduates top 10th of his class and with things never looking brighter, falls flat on his face.

Can't keep a partner. They refuse to work with him, call him super rookie because he's so good at finding evidence. Guns, stash, bodies—he seems to know where they are by asking a few questions, offering a suspect a Coke or a cigarette. He talks about feelings he has, about hunches, about following his instincts. Has the best conviction record in the department. Who wants to work with that?

They call him a freaking Houdini, a mind reader, a wizard. Of all the monikers, Mind Reader is what sticks. That's what they call him. And Karl doesn't mind. In a way, like a backwards sort of camouflage, its accuracy is his hiding spot.

Awed by his own good fortune, Karl expects things to start looking up. They don't. Shields don't like him any better than they did downstairs. A know it all, a hot shot, thinks he's got all the answers, thinks his don't stink and the polish still not dry on his loafers. What's worse, he's always right.

Still, nobody wants to work with him, so they team him with another FNG, a woman. Nice looking, beautiful even, but the best part, the sweet part, the part that bends them all over—she's a dyke. Big joke. Oh boy, did the new kid get screwed. Got a babe for a partner and she's a dyke. Ain't that the living end?

Karl knows what he's getting and can't do a thing about it. He doesn't like gays. Hasn't ever known one. Doesn't want to. Not too many running wild on the cape. If anybody at Ferndale High felt any inclinations in that direction, they'd been smart enough to keep it to themselves. Karl assumes he knows what she'll be like. Assumes she'll be hard to get along with, bitchy, prissy, butch, a man hater. He's wrong.

She surprises him. She's okay. Does her job, and for the first time ever, hallelujah, he's driving. For the first time he doesn't have to pretend to follow somebody else's lead, somebody who doesn't know, can't know what he does. So, he and Sare—that's her name, Sara—decide to play a little joke right back at them.

They start with little looks across the desk when they're sure somebody's looking. From there they go into the coffee room together, close the door behind them. Somebody walks in, they jump, get quiet, slink out. It works. The station buzzes.

They're riled, thinking they've got something going. No fair, that's cheating. If they'd thought she was a get-aheader they'd have kept her with one of them. Then, one night at the local hofbrau after shift, they share the joke.

After they get over being taken, they start to laugh. Everybody has a good one, ha ha, got you, and by the time everybody's had a few more beers, everything's fine. Karl's one of the boys. Sara's one of the boys. Happy ending.

Except for one thing.

After so much time together, Karl finds out he wasn't acting. Sara's beautiful. She's smart. And, as he knows, he doesn't do a thing for her. Not a thing. Hasn't the equipment. But stubborn as he's always

been, Karl won't say uncle.

They talk about it, about what it's like to feel what she feels. He can tell it's hard, but she tells him, says it's how she is, how she's always been. Not something she can change, would change, even, just the way she's wired. He nods as if he understands, embarrassed by her obvious concern, her attempt not to hurt him. It doesn't get any more humiliating than that.

For him she feels friendly affection, nothing else. He knows, he touches her all day, a poke on the arm, a brush of an elbow, hoping to catch the ghost of something, unable to believe he could feel what he does and she can feel nothing. He tries to forget how nice her suits fit her, how nice she smells, and usually he can. But they're always together in the car, and it's not easy. Intimate, cars.

As a team, no beating them, they're the best. Other guys start coming to them for tips, asking them to sit in on interrogations. They look to Karl, two years out of the academy, for help, and it feels good, it feels fine. He's doing the job, and he loves it, he really does. For the first time in his life it's worth it, having this thing, having to hide it, nurse it, try not to let it hurt him. For the first time it's giving something back, and he's giving something too. Then, like that, it's gone.

Sixteen-year-old girl, Mai Lee, honor student, Hmong, strangled while her grandparents are deep in UR in the next room. Came in the window. Did it real slow, the FP said, took maybe an hour. All the time the kid shredding the sheet with her nails. Down to bloody quicks. They've interviewed everybody, called in SID for prints, DNA, everything. What they've got is a big fat zero. Then Karl thinks of something and it scares him.

He's touched suspects. He's touched victims, little kids, too small to say what they saw, to give descriptions. Some of them are bad, harrowing, even, but even if they're hurt, they're alive, and to catch the guy it's worth it. Now, for the first time he thinks of touching the dead. Wonders what would happen. Thinks probably nothing, but what the hell, they've got nothing now, why not try?

When SID packs up, he has the coroner hold off downstairs. Leaving Sara writing a report in the living room, he eases the bedroom door shut behind him. By her bed, he sits on his haunches, lifts the sheet enough to expose her head and arm. Primitive fear keeps his hand trembling above her smaller one hanging limp over the edge of the mattress. Stomach aching with tension, he can't take his eyes off it, so little, the hand of a child really, unpainted nails broken. He hears the door open behind him.

Sara comes in, Grandfather and Grandmother behind her.

When she's close enough to whisper, she says, "Are you out of your mind, what are you doing?"

Karl sees the grandparents watching, doesn't know how much he wants to say. "Just seeing if I can learn anything."

The grandfather watches, eyes hard, then seems to decide, nods, giving him the go ahead.

Karl turns back, but Sara catches his arm in a strong hand, doubt coming through loud as a scream. "Don't give me that, what's going on?"

"Just," he says, raising a hand between them, "just stay away." She backs off to the door. The grandfather, wrinkled face hard, watches.

Embarrassed, ashamed, scared more than he cares to admit, Karl turns, and before he can think,

presses his hand firmly to the nape of her neck.

An abscess bursting with infection, her mind opens. Groaning, he sags against the bed, gagging on anger, fear, hate.

She'd seen him a few times, didn't know his name, hadn't liked his eyes—the man downstairs in 3C. What happened to her he can feel. The helplessness, the pain, the fear, all of it...it's just too much....

Panicked, he jerks his hand away, but it won't come. He can't let go. It's like he's holding a live wire. With a yelp of fear, he tears it away, and the force raises her off the bed. She bounces and is still.

On hands and knees, he catches his breath, relief washing over him. Relief that it's over, that he lived through it, that she didn't reach up to drag him down wherever it is she's gone, didn't snatch away his mind, his soul. Breathing hard, he sits up, back against the bed, her hand prodding his shoulder, nothing more to give. Dreading it, Karl meets the old man's faded eyes and sees understanding.

Mai's grandfather watches him as a snake watches a rat, black hair combed straight back into a widow's peak gleaming, smelling of barber shop dressing. "You know."

Eager to get away, Karl gets to his feet, heads for the hall. The grandfather, following, drags his wife with him. She screams, cries, chatters away fast and sing song as Karl flees downstairs.

From the doorway, voice tortured with anguish, he yells down after them. "You know!"

The voice pursues Karl as he heads down the long, dark stairway, stinking of fish oil, peanut sauce, garlic, "You know!"

Once past the waiting coroner, Sara starts in on him. He won't talk. It's all too raw, too fresh, too septic. Next day Karl tips another detective. They bring 3C in and the SOB clams up, screams for a lawyer. Won't say anything. Won't submit to blood testing, DNA matching, nothing. Slick as a skinned cucumber, he looks right at them and smiles. >From him Karl gets nothing he can use. He's got an alibi, a lie but with what they've got, which is nothing, it's enough.

They cut him loose and Karl tries to forget. Only he can't. He can't forget Mai. The way she clawed the sheet bloody. The way 3C let her have just enough blood to stay alive, teasing her until he tired of her. The way 3C smiles at them, knowing he did it, knowing they know, smiles right at them. Two weeks later they get a call.

3C's shot dead in his apartment. Back of the head. Billfold in his pocket—an execution. They go to see the grandfather. Soon as Karl sees him he knows he did it. Sara he tells to wait outside. Looking daggers, she goes. Hands atremble, Grandma fixes tea, old man sitting at the table still as stone.

Karl looks around the room, the Buddhist set up, whatever it is, he doesn't know. In the corner, little altar on a low table, holos of Mai, baby to high school, pudgy chin on a hand, the hand that shredded the sheet. Tea made, Grandma perches on a hard chair, holds her husband's hand clamped in her aproned lap.

Karl asks if he still has the gun, and without his face changing, he raps something off to the wife. She protests, cries, whines, but he silences her with a hard word. Head bowed, she fetches it, klunks it on the table wrapped in a rag. Heart dead in his chest, Karl pockets it. "Anybody else know?"

The old man shakes his head, puzzled. "Me, I shot."

"Anybody see you?"

Again he shakes his head no. Karl hesitates. Is this how a man's life ravel? So easily? So suddenly? "Now, I want you to listen to me." Karl leans forward, knowing exactly what it is he's about to do. Knowing what it'll cost him. "You were home in bed last night from eight on. You heard nothing, you saw nothing, understand?"

Understanding growing in his eyes, Grandpa nods. The wife worries at his arm. He speaks and as a valve is closed she stops her sobbing.

"She understand?"

The old man speaks again, and she wipes her eyes, nodding rapidly, eager to agree. As a man looks at God come to earth he looks at Karl. It makes Karl nervous. "You can remember that, can't you, eight on?"

"We remember," he says. The woman nods.

Suddenly drained, Karl opens the door, motions Sara inside. She's curious. He's never asked her to leave before, and she doesn't know what it means, why he would. She notices the woman's been crying, but Karl's not worried about that. The old woman smiles tentatively. In front of Sara he asks them what time they went to bed and they say what he's told them. He thanks them. They leave.

On the way down narrow stairs she steps in front of him, blocking the way, "What was that about, asking me to leave, huh, what?"

He's never lied to her. He doesn't want to, now. "I thought they might talk to me alone," he says, squeezing by. The rest of the night she won't talk. She knows he's lying, and she's mad. He doesn't blame her. He's mad at himself.

After shift he can't sleep. He jogs through the park, bundle in a windbreaker pocket clutched in his hand. It's cold, foggy as hell, and he's got a decision to make. The faster he runs, the tighter it squeezes him. Just before dawn, winded, Karl strolls across the Golden Gate. It all comes down to one question: How the hell can he do what he does and let a man get away with murder?

Can't have it both ways; he has to choose.

Right or wrong.

Anarchy or law.

Easy choice.

Except for Mai.

Halfway to Sausalito he stops and, no one in sight, winds up and hurls a small parcel far out over the water.

Too dark to watch it fall.

Too far down to hear the splash.

The gun is gone.

With it goes his life.

* * *

Beside the strangled sister Karl kneels, wishing Villar gone.

A pain in the rear he is, and maybe dangerous, he doesn't know. Karl hasn't touched him. Doesn't want to.

Face like an angel, spittle drizzling from the corner of her mouth, Karl gets down close. Reaching out to wipe it away, he catches himself.

Too late to matter, now.

He reaches out, flat of his palm hovering just above flawless skin. Still warm. Dead only a few minutes. Somehow it makes it harder to be here, to see her. He snaps a light stick, holds it over her eyes. Red, vessels engorged with blood. Strangled slowly, while he was inside her. Like Mai.

Slowly, he reaches out, brushes hair from her face, and gets a jolt that rocks him on his heels. More than he's felt in years.

Ignoring Villar smirking from where he leans against the door, he sifts it between thumb and forefinger. Tingling like an electric current, he can feel it come, a wave rising far out. He wants to pull his hand away. Doesn't want to know this fallen sprite. But he waits for it, and by then it's on him, a crashing wave.

It hits him like a sucker punch in the solar plexus. His breath leaves him in a rush. He can feel her, the ghost of the last thing she felt as she died. What he expects never comes. No hate. No fear. Only despair, deeper than he's felt before in a human being. Sadness. Hopelessness. This he doesn't get. There is always hate, fear—who could be human and not feel both?

But then, he remembers: she isn't—is she?

What there is, is acceptance, that and concern for the Sisters she left. That's all.

Drained, as if he's been for a long swim, he sits back, watching her, half expecting her to rise. The lightstick he takes from between his lips and reaches with it between her legs. In the yellow light he finds a line of ejaculate crimson with blood snaking its way down the inside of a thigh. Blood. Either because he was brutal or because he was her first. He'll wait for the coroner to tell him which.

He notices her hands. Flat on the floor, long nails perfect in repose. In his mind he sees Mai's, broken and bloodied, and wonders what it means. Drugged? He doesn't think so. Strangled slowly and she didn't fight, didn't struggle. Who would, who could do that? Could she have detested life so much to have feared death so little?

Villar laughs. "That how you get yuks where you come from?"

He stands, considers pushing the little spic through the plate glass behind him.

"Any time," Villar says.

Vision clearing, Karl sees a little Mexican with a shaved head. Sure, Villar wouldn't like him, new LO throwing his weight around, shooting off his mouth when he should be staying out of the way. "We need a pathologist in here now."

Villar laughs, looking away as if he's said something funny.

"What's the joke?"

Like a switch cut off, Villar quiets, face turning glacial, "No forensic pathologists out here, detective."

So, he looked over Latte's file, found he never made it out of blues. Karl wonders why he'd be curious enough to go to the trouble.

"The meds'll be here in two minutes, take her away and that's it. She'll be bait by sunrise, like she never was."

Karl hears, but the words mean nothing. "What about the investigation?"

"What investigation?"

"How do you expect to catch this guy? Murder can't be good for business."

The look Villar gives him makes Karl think he may care more than he is willing to let on. "You'd be surprised."

The door flies open and techs come in six strong, brushing Karl aside with practiced efficiency. Karl orders them not to touch the body. They ignore him, showing him broad backs. As he reaches for his gun, Villar presses a hand over his jacket, shakes a shaved head. "You don't want to do that."

Karl watches as they handle her, big hands rough as they zip her into a bag. Yes he does, yes he does want to. "goddam it!"

"Come on," Villar says, motioning with a nod of his head for him to follow. Along the quay, they walk. "Look, things aren't done here the way they're done on the mainland. That," he says, hooking a thumb over his shoulder, "was no murder."

"What was it, then?"

"No human, no murder. That thing back there wasn't human."

Karl is staggered by the outrage he feels. "That what you think?"

Villar's eyes narrow. "What I think's got nothing to do with it. Anyway, we know who did her."

Karl is adrift. "You do."

"Same guy who checked her out couple hours ago. We'll have him before morning. They'll recoup the cost of the merchandise if he's got it, but that's all."

"The merchandise?"

"Her, the one you found so fascinating."

Villar strolls along the rail, runs a small brown hand over a shaved skull. "About a year ago, I tracked one down myself." Sensing Karl's question, he answers before he can ask, "Favor for a friend. Swore up and down he didn't do it. One minor problem—he did."

"So?"

Villar shrugs, "Didn't have two shekels to rub together, no way he could pay the fine. Borrowed the dough to take her out. Could have turned him in, but this friend, she was upset about the whole thing."

Karl can't believe Villar's telling him this, doesn't know what it means, where it's leading.

"Took him out on a scow, pierced his ear with a .22, dropped him over, toilet for an anklet. Jesus, did I stink! Had to toss away the suit, shoes. Two days later it happened again. Same time, same placement of the body, same MO, everything. If I hadn't popped him myself, I'd have sworn—same guy."

Karl doesn't get the mystery. "Copycat."

"Uh, uh, total net blackout, bought and paid for by the company. You won't hear anything about this tomorrow, not a word. Go ahead, scan for it. Genie doesn't like bad press, won't stand for it."

Karl watches closely for a response. "Then you killed the wrong guy."

Villar lights a doob, inhales, shakes his head no. "Haven't you been listening? He did it, all right. Two days later it was somebody else. So's this."

"How can you know that?"

He shrugs, looking out toward the lights of L.A.. "You're the detective, you tell me," he says, cuing his headset with a blink of his eye. "Ah, okay, here we go, com 50."

Karl scans up, passing the setting once, out of practice, gets it. Indoor surveillance camera mounted over the door. A man, balding, fifty, overweight, leads in a woman. He realizes who it is he's seeing and tingles like he's absorbing a static charge. It's her.

"You mean you have it on chip?"

"Shut up and watch."

In she comes, camera catching her from above, movements smooth as a cat. She follows into the room, sits demurely, waiting. "Wait, stop it, stop it."

"What?"

"Why does she go to his room with him? I thought these things weren't supposed to get...."

"Intimate?" Villar looks bored, "They're not."

"Then why his room?"

"Look, Sisters will talk anywhere. What do they care? nobody touches them. They do, they pay."

"Why set it up that way?"

"Organs aren't worth a dime on the dollar infected with HIV. What if it is a harmless retrovirus? Fifty years of propaganda from the CDC takes a long time to pass through the gut. The penalties would choke a horse. It's all in the contract. Some pretty big fish have been hooked when they crossed the line. Genie's got more lawyers than L.A.'s got netpunks. They never lose."

There's something Karl's been wanting to ask. "One thing I don't get. Why do these guys go for this, paying that much when they can't touch her?"

Villar sneers, as if Karl's just shown himself for the scum he is. "It's not sex—sex is everywhere. On the quay you got twelve-year-olds hustling for a few copecs. It's not sex."

Karl is surprised by the intensity in his voice. "What, then?"

Villar marvels at his stupidity, "Her intellect, her compassion, her interest. That's ten times as sexy as anything you can lay a hand on. Believe me."

Karl does. "Okay, then she doesn't expect anything to happen, just talk."

Villar nods, impatient, "Yeah, here we go, watch this."

At the door, just out of range of the fish eye, another man waits.

"Who's that?"

"Don't know, never comes any farther into the room, but there are always at least one or two netpunks as lookouts. We've tracked them down and it's like talking to a wall, they're fried." Villar starts the vid, "You know what they remind me of? Zombies. Look at the way he stands there, it's like he's sleepwalking."

This isn't right. Serial murder's no team sport. "A hit, then."

"Uh, uh, keep watching."

The big man fixes himself a drink, turns and a tremor passes over his face. He seems to change, something about his face, his manner, the way he holds himself—a metamorphosis. Hard to see in the poor light, but it's like a wolf tossing off a lambskin.

Villar stops it, plays it again, "Right there, see that?"

Karl's skin tingles with revulsion. "I see it."

"What, what did you see?"

"It's like...." Karl struggles for words. "...like a mask came off, what is it?"

"Don't know, but it always happens. Here we go."

From her seat on the couch, she glances uneasily at the guy by the door, then back to the man at the bar. "Been enjoying your holiday Mr. Newman?" She asks it like she cares.

That's all she has time to say before he's on her. Moving faster than Karl would have guessed he could, he forces her down. "That's enough," he says to Villar.

She moans with pain as he pulls her hair, already wrapped in his fist, raises her dress to her waist. Karl tries to cut out, can't remember how, and ends up tearing the satcom off his head, fumbling, nearly dropping it, "goddam it, that's enough, I said!"

Villar smiles, "What's the matter? It's just getting good. I thought you detectives collected this stuff, passed it around like trading cards. The last LO did." He motions in empty air, "Look at that, bet I could get ten million a copy for this. I mean, this makes Black Dahlia stills look tame." Villar cuts off, looks him in the eye, face hard, "You don't like it, huh? What's the matter? They're only things, I thought you knew that."

Karl gets the impression he's being tested, probed. He doesn't like it. "You know who he is, why don't you pick him up?"

Villar sub-vocalizes into the air, and Karl thinks of someone speaking in their sleep, indistinct, yet close enough to sound like words. Villar smiles, searching his face, "Want to meet him?"

* * *

In his cubicle Karl sits cross-legged on a narrow bunk, back against the wall, holos arrayed before him on the futon.

Perfection, every one. He'd always heard they only looked human. Inside they were somehow less, somehow lacking. He shuffles the stack with a finger, parade of empty single-serving Johnny Walker boxes lined up along the edge of the night table, glass cradled in his lap, .44 by his thigh.

Needing to hear a human voice, he cues one of the vids waiting for him on his satcom.

"The first fitful attempts at UR required bulky headsets and gloves," says a male announcer, voice exuding competence.

Karl watches archival footage of 20th century VR gloves, headsets.

"Why input data through hands, eyes, ears, when it's possible to go directly to the destination of all interface, the source of all control—the brain itself?"

A 3D computer brain simulation overlaid with an implant schematic tumbles through a 360. "First available in twenty-oh-five, satcom headsets were crude, but with holo glasses, integral auditory stimulators, and ocular movement interactive systems, a vast improvement over what came before."

Fluttering black and whites of a gawky boy with horse teeth trying one on. "Gee wilikers! This is swell!"

"Next came implants."

A professor lies on a sweep of black sand under beefwoods, sand filtering slowly through his fingers, as a thousand students observe his presentation. "Freeing the body from all external heads up hardware, implants permanently linked vision, auditory, pleasure, olfactory and tactile centers in one network, allowing levels of realism in UR until now unimaginable. Implants made instant satcom access and use of inactive cerebrum for data storage possible at last."

Split view of a dozen couples, all colors, both same and mixed sex playing with toddlers. "Now, Genesistems and the miracle of genetic engineering can insure your child's safety, education, and happiness from the moment of exogenesis. The modern couple prefers not to rely on chance to decide their offspring's destiny. Now at the same time you conduct other conventional manipulation during germ cell therapy, you may insure not only your child's future, but your child's offspring—and theirs. The new Biocom offers complete net link and satcom functions with no electronic implants! Generated by your child's own body from the code implanted, Biocom will form an integral part of your child's brain, and be passed on to future generations."

Close up of child's face, eyes intent.

"Imagine—your child may now come online before birth! Extensive testing has proven that children developing with Genesistems' Biocom surpass infants receiving conventional implants. You can now talk directly to your child via satlink, whether in utero or the more carefree fetal development chamber! Begin molding your child's character and intellectual development from the moment of conception. In conjunction with the new intelligence enhancing engineering, who can predict to what heights man may rise?"

A view unfolds of Earth as seen from a craft rising rapidly to space. "At Genesistems, we envision a world in which all humanity is linked, a world in which no one is without companionship, without stimulation, without access to the accumulated knowledge of mankind.... With Biocom the sky's the limit!"

Well known actress, voice sultry yet wise, coos, "Oh, that Genesistems!"

Swiping his headset off over his head, he tosses it across the bunk. Again his eye falls on the holos spread out before him. Among them he finds the one murdered last night. Shockingly beautiful, she smiles up at him. He lifts his glass, shakes the ice just to hear it jingle, drinks.

He may not know much about genetics, or psychology, or biology.... But one thing he does know. He lays a finger gently against her cheek, remembering what he'd felt when he touched her. He may not know anything at all, but he knows what people are like inside. And that woman is...was...as human as any he's ever touched. And what happened... that was murder.

What it means is he's been wrong about recombinants his whole life. Thinking about that, he tears open another box, squeezing it into his glass with the sound of urination.

How many other things is he wrong about?

The holos he shuffles, stirring the pot. This time Romy ends up on top, looking up at him with eyes that melt their way inside him.

Can beauty like that be anything but hollow?

He's never spoken to her, yet he's known those eyes forever. They call to him, reach for him. Slowly, he reaches out a hand to the face so lifelike there before him. As his hand nears the sheet, his headset hums. Karl jumps, spilling Tennessee whiskey over the holos and his bed, "goddammit, what?"

"Love you, too, sweetheart." It's Villar.

In security at the base of the tower, Villar leads him to a room where, behind one way glass, an ordinary looking man paces. The man in the vid, yet not the man who forced her to her knees. This man is nothing like that one. Face is wrong. Eyes are wrong. Might fantasize about it. Never do it.

"Our friend from the tape," Villar says. "Caught him trying to sneak aboard a taxi."

"What took so long?"

"Had to get his story."

"So what's he say?"

"So far nothing, just that he didn't do it. Played the movie for him...." He shrugs, "Didn't look too surprised."

Karl watches him as he paces the room nervously. "What'll happen to him?"

"Doesn't have the ten bill penalty, so he'll go up on grand theft in L.A., get five years in-house, probably."

"No ride on a scow?"

Villar looks at him like an unfriendly dog, says nothing.

"I want to talk to him."

Villar shrugs, "Be my guest."

"Need a pack of jays and a lighter."

"Going to make friends?"

Karl nods impatiently, "Just give me the sticks, huh?"

Villar digs out a pack of Lucky's more than half full and a lighter, hands them over. "Sure, man, enjoy." He waves a hand in front of the door and it unlocks, springing open. Karl goes in, feeling like he has the hundreds of times he's done this in the city—little high, little like an actor on for an opening night one-liner.

He sits at the table, motions the guy to a chair turned 90 degrees away, the best angle for conversation, shakes out a doob, offers it. "You look nervous."

He sighs with apparent relief, and like a drowning man offered a hold on something solid, sits. "Finally!"

He takes the offered smoke, and in an instant, like a rush through a short tunnel on a bullet train and out into the light, Karl's inside him.

Guilt for petty sins, squalid pleasures, unexceptional vices: the sins of a common man. Worry, fear, it's all there, but nothing like the ferocity, the viciousness he saw in the vid. He's the man, he can see that, but just as definitely, he's not. Weird. No way he can lie to him. Doesn't know he's being read. Couldn't if he did.

"Christ, nobody will listen to me. These Genie guys, they're a bunch of jerks. Listen, you from L.A.?"

Karl nods.

"Those dicks wouldn't know beans if the bag was open. Look, the first thing you should know is that I didn't do this." Hands rocking, he pinches the jay between his lips. Karl slides the Zippo across the table where he snaps it up, flips the lid with a practiced hand, lights up. He slaps the lid shut with a metallic chirp, drags long, talks without letting it go, voice a croak. "My wife can't find out about this."

Karl nods, watching. He's scared, not faking, really scared. "Tell me about last night."

He shakes his head, lets out a lung-full of smoke, "You'll think I'm nuts—or lying."

Karl knows he's neither and it worries him. "Try me."

Like a man who's just dug a trench and is ordered to fill it in, he breathes, lets it go. "Picked her up about nine. Fifty thousand for three hours. Know how long I saved for that? Five years. Five goddam years...." He shakes his head sadly. "We went out, ate, walked the quay, that's all. Always been kind of a roamer, you know, been with all kinds. Recoms, netpunks, however the mood strikes me, right? Well, let me tell you, most of them, you might as well be alone."

Relaxed, now he goes on. "With them I'm lonelier than I was before, right? Not with her. I heard about Sisters, figured, sure, just another scam, another way to separate a sucker from his cash." He shakes his head, "I know they say they're not real women. I'm here to tell you, they're better."

Karl nods. He's used to listening, letting them talk themselves out. He has that effect on people. "Then what?"

He looks right at him, shakes his head as if he's trying to dislodge something from an ear. "I don't know. I'm talking to her, and she's looking at me with those eyes. You know what that feels like? to have one of them pouring all that attention on you? Do you? all that high voltage?"

Karl shakes his head. He has no idea what it's like and he's not pleased to find he's sorry to admit it.

"Well, let me tell you, man, I been married twenty years, and it's been longer than that since my wife's paid that much attention to me. If she ever did. It makes you feel like you're the one and only man she wants. I'm not talking about all that sighing and oh, baby crap the others give you. No, this is real. I swear it is. She listened to me.

Karl sees his hands are shaking again.

"I thought that maybe I was going to be the one, the one in a billion. And I'll never have to go home again, right? We'll just run away from everything together, just her and me." He smiles, leaning forward in the hard-backed metal chair, turning the lighter in pudgy hands, hands Karl's sure spend their days at a computer console. Hands unused to violence, to hard labor.

He takes another drag. "Then out of the blue...." His face distorts into a grimace and he presses two hands to his receding hairline as if he's got to hold on the top of his skull.

Karl remembers the changes in personality he came across on the net. Can this be one? "What?"

The guy is sweating, nervous, frightened. Karl finds it catching. Why can't he just say it, whatever it is?

"Something's in here with me. It's like I'm not alone, like I see a movement out of the corner of my eye, you know?"

Karl feels the need to look behind him, sloughs it off, "In the room, you mean, the hotel room?"

"No, no, no," he says, slamming the heel of his hand against his forehead, "In here!" He gets up, pacing, moans, "Oh, Christ, I'm screwed. Nobody's going to believe this, nobody."

Karl's listened to a lot of liars. This guy isn't one. "You don't talk to me, I can't help you."

He comes back to the table. "How do I know you're not with the company?"

"I think you know."

"Yeah," he says, eyes moving over Karl's face, "you're different. What are you, anyway?"

Good question. What is he? "Mainland liaison."

His eyes widen in disbelief, "Liaison?" He resumes his pacing. "Oh, Christ, I'm screwed. Why am I even wasting my breath talking to you? I've already told the story ten times. I'm sick to death of telling it. I thought you were LAPD, somebody with some pull over there. I'm an American citizen, I don't want to end up in some stinking Mexican jail."

Conscious of Villar listening, watching from the next room, Karl chooses his words with care. "What I am is somebody who's willing to listen." Karl rises, moves to the door, "You don't want to tell me, that's fine."

"Okay, okay," he says, "stick around a minute, I'm getting to it. I'm just tired, that's all. He leans far over the table, arms stretched out, palms down. "I never told anybody this part, this is where it gets real weird. They showed me the vid, but I already knew what happened. I remember it all. I remember what it felt like to do it, the feel of her hair, her skin, all of it. God, I can smell her on me, now. " He drops his head on his arms.

Karl's mind races, trying to make sense of it. "You said you didn't do it."

"I didn't, I didn't do it." Frustrated, he stops, hunting for a way to say it. "You ever have a dream, a bad, a real bad dream, and try to scream, try to run, to do anything? That's what it's like. Whatever had me was strong, real strong, I couldn't fight it."

The hair on Karl's neck prickles. "It?"

Frustration coming off him like heat off a stove, he pounds the table, "It, the thing that took me over!" Running a trembling hand over his hair, he looks up at Karl, "You want to know what it was? Want to hear me say it? Okay, it was a demon."

Understanding he's perfectly serious, Karl feels the walls of the room close in, the lights dim. "Why do you say that?"

"Because it was evil, that's why."

Karl shoves away from the table, paces the room in front of the door. "Ever felt anything like it before?"

"No."

"Ever treated for any...." Karl searches for a delicate way to say this, fails, "...problems?"

"I'm not nuts!"

Everything Karl feels, everything he knows tells him it happened just as he says it did. So, what does that mean, that there are demons out there, things lurking in the dark just beyond the glow of phosphor tubes? He doesn't believe it, doesn't want to. "Go on."

"After I... it... did it, it let me go. And there I am, and there she is, and God, I'm going nuts. I mean I just killed somebody. I don't know what to do. I know nobody'll believe what happened."

"What then?"

"I get out of there, stay out of sight for a while. When I try for a taxi they grab me."

"That's your best story—a demon?"

Face hunted, eyes far away as if he's forgotten Karl's there, he says, "It loved it, really got a kick out of it. Every time she whined, every breath.... The pain," he says, voice low, "the pain's what it's after, not the sex. It wants, it needs the pain. Oh, yeah, it loved every second of it."

Karl watches him, sickened, "And you didn't."

"No!" he says, face breaking up, like he might be going to ball, "Not most of it," he says, whining, "but come on, man, she was a goddess. You telling me you've never thought about what it'd be like? Come on, haven't you?"

Karl lets the question hang in the haze of smoke, gets to his feet.

He follows Karl to the door, grabs his arm. "I know what you all think, but if it had let me, I would have stopped. I would have let her breathe, I would have."

Karl relaxes the block he throws up when touched just enough to feel he's telling the truth. "I believe you."

His mouth opens in surprise, "You do?"

Karl nods.

"Then come on, man, help me out on this, will you? I can't afford ten bills, I couldn't afford what I spent."

Sickened by the sight of him, he fights the urge to slap his hand away. "I'll do what I can," he says, knowing he won't.

In the dark, Villar waits.

"You heard?"

Villar nods. "Believe him?"

"He's no liar, too scared."

"So what's he talking about? I mean, come on, the devil made him do it?" Villar laughs through his teeth, "That what you believe?"

Karl's got nothing to say to that. Maybe he does, maybe there is evil out there. Maybe all their trinkets and twenty thousand years changed nothing. Still light against dark, still man huddled around the fire pit, eyes circling.

Villar turns serious. "We've got the DNA, the prints, the vid—he did it, all right. I don't care if the devil did egg him on, we caught him and he's going to pay."

Karl wants out of this dark, cramped room, away from the man on the other side of the glass crying on folded arms. "Later."

Villar's voice booms after him as he goes. "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."

Karl hesitates at the door, "Peter?"

"First, 5:8. So, know your Bible? Religious man, are you?"

Karl shakes his head, "You?"

"Ha, ha, he laughed bitterly," Villar says, rising. "You say you believe him, that mean the part about the demon, too?"

Karl pushes his way out the door, needing to get out into the light, into the air. "I don't know."

"Think about it, Marlowe, and let me know when you figure it all out."

As far as Karl was concerned, Villar would be the first to know.

* * *

On the way back to his cubicle, Karl remembers their last meeting in Tate's office.

"Just what is it you want me to do?"

Auri doesn't hesitate, "I want you to stop them, I don't care how you do it. Stop them before they kill her."

Karl's curious. "You say there are about fifty left, what makes Romy so important?"

Face to the window, Auri answers, "She's the last one of mine, the last one of my daughters."

Karl rubs a face in need of a shave with a work-roughened hand. Now he understands. "Is that all?" He laughs, seeing nothing funny about it. "Before I came to see you, I did a little research. Genesystems is one of the largest cartels in the world. Chi-Coms took over in '20, gobbled up Genetek, Genysis, Generelle, all the bio tech firms. They sell Sisters and Brothers worldwide in hundreds of types. It's big business, all perfectly legal. Got a former president and three senators on the board."

She presses forehead to glass, "Please, all I ask is that you try. Meet her, meet Romy, talk to her. She knows everything. If you do that, you'll know what needs to be done. That's all I ask, a few days of your time. In exchange I'll fix that thing with EPA."

Karl glances at Tate who seems to find the surface of his desk fascinating.

"I don't know what he's told you about me, but I don't leap tall buildings in a single bound. Sometimes it takes me two or three tries."

She turns to Tate, eyes disappointed. "But you said—"

"Sweetheart, Darlin', I'm not your man. Five years ago maybe, not now. I'm a farmer. Any of Tate's agents would be ten times better than I."

Tate toys with a pen, balancing it on a forefinger. "I sent eight agents before Alandro. Good people, best I had."

Now he really doesn't follow. "Aren't they stumbling over each other out there?"

Tate says nothing.

"Well, come on, what'd they come up with?"

Auri stands, broad back to them at the glass. "They ended up same as Alandro."

Tate looks as if he may be sick.

"Nine?" Karl says, stunned. "All nine?"

Tate nods.

A cold finger traces its way from Karl's tailbone to the nape of his neck, over the top of his scalp. "This just keeps getting better." Karl thinks of Sara and his stomach clenches. "I know any of them?"

Tate opens his mouth to answer, and Karl raises a hand, cutting him off. "Forget it." He knows the answer. If he sent his best, he sent Sara. "I don't want to know."

Tilting Bink's head up, absently he scratches his chin. The dog's eyes close, tail doing a lazy wave. Karl knows he won't get out of this one—nobody's luck's that good. "So what do you think I can do that they couldn't, besides adding to the glut on the liver market?"

Tate squirms in his chair. "I've told her about your talent."

Karl sees it had to be that, sighs, "Stupid question."

Seeing the look on Karl's face, Tate raises a placative hand, "She wanted you, Karl. You're the only one she wanted."

Karl gets to his feet. Anger deciding for him, he moves for the door. On his way out he turns, "Well, Honey, you can't have me."

THREE

Tate catches him on the roof.

Karl signs to the pilot and the engine whines as the rotor winds up. Released, Bink presses close to the backs of his calves.

Tate gets in his face, "Since when are you a dilettante?"

Refusing to be intimidated, Karl keeps his eyes on the skyline. Miraculously, a rift opens in the haze, and the sun glints off platforms, setting alloy aglow with a dull sheen. "May you consume offal and expire."

The rotors raise a gust. Bink whines, trembles, fear sent strong through Karl's legs.

"Clever. Okay, I don't scare you. Glad to hear it. How about self-interest? They won't give you a dime on the dollar for that place, you know that."

Karl's had enough, doesn't want to hear about it—probably set the whole thing up anyway. He turns, faces him a meter from a sheer drop to the water. "I ought to toss you off, you know that?"

"Maybe you should. I deserve it, giving a damn whether or not you and Bink end up in a trailer park

behind the LP yard in Eureka. Oh, I'm sure you'll like it. I hear there's a space available down by the mud flats just across the bay from the pulp mill. What if it does smell like you've got a wet paper bag over your head? You'll have your goddam self-righteousness, and that's what counts, isn't it?"

"They won't get me out."

Tate shakes his gray head, hair whipping in the draft from the blades. "Karl...." He says it the way he always has, admonishing a wayward child, "They're fanatics. Okay, you're that good, you may take down a few, but they won't stop until they get what they want. They're fighting for all God's little creatures. You, you're the new version of the devil, remember. You eat our furry animal friends, you cut down the pretty trees."

"Then I'll go to them, hurt them where they live."

Again, Tate shakes his head, hair awry, "You think there aren't more where they came from, aren't more waiting in the wings for their chance to curry favor with the Greens? All you'll do is give them an excuse to crack down harder on other poor slobs like you. It's farmers, it's ranchers, loggers who are the endangered species." Tate signals the pilot to cut power and the whining drones slowly down.

Karl looks at him, sees a frightened old man, shrunken, not the Tate he remembers. An old man, impossible to hate, to be pitied. "Why call me back, why on this one? You know there's no way you can win against one of the cartels, and if there were, not against this one, not against Genie." He remembers the people he worked with, people he thought of as still alive until this morning. "It's not like you to throw good men and women down the tubes."

Tate turns his back to stand at the brink, staring down at the water. "Okay, truth time: The agency's being choked off. Maybe you haven't heard, but things are tight. Greens are cutting everything but welfare and EPA. On top of that the GAO notices we're budgeted to provide justice with toilet paper, liquid soap and pads, all of which duplicates services provided by a janitorial sub-contractor. I'm fighting tooth and nail for funding to keep afloat."

The agency's always scraped by on a shoestring, on favors from other agencies, borrowed weapons, equipment, but this is something else. "I didn't know."

"I'm losing, Karl. I thought maybe we could help each other." Tate turns. "So I was wrong."

"Wait, I want to get this straight. I go in cold, try to get close enough to protect this subhuman freak, convince her to come back with me, and if somehow I get her and myself out alive, Auri will see what she can do. That it? that the deal?"

Tate looks pained, "You're hard-headed, Karl, always have been. But you've never had a closed mind. You've changed."

It hurts, Tate's disapproval, his disappointment. It hurts more to know he's let himself be manipulated. Karl gathers Tate's shirt in a fist, "After this, I'm through—with you and this penny pinching agency."

Feet skimming concrete half a meter from the edge, Tate watches him, eyes laughing.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you set the whole thing up with EPA." Throbbing with fury, Karl shakes him, "Did you?"

Tate opens his mouth.

"Never mind, I don't want to know." Karl sets him down, signals the pilot, who raises his arms, weary of the game. Again the engine revs.

They stare into each other's eyes, wind rocking them at the edge, rotor blast whipping their hair, neither speaking—a test of wills.

Karl lets him go, shouts to be heard over the rotor wash. "I'm going to do this, and you tell that formaldehyde doll down in your office if she can't do what she says she can, I'll be back to ask her, and you, why not."

Karl opens the door of the helicopter and Bink scuttles to leap in. Karl follows, slams the door, taps the pilot and they rise off the roof. As they climb, Karl watches the old man dwindle on the shrinking roof heli pad below. The last of his strength leaving him, Karl leans back, cues his headset.

"Tonight on Uninet, bad day for Genesistems stockholders."

Ice-blue Pompadour is troubled, risks a frown as he drones on in a sonorous baritone. Wondering how he had survived so long on the net with a voice that annoying, Karl jacks it up to hear over the rotors.

"Aging super model Auri Zerai emerged victorious in the first phase of her decade-long court battle with DNA multinational, Genesistems. In a ruling today, the supreme court granted first generation Sisters human rights as of their 30th birthdays."

Karl sits up, nerves tingling as the words penetrate the haze of fatigue.

"What this means is that in mere days, they will have no further obligation to the genetic giant. For a corporation that earns a large portion of its revenues from organ procurement, this ruling is a body blow."

Somehow Karl can't see the genetic giant being very pleased about it, no.

"Wall Street reacted to the news with a massive sell off of technology stocks across the board. By the closing bell, Genie had fallen nearly ten points, a record one day decline.

"How lucky for me I don't hold any," Karl says into the white noise of the wash.

"A second suit brought by Zerai seeking both punitive and compensatory damages is due to be heard by the court next month. In light of today's ruling, many legal scholars see more trouble ahead for the developer of Biocom."

Now that, Karl thinks, cutting off the broadcast, may well be the truth.

They swerve leeward and the skyline opens up, spreads out before him.

The warren, in all its fecundity.

In all its degenerate splendor.

Los Angeles.

* * *

Sisters Tower, three a.m.

Things are slow. Usually are about now. A week on graveyard is enough to show Karl how the land lies. Deep in the embrace of a leather armchair in the lobby he sits amid most of an acre of peacock green carpet, a lake becalmed. Dinner crowd already in safe and sound. All-nighters trickling in. Romy due any time.

By now he's given up trying to classify men who fork over a fortune for a few hours' attention from a goddess. All types. Men he'd pass on the street without a second glance. Why do they do it? Who can know? The face that launched a thousand ships and all that—beauty to die for. If men will run onto a spear or into a food processor of hacking swords for a woman, what's a year's salary? Spin the wheel, roll the bones, take your shot at nucleotide ordained love. Why not? Makes as much sense as anything else.

Karl folds a stick of Juicy Fruit into his mouth. Villar saunters by, two underlings trailing, Walther submachineguns slung under the arms of crisp blue tunics. Insolent bastard gives him the evil eye. Karl smiles back, nods. Screw the little spic.

Most of them have long since lost interest in him—this crazy LO who won't keep his ass in his office—but not Villar. Karl has no idea what his problem is. Maybe it's Karl's face or the smell of him. If dogs can tell friend from foe by sniffing under a tail, surely men can do as much.

Wiry little Mex with buzzed head, phrenologist's banquet, black eyes always watching. Looks at him and smiles. Like he knows that soon Karl will be wired to a length of pipe, hollowed out, doing the statue dance knee deep in muck five clicks down. Does Villar dislike all LO's this much or is it just him? He won't lay a hand on him to find out. Karl pictures the first nine down there in the dark, the quiet, and a chill crawls over his scalp. He'll watch his back. And Villar.

Long quiet mornings he walks the quay, Bink at his heels, round and round, klick a pass, walks to keep his legs from going to sleep, to pass the time, to keep from going out of his head. He should corner her, talk to her, but for some reason he doesn't. When she's out of the nunnery, he shadows her, feeling more like a cheap gum shoe than anything else.

He's seen her flash that high-voltage charm. Seen her switch it off just as fast. He's seen her watching him watch her, and he's sure she'd like it if he went away. If only he could. He's seen her way of showing interest while keeping her distance, and from what he can tell, it's all a con. She's no more interested in these corn-fed hicks than he is. But he can see why they eat it up. >From his vantage across a crowded eatery her eyes tug at him like she's got fishing line wound through his guts. From up close it must be a killer. He'll keep his distance, thank you very much.

He's tried calling. Won't call back, won't come to the sat. No surprise. What can he expect? She doesn't know him, and he can't tell her anything until he gets her alone.

Bored out of his mind, Karl studies a dog-eared paperback of mathematical puzzles. Tonight he batters his head against a century old conundrum about a crooked Chinaman, a sailor, and a length of hemp rope. So far no dice. He'll put it to Sam.

Been there forever, twenty years at least, Sam's maybe sixty. Took to Bink right away. Calls him Mr. Binks. Karl trusts him at once, not enough to reveal himself, but as far as it goes. Sam can usually help him out of a jam with these things. It's been more than a week and he's not even a quarter way through the book. Tells himself when he's through, he'll go home, whether or not he talks to her.

At the rate he's going, it'll take a month. He has two days. After that she won't have to worry about being raped. In two days she turns thirty. In two days they all do. Same hatch, brood, clutch—God knows what the right term would be. Karl doesn't know. Doesn't want to. Things designed in labs, made to look human, raised in tanks like trout, immaculate whores for rent by the hour. Gives him the creeps thinking about it.

From his chair in the corner, he broods, eyes open but unseeing. Two days and she'll be retired. Nice word, retired. Nice way to describe being zipped, stripped, and sent to the bottom. Not a good way to lose your cherry. Even for animated mannequins it seems cruel. Watching their faces as they pass, he wonders. Smart as they are, they must know. Is it possible they don't care?

Shaking off the trance, he hoists himself to his feet. Definitely not a graveyard shift kind of guy. "Hey, Sam, got one for you."

Sam looks up, grimacing as if he's got a gutful of gas. It means nothing. He always looks like that. Varicose veins in his legs bother him. Keeps his feet propped on a little stool under the counter to keep the blood from pooling in his legs. Wears penny loafers look like they're fifty-years-old. Maybe they are.

"Wha' you want? Trying to do some paperwork, here, for chrissake."

Face showing more wrinkles than a hound with an abscessed molar, Sam won't let on, but he's glad to be bothered, gets as bored as Karl does.

Sam sticks a finger in an ear, grubs around in a dense bush of grey hair. To keep things opened up, Karl figures. Drives Karl nuts. He had his way, he'd yank out the undergrowth with a pair of pliers. He's thought about it a lot the last week, taking Sam in a head lock and yanking it all out. Like weeding cheat grass. Might hurt a little, but it would get the job done. Do him a favor. No more finger-hoeing for Sam.

Karl leans on the cool glass of the counter. "Okay, there's this sailor who needs a length of rope."

Sam holds up his hand, the one that isn't halfway up his ear canal to his brain. "What'd he need it for?"

"I don't know what he needed it for. It's a puzzle, Sam, a puzzle, not a goddam short story. They don't say why."

A short guy in a chartreuse tux brings in a Sister and Karl waits while Sam checks them in. The guy's obviously down, the way most of them are when their time's up. From the look on this guy's face, Karl guesses maybe he'll be paying for this for a long time. The Sister, one of Tatia's, he'd guess by the cinnamon tone of her skin and rope of midnight hair, saunters to the elevator. The guy slinks out, a whipped marmot. Karl watches him go. Wonderful thing, hope.

Sam bares bad teeth in a foxy grin, "Hemingway didn't say why."

Karl ignores him. He's always coming up with stuff like that. "Anyway, there's only one rope dealer in port, a Chinaman. The sailor knows the guy's crooked, but he needs the rope."

Sam leans over the desk, frowns, "Yeah?"

Karl has him, now. He's a sucker for these things as much as Karl is. "So he goes in and he says he wants twenty yards of hemp rope. Well, the Chinaman says he's got a hundred-foot spool for two cents a foot. Sailor looks it over, says it isn't worth more than a penny, but he'll take twenty feet. Now, he knows this guy uses a rule that measures an eleven inch foot, so after he cuts him his twenty feet, he pretends to change his mind. Now he says he'll take the eighty feet instead."

Sam rubs his eyebrows with his thumbs. "Why in hell he do that?"

"Because he wants to beat this crook at his own game. When he measured out his twenty feet, it was short, because the guy's a cheat, see? So the eighty feet is really more, get it?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure, go on, go on, go on."

Karl sighs. It happens this way every time. This place is driving him nuts, he has to get home. "Okay, so the Chinaman's not happy about it, but what can he say? If he says anything it would be admitting he's a crook, right? So he figures up what the guy owes."

Sam takes the pencil from behind his ear, blows off a few loose hairs while Karl waits. He's this far already, but it doesn't do to interrupt Sam. Just confuses him. One lane mind.

"Eighty feet at two cents a foot...." Sam scribbles on his pad. "Comes to dollar sixty."

"Sailor pays him with a five-dollar gold piece. Now the shopkeeper doesn't have change, so he goes next door and changes it. He gives the sailor his change, and off he goes."

Sam holds up his hands, "So? what's the big deal, I tole you, dollar sixty."

Karl smiles. This is where his mind starts to carousel. "Fake gold piece."

Sam slaps a hand on thick glass. "Oh, fiddlededee, they're both crooks!"

"So, counting the extra inches, how much did the sailor take him for?"

Sam deflates, "Ah, you did it to me again!" He groans, waves him off to his seat at the far wall. "Don't know why I let you tell me these damn things. Go on, get away from me, let me think, let me think, for chrissake, I'll get back to you."

He'll let Sam chew it over for a while. He might come up with something he can use. Usually does.

Karl turns and forgets to breathe.

An arm's length away stands Romy looking him straight in the eyes.

And mercy, what eyes they are.

The Army of God rises at dawn.

Drew rolls from bed to set bare feet on cold hardwood. The large room is furnished with antiques, any piece of which, sold, would see his cell fed for a year. Pacing, hands pressed hard together just under a weak chin, he claps hands, small, soft claps, a ritual for prayer.

Guilt gnaws his gut.

Today's the day.

He hates his mother's house. He puts up with her, so pigheaded, so absolutely blind to his vision of God. It's that or cut her out of his life. Her wealth he tries to ignore. Usually he fails. Naked body taut, he gazes up through a skylight at the brightening dawn sky and smiles.

Today's the day—the day he will prove he is not a part of this, that he is as devoted to God as any of the others. That's why they gave him this one, so he can prove it, and he will.

He runs a hand over a flat belly, groans, sick. Ate too much last night. Always does here. Eats as if he could eat himself senseless, eat himself to death, eat his way out of guilt, out of hating them both. He can't.

Away it's one meal a day—vegetable curry, rice, half stale sprouted wheat bread. Whatever he can get at the health food store down by the park. Sea-hag with frizzled gray mane works there, saves stale bread and soya snacks, all the outdated stuff. Keeps it under the counter for him. Most days it's all he brings home. Just enough to fill his belly, to quiet the pangs, no more. Always the edge, gnawing insides kept at ebb. The way most live, the way God would want him to—knowing the want of the world.

Here at his mother's it's two-inch-thick New Yorks and asparagus. Food for the rich. God help him, after a month scraping mold off tofu he hasn't the strength to refuse.

Again he pats his stomach, reassuring himself it's still flat, shivering with revulsion at his own gluttony, worst of the seven, and not his only one. Over the toilet he gags, ridding himself of last night's meal. Done, he peers down at it curiously. Has he lost the ability to digest so much flesh at once? Today he'll fast, drink only water, purify himself. Today he will not sin. Today is the day he will penetrate the evil tower, a sword thrust into the bowels of Satan, spreading cleansing fire within.

Thinking of this, he drops to do push ups, the thought of so many dying, some innocent, so many hooks in his guts. Sisters are not to blame for what they are. Women may hate them for their beauty, for the power they have over men, but he can't. Them he doesn't want to kill.

He thinks of the million he's been allotted for his mission, his private mission, and collapses onto the cool wood, heat rising to his face. He will save her if he can. If not, she will die. In war, good die alongside bad. In war one uses whatever weapon comes to hand, and right now that means the case under the bed.

Overcome with a rush of gratitude at being selected for the task, unworthy as he is, he falls to the hard planking, lips moving against cool oak. Praying, he rocks up and down on knees, eyes squeezed shut.

He hates this world, a world strangled in the seductive grasp of The Evil One. Once he laughed at the concept of a devil, smiled at the quaintly naive idea of the personification of evil. Now he sees. The liberal

humanists are deceived. There is evil in the world. Evil solid as quartz. Not evil of happenstance. Not evil of the under-privileged, the abused, the downtrodden.

Living, breathing, pulsating evil. Evil that wants, waits, hungers. Evil as entity. Evil as wind moving the world. Evil that owns the world and most of those in it.

Rising to pull on slacks, he comes face to face with himself in the mirror and looks into his own dark eyes. Why does he come back here, this house in its gated neighborhood? He has no answer. Though he loves his mother, he's not sure she's the reason. Maybe he wants to be tempted, to succumb, to revel in what he ordinarily denies himself. Maybe she's the excuse.

Drew dresses silently in the flesh-colored light of dawn. Carefully he lifts a leather valise from under the bed, opens it, needing to see its treasure one last time. Inside, held in place with duct tape and blocks of foam, are twelve slender gray loaves of waxed paper-wrapped C-4. Heinrich showed him how to press a pencil into the blocks to make impressions for the detonators, how to place it in a corner near glass to get the most effect in a closed room, even how to set the timer for fifteen seconds. Enough time to get away—if he wants to. He doesn't.

A dozen loaves—a gift from God.

Drew closes the bag, pads silently downstairs, letting himself out. He dares not wake her lest she see something in his eyes. Better to leave pure, soul empty as his heart, burned clean as the nexus of evil will be.

Out into sunlight, down an empty street writhing up and over hills he walks, shades the color of blood shielding his face from UV. It is wise to be careful, he thinks, smiling to himself as he descends the steep hill. Skin cancer is a hazard, they say.

He knows that afterwards he will be on the news. He will be portrayed a religious fanatic, all because he is willing to die.

Drew stops, sets down the case, bends to examine a wild lupine growing by the edge of the sidewalk. Through the polarized filter of his glasses the indigo floret glows magenta. A bumble bee lurches onto it as he watches, causing it to drop, unsheathing scimitar of pistil. When the bee again takes to the air, this recedes with the slow control of hydraulics with its prize of pollen. He smiles to see the bee forced on its way, robbed of a fraction of its hoard—genetic treasure filched by an insensate herb, animal never the wiser. Foolish is man, so quick to claim superiority. The blessings of the creator are indeed manifold.

Rising, he smiles. Anyone willing to forego the next meal, the next sexual congress for God, is branded mad. Melancholy contentment washing over him, warm and solid, he heads for his bus stop. His heart is pure, his aim righteous. Though the evil he opposes is great, he does not fear.

Soon, very soon, he will see the face of God.

* * *

More people die at three in the morning than at any other time.

So Karl's heard.

Well, when Romy's eyes take him in their embrace, he dies.

The ache starts in the pit of his stomach, snakes up his spine, spikes its way through his brain—disgust, desire, fear, loathing—for himself, for her. Numb, he gives up trying to think.

Holos can lie—usually do. Airbrush, cosmetics, gene therapy, digital imaging—what truth can survive them? People, they lie more than they don't—if he knows anything it's that. The net—forget it. UR is truth and lie rolled up in one marble-caked dung ball.

So now here he stands, knee-deep in cement, brain turned to masa, no more able to turn his eyes away than he can leap to cling to the ceiling by his nails. Sure as beetle pinned to entomology case, he is nailed by those eyes.

Holding his gaze, movements fluid as water, Romy passes her hand through the sensor, her glance passing over him, hot as a blast of sun on a coast shrouded by perpetual cloud. Karl sees it, now—everything he's ever heard about them is true.

The last week he's read all the brochures, heard the Net ads, seen the vids, and though he doesn't quite believe it, about her they told the truth. Clothing soaked, hair hanging, no face paint, there she stands, just what she is—the most magnificent female he's had under his eyes.

Tall, slender, but no mannequin. Freckles, she has them, if you can imagine freckled perfection. Not another blond. Hair rubbed ash. Cedar left out in sea air. A luminous shine to it, same as what he's seen on porcupines in his apple orchard late of frosty autumn nights.

Stunned, feeling like he did when he fell off the swing in kindergarten, winded, sick, he swallows his gum and sticks his pencil behind his ear. After a week getting nowhere, he can't wait any longer. This is it—he'll get her to talk to him or die trying.

He opens his mouth and the sun disappears behind cloud as she shifts her gaze. Passing him by like he's gas, she goes to his chair, sits, takes up his book of puzzles.

Now the weasel-faced guy brought her in sets his satchel under the counter and settles up with Sam. Odd kind of guy, intense. Moves like a bird. Business done, he follows with the satchel, a man with a mission. He draws Romy to her feet, whispers in her ear. Edging off toward the elevators up to her tower, she smiles, eager to get away.

Tetuán street kid in last year's suit, he won't give up, won't take no, won't cut her loose. "Come with me, now, while you can, come to God," he catches her elbow in a bony hand, eyes the gray of night cloud.

So misplaced is the sermon, Karl feels the keen urge to laugh. Face straight by an effort of will, he takes in the show.

"You know I can't, Drew," she says. "I've got to go."

Karl's mouth goes dry. Her voice is wind in tall fescue, that soft. There, too is polished granite—hard, and as slow to heat.

He releases her, drops the bag, speaks, voice rising, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one

man, and death through sin, so death spread to all men because all men sinned." Speech done, he waits.

This guy's waiting for something. He's scared. In his face is struggle. With a glance over his shoulder, he bolts, brushing Karl's hand with the back of his own as he passes. Fleeting contact, but enough.

For Karl time stops. He loses a breath in a grunting exhalation, doubling over, a vision exploding through his mind. Hell vivid as Brueghel: a blast. The stench of burning flesh, singed hair, death. Recovering, he turns to see him bolt out the big door.

Karl has touched schizophrenics, paranoiacs, autistics—lucid in their warp, bathed in the scalding ice of delusion. This isn't like that. This is concrete against incisor, nothing nebulous about it. Real, immediate, close, very close. He remembers the satchel, turns back to see it, and understands. Wondering how long he has, he finds Romy waiting by the elevator.

"Big deal." Sam excavates with a forefinger. "What was all that about?"

Time crawling, Karl forces himself to move. Deaf, nearly blind, tunnel vision clamping down, he passes the bag to run up behind her in air gone to molasses, taking her about the waist without slowing, lifting her against his hip as he goes, hearing his pulse swishing in his ears, he counts.

One....

He's got to put some distance between them and the eye of the coming millisecond storm. Karl runs, but she fights, wrenches, a writhing snake in his arms. Too strong!

Two....

The carpet sucks at his shoes like muck. Up ahead he sees what he's looking for—what they need—a place to go to ground—a meter wide pillar. He won't make it in time, can't move that fast with her jerking in his arms.

Three....

She kicks, struggles, stronger than he can believe. He takes it, her hitting, prying, squirming. He wants to tell her, but there's no time. Behind them security follows, boots pounding carpet, gaining. It won't be long, they'll have them.

Four....

Hands against his chest, Romy pushes herself away, eyes branding the skin of his neck, a mewling whine rising from her throat, the loathing she feels for him coming through over the length of her, whipping him, stinging, salt in a cut.

Five....

The corner looms, but too far, too far. He sprints, her thoughts screaming in his mind. He's like all men, only worse. She wants away from him, his hands off her, his smell out of her nose. Of course she would feel that. He's not surprised. Sadness clingy as kelp wraps itself around him. If he had time he could drop her, try to explain, but there is no time. He can only run, run with her on his hip no more than a mass to be shifted, like clothing, like the gun under his arm.

Six....

If he had time to think he wouldn't be here at all. He'd be a thousand clicks north where he belongs. Instead of the 10th agent to be parted-out, the tenth to take the half-klick slow-mo plunge to the bottom. Right now, his brain has shrunk to contain only one thought—to get around the wall and out of the way of the expanding gas cloud. But she's too heavy, he's too off balance. He won't make it.

"God...."

He says it out loud though he never prays, never begs.

"God!"

Eyes on the pillar. Her hands catch at a chair as they pass, jerking him off balance. He's got no time for this—no time!

Seven....

Anger scalding his throat, he raises his knee to break her hold. Another ten meters around the corner, he flings her onto a chaise. Teeth bared, she spins to face him as he throws himself atop her. Villar thunders toward them across the lobby, leading two others, an incipient avalanche of brawn, as Romy claws to get free.

Eight....

Karl wraps her head in his arm, using the thick ostrich hide of his jacket to shelter their faces. No time to talk, to explain as her teeth find his earlobe, shocking pain flooding his eyes, he wrenches free, "Lie still. Can't you just lie still!"

Nine....

No, she thinks, no, fighting it—what Karl can't read, something she fears, dreads—a spark from down deep: No, this one can't be the one!

He wants to know, to ask her, what it is he can't be. At the same time he wonders if maybe he's wrong, if maybe there are undershirts and boxers in the case. Has he lost his instincts?

Holding her under him, Karl sneaks a quick look back as Villar swoops, victory on his lizard face. Then, hair on his head prickling, feeling it coming like a sneeze, Karl buries his face in ostrich hide.

The air swats them like a hand, knocking the breath out of his lungs, sound louder than sound, battering eardrums, brain, sinuses. Shards of steel rip air heavy with glass, cement, insulation. Girders groan, wrung awry under load.

Then quiet.

Numb, what is surely blood draining from his nose down teeth, salty in his mouth, to drip off his chin, Karl opens his eyes to find he's blind.

At eighty, still at work shaping mankind in his image, Francis Crick looks up, blue eyes sharp under a white bush of brows to postulate the existence of an area of the brain as the seat of free will. Sure there is no God, he works eagerly to free man from the faith that there is more to us than what can be coded in the helix.

For an adoring public he pinpoints the anterior cingulate sulcus as the seat of what unenlightened men have for ages believed was a soul. Prometheus Crick will lead them to the tunnel mouth where blares the flame of reason. Laboring tirelessly as Auden's Honeyman, Crick bequeaths us the knowledge to grant government its fondest fantasy—control over the common mind. No longer are stripped electric wires, truncheons, dental drills the shapers of dissident thought.

To posterity Crick delivers subtlety of means.

* * *

Darkness absolute.

Air thick, hard to breathe, a colloid of gypsum dust, Karl cocks an ear, working his jaw, sure he's deaf. Hearing sobbing, he lets out a held breath, relief flooding him. A scream long, dying, then only the patter of raining detritus. And under it all, the slosh of the sea among the pilings. Romy still under him, he is suddenly afraid of falling.

Pushing himself off, sliding onto one knee, shin slamming something sharp, pain brings him back, a cold slap. Using touch alone, he takes her head in his hands, runs a palm over dome of skull feeling her whole. In her hair he feels no blood.

Fighting vertigo and a fear of blindness, he finds a lightstick in his pocket, snaps it to life, shakes it to distribute catalyst. With heartstopping relief, he watches it glow blue-white. Frantic to see if she lives, he holds it to her face and is relieved to see she glares at him with wary eyes.

"You okay?"

She nods, and he remembers what he needs do. With his left hand he takes her wrist, pressing it as if taking her pulse. Eyes on her wrist to distract—the old con—with his right hand he presses an adhesive chip the size of a sesame seed to the nape of her neck. Guilt gnaws at him as soon as it's done. Can't be helped—business first.

"You've got a pulse, anyway." He stands, wishing he were taller, younger, hating himself for wishing it. Backing away, needing her eyes off him, he nearly trips over Villar. >From the deck he looks up, eyes mad with shock. Seeing blood trickling from his ear, Karl drops to check for concussion.

Villar slaps his hand away. Karl should know better than to try to help a wounded dog—get bit that way. Karl goes to find Sam, lightstick overhead, calling into dark, dust. He steps over the other two

guards, shoes slipping in something dark and slick. Hunkering, lightstick between his teeth, he lays a finger along each of their necks. Already bled out. His hand comes away glistening black in the glow.

Materializing from the gloom at his feet, the blond who came in behind Romy lies on her side, alloy crescent sprouting magically from sternum glistening with arterial blood.

"Ow," she says, "oh, ow, ow, ow." She works with blood-slicked hands to free it, over and again, strength fled.

On knees beside her, Romy, draws her hands away from the jagged sprout of steel, pins them to her, "No, Kara, leave it, baby, leave it." Smoothing hair from her face, Romy leaves dark smears of blood from hands wet with it.

As Karl watches, a med tech, all business, bustles out of the elevator, red and yellow light sticks clipped to his tunic. He hunkers down at her head, passes a strobe over her hand, consults the glowing data running across his vision, "Got her," he says, moving on.

Wondering at his efficiency, Karl steps in front of him, "What are you going to do?"

"Do?" His voice oozes contempt. "I said I've got her." A man unused to being questioned, he starts past.

Karl catches him, big man, by slick synthetic jumper, swings him around. "Give her something."

Frowning, he slaps his hand away like he's swatting a bug, leaving Karl's wrist smarting. "Liver's ruptured. What do you want? You can see the blood, it's the wet stuff."

Karl blocks him again, too numb to fear the blows he knows will come, the man's hands he can feel on him now. "Make her stop hurting."

He jerks away roughly, irritated. "And who the hell are you?"

Somehow Karl's gun fills his hand. He raises its pig snout, says, voice low, "I'm maybe the last man you'll ever see, that's who."

Suddenly reasonable, the big man shrugs meaty shoulders, mouth smiling, eyes dead calm on Karl's face. "What's your hurry? She'll be dead in a minute."

Karl's getting lightheaded. Security catches him with his gun out he's gone, off the plat and on a fast boat to China, ten mandatory for possession, twice that if he uses it. He's no cop, has no credentials, nothing. He's on his own. Too late to back down, now. "Do it, do it now, right now."

The big man kneels by Romy, looks up, sure Karl's lost his mind. "That's a billion in organs there. I could lose my job, the opiate will taint them."

Knowing it's the wrong thing to do, but not thinking of anything better, Karl grabs his hair and presses the blunt muzzle of the .44 into the valley beneath his ear, shoves his head down, hoping the cold steel against his skin will move him, "Do it anyway."

Wrenching free, he injects her through the skin of her neck, looks up, face nasty. "Happy now, big man?" He slams the injector into the case, stands, looks closely at his breast ID. "I'll make sure Mr. S knows who gets credit for this." He disappears into the jungle of hanging fiber optics and insulation.

Feeling he's being watched, Karl turns to find Villar has seen the whole thing. Karl wonders why he didn't stop him from throwing away so much of Genesistems money. Suddenly tired, Karl watches as Romy strokes the quieting girl. Is it the drug or just that she's running out of blood? At last she quiets. He feels a weight against his leg and looks down to see Bink, flocked in dust, trembling against him. With a pang of guilt he realizes he'd forgotten him.

Putting the revolver away, he strokes the dog, looks up to find Romy watching him through tearing eyes. Face hard, what she looks is curious. In this light he can't read her eyes. The look could mean anything. It doesn't seem so important to talk to her now.

Reaching down, he lays a finger under the delicate curve of the dying girl's jaw to feel for a pulse. Finding none, he gets to his feet, stumbles through white haze to help Villar and the others dig out survivors. One Sister is still breathing when they pull her head-first from the fallen tangle covering her. As she comes free, Karl reaches to take her ankles and grabs air. A stone drops in his stomach. Her legs end just below the knee. Villar cradles her head on his thighs, holding her as she screams, as she reaches out with delicate hands to yank at his ears, his collar, his mustache, biting down onto the brown skin of his wrist with perfect teeth. Villar lets her bite, eyes on Karl's, a different look in them now, hate gone. And something else there. What, an appeal? Karl doesn't know, can't believe he's seeing Villar do this.

Same tech bustles over. Rage rises in Karl as he sees the SOB isn't going to give her anything. He shuts his bag. Karl reaches out, taps a beefy shoulder. This time a look is all it takes. He reaches for his injector. With it poised at her neck, he looks to Villar.

Villar nods, short, barely noticeable, and the tech presses the stud, forcing the drug through her skin. Glaring, he goes away. Soon after, a slow smile softens her face. She looks up at them, eyes wide as a child's. "Where's Romy?"

At once, almost as if she's been summoned, Romy is there on bare knees beside her.

"What is it, Lia, what?" Romy says, ear to her mouth.

"I..." she says, eyes growing vacant. "I want you here." It's as if she listens to her own breathing, puzzled by the sound. Then her eyes return to her sister's. "Romy, oh, Romy I'm afraid."

Romy wipes dust-caked blood from her face, "It's all right to be afraid. I'm here, I'm here, now, Lia."

Humbled by the intimacy of death, Karl looks away.

Her mouth opens for a breath she never draws. Slowly, imperceptibly, her hold on Villar eases, hands sliding down his filthy tunic to rest like broken birds among the debris.

Dust coating his throat, Karl backs away, picking his way through fallen framing, hanging wires, dangling insulation. Barking his knee on an I-beam bent bowed, he reaches down to quell screaming pain. He's seen all he can stand, needs to get out of the dark, the bitter dust, the smell of blood.

But before he goes, he's got to find Sam. Not far in front of where his counter should have been, he stumbles on what looks in the dim glow of his tube like an area of immaculate dark carpeting. Wondering how this could be, he hesitates before stepping out. Hunkering to investigate, he is shaken to find a gap in the floor open twenty meters down to the sea.

No desk.

No Sam.

A loafer he finds, penny still secure in its slot. Looks like the old man's. He stoops to pick it up. It's heavy, full of something. Looking inside he understands. Sam's foot's still in it. Swallowing carefully, Karl sets it on concrete scorched clean, backing slowly away. Desperate for air, he shoulders his way out past tourists gawking outside.

Somehow he makes it to the rail where he clings to cold alloy hard with both hands, mind dead numb. Letting his eyes fall to the sea below, he watches swells sweep under him, breaking blue green as they plow past barnacled pylons.

God, he misses the sea.

Not this sea. This isn't the same Pacific that booms into the dead end cove where his pasture falls away to rocks a hundred feet below. This sea is foul. Like the plat, like L.A., like everything here.

He had her there in front of him and he said nothing. Nothing. Under that gaze he choked, and he won't get a second chance. When Swindlehurst hears about the three bills he cost the company, he'll be gone. Not that it matters. If he blows this, he might as well be down there in the dark as anywhere else. He doesn't want to live without the land. He won't.

Behind him the grid clanks, shifts under his feet. Karl notices Bink doesn't growl and wonders why. He turns, hand going to the Smith, but lets it fall, turning back. Gray water smooth as slate spreads to a coastline caught in transient equilibrium between night and day. L.A. with its halo of sodium light, hills beyond shrouded in hydrocarbon haze as the first glaze of dawn floods the east.

"Forgot your puzzle book," Villar says from the rail.

Karl takes it.

"Hungry?" Villar says, as if it's nothing out of the ordinary for him to be talking to him without a sneer edging his voice.

Karl says he is, which is the truth. A week of living off dried apples and deer jerky he brought with him and he's ready for something else. "Any place a guy can get a steak out here?"

Villar's eyes are different, the mocking gone. A man who might or might not be a friend. Villar squats, holds out a hand to Bink. Still he doesn't growl, even lets Villar pat him on the hock. Amazing.

Exhausted, hungry, Karl sags against the rail. Bink's judgment is good; he trusts it. He could always reach out and take his hand, but he doesn't. Doesn't want to, not yet. Might find out something he'd rather not know. Right now he's happy just to have someone to talk to.

"That depends," Villar says to the dog, "on what you mean by a steak."

Karl remembers the chip he planted in Romy's hair, cues up his headset geo-locator and finds her in the tower right where she should be. Romy's chip in its memory, it'll let him know if she goes anywhere. "What's to describe?"

"When somebody says they want steak out here, what they get is a slice out of a fifty-ton tissue culture lolling about in a quarter million gallon nutrient tank. Same, only without the bones and gristle. So they say. I say bull."

Karl's raised cattle, looked them in their big black eyes when he shot them in the X between eyes and horns. Good life on tall pasture, low-limbed Sitka to shelter from driven rain, clean, cool spring water, a quick death you don't know is coming. Give him one of his steer's lives. There are worse ways to go, worse ways to live.

"Okay," he says to Villar, "Porterhouse this thick out of a steer left tracks on range. Hung at forty degrees till good and moldy, grilled on red hot iron three minutes to a side, couple eggs over easy, rye toast with caraway dripping butter, real Java, fresh squeezed OJ."

Villar looks as if he may smile, but doesn't—just his eyes. "You don't ask for much, do you? Been to The Derby, I see. Let's hop on over for breakfast, what do you say?"

Karl looks Villar's uniform over, then down at his own.

"Don't worry about it, they won't. You up for it?"

"Give me a minute to drop Bink."

Villar leads the way down wide stairs to the dock where tourists mill about the casino entrance. Big businessman leads a Sister by the arm, vacant smile on her painted face.

"There's a new one," Villar says, shaking his head in derision, "Second generation—no better than the whores upstairs."

Villar leads him past the tunnel down to hover service.

"Where we going?"

"Taxi." He looks back, contemptuous, "The flying douche bags are for the touristas." He raises a hand and a speedboat standing off the quay tears up to come to easy equilibrium along the tires lining the waterline. "Let them eat the blob in the tank."

They step down, and engine roaring, the small boat pulls away.

So hungry he can barely stand, Karl grabs hold of the rail as the taxi whips them across to the mainland. Blinking, he checks the menu to see what else of interest his search of the archives has unearthed. He finds 32 items waiting. He cues one.

"The following is a Uninet public service announcement."

Party. Cannabis smoke marbles the air. Dresses glitter. Earrings shimmy. Music jangles, jars. Tossing their tresses for effect, eyes painted to look as if they've been beaten, young women pose at looking unposed. Young men with perfect skin, eyes on other young men, barely tolerate them.

Karl remembers this one. Twenty years old and still vital as if chipped this morning. And here he is. Vic somebody, an ordinary man. Not handsome, not tall, not anything—an Everyman. Obviously meant to be the center of his sympathies, he catches a blonde's eye and Karl gets a shock. He knew he'd seen her

before, but hadn't known when. It's Auri, a jaded seventeen.

Under the wind, Karl speaks out loud. "In the net role that catapulted her into the limelight."

Her whole body swells erect, silicone augmented ornaments rising beneath sheer satin. The belle of the ball, she's interested, very interested.

Karl freezes her in a tight close up, lips parted in invitation. It's her all right. Boat lurching under him, he remembers. The saturation campaign back in 2010. It may have been crude. It may have been crass, flagrant, glaring, but it did the job. As a result, more than nine of ten norteamericanos were implanted by 2014.

Quick, painless, easy—and for one year, free—implants were more a national passion than sugar cube polio inoculation ever was. Like the drive to stamp out smallpox, it left the beneficiaries with a small scar, this time just above the hairline at the nape of the neck. He cues it.

Laying a long forefinger to her temple, Auri signals him onto com, running a pink tongue over full painted lips, promising what sensuous dissipation we are left to imagine. That's the way it starts. Now with a blink of an eye they can exchange codes, STD test results, holos, whatever, storing them for later. All without touching, without speaking. No fear of humiliation, rejection, disease, complication. Either can end it with the firing of a synapse. Easy. Clean. Risk free. All around them it goes on.

Our hero, eager face awed by his good fortune, reaches back in an unconscious movement to seat the pick ups more firmly against the nape of his neck, a gesture habitual among headset wearers.

In that instant Auri's face wilts with disgust. Her voice comes over his set, sultry, but not right. Something's wrong. What, he wonders?

But we know.

"Sorry, I'm looking for a man who's hard-wired," she says, voice dripping vitriol, accent on hard, subtle as ball-peen on kneecap.

Crushed, he slogs away off-vid and into the twilight of obscurity.

The actor, whoever he was, was rumored to have died soon after, mind addled by UR kiddie-porn, drowned in a hot tub under a flowering yucca somewhere in the Hollywood hills. Typecast untouchable by his first, his last, his only role.

Forever and always, etched on the public memory, what there is of it, a loser.

* * *

Still numbed by the blast, Romy showers, curls up with Lena on an expansive bed in Dr. Vici's suite.

No sooner is she asleep than it comes.

The dream.

Always the same.

Little girl, hair Romy's tint of platinum, features hers.

Her daughter, she knows it.

One, no older. Teetering, she runs, looks back, falls, looks up, lip trembling, straight at Romy. Wanting, needing to be picked up, held, loved—needing all the things a mother can do, can give—all the things Romy never can.

Mutely, she witnesses the need in those eyes, same jade as her own, desperately wanting to explain she's not the one she needs, that she is not—and can never be—anyone's mother.

At that moment she wakes, as always, marooned by a tide of despair, of loss, of longing.

For whom?

For the little girl she will never birth, never take in her arms, never speak comforting nonsense to? Or for herself, emptiness solid and cold as basalt within her?

Jade eyes still vivid in her mind, Romy turns, clutches the bedclothes to her throat, casting herself back onto the surf of sleep.

To forget.

* * *

The taxi dumps them along the boardwalk where Cherry Beach used to be.

Lost, Karl scans row upon file of houseboats, junks, hundreds of floating shacks bobbing on calm waters behind breakwater rip rap, boulders hanging with every form of plastic flotsam captured by the tide.

Villar passes a hand over the ruby eye and the hack grumbles in Punjabe, roaring away, setting the dock arock.

Sun rising above the hills, they walk north past a motley line of floating houses, shops, some Karl can't tell what they sell, junk all he sees. Broken, torn, soiled, castoffs fished from torpid surf. Things he wouldn't let in his barn. Kids line the walk, eyes vacant, slack faces growing animated at the sound of their approach only to lapse back into their daze seeing their uniforms.

"These kids, they live here?"

Villar nods. "Runaways mostly, netpunks, some from money, homes where both parents have pupated."

Karl frowns at the word, doubting his ears. Carefully, he steps around an impossibly thin boy, knees wider than thighs, naked but for a filthy pair of briefs. "Pupated, as in pupa?"

The boy raises an open hand, skin raw, oozing rashy, scabbed, patches pink where he's picked them away.

"Keep your distance," Villar says, giving the kid room as he passes. "Watch yourself."

Fascinated, Karl stops, "What's with him?"

"Deep in UR and not to be disturbed. Don't eat, don't wash." Villar shrugs. "Ringworm, scabies, leprosy—all making a big comeback down here. L.A....." He grunts, something like a laugh. "...new Calcutta."

Karl sidesteps the boy, who sits oblivious, hands open in a habitual panhandler's benediction. "Why here?"

Villar stops, turns, waits for him to catch up, "The boardwalks? Private property, no cops, they can dodge the owners by ducking under the floats. Sleep under them, too." He stomps the decking. "Down here."

It's too bizarre. How can this city, this world have changed so much so fast? Karl gets down, lowers his eyes to a slit in the thick plastic, cupping his hands to shield them from sunlight. In the dim he makes out several pairs of eyes, children's eyes. Wary, they watch him with a feral glint. Karl sees it coming, pulls away as the hand rises, wire jutting between the fingers of a dirty fist.

The point misses his eye by a centimeter. Stunned, he rises, dabs at his temporal bone. His hand comes away bloody.

Villar stomps the wire down, sprays OC between the slats. From underneath comes a howl, a splash. "Cuidado, hombre, this isn't Disneyland. Better clean that good, too, probably smeared with crap, fester if you don't." Reading Karl's face, he shrugs, explaining, "It's the same all over L.A., anywhere kids live on the street. They try to help them, but first they got to catch them. Last thing any of these kids wants is to be taken in and cut off UR—they like it right where they are."

Karl doesn't believe it. Again Villar guesses his thought. "They're not here, not down there in that filth, they're somewhere out there," he says raising an arm to the sky. "This isn't their world, that is," he says, touching finger to temple. "Ultimate Reality—they call it that for a reason, you know. They say it's better than this, more intense. If they didn't have to come back at all they wouldn't."

"Wait, wait," Karl says, "you said something about pupating. That's a bug thing, isn't it?"

Villar smiles, frowning, lines creasing his shining brow. "You just fall off the truck from Jalisco or what?"

"Been away for a while," Karl says, feeling the need to explain. "Out of circulation."

Villar's mouth turns down, he nods. "Pupating's the next step, cocooning themselves in a jell pod. Not like these kids—they've still got to pick their scabs, eat, excrete—they keep getting jerked back. The ones that can afford it, call themselves digerati after illuminati—now that's a joke—the enlightened ones. They go into pods to lose the meat. Once they do, they spread their wings and fly away."

They pass a junk with what might be a cat or a big rat turning on a spit over a hubcap of coals set up on three bricks to keep it from melting its way through the deck. A boy, dreadlocks matted with filth, senses

their approach, rises to a crouch, raises a pipe.

"Now see," Villar says, "this kid's not here, but his belly brings him back every once in a while. Not good. To them it's like death to come back. One of them, fifteen-year-old whore I know, told me it's like dreaming you're abed among rose petals, and waking to find yourself chin deep in sewage. No, they don't like us much. If we'd all go away, that'd suit them just fine."

Karl struggles to take it all in, can't.

"This isn't real to them, we're not either. Unpleasant things to be dealt with—that's all we are. They're in to stay. This isn't their world anymore. I heard a rack of pods down in Van Nuys went down, and when they cracked the seals to get them out, they were flopping around like fish on the bottom of a boat."

Karl looks up from the coal brazier with its skin-tailed delicacy slowly turning. "Why?"

Villar smiles, mouth hard, the effect more like a jackal's snarl. "Shock of losing it, maybe, quien sabe?" He points, "Look at him, afraid we'll steal his rat, but he won't come up unless he has to. He's just listening, still out there." Villar picks up an empty drink box floating on the water, "Watch this." He tosses it at the boy where it bounces off a bare leg.

Leaping unsteadily to his feet, screaming a stream of vile epithet, the boy swings his pipe back and again. Seeing their uniforms, he scoops up the box, sends it back at them, and, with a final imprecation, sits, sinking back into reverie.

"I know," Villar says, "cruel, right? I felt that way, too, but you can't take it seriously, can't think of them as real—they sure don't."

Smelling a familiar stench, Karl leans over to see a body. Bloated, grinning, it stares up at him. Whoever it is has been there long enough to come up on his own. Before he can speak Villar drags him away by an arm. "Come on," he says, genuine friendliness coming through, muted by ostrich hide. "It's best not to look too close, nobody else does. Let's go, the Derby's not far. I'm starving."

From there the floating wrecks are gradually displaced by pleasantly maintained shops, flowerboxes and potted trees lining the wide floating walk, foot traffic becoming more and more plentiful as they pass under bowers of bougainvillea the color of dyed tissue.

"Better neighborhood," Villar says, pointing at a curving brown dome ahead. "There she lies."

The Derby, as far as Karl can tell an exact copy of the restaurant back a century ago in L.A., rocks on languid waves. He hasn't seen one since he left, and that one's underwater, now. The roof a hat twenty meters wide, is an eye catcher floating out there among the boathouses. Coming up on it, Karl has to smile. From the hills it must look like somebody's tossed his hat out on the water. He's glad to know somebody still has a sense of humor.

Inside it's coffee brown and white. Hundreds of old autographed black and whites of movie stars look down from the walls. Villar moves to sit, but Karl holds him back.

"What?" Villar says, following Karl's eyes. "What is it?"

It has to be here—it always is.

Karl scans the walls to find the one photo he always has to find. Mitchum, standing alone, trench coat caught by the wind on some bay-side cobbled back street. What bay Karl has no idea. He likes that picture, doesn't sit out of sight of it. At home he has one by his bed. He sees it last thing at night, first thing in the morning. Superstitious? sure. Ridiculous? probably.

What it means to him he's never talked about, never even thought about. It's from an old ad, that much he knows. Something from the last of the century. Doesn't matter. What does is that Mitchum speaks to him. Strong and clear, he says everything he's always known is true.

With his eyes he says it. The way his collar's turned up to the wind says it. The way he stands, looking old, tired, worn, the way Karl feels most of the time. Head held straight, Mitchum says it: Do right, and screw who doesn't like it.

Karl believes that, lives it, doesn't give a damn what anybody thinks about it. Over the long counter, chrome and white, Karl spots him, slides onto a stool.

Warily Villar follows. "You like this seat? You sure, now? I don't want to rush you."

Too tired to notice the teasing, Karl's mouth waters as he opens the menu. "Sit down."

"Mind telling what it is you were looking for? I've always wondered what dogs get out of turning around three times before they lie down. You may give me a clue."

Karl motions to the picture, surrounded by dozens of others.

"Ah, a picture you like, huh? Now let me guess.... Could be Grable, she's got a great set all right, but I don't think so." He appraises Karl, glances back at the wall. "Could be Hepburn. All that tall, bony charm.... Might even be Douglas. No, no, wait, wait, I've got it." A slow smile grows on his mouth. "It's Mitchum, isn't it. Oh, yeah, that's the one. That's the one you'd like. That Kipling If... attitude, he sends across, right? Yeah, that's the one you'd go for. I right?"

Surprised, Karl nods.

"Uh, huh," Villar says, gloating.

Disturbed he's that easy to read, Karl changes the subject, "Come here a lot?"

Villar shrugs. "What do you think? At two-fifty a plate, it costs too much, but me, I'd rather eat one meal a day of the real stuff, than three of the pap they serve out there."

Karl looks around, swiveling on his stool, looking over the dozen diners, eating, talking, playing chess, reading. Something's wrong, different from the restaurants on the plat. "What's missing?"

"Noticed, huh?" Villar grimaces. "Damped—no signals in, no signals out. Legal, barely, since it's a floater. Offshore you can get away with a lot you can't in the city." He turns to look back at the dozen or so diners at the tables behind them. "Shot hell out of business—aren't many willing to pull out of the net long enough to eat."

Karl sees it now. Most places he's been the last week it's like walking in on a seance. Everybody seeing and hearing something he can't without taking the feed. Every once in a while, they'll laugh, wince, sigh, depending on which center's getting tweaked. They murmur, they mutter, eyes on air. A creepy feeling,

being on the outside—he doesn't like it. Anything that keeps the hive society away suits Karl just fine.

"One time I saw a couple," Villar says, "implants, try to make it long enough to eat without net feed." He comes as close to laughing as Karl's ever seen him, teeth flashing ivory against pollo en mole skin. "They looked like they were crawling with fleas." He blows air between his teeth, "Out the door before they ever got their order."

Karl looks at Villar, "Why aren't you planted?"

"Nobody gets in here," he says, thumb tapping temple. "Let the lambs join the flock, not this Mexican." Villar's eyes blaze over him like Baja sun. "The Sister you pulled out of the way," he says, towing fork and spoon around on his napkin with a single finger, "know her?"

Karl says he doesn't. Strictly speaking true.

Shaking a bowed head over a thick heavy mug of coffee the girl sets before him, Villar grunts like he's considering it. Hands, small, strong, nimble as lizards, wrap themselves around his cup. "Pretty popular lately with some of the new guys, always asking about her."

Instantly, Karl's on his guard. Just what and who is this guy, and what does he know?

"I've seen a lot of LO's coast through here in ten years, I've never seen one that would have done what you did. I don't know what you are—"

Karl inhales to string him the line and Villar waves him silent. "I got Sam to give me a peek at your record," he laughs, examines bloodstains on his hands. "Poor Sam, cured his varicose veins, anyway, huh?" Again he shakes his head. "I don't know what the hell you are, but you're not some drunk also-ran from Timbuktu."

Villar looks at him like he's waiting for him to tell him what he is.

Karl sizes up the tough little Mex perched on the stool next to him. He's never much liked Mexicans. Never trusted them. Maybe he can trust Villar. He doesn't, though, not yet.

"No dice, huh? Don't like Mezcans?"

Karl looks at him, sees he's serious, "Not much."

"Ever had breakfast with one?"

Oddly, Karl isn't made uncomfortable by the question. "Not when I had a choice."

"Well, we're making progress, then, aren't we? Maybe racial harmony is within our grasp after all, huh?" Villar taps with nervous fingers on the counter. "I didn't think much of you either."

Thinking of the reception he got a week ago, Karl smiles, "No kidding."

Villar grimaces, tugs at the neck of his vest to work it down from where it's ridden up, something he does all the time without realizing it, Karl notices. He raises his cup to drink, "You know you're dead."

Karl tastes his coffee, mug feeling good in his hand after the ersatz crap he's swilled out of foam for a

week. Bitter, hot, the way he brews it at home. "I didn't plant it."

Villar looks tired in torn tunic, blood and a slash of black grime over one eye. "Didn't say you did. They don't care about the bomb. By the time they get done they'll make money on it. It's the organs. Those two sisters, the ones you convinced the tech to shoot with painkiller—that little bit of chivalry cost Genie three bills. Mr. S doesn't like losing money. The way I see it, they'll recoup what they can from yours."

Karl nods, suddenly doubting the wisdom of being here, "Who's going to collect, you?"

"Me, no, not me, I clean up messes, I don't make them. Swindlehurst's got other guys you better watch out for, though. Good, too, from what I hear. Very good at making trouble disappear. Last few months I've seen a few guys get a little too pushy, a little too interested. All of a sudden they just pack up and go, no notice, no nothing, just gone." He drinks, making love to the heavy mug hidden in his hands. I'd hate to see that happen to you, that's all."

He seems to mean it. "I'm touched."

"Yeah, yeah," Villar says, glancing over his shoulder. "How about what happened in L.A. the other day, huh?"

Karl says nothing, waits to hear what he has to say.

"Some security guys babysitting that old nag that's suing Genie, Ori, Ari, something like that, you must have heard about it."

"Nope."

"Whacked, five or six of them, maid too."

Karl listens, watching his face in vain for any clue to his thoughts. "Got her, huh?"

"Got away. Think about that. Team goes in by air slick as snot, hits half a dozen guys armed to the teeth, and she gets away?" Villar watches, eyes probing, "Never happen."

Karl sips his coffee, wishes he could crawl right down into it and soak his aching ribs, knees, head.

"So what do you think?"

Tiring, Karl looks at him, cup in his hands as the waitress fills it brimming. "What do I think? I think there's nothing like real Java. Over a hundred different compounds give coffee its flavor, you know that?"

"Nonono." Villar snorts. "About the old broad, how'd she do it, how'd she get away?"

Karl pretends to consider it, "Maybe they snatched her."

"Na," Villar says to his coffee, "got away, it was all over the net."

It's obvious Villar has an answer. Karl decides to hear it. "I give up, how?"

Villar watches him, eyes sharp, "She had help, that's how."

Karl looks up, meets eyes hard as opals. Hands still shaking from the concussion, the nearness of death and his own escape, he feels nothing so much as numb. Numb and tired. He breathes deep, waiting for what comes next. Why the hell did he agree to come? He doesn't need this jousting when he's trying to enjoy the first decent meal he's had in a week. "I don't know, man, if you say so."

Villar nods, looks as if he accepts his ignorance. "So why the hell'd you do that today? Most guys wouldn't cross the quay to spit on a sister if she were on fire."

Karl takes another sip, hot coffee burning all the way down, clearing the taste of dust, the stench of the floating corpse from his palate. This is what Villar really wants to know, why he offered to take him here. "Maybe not, but they pay a hell of a lot of scratch to be with them for a few hours."

Villar shrugs, "They're buying fantasy. They pay to bang one of the girls on the quay, too, that doesn't mean they'd take a chance the way you did. All I could think was you wanted to impress Romy, and that didn't fit. I've seen you around them, you don't even look up from that damned book of yours when they go by."

Karl's not letting him get away with that. "You were there, why'd you let me? Seems to me you're an accomplice. Odds the tech will think so, too."

Their waitress takes their order and goes away.

Villar watches him, knowing more than he says, no more willing to trust than Karl. "I never argue with a man with a gun that big. I told you...."

"Yeah, I know, you clean up messes."

"Genie doesn't hire cowboys." He smiles, waves a finger, "Nice try, but you still didn't answer my question—why?"

Hard question. One Karl's not sure he could answer if he wanted to, which he doesn't. To impress Romy? He smiles at the thought he would ever be foolish enough to try. He sips coffee wishing he had one of the little boxes from his cubicle to squeeze into it. "Where I come from, a man doesn't let an animal suffer."

"Ah...." Villar's eyes spark. "So they're animals?"

"Aren't they?" Karl drops his head, seeing again the look in Romy's eyes after he got off her, feeling again the clarity, the sensitivity of her mind. He realizes he doesn't know anymore. "Whatever they are, they don't deserve that."

Villar shrugs, rubs a brown hand over a close-cropped head, watches him speculatively. A Negress in a white and brown apron slides their steaks in front of them, then the tablet with the bill. Karl reaches for it, but Villar beats him to it.

"Got it, and thanks."

Karl lets orange juice run down his throat, so cold there's frost around the rim of the heavy glass. Villar's not smiling. "For what?"

"For keeping your eyes open."

Karl doesn't trust him, it's all coming too fast, too easy. If he weren't so damned tired of being alone he wouldn't be here. The steak's good, first real food he's had since he's been here. He thinks over the seconds before the explosion. "Why'd you chase me down?"

Villar nearly laughs this time. "You looked like you had a good reason to run, so I ran, too." He shrugs. "Something I picked up in Way Tay, saved this brown ass more than once."

Karl chews the steak, tender, salted, charred from the grill, wishing Villar would shut up and let him eat.

"Can I ask you something?"

As if anything he could say would shut him up. "Go ahead."

"You believe in redemption?"

Karl turns to see if he can be serious.

"I'm serious, you believe in it? Can it happen? Can it work? Can a man—an imperfect one, a flawed one—redeem himself, make up for all the...lousy stuff, all the mistakes?"

This is not what Karl expected to hear. As far as he can tell, he's perfectly serious. Karl saws through steak, chews, swallows. Can this guy be a holy roller? He's never met anybody looked less like one.

Redemption? What does he know about it? About as little as anybody can. Anybody starts talking God he runs the other way. Like anything else, he reckons—them that talks ain't doing. "You need to ask somebody who knows more about it."

Villar's eyes shine dangerously. "Well, I'm asking you."

It's been a long time since he's thought about anything like this. It makes him uncomfortable thinking about it now. Redemption—he's not even sure he knows what it means. "I'm for it."

"That mean you believe in it?"

Karl wants more than anything else to be left alone to eat his steak, but if he can't do that, then he's willing to walk out and leave it behind him. What he's not willing to do is endure a Jesus spiel. "Look, why ask me?"

"Why not? We're two of a feather, you and I." Villar looks at him over a pointed finger as if it is the sight of a gun. "I've thought about it, I thought maybe you had too. You telling me you haven't?"

What if he has? How the hell can Villar know about it? "That's what I'm telling you. Need answers, ask somebody who's got some to give."

Villar grimaces. "Sure," he says, slides off his stool, heads for the toilet. "Back in a minute."

Watching him go, Karl squirts Heinz on his hash browns. That is one strange SOB.

He takes out the puzzle book, dusting it against his trousers. Still can't get past the bogus gold piece. He's all right up to that point then it all slips away. Sawing off another chunk of beef, he opens the book,

finds a note in the margin: Don't worry about the gold piece.

And he sees it. The Chinaman getting change is chaff, doesn't change a thing. He remembers, now, how he turned his back on her for a few seconds. The book open on the cushion.

It had to be her. She saw his scribblings and guessed where he was blocked. So she's smarter than he is, too. Why doesn't that surprise him?

He doesn't want to think about it anymore, just wants to eat. This isn't turning out at all like he thought it would. He glances up at the mirror behind the counter where he can see the front door, just checking, good view, though he would have preferred a booth—always more comfortable with his back to the wall. He wonders how long the news will take to get to Swindlehurst, guesses he's had it since before he left the plat.

He won't end up on the bottom of the shelf, a hollowed out bodega bag. Thing's get that bad he'll take his chances on the cape. Not much of a chance maybe, but better than dying here. If he can't choose anything else, he can choose where he dies.

He's about to look back down to his plate when a big guy in a bulky coat comes through the door wearing what look like sunglasses. Karl minces eggs with his fork, mind running four ways at once. Alarms go off in his head like a series of electric shocks, but he keeps still, keeps steady, doesn't attract attention. He's overcompensating, he's sure of it, it's been barely an hour. Too fast, nobody's that efficient. But there he stands, filling the doorway.

Karl takes a bite of egg, chews, swallows, watching the stocky man scan the room. Sunglasses he leaves on. Isn't it lucky Villar's at the phone, he thinks, isn't it lucky? Dark, the glasses are glossy black. Not a style he's seen before, but then he's been out of touch a long time. He remembers a net piece he caught on the latest in night vision.

Karl takes another bite, going through the motions in his head, doing the mental practice, taking the Smith in his hand, swiveling, thumbing back the hammer, extending his arm, watching the front sight, firing—at the head, it would have to be the head, no way would the the slugs cut through the heavy vest that mountain could be hiding under there.

He spears a chunk of charbroiled New York, lifts the fork to his mouth, no longer hungry. Chews, not tasting, thinking he might as well be eating a drink box as he glances back up into the mirror. The big man staring straight at his back smiles, horse-teeth shining.

Every hair on Karl's body prickles. His back crawls. The man at the door draws back his coat revealing something long and black. Karl drops his fork, clanking on thick crockery, tumbling off onto the counter, taking a heart shaped droplet of ketchup with it. Red and thick. He feels the butt of the heavy revolver in his hand, still out of sight under his jacket and starts to swivel on his stool just as a waitress comes out of the kitchen carrying a tray of plates heaped high with onion rings.

She moves away, enfilade, and dammit, he can't see what he's got under the coat.

The lights blink out.

Karl rolls over the counter, hits tile on his knees, pain shocking in the dark.

Feeling blindly along the back of the counter, putting some distance between where he is and where he was, expecting to hear the drone of a carbine at 900 rounds per minute.

He doesn't.

The lights wink back, the cook cursing power outages. Karl peeks around the edge of the counter to see the big man adjusting the dial on an oxygen concentrator, clear hose snaking up inside his clothes and up a big nose. He follows a hostess to a booth.

At once, Karl makes the connection. Back in '23 a leaking valve sent EDB rolling in from San Pedro, a deadly mist carried in with the fog. Those who survived were on concentrators as long as they lived. The power outage just another inconvenience as the grid compensates as L.A. microwaves breakfast. He's read about them, why hadn't he remembered? Feeling a nudge from behind, Karl looks up to see his waitress glaring down at him.

"You looking for the little boy's room, honey, it's through the kitchen."

Slipping the .44 under his coat, he stands, ignoring an old couple staring after him as he goes. He's not back at the counter long when Villar slides onto his stool and notices the waitress cleaning away the orange juice Karl spilled when he leapt the counter. "What happened to my juice?"

Giving Karl a baleful look, the big negress says, "Clumsy me, I'll get you another one." She goes to fetch it.

Karl, feeling like a jerk, forces himself to eat.

"Tell you what," Villar says as the taxi shuttles them back to the plat, "get some sleep, a shower, and tomorrow morning on break we'll hop on over for lunch."

Karl isn't sure he heard right. "Tomorrow? You mean they'll have the tower up and running in twelve hours?"

Villar laughs as if he's out of practice, "You think they'll let a little thing like this shut them down? Uh, uh, they'll work out of the mezzanine."

Karl agrees.

Back in his cubicle, he showers, slips into the narrow bunk. Bink whines, licking a cut on the pad of a front paw. "Sorry old buddy, no running around tomorrow. I'll bring you a side of sausage, huh?" he says, smoothing his muzzle with a finger.

Seeing the glowing neon blue 42 in the periphery of his vision, a reminder of the news items waiting on satcom, he cues it. If he can't sleep, he might as well learn something. At the rate they're accumulating, he'll have to wade through at least half if he ever wants to get through them this century.

Instantly, the cubicle comes alive with movement, with sound. Under glaring lights masked police in black lead a dozen men and women, eyes resigned, to a waiting van. Cut to newsbabe with perfect

turned-under newsbabe hair.

"Uninet news as it happens...."

Karl wonders if it's something they learn to do at newsbabe academy or if they're just selected on the basis of their hair's willingness to curl under in just the right way.

"Fundamentalist Christian terrorists blamed for the failed attempt on the life of aging supermodel Auri Zerai, in which a half dozen people, including a long-time personal assistant, were killed, are led into waiting police vans by L.A. SWAT early this morning."

Mouth hanging, Karl listens, not believing what he hears. The guys he met worship one fundamental religion: the almighty buck. No way was that anything other than a professional whack. How is it that whenever he has any personal knowledge of the news, the babes get it wrong?

"Raids on an underground church headquarters yielded weapons ballistic analysis has determined were the same as those used in the attack last week."

Neat trick. Karl suspects they never even bothered to fake results. After all, who would question? Not journalists.

" More than a dozen suspected terrorists were taken into custody in the pre-dawn raid, LAPD Anti-terrorist Division spokesperson said this morning. Thirteen terrorists, among them five children, died as a result of gunfire exchanged between the entry team and the terrorists. No SWAT team members were injured."

How lucky for them. Disgusted, he sighs, cuts it off. Reaching up to switch off the light, he sees the holo of Romy with the others scattered over the floor, reaches to pick it up. Propped on an elbow, he looks at it for what must be the hundredth time in the last week, and for the first time sees it's not perfection, that in fact it doesn't even begin to show what it is about her that pulls at his insides. No more than a holo of a rose blossom can capture the cool velvet brush of petal upon lip, the scent, the prick of a thorn.

Switching out the light, he lies long awake. Insane are the thoughts that sweep through his mind despite his effort to quiet it. She is scum on the cesspool of the world, the culmination of the trickster's art, everything he despises, the worst of it all. He knows she is. And yet....

If she is all that, then why is what comes through from her mind clean as an apple newly picked and sliced with a jackknife? Never before has he doubted what he sees, never.

He does now.

For the first time in his life he won't trust his gut. He can't. If he does he'll have to admit he wants her.

And damn it....

That he won't do.

* * *

Snip.

Tiny clippers taking away, and by subtracting, adding, Romy shapes the gnarled tree before her.

Head canted, eyes intent, she circles silently.

Snip.

One of her favorites, a Shara-miki maple, seven-eighths dead, windswept, leaning precariously, as if yearning for earth it will never touch. The bonsai stretches, weeping for the earth from its elegant prison, a cobalt ceramic tray of such exquisite simplicity it hovers near invisibility.

Head tilted, appraising the creature before her for a long minute, she clears her mind to see it. Not what she wants it to be, not how it will be—what it is.

Not easy.

Not easy at all.

She imagines what it must feel, this primitive soul. Roots trimmed, life force kept flickering by constant attention. Bound, stunted, cramped. Kept apart from the soil it craves, from the earth. What would she feel?

What she does feel is a yearning, a need to be more than she ever will. Squeezing sea green eyes shut, not to hear, not to think, she moves along the line of trees arrayed before her on a rooftop ledge overlooking the sea. Mist sweeps over her, leaving droplets of moisture clinging in tangled platinum hair, on faultless skin, on her trees.

Why spend so many hours alone with these maudlin ancients?

Down the line she moves, caressing, bending a wire-trained limb of the Ne Agari beech, roots straining fingers. Pinching back a terminal bud on a Sharikan elm. Peeling a shred of bark from the trunk with her nails. Dread building in her, she runs a perfect hand along the coiled trunk of the little cypress, a Bankan, trunk a serpent.

Her favorite, she's losing it. Salt spray, chemicals in the air are bleaching the last of its scaly leaves sickly yellow. Life in this, the oldest of her treasures, sputters. She bends, mane tenting it. Brushing her lips over scaly leaves, she breathes a plea, woman to shrunken ancient three times her age. It must heal, live, grow. It must not leave her alone on this steel island.

Sulking, pensive, the small mindless thing will not yield. It sends back only a mulish determination to die. Standing erect, she backs away, unwilling to cry.

With her tray of tools, wound seal, micro-nutrients, she moves on to a grove of beech, small mound carpeted with moss. If only she could disappear into that grove, lie on that velvet carpet in the sun. The spiny leaves of a Tako Zukuri cork oak prick her palm as she runs her hands over branches stretched wide in need.

These poor stunted beings she tends were made to serve a purpose, fill a need. As was she. No more human than they, she tends them. She raises her face to a sky hanging heavy with fowl-smelling mist and,

voice an intense whisper, cries out. "I do have a soul.... I do."

In spite of everything she believes it. Whatever she is, however she was made, whatever anyone says—she knows it. A soul is not dependent on ordered bases, on a coded helix. A soul no one can take away, no matter the law. In defiance of all she knows, all she sees, she believes. Believes she is more than a sequence of bases, that there is a ghost in the machine, that there is God, that God hears. So many limbs out, so very far from the trunk she's willing to go for it to be so.

Nonsense, her sisters say: "You can't seriously believe in a god that would let them create us."

Most, having seen stranger fetishes, only laugh. Some say it's her need for a father talking, that it will pass.

But for her, it never does. Romy believes in good, in happy endings, in humanity. In a few days she'll be thirty. They will come, for her, for all of them, and what few remain of first generation Sisters will be gone.

One last time before she goes out she passes among the century old trees on the bench. She will miss these stubborn old men. Will they notice her passing?

Alone in the mist she laughs out loud at the thought. Her passing after thirty years will be noticed by not a single living thing. It will be the same dawn, the same wind, the same sea. When she is taken, all who would miss her will go with her.

The lucky ones are taken first, she decides. They are remembered by those left behind.

Troubling thoughts worm their way into her mind. The man who carried her out of the way of the blast. Why had he done it? Again she feels the gut wrenching attraction—irresistible as it is unwelcome. Again she smells him—so familiar yet so alien. Never before has a man affected her this way. Never. Can the ads be true after all?

Of all the men she has known in fifteen years as an escort, none has ever behaved that way. As if impressing her had been the last thing on his mind. Nervous, uncomfortable, almost as if he couldn't stand touching her, couldn't wait to get off her, away from her. His awkwardness is puzzling, the freshness of it intriguing. And how had he known about the bomb?

Even more troubling is her reaction to being grabbed. Her struggles had been bogus, for show, the nip on the ear cheap theatrics that shamed her now. She's never let herself be manhandled before. Why hadn't she freed herself?

The clippers she hangs on a nail out of salt mist, hesitating at the door for one last look before starting down.

The old ones will be cared for when she is gone.

That's what matters.

That's all that matters.

At midnight Karl finds Sisters Tower open for business.

New guy at the counter. Karl consults the record, finds Romy's out for a two-hour gig. Due back at two. Time crawls as he waits to see her. Every time the door opens, he has to look. He doesn't know what he expects to have changed after last night, but he does know he's a fool to expect anything at all. He knows what she thinks of him.

Right on time, she saunters in with the grace of a cheetah. Leaving the poor fool at the counter, she heads for the lift, Karl tracking her every step of the way. She knows he's watching, feels his eyes on her, he can tell, yet stubbornly refuses to look his way. At last, as the lift doors whisper closed, she turns, sending him a single furtive glance.

Disgusted, he heads out on the quay, spends an hour knuckles white on the cold rail fighting an urge to hop the next taxi off. He drags her bony ass out of the way of a bomb and what does it get him—a bitchy glance from the elevator.

A week here and he's still no closer to talking to her than he was when he first stepped on the plat. He feels again the conflict raging within her before the blast. What is it she fears so much, dreads so much? What is it he can't be?

At four, Villar finds him, suggests another meal at the Derby.

When Karl hesitates, he smiles, "Come on, LO, if a couple keys of C-4 can't stop the Sisterhood, I guess we can grab a decent steak without everything coming crashing down can't we?"

Karl has to agree.

Before they go, Karl tells the new clerk to call him if Romy goes anywhere. He promises he will, and though Karl doesn't feel right about leaving, even if for only an hour, he follows Villar down to the taxi.

* * *

The Derby's nearly deserted at this hour. They sit at the counter, and the same woman takes their order, fills their mugs with steaming coffee. The cook, a fat black, brow beaded with sweat, hums as he slaps New Yorks on a red hot grill.

"You say you don't know her," Villar says, looking clever. "Yet I saw you just ask that kid to call you if she leaves. Maybe I'm thick but I don't get it."

Karl chews, stalling, wondering what he can say to that. The guy's like a pit bull. Once he grabs on he won't let go. "Just trying to do my job."

Villar purses his lips as if he's trying not to smile, "You don't know her, I know, I believe you. Want to?"

Karl does his best to keep his face impassive. What the hell is this? "Can't afford it."

"No, no, on her own time. I know Romy, we have a mutual friend. She would, after what you did, I'm sure she would."

"She'd meet me," Karl says, unable to keep the confusion out of his voice, stunned at the direction they've taken.

Villar nods, "What's so hard to believe about that?"

That he's not anybody's idea of handsome for starters? That she seems to hate him running a close second?

Karl doesn't believe it, not for a minute. "You're having me on?"

Villar seems serious. "You want it, you got it."

Does he want it? Does he want a chance to talk to her, to convince her to come with him back to L.A.? Does he want off this metal island and home?

Karl shrugs, "Why not?"

Seeming pleased, as much as he ever does, Villar says, "I'll ask her," and reaches back to press the set to the back of his shaved skull. Irritated, he slides off the stool, "Forgot, I'll have to use the booth. Be right back."

Karl watches him go, warming tented hands over steaming mug. It's beginning to look like Villar may turn out to be not quite the pain in the rear he seemed at first.

Back on his stool what seems an instant later, Villar attacks his food, "Funny," he says, mouth full of egg, "doesn't answer."

Red coal of doubt searing the pit of his stomach, Karl reaches up to his ear and finds that the alarm has gone off, only he hasn't heard because he's had the gain turned down. He calls up the overlay and sees what he's afraid he might.

Damning himself and his fate, Karl shoves away from the counter and pushing bad knees to their limit, sprints out into the darkness.

Romy is not in the tower.

* * *

São Miguel in early fall.

Five years ago. Karl's first vacation in a year and Tate calls him back a week early. The Azores. Stone houses cling to cliffs. Streets snake up, around, through hills. Alleyways cramped enough to deny two

burros passage. Lemon trees, limbs pendulous with fruit. Cactus. Hotel perched high above a smoked glass sea. Bougainvillea bower framing arched doorways. Fresh-caught shark grilled over oak. As far away from L.A. as he can get. Long languid days and nights under a lazy ceiling fan with a lovely girl with caramel skin, the hands, the mouth of an angel, the soul of an imp.

Kid comes knocking with the wire. When Karl sees who it's from he's torqued. Aunt sick again. Job only he can do. Sure it is. Behind him, the girl calls him back to bed.

God, he doesn't want to leave.

At the sea he smiles, drops his head onto the iron rail. Tate is Tate. The job is the job. Girl already out of his mind, he crumples the paper into a tight wad in his fist, tosses it off the balcony and watches it tumble all the way to the sea. Ten minutes later he's dressed and on his way.

At LAX a pool car waits—ugly, gray, smelling of smoke. Duffel in the trunk—vest, gun, spare strips of .44. On the front seat a file folder. Cruising down out of the parking garage, radials complaining, he opens the file in his lap while slipping conical AP rounds into the Smith. Governor's daughter, seven years old, didn't make it home from her bus stop. Gone twenty-four, no....

He glances at his watch, does some subtraction.

Thirty-six hours. Not good.

Steering with his knee, he turns the page. Holo of her posed with the family. Kat's her name. Nice looking kid, nice eyes—smart, sensitive. Not smiling. Threading the concrete loop down to the street, rubber screaming, he smiles, thinking about how much guts it must have taken her to deadpan a publicity shot. Must be tough. This kid he likes. Now someone's got her. Someone who shouldn't.

Karl hops onto the Long Beach, and straight out to the Governor's home to see the friend who saw her last. The governor's wife, Adriana Velasquez, good looking woman, used to be a crooner, lets him in without a word, face held together by power of will. Suit with spooky eyes sticking close behind her, she leads him past a room filled with idling FBI, tension puckering like yesterday's egg white. The looks he gets are cold enough to condense the moisture in the air. Not that this surprises him.

Catching sight of him, an agent he's crossed paths with before, big guy named Peters, steps in front of him. "What the hell you doing here?"

Ahead, the governor's wife, waits.

Karl doesn't like this guy, never has. "My job."

"You want to help, why don't you just stay the hell out of the goddam way?"

"That's a good idea, now if you'll get out of mine, I'll do just that."

Peters moves close, wetting his lips, "Why don't we just step out in the garage for a minute, huh? I've got something I'd like to show you."

Karl feels heat rise up his neck to his face as fear takes him in its talons. There's no doubt this guy can kick his ass around the block. Karl knows it. He knows it. Considering his options, Karl hears the click of the woman's heels on marble.

"We're waiting, Mr. Latte."

To the agent, Karl says, "Maybe another time, huh?"

Not happy, he backs off, "Yeah, another time."

In a large room the girl and her mother wait. Still not introducing herself, the governor's wife raises a stiff arm, motioning him in. At first he resents the chill. Then he thinks of the hell she's been through the last day and a half. No sleep, mind flashing horrific negatives—her baby hurting, alone, and he understands, forgives. Stepping close to her, he says, "I'll find her."

Whole body trembling as if she's resisting mounting internal pressure, she nods quickly, biting her lip. Karl senses desperation in her strong enough to curdle milk. Desperation enough to try anything. Desperate enough to let a psychic, showing up in a Hawaiian print shirt and tennis shorts in the middle of January talk to a little girl in pigtails.

Karl sits cross-legged on the rug, handwoven Cashmere by the feel, and with the mother's eyes on him, meets the child's curious stare. She doesn't know about him, about what he's there for, which makes it tricky, but not hard. He's had a lot of practice.

"Who are you?"

"My name's Karl."

"I'm Louisa. Are you FBI, too?"

"No."

"Are you going to ask me more questions?" She says it as if she dreads it.

"No, but I'll tell you what. I see you draw, and I was wondering if you might make me a picture."

This gets her attention. "Of what?"

"Oh," he pretends to think, "How about a picture of a party, the one you'll have when Kat comes back."

Kat's mother loses the breath she's been holding, and covering her mouth, runs out, shoes tapping granite.

The girl looks up at him with big eyes, "Kat's mother's very worried. You're sure about the party? I don't draw very good people."

"I'm sure. Now let me see...." Under the worried eyes of her mother, he picks out a crayon in a revolting shade of green, offers it, scooting close. "This is my favorite color, would you use it for me in your picture?"

She nods, reaches for it, touches his hand, and the rush comes fast and strong as static shock.

On a sunny sidewalk he stands, warm, four-o'clock winter sun on his back. There himself, he can't explain why. He's got only a few seconds. Moving quickly as he can, he heads straight to the van, opens

the passenger door, climbs in over the seat, clamps the man's throat in his hand, and for an instant, freezes as a flood of poison streams into him. Odd technique—double dipping. Unlikely as time travel, logically, it shouldn't be possible. Why it works he has no idea. He only knows it does.

Had all he can stand, Karl rips his hand away, breaking the connection. Too much. Too dark. Too ripe, too septic—a ruptured boil of thought.

Blinking to clear his head, he smiles, greets curious eyes the color of an Azore sky. "Thank you, Louisa."

He has what he needs—his name is Darrell.

"Were you there?" she says, brow wrinkled in a frown. "I think I remember you there."

He's not surprised, though Louisa's mother stifles a cry, eyes tearing. One thing talking about Psi, another seeing it. Karl knows the reaction, has felt it himself—the awe, the shattering impact knowing can have.

"No," he says, gently, levering himself up on stiff knees. "No, not me."

Disturbing image forgotten, she goes back to her drawing. "But you can't leave. I'm not done."

Karl sees Kat's mother watching from the hall. Behind her waits Peters and her shadow. "I'll come get it later, okay?"

He heads for the front door, Adriana following him with terrified eyes, "You know, don't you? You know."

"I'll get her," he says.

Peters blocks his way, "Slow down, hotshot, we're coming along."

Karl says to the woman, "Tell him to get out of my way."

The agent takes a step for him. Karl reaches under his jacket. "I know where she is. You going to shoot me you better do it, because otherwise I'm going out that door."

"Roberto!" Kat's mother screams. "Roberto!"

Into the hall comes a man Karl has seen many times on the net: the Roberto Velasquez, governor of New Mexicali. Though a head shorter than Adriana, he's wide as a fullback—an imposing man. "You Latte?"

"Yeah." Hand on the butt of the .44, he's already decided to do whatever he has to do to get out the door. He'll let Tate worry about what happens later.

Velasquez raises a squat finger in Peters' direction, and in a voice used to being obeyed, barks. "¡Ve te hombre!"

Peters opens his mouth to protest, but thinks better of it, goes without a word.

Velasquez turns on Karl, "Mr. Latte, we have half a hundred agents here, if you know something, don't

you think it might be wiser...."

But Karl's already sprinting for the door. No time for arguments, no time for anything.

"Let him go," his wife says.

Karl floors the loaner, fishtailing down the driveway way too fast, smashing a fender, scraping the black face off a smiling footman, knowing what he'll find if he's too late.

An address in Bell, a house with a half basement, a basement, oh, sweet Jesus, a basement. On the Santa Ana he passes cars on the right at ninety, leaves a hubcap rolling and spinning on the off ramp as he goads the gutless Ford, bounding over a raised berm. Just a few blocks, now.

In the rearview mirror, flashing blue lights. With his palm he pounds the wheel, cursing, stands on the brakes. Heading back to the CHP car with hands plain in view, he hands him a card, "I'm on US government business, I'm in a hurry, com the number on the back of the card, I'll wait." He goes back to his car, leaving the patrolman standing by the side of the freeway. In the mirror, motor purring, car in drive, he watches as he speaks into the air, looking a bit bored. Fighting the temptation to drive away, Karl counts to ten.

He's on three when the officer's face changes, on five when he begins his sprint to the car, nine when he tells him breathlessly he's free to go. As Karl pushes back into the flow of traffic, he smiles. Magnus' idea, the number on the card leads directly to Magnus 24 hours a day. It never fails.

Running fast, concentration half a block ahead of smoking front tires, Karl pushes deeper into the bad side of L.A.. Around corners at 80, tires stuttering in gutter muck, used diapers. Children squat on the curb. Mothers, seated along a low wall, improbably young, wide Aztec faces staring at nothing, feet dangling flip-flops.

He cuts left down Orchard, using the straight stretch to wring the last click of speed he can from the pool heap, laying on the horn. Almost there, his thoughts darken.

Why the basement? You can never find the light switch in basements. Cold, smelling of earth. No place for a girl with such knowing eyes.

Recognizing the house, he romps on the brake, pedal alive and jumping under his foot as the ABS keeps the car from going into a skid. Sway backed farmhouse. Lawn dead. Garbage scattered by dogs. Gate closed. Too bad.

The car he blows through chain link, up over lawn onto the sagging porch, splintering a four by four post as he skews to rest, setting the roof to sagging. Out and up the stairs he runs, gun in hand.

Barbie doll nailed through an eye to porch post, black string around her neck, torso slit open and what looks like a chicken heart stuffed inside. As he gawks the door cracks. He looks Darrell in the face. Karl hits it with his shoulder.

Mouth open in surprise, Darrell puts his weight behind the door. Karl blocks it with a foot, sticks in the barrel of the .44. Before he fires it swings wide.

Darrell whines, dirty hands held open, "don't shoot me, Bud!"

"Where is she?" Karl says, "Tell me, now, right now." Darrell backs and Karl stays with him down the hall, knowing he should kill him right now—not able to do it that way. Back down the cramped hall Darrell leads. Knowing he's losing it, letting the moment of surprise slip away, Karl says, "Stop, down on your knees."

Darrell's eyes flit to the left, then quickly back. "Sure, Bud, sure."

Scalp itching like he's got lice, Karl turns to see a guy the size of a linebacker come at him out of the living room, axe handle raised overhead. As it cuts the air, he ducks, the .44 bucking six times, too close to miss, fast as he can put them out, the blast awful in the close hall as pee wee winds up for another swing.

The big man, arms like hams, just like hams—Karl never knew what that meant before—eyes gone glassy, several entrance wounds in his neck and cheek, back of his head artwork streaming down the wall, goes down swinging, a dead man still on his feet. Karl raises an arm and the hickory catches him just below the elbow, snapping his ulna with the sound of a breaking breadstick. The fat man slams down on top of him, pinning Karl to the wall, paper slick with grime, dead man's face against his.

Reeling, dizzy from pain, shielding his ruined arm, wondering what in hell this guy ate—his last breath is sewer gas—Karl strains to get out from under him. Two hundred kilo if he's a gram, the contact with his skin is like turning over an animal on the side of the road and seeing maggots squirm for cover—worse than that. As much as he can he shuts himself off from it, but he can't do much—the man's mind reeks like a two-week-old corpse. Hand on his face, fingering an eye socket, Karl shoves with all he's got, and frees his gun arm.

Ears ringing, Karl looks up to see Darrell come for him, short handled trench shovel raised over his head for a hacking swing. He can see the side of the blade honed sharp, spattered with something dark. Knowing he's dead, Karl smiles, raises the empty gun, obvious to anyone with eyes the cylinder's empty.

Darrell blanches, turns, pounds down wooden stairs to the basement, door slamming behind him. Convinced of miracles, Karl, still not believing he's alive, sags against the dead man. Wrong, it's all going down wrong.

Nagging guilt uncoils in his gut, burning what it touches. He should have come in with a dozen agents, not like a goddam hotshot, alone.

Wrenching free, he sets the revolver on the batter's broad back, and with painful clumsiness, ejects the spent cases one-handed. Now he may lose them, lose his one chance to get her back. It was pride kept him from calling in the suits. Pride that ruined his arm. Pride that might still cost Kat's life. Jesus, what an ass he is.

Watching the door, praying he doesn't realize his mistake and come back, Karl digs a strip of cartridges out of his pocket and, with trembling fingers, reloads one handed. When he closes the cylinder, he feels better. Pushing with his legs, he shoves the body off him, getting to his feet. The cellar door's unlocked. It's dark and of course there's no switch. He feels anyway, finds it, flips it—nothing.

Halfway down he realizes he's going to die. Darrell's waiting down here. Waiting to split him open with the shovel. The reek of earth is strong. He reaches out with his gun hand and touches dry soil, packed hard. He blinks, willing his eyes to see. They stay blind. Left arm numb, useless. He clutches it to his chest, air like ice on jagged bone nosing out through torn skin. The revolver he brings in close to his ribs, hammer back, determined not to be the only one to die down here, not to let him get away.

The outside cellar door slams open, the glare blinding him. He hears her moan. She's alive—that much at least has gone right. With a bang the door slams shut, and overhead Karl hears him drag something across, barring him in. Cold fire reaches up his back. He won't be trapped down here. Backing up steep stairs, ducking under a low beam, Karl forgets and hits the door with his ruined arm.

He gasps as pain jolts through him like electricity. Down the hall he moves, climbing over the bloated man with no skull. He hears a car turn over. Pushing himself, every step jarring his arm, he bursts through the rotten screen door and outside as a white Fairlane in the carport catches, vomiting clouds of blue smoke.

Darrell's got an arm round her neck, straight razor in his dirty right hand, her frightened face hidden against his chest. Karl calls to her. "Kat!"

She turns and he sees red eyes, expression like a hunted animal, and Karl knows what she's suffered during two days with this thing—this soon to be dead thing.

Karl shuffles to where he can get a shot, .44 held out barely three paces from Darrell's nose. Tip of Karl's finger light on the trigger, car idling. It's a moment of cusp, of equilibrium, washed in choking exhaust.

"Hey, Darrell, let's stay cool, now, shall we?"

Darrell's eyes flit from the gun pointed at his head, back out the dusty, cat-printed windshield and back. No intelligence in those eyes, only a shifting caginess, the sly understanding of a dog circling to bite.

Looking past the front sight, Karl sees the eyes have changed. No longer vacant, they become shrewd, triumphant, calculating. Darrell looks up and down the street in front of the house and sees no cruisers, no strobing red lights. A smile bares brown broken teeth, "Where's your backup, Karl?"

A glowing brand, his name burns its way into his brain. How can he know? Throbbing arm cradled against chest, Karl concentrates on staying alert. "Let her out of the car, Darrell, and I'll let you drive away," he says, voice as low, as calm as he can make it. "No police, you just drive away." He lies. No cush life inside for this boy. Come what may, he's talking to the dead.

Kat starts to cry, and Darrell slaps her hard across the mouth with a free hand. Karl wants to kill him right now. The girl, used to him, quiets, gasping, eyes wide with terror. The thin man's eyes find Karl's. "Okay," he says, "I'll push her out, then I'll go."

Not believing, knowing it can't end this way, can't be all right, Karl nods, looking for a shot, seeing none, the girl shielding him. "I won't shoot, Darrell, not if you leave her with me."

Can it be a sin to lie to something like this? A sin to kill it? Karl doesn't think so. If he's wrong he'll tell his side when his time comes. Until then, he won't worry about it.

"You promise, no shooting?"

Already going to the place where he goes when he has to drop a hammer on a man, even a man like this one, Karl's ready. He's heard about cops who can't eat for three days after shooting somebody, and wonders if maybe there's something wrong with him because he can do it and go on with his life. Maybe there is. He doesn't know. Karl swallows. "I promise."

Satisfied, Darrell lifts the girl out of his lap. He holds her between them by long hair the color of clover honey, her tee shirt and jeans torn, smeared with something black—grease, Karl hopes. Darrell's gaze darts along the street, then back to Karl, "Take her, she's yours," he says, swiping the razor across the soft skin of her throat and shoving her into Karl's waiting arms.

As if reaching for dropped eggs, Karl reaches out for her as Darrell, gunning the engine, lurches, laughing, into the sunlight. Pressing her to him with his gun arm, Karl sights carefully over the back of her head, putting one shot into the dirty rear glass where Darrell's head should be.

Blood fogs the front windshield. The Ford rams a gnarled fig, breaking off a limb and showering overripe black fruit over sidewalk and hood. In a patter of wet slaps, they drop, bursting open as they land. Engine dead, the horn blares.

Panicked by searing pain, Kat tries to scream, but can only gurgle as she collapses into his arms, dragging him with her down to oil-stained cement. Helpless, Karl holds her as she calms, eyes fluttering, quiet now, as a mountain of filth, a tsunami of disease topples onto him from her mind—the last 36 hours of her life. In vain Karl gathers slippery edges of the wound together with one bare hand. All of it, the toxin of the last two days, pours out of her. Using fingers to plug the carotid artery, hands slick with blood, mind numb, past feeling, he waits. For what, he's not sure.

People gather. Neighbors, curious, snoop around the car, around him. He screams at them to send an ambulance, and though no one moves, several mumble. On his lap he rocks her, this sweet dying angel crying for her mama, even now, past talking, past words, still, she calls, as she moves away over them, looking down, puzzled.

Karl hears her laugh, though she can't make a sound, now, so much of her blood has run out hot and sticky under his hand.

In the dim air above them, he moves with her.

"How can you follow me?" She asks him. "How can you be here?"

Anchored to the world by shackles of grief, he doesn't answer, the pain too sharp, the tip of the ulna nosing out through the skin near his elbow, the dead girl he might have freed in his arms. Mutely he follows, watching them both down below, seeing the roof of the house, the ambulance coming from two blocks away, the neighbors peering in at the man in the car with no face. The windshield Karl thinks looks like the wall of a cave where aborigines chewed and spat sienna in an umber spatter.

They come.

They take them away.

Karl sees it all, knowing it doesn't matter.

They're free now, free of the evil, the ugliness, moving through the dark toward the light together. He won't leave her, won't go back, not to Darrell's world. Not to a world that breeds and succors Darrells.

When she moves into the love, the warmth, he can't follow. Like trying to fly. She goes on and he's left behind, the door shut, alone.

A bushy haired ER intern resets his arm, and Karl sits up, screaming profanity, swiping at the one who hurt him with his good arm.

Picking himself off the floor the MD yells. "Anesthesia for chrissake!"

A prick on the inside of his elbow and Karl's gone.

Twelve hours later he comes up out of the well, finds his clothes still warm from the dryer, dresses awkwardly one-handed, and calm as a dream, braced arm throbbing with every beat of his heart, heads for the door. A couple security men try to stop him and with one arm in a sling, not even thinking, only needing to get out, get away, he puts them down. Doesn't stop until he's home.

It takes him a week hitching, looking like he does. Winter is winter in Humboldt county, not like L.A., and he eats nothing but a few crackers and a bologna sandwich in seven days. But he makes it.

When he walks in the store, Mary sits him down and feeds him breakfast: dozen hotcakes and coffee milked and sugared up the way she used to fix it for him when they were kids. When he won't answer her questions, doesn't even seem to hear, she gives up asking.

While he eats she calls a number she has taped to the back of the malt mixer, the number a man left with her, saying to call if he came, saying he only wants to help him, which, in spite of her innate distrust for anybody smelling of government, she believes.

Tate drops in. Brings a nurse. Comes to make sure Karl has everything he needs or will say he wants, which is nothing. Tries talking him into coming back. No dice, so Tate goes back to take care of the mess. Keeps the press quiet. Somehow gets the coroner to declare Darrell's death a suicide. Does what he does best, muddies the waters.

A month later, Karl drives the nurse—a woman so unremittingly cheerful she sets Karl's teeth on edge—to Eureka, puts her on a Greyhound for L.A. Sends her with a message for Tate pecked out out on an antique Corona.

M.

Need nothing. Want nothing. Won't be back.

K.

* * *

On the bounding taxi Karl's headset shows Romy a red circle on a plat overlay. Three blue X's with her, maybe the men he'd just missed in the elevator at Auri's. He swallows, asks himself what the hell he's

doing rushing to meet them, all for a beautiful freak. He watches the plat grow larger, a million lights glittering on tall casino towers—a potent vision of Hell.

Cold wind cuts into him through the open front of his jacket. He thinks of the steak and eggs he left on the counter to cool and tries to ignore the pangs in his stomach as the boat lurches through the chop. He misses the cape, the peppermint scent of pennyroyal crushed under boot, the cries of red tails soaring lazy on thermals wafting up from the sea. Mostly he misses Mary.

His headset shows Romy still moving and that's good, but they're already on the 20th floor of the casino hotel and that's not. The taxi starts to wind down. Too close to the casino to go to his room to get the twelve. The .44 will have to do.

The driver he points to an emergency access ladder off the north edge of the plat. Focusing on the overlay again, he sees his green X nearly on top of hers. He peers up at the sixty story monolith looming above him. Romy's up there in one of those rooms. As the boat slows, Karl reaches up for the rungs of the ladder, knowing as his hand contacts cold alloy, he won't make it home again. He'll end up with the others on the shelf, liver in some Orlando millionaire's gut.

Barnacles rasp his hands as he dangles from the bottom rung, feet scrabbling for a hold against a piling big around as the taxi is long. Boot catching on a buildup of mussels, he's up and climbing. A swell brings the taxi close enough to crush him against the ladder. He fends it off with his foot.

The driver curses in pidgin English. Karl's chip's hasty pass across the sensor was denied, and the jerk won't go away without being paid. The hack makes a grab for his pant leg. Karl kicks, catches him on the chin, pulls free. The bill he can take care of later—if he lives.

Dropping over the rail to the grid, the driver's curses following from below, he ducks inside, catching a lift as it's about to close. Young couple, maybe honeymooners, clinch in the corner of the car. Girl, short Latin, leans back against her tall, thin beau, giggling, whispering. Karl turns away, disgusted by the babble of love. Temporary insanity for the weak-minded. Not him. Nobody makes a cooing buffoon out of him.

Breathing heavily, heart racing, he leans back against the wall, calls out his floor as he tunes out the car's babbled ads. Heart feeling as if it may burst through his ribs, he focuses on the holo. They haven't moved. Good. Easily, he can imagine the scene in the room overhead. What's happening up there can't be pleasant, not with three of them.

Seeing again her eyes, the gun comes into his trembling hand. Opening the cylinder, he picks out a round, blows a bit of lint off the conical tip, slips it back. Five years ago the best vest cutters on the black market. Now, he doesn't know. A lot can change in five years. He closes the cylinder. Six rounds, three men with her. Should be easy.

Should be.

He notices the lovers are quiet and looks up to find them staring, eyes wide with fear.

"I'll be getting out in a minute, don't worry."

But they do, they worry plenty. With gun possession buying mandatory life, few witnesses live to talk. He can see they are sure they're about to die, thinks about reassuring them, decides not to bother. It'll all be over in a minute anyway.

"Please," she says, pleading.

Karl turns away, keeping the kid in the edge of his vision in case he decides to be stupid and he has to slap him.

The ads on the door fade. "Today on Uninet News, a deadly explosion on Pleasure Island."

Karl shushes the blubbering bride and she jumps, quieting.

"Investigators blame a leaking gas main for an early morning explosion on Platform 66 resulting in the death of three Genie personnel and two Sisters, as well as hundreds of billions in damage to Sister Tower itself."

"Liars," he says out loud.

"Work to repair the lobby is proceeding apace, and a Genie spokesperson offered assurances that in no way will the construction interfere with Genesistems' valued guests' enjoyment of their time on the island."

"Thank God for that." Impatient, he kicks the door. "Come on!"

It gapes. At a trot, .44 behind his thigh, he rounds one thirty degree bend in the hall and then another. By the third, he is very close, and nearly runs past it—room 40143. Listening with his whole body, not breathing, he stops, pressing his back to the wall. No one outside. Strange.

He expected one to be outside watching. The security override he passes over the sensor in the wall and the door springs open a finger width.

A low groan sounds in this throat as he winds up, breath coming deeper, faster. Certain he's going to die, he feels the rounds cycloning through his out-of-date vest like tissue, warm seeping blood wet against his skin.

In a burst of pent energy violent as a released bungy, he goes in.

* * *

Heart cold dead with disappointment, Vincent Vici steps into the elevator, "Quay."

"Quay," the lift echoes seductively, humming to life.

Fiftieth floor of Genesistems Sister Tower, and for all the tightened security, he still has the run of the place—they have that much contempt for him.

In Sasha's apartment a few moments before, she'd laughed at him, laughed her bitter laugh at him for being old, for telling her she was in danger, for wanting to save her.

Silly, shallow thing! Grown too used to attention, adoration, praise, she is vain, too vain to listen to an old man, even if he is her father. Oh, no, she has plans, big plans. She will open a fortune telling shop, somehow believing they will let her do that here of all places, let a recombinant carrying 1.5 billion in

Genesistems' organs read a crystal ball for tourists on their very doorstep—amazing. For one so bright, she is very dim. But then what can he expect from a woman who has never thought for herself?

They are children, he realizes, conditioned to accept their position as non-persona as the natural state of life. Robbed of themselves, of the clarity of view to see that each is flawed as a snowflake, each unique, an accident, a confluence.

But how can he expect them to know, when he had not? None of them had understood that the code was just the beginning. That one plus one yields three. That the more they do, the less they understand. That there will always be a shadow land closed to them—whether they choose to believe or not. Always there, mocking, taunting—the ghost in the machine.

Years before, he'd seen good scientists shrink before it. Confident as he was in his youth, he'd shaken his head, pitied them for not being able to rise above superstition. He'd looked down from the sublime height of pure logic, the rare ether of the proven, the replicated, as a god looks down from Olympus, and pitied their ignorance. Now, after a life working to prove the darkness was never there, he's face to face with it himself.

Back in '98 Genesistems was three men, two women, all unknowns. Friends, all sharp, all hungry, working twenty hour shifts in a double garage off Figueroa. Borrowed equipment. No money for salaries, they worked for the sheer rush of being on the edge of an emerging technology.

They pooled their money to buy the gene enhancer, three models obsolete, but still working. Ova they scrounged from abortion clinics. Sperm they got for free—he always said he'd jerked his way to the top.

When they found they could do it, they got the backing and issued stock. After five two-for-one splits, one of those shares is now thirty two. Each share worth more than the five thousand each took at the original offering.

When his partners took their profit and ran, he held on. That made him Genesistems' single largest stockholder. Worth what? he doesn't even know, trillions. He gave up keeping track long ago. A hostile takeover back in '22 put the Chicoms in charge of it all. He'd met them, come away disgusted. Sleazy vacuum cleaner salesmen, their only interest lay in wringing every last dime from his children. That's how he thought of them, and that's what they were. A midnight trip to the lab made sure of that. A switch of a dozen tubes of sperm and the rest was, as they say, history. All of them, the entire first generation—his girls.

Then came little men with abacus minds. No more studies, no more science for the sake of learning. Now they must earn their keep. High priced whores without the sex, then, like nags to a glue factory, sold off for their organs. Now, Auri's suit. Two more days and he would take them away to someplace where they'll never see another tourist, another businessman. If any are still alive....

Himself he isn't worried about. They don't dare kill him. He's taken care of that. But of his girls, only fifty remain. Of which Romy is his favorite. In the empty car he smiles a bitter smile. Romy—the only one who neither hates nor fears him. To the others he offers safe haven, as much comfort and safety as his fortune can provide. And though he begs, they shy.

Though they can see what awaits them, they refuse. Though Romy appeals to them, they prefer what they know, conditioning overcoming even desire for life. They teach him yet.

His life has been satire, black comedy. Morally rudderless, he has drifted. And now, too late, he would

change it. Sighing, he sinks to lean against the back of the car. It's all dead, all over. Nothing matters, not now.

Of a sudden, the car jars, shudders to a stop between floors, instantly moving upward again at a speed that sends his insides dragging. Surprised, more than a little frightened, he watches the indicator over the door.

Never in a long life has he known an elevator to change directions in travel for no reason. What can it mean? Is he about to die?

Remembering it is best to be off the floor when impact comes, he reaches out to the rail. Then, thinking better of it, steps to the middle of the floor. What can it matter?

Let it come.

Resigned, he lets the elevator carry him where it will.

One thing haunts him.

One thing he must know.

Will he be forgiven?

FOUR

Karl sees only two.

From her knees, Romy cranes her neck to see him, "No!"

Two men look up, faces blank with surprise. The closest, a lanky Indian with long black hair, looking

like a shaman in blue business suit says, "Karl, a pleasure to see you again. "

Time frozen, Karl stares into dark eyes, doesn't like what he sees. How can he know his name? Why is he familiar? He's never seen him before, yet somehow, somewhere he must know this chocolate skinned pencil neck. How?

The shaman smiles, and things move fast. Without a word, without even a flicker of his lips, the big guy holding Romy comes at him. Eyes on the Indian, Karl raises the heavy revolver. Sighting on white skin just under the chin, where no vest will stop it, he squeezes the trigger. A small dark mole appears as the slug tears through trachea, cervical vertebra, soft mush of spinal cord, snapping his head forward. Knees buckling, he collapses on the couch like a man in need of rest. Arms at sides, eyes wide, mouth gaping with surprise, he gasps for a breath he'll never draw.

Karl turns back in time to see something move at the extreme periphery of vision. Much too late he realizes where the third man has been—the bathroom. With no time to turn, he tries ducking and fails, taking the stun gun's charge on the back of his neck.

When he can see again, move again, the room is empty except for his friend on the couch. Skin buzzing, hands prickling needles and pins, he snatches the Smith off the carpet and staggers out the door to follow. Ears ringing, he jogs to the elevator, uses the security override to bring it back up. Waiting, he leans against the wall, presses a hand over his heart to steady it. Won't slow, won't settle down. Every once in a while it misses a beat, then hurries to add an extra one to catch up. Like a kid trying to march... What a stupid way to die.

Light-headed, weak, he waits. Behind him, the lift door slides open and he almost laughs at the timing.

"Security override on floor forty, awaiting instruction," the lift recites in a lilting feminine voice.

The spell hits him and he loses his grip on the .44, letting it fall to the carpet, watching it stupidly through blurring eyes. Jesus, he can't even hold onto his gun.

"Awaiting instruction," it says, nagging.

"Wait a minute, will you, dammit?" Reaching, careful not to lose his balance, he scoops up his gun.

"Lacking authorized instruction, returning lift to service."

Blocking the door with an arm, he falls into an elevator bearing one confused old man with the kinkiest head of white hair he's ever seen.

With curious, watery eyes, he watches Karl. "I told it I wanted to go down," he says, "but it came up again. Odd. Don't you think that's odd?"

Karl nods, saving breath. The car falls, lightening them on their feet. Nothing to say to the old reprobate, probably visiting the third floor with its fifteen-year-old sisters, Karl watches the screen overhead, trying to get his vision to focus. He won't do anybody any good if he can't see.

"Nineteen..."

"What is that gun for? You a bandit?"

Smiling, Karl slides down onto his haunches in the corner of the car, hoping it'll help his vision come back. "Trying to catch one."

"Fourteen..."

Still Karl can't make out the numbers glowing overhead. The old man comes up close, takes Karl's wrist, bare fingers icy on his skin before he can pull away, and as Karl winces before the onslaught, the flood comes upon him: Regret strong as wine gone to vinegar, and a simple desire to help. That's all, nothing else, no hate, no hidden dark desires, not even the lewdness he expected. Only the knowledge and skill of a doctor.

Karl turns to look into the face of the man at his side, marveling at the simplicity he finds there. "What are you doing?"

"Ten..."

"Oh, my dear young man, you should be resting, not running about with guns and such. With an arrhythmia like yours, too much of the wrong kind of exercise could bring on an episode of fibrillation." He reads Karl's face. "You know that, then?"

How Karl wishes he could see. "I know it."

"Then why haven't you had it corrected? We have therapy for that, you know."

Karl looks at him, then back at the floor. He wants to tell him that he doesn't want any lousy gene therapy, doesn't want anybody mucking with what God gave him. Heart killed his father at fifty. Karl reckons it's as good a way as any to check out. When his heart picks up its syncopated rhythm, it doesn't scare him. In a way it's reassuring, the hand of God there beneath his ribs, letting him know he hasn't been forgotten. A reminder that any moment he might learn all there is to know.

Hunger, regardless of what they say, is not the best sauce. It's the nearness of death that hones the edge of the appetites. No, he won't have it fixed. Die he must. While he lives he'll live.

Too tired to bother telling the old man any of this, he only grunts, the big Smith unbelievably heavy in his hand.

"Ah," the old man says, smiling wanly, patting him as the missionary pats the pagan. "A religious man, eh?"

Karl wants to ask him what he's doing on the plat, why he's here with the engineered whores, the sexual freaks, the chimera, the rest. Instead he struggles to focus on the angrily flashing holo before his eyes: two blue X's flanking a red circle—his red circle. They were moving fast. A thrill of fear courses through him. They get her on a taxi and she's gone.

"Romy, they've got her," Karl says to nobody in particular, not noticing the old man stiffen. "I don't care what she is, nobody deserves that kind of pain, that kind of death."

"Romy, you said?"

"Long O—Romy. Pet name for Rosemary," he says, panting, "Germanic, I looked it up." He says it again, listening to the sound of it, liking it, "Romy."

"In trouble, you say?"

Karl isn't listening. "God, oh God, oh God, I'll be too late, too late."

"Too late? Too late for what?" Vici shakes him. "Are you listening to me? Too late for what?"

If he can just get out of this lift and out into the fresh air, Karl is sure he can make it. "Open, God damn it, open!"

"Where, where's Romy?"

Karl watches the brushed stainless door, not hearing. "I didn't know, didn't understand. They're human as we are. It's not their fault what they are, what they look like, any more than its anybody's."

Ignoring the gun, Vici takes him by the lapels of his jacket, slamming him against the wall, "What are you talking about? If Romy's in trouble, tell me where she is!"

"Quay," says the lift in the voice of a temptress. The door opens and Karl jerks free of the old man's grasp, "Look out, old man, I've got to go."

Teetering like a drunk, feeling ridiculous, he shoves off the wall and out the door. Sight shrunken to the view from a half-clenched fist, ears ringing with low blood pressure, he stumbles out into the lobby.

* * *

Like any first product, Romy's generation has bugs. There are problems with uniformity, docility, even obedience. Some learn too quickly, others not swiftly enough. Still others can't, or won't, internalize the routine of life in the Sisterhood. Some make problems for nurses and teachers. Romy is one.

Precocious, sharp-witted, often she appalls the matrons with a razor tongue. Quick to detect weakness, mercilessly she taunts. Soon after she turns ten, three of her pack of incorrigibles disappear from the dormitory. Never slow to detect a sea change, Romy at once learns to use her smile.

Through whispered rumor after lights out, she learns someone has heard screams from the infirmary and later seen stasis chambers wheeled from the medical wing trailing clouds of vapor along the floor behind them. Stenciled on the side: ORGANS/EXPEDITE. Romy doesn't know whether to believe or not, but gone her sisters are—so much is incontrovertible.

Five years later, a fifteen-year-old Romy lies awake, eyes on the swelling number of empty beds. One, stripped of sheets, now, over one row and down two files is where Chantal had slept for as long as Romy can remember. Chantal, who always asked so many troublesome questions. Chantal, who the other girls seemed to follow instinctively since they could walk. Chantal, the natural leader. Two nights ago they came for her.

Ears alert, Romy hears she is not the only Sister who does not sleep this night. Some weep. Not Romy. She has no time for tears. Too busy is she planning, digesting what she has learned. Now she knows what happens to leaders. Two days later, when they come for Lissette, she learns something else.

Lisette—always last done, always last out of the shower. Lisette the slug. Lisette the snail. From Lisette she learns it is fatal to be slow.

Barely a month later, they come again. Boots sounding alloy floor like a drum head, they come among Sisters lying naked under covers clutched to chins. Many tremble. Romy does not.

Eyes on high ceiling, curiously calm, she stares at nothing. She has nothing to fear tonight. She knows they come for her. Clearly they have been able to read her mind. They know she repeats the words morning and night feeling nothing. They have found her out. They know she hates Genie, hates it for bringing her into the world, for giving her life, for taking it away day by day. They know, they must.

Nearer come their boots as Romy listens, breath abated. Along her row of beds, two files away they come, how many she's not sure, three maybe, four. Eyes squeezed shut, she can already feel their hands on her. In the seconds that remain, she wonders if what she's heard about them is true. Romy wonders what it would be like to be caught up in those hard arms.

Without slowing, they pass. Suddenly frightened, she sits up. No, they will take no one else by mistake. They have come for her, and it's her they will have.

"Stop," she says, voice loud in the quiet dorm. Hulking shapes through the murk double back, boots setting her bed arattle. Looking up she sees them, blackness in the murk, surrounding her cot. "It's me you want."

Light-gathering headsets glowing violet, they hover over her like undercut buttes, like bulldogs, all their weight in arms and shoulders. Though it's too dark to see their faces, she knows they can see her, and self-consciously she covers herself.

The leader, the biggest among them—she can tell even in the dim—tilts his head to see the holo projected from his headset.

Why does he hesitate?

An immense hand takes up her wrist in a grip infinitely gentle, and in the gentleness she senses this hand could crush her wrist as easily as she crushes a drink box. She strains her eyes to see his face and fails. Which is this? Has she seen him work out among the sweating men below where Sisters take their walks?

With a ruby wand he reads her chip. She is ready—why doesn't he take her? She can imagine the feel of the knife as it bites into her side.

"S... sleep, little s... sister," the faceless one says, voice low as booming surf, "We've c... come for another."

Hands moving with great gentleness, he lays her back onto her pillow, drawing the blanket over her. The others milling silent as so many ghosts, he reaches out to touch her forehead with one finger. Slowly, barely teasing the down on her face, he traces downward to the tip of her nose. Backing away, together, dark hulks marked by pinpoints of violet light, they move away.

It is Rada they take. Rada who could never be anything but the best. In the dark between them she follows quietly, calmly.

But why Rada? Why should the best, the brightest, the most adept be punished?

If she learns from Chantal, from Lissette, from Rada she learns more. From this night she is careful never to let anyone know how much or how well she can do. From this night Romy is in the center of every group, near the mode of every test, every measurement. Like a small bird among thousands of its like, she strives for the safety of the middle.

Nothing she says has not been said before. Nothing she does attracts notice. In a world she views as if from a great height, she has one goal—survival. Determined to live, why she can't say, she will do what she must.

No longer able to refuse, Romy learns to give and take pleasure as her sisters commonly do. Pleasant enough, she doesn't mind it, but for her it is less excitement than a temporary reprieve from loneliness.

Always she does as expected, but often, though she never dares speak of it, she thinks about the other thing, the thing men do with women. The odd, frightening thing she has learned of by threading her way past barriers on the net set up to keep it from them. This thing, above all, puzzles her.

This linking of bodies, this attraction of positive for negative. Described in such anatomical detail in the literature, yet not really described at all. She deduces from the sighing and moaning that the activity is proposed as pleasurable. The act seems to her nothing so much as ugly, as animal.

Such a grotesque ritual this intrusion of the one into the other, what could possibly induce a male to do it? And, yet more puzzling, in a day when such trespass is unnecessary for reproduction, why should the female suffer it? Nothing, Romy is sure, could compel her to endure such base intrusion.

Once, feeling especially alone, she asks Lena if she ever thinks about men.

"Of course not," Lena's head tilts. "Why? Do you?"

Suddenly it's as if she's being tested, as if the other girls stare, straining to hear her answer. A voice inside her screams.

Romy shrugs carelessly, laughs, "No."

Lena, seeming to relax, moves easily down to rest her cheek on Romy's thigh, making her forget the fear, forget everything else but the now.

Later Romy lies mimicking sleep, pinching herself hard on the tender white place on the back of her arm, punishing herself for being so stupid, for trusting, for hoping to find another who felt the same.

Never again will she reveal herself.

Never.

* * *

Karl's not going to make it.

He rounds the corner at a dead run, boots pounding alloy grid of the quay. Dodging netpunks huddled

along the wall, he pushes himself. Past tourists straggling back from the casinos he runs, at last picking her up more than a hundred meters ahead. Romy—this freak, this lovely recom mishmash he's got to keep alive if he wants to go home.

It's going to be close. The shaman guides her, arms bound, mane clamped in a big hand, moving fast to the waiting water-taxis. From there an easy eighteen minutes to L.A., where, undisturbed, he can wring her of all the pleasure she can give.

Uh, uh, not this time.

Dizzy, heart protesting, Karl lopes, head throbbing like a melon bruised from a drop on cement. Feet skimming grillwork, he runs, ignoring his thudding heart. Too winded to yell, too stubborn to slow, feet clanking shifting plates, doggedly Karl closes.

Netpunks stare through him. Tourists shrink, clinging to the rail.

The Indian turns to nail him with cobra eyes, and though he's never seen him before tonight, Karl knows them well.

"Let her go," Karl says, voice breathy, raw, gulping air heavy with the stench of kelp.

Romy strains to see him, eyes pleading, "No, please, no more killing."

Too late he notices it's not him she's talking to.

He sees it come, shrugs, takes it glancing off his shoulder rather than on the back of the skull. The netpunks—how could he have forgotten them? One stupid move and, that quick, it's over.

He falls hard, tasting blood, gun skittering across the grid. Maybe a sap, maybe a ball bearing in a sock, either way he's just as dead. Face down on the grill, hands and feet numb, just not there, he explores the torn flesh of his inner lip with his tongue, teeth grating cold alloy.

Looming meters below: the sea. Knowing what's coming, not able to get his hands to work, Karl waits for it. Below, the sea sloshes in and out among pilings, rising and falling in bioluminescent ebb and flow. If only he could turn to sand and sift through the grate.

With boots they probe neck, crotch, kidneys. He curls up, arms and hands wrapping up his head, nose to the grate, protecting his face. Not much else matters at the moment. Fear doesn't matter, a plan doesn't. He doesn't need a plan to end up at the bottom of the shelf. And that's where he's going.

Karl sneaks a look at the one holding Romy. Just in time he covers up, the kick glancing off his jaw, slamming his teeth together.

That's the one he wants, the one he's going to hurt. He doesn't know how, but he will. With every kick he's more certain.

Face to salty grate, a thought makes him smile. Karl's wondered what it would be like to die. He's seen people die. Always thought it looked easy. Now, here over the water, it seems he was right. It doesn't hurt, not much. It's like it isn't even him down here on the grid, like it's somebody else. Maybe this is what UR's like, he thinks, sort of real, sort of not. Good enough to fool you, but only if you want to be, only if you play along.

The tall one leaves Romy to come stand with the other two while they catch their breath, and what's weird, they say nothing. Not a word. This reminds him of the other thing, the odd thing, the thing that scares him more than the idea that he's about to die.

When they touch him he doesn't feel a thing, not a thing. In forty years, that's never happened. Never. A first. Bully for him. What it means he has no inkling. Then he thinks of something. Maybe when they hit him they knocked it out of him, the talent he's spent his whole life running from. Now that would be rich. Cured just to die. For all he can tell it may be true.

Squinting, he sees Romy still right where they left her, waiting like a horse at the rail. He wants to scream at her to run, to go over the side into the sea, to go anywhere. If he could find the breath, he would. For a genius, pretty stupid.

He tries to move and pain bites him, gnawing his ribs. He realizes now he's dead, and wonders if this is how the others went—if this is how Sara went—kicked to death in the dark. One of them pins his arms with sandpaper hands, jerking him to his feet. A slap jogs the pickup behind his ear, cueing his headset and it blares full volume.

"Tonight on Uninet..." says a suit sitting suspended in space just above the rail. Riding his head, an ice-blue pompadour that could pass for an iceberg if he were submerged to his hairline. Wincing at the blare of his voice, Karl wishes he were.

"...Rumors of the occult."

An item his topic search has netted for him. How nice to be kept current as he's being kicked to death.

"It seems every time we turn around we hear of another case of supposed demonic possession, or another mysterious disappearance. These are the subjects of Morgana's commentary this evening. Morgana..."

Angel face on the body of a succubus, Morgana sits, shimmering dress of Chinese silk slit up to forever, lean legs crossed, smiling as if she's done it all, seen it all, and found it all damnably tiring.

Karl likes her right off. So unequivocally corrupt, he finds her refreshing after the pretension, the affectation he's seen the last week of his life.

"Demonic possession? Really?" she says, voice sticky as the dregs of love, "I mean, who's kidding whom? People claiming loved ones change before their eyes, become vicious strangers, as they watch. We're expected to believe this? Are we living in the age of reason or are we not?"

"Some even blame implants and biocombs for it. Now there's a non sequitur for you. Ever since the leap forward into satcoms a generation ago, religious extremists have been looking for a way to derail the advancements made in the last fifty years, and send us back to the dark ages when entertainment, communication and commerce were isolated from one another, when TVs, phones, computers, FAXs, stereos, radios, VCR's and cameras each did its own little job and that's all. Hard to believe, I know, but it's true—they want to go back. To the days before Uninet, before UR, before mankind was linked into a global village."

Now why would that be? Karl would laugh if he could spare the breath—he can't.

"It's been half a century, and this is the best they can come up with—digital demons? Oh, puh-lease! It's a joke. Look, you can believe there are dark forces afoot on the net if you want to, but don't expect to see me in line to have my implant ripped out of my skull, all right?"

She leans closer, exposing endless cleavage, "You weirdoes scuttling around in the dark, living in fear, crying Henny Penny, I've got a little message for you. Like it or not, you're living in the 21st century. You come up with Beelzebub and I'll be the first to invite him on for an interview, but until you do, just snap out of it, why don't you?"

Karl promises to do just that.

Blinking his eyes to clear them, he can see Romy at her place by the rail. In the moonlight her face looks troubled—he wonders why. Can it be she isn't enjoying the show?

The big Indian rabbit punches him in the short ribs with what feel like depleted uranium knucks. When he can breathe again, Karl discovers a couple ribs have gone south. Doesn't make sense just a few broken bones can hurt that bad. He gives not breathing a try.

Karl takes a knee in the crotch that lifts him off his feet. All three laugh as if on cue. The same laugh—one he's heard before. Karl finds out that he can hurt more than he already does as waves of nausea and cramps wash over him. The one with pig-iron hands drops him and he hits the deck hard as a sack of rolled corn. Curling up, he fights dry heaves, cold sweats, four-minute flu.

His old friend, the grid. He notices an oddly beautiful pattern to the holes punched in it, something he's never seen before. Funny what you notice when you're about to die. It's cold. It's hard. It tastes of salt and smells of urine. Not bad really. It doesn't kick and it doesn't punch. Kind of like home. If he could burrow his way into it he would.

In the dim light given off by a Coke machine rolling down the passage, he makes out a boot close to his face.

The box sings as it comes, a waist-high minstrel. "Good evening, Visitors, good evening, Sister. The lights along this section seem to have failed. Please watch your step. Would anyone care for a Coke?"

It runs up against his foot with a balloon tire. "Excuse me, sir, are you in need of assistance?"

"As a matter of fact—"

He takes a boot hard in the mouth and it goes dead. He tastes blood, feels with his tongue, finds a mouth full of teeth that can't feel back. At least they're still there.

"Help has been summoned," the vendor says merrily.

Thanks heaps and gobs.

An errant kick bounces off the box, and it backs away, siren howling, strobe flashing a painful barrage of blinding light. "Security has been summoned. It is a class two felony to assault a rolling vendor. Security has been summoned." It retreats back down the passage as the two follow after, kicking, laughing. Teeth grating against cold alloy, Karl smiles—at least it got away.

Glancing up, he sees the shaman's ankle near his face. With the other two chasing the box, it'll have to be

now. Reaching back, Karl frees Tate's clip knife from the waistband of his trousers, thumbs it open. Wrapping the ankle up in his left arm, he bears down viciously over the Achilles tendon until the serrated blade grates bone.

Hamstrung, he screams, goes down, and what's stranger yet—feels.

Fear, rage, confusion all come through from the man scrambling on the grid next to him. Karl reaches out, drags himself up his coat to look in his face. Pressing a hand to the skin of his throat, he gets him loud and hard. This is a man, all right, a scared one.

The shaman sits rocking, whining to himself, suddenly turned kitten. "Oh, God, man, I'm sorry I did that, I'm sorry I hit you, I... I didn't mean it," he says, wincing from the pain, hands raised to ward off Karl's anger. "My ankle's broken, I think. Did I fall?"

Karl can only stare. This is the same man who had Romy's hair clamped in his fist, who was about to kill her. Karl knows he's telling the truth, knows he's not a man who could ever do what he has done, what he was about to do. In the rocking of the grids beneath them Karl can feel it—the other two are coming back.

A boot comes from the right, then the left. Karl loses the knife somehow, and burying his head in his arms, watches as it tumbles down, dark water glowing where it hits. Good knife, he hates to lose it. No fear, he can get it later. He'll be going down after it.

A quick glance tells him Romy's where they left her, watching.

What in her eyes, pity, maybe?

If he didn't hurt so much, he'd laugh. Pity from her he doesn't need. Pity from a doll, from a genetic freak with angel face and a magnum intellect. The dear Sister feels sorry for the man being kicked to death under her nose. He doesn't want it, doesn't need it, can die just fine without it.

The turban squawks and rolls out of the way as the other two step on him in their eagerness to get at Karl. They ignore him where he lies mewling against the rail. If Karl lives, he'll have to give this some thought.

He doubts he'll get the chance.

He has to get up while he still can, but not now. Now he's too dizzy to move. He shuts his eyes.

Tired, so tired.

A little nap's all he needs, just a wink or two. It's comfortable on the grating. The water rises and falls around the pilings, up down, up down. How he hates this sea.

He's sick again, but has nothing left to lose. He is convinced puking with broken ribs is one of the deeper levels of hell, reserved for lawyers and churning brokers. The pain hits him and his stomach spasms again.

This he just wants over.

Why don't they just roll him off the deck and let him sleep?

• • •

For Romy, Sundays were fun days.

Sisters are allowed to visit the public entertainments offered in the great amphitheater. Whether a play, a musical, full contact jai alai or rugby, for girls barely sixteen it is always exciting. Romy enjoys drama as much as any of the other girls, but even more she loves the games. Sports allow her to watch the Brothers' bodies as they play. So hard, so big, so male, they both frighten and attract her. A guilty pleasure, it's one she dares confide to no one.

This Sunday the game is unarmed combat, first man to his knees the loser. The contenders make an even match. Both highly skilled and fit. In thong briefs, their bodies glisten as they parry, feint, dodge, lunge in synchronized ballet pugilistic. All practiced perfection, the contests end bloodlessly: a deft throw, a lightning pin. The crowd about her enjoys their Sunday, screaming themselves hoarse, tossing hair ribbons down onto the stage to the victor. Romy feels stupid but in the interest of invisibility does the same.

Now comes the big event—what Romy can't guess. Into the arena a large man is led trailing a plastic cable from one massive leg. First generation Brother, same generation as Romy herself—another of the unpredictable ones. Top-heavy as a bull, built to fight, to kill, she guesses his center of gravity at somewhere about nipple level.

She has seen his like, but never his match for size and power. Watching slab pectorals ripple over his chest as he walks, loose-limbed as a cat, she catches herself trembling. This one frightens her.

His cable two smaller Brothers loop to an eye in the center of the floor. One of the attendants offers him a flexible wand of soft tubing. Useless for defense, that she can see. It's the Aztec ritual.

She's read of it.

An enemy warrior of distinguishing bravery is not sacrificed with the other prisoners, but given a chance to live.

Heavy face impassive, the Brother ignores the offered wand. Thrust into his hand, he lets it fall. Watching, Romy is transported back half a millenium through her studies of central American civilization.

About the waist the warrior is tethered to a millstone, given a sword with feathered edge.

From her perch high in the stadium, Romy frowns as the crowd about her jeers the passive giant below. What can be coming? Surely nothing like the ritual it reminds her of.

If he can kill five of the best warriors armed with razor edged weapons, he goes free. This is his chance.

Onto the stage struts an emcee dressed in a sequined suit that glimmers under the spot. A banty cock of a man with a large voice and an irritating laugh, she's seen him before.

"Here he is!" He circles the giant as if he fears he may break free. "Here stands a monster, a genetically

bred killer! Bad to the bone, craving flesh, lusting for blood!"

It's all Romy can do not to laugh, though looking about her, the others seem taken in. To her it's obvious the Brother has no interest in doing anything at all at the moment. What can they have planned for him? What could he have done to deserve it?

"Look at him! Butchery and dismemberment on his mind. Don't be fooled by his act, this one's capable of limitless mayhem."

The emcee approaches the audience, "Is there anyone here man enough to bring this killing machine to his knees? Is there? Your weapon—the hot stick." He brandishes it over his head. Romy has seen them before, a meter long, slender length of spring plastic molded with metal filament to conduct a 20,000 volt charge from the handle.

The strutting master of ceremonies offers it in two hands to an audience enraptured. "Excaliber! Who will be our Arthur?"

Applause flares as a rawboned tourist stalks down onto the stage in neon jacket and clashing shorts, legs flashing white. Romy watches, disgusted, as he parades around the stage, wielding the prod as if it were a broadsword. Curious, her eye returns to the Brother standing as if admiring the fine cloudless sky above him, arms loose.

What might his thoughts be?

Rod high, the man in shorts circles as the Brother twice his mass stands inert. Striking out furiously with the rod, he lays it hard on the Brother's back and chest.

Romy watches, jumping with each impact.

The tourist dodges, thrusting the long foil in to spark against bare skin. The Brother takes strike after strike, muscles in arms and chest spasming as the prod discharges. Each strike leaves a small dark crescent of burnt skin. Still, he stands unresponsive.

At last, snarling with contempt, the man in shorts hurls down the prod. At this, the crowd roars its approval. Making a show of rolling sleeves up over flaccid arms, he moves in barehanded, hammering, hammering. With each slap of fist against flesh Romy flinches. Eyes upward still, the Brother neither blocks nor parries, only takes it, making no effort to cover up. All of this Romy sees, nails cutting palms, hating those around her for finding this entertainment.

"Fight!" They scream it in a voice five thousand strong. "Fight!"

The Brother lifts massive arms skyward and, following his gaze, Romy notices a flight of sea birds, pelicans she thinks, soaring overhead in a lazy delta. What can it mean? It's as if he would join them, would fly away. There in the overheated stadium she is chilled. Never has she hoped to find another who longs to leave as does she.

Arms beefy, heavy with flab, the tourist steps in to whip his fist across the bridge of the Brother's nose in a backward knuckle snap. This he follows with an elbow to throat and solar plexus, then a fist snap to groin.

Hearing the sickening contact, Romy covers her eyes only to peek through parted fingers. The Brother

staggers, drops to one knee.

Go down, go down! Biting her fist, Romy wills him to fall. Unsteadily, he rises, locks his knees, muscles of his thigh spasming like she's seen horses in vids flinch to dislodge flies. Her stomach roils as the stench of burning flesh and hair reaches her. The Brother's wounds, though not fatal, must be more painful than she can imagine, yet still he stays on his feet—why?

Sick with loathing, she looks from matrons to lab-coated observers mumbling observations to the air. No one seems the least inclined to stop it. The sisters about her enjoy themselves, as do younger Brothers gathered round the raised platform. Screaming themselves hoarse, they call to the tourist to drop him, to bring him down.

How could she ever have enjoyed these games, ever have found these howling wolves attractive?

A curious feeling rises from the pit of her stomach, a feeling she has never before experienced. Having no name for it, she only know she no longer cares whether she lives or dies, so long as the torture of the Brother ceases. Knowing full well she must do nothing, knowing she must sit quietly and observe, showing neither too much pleasure nor too little, Romy rises.

Levering herself easily over the rail, she drops lightly to the cushioned floor a dozen feet below.

Stop. She must stop. This is insane. An internal voice hammers at her, a voice that has kept her alive. Does she want to die? Is that what she wants?

Ignoring it, she moves through the stands, gravity drawing her down the sloping ramp to the stage. What will happen to her she knows intimately. She will be noticed, singled out. She will lose her precious invisibility and, with it, her insides. Yet down she strides.

Passing between screaming boys, packed tightly shoulder to bare shoulder, she crams herself between them, climbs the raised platform. Brother barely an arm's length from her, she can see his wide lip beaded with perspiration. Thighs triple the girth of her waist, shoulders far too wide to encircle with her arms, the Brother waits, eyes on the sky. The tourist retreats, unhappy to no longer be the focal point of the crowd.

Facing him, Romy realizes all at once what she has done. Looking up, she sees matrons motion, calling her back. Never are sisters allowed to mingle with Bothers. She has undone all she ever promised herself, thrown her life away. Slowly, so slowly, as the crowd roars its delight at this outré, this never before seen diversion, the Brother's powder blue eyes fall to her face. In them there is curiosity—and compassion she has never seen.

"Give them what they want, go down. Don't you know you're being a fool?"

Nose running blood, lip split, burns and welts spread over a table chest, his eyes smile with irony, "As m...much a fool as y...you?"

Behind her she hears the other, and suddenly afraid, she whips around, staying between the two as he moves. The amphitheater explodes with applause, with screams, with the roar of approval, and two women in sequined nothings come to lead the disappointed tourist away to his prize. Not understanding, Romy turns to find him on a knee behind her. In his eyes she sees he's laughing. She doesn't have to ask why.

She knows.

Not for the pain, for her—because she asked.

She opens her mouth to say something and sees his face harden. The crowd's voices rise in a crescendo as he reaches for her. Taking her by the front of her tunic, he jerks her off her feet. Romy thinks that, having been so stupid, it serves her right to die.

Before she can react she hits a shoulder hard as alloy, losing the breath in her lungs. Nimbly, he catches her in an arm, and she sees the tourist come at them with the rod. Carrying her as if she were a part of his hip, he leaps like a huge cat, chopping the wand from his hand, wrapping the other's arm in his own. With an easy wrench, he snaps it back at the elbow. Then, planting a foot in the center of the startled man's chest, he sends him catapulting over the rail. Now, amphitheater eerily silent, he sets her gently on her feet, releasing her—but not with his eyes.

Face heavy, coarse, shaved head seemingly rooted to the base of his shoulders, he is uncomely a man as she has seen. But his eyes.... In them is kindness she has never known. Even as the matrons come for her, he holds her eyes with his. Nothing does he say, but reaches out with a finger thick as a root. Eyes smiling through deep sadness, through hopelessness, he brushes her skin lightly from the center of her forehead right down to the tip of her nose. When he speaks, his voice is a whisper, "S... sleep, little s... s..." He breathes. "Little sister."

Truth dawning, as matrons lead her away, she strains to keep him in sight as long as she can.

It's him.

* * *

The one with the stevedore grip jerks Karl back on his feet, drawing his head back hard by the hair.

Karl fights to keep his chin down so he can't snap his neck, but he's tired. Hands in his hair, knee in his back, they win. A blade snaps open with a frosty snick. He knows what's coming. Again he notices he's getting nothing through their hands. Even autistics have a whirlpool of emotion swirling inside them—not these two. He'd like to know why, knows he never will.

"Any last words, Karl? A lecture perhaps, concerning morality, concerning the value of life?" He prods Karl under the chin with a needle point blade. "Come on, what do you say? Let's hear an epistle on the sanctity of the law, shall we? You're an expert on that, aren't you?"

Karl blinks, trying to clear his eyes of sweat, of blood. He can't see too well, but from what he can, he's sure he's never seen this guy before. It doesn't add up. Not only does this psycho know him, he doesn't seem to like him very much.

"You know me," Karl manages to say.

That laugh again. Where has he heard it?

"Oh, yes, I know you."

He can see he wants a reaction out of him, wants him to ask how he knows his name. He won't do it, won't give him the joy. It can't matter, now, anyway. "So do it, hotshot."

He takes Karl's chin in his hand, draws back the blade. The skin on Karl's throat crawls as he waits for it.

"Can you feel it, Karl? The steel biting you, the ice as hot muscle gapes open to air? Use your imagination."

Who are you, Karl wants to ask, how do you know me? But breathing's too hard and there's no time anyway. He takes one last breath, wincing at the ache in his side. One should be enough to last him the time he has. Dying should be painless. He'll tell them in a minute, anybody wants to know.

Very near, a plate shifts.

The knife freezes mid-swing.

They aren't alone.

* * *

Quietly Romy follows.

To the labs.

To the place where Sisters go and do not return.

Hands trembling, a tech in white leads her into an office with carpeting the color of coral. There she is left alone with a man who sits watching her over tented hands.

He nods her to a chair, eyes never leaving her face. She complies, wondering why she is not simply led to one of the tables in the operating theater and strapped down.

Why is there only this one old man with eyes that seem to see through her? Where are the others, the teks that will open her?

Somehow, no longer frightened, she waits to see if he will speak. When he does not, she turns her attention to the room. All very ordinary but for along the long windows overlooking the sea. There, in a long row, are the strangest things she has ever seen.

Trees impossibly small, terribly old and wizened, they lean as if tired. Her fate forgotten, she smiles, straining to see from her chair, not daring to get up as she had been told to sit.

"You like them?"

She nods, trying a smile only to have it shatter. She must be careful, must not say the wrong thing, must not anger this important man with heavily-veined hands. As if it matters now.

"Go ahead, have a look."

Hesitant, she cocks her head, not sure she understands, unwilling to misstep.

"Go on."

She rises, and warily as a cat on glass, goes to them.

From his desk he watches her as she examines each tree, running a finger lightly over furrowed bark, delicate leaves, hanging pea-size apples. Thrilled, she looks back timidly, curiosity overcoming fear. "What are they?"

Behind his hands he smiles, "Bonsai, potted trees, some four times your age."

"They're...." She turns back, searching for the word, not finding it. "They're like old men, aren't they?"

Again, she thinks she may have seen his face change.

"Yes, very much like them."

Returning to sit primly on the edge of her chair, head erect, she takes a deep breath. She is ready. "Am I to die now?"

"No," he says, wrinkles forming around tired eyes. "What on earth gave you that idea? I want to talk to you, that's why you're here, to talk. I don't want you to be afraid, don't be. Nothing will happen to you, I promise you that."

She listens, not believing a word, "I'm not afraid."

"What gave you that idea?"

"Chantal, Lissette, the others, the ones who were taken away, they were killed."

"No, no, no, they were sent away. This isn't the only group of Sisters, you know. There are a thousand of you spread all over the world. We often shuffle them, to see the effects on interaction."

"Oh," she says, chagrined by her simplicity. "I didn't think of that."

"What I'd like to know, Romy, is why you did what you did today."

Hands clasped tightly on her lap, she looks down at them wondering what to say, how much to tell. Does she dare tell him the truth? Is it all a trick?

"I tried not to, tried to sit and watch, even closed my eyes. I couldn't stand it."

In an immense chair he leans back, hands clasped together over his chest, "What couldn't you stand?"

"The way they hurt him, the way he did nothing but stand and let himself be burned. I had to stop it."

"Even though you thought you would be killed if you did?"

Afraid she has said too much, she adds nothing.

The man thinks for a moment, then seems to decide. "If I were to allow you to see this..." he consults a tablet on the desk, "...Willy, would you care to?"

She nods, not believing. She had been sure he would be taken away too.

"You know he's dangerous."

Blankly, she looks at him. What can he mean? "Dangerous?"

"He may not look it, but he's one they made for killing, that and hard work. He's got it in him but he's a strange one, doesn't follow the map, believes it's wrong, he says. Let's see, I was just reading about him. He was one of the best in his generation, a real talent for it, but not too long ago he changed."

Desperately, she wonders if he expects her to reply. "How strange," is all she can think to say.

He smiles, "You are a surprising creature, Romy. Not at all what we expected either, are you?"

How much does he know? How much has he guessed, about Sisters, about males—has he guessed that? "I serve the sisterhood well, I hope."

That he waves away, "You can forget about that claptrap with me. And don't be afraid. I'll see that nothing happens to you. I promised you that, didn't I?"

Not reassured, wanting only to get away, not daring hope, she squirms on her perch.

Vici rises, very tall, very thin. Now, for the first time, she feels fear as he comes around his desk to lean back against it, long legs stretched out in front of him, "We still don't know what makes us the way we are. We have so much to learn. Will you help me learn why you and Willy are different?"

Eyeing the door, she nods, still not believing she's allowed to leave. "Can I go now?"

He smiles. "Of course."

She's up and moving for the door in an instant. When he speaks she is only halfway there. "Romy?"

Knowing it's all been a lie, that she will be taken and strapped to the tables, she whirls, betrayed. "What?"

"Would you..." he motions at the bonsai, "...like to learn to make, to tend trees like these yourself? I could show you."

Eyes narrowing, she senses a trap. "You would?"

"Yes, you and Willy too, if you can satisfy me he can be trusted. I have a potting shed and beds on the roof," he points. "In the morning say, day after tomorrow?"

Torn to her core, she opens her mouth to speak, the desire to flee balancing her yearning for the wonders lining the glass.

"They could be yours," he says, offering a hand. "Here, come, choose one for yourself, a gift for your helping me understand you. Come and pick."

She shrinks. This is too much. She cannot, will not pick one. How can she? She owns nothing of her own. "But..." she says, struggling with herself, with her fear, "I have nowhere to keep it."

"You may keep it on the roof with mine."

Her resistance fails. "You're sure?"

"I am."

Swallowing, she decides instantly, laying a finger on an old yew, more than half dead, branches straining against imaginary wind. "This one."

This seems to please him. "Good choice, the most valuable of the lot, nearly a century old. Oh, yes, Romy, you are very different. I have much to learn from you." He leads her to the door, "I'll call for you, and you'll come, won't you?"

Confused, she examines his face. "You're... asking me?"

He opens the door, stands back out of her way, "I'm asking you, yes. Will you?"

Never as long as Romy can remember has she been asked to do anything.

Ordered, yes.

Never asked.

A new feeling—one she likes.

Moving quickly, still suspecting a trick, she bolts, casting her answer behind her as she slips away, "I'll come."

* * *

Under Karl's feet the grid shifts as behind him, cat quiet, someone moves.

Vertebral cartilage rends with a snicking crackle as the netpunk pinning his arms dies. Karl can imagine the icy tingling, imagine the confusion as he falls, not understanding why, only knowing he can no longer breathe, no longer feel, no longer speak. He slams to the deck and free, Karl wavers.

The blade man's hand is snatched and his arm broken over a knee by a hulk in glowing green jumpsuit. Without a breath of hesitation, he lifts him, flings him over the rail.

Knees buckling, Karl falls face first on the grill. The decking by his face gives as if a great animal stands over him. Much too tired to move, to care, he awaits what comes. What stands over him plucks the dead man off the grid. A distant splash. Circles of phosphorescence spread as he hits water, tossed like a doll

over the rail. Steeling himself, Karl takes the breath he didn't think he was going to need, and at once regrets it.

The man Karl hamstring scrambles for the ladder, a whimpering seal calf fleeing the club. Knowing it's over, too frightened to look back, he claws his way along the grid. Karl sees a hand clamp down on his leg, and he's gone, cartwheeling over the rail. His Dopplering scream ends with a splash. This one Karl wishes well. Once the madness left him he didn't seem so bad. He may live—if he swims.

He's next. He just hopes he misses his buddy when he hits the water.

From the corner of his eye, Karl sees Romy, cloak clasped about her, looking much better than she has any right to. Grid cold against his face, he watches, strangely unconcerned as two very large boots come back for him. From his angle of vision he can see the quay give under the man's mass. A hand in his hair lifts his head off the deck. A second takes his chin. Back flexed painfully, he can do nothing but wait for the wrench he knows is coming.

"Willy, no!" Romy says as she might correct a beloved dog for digging among the iris. "Bring him, and be careful. He was trying to help me."

Karl knows the voice, wants it to come again, needs it to. The old man from the elevator turns him gently. Karl wonders why he's here.

"You all right, my boy?"

Is he all right? He's hunkydory.

Karl's heart jumps the track. Thumping a click a minute, four times a second. Hits him hard as a freight. He can't answer, can't speak, can't move.

"Wait," Vici says, "something's wrong." He lays a cold hand against his neck, "He's fibrillating, we've got to get him to the clinic." He looks at Romy. "Unless..."

Vision narrowing, Karl lies on his back in what seems a well, way to the world of the living irising closed above him. Then she is there, face close over him, eyes swallowing him. In an instant he guesses what she's up to.

God, don't let her touch him. The last thing he wants is this freak touching him.

He tries to speak, to scream but can only watch as she reaches down, her cloak soft as cloud whispering across his open hands on the cold deck. Romy unzips his jacket, yanks wide his shirt, sending weak thrills of feeling through his skin—peace, calm, caring. Then, eyes on his, she presses hands flat against his chest, and in a rush quick as a fall into water he knows all there is to know.

The yearning, the need to live, the despair of knowing she won't, of being less than human, less than woman. And something else—recognition, completion of a puzzle, the missing piece falling to place unquestionably, the lone vacancy in a jigsaw making a whole. What it means he doesn't know, but through her hands and in her eyes it's plain.

She's puzzled, frightened, filled with desire, with longing.

Why? For whom?

Romy seems to shake herself and over his heart there grows a tingling, a vibration, a probing of current. It hurts.

"Ah," he says, mouth wide, "ah!" He jumps, the heels of his shoes clanging the grill, falling back from a contraction. Too quick for fear, he's better. Heart calming, settling into a normal rhythm, it's over.

Tentatively, as if ashamed, she jerks her hands away, leaving Karl wanting them back. "You're better, now," she says, backing away.

"Well done, now security's on the way," the old man says, taking her arm, pulling her off him. "We've got to go. Willy, haul him up to my floor."

Romy hesitates, "Wouldn't my room be better?"

Karl feels their boots through the deck.

"There then, but let's move, shall we? Willy's just tossed three men over the rail."

At her nod, Willy hoists him over a shoulder and red hot hayhooks sear their way into his chest as broken ribs grate.

* * *

On Vici's say-so, a sixteen-year-old Romy is allowed into Willy's cell.

A white room, perhaps three meters by five, absolutely bare, lit starkly from above by a single skylight. In a far corner, water drizzles from a hole in the ceiling into a larger one in the floor. Simplicity.

Willy hunkers, back to the wall, elbows on knees. Feet bare, fingers linked, eyes closed, head back, he rocks to an inward rhythm.

As the door slides shut behind her, she begins to wonder if she is wrong about him. Can he be as dangerous as they say? What then?

She turns back, peering out through the glass to the empty hall beyond. They have left her alone with him. If he should crush her it will serve her right. With a sigh she turns to find him watching.

Back to the door she squats.

"They didn't se... se..." he says, voice a husky whisper.

Easily, she guesses what he wants to say. "Send me away, no."

A minute passes, maybe more, Romy can't tell. Through the wall, she hears a mumbling, a scream, banging, then quiet.

"W... w...." He struggles for some seconds, then stops, breathes, tries again, "Why are you here?"

"That's a stupid question. To see you."

"So...." Lazily, he shrugs broad shoulders, "You ha...have."

Romy swallows as the slap sinks in. She doesn't understand him. After the other day, now he acts this way. Can it be he doesn't want to see her? "Shall I leave?"

He glances up, then back down at his ankles, shakes his head no.

Small victory, but it doesn't answer the ice in his manner. What can she have done to deserve it? "I'm here to ask you something."

"Wha..."

"Dr. Vici says that if you can satisfy him you won't hurt anyone, you can go free."

"W...where sh.... Where should I go?"

This isn't what she meant to say at all. "You shouldn't go anywhere. What I meant was that you could come to work with me on Dr. Vici's floor in the tower."

A broad brow gathers itself into furrows. "Why?"

"To help him learn about us, about all of us, about why we're different."

He opens one pig eye, shuts it again, "I would s... s... see you?"

"Every day."

"You w..."

Knowing what he's about to say, Romy waits.

"You w..."

"I want it."

"You know n... n... nothing about m..."

"About you?" Oh, yes she does. She has seen his eyes, has seen him suffer without hurting back. She knows all she needs to. "Yes I do."

"Do you?" He smiles, offering a hand. "D..." He struggles to force out the word, whole body working. "Do you know what it's like to t...to t..."

Her stomach wrenches to hear him fight so. "Take your time, I'm not in a hurry."

"To take a man's life with the flick of a h... of a h..."

"A hand?"

He nods. "Do you know what it's like to j..." He stops, breathes slowly, "To jerk a man's t... A man's trachea from his th..."

She swallows. "Throat?"

"Do you know what it is to ac...to ac..." Frustrated, he slams a palm to the floor. "To ac..." He bellows his frustration, then forces himself to slow, to breathe, "To acquire a taste for it?"

His eyes focus on her. Romy has the impression of looking into the eyes of a predator temporarily sated with blood.

"I d..."

So excruciating is it to listen to him struggle, she finishes for him. "You do."

He nods.

Romy swallows, wondering how long it would take to get anyone to open the door. Way too long. "But, you're kind. I saw that, I saw you at the amphitheater, I know that much about you."

He broods. "Am I?"

Confidence slipping, she feels blood rush to her neck, and knows she must be coloring, pale skin betraying her. "Yes, I know you are."

"Wh...what if you're wrong?" He slips to his feet easily, as if for him gravity were held in abeyance. Three leopard-like paces and his face is centimeters from hers.

Nothing hesitant about the way he moves. Nothing at all.

Romy, trembling, not willing to be intimidated, keeps her eyes on his, "Maybe you should tell me, what? And while you're at it, maybe you could tell me why you're trying so hard to scare me."

He hesitates, stunned, returns to his spot against the wall, slides back down into a crouch. "Am I?"

Encouraged by his reaction, she pushes on, "You know you are. Why?"

"And am I s... s...?"

"Succeeding?" She smiles, looks him in the eye. "You are."

His mouth twitches at the corner, "You're h...honest."

"I see no reason not to be, do you? What is it you're so afraid of?" She rises, hunkers down in front of him, searches his face. "What?"

Eyes closed, he opens his mouth, bull neck straining. "I d..." He strains to say it, vein standing out at his temple.

"You don't what?"

"I don't want to h... to h..."

She understands, but she doesn't believe. "Hurt me? You don't want to hurt me?"

As if ashamed, Willy nods.

Reaching out hesitantly, Romy runs a hand over the bumps on his skull, "What makes you think you would do that?"

Mouth wide, he strains to speak, face pained. "It's all I know. H...how can I resist doing what I was m... m..."

"Made to do? But you already have, I saw you."

"And did you s..." He sucks a lungful of air. "Did you s...?"

"I saw." Romy heard they'd had to airlift the tourist to L.A. with a fractured arm, pelvis, cervical vertebra. They said he would be paralyzed. The thought had both revolted and thrilled her. "You did what you had to, that's all." Romy, conscious of being so close within reach of those deadly arms, deadly hands, reaches out to lift his gross face, hand rasping on his beard. "Look at me, now. Look at me."

He opens his eyes and as quickly, shuts them.

"I said look at me."

As if he fears her more than he had the tourist with the rod, he squints.

Hands on his face, she tells the wonderfully ugly man before her something she has never told anyone. "I'm not afraid of you, Willy, I trust you. Do you hear me? I trust you. I know you won't hurt me. You understand?"

The words strike him as blows. His mouth falls open. His chin trembles. "Y..."

Romy nods, smiling, as her vision blurs, "Yeah, that's right. I see the good inside you. I see it, I do."

He flinches as if she had struck him, turns away.

"Will you come? Will you come be my friend?"

Body taut, face contorted into grotesque mask, jaw clenched, he hides his face in the crook of a massive arm in a violent attempt at control.

Puzzled by his reaction, Romy doubts he has understood. When between his boots droplets spot concrete, she sees she's wrong. "Oh, Willy..." With a hand she reaches out to stroke his head, presses her brow to his. "Will you?"

So slowly she nearly misses it, he turns one hand palm up.

Seeing she has her answer, Romy's heart leaps in her chest. Into this claw, this killing tool, she lays her hand. Now she watches muscles in his forearm work as fingers the girth of her wrist close over her hand

with a grip that wouldn't harm a sunning swallowtail.

Her throat constricts. "Oh, Willy."

No longer is she alone.

* * *

Karl wakes.

Forcing open gritty eyes, he sees what looks like what might be morning. Carefully, he turns a head that feels as if it may come off.

Not his cubicle. Ten times the size of it. Never seen it before. Every horizontal surface occupied by Bonsai. He can feel he's not alone. Straining his neck, he sees Romy. In a chair by the door she nests, legs folded under her, book cradled in the crook of an arm. Waiting for something. Maybe for him to die.

Revulsion washes over him. Damn her for looking like she does. Damn her for seeing through the problem so easily when he couldn't.

He watches her read, unaware he's awake. He remembers reading her when she slowed his heart on the quay. She read pure, pristine, guileless as a child. Like no woman he's ever touched. Dizzy, head aching, he gives up, presses hands to his eyes. None of it makes any sense.

Looking up, she notices him, closes her book. "So you're back." Slowly, as if she's a little afraid, she comes to stand at the foot of the bed. He can't imagine what she can have to fear from him, but that's the impression she gives. "It took long enough, it's nearly ten. How do you feel?"

Not liking the feeling of her standing over him, he tries again to rise, "If I didn't have to breathe, I'd be fine."

"Don't try to get up. Vincent says you won't be well enough for that for another day at least."

Propping himself on his elbows, he works on focusing his eyes. When he does, he wishes he hadn't. She looks better than he remembers. "Vincent...who's he pitch for?"

Puzzled, she frowns. "Pitch?"

A literal mind. "Who is he?"

"Vincent Vici. You must have heard of him," she says, looking at him as if he'd never heard of milk. "He's the one who went to get Willy, who made sure you were taken care of."

Her voice is like... what? He can't decide. Husky, dark as dusk, it's a voice he wouldn't mind hearing more of. "Willy? what is this, War and Peace?"

"I'm sorry. You don't know Willy, do you? He's waiting outside. I'll introduce you."

"Wait a minute." In Karl's mind something clicks. "The Dr. Vici— that was the old man on the lift?"

She nods, "Is there another?"

"No, I mean I don't know.... Look, we've got to talk."

She turns, "Sorry, I don't have time. I just wanted to stay long enough to say thank you for what you did yesterday for Kara and Lia."

Sitting up, he raises open hands, "For who?"

"The two Sisters you forced the tech to help."

Anger rises in him. "And what about what I did for you?"

She shrugs, saying nothing.

"Wait, wait," he says, confused. "If I hadn't done what I did you'd be in pieces now." He holds up two fingers, "Twice now you'd be in pieces. I just about am myself."

She props a hand on her hip, "Maybe next time when someone asks you to mind your own business you will."

Karl can't believe what he's hearing. If he could move he'd think about slapping her. "You're welcome."

She tilts her head, "Oh, I'm supposed to thank you for saving the day, huh? Okay," she says as she moves toward the door, "thanks."

"Wait a minute, come back here."

She frowns in puzzlement, "Why, you don't even know who I am."

"Yeah, Romy, I do."

At the door she stops, turning slowly. "If you're another of my mother's men here to convince me to come away, to testify for her, you won't last any longer than they did."

Karl gets his feet on the floor, pain in his ribs like a dive in an ice water lake. "I'm nobody's man."

"Then what are you?"

He reaches for his clothes. "Somebody who'd rather be somewhere else."

Frowning, she crosses arms across her chest. "Then why stay?"

So far he's doing much better than he'd dare hope. She's still here and they're making noises at each other. "I want to go home, I've got to get you off the plat."

The hint of a smile plays over her eyes as they run over the bandages spanning his chest, behind his ear. "So you're here to protect me?"

"Yeah," he says, knowing how ridiculous it must sound. He's got to get the hell out of this bed. "That's right."

"And who's going to protect you?"

He's got no comeback for that one. He never could argue worth a damn.

Again, she turns for the door, "I've already got all the protection I need."

Gingerly, he slips into his shirt, unsure about how he'll work the pants. "Do you? What about last night?"

From the way her eyes flare he can see he's hit a tender spot.

"Little boys playing with your guns.... You disgust me, you know that? Nobody asked you to interfere, to rush in shooting, killing."

He's not sure he follows. "Would you have preferred I hadn't shown up?"

For a minute she says nothing, then she laughs, face serious. "Who sent you?"

"Auri sent me. She's worried about you."

"Forty years too late, let her worry." Eyes the color of deep, clear water narrow suspiciously, "Why me?"

Karl's fed up with her, and he's having a hell of a time doing up his shirt one-handed. "Ask her yourself."

She lays a hand on the door. "I've got to go."

He slips on his trousers. "I'm coming with you."

She laughs as if she finds him amusing in a tired sort of way, as if she's seen too many of his type and no longer takes them seriously. Coming back, she smiles doubtfully, "What you're going to do is get back in bed." She reaches out to press him back, robe opening to expose her neck, and he traps her wrist in his hand.

"Don't," he says. He doesn't read her, now. Somehow he's able to hold back the flow when it's he who does the touching. If he wants he can. Like any callus, this skill of his built up over time with a thousand small hurts. "Don't touch me."

As if she's touched hot iron, she slips from his grasp leaving him not quite sure how she did it. Face shut tight as a door, she steps back, "I understand. You'd be surprised how many people feel that way, but I don't blame them. In their place I'm sure I'd feel the same." She says it as if she's discussing how most people prefer their coffee. She slips into her jacket.

Okay, so he's a jerk. He doesn't want to hurt—her or anybody. "It's not you." He runs hands over tender ribs, probing painful spots, gauging their depth. "I don't like to be touched, by anybody. It's just the way I am. Been that way a long time. Nothing personal."

"Of course not," she says, face bitter.

She has a way of keeping him off balance. "Look, I mean what I say."

Her face changes as she seems to realize he's telling the truth, "Never? By anyone?"

The question catches him unprepared. He answers with the truth. "Anyone." He wonders why he's telling her things he doesn't tell anyone. Wonders if it's because, not being real, she won't care, won't understand, most of all won't pity.

When she speaks, her eyes seem to see through him, through the wall and out across the sea. "That must be very lonely."

He sees he's wrong about her—maybe about everything.

"I'm late, I've got to go."

Back turned, he struggles with his fly, "Where? You can't go out there. They're not kidding around. Is that what you think, they're kidding? I need to get you back to L.A. where they can protect you until you testify."

"And what makes you think I want to?"

Her answer blindsides him, leaving him sputtering. He'd never considered she might not go along with Auri's plan, might have ideas of her own. Do near-humans have ideas? Zipped, he turns. "You're saying you don't?"

She ignores the question. "I can't leave now."

She's at the door. Desperately, he stalls, moving as he talks, "Why not, why can't you?"

"I have things to do."

He leads her to the bed, sits her down. "Wait here a minute, I'm coming with you."

"No, you're not."

"I thought Sisters were supposed to be great company. All you do is argue."

She looks like she'd like nothing better than to kill him herself. "At half million an hour we are. I wasn't aware you'd paid." She rises. "Anyway, I'm done with that." She moves for the door.

He looks for his gun, doesn't find it. "I need my gun and I'm ready."

She laughs, shaking her head in amusement, "For what, to protect me? You can barely dress yourself."

Moving fast, ribs aching with every step, he cuts her off, "You can wait a minute."

"I said I was in a hurry."

"So wait anyway."

Romy smiles, pokes him lightly in the ribs with a finger. He winces at the unpleasant surprise.

"Lucky for you I don't push people around the way you do, isn't it." She jabs him again, harder this time, pain jolting him. It's a moment before he can breathe.

"Oh..." She coos. "Does that hurt the big tough guy?"

She reaches out and he slaps her hand away, backing, "Knock it off."

Working her way easily around his guard, she prod, taunting, "Why don't you hit me, why don't you shoot me like you shot that man yesterday, huh? Bang, bang goes the big tough guy's big tough gun, isn't that right?"

She reaches out again and he catches her wrist, feeling bones flex under his grip, seeing the pain in her eyes. "Stop it."

Mouth turned up in a bitter smile, face close to his, she whispers. "Oh, yes, that's the way we like it, isn't it? We like hurting don't we? especially women, though I'll bet you're a real tiger with children and dogs, too."

Startled by the voltage, the ugliness of her disdain, he lets her go. Let her think what she will, he won't deny it. Let her hate him, in the end it makes no difference. "I can't let you go alone."

Hand on hips, patience spent, she sighs, "Look, whatever your name is—"

"Karl."

"Yeah, okay, fine, I've been up twenty-four hours watching you sleep. And let me tell you, I've had more fun. I'm tired, too tired to play any more." Over his shoulder, she calls out for Willy.

Behind Karl, the door swings wide, and he turns to see. Loose jointed, moving silently as a big cat in high grass, a big man slips through. Irresistible as dew, he moves across the rug to flank Karl. Long arms hanging, he radiates power as a glow tube sheds light.

Karl guesses his mass at maybe one and a quarter kilo, but he's light on his feet, as if his short, thick legs are spring steel. Head capping massive trapezius, his chin leads in a bull neck to a wide chest. Mouth open, guileless, ears like two delicate pink camellias against the stark white flesh of the side of his head. Eyes, small and delicately lashed as a pig's, watch Karl.

Romy reaches out to lay an arm on Willy's shoulder. "Willy would kill you if I asked him to, wouldn't you, Willy?"

The eyes move to her face then back to Karl, not to his eyes, to him, his body, all of him, sizing him, weighing him, gauging pressure points, weaknesses, the best fulcrum from which to break an arm, an ankle, a neck. Karl knows the look. He'd bet his life he would. Hell, yes. In the shake of a lamb's tail.

Willy stands poised on his toes, left leg jumping with nervous energy, on edge, wound tight, ready to spring.

Karl swallows, watching his eyes, feeling naked. He's too close to reach for the .44, even if he had it. He doesn't. Nothing else within reach, nothing, not even a chair, and what good would it do if there were? Willy could take him easily—one kick in the short-ribs, one jab would turn him to jelly.

"But, you see," she says, voice cold, condescending, "I'm not like you. You want to know the truth, I wish you'd never found me last night. If you hadn't, it would all be over now. No one had to die."

Karl doesn't move, knowing that right now, within reach of those hands he's as close to death as he's been in his life. "No one but you."

Romy sighs, exasperated, "You keep saying that like it matters."

Through new eyes, he looks at her, "It doesn't?"

On the way out she turns. "Don't hurt him, just keep him from following me." She looks Karl in the face, "He's a very sick man, Willy. He needs his rest."

Willy nods, slate grey eyes on Karl.

Romy shuts the door behind her.

And now it's just the two of them.

* * *

Under Willy's wary eyes, Karl paces.

He's got to get out of here. "Don't like me much, do you, Willy."

Nothing.

What's to lose? He may as well try, see what happens.

Karl heads for the door. Shoulders loose as a wrestler about to make a take-down, Willy blocks his way. Karl goes back to his pacing.

He imagines what it would feel like to be grasped in those arms, cracked ribs grating. He's got to try.

"Okay, Willy, you heard what she said. She doesn't think it matters if she dies. I got to ask you something. Are you more afraid of doing what she's told you not to, or of letting her die?"

Still he says nothing, but his eyes show he's listening. Karl hopes that's a good thing, hopes it sincerely. "I thought so. Okay, then you and I need to talk." Karl realizes how little he knows about this guy. Not knowing how or where to start, he sits. "I've never known anyone like you, or her either and I never thought I would."

Willy nods.

Voilà—communication. Karl knows what comes next, though he isn't too hot on it. "You think you could get me one of those pain pills she left for me?"

Willy returns with a little blue pill in his hand. Watching his face, Karl dreads touching him. He doesn't want to see life through porcine eyes. What a curse it is, this gift. What a repulsive talent—right now one

he needs. Reaching out, Karl picks the tablet off his palm and spirals down the maw of a whirlpool.

A chamber with darkened periphery. At the center an alter lit by a shaft of sunlight angling in from a slit in the ceiling to illuminate a sleeping Romy. Face serene, preternaturally lovely, a robe of unbelievably sumptuous indigo velvet drawn primly to her chin, white hands folded like birds over her breast, she sleeps. About her the stone floor lies littered with corpses. At her side stands Willy. Karl makes out someone hiding in shadow beyond reach of the light and recognizes himself.

So, for Little John, here, Romy's the sun and moon. It doesn't surprise him, he's seen it before. Throne rooms, he calls them, places in people's minds where everything they value, everyone they love or hate has its place. This is Willy's. No one else, no other masters, only she, the rest of the world against them, Karl lurking in the gloom. He thinks he understands. Willy hasn't made up his mind yet whether to add him to the bone pile, that's all.

Jerking his hand away, Karl breaks the spell. "Thanks." He downs the pill, rising to search the room for his gun. "As I was saying, you and I are going to be friends."

Broad brow furrowed, Willy watches him from a big easy chair by the door. "W...why's that?"

Karl hesitates at the words, the first he's heard him speak. It's a good question. Considering the way Willy thinks of him, one not easy to answer. He checks the last drawer, still nothing, then ducks into the bathroom and finds it in a wicker hamper. Gun and shoulder rig tightly wrapped with his headset in the bottom under some damp towels. Thank God she didn't get rid of it.

"Why?" Karl says from the bath, "I'll tell you why." Somebody didn't want him to find it—he can guess who. Karl slips into the rig, heavy revolver slapping hard against a broken rib, feels better at once with the weight back under his arm. Checking the cylinder, he finds he's still down one. "Because we want the same thing, that's why."

Pulling one round off a strip under his left arm, he fills it, snaps it shut. Coming out of the john, he finds Willy where he left him. "We both want to keep her alive, don't we?"

Willy nods, a movement so slight he might have missed it. So far he's got him. Now to see if he can keep him.

"Okay, we're together on that, then. You know about the murdered Sisters, right? You know how they died? They were raped, strangled with their own hair, very slowly. It took a long time. Long enough for the blood vessels in their eyes to swell and rupture. Can you imagine what that must be like, dying like that?"

Karl can see he's got him. "Imagine coming up through water, lungs bursting for air, and just as your mouth hits the surface, being jerked back down under. Over and over until finally you stop fighting. They were conscious, they knew what was happening to them, and they knew they were going to die. You want Romy to die that way?" He watches Willy's face. "Do you?"

He doesn't answer. He doesn't have to. Karl can tell by looking he's getting it. "Okay...." He leads him. "Last night they nearly had her. Now, with you and I both here, who's going to make sure they don't do better tonight, huh, who?"

Still Willy is silent. Karl wonders what he thinks, or if he does. Patience evaporating, he gets up to search for his shoes. "Come on Willy, make a decision. I have. I'm laying all my cards on the table. If I

ever find my shoes and jacket, I'm going out that door. And though I'd love to wrestle you for it, I don't have time. I don't know how much of this you can follow, but if anything happens to her, I lose everything I've got.

"Now that may happen, but not because I'm sitting here on my ass. Now I know in a fair fight you could tear me in two, but I can't afford to play fair right now." Karl peeks under the bed, "Aha!" He reaches under to pull out his shoes, sits on the edge of the mattress to slip them on. "I know you could tell she doesn't much like me, and, well, I'll tell, you, Willy, I don't much like her either. But I think she needs us right now, don't you?"

Does he see a change somewhere down deep under that slab face? He hopes he's not kidding himself.

"Now," he says, taking out the revolver, "you know about guns, don't you, Willy?"

"I know."

"Good, because no matter how good you are with those hands of yours, this is better. This is a .44 magnum—not the biggest handgun by any means, not the most capacity, not the most accurate. Just an old six shooter, but big enough." He opens the cylinder, pulls out a round, holds it up for Willy to see. "See this? Ice cream cone upside down, right? It's not lead, it's bronze. The shape, well, worst of both worlds, I guess you could say. Penetration on everything but the new vests, and hydrostatic shock like a hollow point."

Willy watches, face blank.

"You following this, Willy? I'm telling you this for a reason. I don't want to kill you. I've never killed a man that didn't deserve to die, and I'll tell you something, I don't think you do." Karl reloads the round, closes the cylinder, lays the revolver on the bed, taps the air with a finger, "You know, Willy, what I'd like to happen, and I know you don't always get that, but what I'd like, is for us to work together. Would you help me?"

Is there enough space between them to allow Karl to shoot before he's on him? A lousy thought, but he hesitates and he's dead.

Slowly, Willy rises, and Karl's hand moves to rest on the gun by his thigh. He doesn't want to kill him, but he will. So help him, he will.

Willy goes to the closet, drags out Karl's jacket, offers it. "We should h...hurry."

* * *

Willy leads him out of Sisters Tower and down to the quay, moving in an easy lope as Karl struggles to keep up.

The overlay on Karl's headset shows her in the corporate tower looming above and ahead. "Hold it a minute," Karl says to his back, "Where is she?"

Willy stops, raises an arm to Genesystems Tower. "Vici's."

Musing at Willy's talent for economy of speech, he taps the broad back in front of him. It's like touching

a sun-warmed bole. Willy turns, squinting at him with eyes that remind Karl of nothing so much as those of his long-tushed boar back home. "I need to go to my cubicle first to get some things." He gives him the number and Willy leads them along another passage over the sea, then out into the thick of the crowd.

A high, bright fog washes over the platform. Breakfast's cooking—cultured eggs and sausage, heavy stench of grease blown down from the kitchens by vents under the grid in hopes of luring the herd. Karl's hungry. Mouth wet, he wonders when he'll get back across to the Derby, hopes it'll be soon.

Girls young and old at the same time line the quay. An almond eyed girl standing two meters in stiletto heels reaches out, catches his sleeve, "How about it?"

Karl pulls away, catching a glimpse of self-loathing so strong it backhands him. He stops, and, thinking she's got a hot one, she cranks up the voltage in her smile. From inside where light and music blast, a stairway leads up to rooms leased by the minute.

"Why?"

"Fifty bucks."

He strains to be heard over the blare.

She's not listening. "Fifty."

"No." He says it again, louder, "Why, I asked. Why?"

She frowns, puzzled, "Why, what, stud?" she says, voice gritty as river sand.

Does she yell herself that way? Does she go out on the quay at three a.m. and scream and scream?

"Why hate your life so much and not change it?"

Face crumbling, she backs away, elbows her way through the crush to squat, back against the wall, face gone blank.

Willy takes his arm, leads him back into the moving press, "Too l...late." He points at an emaciated woman, arms impossibly thin, face hollowed, eyes wounds, "Her in a y...year, come on."

Karl watches her as Willy leads him away. Smiling, mumbling, raising an arm in benediction to empty air, perhaps a princess holding UR court, she fades into the crush.

Old couples here for the shows, the slots. Kids looking for pockets to pick of tokens, selling vials too hot to clear the drug scan. Men here for the girls, the boys. Karl can't take much more of this. He hates crowds, hates their smells, their noise. Most of all hates being jostled and treated to another squalid mind. A boy with a tattooed face kicks out, grazing Karl's shin with a boot. Anger flaring inside him like black powder, Karl turns.

As if on signal, five boys whirl at once, knives cutting air. Nine years old, ten maybe, no more, heads bobbing in time to music only they can hear, eyes seeing him, but more too. They move like one organism, waving their knives in one fluid arc, giving him the come on.

Willy drags him on.

Karl, disgusted as much as he is resentful, lets himself be dragged—as if he could resist anyway.

Down to the dark hallway leading to his cubicle. Karl rounds a turn and sees the door ajar. Willy he sets against the wall, by signs motioning him to stay, to watch the hall. Magnum inconsequential in his hand, Karl nudges the door with his toe, and out tears Bink. When he can breathe again, Karl lets him jump up in his arms to nuzzle his ear. From Bink Karl learns there's nothing to be afraid of in the room—not any more.

Poor Bink, doesn't like it here any more than he does. Too many feet, no moles to dig for, no peafowl to chase, no turf to tear with his nails after a particularly satisfying bowel movement. Karl can't agree more—it stinks.

Halfway open, the door sticks. Karl stalls, trying to think of a smart thing to do. The room may bristle with booby traps, but he needs what's in there. It's all he has. They may or may not have found it. Either way he has to know, has to see.

Karl lets Bink down and before he can catch him he's back inside. Shouldering the door open as far as it will go, he ducks his head around and jerks it back fast, scraping his ear painfully. A Sister lies on his bed facedown unmoving as Bink sniffs her toes. Shoving his way inside, he kicks a fallen cushion out of the way of the door, leaving it open behind him. The room reeks of cheap cologne, not his.

Checks the bath—no surprises. Checks the ceiling—looks good, untouched, the hair he slipped between the tile and the frame still there. Up on a chair, he slides down the bag. They may be smart, but they aren't perfect. That's good, because he sure as hell isn't. Now to get away. Far away.

He turns to go out, but instead, stops, sighs, drops the bag, turns to look at her. Though she looks asleep, he doesn't have to touch her to tell she's not dreaming. Flawless legs apart, palms up, hair twisted about her throat, she waits for him. Again he sighs, drops to aching knees. This part he despises. Somehow, prying open the thoughts of the dead seems indecent as grave robbing, but they need to be heard. He's sure about that.

If she has something to say, how can he not listen? In a way it's a duty. That's how he thinks of it.

On his knees, dreading what's coming, Karl raises a hand over a bare curve of spine, over skin so white it might be calcite. He closes his eyes, trembling hand poised a centimeter over her. For the hundredth time he envies the normal, curses the gift.

Gift—that's rich.

Well he knows the feel of the dead—colder than it seems skin can be. He covers her with a sheet he finds on the floor and somehow that makes it easier to be so close.

He cocks an ear toward the door as down the hall voices grow louder. Tourists bleary with drug or drink, they pass. Lowering his hand, he hesitates just brushing the fine hair on her back, sending a tingle up his neck. God, she's charged. He can tell. Oh, yeah, there's something waiting for him on the other end, something intense, something he can use, maybe? A name, a face? He wishes he could know.

He swallows, throat dry, snatches his hand away, rubs it against the leg of his pants to dry his palm, makes a fist, looks over his shoulder at the door.

Come on, come on, come on... They'll be here to collect her any minute—they might be zipping up the lift right now. They find him here, he'll have to fight his way out, and that he doesn't want.

He presses his hand flat onto her icy skin and a wall of hate like a wave rolls over him, crashing in his ears. He can't breathe, can't swallow. Slowly, so slowly she's deprived of air, of life, the pain of his sex inside her burning. Karl sags under the force of it.

Bastards, you bastards, I did everything you asked, why, why? You lied to me!

Karl can feel a hand between his teeth, feel his teeth meet through the web between thumb and finger, feel her delight having done it.

Oh, Romy, Romy, I'm sorry, I betrayed you, forgive Sasha...

That's all. Shorter than some, but more intense. It usually is when they have something left to finish, but damn, nothing to nail it. Then he remembers. So, Sasha bit him. That might help. But there it is again—or isn't. He got nothing at all secondhand from the creep on her. Weird, damned weird.

He peels his hand away. It comes sticking slightly as if honey had been drizzled over her back. It's always like that when it's intense—static maybe. He doesn't know—one of many little mysteries. He accepts it. Some day the bright boys at The Skeptical Inquirer can explain it to him.

Sitting back on his heels, hands shaking, drained, he presses his eyes with the heels of his hands. After knowing suffocation so intimately he draws breath deeply, fully, as if he's just surfaced from a dive. He hates this part. Hates hearing the anguish of the dead. Hates the helplessness he feels.

Footsteps, voices approach from the hall. Suddenly Willy's at the door. In time they make it to the safety of the stairwell. Dizzy, onto a cold steel tread he sags, breathing deep of the dead air.

When he can stand, they climb the stairs to the quay.

Now he's in deep. No accident they did her in his cubicle.

Somebody's on to him—who?

* * *

First step out on to the quay he's screwed.

Two security officers call his name. No stooges in monkey suits these. Walthers slung, grips within easy reach, they corner them in a cul-de-sac. He thinks about settling things right now, reckons his chances slim and none, decides he'll wait.

Swindlehurst is waiting in his office. They'll be happy to take him.

Sure they will.

Karl flashes his security ID, hoping for a break. He can find his own way. Reluctantly, they agree. Karl

takes Willy by an arm and gets him moving while they query the air for further instructions. He doesn't have to go, but then why not? Might learn something.

Willy takes him in through the side entrance as workers, most of whom might be Willy's twin—and probably are—clear away the mess from the bombing. Some scoop broken glass. Others torch away twisted alloy, sparks spurting through a tangle of hanging fiber optics. Outside, tourists gawk, corralled by a barricade of charged tape.

Around two bends in the walkway, down a side way Willy leads. Here the crowd thins to nothing. At a service entry Willy stops, runs a hand past the black plate on the door frame. It parts. Down a long hall and up ten flights Willy lopes. Karl drags after, duffel weighing heavy in his hand. He wonders if Willy picked the route for spite. From below and behind, he watches his thighs piston effortlessly and hates him either way.

Upstairs, Willy waits outside with the secretary. Doesn't look happy as she holds open the door to Swindlehurst's office. Not used to being around Willy's type, Karl guesses. As he passes he drops the duffel in Willy's lap.

Inside, it's frosty. Swindlehurst quivers, steel rope wound to test, "Security will be arriving any moment now to take you into custody. Medical's expecting you."

This isn't what Karl expected. "What for?"

Swindlehurst leers, shock of yellowish hair falling over one eye. "You cost us three bills in tainted organs the other morning. If it were up to me you'd be dead already." He sneers, "Nothing to say? Funny, neither did the others."

"You knew about them?"

"I look that dumb? Auri's lucky to be alive. She won't be for long."

Panic pricks Karl's neck. If he's telling him this, he won't be either. Sure he's going to die, sure it'll be soon, he's not at all hot on the idea of doing it alone. Karl rises, draws, points the revolver.

Swindlehurst laughs. A filthy sound, it makes Karl want a shower. "It's not me you have to kill, Karl, it's Genesistems."

The .44 Karl keeps aimed at his heart. There's got to be a way out of this. Should he run? Wait for them here? He debates using him as a shield. "You put Sasha in my cubicle?"

Swindlehurst watches him from under drooping eyelids, "I wouldn't worry too much about that, just our legal department working their angle. You won't live to see arrest let alone trial. Twenty-four hours from now, you'll be spread from Tijuana to Tibet. At least you'll repay a fraction of what you cost me. You know that noble stunt you pulled the other day could cost me my bonus, don't you? We can't have that."

Karl wants to run, to get out before he has to pass carbines to do it. He thumbs back the hammer.

"Oh, come on, you're not going to shoot me. You do you'd be a murderer. And you're not, are you." Swindlehurst points at vacant air, "Oh, look at the time, you're wasting what little you have."

Disgusted and more than a little sick, Karl lets down the hammer, puts the gun away, heads for the door,

feeling death close around him. At the door he pauses. That smell.

He remembers Sasha reeking of cheap after shave, looks back to see Swindlehurst's left hand hidden in his pocket. "How's the hand?"

Smile genuine as pyrite, Swindlehurst raises his right, turns it in the air, "Fine, why?"

Three strides and Karl has his wrist clamped in his hand. An angry red crescent stretches between thumb and finger. Karl opens his mind and in rushes fear, desperation, confusion. Though he did it, like the other one, Swindlehurst believes he's innocent. Is the urge to kill being passed around like a cold virus? "You did it."

A change comes over Swindlehurst's face. And something Karl's never felt before. His wrist turns to wood—door slamming on all thought, all feeling. Swindlehurst's eyes change, too. He yanks his hand away, "Get out."

Karl backs for the door. He won't let him live long, now he knows. He'll be lucky to make the quay. It could be anybody, anywhere. He's armed and he's no cop—they can gun him down and claim whatever they want. The gun alone makes him guilty. He never should have let himself be pinned down here this long.

He feels again the revulsion in Sasha's mind. He sees Sara smiling, hair tucked behind an ear. He'll never get another chance at this guy. Even if he lives, he'll never be this close again to the one who had her murdered. Can he walk away? Can he do that?

Swindlehurst's voice follows him, "You dumb-cluck, who do you think you're dealing with, some low-life child molester?" At the shock on Karl's face he laughs, "And as for Romy, take her, she's yours."

Karl freezes, for an awful second doubting his sanity. Darkness crowds him as he remembers the words of a man he killed five years before. He makes himself look into his eyes. Darrell looks back. Through a tight, dry throat, Karl says, "Who are you?"

Swindlehurst smiles, and though the face is different, thinner, cleaner, younger, it's the same smile—the smile from the carport. "You don't know me, Karl?"

It's him. It can't be, but it is. He's positive it is. He's looking into the eyes of a dead man. Nerves humming with fear, he wants nothing so much as to be out the door and away—from this platform, from L.A., from the thing in front of him. But he's got to know. "What are you?"

"Now, Karl, you wouldn't want me to tell you that, it'd ruin all the fun we're going to have."

The heavy revolver in his hand wavers. He wants to kill this thing, whatever it is, wants to grind it under his heel. But it's true, he's not a murderer. Can you murder the dead? He doesn't know, that or anything. Behind him the door opens.

Willy takes the room in. "T... time to go."

Karl doesn't waste the effort to fight, lets him drag him out. The secretary sits, long legs tightly together, skirt tented over thighs as he goes. How could he have ever found her anything but repulsive?

Swindlehurst follows, "Go on, run, Karl, run, and see how much good it does you!"

Gun still in his fist, he swipes the bag from Willy's grasp, tails him out.

"Tell you what..." Swindlehurst calls after them. "I'll have them take you alive and I'll open you myself. I'd like that."

Karl follows Willy down, dragging at least three floors behind. Willy's boots are a distant clatter on steel treads somewhere below.

Stopping to gather his breath, he sets the bag on a tread, fishes out the 12, clips it under his arm, zips the duffel and starts down.

Thinking with the clarity of a man about to die, he makes a decision. He goes to the shelf he'll make damned sure he has company.

Karl hits the grid, slams out into the glare.

Plenty of it.

* * *

Outside, Karl squints in bleached sunlight, wavers, stunned, as his eyes adapt.

Hunkered on thighs, Willy waits, back against the wall as tourists flow past, faces intent on their pleasures. Eyes slits, Bink stands on hind legs overcome with ecstasy, as Willy scratches his jowls. Bink—the mutt who won't let strangers get within a stones throw of him, a pushover for a recom.

Karl looks down at them, big man hunkered on thighs over a dog no bigger than an L.A. rat. "You two get along pretty good."

Willy gives his big head a nod, not looking up, "To Romy, now?"

"Yeah, take me to Romy."

Vici's suite takes up the 60th floor of the tallest tower on the plat. In the lift up, Karl muses. How will he get her to listen? The first time he didn't do so hot. So, let's hear it for second tries.

The lift slows, sending Karl's stomach into his throat. The door slides away and Karl steps out as an alarm screams and five bodyguards raise stubby HKs, bolts clacking home.

"Don't move," the leader says. Then over a shoulder, "Dr. Vici, can you spare a moment?"

The doctor strides into the anteroom to meet them, "Ah, Willy, you've brought our friend, Mr. Latte. You can't keep a good man down, I see," he says to Karl, laughing at his wit. "Please, don't mind the unfriendly reception. Come in."

The muzzles stay where they are. Very jumpy, Karl thinks, maybe very eager to make some noise, prove how alert they are.

"The small one has a weapon."

Not fond of the moniker, Karl raises open hands, trying a friendly smile, not doing too well. "Let's all stay cool, okay?" He's seen the tests done on goats back in the '90's, and has no desire to replicate them. Five streams of 5mm at a thousand rounds per minute from two meters and he'll need a lot of bandaids.

Tension thick as Brie, Karl says, "You let them use those things you'll never get the stain out of the rug."

"Oh?" Vici says to Karl, "We must be careful about that, then." He points to his jacket with a long finger. "Bad boy, eh, what have you got?"

"Not much," Karl says "Want to see?"

"If you wouldn't mind."

"Not a bit." Karl opens his jacket, revealing the short shotgun hanging under his right arm, and the revolver under his left. The hired guns tighten their grips on their carbines.

"Oh, my." Vici finds it funny. "We've got a walking armory here." He runs a finger along the Remington's receiver, pokes it into the stubby barrel. "A shorty, my God, I haven't seen one of these in forty years, and nothing that looked like this puppy." The doctor's eyes move over him. "Why the artillery?"

Not sure what to say, he tries the truth. "I want to live."

Vici sneaks a shrewd smile, "Didn't do much for you night before last, did it?"

Karl shrugs. True enough. "No guarantees in life."

Vici frowns. "Why carry antiques, then? Surely there have been some advancements in small arms in the last hundred years."

Karl looks at the five men covering him. There's more to life than results. "Not that I can see."

Vici nods to the leader, "Okay, Eric, I think we can let him keep his toys."

Eric isn't happy. "Dr. Vici—"

Vici raises a hand. "It'll be fine, Eric. I trust Mr. Latte." He turns to Karl, fixing him with a gimlet eye. "Am I wrong to do that?"

In the old man's eyes Karl thinks he sees sadness, infinite disappointment, also great intelligence. "No, you're not."

Eric's not convinced, but he backs off as Vici leads him inside. Karl follows, letting a breath go. It's good to have those snouts off him.

"Come in and talk with me, come," Vici says, leading the way into his office, desk and walls chockablock with bound books. From the wall, the immense shaggy head of a buffalo looks down.

"Who's your friend?"

Vici looks up, "Who, Chief Joseph? The last of the North American herd, gone now. He's here to remind me things change."

Karl looks over the stacks of books, "Impressive library."

"I love the damned things. More buffalo is all they are, soon extinct themselves. Can't stand the new ones."

The desk is loaded with teetering stacks of the wafer-flat tablets, screens dark. "You've got enough of them."

"Oh, I read the damned things." He tosses one over the desk, where it responds to the jar, screen glowing, "But only because I have to." From the sagging shelf Vici plucks a paperback, "There's just something about a book—the heft, the cover art, the grainy, brittle pulp yellowed with time, even the smell."

Karl smiles, hearing his thoughts echoed so precisely. Last of the glut from closing libraries just about gone, books are scarce. Their passing Karl will regret.

"All the new stuff's on tablet, now. Nobody prints anymore. Big publishers gobbled up by media conglomerates and liquidated the year the push for implants began. A few stubborn small houses kept on for another twenty years, but there was no fighting it. Each run a few less copies. Nothing sees print anymore."

Karl feels the old familiar disgust percolate through him, along with a camaraderie with the old man across the desk. "Who wants to bother reading when you can catch the latest UR? Why read the news when you can have it read to you by cleavage with caps?"

"It's easy to see the advantage from the government's point of view," Vici says. "The more people who can't read, the more who depend on its version of the news. Nonreaders can't challenge what they hear on the net."

Bink in his lap, Willy reaches for a tablet, scrolls through.

To Vici, Karl says, "What's he reading?"

"Something on viruses, I think."

"I didn't know he could," Karl says, feeling stupid.

"Read? Why shouldn't he read? He's first generation, same as Romy." He sits, propping slippered feet on the desk.

"But," Karl says, stumbling, "I thought they were made to fight."

"Bodyguards, soldiers, yes, but mostly they are workers. The ones they make now—fifth generation—can't do half of what he can. When I ran things, we didn't suppress intelligence, free will. Even so, among the first generation Willy stands out."

Willy reads, ignoring them, Bink curled up in the crook of one heavy arm.

"Doesn't say much," Karl says.

Vici smiles fondly at Willy. "Most people would benefit by emulating him, don't you think?"

"What is he?"

"Willy? A recombinant, of course, like Romy and the others."

"He doesn't look much like Auri."

"No, no," Vici smiles, purses his lips. "Willy's mother was never born."

"Wait a minute," Karl says, raising a hand to stop him, glancing at Willy to see if he's listening, relieved to see he's not. "You lost me already—never born? What's that supposed to mean?"

"What it says, she was aborted as a fetus."

Sorry he asked, Karl's neck prickles, "Then how..."

Vici smiles condescendingly, "Look, just how much do you know?"

Karl doesn't like being ignorant, but knows enough to admit it when he is. "Not enough to bother you if it got in your eye."

Vici smirks. "A history lesson then. Half a century ago, scientists looked around, saw what they could do and were scared sphincterially constricted. Those with the wisdom to see beyond the next grant raised hell, wrote letters, signed petitions, wrote articles alerting the public to the dangers of man playing with the tinkertoys of life. Most of us, the ones doing the work, saw them as carbuncles on science's ass.

"As Palomar committees met to draft rules for the creation of new life, experimenters with conflicted interests assured scientifically illiterate reporters all was well, that there was no danger, and they bought it, printed it."

Lost, Karl opens his hands, "Why?"

A bit sadly, Vici smiles, "Because when a Nobel laureate like Crick tells a reporter who's failed Chem 1A how the cow ate the cabbage, he either plays parrot or he hits the pavement, that's why. After the seminars, the conferences, the bull sessions, all well-covered by an ignorant media, the National Institute of Health responded to public concern by drafting a set of guidelines.

"What they came down to was this: No new forms of life will be released into the environment without adequate testing."

"And what if they are?"

Vici shakes his head, "Nothing. That's it, just a set of rules no one was expected to follow."

"In other words," Karl says, "it was toothless."

"In other words, the old law applied; If it could be done, it would be done. If there was profit, if there

were patents, if there were papers, books, articles in it, then screw the NIH and its impotent protocols, and get on with it. And that's precisely what we did.

"Ah..." He breathes deeply, reminiscing, "it was a hell of a ride. Roe v. Wade provided more fetuses than we could ever use. We salvaged trillions of viable ova. The Human Genome Project cracked the code at the millennium, and with the first patents for living organisms granted nearly three decades earlier, patents for near-humans were only the next logical step. Genesystems was the first to apply.

"At first we had to put up with a lot of bitching from the ACLU, but a seven figure contribution oiled the waters well enough. Soon they were back to insuring everyone's free net access to sadomasochistic torture UR. When the patents for Sisters came through we knew we'd made it. That year Genie was the biggest stock miracle since Microsoft."

"Look, you're going to have to help me out here," Karl says, "I know I'm dense, but I still don't get it about Willie."

Vici rolls his eyes, making a not-so-subtle effort at not losing his patience, "A fetus has all the ova the woman will ever ovulate—on average nearly half a million. That's where Willy's ovum came from—aborted fetal tissue. Get it, now?"

Stunned, Karl looks again at the big man seated in the corner. What must that be like? To live your life knowing your grandmother killed your mother before she was born? Watching him, Karl feels something he never thought he would—empathy for a recom. "Father?"

"Out of nitrogen." Vici shrugs, "Who knows, might have been anybody who donated sperm in the last fifty years. Doesn't narrow it down much, does it? Altered quite a bit anyway. Be right back," he says, going out.

Karl chooses a tablet and the screen glows green with the title: Unscrambling the Code: Bane or Blessing? Frowning, he scrolls down to the introduction. He never liked tablets, but he can use them.

One of the two men to describe the structure of DNA most of a century ago, Francis Crick was neither a biologist, nor a geneticist.

What he is at thirty-one is a loud-mouthed physicist with a mediocre degree, unpublished and unknown. Fresh from the admiralty where he spent the war safe from everything but buzz bombs and Yanks (only three things wrong with Yanks: they're overpaid, oversexed, and over here) designing mines to sink German shipping,

Nothing much in front of him, and damned little behind, he blusters his way into the PhD program at Cambridge in '51, where he meets the other half of the critical mass that will change the world forever.

At Cavendish he runs into Watson—a gawky American biologist in his early twenties with an out-of-control mop of red hair disguising a balding pate. When he meets Crick he knows he's found the place he was meant to be.

DNA, they both know, is the prize, the jewel, the key to all that comes after, and from their first meeting they talk. And talk. So much do they talk they are given their own room so they won't bother other experimenters with their chatter. They argue. They build models out of bits of wire, clamps, and tubing. They talk some more.

In '53 Pauling describes the Helical structure of proteins. It's only a matter of time before he cracks the puzzle of DNA. What chance do these two nobodies have against a mind like that?

Rosie from King's gives them X-ray photos of DNA looking like spinning paint wheels at the fair, proving the backbone lies outside the spiral. The outside, not the inside as Watson had hoped—on the outside they might fit together any of a hundred ways, and how the hell to know if your diagram is the right one?

While the machine shop dawdles with the tin cut-outs of pyrimidines and purines, Watson feels Pauling's breath hot on his neck. Linus knows more about hydrogen-bonding than anyone else in the world, and neither Watson nor Crick knows bugger-all about chemistry.

Will he beat them to it?

How can he not?

Staying late to test his theory of like-with-like bases, Watson comes up with what he thinks is the pattern, writes a letter saying he has it. An hour after he posts it Donahue tells him he has the wrong forms of thymine and guanine—the enol, not the keto form.

One misplaced hydrogen atom, bonded to oxygen instead of nitrogen makes all the difference—throws the angle of the bond off by a few degrees. He's been trying to solve a jigsaw with all the wrong pieces!

Back to work with scissors and poster board he goes and stumbles onto it. Cytosine paired with guanine, adenine with thymine: now it's obvious why Rosie's chrystalographs showed identical purine and pyrimidine residues. God, it's so simple—one always mates with the other.

The beauty of it staggering—they form their own template for replication, bonds allowing the pairs to follow in any order. Zipper twisted into a spiral, during replication unzips, teeth a series of blocks and holes—round and square. Linus speculated so much twenty years earlier. Each half of the helix must act as a template for its own reproduction, and by each tooth of the zipper, each nucleotide mating only with one possible partner—adenine with thymine, cytosine with guanine. A four letter code.

They fiddle with the model, run to the metal shop to get the soldering done and come up with the spiral staircase of sugar and phosphate: the double helix. Though they rack their skulls to see possible errors, they find none. It fits. From America Linus comes.

The world's pre-eminent chemist travels to stand before the model built by two unknowns half his age, comes to see the solution to the problem he's nearly solved and missed, the problem they'd solved by reading and rereading his book on carbon bonding. And with Watson and Crick cringing before the expected devastating assessment of their error, he speaks. "Yes, yes, you have it."

For fear others in France, the US or UK might beat them to it, the article they draft for Nature is unusually brief. Saturday, typists off, Crick's wife, Odile, typed it, sketches them a helix instead of her usual nudes, and off it flies by overnight post.

Characteristically, Crick wants to extrapolate biological implications, but Watson, afraid to say too much lest they be proven wrong, insists they play it safe. Crick, afraid to say too little and be thought too dumb to know what their own work means, slips one sentence in at the end. One carefully wrought line that changes the world and man's place in it forever:

"It has not escaped our notice that the specific pairing we have postulated immediately suggests a possible copying mechanism for the genetic material."

One sentence, but enough. Enough to open the door, to point the way. Enough to suggest cracking the code.

If they weren't laughed at, neither were they applauded. Chargaff at Columbia jeers, labeling them scientific clowns. Others say nothing, unimpressed by the two brash unknowns and their theory of hydrogen bonds. Five months later, no longer hesitant, they publish a paper that sews it up. Pauling at Cal Tech, Rosie at King's, Wilkins, Franklin, they beat them all, bringing us one step nearer to creating, to shaping life.

So soon after the Manhattan Project blossomed over Japan with petals of fire, how is it they never stopped to ask themselves what it was they had done?

Scrolling back to the title page, Karl notices the author and is more than surprised.

Vici returns, heavy glasses of ice in his hands. One he sets before Willy.

"You wrote this," Karl says.

He glances at it, hands Karl a glass, "Surprised?"

Noticing the blue ice, Karl lifts it to the light, curious.

"Glacial ice, flown in from Patagonia, takes longer to melt, frozen for millennia." Over it Vici pours something clear. "One of my little luxuries. One has money, one must spend it, mustn't one?"

Karl tastes it gingerly, is relieved to find it water. Unimpressed, still he's glad to have good water after the chlorinated sewage he's been drinking for a week.

Vici watches him, "You need something stronger, I can get someone to bring you something. What do you prefer?"

"I'm fine." Karl studies the ice in his glass, not sure how to start. He hasn't met many people of Vici's caliber, finds himself intimidated by the power of the intellect shining behind those tired eyes. "You asked if I were surprised... I guess I am. Not that you wrote it, but by what it said. From what I've read about you, I wouldn't have guessed you felt that way."

Vici raises bushy eyebrows, dropping the corners of his mouth, "I haven't always. You'll find the copyright date fairly recent." He takes up the tablet. "I'll read you my favorite bit. Ah, now, let me find it...here it is." He looks up, "More history, I'm afraid, will it bore you?"

Karl is curious, now. "It may. I'll take the chance."

"All right, then." Vici reads. "At eighty, still at work shaping mankind in his image, Crick looks up, blue eyes sharp under a white bush of brows, to postulate the existence of an area of the brain as the seat of free will. Sure there is no God, he works eagerly to free man from the faith that there is more to us than what can be coded in the helix.

"For an adoring public he pinpoints the anterior cingulate sulcus as the seat of what unenlightened men

have for ages believed was a soul." Again he turns milky eyes on Karl. "Follow that?"

Baffled, Karl laughs. "Sure thing."

"Thought not. A sulcus is... you've seen brains..."

"Sure."

"A sulcus is one of the furrows, one of the wrinkles. Cingulate means encircling ridge."

"Got it."

"Good." He continues. "Prometheus Crick will lead them to the tunnel mouth where blares the flame of reason. Laboring tirelessly as Auden's Honeyman, Crick bequeaths us the knowledge to grant government its fondest fantasy—control over the common mind. No longer are stripped electric wires, truncheons, dental drills the shapers of dissident thought. To posterity Crick delivers subtlety of means."

"You believe that."

"I do now."

Karl debates whether to ask the question that's been bothering him. Watching Vici sprawled, leg over the arm of his chair, he decides. "I know you started Genie forty years ago, what I've always wanted to ask is, why? Why make Willy, Romy, the rest of them?"

"Why?" He chuckles as if it's a stupid question, eyes the eyes of an executioner. "Because we could." Vici smooths wiry hair, hair that springs back erect with the passage of his hand. "The field was wide open in the late nineties, NIH regs a joke. We'd had germ cells in nitrogen for half a century—no records, parents dead. Who owned them? Nobody. They were property, experimental material, tissue. The moment we won the patents on near-humans we were made men."

Karl's over his head and knows it.

Vici smiles, shaking his head at Karl's stupidity. "The one thing we could not do, the one thing science can never do, is stop. When, in '98, the Japanese came up with a viable method of exogenesis..." He hesitates, remembers who he's talking to, "I'm sorry, gestation outside the womb, we had humans out of the loop. From then on it was smooth running." He smiles, reminiscing, "An exciting time."

Karl listens, watching Vici closely. He wants to remember him, wants never to forget what hubris brought to its ultimate conclusion looks like. "If you had it to do again, would you?"

Vici leans back, waves a hand expansively, "We wanted to create the perfect man, the perfect woman. We wanted to learn what it is to be human, who and what we are."

"Please," Karl says, tossing the tablet onto the desk where it caroms off a stack of books, "spare me the flim flam nobility, the shtick about the tireless search for truth. You wanted to make a buck and you did, and to hell with the consequences, especially for Romy, for Willy."

Vici gives him a smug smile, "You have any idea of my net worth?"

With an effort, Karl keeps the repugnance he feels off his face. He's sure he'll tell him.

"One hundred trillion dollars."

Karl remains unimpressed. Once the numbers get that high, what do they mean, really? "You haven't answered me."

Vici glares, "About what?"

Karl knows he hasn't forgotten, but asks anyway. "Would you do it again?"

All levity gone out of his face, Vici looks hard at him. "I was young, enthusiastic. This wasn't the way I wanted it to be. Not this way. Do you realize, that if you hadn't gone after her last night, if you hadn't run into me, like you did, Romy would be gone? Do you?"

He says it as if the thought terrifies him. This surprises Karl. Why should he care so much for one of a thousand?

"The murders keep on and no one does anything. Why is that, do you suppose? I'll tell you why. Because every time one of them dies, Genie makes 1.5 billion."

He picks up a tablet, shakes it under Karl's nose. "And what does security say about them?" Viciously, he hurls it into a corner where it bounces off the wall undamaged. "They say the crimes aren't related. Like hell they're not!"

With an effort, Vici calms himself. "Would I do it again—no." He rises, leads the way outside onto the roof. Karl adjusts the shotgun, uncomfortable against his ribs, following him out.

Vici points, "Slightly illegal, isn't it?"

"Very."

Vici nods, "Ah, yes, now we must hire our guns if we would be safe. By the way, I should apologize for Eric. I wouldn't have them here at all, but for Romy. I have nothing to fear from Genesistems. My block of stock is held in trust for The Army of God." Seeing Karl's confusion, he explains. "A group believing Genesistems is the work of the devil. They'd love to be able to get into the stockholders' meetings and vote a block of shares the size of mine. They used to believe I was the Antichrist, though I'm sure they're over that now. I die, they get my shares and the votes that go with them. Ironic don't you think, my sworn enemies my life assurance policy?"

Willy follows them out into the wind.

Vici breathes deeply. "There, that's better. No, Swindlehurst and the rest aren't too fond of me, but even I'm preferable to them." Vici looks at him. "You like wind?"

Karl scents the chemical tang on the air and again feels a pang for the cape. "Where I come from there's a lot of it. Thanks for wrapping my ribs last night."

"Me, oh, no, Romy did that. Trained her myself. Body like yours, you'll be mended in a few weeks." He paces the railing, waves of windblown mist breaking over them. "What I would like you to tell me is who you are."

Taken by surprise, Karl says nothing.

"Come on," Vici says, prompting. "I've seen the load of crap that comes on your chip." He smiles, a white-headed troll. "Don't believe a word of it." His eyes lock on Karl's, and the smile is gone. "Who the hell are you and why'd you take the chance you did last night?"

Karl considers, sees no reason not to level. "Used to work for an agency under DOJ auspices."

"Ah, G-man."

"No more."

"Freelance, then?"

Karl shakes his head, no. "Farmer, I raise apples, lambs, pigs, in a place you never heard of."

"Retired?"

"Quit."

"Lambs..." Vici frowns, "What's a farmer doing on this stilted Hades?"

"Auri sent me."

When he hears this, Vici begins to smile, then he laughs long and hard, finally looking thoughtfully up at Karl. "Auri, I might have guessed." His eyes narrow as he seems to think of something. "And did you have anything to do with her surviving that ugliness last week?"

"Not much."

"No, I'll bet not," he laughs down deep in his throat. "Ah, what a woman she was," he says, raising his eyes to a bank of dark cloud moving inland over their heads. "Did she tell you that she and I..."

Karl shakes his head no.

"Not that she would remember me. I was hardly anyone for a woman like her to remember. But she was incredible. Romy's got her mother's looks. And her brains." He watches Karl, speculatively. "She must have something pretty strong on you to bring you out here away from your little lambs, eh?"

Karl doesn't answer.

"Enough to get you to go after those men with your heart ready to burst through your rib cage. Must be something you value pretty highly." He shrugs, not seeming to care that Karl doesn't respond. "It's all right if you prefer not to say. She has dirt on everyone, gets anything she wants in Washington with a crook of her finger. My guess is she learned a few things from that fiasco at La Crillon—has a few vids of her own, now."

Impatient, Karl interrupts, "Romy, is she here?"

"Romy?" A sly smile snakes its way across Vici's face. "Find her interesting, do you?"

"Very," Karl says, irritated. "Can I see her?"

"She's spent the last twenty-four hours sitting up with you. She's showering." Vici smiles, motions, "Of course if you can't wait she's back there, feel free."

Something about the way he says it turns Karl's stomach. "I can wait."

Vici reaches out, not quite touching his chest, "How is your heart, by the way?"

"Better..." He hesitates, not sure he wants to go on.

Vici watches him, barely concealing a smirk. "What?"

"She put her hands on me." Not easy to talk about, but it's driving him nuts and he's got to know. "On my heart..."

"And you stopped fibrillating." Vici says, prompting.

"How'd she do it?"

Vici leans over the rail, face haggard. He nods, breathes deeply, slowly. "Forty years ago I was young, I had a name to make. It was my idea to buy ova from Auri and the others. Oh, we had all we wanted or could ever use already, but I thought the publicity would be good. I was right.

"They turned out more beautiful than any of their mothers. But beauty wouldn't be enough. If we wanted the patent, and we had to have it, we had to think of some way to change their genotype, their genetic blueprint, without giving them three toes, or say, programming in susceptibility to cancer."

Karl can see he's having trouble going on.

"So, we added things." He looks hard at Karl, leaning close. "Don't misunderstand me, I've done many things in my life I'm ashamed of, foolish things, but my daughters I don't regret. How could I regret them? I can't, I don't."

Karl looks more closely, wondering if he heard him right. "Your daughters?"

Vici looks over to see Willy across the roof. They are alone. "No one knows that but you, Auri, Romy. Call it the egotism of an awkward young man, if you will, but yes, I'm their father."

"All of them, but..." He must have misunderstood. "Aren't there over a thousand?"

"There were."

"And, now?"

"Fifty-two."

"Jesus," Karl says, breathing it, seeing the resemblance of them both in Romy.

"Things have gotten very ugly. Auri, she's doing what she thinks she should, though I've tried to dissuade her. The suit, it was too much, too quickly. I would have found a way. I pleaded for just a few more

years, but no, she had to push it, her and her murder of lawyers.

"Auri's got too much money to play with, is the problem, too much time on her hands. And with public sentiment the way it is, even Genie couldn't fight it. I told her what might happen, but she forced the issue, panicked them."

"Them," Karl says, struggling to follow, "who, Swindlehurst?"

"God, no, he's nothing, I'm talking about the board, the major stockholders, the dozen or so men and women who really run Genie."

"You know who they are?"

Vici shakes his head, "Who can tell the skills from the players, I can't. She forced them into a corner. Maybe she thought they would just take the loss of 1.5 trill in profits from organ and tissue sales, I don't know. If she did, she was wrong."

Getting more and more confused, Karl interrupts, "But the last I heard they were breeding pigs with human genes for that, raising clones for transplantation tissue."

Vici silences him with an arrogant wave of a bony hand, "No, no, the pig thing went the way of baboons, rejection rate way too high. They couldn't get it down. I for one was glad when they shut them down. They had the poor dumb things in metal cages stacked five high in warehouses, cages so small the poor bastards couldn't even turn around. I think stress was a factor, but it doesn't matter, they're long since bacon.

"The clone thing, the worry we'd breed brainless children as a pool of compatible donors—just a pipe dream, a sci-fi conceit from the last century. All the hubbub about cloning mammals, condemnations by the pope, hand wringing by ethicists," he blows air, "A joke, as if they could stop anything with regs. UK banned cloning of mammals in '97. Did it stop? No. What stopped it was economics—there were more profitable ways to do it, that's all."

"Then Sisters were created primarily as organ donors?" Karl says, trying to draw him back on track.

Again Vici looks at him, disdainful of his ignorance. "Haven't you been listening? I told you, we made them—I made them—to do what random mating has never done—create the perfect woman. But we did more, much more. We gave them the scent of orchids, the talents of electric fish, the ability to regenerate lost appendages the way lizards regrow tails. We slipped a little something in the introns—you know, the 95 percent of the genotype we used to think was junk. Of course we know more, now, but then.... We thought introns were deadwood, leftover code from a million years of evolution, genetic buggy whips.

"We elbowed our way into them using enzymes and bacteriophage, substituting snippets of what we wanted. Just dumb luck we did no harm. That was how we beat the resistance of the patent office. It was our coup. It got us out of the garage. It made us rich."

Too much, too fast. "So what," Karl says, appalled, not wanting to believe, "Romy's part eel, part lizard?"

"Nonono.... What, you sleep through genetics? Not part anything, she's human, but...she does have the ability to generate a field of 600 volts at one ampere for, say, a thirtieth of a second or so. A

Microscopic differentiation in a percentage of the muscles in her thighs, that's what she used on you."

"How did she know...." Karl's not sure how to put this.

"To use it?" Vici smiles. "She's not stupid. She's read most of my medical books. Romy's retention is magnificent. And you were hardly a difficult diagnosis. Demonstrated any more symptoms and you'd have been in arrest."

Karl struggles to understand, "Genie's already killed most of them for their organs, that's what you're saying, isn't it?"

"China's been dealing in organs for forty years. At first only political prisoners, about five thousand a year at the end of the century. Back then kidneys went for 100,000. Now they're a thousand times that. A heart? five times that, livers the same. Demand's up, the market responds. But what's sweet, as patented non-humans, their organs fly right by the law banning the interstate transport of human organs for sale." Vici stabs the air with a finger, "That's what brought Mainland China in."

"Why? They have more people than they could ever use."

Smiling smugly, Vici says, "AIDS, drug addiction, Herpes, the hepatitis alphabet—the world's elite want more for their money. They want organs untainted by disease or drugs and they're willing to pay for them. Sisters were the answer."

"In two days they'll be free. Until then, I've got all that are left staying here with me. All that Romy and I can convince to come, anyway." Vici turns his face out to sea, expression bitter, "Not all would listen."

This Karl can't believe. "They prefer to die?"

Sighing as if he's talking to a moron, Vici explains. "They have lived thirty years believing Genie would take care of them. When the Chinese took us over, they got the best psychologists they could find to do the conditioning. They weeded out any that caused trouble, questioned too much. I raised hell, though by then I'd lost control. I was told they were being sent to the mainland for behavioral studies. Like a fool, I believed—maybe because I wanted to. In fact they were taken for organs, sold to rich Americans under Most Favored Nation trading status."

Karl finds himself appalled by the picture of a young Romy led away to be murdered.

"I didn't know it for years. When I found out, I signed over my interests to the Army of God, then began to throw my weight around a bit. When, as a teenager, Romy got into trouble, I took her under my wing, kept her out of their hands. All of which brings me back to my question. Why are you here?"

Again Karl goes with the truth. "To get her out alive."

Vici seems to find this funny. "She won't go, you know, not without the others." He shakes his head, emphatic, "No, never without them. You've got to try and understand. They're her family, her friends, her lovers. They're all she has, and they're not leaving yet."

Karl sighs, fighting back a rising sense of desperation. "Then when?"

"Two days, when they turn thirty, that's what we're waiting for. To take them away before that would make me guilty of grand theft."

"And until then?"

Vici doesn't seem to understand. "Until then we wait."

"And you don't think that seventy-five billion dollars waiting around here are going to tempt anybody to do anything ill-considered, maybe get rough?"

Vici flashes an arrogant smile. Karl can easily picture him as the man who created a thousand daughters with the eggs of the loveliest women alive. "They wouldn't dare, I told you—"

"Yeah, you told me." Karl says, unconvinced.

"Those men you saw by the lift, there are four more like them, people out of San Diego, Auri sent them, the best."

Somewhere deep in the well of Karl's mind a pebble drops.

"Oh, yes," Vici says, "we're safe here as anywhere in the world." Exactly Karl's point. He remembers the men he stepped over in Auri's lobby, remembers how close he'd come. "Thank the Lord for that."

For a moment Vici's eyes fill with doubt. "You think I should worry?"

Karl thinks it over, shakes his head, "I wouldn't," he says, but he is. Very worried.

Just then, Romy ambles out on the roof with a Sister Karl doesn't recognize. They hold hands, not like lovers, like sisters. She sees Karl, whirls, "Willy, I told you not to let him follow me!"

Bink slides between the big man's boots, alarmed by the tone of her voice. Willy hangs his head, looking like Bink when Karl catches him sucking eggs.

Romy turns on Karl. "What did you do," she says, voice rising, "beat him up?" She lifts Willy's chin with a small hand to look into pig eyes. "Did he hurt you, Willy?"

Amazed, Karl watches. Can she be serious? Who does she think he is, Superman?

"No," Willy says, voice low, ashamed.

"Then, why is he here?"

Karl's had enough. "Oh, quit it, for Christ's sake, will you? He came because I beat him into submission, okay? Now lay off, you're scaring the dog."

She ran her hand over the stubbled dome of Willy's head, looking hard at Karl. "It's okay, Willy, I'm sorry I yelled. It's all right, I'm not mad.

Willy looks up, face a mask of guilt. "He said you were in d..."

"In danger, of course he did." Her eyes flash at Karl as she comforts him. She turns on Vici, "And why did you let him in?"

Vici seems puzzled, even entertained by the question. "I saw no reason not to. After last night I think we can trust him, don't you? It seems to me you might even be just a wee bit grateful to him for saving your life, first in the lobby, then again out on the quay. Am I being unreasonable?"

Her mouth curves up into a cruel imitation of a smile, "Oh, yes, that was impressive, wasn't it, a rare demonstration of prowess." She sneers. "If you hadn't brought Willy, how much would he have helped?"

Vici looks embarrassed. "I don't think that's fair, do you, Romy?"

She leaves the flame-haired Sister who Karl notices is really quite lovely in a fine-boned, Irish way. Romy moves close, "And you know who asked him to come out here, did he tell you? Auri, that's who."

"He's okay," Vici says.

She nearly spits. "Why? because you can tell by the look of his face? What is it, a man thing? Something about the way he pushes people around, the way he kills?" She reaches out, unzips his jacket, throws it open, "Or maybe his big gun, huh, that it? Oh, that's great, let's all get down and kiss his feet, why don't we?"

Bink rushes forward, bounding into Karl's arms, trembling.

She holds out an arm, laughs, "And what is it with this dog? He's a traveling circus!"

Willy surprises Karl by interposing his bulk between them, raising a huge hand to comfort the dog in his arms. "No, Romy," Willy says, in gentle reproach. "Don't scare B..."

Bink surprises Karl by kicking his way into the big man's arms and under his hot green jacket, leaving only a freckled snout exposed as Willy hunches round shoulders protectively.

Stomach churning, Karl's having trouble keeping his face impassive. He doesn't know why he should care what she says, but he does. He's very close to walking out the door, telling Auri she can stuff the whole thing.

"Romy," Vici says, reproving, "this isn't like you. Mr. Latte is a guest in my home." Vici takes her elbow, ushering her and the redhead inside. "Ah, Lena, I'm glad Romy could convince you to join us. Come in where it's warm and we'll talk." Over a shoulder he says to Karl, "I'm sorry about the scene, Karl, it won't happen again. You will join us for dinner?" Not waiting for a response, Vici disappears inside.

Willy paces the railing at the edge of the roof, cooing softly to Bink. Curious, Karl reaches out to clamp a hand on Willy's shoulder and finds it hard as a boar pig's. "What do you weigh, Willy?"

"One-fifty three."

That would make him almost twice Karl's mass. He swallows, thankful he didn't have to try to stop him from two meters with only a .44 magnum.

Willy's face is troubled as he looks up, "She wasn't f...fair."

Karl tries not to smile. What do you say when a man who came a breath from snapping your neck shows concern for your feelings?

"I can take it. Now, listen, I've got to go out for a while. Watch her for me?"

He nods, head, shoulders, chest, all as one. "Go. Bink and Romy...." He gives a thumbs up. "Okay with m...me." Face serious as a car wreck, Willy waves him over, pulling open his jacket with a finger thick as Braunschweiger. "He's s...sleeping already, s...see?"

Karl peeks into the dark cavern formed under his arm, and sees it's true. He thinks of something, calls him back as he turns to resume his pacing. "You know how to use a gun?"

"No," he says, frowning in disapproval, rubbery mouth pursed, "no guns."

Watching him return to his pacing, cradling Bink in arms that the night before had swung men through the air like bullroarers, Karl sees he has underestimated the complexity of the man. As he goes inside on his way out, he wonders how much more of Willy he has yet to plumb.

The hired guns at the elevator stare vacantly as he passes. Curious, he backtracks to pass a hand in front of Eric's face, snapping his fingers twice before he comes alive enough to grunt, "Yeah, yeah, I see you," and is gone again.

Disgusted, Karl heads downstairs. This is security?

It's good Vici's given Genie a reason not to hit him. With these guys on the job it had better be a good one.

A hundred billion dollar one.

FIVE

Karl slides onto a stool next to Villar at the counter.

Villar grunts, runs a hand over a stubbled skull, "I was beginning to think somebody took you deep sea fishing." Looking up into the mirror, catching a closer look at the cut lip, the bandage behind his ear, he whistles long and low, "Jesus, you're looking better. That why you were in such a hurry yesterday?"

The big Negress comes over to take their order, sees Karl and is none too happy about it. Karl makes a note to tip well. With his problems, an irritated waitress he doesn't need.

Thinking over where he stands, Karl decides he's got little to lose by trusting Villar—up to a point—and fills him in on the last two days. When he gets to the part about Swindlehurst, Karl's not sure how to read his face.

"He did it? You're sure he did it?"

Karl nods.

Villar whistles low, "That's not the Mr. S we know and love."

"Half expected them to pick me up on the way over."

Villar shakes his head, "I wouldn't lose any sleep over it. If you're right about him arrest is the last thing you should be worried about."

"Thanks, I feel better already."

He fixes Karl with a hard glance, "What, then you're saying Mr. S and this guy you cut both think they were taken over by something, same as the guy we picked up on the last one?"

Karl hears how it sounds, "That's what I'm saying."

Like a dog with a burr in its ear Villar shakes his head. The fry cook, pencil-thin Cuban cigar stuck behind an ear, sings When The Saints Go Marching In as he works the grill. White teeth against horse chestnut skin.

"I know how it sounds, but you heard that guy. You're a cop, you know men, you know a lie when you hear one. Was he lying?"

Villar meets his eye. It's obvious he doesn't like the question. He lifts his mug, signaling for the waitress' attention, waits as she fills it. "Aaah, I don't know, man, that's a little far out there in left field for me."

Karl doesn't blame him for not believing. If he hadn't seen inside him, he wouldn't believe it either. If he could only lay it all out for him. He can't.

"I've got to know something," Villar says. "What you did the other day for the Sisters, what you did for Romy, that's not something a man does because he's getting paid."

Karl lifts his arm as the girl slides their plates, hot from the lamp, in front of them. "Enjoy...and listen, Sweetie...." She leans close, voice a whisper, "If the lights go out don't get a wedgie over it, huh? It happens out here a lot."

Villar casts him a quizzical look and he runs a hand over the tablet, tips her precisely one centavo, slides it down the counter to her. Wedgie that, Honey.

"Thanks," Villar says. "I asked you a question—why?"

Karl remembers. Why? Good question. The last twenty four hours a lot of things have changed. How Karl's not sure, but they have. When a man's ideas about things melt like sand castles under surf, that's change, even before he knows how they'll congeal. Sipping Java, he looks at Villar and sees, not a spick, a man, a friend maybe, who can know, but a man, an equal. For him, that's something new. "I don't know."

Villar watches him, thoughtful. "Okay, I'll tell you why. You come here thinking like most people do, they're freaks, some kind of walking mannequin, and you found out you were wrong. You found out they're as human as we are, maybe more, that's why."

The words are lemon juice in a paper cut. "Sorry, try again."

"I'm right, I know because I was the way you are."

"Oh, yeah, what changed you?"

Villar smiles. "You wouldn't be the first man to fall for a Sister, you know, happens all the time. Seen them, rich men, spend every dime, all on a Sister who couldn't care if he lives or dies."

Karl's got to know. "And what about the other way round, the one-in-a-billion shot they hype so much...ever happen?"

Villar grimaces, drops it, "It happens."

He'll bet it does. "And they live happily ever after."

"Ten years I've seen it happen three times. First time was a salesman out of the valley, had a family, wanted a night to remember, not a recombinant soul mate. She came back after two days. They parted her out before she could develop any antibodies—just in case."

"Happy ending."

"Second wasn't much different. No fairy tales out here. There was one, though, artist I think he was, sculptor if I remember right. Shaved her head, got her off the plat made up to look like a netpunk. Didn't realize we locate them by GPS—the eye in the sky, right? Tailed him on the douche bag over, rode right next to them at the rail." Villar's eyes focus on nothing as he remembers. "He was smitten, all right, could barely stand he was hit so hard. You should have seen them, barely keep their hands off each other. If anybody had a chance, they did."

Karl looks at him with new understanding. "You let them go, didn't you."

Villar pushes away his plate, slides his mug close, motions for a refill. Resentful, the waitress fills it, glaring at Karl as she goes. He gives her a pleasant smile.

"Lost me at the dock."

Karl has to laugh. Sure they did. "They make it?"

Villar cocks his head, "Never heard anything, never came back. Somebody must have clued them to ditch the chips. They came up on the bottom where the main sewage line dumps off the coast. Company line was double suicide. I say they flushed them. They're out there somewhere, Mr. and Mrs. Anybody, Anytown, USA."

Karl tries to picture a Sister blending into Anytown, USA, and can't. "What about that face, that hair?"

He shrugs, "Some cheap hair color from the corner nickel and dime, Mexican make up, a bulky jacket and you wouldn't look twice. Just another skinny broad. No, they made it. I know they made it."

It's obvious Villar wants to believe it. Karl does, too. Thinking of something, he slides off his stool, "Be right back."

Wedging himself into one of the three wooden phone booths that line the back wall, he forces shut the squealing door, settles onto the shelf seat in the corner, air stinking of stale smoke. The phone hefts good and heavy in his hand, a curiosity now, these old dinosaurs.

The voice on the line asks for his number and he dials it with an index finger, waiting for the mechanism to spin slowly back. So clumsy, he wonders how anyone ever used them and not die of boredom waiting

for the damn thing to climb back around. Maybe they used to be faster.

When the com asks for payment he passes his hand over a sensor. The Bakelite receiver clucks contentedly as the light turns green.

Tate answers.

"It's me."

"Just a minute," he says, and a low hum comes over the line, telling them the line's secure.

"So, how are you?"

Karl runs a hand gently over cracked ribs. "Swell."

"And?"

"She won't come."

"Why not?"

"Doesn't like me much," Karl says, taking his temples between thumb and forefinger. Karl can picture Tate pacing the office impatiently. Tate's anger is conducted over the silent line like a charge.

"So, when?"

"Don't know yet, have to see."

"I heard about the others, how many, now, five, six in what, three days? Wouldn't take too long if I were you."

Karl doesn't need reminding. "How's Auri?"

"Fine." After a pause, "Can you use some help over there?"

Anger iced with embarrassment heats his face. Never in ten years has Tate suggested he couldn't handle a job. Karl smiles out the glass at the wall and Harpo smiles back, tipping a cigar. Karl wonders if he's gone broke in the market crash by the time the photo was taken, wonders if he'd yet mortgaged his home, borrowed against future salary to meet never ending margin calls. Don't do it, Harpo. Don't listen to them. You were right, Harpo, it's all just a bunch of hoonga-doonga. At least that much hasn't changed.

Karl doesn't care whether Tate has any faith in him. Why should he? "I'll get her out, you just have somebody ready. I'm not bringing her out to drop her into a meat grinder."

Karl hears him take a breath and without waiting for an answer, cuts him off, dialing a second number. At last the line rings.

Melvin answers. "Yeah?" He sounds older, more mature than he is. The implant transmits not what he says, but what he thinks, express from speech center, no detour via mouth.

"Melvin, Karl."

"Hey, Unc."

"You feeding the animals, Melvin? You remembering to do that?"

Melvin sighs, disgust plain through the synthesized voice. "Yeah, yeah, sure. Mom!"

Karl holds the receiver away from his face, wincing at the volume. Mary comes on, picking up the old phone behind the counter, sounding like herself, voice familiar as the smell of flapjacks. "How's things in the big city, little brother?"

"Lousy, rather be home."

"Oh, don't say that, I'd kill to be where you are. It's pouring up here. What's it like there, sunny, I bet, huh, warm as toast?"

He remembers the sky outside, gray and chill, with a chemical edge from the refineries up and down the coast. "Yeah, little too warm. I miss the fog."

She laughs, "You're nuts, too, you lucky duck."

He can see her at her place at the counter, frizzy hair gone silver drawn back. Pretty at sixteen, with hair like a halo, twenty years later she's thickened, rose become a hip, gross with seed. Her eyes, though, haven't changed, still just as kind as they ever were, kinder maybe. Mary. His only sister. His only family.

"Listen, Melvin feeding the chickens and pigs, putting them in every night? I've got a weasel up there that'll kill my hens if he doesn't."

"I chase him out of here every night and every morning, and he drives off up there, but with Mel, who knows?. I'll go up and check on them myself with him tonight, okay? Now don't worry, you're in LA, you're supposed to live it up, go shopping, not worry about this stuff. Enjoy life, eat out more often."

Alone in the booth a thousand clicks from her, he smiles.

Saturdays he comes in for his mail right about sundown. Mary sees him drive up, pulls a couple tall ones out of the wash tub she keeps filled with ice, and in folding beach chairs out under the big cedar they watch the sun as it drops out of sight behind a layer of cloud out over the Pacific. They don't say much, just sit. Mary's quiet is better than most people's words. He never misses a Saturday he can help.

They have an understanding: He understands that with her husband gone, she wants them to be more of a family, and she understands that right now it's what little he can give or nothing.

"Karl, you okay? This is costing you money."

Three men come in out of the drizzle looking heavy under long coats. Karl thinks body armor, and laughs at himself. He won't be fooled again. He examines names scratched into enamel. Hector loves Ana. Jaime y Maria 4/ever. The usual. Scrawled half a century before. Where are Jaime and Maria now? "Yeah, I just want to be home, that's all."

A nagging itch at the back of his skull drags his eye to the door. These guys didn't come for the food.

They're working. It's obvious from the way they stand, the way they hold themselves, hands deep in pockets. He's seen it before, the abortoire look, he calls it, the casual look of men who kill for a living.

"Karl," she says again, "you sure you're okay? You sound worried."

He reaches up, switches off the light in the booth, unzips his jacket, freeing the cut down Remington, "Not me, I don't worry." Balancing the receiver between chin and neck, he nearly drops it.

Two of the three stroll through the restaurant, eyes combing, right hands in overcoat pockets, swaggering, cats among mice. One goes down the counter, one back to check out the booths. The third sticks by the door, one hand in the deep pocket under his coat. He unbuttons it with a big left hand, nails polished to a sheen. Right then Karl knows who he's looking at. It takes a lot of dough to keep a paw manicured like that. That means he's good. Very good.

"Karl," Mary says, "I hope you're telling me the truth. You know when you lie to protect me it only pisses me off."

This is no random search. They're here for somebody, and they're not guessing—they know. That means they have his number and are locating him by GPS. Very, very bad. He glances at his hand, and not for the first time wishes he could rip his chip out from under the skin. Too late, now.

The shotgun is a toy in his hands. He might get one, maybe two—three never. They won't be using twelves. In the darkened booth he cracks the action, making sure there's a round in the chamber, slides it shut again. There's got to be a way out. He's got to think.

"Karl, what's that sound?" Panic rises in her voice. "That wasn't a shotgun, was it?"

He reaches into his jacket pocket to jumble shells. Not many. Five in the gun, as many more in his pocket. Each one of his new friends can put out ten times that. When he runs dry, any one of these horses can probably break him between their fingers like a stale ficelle. He's hard, but from sawing, from splitting. He hasn't been out on a mat in five years, and right now he feels like a teacup smashed into small pieces and held together with chewing gum. Here comes the firehose spouting steaming tea. Rotsa ruck.

"Karl," Mary says, sounding like she does when she's run out of patience.

Mind racing, he remembers the passage to the kitchen and the door out back. He might, he just might make it. It's a chance. Throat dry, he strains for the spit to swallow.

"Look, Mary," he says, talking fast, eyes on the big man's hand, the one he can't see. "In the chicken coop under the roofing there's a piece of PVC capped both ends, big one, four incher. There are some papers inside I want you to have—account numbers, cusips, deeds. I'm not home in a week go get it—just do me a favor and don't let Melvin piss it away. It's a lot of dough."

The man at the door looks his direction, face curious, maybe wondering why the light's off in the booth. Karl's stomach drops like a medicine ball.

"What are you telling me for? I don't want to hear that, you hear me?" she says, fear edging her voice. "Now I don't know what you've gotten yourself into down there, little brother, but whatever it is you can just get right out of it and get your ass back here!"

Karl lays the gun on his lap, angling it so he can shoot from the hip. His hands twitch. Death is close. So,

Swindlehurst wasn't bluffing. These are the guys who save the legal department the effort of working up a case. Maybe they're even lawyers—the ones with too many scruples to practice.

"Karl!"

He can feel himself draw up tight with fear, feel his sight narrow down so all he can see is the man across the room. It's a while before he realizes Mary's still talking.

"Karl, listening to me? I've got a tall one on ice for you, Karl, you hear me?"

The snout of a 5mm bullpup noses out from under the man's coat as he starts for the back. The sight's a relief. To know he's right, to know he still has his instincts. "Be seeing you, Mare, got to go."

"Karl, you take care, you hear?" He hears her distant voice, as gently he sets the receiver in its cradle. Karl tries to swallow and can't. Bad sign, gun out in the open, no masks—means there won't be any witnesses. Karl thinks about the crab of a waitress with her big behind in that brown skirt with a white bow, about his hotcakes and mug of coffee cooling on the counter, about Villar. He'd call him if the dump weren't damped. Will he see them in time? He will or he won't, either way he's on his own. He can't help him. If he had to bet, he'd bet he'll land on his feet. Like a split-eared old tom.

Here he comes. Couple more steps he'll make Karl out inside the booth. So close to annihilation, Karl feels only calm. Finger along the receiver of the twelve, he waits. Mary will be all right. Mel...well, kids grow up, he supposes. He did. The ridge—it'll go on in spite of anything the Greens can do to it, the potash from the bonfire of cabin and house will be just a green place in the meadow in a year. The earth? She endures. He remembers the towns abandoned downwind of Chernobyl. Uninhabitable, they slid back to Eden. Him? Who would miss him? Besides Mary, nobody.

Shockingly sharp, Romy's face and eyes come to him. The way she looked at him over the dying Sister in the bombed-out lobby, the way her mind felt to him, the need he felt in her—if that's what it was—shaft of sunlight in a darkened room. A need for him, no one else. For him.

The shotgun bucks on his lap, deafening in the closed space, glass door shattering into diamonds scattered across the floor.

Forcing open the squealing door, sending chunks of tempered glass scattering, Karl racks in another round as the man hesitates, dazed, eyes on the hole in the middle of his overcoat. Then as if he just realizes what happened, he lays on the trigger and the suppressed carbine, nose down, hums, emptying a magazine into board flooring, sending up a fog of dust, splinters and sea water as screams echo through the Derby like the rings in a stone-tossed pool.

From one meter Karl puts the bead at the base of his neck as he goes by, turns his face away to avoid splatter, and shoots him a second time—there's one he won't see again. Hearing more bursts from the dining room, he doesn't wait to see him fall. Around the corner into the kitchen, 12 held muzzle up, past the fry cook, open mouthed, egg poised ready to crack in a dark hand, Karl hustles.

His waitress sees him come and, dropping a tray, ducks into the pantry, calling after him, "Stiff me, Honey, I hope they get your ass!"

Scrambling, slipping on broken crockery, egg slime and syrup, Karl catches himself, raking a hand along a sharp edge as he goes out the back door and sprints a hundred meters down the boardwalk. Cringing from the fire in his ribs, he slows to an inconspicuous saunter, lets the shotgun hang on its sling back out

of sight under his arm, signals for a taxi.

As one pulls up, he hears firing from behind. Vaulting the rail on an arm, rounds cracking overhead at three times the speed of sound, loud as a .38 going off behind his ear, Karl kicks the throttle as far forward as it'll go, and takes the wheel as the hack lies huddled in the bilge. A few long seconds later they're out of range, and Karl throttles back, merging them into the flow of traffic. When he's sure they're not being followed, he gives back the wheel, perching on a seat to catch his breath. Fishing a couple rounds out of his pocket, he slips them in the trapdoor of the 12 as he waits for his heart to slow. Close.

He wonders if Villar made it, guesses he did. The Walther he wears under his arm like an ornament would have been more than adequate—if he saw them in time. Breeze in his face, Karl closes his eyes. All that because of a lousy three bills. These guys take their responsibility to stockholders seriously.

Again Karl peers over the stern to see if they're followed. Nobody he can see. At the dock the hack's still shaking. He tips a C note and the kid smiles, babbles some Mex back. For the 100th time since they turned half the state back to Mexico he wishes he'd picked up the lingo. Whatever the kid's saying, it sounds like he's happy. He waves, smiles as he goes.

Mex—what a lingo.

Shaking his head, Karl waves back.

Grassy ass to you, too, kid.

* * *

Three dozen Sisters fill Vici's flat, Romy among them, Karl's glad to see. At the door, a servant meets him, leads him to his room, past more beautiful women than he's seen in his life, him splattered in egg, pants soaked from the bottom of the taxi.

Head down, he follows, noticing Romy casts him an evil look. He guesses he deserves it. He is crass. He is a killer. About both she's right, so where's his gripe?

Among them he spots Willy, serenely oblivious, Bink asleep in the crook of an arm. Karl feels a prick of jealousy. Little traitor.

As he shuts the door behind him, Karl feels nothing but relief. The room's okay, small but not cramped, with its own shower and toilet. Peeling away the dressings from over his eye, lip, the back of his head, he douses them with peroxide, enduring the itching sting as it penetrates, sterilizing the wounds. Showered, confident he can do no more, he curls up on the bed.

Aching all over, tired as he can remember being, Karl sincerely hopes that Vici is right about his arrangements insuring his own safety. If he is, maybe he can keep Genie off his neck long enough for him to get off this stilted hell.

Gun in hand, he casts himself into a surf of troubled sleep.

* * *

Headset waking him at dawn, Karl follows his nose to the kitchen.

He ladles himself a bowl of oats from a burbling cauldron on the stove. Milk he finds in a walk-in. The next twelve hours he spends working the kinks out of his muscles in the deserted roof spa, working his way through Lloyd's puzzle book. Duffel never far away, Bink and Romy in Willy's care, he dozes, stretches, exercises submersed in steaming water under a drab, drizzling sky.

As light fades, Karl slips on his headset.

"Tate."

He sounds discouraged, tired, something. "You sound like your kitten died."

Tate ignores him. "Enjoying your vacation?"

"Having a lovely time, wishing you were here."

"Instead of you, yeah, I know, glad to hear it. Any news?"

"Tell Aunt Celia we'll make the wedding tomorrow after all." Karl's not sure how he'll get Romy away from Vici, or off the plat either, but something will come along. He'll just have to wait for it.

"She'll be thrilled. When shall I say you're coming?"

It's been a while since Karl's used the open-line schtick. Weddings are noon, funerals midnight. "Two hours before should be enough, don't you think?"

"Oh, I should think, is this a definite, then?"

"A definite maybe." Karl's not sure they'll make it by ten, or at all, but he'd rather Tate be ready in case. Of course, to get her there he'll have to convince her to come. Then again maybe he'll just roll her up in a rug.

"You remember how to get to the church?"

Pick up points alternate according to month. April is the mall out on La Brea, if it hasn't changed. "Same church?"

"Same one."

"I remember."

"We'll be expecting you," says Tate and is gone.

Aching all over, Karl slips into his jacket and plods down the stairs to his room. Too soon to go back to

the Derby, he plans a run at the pantry to get him through the night. At the lounge, he hesitates, wishing there were another way to his room. Running that gauntlet of eyes is not something he wants to do again, but he's tired, sweaty, needs a shower. Deep breath and in he goes, moving quickly, head down, painfully conscious of himself as an ordinary man. So much beauty in one place he's never seen. Being near them is like being near a bonfire. Each radiates. Together they're overwhelming. Halfway through, a gong sounds, and they're up and moving, excited. As he passes the balcony he's surprised to see a shaved head at the rail.

Silently, Karl comes up behind Villar as he watches the sun squeeze over the edge of the world.

"A day gone." Villar cocks his head, barely turns, vision like a gecko. "Just when we are safest," he says, facing out to sea, "there's a sunset-touch." He turns, breathes as if casting off melancholia. "So, you got out. With all the blood, I wasn't sure."

Karl pauses at the rail beside him, chill air raising goose bumps on skin overheated from the spa. "I got out."

"Surprised to see me?"

Karl laughs, "Not at all."

Villar watches him, eyes bleary, "Picked them up in the mirror soon as they came in. You want to know what gripes my ass? They were going to wipe the whole place and burn it after—the only decent place to eat this side of the hills, The Derby! Things just aren't what they used to be around here. Something's wrong when they send in that much muscle to hit a guy in a public place like that. No finesse, no class, you know? Swindlehurst's slipping."

Villar raises his glass in salute to the setting sun, "And there she goes. I Never get tired of that."

Karl doesn't watch sunsets. He watches the sea after sunsets, watches it turn iron gray, watches fading light bring fish to feed. Like they're feeding on Sara and the others a kilometer below them right now. Like they'll feed on him, like they'll feed on Romy if he makes another mistake like he did on the quay. "What are you doing here?"

Villar smiles, looking proud of himself. "Celebrating. Tonight's my last night." He smiles at the puzzlement on Karl's face, "That's right, I'm going over with them."

As this sinks in, the redhead he's seen with Romy comes to whisper into Villar's ear. Hand on his arm, she watches Karl as she speaks. Not like she's showing off, like she has something to say and doesn't care who sees her say it. Villar whispers an answer, and with an affectionate stroke of her hand over the stubble on his head, she's back inside.

Karl watches her go.

"I told you it happened, didn't I?" Villar looks down at himself, laughs. "Who could believe it, huh? Erin and a guy like me?" He leans close, juniper strong on his breath, "I'll tell you what, man, she's like no woman I've ever known, and I don't give a damn about her genes."

Skeptical, Karl listens. "How long?"

Villar smiles, "Has this been goin' on?" He shrugs, serious, "Month, maybe. Let me tell you, you don't

know a thing about them. You think you do, but you don't." Villar raises a glass, drains it. "What do you think, can a man change, really change?"

Thinking of home, Karl watches the last of the light bleed from the sky, turning the sea to ink. "Maybe, if he wants to bad enough."

Villar nods, pushes off, "Got to go."

Karl turns and Vici spots him. "Ah, Karl, there you are at last. I hope this means you intend to dine with us."

The smell that reaches him from the dining room jellies his knees. He opens his mouth to answer and catches Romy's glare. Vici follows his look, "Romy, tell him to stay and eat with us."

With only a moment's hesitation, she smiles as if she's bitten her tongue, "Yes, do." Vici turns and the smile fades.

He's not that hungry. "Thanks, anyway."

"Oh, no, you don't." Hand whipping out, Vici hooks him, finger through an epaulet, drawing Karl after him. "You're not getting away with that," he says, calling over two Sisters who twine their arms with Karl's, towing him into the hall.

Karl allows them to lead him, conscious of Romy turning away in disgust. Long table centered in a longer room, Vici at its head, Romy opposite Karl.

With them seated, servants descend, ladling steaming chowder heaped with carrots, potatoes, celery, not an hour off the cutting board. A little woman glides to his elbow, filling a glass the size of a thimble with what might be orange juice. Curious, Karl tosses it off.

With an index finger and thumb he picks a pip from the tip of his tongue. God, yes, it's real—the tongue-teasing piquancy of fresh valencia hits him a physical blow after a day in the spa. Motioning her back, he turns his empty water glass up and waits for her to fill it.

Vici looks on, amused, "Like it, do you?" He nods to the girl, "Leave the pitcher for Diamond Jim, here, and fetch another."

Around him, Sisters eat, chat, laugh. Inconspicuously as he might, he props one elbow on the table, back of his thumb pressed to his forehead. It's a gesture he's made since he can remember. Eyes closed, the dark opens up, endless, before him.

Me again, God. Where do I start? Been a while.

He sighs, suddenly more tired than he's been in a long time, not sure how to go on.

I know you brought me here for a reason, but I'm damned if I know what it is. I want to go home, that's all I want. I'm not asking for help....

Asking for things is not why he prays; he's got a rule about that. He never asks for things. The way Karl sees it, God's not there to be a wish catalog.

I'm not telling you your job, I'm just letting you know, that's all.

Alerted by silence, Karl looks up to find Vici and the Sisters watching.

"You pray?" Vici says, amusement brimming his eyes.

Ignoring the insult in his tone, Karl tears a hunk out of a sourdough cannonball with his teeth, chews, swallows. Aside from a meal at the Derby, it's been a week since he's had more than bennies, jerky, and vender crud. At the first taste of it on his tongue, his hands tremor. This is food. The chowder's good, clams and carrots giving his teeth something to work on, not like the mush they serve in the casinos.

He swallows, soup burning as it goes down. For five years, he's eaten alone. If he could, he would grab up his food and run like a dog with a hock to eat in solitude. He can't. If he would eat, he must do it under these eyes.

And he will eat.

"Wasn't trying to make a show of it. I made you uncomfortable, I'm sorry."

"Oh, nonono, I'm just surprised, that's all."

Karl finishes the bowl, and a woman comes to ladle it full. "Surprised—why?"

"Well, you seem intelligent to me," he says, looking around him for support, "hardly the type."

If he won't let this affect his appetite, neither will he run from it. His voice he keeps low, soft, "What type's that?"

Sisters watch, soup cooling, curious what to make of this.

"Provincial, rustic, I don't know." Vici stalls, and from the corner of his eye, Karl sees Romy watching.

"What Vincent's trying to say is that he doesn't expect his guests to be worshipping a savage god at his dinner table."

He's not surprised to hear her voice, less to hear the vitriol in it. Across the table and down, he's almost sure he sees Willy smile as he stuffs his mouth full of bread.

Vici, not looking too happy about what he's started, raises his hands, commanding truce, "Romy, dear, I think it's best we left the man's religious beliefs unsavaged. Karl, I hope you will forgive me for bringing it up. I misspoke. A man's beliefs are his private affair." This he says like a man capping a well.

Karl barely hears him. Soup spoon halfway to his mouth, he holds her gaze. "And what makes God savage?"

"What makes your Judeo-Christian God bloodthirsty? Is that your question?" Romy laughs with scorn.

"Not too bad, eh?" Vici says, fighting a losing battle, but still trying. "There's nothing like fresh clam chowder to give a man appetite."

"Oh, please," Romy says, ignoring Vici as if he hadn't spoken. "Can you be that ignorant? Can you

really? Might it be the countless millions slaughtered on the altar of a religion convinced of absolute superiority? The crusades, the intrigues, the exploitation, the slaughter, the inquisitions, the slavery, the papal corruption... If Jesus could see what became of his teaching he would cry—he would vomit!"

Attempting to distract the table, Vici half stands, "I want you all to know who we have with us this evening. This is Karl Latte, the man who carried Romy out of reach of the bomb, and saw to it Lia and Kara didn't suffer as they died."

Karl can feel million candlepower eyes on his face. Willy, entertained, watches, doing his best to look disinterested. Karl is hungry, and he will eat. Almost imperceptibly, the Sisters either side of him have moved closer. Their arms brush his and gratitude seeps through, but that's all. Nothing else. It's so close to what he was used to feeling from Sara, it makes him want to scream.

Romy's eyes glare contempt. "Did you hear me?" Like a terrier with a rat in its jaws, she worries him.

How it is she can possibly dislike him so much? In the two days she's known of his existence, all he's done is keep her alive.

Watching her, dislike plain in her eyes, he wonders—can that be it?

Vici, fairly frothing at the mouth, is out of patience. "Romy!" His voice at once a command, a calling to heel, a threat.

"I heard you," Karl says, voice low, "and you're right."

The table holds its breath. Eyes clouded with doubt, Romy's mouth opens, shuts, confusion plain on her face. "I am?"

Between bites of grilled swordfish, crust barely holding juices in seared white flesh, he nods, "What's religion to do with God? Nothing. Any more than most of the slop they serve out here has to do with food."

Looking lost, she sputters, "But...you pray."

"I say what I have to say—to my God—no one else's. I don't need anybody's approval for that, not yours, not anybody's."

Sails gone slack for lack of resistance, she stares, mouth agape. The others have resumed eating, if hesitantly. But not Romy. She sits frozen, staring, knuckles white on mauve tablecloth by an untouched plate. As he eats, he watches her. Only partly to see what she will do, just as much because she's the best-looking woman at the table. The others, attractive, miss. Where she burns, they are cool. About this he's sure Vici told the truth. Romy is unique. The closest he's ever come to feeling her fire in another woman is Sara. And where Sara is, she's not much competition.

She casts him a fragile look. "Then why do it?"

He's not sure, but he thinks that maybe she really wants to know. Which is too bad because he's done talking about it. There are things better left unsaid, things too personal to share—God is one.

Karl lays down his fork to take up the glass of juice. "I'm sorry, I don't talk about God. What's there to say? Either you know him or you don't. Talk doesn't change it. Tell you what, though, play your cards

right and I'll take you to my church some time."

Something gives in her face. "No thanks," she says, and she's gone.

Karl eats, feeling the table relax around him. Methodically, reveling in the sheer luxury of it, he works his way through hothouse green beans, new potatoes in parsley and butter, a second slab of swordfish—fuel.

He can operate another two days on this.

More than he needs.

* * *

Karl drains his glass.

Meal done, he thanks Dr. Vici, begs off further conversation, heads for his room. Door shut behind him, he lets out a long breath of relief, going slack. Time is short. They leave tomorrow. Good news—if every instinct he has weren't screaming Genie would never let them go.

From under the bunk he pulls the duffel, emptying it on the bed. He looks over what he's got. A box of buck and a couple sabot for the twelve, and a couple strips for the .44. Pitiful.

Unclipping the shotgun from under his arm, he tosses it on the bed. He sits, leaning back against the wall, unloads the magazine through the trapdoor, strips the gun. Reeling a swab down the barrel with a chain, he debates whether he wants the pea-size buckshot alternated with sabot. It's a habit of his, fiddling with ammo. It calms him. He can do it for hours.

The door opens and he looks up to see Romy, frown creasing the perfection of her face. "What are you doing?"

He goes back to work on the shotgun. This he doesn't need. "I forget to shut that?"

"Playing with your guns, so typical..." She sputters, angry enough to make speaking difficult. "Can't you get it through your head that we don't need them here?"

"Ah," he says, feigning enlightenment, "I forgot. Genie security protects you, don't they?"

He watches her pour the power to her eyes, deciding the hatred in them makes her, if anything, more beautiful.

"I don't like you, you know that, right?"

He sets the barrel back into the receiver, drops in the magazine spring, seats the cap. He knows. "No kidding?"

Anger translating into movement, she paces, "Why don't you just go away? Hovercraft pull away every hour on the hour. You could be gone that fast. Why don't you go?"

He watches her move, enjoying it like he would watching a horse, a cat, a cloud, any wonder of nature—in her case, creation. "I'm here to keep you alive, that's why."

She laughs, frustration warping her face, her voice, "I don't want your protection, don't you get it? I don't want you here at all."

He nods, slipping shells into the magazine, spring pinging as it compresses under load. He's not at all sorry she came in. Being this near her gives him the same feeling he gets when he stumbles on a fawn hiding in waist high fern on the north slopes of the cape—stomach aflutter, a sense of awe keeping his breathing shallow. She reminds him of a deer, too, the way she moves, the wary look in her eyes. "I get it."

She raises fists, tendons standing out on slender arms, and shakes them, sending hair writhing about her face. "Then why are you still here?"

He looks up. "I'm here because what you want doesn't matter. I need to keep you alive and that's what I'm going to do." Now if you don't mind too much...." He looks meaningfully at the door.

"You need to...what's that mean, you need to? If Auri's paying you to protect me, I'll pay you not to. How much?"

This is getting interesting. He's never thought of Sisters as having money. "More than you've got."

She watches, unperturbed, "Million a day, two, what? I'll pay you twice that to stay out of my sight."

She wants him gone pretty badly. Tempting... If only he could take it. "It's not about money."

Her face turns ugly. "Oh my, yes, I get it, now. You're another one of Auri's friends." Lip curled, she laughs. "Do you know she's old enough to be your mother?"

He doesn't believe it. The woman is so cynical she takes his breath away. Her mother's daughter, all right. "Not about sex either."

She sighs, frustrated, "Well, then, what is it about?" She holds up a hand, "Never mind, you wouldn't tell me the truth anyway." Jaw clenched in a hard smile, she leans back against the door frame, crossing graceful arms. "There's no way I can convince you to stop bothering me?"

"I'm doing just that."

"You bother me just by being here."

He's only willing to take so much battering, even from this wildly beautiful thing. "Me bothering you? I'm not bothering you. You're the one who started the inquisition over dinner, and right now you are the one in my cubicle. I've known contract killers with better manners than that."

Bitterly she laughs. "I'll bet you have."

She watches him as if she's won, as if his anger confirms everything she's always thought about him. And now he sees it, sees how prejudice works, how it finds its own justification. He's been damned with her since her first sight of him—why he can't guess. It's not fair, her judging him before she knows him. It

makes him mad. Worse, it hurts.

And, in that instant, as if from outside himself, he sees his prejudice against her, against Willy, against Villar. It's an ugly portrait of himself he sees, worse for having felt it from her. "If you don't mind, what I'd like to do is take a shower." Karl shrugs out of his shoulder rig, wrapping the .44 tightly in its nylon sling. Back to her, he lays it on his jacket, giving her time to go.

She stays put. "So, I can't convince you?"

He's had it. "The answer is no. Now will you please go wherever it is you go?"

Distaste on her face, she watches as he draws his shirt over his head. "Can't you see I don't need you? Vincent's taken care of everything. Why can't you see that? What is it about you that you think you're so damned essential?"

Karl turns on the shower and at once it runs steaming-hot, scalding his hand. "Damn, I'll never get used to that. Where I come from..." Seeing her lack of interest, he catches himself.

When will he get it through his thick head she can't stand him, doesn't want to hear anything he's got to say? Stiffly, he reaches for the clasp on the bandage binding his ribs, not quite reaching it.

"No," she says, "leave it on, it won't soak up water. Now, will you answer me?"

He hesitates at the buckle to his pants. "Why do I think I'm necessary? Self-importance, what else? Why are you so anxious to have me go? You've only known I existed for two days. I've been here a week and I never bothered you." He turns away, steps out of his trousers, leaves them where they fall. "So what's the big deal? I'm nobody, ignore me. You're pretty good at that."

"I can't ignore you," she says, voice dark as charcoal. "Death follows you. Why is that?"

He shrugs, steps into needle spray, wishing the shower had a door he could shut in her face, groaning as hot water searches out cuts and bruises. On the tender wound behind his ear it's heaven and hell both. After the last few days, he's happy to be alive, whole, and hurting. Maybe she's right, maybe he should leave. Over his shoulder, he says, "It's not something I plan."

She comes to lean against the doorway of the stall, watching him with those goddam eyes of hers, hair behind elfin ears, lips—no damned way he's going to start thinking about those.

He pauses lathering his arms, anger and embarrassment welling. It's been years since a woman's seen him out of his clothes, and he doesn't want Romy watching him now. "Privacy—heard of it?"

"Yeah, I've heard of it." She stays where she is. "Primitive need for a primitive man."

"Okay, so I'm a knuckle walker. I'd still like some, if you wouldn't mind."

"We don't always get what we want, do we? I'd like you to go away, but you won't."

He moves close enough to feel heat off her skin, anger and something else humming inside him, a dynamo building rpm. "Let me explain it to you, honey," he says, having heard enough of her sarcasm, needing to be alone, needing her jade eyes off him, her scent out of his lungs, out of his head. This mockup, this fake, this thing—why can't he remember that's what she is?

Karl looks back at her and realizes how hopeless it is. No word can change what she does to him, maybe nothing can. "I may have to stick around to keep your heart pumping—things like you do have hearts, I guess, huh?" He sees the hurt he hoped for in her eyes, its reflection a stab between his lungs. Afraid his body will betray him, reveal what he feels, he drives himself on. "But I don't want you around me anymore than you have to be. You give me the screaming-meemies. Now, go on, get lost."

"The what?" Her eyes cloud with confusion, with pain that makes him want to draw her to him. God help him he wants to so bad. She cries and he's done.

"The creeps, the willies, you know, the heebie-jeebies."

"Yeah, okay," she says, eyes half closing, "I get it."

"Okay, then," he says, waiting, irritated enough to hit her, "will you go?"

She raises her eyes, smile growing slowly on her lips. "If I won't, what will you do, shoot me?"

He doesn't believe it. "You won't?"

"That's right, go ahead and shower, I won't get in your way. And how did you know to come to my rescue anyway?"

The sarcasm in her voice infuriates him with a suddenness that frightens him. Without thought, he reaches out, takes her wrist, jerks her in with him. Squalling with surprise, writhing in his arms, she struggles. He holds her clinched against his chest. "There, like that?"

No longer struggling, she watches him as water courses over and between them, wetting her dress, her hair, her face. Hair plastered to her ears, she looks a fast fourteen. A drop runs down her nose to hang there. More than he's wanted anything in a long time he wants to take it with his tongue.

The scent of her wet comes to him, strong, decent, satisfying as summer rain on pavement. Holding her fast, he breathes to get more of it inside him. "You want to know how I knew?" He runs a hand under her hair to the nape of her neck, finds it, tears the cell from her hair, dangles it in front of her face, "That's how."

Her eyes accuse, but what he feels through the length of his body as he presses her to him is a surge of attraction so overwhelming it leaves him mute, a need so great it scares him.

Along with it comes the certainty that if he wants her, he can have her right here, right now, against the wall under the spray. He can spread open her dress and have her as he likes—violently, gently, as he will. She'll comply. With anything. Anything he wants—and he does. He does want.

He sees he's not better than she is, not above her, not anything but like her. Freaks the both of them. Mouth dry, head reeling, stomach heavy, he drops the cell, lets her go, backs away. "Get out."

She stays where she is, reaches back to cut off the water, leaving the room silent. Arm braced on his shoulder, she sheds her dress. Back to the wall, unable to turn away, paralyzed, every nerve humming, he waits for her to touch him.

From the wall she takes a hit of body gel, spreading it over his chest and shoulders, slick hands sliding

gently, slowly, eyes on his.

He can't think, can't speak—not with what's coming through her hands. Not with the current he feels in his spine. He's losing control and doesn't like it—he's never liked it.

She turns him, "Let me get your back."

Letting her move him, he rests his forehead against the wall, mind blanked of everything but the feel of her hands. This isn't good. This isn't good at all.

Her breasts tickle his back as her hands move over the part of his chest not covered by bandage, sending currents through him as they go. "I've never touched a man before, not like this."

Her hand drops and he catches her wrist, reaches back to open the shower valve, water pelting them both. "Take off."

Face cracking as if he'd slapped her, she backs out, finding a robe, forcing her arms roughly into it. "I repulse you."

Rinsing, Karl nearly laughs out loud. He's been powerfully attracted to women before. He's had it sandbag him, had it jerk at his guts. Felt it from plain women, all kinds of women. Felt air turn to syrup, his tongue to lead, brain to mush. Never has it hit him harder than this. Facing her, the answer would have been painfully obvious. "That's right, you do."

Wrapped in a robe she finds on the back of the door she bends at the waist, drying her hair at the wall dryer. "Maybe now you'll go away."

Drying, he watches her, unable to turn. He understands what she feels, the confusion, the hurt, but things are bad enough now without this. If either of them is going to make it off the plat, he's got to keep his mind off the way she moves, the way the hair comes to points just in front of her ears, off her eyes—and on keeping them alive.

Back to her, he dresses in his last clean clothes, unwraps the revolver and sets it by the pillow. If only he were another man, a man who could think about her shoulders, about the feel of her under his hands. But he isn't. He never was. "Not just yet."

"Because I don't need you here," she says from the door, "I don't want you."

Seeing her go, knowing she lies, unwilling to be alone just yet, he gropes for a reason to make her stay. "Yesterday, in my cubicle there was a sister. I saw you with her once before, tall, black hair."

Her eyes flash. Is there jealousy in her face? "Sasha in your room? She hasn't come in yet. Did she say when she would?"

"She didn't say much." Not that he can talk about.

Her face changes, braggadocio leeching away. "She dead." A statement of fact.

He nods, and sees what it does to her face.

"Mole here?" she says, tracing a line behind her ear.

He nods.

She closes her eyes, and he watches her take it in. No big show. She must have cared, that's all, must have cared a lot. Lover, maybe. He needs to ask her about what she told him, but can't without revealing himself, and that he won't do. "Trust her?"

She turns on him like he's slapped her. "She was my sister. A friend. We were..." Romy's eyes dive. "I was expecting her, she was coming with us tomorrow."

He sees no reason to tell her differently. "Any reason for her to think she'd betrayed you?"

Now he's got her. "Betrayed me? I thought you said she was dead."

"There was a note, just a scribble."

"Where is it?"

"Had to leave in a hurry, didn't get it."

She frowns, not believing, "What did it say?"

"I'm sorry."

"There was nothing for her to be sorry for."

Karl's sure she's lying. "Nothing?"

"No."

"Might she have told where you are?"

"They already know that."

"When you're leaving, then, something to compromise you."

"No." She says it as if he's suggested something obscene.

"Then why was she sorry?"

"I don't know," she says, sagging, fight gone.

If Karl could have any wish right now, right here, this second, it wouldn't be to be home. It wouldn't be for health or wealth or peace on earth. It would be to take her into his arms and draw her down with him on the bed, to tell her everything that he can tell no other woman, to show her she's wrong about him.

He lies back, drawing his jacket over him, .44 under his hand. "Lock the door on your way out."

Hearing the lock seat, knowing she's gone, he exhales long and slow, letting tension go with it.

His last thought before sleep is that Vici or no Vici, tomorrow's little outing will be anything but

sweetness and light.

* * *

Karl wakes to a buzz in his ear.

Muscles tense, hand tight on the grip of the .44, he mutes the idiot chime. A dream, broken now, haunts him still. He had kept Romy under the shower. He had kept her there and felt no revulsion at all. Their coupling was homecoming. Sitting up, he dismisses it.

He sits up. He looks down at the bed, linen still warm, wipes his eyes trying to clear the fog from his head. How long before he has another shot at a bed like this? Do they sleep in beds in Chi-com labor camps?

He aches all over, feels like he's slept two hours and not the eight he programmed in his com. Can he be getting sick? The swordfish, maybe? Food poisoning is all he needs. Insides lead, throat boot leather, he loosens gummed eyes with a fist, trying to read the hour hanging on the vacant air in front of him. No good. At forty, he's not so quick to clarity. Can it be morning?

The set hums again, no alarm, it's a call. It can only be Tate, probably with bad news.

"Something's not right." Only Villar.

"Tell me something I don't know or let me sleep."

"I mean it."

Karl's much too tired to want to hear about it. "What time is it?"

"Almost four, I'm telling you something's wrong."

Damn! No wonder he feels like he does. "It's called a hangover, you must have had them before. Eat some soda crackers and you'll feel better."

"Shut up and listen. Medical's a madhouse, techs everywhere."

"So, why bother me about it? Find out what's going on."

"No dice. Chi's are here from the mainland, full reactive armor, not even a little bit friendly. They've got us three deep out here guarding the douche bag they came in on. Keeping us out of the way is what they're doing, keeping us from seeing anything."

Still drugged from sleep, Karl batters his brain to get it to work. With them leaving in only a few hours with 100 bills of Genie's merchandise, the timing looks bad. Giving up hope of sleep, he leans forward, stretching out a stiff back, careful not to jar aching ribs, "Okay, what are they doing?"

"Priming stasis carts, getting ready for something, something big. It's like they expect a hundred donors to fall into their lap."

For a moment, neither speaks. Karl puts it together, feeling in that frozen instant the shrinking impotence

of nightmare wrap him in clammy arms.

"Madre de Dios," Villar says, voice a croak, "I'm coming up!"

Adrenalin nearly blinding him, Karl's up, working to force his arms into a tangled shoulder rig. "No you're not. Get us taxis and wait off the north side, we'll be there."

"I'm coming up."

"You're holding the goddam taxis, I said!"

"Erin—"

"I'll bring her."

"You will."

"I will."

"You better."

"I said I will, just get us a way off."

"Bring her," Villar says, more threat than command.

"Just you be ready."

Karl cuts the com.

It seems Vici gambled wrong.

* * *

Dead quiet.

Ear to the door, Karl senses no movement. The living room is a sleep over, lights dimmed, Sisters sprawling, spooning, spread wall to wall. Karl picks his way quietly between them as they sleep, mouths wide in unconsciousness, muffled breathing the only sound. He thinks he spots Romy among them.

In the dim light, he can't be sure. He gets down, knee grinding berber, taps an arm. Disentangling herself from the dark haired Sister spooned against her, she raises her head, blinking. Suddenly he's not sure at all. It's her, but not, something's lacking from the eyes, the expression. "Romy?" he says, whispering.

The head shakes, already sinking back. An arm lifts to point, and she's gone with a sigh. Rising painfully, he picks his way through to her. He finds her plied against the redhead. No surprise. Jealously an ice pick under his sternum, he squats, knees popping. Tate tried to talk him into new knees, but would he? No.

Knowing he may have only a few seconds, he takes his time. Hurrying gets people killed. He forgot that

on the quay. He won't again. Seeing her face from up close, he knows it's her. Something is there, even in slack-jawed slumber, something makes him wish the redhead weren't there beside her. What is it makes him want what he can't have?

He reaches out to touch her, hesitates. Her dreams in this colleen's arms he doesn't want to know. Her name he aspirates close by her ear.

Romy squints up at him, and he backs away, conscious of the intimacy of what he's just done. He wishes he could help them all. He can't. They may not get out themselves.

"What?" she says, voice furry.

"Get dressed, bring Erin out on the balcony."

"Why?" She rubs her eyes, looking unhappy. "What time is it?"

There's no time. "Vici wants to talk to you."

She rises, nearly falls. He reaches out to steady her elbow and she pulls away. "Don't," she says quietly, "I can do it."

Outside, he waits, feeling lousy not warning them all, but he's only one man. One man and he wants to live, at least long enough to get home. He paces. It's cold, stars out. She's taking too long.

In a sheath the color of taupe, Romy comes, Erin in tow. The dress, clingy as nylon, seems an odd choice for a four a.m. bolt, but then he reminds himself she doesn't know that's what it is.

Rubbing one eye with the heel of a hand, she watches Karl curiously as he shakes out a rope from his duffel, hitches it to the rail. It nettles him, beauty like that and not real, not human. What perversity, what waste.

"Playing games again?" she says, an edge to her voice.

Karl reaches out to shake Willy. Instantly his eyes open, dangerous as a snake. "We've got to go." Comprehension is instantaneous, and for a moment Karl sees him as what he is—a killing machine.

Easily, Willy sits, chaise squeaking as he shifts his bulk. Slipping on shoes, he stands, comfortable as if he'd been awake for hours. Bink pokes his nose out into the cold, snorts, retreats back into the warm security of his coat.

"You said Vincent was here, I don't see him."

"I lied," he says to Romy, leading her by an elbow to the rail, out of line of sight from the wide door. She jerks free and he sees her eyes, black in starlight and wash from LA. "I don't know where he is," he says, stepping into rappelling harness, cinching it tight. "Do you?"

"In his room, I'll just bet, sleeping. It is the middle of the night. And that's just what we're going to do. Come on, Erin."

Karl touches her arm and she whirls as if about to strike out, left foot falling back. Maybe she is more than a kitten. "Is there another way out of here?"

She looks from him to Willy, then back at him as if he's the village drooler. "There's the elevator."

"Stairs?"

"By the elevator." She steps back, wary, "Look, I'm not going anywhere except back to sleep. Willy, don't let him take me anywhere."

Karl's hand flashes out to close on her wrist, surprisingly small and delicate. He gets the feeling he could lift her, no problem. She fights to get free, much stronger than he would have guessed.

"No! Willy!"

Slowly, Willie's blunt head swivels to look at him, not happy.

"Willy," he says, not worried about him—not yet. "Can you get down that rope to the next balcony?"

Brow furrowed, he understands, nods, mouth open, eyes on Karl's hand on her wrist. "Why?"

Karl senses he's on the balls of his feet again. He can't afford to wrestle him now, can't afford to shoot him either. With an effort, he captures her other hand. Under her skin, through the block he throws up he senses something puzzling. It's almost as if she's letting him hold her, consenting to his overpowering her. He cuts her off. "Willy, you trust me?"

"Willy," she says, "don't listen to him."

Something's coming, Karl can feel it on the back of his neck. He's got no time for this. "Do you?"

Like he's not too thrilled about it, the big man nods.

Mouth falling open, betrayed, she gasps, "Willy!"

"Then listen—they're coming, we don't have a lot of time to talk." Karl sees Erin come fully awake and take a step backward. "Erin, Villar wants you to come with us. He's holding a taxi right now."

She nods, though frightened, stays put.

Eyes wide with disbelief, Romy laughs in a whisper, "What? You're insane! Vincent told you we're safe here, don't you listen?" She cocks her head over her shoulder, "An army couldn't get in here. Willy, can't you see, he's—"

The howling of an alarm from inside cuts her off. Karl moves, taking her with him to the wide glass doors. At the lift, security men wait. Lights flash above the elevator. Now she's afraid, now she believes him. A little late. Vici's bodyguards shake themselves, rising from UR stupors. Arrogantly, they stand in the open, annoyed by the interruption in their private Edens. Roller bolts lock up as Eric opens a panel in the wall, cutting off power to the elevator. They laugh. "Gotcha!" Eric says.

Another of the team turns cocky clown, dances up to rap on the metal door with a burly knuckle, "Hey, how you like it in there, huh?"

Doubting himself, Karl hesitates, letting Romy slip free.

Vici shows up wrapped in a robe. "What in bloody hell is going on?"

"Nothing to worry about, Dr. Vici."

"Of course there isn't, you moron. That must be Sasha. She's the only one that knows the code. Switch it back on, Eric, switch it back on."

Karl moves for the door, to tell him it's not Sasha. Romy blocks his way, glares, "Oh, so we have to run away." She taunts, lip curled in disdain.

Karl sets her aside only to see he's too late. Security men scramble back, only Vici keeping his place. The lift doors open, and from inside erupts a wall of violet gas.

"Sasha?" Vici says, voice uncertain. "Sasha, that you?"

Either side of Vici, six smg's erupt at once, rounds sparking off reactive armor. As mist rolls over them, their guns quiet. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Vici's head tilts back, and like a diver, he arches, sinks into rising mist.

Fog surges with impossible swiftness over Sisters who sit up only to fall back, overcome. Wave of fear rising in his gut, Karl watches as the gas eats up the distance to the door.

Back of his throat itching, Karl slides the door closed on the doomed women inside. It's quiet now, all guns, all voices silenced. It must be strong, whatever it is, very strong. The tang of it burns his throat even out here.

"Let me in," Romy says, drawing him back, to the door, to the gas, to death.

He pulls her away, turns, hits a wall—Willy. Karl sends him to the rail. No argument this time. Easily, Willy levers himself over, sliding to the balcony below, heels slamming the deck as he lands. Karl holds his breath, lowers the redhead, Romy helping. He lets her go, and, rope pinched between legs and hands, she slides down into Willy's waiting arms.

The smell's stronger now, a tickling coughing won't clear. He wonders how long they have before the men inside find their way to the balcony. Inside, violet haze skims the ceiling. "We're next."

Warily Romy backs, "I won't leave them."

He yanks her to the railing. "Yes, you will." Straddling the rail, Karl hooks the carabineer with a free hand, the reek making him dizzy.

"No!" Romy cries out, voice laden with grief and self-loathing. "I promised them they'd be safe. I can't run, I can't." She yanks hard enough to draw him off his hard perch on the rail and suddenly he's had enough. Viciously, he jerks her back, delicate wrist locked in his hand, whipping her arm so hard she cries out.

"They're gone, they won't wake up. The Chicoms'll be on the balcony any second. I want to live, do you?"

She turns her face away, and he jerks her to him, hair at the nape of her neck in his gloved hand,

screaming in her face. "Do you?"

A thump at the door draws their attention. Inside, a stocky figure in black gropes for the handle. Karl knows reactive armor, knows nothing he has will touch it, won't waste his time trying.

She cries silently, face a mask of pain—no answer his answer. He lifts her by her hips to straddle his lap, the Remington cutting into his kidney as she rides him. The glass door rumbles as it slides wide. Hands numb, tingling, Karl kicks off, drops. Just above the deck, his hands slip. They hit hard. The jar to his ribs takes his breath. The bruise behind his ear throbs, turning his knees to rubber. He sags and it's Romy who tugs him to his feet.

Willy forces the door and Karl backs in after them, shutting the door as heavy mist cascades off the balcony above like a sheet of water. The apartment's dark, empty. Base of his skull pulsing like a second heart, lids pig iron, he surrenders, flops back on the bed. Mind uncoiling slowly, tea-colored cypress water rising over him, he sinks into the muck, the deliciously warm, evil smelling muck at the bottom.

* * *

Fear hangs metallic on Romy's tongue.

In the bathroom, she tears through a closet, draws out jeans and a shirt for Erin. She hurries her into them, goes back to see Willy, the fool, playing with the dog. Bit of cloth in Bink's teeth, they fight over it, Bink tugging at the prize, growling low in his throat. Even now, he can play. Turning, fear knives through her.

Hands open, palms up, mouth gaping, Karl sprawls on the bed. Without him, they're dead, she knows that. Kneeling by him, she hears something, shushes Willy and the dog with a wave of her hand. Frozen, Romy listens to boots barely a meter over her head. Terror pulsing through her, she yanks Karl up, slaps him hard on his unshaven face—so odd a man's face with its bristles—talks to him, coaxes him back.

Slowly his eyes focus. "What?"

"You were out," she says, dragging him to his feet. "Come on, we have to go!"

He looks at her blankly, "Go," he says, threatening to drag her down, breathing as if he's just run, "go where?"

"This isn't going to work, Willy, help me." They get him to his feet, Willy holding him erect by the hair on his head, one arm circling his chest. She raises a hand, hesitates, slaps him hard yet again, sees awareness come into his eyes, points upward. Afraid to talk, she whispers, "Listen."

Boots—a lot of them, and a sound like bodies being dragged over carpet. His eyelids sag. She slaps him again. "Wake up, dammit!"

"Hey!"

"Hold him, now." In the bathroom she finds Benzedrine, puts them in his mouth one at a time, makes him drink water.

He nearly chokes, swallows, rubbing his eyes hard with the heels of his hands. "You can let me go now."

Willy releases him and only has to catch him once before he stays up. Romy watches him closely. Any second now they should hit him. She knows how it feels, the tightening when they kick in, the rush of lucidity.

He looks around, "Had a nap, huh?"

Throat tight with fear, with relief, she nods.

"They'll be looking for us," he says, checking his gun, snapping it open, then closed.

"Willy can get us to the stairs." She reaches for his arm and he pulls away. How can anyone live without touch? It's more than she can imagine.

"I'm fine." He opens the door to the hall, checking outside, "Let's go."

Trying not to think about what's happening over her head, she follows Erin out. Sisters she's known all her life. They trusted her. Now they are dying an arm's reach over her head, and she runs. Guilt, self-loathing well, bitter as bile in her throat, leaving her sick. Weak, wanting to vomit, she follows blindly down the corridor.

Karl... She hates the name. Also the guns, the way he talks, acts. So tough, so cold. Why do men have to be that way?

Him she can't hate, him she wants, maybe the way women want men in books, in vids, she doesn't know, has no way of knowing, no way to judge. There's something inside her he sets aglow. Some place she never knew existed until she saw him, smelled him. A well of feeling he was the first to tap. Now, he's given her back her life a third time. What she has to know is—why? Auri's money, maybe, but she doubts it. Despite the way he talks, his eyes say something else.

At the stairwell he stops, handing his heavy bag—more guns probably—to Willy. She watches him as he takes the big gun, whatever it is, it's ugly with an end big as an open mouth, and moves into the stairway. She's glad he's there, it makes her feel safe that he's here. Though she doesn't want it to, it does.

A bang overhead. She jumps, shivers as she thinks of what might be happening to her right now if he'd let her go back, if he'd slipped away without her. Her hand runs down the flat of her belly, assuring herself she's whole.

Karl waves her forward at the stairwell door, black snout of the gun by his face. How can he hold it like that, so close? She pushes Erin forward. Willy follows.

So, he was right. All along he was right. Somehow she's not sorry. It does no good to be sorry for what is. That she learned long ago. When they took her sisters she learned that.

One thing only she feels.

With every breath, every pulse of her veins, every step she feels it—content to be alive.

Karl hates stairwells.

Always has. So many angles, so many opportunities for ambush. Nooks, slits, overhangs—a lousy place to be alone with no one to cover your ass. A worse place to be carrying baggage like these three.

He stops them, listens, letting his ears see around bends for him. The rules are simple. Stay away from walls—a round bounced off a hard surface, seemingly defying natural law, hugs it. Here everything's hard, everything's close.

Hearing nothing, he heads down, leading with the muzzle, nosing around corners. They make good time. Steel gray walls and rails. Down, around, down, and back around. Over and again. Steel fire doors with the number 59 in puke green. Soon he no longer sees them. The world is three meters by two meters by two meters. Gray. Silent. Stinking of PVC and paint.

Move.

Stop.

Listen.

Move again.

Round and round, metal treads clanking, past after door, dizzying work. Karl's tiring—they've come a long way.

"Thirty," Willy says.

As Karl pushes off down the next flight, a door, no different from any of those they've passed, slams open behind him. Karl spins and stares into the surprised face of the medtec from the bombing. A smaller technician runs into the first from behind as the door slams shut. Fast as a dream, the big man snatches Romy by the hair, jerking her back to wrap a forearm around her neck, scalpel prodding just under her jaw.

For one frozen second no one moves.

"I'll cut her," he says, edging back to the door, taking her with him. "Leave the Sisters and you can go."

The second tech, stunned, watches slack-jawed, eyes roving from Romy to Karl to Willy to the shotgun muzzle, and back to Romy.

"Can I?" Karl says, wondering if he's serious. "Can I really?"

"Set it on the stairs. Give it up or she's dead."

Now the big tech's got the door at his back, but no hands to open it. He bellows at the smaller tech to open the door.

Uncertainly, eying Karl, he edges back. Karl keeps the muzzle on his kill zone, "Hold it just a minute, I'm still thinking here. Willy?" Karl points, and Willy's on the second tech, big hand coming up into his jaw, slamming his head back into the steel door. Out, he slumps down the wall to the landing.

"Goddam it!" The one has Romy roars, voice echoing off the walls. "Keep him away! Keep him the hell away from me!"

He backs off and Karl follows. One stair at a time the tech drags her up after him, thick arm a noose about her neck. Karl looks for a head shot, but the tech's cagey, dodges, stays behind her.

Times getting short, and Romy's eyes he thinks he can read. To her he says, "I want you to be sure, now. You want to live, even if it means killing? Is that what you're trying to tell me? "

Eyes brimming, hands locked on the thick forearm around her throat, she nods short and quick, squawking in a try at yes.

"Shut up!" the tech says, tightening the crook of his arm, then to Karl, "I'll open her." He yanks her off her feet up onto the next landing, her shoes off the steps, all her weight on her arms and neck—halfway to the next door and out. He makes it, he's won.

Karl paces them, trying for an arm, a foot, anything, not able to get a shot. "I want you to understand something. One—I'm not leaving here without her. Two—the second you cut her you're dead."

As he talks, the tech moves. Door 32 looms. "Stop!"

The tech keeps moving.

Karl tries again. "Let her go, I'll give you five long breaths to get out of my sight. That's the deal."

"Keep away from me," he says, bellowing, blade tenting the soft skin of her neck. Blood wells around it—nothing arterial. Not yet.

"So, you're sure," he says to her.

Somehow she is able to whine through a constricted throat. "Yes!"

Good girl.

Two more steps and he'll be at the door. Karl opens the action, buckshot shell clanking on the step behind him, racks a shot shell into the chamber, lowers the muzzle halfway to the floor. "Well, you're the genius."

For an instant she doesn't get it, then, taking the blade in a bare hand, she kicks up, raising her legs. Karl puts a dove load into his knee, knocking his leg out from under him. He goes down on his back, Romy's neck still in the crook of his arm, skidding hard down the stairs to stop at Karl's feet. Karl racks the slide, empty shell clattering down the stairs behind him as the tech yammers in a rage of panic and pain.

"Let her go." Karl moves in close, presses the muzzle to his top lip, feels it slide over teeth, "If you please."

Mewling, he lets her up. She scrambles away. Karl backs after her, hesitates at the landing, bead held on the tech's face. Again, he smells the women upstairs as they slept, the sharp stink of the gas as it rolled along the floor, felling them as they rose. They're all gone. All dead. His finger tightens on the trigger and the tech raises his hands to fend off buckshot.

Romy hangs on his arm. "No!"

Karl imagines a scalpel's travel along an exquisite curve of back, blood welling up in ruby tears. So much beauty, so much intelligence gone—for a buck.

Hand cool on his neck, on his face, she raises the muzzle. "Karl, no, I want to go. I'm ready."

The tech moans, blubbers, hands clamped above a ruined knee as Karl lets her drag him away.

* * *

They emerge on a deserted quay.

Tourists gone to bed or back to LA. Netpunks lie huddled against walls, in corners, wherever they can get shelter from wind and mist. Blind, roused by a peripheral alarm, still realities away, one raises a wasted arm in mindless solicitation as they pass.

Willy leads them to where Villar waits with a swarm of taxis. When Karl shakes his head, he waves the others away. With shouted curses for time wasted, they roar off. The five of them board the last and the hack noses them east to LA.

Romy and Willy go into the forward cabin out of the wind. Erin comes to press her head over Villar's heart, arms wrapped tightly around him. A peculiar pang in his chest, Karl searches astern, alert for lights moving to intercept them, sees none.

Chop makes it a rough ride. Mist whips Karl's hair as Villar, sending Erin forward, works his way over to him along the rail. "Smooth ride," he says, yelling into the wind.

The pounding feels good to Karl, every bone-rattling jar proof that he's off the plat and on his way home.

At last—home.

Soon it will be lambing time. Mel will be no use if there are problems. The thought of his animals suffering he can't abide. A glance at Villar tells him he chews something bitter.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"For getting her out." Villar says it like it hurts.

He debates the possibility Villar's still working for Genie, and goes through the mental motions of stepping in, palm strike up as he turns the muzzle of the Walther and levering him over the low rail and into the wake. If he's going to make a move it'll be now. "Thank Romy."

Villar shakes his head, marveling, weight on the rail, "You, hombre, are like nopal, prickly as cactus." He sees the Remington, reaches to open Karl's jacket with a single finger. "Uh, uh, you'll have to ditch

those," he says, yelling over the roar of the engine. "They'll pick you up right away in LA with that much hardware."

Nothing Karl doesn't know, he nods, giving the horizon one last scan. They could be closing without lights, but he doesn't think so. Why should they be in a hurry anyway? His face he lifts to a hazy sky, rubbing the back of his hand. Where can they run? They're being read right now. He can sense an invisible fiber leading from him to the LEOS overhead, and wants to bring his hand to his mouth, to tear his chip out from under his skin with his teeth.

Karl slips the twelve under his jacket, zips up.

Villar edges close. "That won't make any difference, they'll pick them up from a block away."

Karl shakes his head no. "Opaued, walk right through a scan, they see nothing."

Villar nods, impressed, "They can do that?"

Suddenly curious, Karl says, "Where will you go?"

"Us?" He nods a shaved head at the horizon. "Iramos a México. I've had enough, time to find a place to raise some chickens. What about you?"

Karl sees again the gas spread along the floor like a living thing, silencing everyone it touched. Up ahead towers twinkle as they turn north into the traffic lanes off Palos Verdes. The first glow of dawn rises over Mount Wilson. Tate will have men waiting. Any luck at all and he'll be rid of them both by ten. After that, he's got to see someone—if he's still there. "I'll take her where she needs to go, and then home."

"Where's that?"

Karl watches cold light stream over the hills as the taxi pounds below a dirty scud of cloud. He doesn't distrust Villar—doesn't trust him either. "Far."

Cold wind a drumming ache in his ears, Karl remembers Romy struggling to go back in with vapor dropping them like wheat before a scythe, and wonders what it is makes someone human.

Is it a marching code of peptides?

Or is it something else?

Does he know?

Has he ever?

* * *

Santa Monica taxi terminal, stinking of sewage and propane exhaust.

Amid the noise, the hurly-burly of tourists, Romy and Erin embrace. Humbled by the the dry-eyed

intensity of their emotion, Karl looks away, imagining what it must be like to say goodbye to your only family, to a sister you will never see again. He can't. When at last they break apart, the three of them watch the taxi carry Erin and Villar away, Villar giving him a smile that says he thinks something's pretty damned ironic, and a little wave of his hand. "Seeya," Karl says into the noise of the terminal. Though he expected to feel relief, he feels instead, surprisingly enough, regret.

The three catch a water bus to Hollywood, and as he scans his hand to pay the fares, he knows he's just given them an update on where to find him. Right then he decides on a change of plans. They'll ditch their chips before he does anything else.

LA is dirty. Worse, much worse than it was, more kids on the streets, more garbage, graffiti a mangle over everything, over every square inch, like a jungle vine imported from the south run wild to bury them, kudzu-like tendrils strangling everything, catching hold of them all, dragging them down into the filth. He hates it. It scares him. It's the end, the red pucker on the wound, the bloating of the carcass. More than ugly, it's putrefaction.

The ride is slow, bumpy, a caravansai across the waste of a blasted LA, evidence of the 2012 quake everywhere. They stop often. The bus fills, soon grows hot and stale with sweat, the acrid tang of cannabis heavy on the air as people pack in tight. They sway as the bus jolts its way across a washboard of countless wakes. Engine reversing with nauseating power, they come up short at lights, as if each one surprises a driver paying more attention to his dreadlocks than the water ahead.

The riders are okay. Karl looks them over and sees nothing to worry about. Kids on their way to school, whores on their way home, punks riding the circuit, going nowhere, just to be out of the rain.

Nothing much to think about, he reckons he'd better tackle the newscasts piling up on his set. This time he checks the volume. "Uninet News..."

The news babe with the turned under hair again. Thinks it's her, he's not sure. How can he tell? Is it margarine or is it butter? Is there a difference?

"La Guardia Civil blames radical Christians for the deaths of more than fifty first generation Sisters on Genesistems' plush resort, Platform 66 early this morning."

Dazed, Karl shakes his head—well, then, it must be true.

"The group known as The Army of God executed them while they slept last night on Genesistems' platform off Long Beach. A Genesistems spokesperson says the terrorists smuggled weapons aboard the plat in luggage posing as tourists, forcing their way into apartments. The loss to the corporation has been cited at over one hundred billion."

Sure it was. Karl will bet they lost nothing. With organs harvested, they came out just about that much ahead. Again he wonders at the myth of unbiased net reportage. As myths go, pretty far-fetched.

The Net babe purses her lips, shakes her hair, evidently deeply troubled. One second later a thousand candlepower smile explodes onto her face.

"Genesistems wishes to remind you that despite the minor inconvenience, with new security measures already in place, the island is now open for your enjoyment."

Karl looks up to find them well into Huntington Park, sees what he's looking for, taps Willy on the

shoulder. They follow in Willy's wake through the crush and into the cool stink of the wharf. If the neighborhood was bad five years ago, it's worse now. Karl finds the address, stomach clenching as he sees the sign gone. A punk lying on the stairs nearly trips him—dead maybe. Can't tell and not about to check.

The man he's come to see he's missed, maybe by years—about that there's no question. The only chip dealer Karl knew in LA. He has no idea how he'll find him, now. They aren't listed on the net, men like Raj.

"What is this place?" Romy asks.

Karl turns away, "An old friend, somebody that might have helped us."

"Might have?"

"He's gone, must be."

Willy descends the short well, reaches up to knock. Before he can, an alarm screams loud enough to drive them back with the force of its sound. Covering his ears, Karl nearly stumbles over the kid again. Still he doesn't stir. Got to be dead for this not to move him.

When it shuts up, Karl kicks the door hard just to let it know he's still there. Again it blares. This time a voice cuts it off. "Get your ass off my stairs!"

The voice is different, but it's Raj, he can tell. "It's Karl," he says to the grill above the door.

Silence.

He kicks the door again, and right away the voice: "That's it, I'm calling La Guardia!"

"Raj, it's Karl, Karl Latte!"

He waits for an answer. Still nothing. Draws back for another kick.

"What'd you call me?"

He can imagine Rajvinder, the tall, plump Punjabi with his boyish face greeting them in his paisley silk robe. All he ever wore, that robe, a cravat and a pair of deerskin slippers. Karl can picture him as he saw him last, as he would see him again in just a moment. With his love for beautiful things, rugs, sculpture, furniture and an income that might have given him the Palisades, he chose to live in the most squalid section of L.A.

"It's Karl, Raj. Open up!"

His stock was always clean, expensive, and so he said—Karl chose to believe him—from netpunks who sold them by choice for the month of carefree escape they brought in paid meals and satcom time. Other dealers sold chips cheaper, but Karl wouldn't have wanted to carry the chip of a man whacked for it. Raj could withdraw an old chip and insert a new one just under the skin leaving no scar at all in under a minute. They'd done business often. It was good to hear his voice after so long, even if it was over filament. At least now he has someone he knows, someone he can trust.

"Stand back so I can see you."

Willy lays a heavy hand on Karl's shoulder and he turns to see six, eight kids, mostly guys, hovering, eying them from the walk across the canal. As if of one mind they seem to decide, fanning out to cross the footbridge, hands in pockets, eyes on Romy. Having a Sister down here is like trolling for shark with a side of beef.

"Well what do you know? Karl come to see his old friend, Raj. Damn, it's really you! I thought you were spare parts by now."

"Not yet," Karl says, "but if you plan on taking very much longer here, I may be soon."

They're getting close. Romy reaches under his arm for the Smith, hand cool against his skin. She grips it in two-handed isometric, surprisingly relaxed. He opens his jacket, cycles the Remington, the sound pitifully inadequate.

They see the shotgun, hesitate, eyes on their prey, mumbling back and forth, talking it over, debate bouncing up to LEO's and back—with their technology still feral children. Karl nearly smiles—progress.

Something changes in their eyes. They spread out to outflank them just as behind Karl the door clicks open. "Come in, Karl, and mind the garbage."

Giddy with good fortune, Karl backs in giving them a wave and a smile. Prey down its hole, they halt, faces blank.

Careful to step over the body on the stairs, Karl follows Romy inside to safety.

* * *

Inside, Raj's shop is cool, dark, elegant, exactly as Karl remembers it.

Rising to meet him is a girl, maybe twenty, dressed in a loose robe, small, darting eyes, black as opals, set in a fine dark face. She smiles broadly, teeth glowing, coming to offer small hands one above the other the same as Raj always had. The sight gives Karl a twinge of doubt as he reaches to take them. Her skin cool and dry, Karl gets—nothing. He thinks of Swindlehurst, of the men on the quay, and is on his guard.

"Ah, Karl, my friend, it's good, so good to see you. >From what I heard, I guessed I should never lay eyes on you again. Ah, yes, I know what you must think—how my old friend has changed, eh?" Looking down at herself, she laughs, the same laugh, higher in timbre, but the same. "It's true, I am different. The

meat's gone the way of all flesh, I'm afraid. My little friend here has been kind enough to offer me use of hers for a while. We have a good relationship the two of us."

"Raj?" Karl's not ready for this. "This is you?"

"Nobody else."

Mind bound in ice, Karl stutters. "What...I mean...who—"

"Killed me? That what you want to know?" A raucous laugh—Raj's—erupts from the girl's mouth. "Pancreatic cancer—like a sledge between the eyes, almost six years ago now."

Karl doesn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"That...that you..."

Her hand wags impatiently under his nose. "No, no, no, Karl. I'm not dead—I'm digital, a pattern in a server."

Understanding breaks over Karl like surf. "You're DMI."

She smiles, delighted, "Why, Karl, I didn't know you kept up on such things."

"Do you know where?"

She shakes a delicate head. "What does it matter? Van Nuys, Kansas City, Calcutta—it makes no difference. I exist in cyberspace, nowhere and everywhere. And insofar as I prevail upon my friends to allow me a physical existence in what some still call the real world, I exist here—as you might say, in the flesh."

She raises a small brown hand, "And don't you dare pity me! I've evolved into the next stage, the next plane of existence. The wheel has turned. If you must pity someone, pity yourself. I'm immortal, couldn't die if I wanted to. Come, sit," she says, tucking delicate bare feet under her. "What a boor you've become, Karl. Where are your manners? Who is this lovely creature you've brought me?"

Karl introduces Romy and they sit opposite on a long couch, Willy hanging back by the door. A pair of boys, maybe seventeen, dressed in silk robes, bring them tea. Karl doesn't like their eyes. He brushes against one purposely as he sets his cup before him and it's the same as with the girl—empty.

"You've come to do business, am I right?"

Worried, Karl nods.

She throws back a lovely head with overdone abandon. "You see, I know you. There's been some trouble and you and your charming companion will be wanting clean chips won't you?"

She rubs her temple in thought just the way Raj used to. Uncanny, this girl with mannerisms of a dead man.

She rises. "First let's get rid of those filthy chips, shall we?" Karl and Romy follow into the back room, where it is quickly done. The size of a grain of rice, they are extracted with little pain. Distracted, Karl barely notices her as, smiling, she raises another instrument, slightly larger, to the nape of Romy's neck. Karl reaches out, clamping her wrist in his fist, the maw of the pistol-gripped device a centimeter from the base of Romy's skull. "What're you doing, Raj?"

She looks up, mouth open, all innocence, "I thought I might as well take care of an implant at the same time. No extra charge. Genesistem's latest version, fresh out of shrink wrap. New, no repos, remotely updatable, still under warranty."

Karl meets Romy's eye, sees they think the same. "Not right now, thanks, anyway."

"Ah, Karl." She laughs. "Still superstitious about anything that came along after the cotton gin, I see." She racks it. "Must be a bore muddling along without an implant in a modern world."

"I manage."

"I don't see how," she says, on her way to the toilet. Wrapping the chips in a length of paper, she flushes. "There, that's done. On your way to the Pacific—let them track you now."

They return to the larger room where the boys take their places behind her, faces vacuous.

Deep in elation, Karl rubs the back of his hand. A fresh start, but with no chip he's a nonentity. He can buy nothing, do nothing but beg for tokens, like a vacant.

"You're lucky you came to me, now," Raj says. "Within a year they'll track DNA. A bit harder to change."

They sit, and one of the boys brings a box the size of a kilo of cheese. Raj opens it, searches inside, removes two tubes the size of small cigarettes, slips each into its own tablet, smiles, closes her eyes. "Ah," she says, and a holo appears in the air between them. A man Karl's age, hair a shade darker, but face and build remarkably similar. "Meet Idwal, forty, clean as a whistle, missing three years, no family, no record." She raises an arm in triumph.

A girl of Romy's height and build materializes nude at his side. "And this little thing, though she doesn't nearly do your friend justice, is Leela. You'll want to see files of course." A boy brings them each a tablet. "I've called them up. See what you think."

Karl scrolls through, and it's just as he says; they're prime, just what they need, worth at least ten million per. What's in Latte's account should just cover it. "They'll do." He slips Leela's tube from its slot in the tablet, holds it up to the light, "Opaqued?"

"Might look just a little odd, don't you think, if the eye in the sky were to see several hundred people, all missing, occupying the same cubic decimeter?"

Karl gets the point. "Can I see the others?"

She shrugs, hands the box to the boy, who brings it over. Karl finds it filled with bar coded tubes. He doesn't like the feeling it gives him to touch them, like pawing through personal effects of the dead. What he needs to do now is to get the money straight, get them put in and head out the door. He suspects he shouldn't ask, but he has to know. "What are their stories, Raj?"

She smiles, a cynical, world-weary smile. Not the smile Raj used to smile, the kindness, the understanding for human flaw gone—in its place chill calculation. "I don't see why I shouldn't tell you. They were a couple of my first."

Karl thinks he knows what she means, and he's worried. It sounds like a Don Juan numbering conquests, a predator reminiscing kills.

"Not easy, dying. At first all I felt was fear. So alone, you can't imagine it. Don't try. No matter how alone you are, you have yourself. You can see yourself, touch yourself, talk to yourself. I couldn't.

I came to in nothing, as nothing. Think about that. Everything I knew was gone, all of my belongings, even my body. All I had were my thoughts."

Karl is not comforted.

"Oh, I got used to it. It didn't take long for me to rejoin the multitudes in their dabbling. Only I wasn't—dabbling. For me it was life, my only life, my avatar my only existence. It wasn't enough. That surprises you, I should think, coming from me. You know how I loved my cyber playthings, but it's true.

"The avatars I met in the scape might spend every hour they could there, but sooner or later, they had to leave. Had to go home. Even netpunks—and there are more every day—even they have to eat, drink, eliminate, sleep, though some are sleeping out of body now, sharing their dreams. I had nowhere else to go. They wore masks; I was a mask.

"Can you imagine what that does to you? Can you? To live in a dream, in a play where the other characters are real people, and you are nothing. Where, when the curtain falls, they go home to their lives, and you stay behind on a darkened stage. Oh, it changes you. And I did change. I became a spider. A venomous spider with long sensitive legs spanning the web. And came the flies.

"Stuck fast in the trap I'd set, they could only wait for me to come. At first I was slow, clumsy. Many died while awaiting my ministrations. You've heard of them: vacants. The netpunks with fried brains they scoop off the streets. Hundreds of them—I'm not the only one hunting. There are others, many others. No one wants to die.

"Alone, no one to guide me, teach me, at first I wasted them in my gross attempts at control. They died of shock. My fumbling is what killed them. It isn't something you can pull up on a search, you know—how to possess. Like any learn-as-you-go proposition, it takes practice.

"Oh, I got them to come to me here, easily enough, but after that, what? So fragile, they died, and what could I do? I couldn't move them, I had no hands. All I could do was crank the refrigeration up, keep it working twenty four hours a day. I kept the place like a meat locker, which, after all," she says, smiling an ugly smile, "it was.

"At last I broke through. It was great, I can tell you." She runs hands over her arms, reveling in the feel of her skin. "What a job cleaning up after my bumbling the first few had." She motions at the box. "Salvaged their chips, after all, why waste them?"

Karl turns to see Willy still at the door. "And the girl?"

"She's in here with me right now."

"This can't be what she wants."

"Ah," Raj says, "but it is."

He's lying, he has to be. "Why would she?"

"I give them what they want, freedom from their bodies, escape, a life uninterrupted by mean necessities. Oh, yes, they do it willingly."

She reaches out and the blond boy comes to draw a long tongue across her palm. It's as if Karl's seen a cottonmouth slide out of her sleeve. He can't let what he feels show in his face.

"Can you imagine experiencing congress as a woman? I had no idea how rewarding that could be. Can you imagine it from the vantage of two minds? More?" A slow smile twitches its way across her mouth, across the mouths of the boys with her. "Love, in all its many possible forms—and there are many—experienced through all participants. I'm telling you, Karl, it's like nothing you can possibly imagine." Jaded eyes move to caress Romy, "I could arrange for you and your friend to join me if you like."

Karl turns back to check the door. He wants out—right now. A dead man staging zombie orgies with himself. Jesus, just how sick have things gotten in five years?

"Not right now, but we'll think about it." He turns to Romy, "We will, right?"

She gives him a look, smiles at Raj, "Yeah, we'll let you know."

She's not doing a very good job of acting. Raj doesn't buy it, but that's not important. What is important is that they get the hell away from here.

"You don't approve."

"Raj, you've read us, there's over twenty million on Latte's account. Leave us a few bucks to eat on, the rest is yours. How you live..." Karl scrambles to say what he means using words that no longer apply. "...is your business. Trade us straight across for the two clean chips and we'll be out of your hair."

She looks hurt. "Why Karl, I hope you're not suggesting that I would pull anything on an old friend."

"No," Karl says, more worried by the second, "Course not."

She smiles. "The problem is that you're in a very weak bargaining position. You see, what you've done is receive a service without specifying cost. Twenty million credits are all well and good, but I have no trouble finding what money I need these days." She crosses slender legs, examining nails bitten short. "A sin what they do to their nails, don't you think? No, what money I need I can get. I'm sure you can see that."

Raj is sounding too calm, too reasonable. Karl doesn't like it. "I don't get you."

She laughs. "Well let me help you, old pal. She stays— that's my charge for your chip."

Karl checks on Romy, finds her ready to bolt. He reaches out a hand to keep her where she is, and

even through the block he throws up, gets a jolt of revulsion that rocks him. "Want her to stay, ask her yourself."

Raj laughs, a sound like wind in quaking poplar, "Ask her? This is between you and me. She's no more human than I am. The law says it. You know it. Look at her, created in a lab, some hacker's wet dream, she's not even yours. Several bills in corporate property, stolen's my guess. Tell me I'm wrong." She smiles, smug, "Come on, Karl, tell me."

Karl's not getting into that—arguing what's human and what's not with an encoded personality. "It's her choice, Raj, not mine."

The girl's languid eyes turn on Romy, and she moves closer to Karl on the couch.

"Okay," Raj says, annoyed, "you'd like to stay here with me wouldn't you, Sweetheart?"

Karl can feel her answer rise from her gut, a font of fear, of loathing. He braces himself for it. Whatever she does, it won't make getting a deal any easier.

"I've heard about creatures like you. I never thought I'd meet one. Now I know my instincts about you were right: you shouldn't be."

Raj prickles, smile turning hard. "Thanks honey, for the sage opinion, but what I asked was if you'd care to stay on. I can make you a rich woman, you know that."

Romy laughs, taking her head in her hands. She looks up. "I've spent the last fifteen years a whore. I'll never be one again. Not for anybody, not for anything. Not for my life."

Good girl. He just hopes to God that's all she has to say. He's still got to try to get some of that money out of Raj.

"And I want you to know something else...."

Here it comes.

"You sicken me. You're an aberration, a cancer."

Karl keeps his eyes on the girl, sees her mouth tremble, her eyes grow hard as Romy speaks, a rage building inside her. The boys shift on their feet, betraying the anger behind the girl's serenity. He understands. Raj controls them all.

Enough of this. Karl reaches out to hand back the box, fumbles it, sending vials scattering over the Persian, "Oh, damn, here, let me help." Before he can, the boys gather them.

"What about it, Karl? You get your new chip, keep your money, and I implant this impudent thing."

Romy watches, ready to sense betrayal. He prays she'll give him time, won't use the .44 she has a hand on in her bag. "I want to talk to the girl you're riding now before I decide."

Raj smiles.

Romy recoils as if he'd struck her across the mouth. Resentment sharp as brine jolts him through the skin

of her arm.

Hold on, will you just hold on?

"You're considering it, that's good," Raj says, "but I fail to see what it is you hope to learn. She's really a most uninteresting type." Then her eyes light up. "Ah, so that's it. She is attractive, isn't she? Of course we can work out anything you'd like along that vein." Her eyes give him the once over. "I'd rather fancy that, I think."

Sickened by the perversity of the thing in front of him, keeping it out of his face, Karl pulls up a chair before her, takes her small foot in his hand, finds it cool.

"Oh," Raj says, squirming, "Are we starting already?"

"I talk to her, then I decide."

"Of course, but you won't like what you hear. Once the deal is made, sometimes they have second thoughts, become peevish, infantile."

Romy watches him, horrified, "What are you doing? She's a child."

Keeping his eyes on Raj, Karl silences her with a hand. "Come on, Raj, let her go and maybe we can do business."

The two boys linger either side, eyes hungry.

Her eyes close, open. "What do you want? I'm busy!"

Still he gets nothing from her foot. To throw him, he peers into her topaz eyes. "Cut the sham, Raj, I want her. You don't trust me that much, no deal, we're out of here."

The girl's eyes narrow. She smiles, a cagey smile. "Sorry, it's not easy after so long. I'll try again."

A tingle of growing amperage, he feels it. Hand curled over the baby-soft instep of her foot, a fluttering starts, then, as she's freed, a thawing. Her face loses its serenity. She gulps, terrified, nearly chokes as her eyes flood. "Oh, God! Oh... God!" From her Karl feels the horror of a dreamer awakening to find nightmare reality.

She looks down at herself lifting brown arms as if not recognizing them, looks at the two boys hovering over her, cries out in pain, in despair, a sound like the dying scream of a rabbit, owl's talons deep inside it. Whining, she kicks him away, stands, looks for somewhere to run.

Karl rises, arms out to catch her, "Don't run away, talk to me."

"I've got to go."

"There's nowhere to run, talk to me."

Her eyes catch his, stick, "What, what?"

He sits her down, arms small as a child's in his hands, "We've only got a minute, so pay attention." A

whine starts deep in her throat. Karl shakes her and she quiets. "Tell me what it's like."

She looks at him, confused. "Like? What it's like? You've got to be kidding." She laughs, stopping her mouth with a fist. With an effort at control, she goes on. "I was just netting, you know, and he took me, made me do what he wanted, pushed me away from the way out. I've been stuck in there, it seems like forever."

"Where?"

"UR. I can go anywhere I want, but nowhere real. He won't let me contact anybody, no one alive, won't let me tell." Eyes wild, she freezes. "Oh, God!"

"What?"

"He's coming, he's coming back."

"Not yet, Raj, we're still talking."

"I don't see what this—"

"Out!"

"Oh, go on then," Raj says with a sigh. "have your fun."

She relaxes, sags, breathes, eyes squeezed shut, arms clamped over her belly, "Oh, God, thank you." She searches him with her eyes, "Who are you?"

"Nobody, but I want you to do me a favor. I want you to hang on. Will you do that?"

She looks at him, incredulous, "Hang on? I can't hang on! I want my life back. My parents, my friends, they must think I'm dead."

"I can't help you now, but I will."

Eyes suddenly desperate, she says, "You mean I have to go back?" She shrinks from him, searching for a way out. "I won't, I can't."

"Don't fight, don't even try. I'll convince him to let you go."

"You will?"

"I will."

"You promise?"

Karl sees a faint spark of hope in her eyes, and hopes he's not lying. "I promise."

She inhales sharply, as if she's been knifed, goes dead under his hands. Suddenly composed, a cool, ironic smile spreads over her face. "Judas Priest, Karl, you can't be that naive," Raj says, holding lovely arms to touch the boys, "I did hear."

Of course, he sees that now. "She's suffering, Raj."

She covers her mouth melodramatically, "Oh, tell me it's not so!"

Karl ignores the sarcasm, "Let her go."

A bitter smile and she leans back, "Troublesome little bitch, if I wasn't so fond of her, I'd get rid of her now. I don't know who you think you are, butting in like that, Karl. I only gave in to you because I need you to help me manage your little wildcat there until I can implant her."

Karl hesitates. Romy sits erect, hand in her bag, on the .44, ready to use it. Can she hit anything, he wonders? Who would she do first? He gives himself even odds with Raj.

The two acolytes come around to wait behind Romy, one at each elbow, eyes sharp as a circling dog's. He wonders what they've got under their robes. Guns were never his style. Monomolecular blades most likely. Were they decent kids before Raj got hold of them?

He pictures sweeping aside his jacket, finding the pistol grip of the shotgun, turning, bringing it up as he racks it, one fluid movement, one he could do in the dark, natural as scratching an itch. Too close to get both. Karl stands, drawing Romy after him. They move with them and he raises a hand, "Don't try it, Raj."

They hesitate.

Watching all three, now, speaking to them all, "So, what do you say, Raj, twenty million, even trade for two chips."

The girl smiles bitter and hard under half-closed eyes. "Oh, no, she's the price, the only price."

Karl nods, disgusted with himself for not getting this straight at the start. "You win, Raj, but I'll tell you, the man I knew would never have pulled this, never."

To this, she smiles. "Finished? Then you can get out. And Karl, take her, she's yours."

Karl halts, dry ice crystallizing in his stomach, burning him numb. He can't have heard right, but her eyes tell him he did. No coincidence. A network of evil, a confluence, one he can't fight.

"I can see you know," she says, "and I want you to know something else, Karl. I was hoping you'd find me. I've owed you for way too long. On the quay, if it hadn't been for that bull by the door, I'd have finished with you."

Mind frozen, at last he sees it, sees it all.

God he's stupid.

The men on the quay, Swindlehurst—they'd read just as dead as the girl in front of him, and never once had he put them together. Then there was the patsy in the interrogation cell and his story about not doing what he so obviously had. And the change that came over the one he'd cut on the quay. Skier in avalanche country, Karl feels the ground tremble.

"Five years ago, you blew my brain out the front of my face as I was driving out my own driveway. Ring

a bell?"

Romy watches every move he makes. What can she think?

The girl bares small teeth. "I was surprised to see you, there, Karl. I had no idea they'd send somebody like you after just one kid. One lousy kid, so what, who would care, right? They disappear everyday. "

He can see Kat's face, feel her thoughts in his mind. "Her name was Kat, she was the governor's daughter. That's why I was there."

The pretty girl who is Raj shakes her head, fingers a nose ring thoughtfully. "What I never could figure out was how you found us." She looks at Karl, sees he doesn't intend to answer, shrugs. "Never mind, I was new at it. I used to worry what happened to my little marionettes. Sentimental of me, I know, but as I say, it was all so new. That was my first taste of forbidden fruit, and you know, I rather fancied it."

"With as many bodies as you could possibly want... use... why take a little girl? Why, Raj?"

She shrugs, already bored, "Why not?" Delicate brown hands flutter, "You're so limited, so... prosaic. How can I talk to you? Philistine that you are, you probably believe that fairy story about an enduring soul."

Karl doesn't deny it.

She aims a thin finger at his heart, "See, what did I tell you? Me, I've rid myself of baggage. I believe what I see," she says, reaching out to rattle the box of vials like a gourd, "what I feel, hear, smell, taste. And the tide is with me."

Raj is right, Karl knows, but if the thing astride this girl is really what's left of the man who was his friend, he has to try to reach it. "You used to, you were one of the godliest men I knew. Punks came to you to sell their chips to get the money to push off on a last slide into oblivion, and what did you do? You sat them down, right here, fed them, got them their first shower in weeks. You talked. I was here, I saw you. I remember thinking it was hopeless, that you were nuts to try. Some you were able to convince to come back. Not many, but a few. They were lives you saved. No man who only believes in what he sees does something like that."

Her eyes cloud, almost as if struggling to recall, then clear as she laughs, "Oh, please, my superstitious past is neither here, nor there. All of this—what you call reality—to me is no different from UR. Nothing I do matters, nothing counts, it's just a game, just a way to pass the endless hours. I've nothing to fear. I can't be hurt, can't be punished, can't be stopped. Kill every one of my hosts and I'll ride as many tomorrow."

A chill demon wags its tail down Karl's spine.

"I'm a new form of life, Karl, a more advanced form, all of you—my toys."

Eyes welded to those of the lovely girl seated across the carpet from him, dread pulls at the pit of Karl's belly. He knows she's right, it's the truth, all of it, and it seems to him he's heard the death sentence for anything decent in the world. A thought pricks. "Why kill Kat, Raj? She was nobody, a kid, you'd done what you wanted with her, why not just drive away and let me have her? What would have been so goddam hard about that?"

She tilts her head on a slender neck, considering, "Not sure, really, just thought it'd be the smart thing to do." She clears her throat, a high gurgle like a bird's warble. "Worried about getting caught, you see. Didn't realize all I had to do was pull out. But then, coitus interruptus has never been easy, has it? Ah..." she says, shrugging graceful shoulders, "live and learn. Now I want to know something—would you have let me?"

Karl glances at Romy, sees her watching, listening. He won't lie, not even for her. He looks Raj in her dark eyes, "No."

Raj laughs, "Oh, Karl, we're more alike than we are different, we two, why can't you see that?"

Fear like nothing he's ever known takes Karl in its talons. Hay hooks dipped in liquid nitrogen find the gaps in his ribs and sink through to the heart of him, freezing everything they touch. Sure he was going to be kicked to death on the plat he wasn't this afraid. He's killed this thing twice, and here it is, still here, still taking lives, taking bodies.

This is evil—absolute evil. Real as sunlight, solid as a fistful of gravel. Evil he can't argue or reason away. Evil aggressive as a starving dog, clever as only the insane can be, with a cigar box full of glass rice grains burbling together—each one a life gone.

One thought in his mind—to get out, to get away, Karl edges to the door. Romy he brings in tow. And as she comes, one of the boys moves to cut her off. Karl's waiting for this, pivots, the twelve coming up, suspended on its strap, bead centered on the kid's sternum.

Raj smiles and the boys fade to her side. "You misunderstand me, my friend, I'm no threat. I'm well aware of your penchant for destructive playthings. The last thing I want is my home sullied, and I'm sure the last thing you want is to hurt these innocents, am I right? No, no, no, continue, continue, go your way. I'm sure you have far to go."

They wait at the door as, thinking it's all way too easy, Karl backs away. Why would Raj let them walk out? Why, when he has them here? What waits for them outside?

"I want you to know what it is you're beginning, Karl. From the instant you walk out that door, you must watch for me. I'll follow. Every moment, day or night. I'll track you, hunt you. And when the time is right, I'll take what I want. You see, you could have had it all, I would have given her back to you when I was done.

"Now all bets are off. When I get her, and I will, I'll use her up, Karl, use her until there's nothing left to use, until she couldn't sell herself for a tube steak on the quay. And you, I'll have you, too, you know I will, have you doing things you'd never imagine yourself doing, things that make your friend Darrell look like a prince, and I'll make sure you know all about it, every minute of it." She lifts the pistol-like implant tool as Karl backs out the door, covering their backs. He considers dropping all three of them right now, but the girl on the couch he can't kill. It's hopeless. He sees that now.

"Know how easy it is to use this, Karl? "

He knows. A child could do it, anybody could. Once implanted they'd be his.

"Sleep well," she calls after them.

Once on the street, Karl leads them a serpent's course up alleys, in and out of office buildings, doing

what he can do to sever any tail. As they run, Karl wonders...

Can they ever get far enough?

* * *

Five to ten.

From the roof of one of the new Chinese office buildings down on La Cienega, they look down on the pickup point as Willy lets Bink down for a walk in the rooftop park.

Romy leans at the rail. "Some friends you've got."

Numb, Karl watches traffic slide past. "I've been out of town."

The dark water of the canal below foams, churned by the wakes of countless boats. Walks along both sides swarm with people.

"So, you can go home now, at last."

He finds the thought doesn't appeal to him as much as he thought it would. "That's right."

"And I'll go into protective custody until I can testify for Auri. That's the plan, isn't it?"

He wishes she would shut up. "Then you want to?"

Her gaze drops to the water as a long barge docks, unloading. "I guess I always did. Someone has to make them pay for what they've done. Someone."

He thinks he hears an accusation in her voice. When he turns, she looks away.

"The girl you were talking about—what happened?"

His stomach falls when he hears her ask. He doesn't want to talk about it, has never talked about it, not to Mary, not to anyone, but a look at her face tells him she wants to know, and for some reason he wants to tell her. "It was the last time I worked. Kidnapped. Two days in a basement. She lived through everything they did to her. If I'd killed him when I first saw him she'd be alive today."

She watches him with an interest he hasn't seen in her before, "And why didn't you?"

Brown foam dances in the chop of crossing wakes as boats sprint by, engines droning. "Don't work that way."

"You did what you could. That is true, isn't it?"

He hasn't noticed her moving closer, but it's as if she has, as if the space between them is less. It's been a very long time since he's had anyone who would listen and not judge. "I almost had her—almost."

"Raj killed her?"

He nods, "I thought at least I'd stopped them. I didn't." He's curious. "What about after the trial?"

She takes a long breath, "After, Auri will get her money and Willy and I can go where we want."

Knowing what he knows about Genie, he deems that unlikely. Let her have her little fictions. He has his. He's going home—what's that if not fiction? And short fiction at that? He calls up the time: ten ten. "They're late."

"You're sure this is the place?"

He turns, scans the walk behind them, sees nobody to worry about—old woman with a kid, couple kids sucking face in the corner. "I'm sure."

Her look is thoughtful. "Where will you go?"

He watches the water for the detail come to pick her up. "Home."

"Home," she says as if tasting the word, savoring it. "What's it like?"

Irritated by her chatter, he sighs. Five minutes she'll be gone. For that long he can put up with anything, with anybody. But it frightens him, too—five minutes. Not long. "It's near the sea."

"Is it big?"

"Big enough."

"How big?"

A swarm of hornets stirs in his gut. What can be holding up Tate's crew? "Thousand hectares."

Slowly, she turns, "That's what...nine square kilometers, isn't it?"

"Close."

"Trees...are there trees?"

Karl takes a deep breath. It's not like Tate to be late. "There are."

"Oak, willow, fir, what?"

"Alder, sitka, madrone, some Port Orford, some oak, not much."

She sidles closer, so that the downy skin of her arm brushes his hand on the rail. Excitement comes through her skin.

"Near the ocean, you said?"

He looks at her, curious, "It runs to the sea."

"Touches it, you mean? For how far?"

Through her arm comes a vision, a fairyland of mist, mountain, forest. "Hair short of a klick."

She exhales as if she's been punched, "Is there a beach?"

He watches her as she stares out over the LA skyline, not seeing any of it. "Not much of one, a few pebbly coves, mostly cliffs."

"There is pasture, and a spring where you get your water, and there are deer, and apples, filberts, grapes in the woods."

How can she know that? Can she be reading him? He doesn't think so. "Yeah."

"How long have you lived there?"

"You tell me."

He can feel a small tendril of sadness wind itself about her thoughts as a smaller smile deflects the curve of her lips, "Lifetimes."

Could be a lucky guess. Could be. He nods.

"You keep chickens and live in an old farmhouse with a sway-backed ridge beam, am I right?"

At once he feels naked before her. He doesn't like it. "Maybe."

"I'm right." Lovely shoulders hunched, she shrugs, "And now you're going home."

Once she's in Tate's hands he can do that, he can go home. Home—where he lives alone. "Right again."

"Your woman, your children will be glad."

"There's a woman, a boy."

A river—the despair he feels in her—rises, dark and cold. He knows what she thinks, and lets her feel it as he basks in her misery. Because of what it means.

Two Zodiacs pull up that might as well have FEDERAL AGENTS spray-painted on them in neon pink. He frowns. Not like Tate either.

"Your neighbors, are they very close?"

Eight agents swarm the walk. Way too many to bring one woman in—too many by six. What the hell does it mean?

"Couple klicks."

She looks at him, wonder in her eyes, "Is it lonely?"

This is not right, not right at all. Tate would never do this—unless he were trying to tell him something.

"Not for me it isn't."

She thinks of his family. "Of course not."

Still, he says nothing to right the mistake. Why?

"Here we go," she says, raising a hand to wave.

Karl clamps her wrist, draws it down to the rail, "Don't."

"Why not? That's them, isn't it?"

Voice in the back of his head blaring, there's no time to argue. "Trust me?" He keeps hold of her to feel her answer. What he gets is confusion, even amusement as she smothers a smile. She does—as much as she does anyone, as much as Willy, and he's not at all happy to know it. It's a responsibility he doesn't want. Not now when it's nearly over, when he's about to dump her and head home. Not needing her reply, he doesn't wait for it, "Then, don't fight me."

She glares, angry eyes moving between his face and her wrist in his hand, not wanting to give him what he wants, but afraid to go downstairs alone, knowing she needs him, needs what he knows, what he can do, wishing she didn't. "All right."

"Don't do anything, don't say anything. Be just another tourist, understand?" A joke with her looks, her hair, but there are so many imitation Sisters on the streets, it might work. For a while it might.

Not understanding why they must be so careful now when it's all over, she nods, "I understand."

Karl releases her and turns his attention to the detail ten floors below. One agent directs traffic. The others search for them. Six of the eight he's never seen. One, small with long hair, wavers behind a pole just out of sight. The last is familiar, but from so far he can't be sure.

From the old woman he borrows a pair of binoculars. When he sees the face, frost crystallizes on his spine. Pug goes out when somebody dies. Never on a pick up like this. No bodyguard, he's a killer, all brawn, with the tenacity of a pit bull. Loves using his blade. They'd worked together—once—that was enough. Never again. Magnus should have known not to send him. At that instant a thought breaks through cloud in the back of his mind. He returns the binoculars, checks to see Willy's still walking Bink.

"Can we go down now?" she says, "I'm cold."

Seeing her standing in the wisp of a dress at the rail, he realizes she must have been freezing ever since he dragged her out on the balcony. Never once had she complained. Hard to dislike somebody that can take it and keep their mouth shut about it.

He moves close, lowers his voice, "Not yet. Stay here. Make conversation. Hold them here if you can. Pretend you're the kid's mom. I don't know, tell them a story, but keep them here as witnesses. They're your best protection."

"Protection? Why do I need protection? Where are you going?"

"Got a call to make."

"Why not use your headset?"

"Don't want them tracking me. The booth I can leave."

Sighing in frustration, she scratches the top of her head, "This is getting awfully melodramatic, can't we just go down?"

He doesn't want to explain, wants to get going. "You see that big guy by the Zodiac? "

She does.

"Saw him stomp a kitten once, to hear its skull pop. Shouldn't be here, this isn't what he does."

He turns away and she grabs for his sleeve. Impatient, he turns.

"Coming back?"

He can read the fear in her eyes, hear it in her voice. It surprises him. Something's changed; she doesn't want him to go. "If I can I will. Give me an hour. I don't show, it's your call. You're on your own. Go with them if you want. I wouldn't, but you can. If you decide not to, Mary's code's on the bottom of the duffel, tell her you're a friend of mine. She'll take care of you."

Romy regards him doubtfully, "She helps everyone who says that?"

He smiles. Good question, but easy to answer. "Nobody says it."

Her mouth curves upward in a cynical smile. "I won't lie."

Meeting her eyes brings them closer than a full body clinch with any other woman he's known. "You won't be lying." He motions to Willy and he lopez across the lawn to be near her. For an idiot, not so dumb. "Stay close."

Severing her gaze with an effort, he heads for the stairs.

SIX

At sea level Karl bums a token, finds a pay com.

Reciting the code he waits, cubicle reeking of urine—cat, human, maybe both. Laser etchings mar the plexi—Vato loco, Viva Mexico Norte! Local color—Mayan culture's gift to the 21st century.

Back to the screen, he watches passersby, doubtful he could tell one of Raj's cat's paws by looking. Does it matter, anyway? By the time they touch him it'll be too late. Still he waits. Mexican com service is worse than he remembers.

"Yes?" Rick again.

"Karl," he says, back to the eye. "Get me Magnus."

"A public satcom, Karl? You've sunk pretty low. Sorry you wasted your token, he's tied up."

"Ricky, I been taking your crap for ten years. Listen to me, now, I know where you are. If I have to come up there, you'll be lucky to open your mouth wide enough to suck a straw. Tell Tate he doesn't get his face over here, we won't be coming in."

Karl doesn't have to look. He can imagine his pout. "Please hold."

Back to the closed booth, Karl waits, watching the promenade, doing his best to cover all directions at once. But for whom? He's good with faces, voices, builds—that won't help him now. Raj can be any age, any sex, any body. Step up behind them and with the press of a stud they're worse than dead—they're his. The back of his neck crawls. Not him.

"I told them you were too smart," Magnus says. "If it matters, I was overruled."

He's on the helipad. That means he's on his implant, secure as any. Karl's public unit's okay, too—too public to be bugged.

Karl turns long enough to let him see his face, and to see his. Magnus looks like hell.

"And would you take it easy on Rick? He'll be in a snit the rest of the day, now."

"Let him."

"You don't have to be around him. I do."

"Got your hint."

"Did what I could."

"So why all the brawn? I made the date. Who's worried I'll flake, you?"

"Not me."

"Auri?"

"I told you, she's got friends."

"You out of the loop, now?"

"Sometimes I wonder."

"But she wants her out, wants her alive. I got her here. Why this, now?"

Magnus looks away over the city, implant giving a good interpretation of his facial expression from brain impulses—just now hopelessness. "She doesn't talk to me. You want my guess, she needs her testimony and doesn't want to take any chances she'll change her mind."

"She'll never make it. Genie will take her out. She knows that doesn't she?"

"Auri thinks we're her best chance to get her there, and don't forget there's half a Quad riding on Romy if she can."

Karl feels sick. "Then all that about wanting her daughter back..."

"Five hundred trillion, Carl, that's how much she's suing Genesistems for. Five hundred million million. All the experts agree. Romy testifies, she's won. Auri never was real mommy material anyway. That kind of money makes up for a lot of motherly love. Come on in and we'll get you on a bird for home."

There it is. He's that close. Two hours he can be there. All he has to do is send Romy and Willy in to die, to betray the trust he felt in her—just that. A small thing. A minuscule thing. Something only he would know. "Don't think so."

"Karl, you're being stubborn. She wants to testify, doesn't she?"

"She wants to live, too."

"We'll take care of her, but Karl, you've got to bring her in. You don't, Auri won't do her bit with the committee. You forget why you came down here in the first place?"

Blind to the walk before him, Karl forces himself to think. "Tell me the agency hasn't been penetrated."

Tate laughs, breathy, low, "With half a Q riding the toss? Don't be an ass."

"Then we'll stay out."

Magnus smiles in that God-but-you're-a-stupid-son-of-a-bitch way he has, "She'll be upset."

"That's your problem. The deal was I'd get her here to testify. How I do it's my problem."

"Auri may feel differently."

Sensing he's been too long on the line, Karl backs away, "Better get back."

Tate looks at him, disgust plain on his face. "This is nuts, you know that."

It's worse than nuts. "I know."

On the way back he thinks how easy it would be to turn her over and be done, be gone. Tomorrow morning he could roll over in his own bed. Jesus, his own bed...

And where would that leave her?

He's got a feeling about how long she'll last once in—about as long as spit on a griddle. Why he should

care he's got no clue, except that to have gotten her out of that charnel house only to dump her in another would leave a rancid taste in his mouth. Then there's that damned trust. Again he curses himself—an ordinary man wouldn't even know. Now he does, how can he wave goodbye? He wishes he could. He can't.

Topping the stairs to where he left her waiting, Karl sees Romy's not alone.

Pug waits on the other side of her, too close for Karl to use the 12, and another agent, small guy, long hair, stands back to him as he comes up out of the well. Pug nods, no happier to see Karl than Karl is to see him.

Hey, Karl," he says in a voice like a diesel with bad injectors, "how they hanging?"

Karl nods, "Stomped any pussycats lately?"

The smaller agent turns.

And the dead rise.

* * *

Sara smiles.

Same old big-sister smile on the same wide, maddeningly kissable mouth. "Well, look who's here. Tate said you were back."

When he finds his voice he says, "I thought you ended up on the bottom."

Her laugh, just as he remembers it. "No wonder you look so white. I was on maternity leave, stupid." She smiles at the look on his face. "And get that somebody-stole-my-candy look off your face. I didn't swear off. It's ours, Gina's and mine, little girl." She shows a pocket tablet playing a short clip of the baby, laughing, wobbling, spitting up. "Is she a bug or what?"

"Cute as," Karl says, thoroughly confused. "I'm happy for you, Sare, I didn't know they could do that."

Getting pretty common, now, infertile couples mostly, but we both wanted a girl and I thought, hey, why not, you know?"

"Cut the Y's out of the loop, huh?"

She sighs, "Let's not get started."

Pug, impatient to go, moves to take Romy's arm, and Willy's on him. Pug bellows, spins, but with no chance to get at his knife he's a puppy in the coils of a python. Willy sweeps his legs out from under him, slamming him hard, face-first into the floor, arm around his throat.

Sara draws, racks the slide of her pistol, drops into a half-squat using the Israeli method Karl taught her.

Karl moves in front of her, arms out, "No, no, no, Sara, wait."

Dark eyes suspicious, the muzzle of Sara's 10 mm waivers between Karl's heart and the floor. She can't decide, settles on his crotch, "What's going on, Karl?" She shouts the way she does when she's up against something scares her.

He shows her his palms, keeping his voice calm, thinking of those +P+ 10mm in Sara's pistol a pace away. "It's all right, Willy won't hurt him, he's just protective. Ease up Willy, keep him conscious! You doing all right down there, Pugsy?"

Meaty mouth kissing tile, the big man growls a profane imprecation, crimson spit drizzling from his lips.

"See, he's fine. It's all right, now, Sara, put it away. Will you put it away?"

She hesitates, decides, drops it to her thigh, still not away. He won't press it. Sara's eyes spark dangerous. "Who the hell is this oaf, Karl?"

"A friend is all, just a friend."

"Come on, Karl, we've got a job to do here, you know that, she's coming in, what you and the ape do is up to you."

He shakes his head, "No, Sara, she's not."

He can see her eyes change as she tilts her head. Like a dog hearing a new tune. "She's not? What do you mean, she's not?"

He shrugs. "I mean she's not coming in. She's with me."

"You nuts?" She steals a peek over her shoulder as if she's expecting somebody. "You know how it works. She's coming in. Tate will—"

"I was just on with him. He's all right with it. He's being pushed, it's not his call."

She's confused, now, he can see that, which makes him think of the time he took her to see her first homicide. First corpse, first blood. Four a.m. They'd just eaten. The corpse had been dead a week. Waste of good ribs. Afterwards, they went out for waffles.

God, but it's good to see her alive.

"She's with you? What's that mean, Karl? You used to call things like her freaks of nature, said they were a mistake, walking mannequins. That changed?" She looks at Romy as if she were an an inconvenient mistake. "What's going on?"

He knows Pug's calling right now, he has two, maybe three minutes to convince her. Not very long. "She goes in, she's dead."

Sara laugh-sighs, "And you care? This is a freak of engineering we're talking about here. Is this Karl I'm talking to or some recom-liberationist?"

He looks at Romy, sees her watching him, eyes worried, right hand out of sight on the .44. A thrill of

fear runs through him when he thinks of these two in an arm-length fusillade. He won't let it happen. Moving just enough to make it impossible, he smiles, not sure why. Eyes never leaving his, Romy smiles back, tense shoulders dropping a little as she relaxes.

"Yeah," he says, embarrassed by the answer, "Yeah, I care."

Pug moans into tile.

"Shut up, Pug," she says, laughing, shaking her hair in amusement. "You find the girl of your dreams and she's a Sister, Karl, a Sister? Why not just come in with her, work her yourself. When it's over—"

"I don't kid myself, Sare. They want her, there's no way I'm going to stop them. I got lucky twice, I won't again. She's not going."

She looks at him like he's telling her Bink can tango. "Not kidding yourself, I'm not so sure. Karl, she's a construct. A Sister for the love of heaven! They don't play your game any more than I do. You know that, right?"

He knows. "That doesn't matter. She has the right to decide for herself." He asks her, "You want to go with them? Tell her."

Romy keeps her eyes on him. "I want to live, and I won't go back. I'll never go back."

Sara, impressed, is beginning to get a trapped look about her. "Karl, I've got a job to do. You know what that means."

For one awful second he's sure she's going to bring the gun up, and he holds his hands wide to calm her. "Sara, she's the last. The same people who sent nine of us to the shelf slaughtered the rest of them last night, all but her and one more."

Her face darkens, "I heard it was—"

"We were there," Romy says. "We barely got out. It was Genie."

Sara turns to her. "Then why not testify?"

Romy pushes away from the rail, slips the gun out from under her coat to let it hang against her thigh where Sara can see it. "I want to, but I want to live, too. If Karl says I shouldn't go in, then I'm not going."

Sara looks at him, face softening. "Not just a pretty face, huh? So, you two are..."

"Friends," Romy says.

Sara gives Karl a tongue-in-cheek glance, "Uh, huh." She leans around, tells Pug to cancel the call, waits for him to do it, holds up a hand for them to wait while she verifies. "Tell Ivan the terrible to let him up and I'll send him down."

Willy pushes himself off, and Pug bounces to his feet, thinks about evening the score with his knife. Karl can see the fingers of his big hand curl, itching to do it. He looks at Karl, knows him, knows he's carrying, looks at Sara, heads for the stairs.

"Karl, know what?" Sara goes to the rail, waves okay to the agents below. "I ran into one of the shields from the city a few years ago. Told me a few things I didn't know."

Karl winces. What now?

"They put me with you because of all the guys you disliked gays the most. They put me with you because they knew a hayseed like you would give me a rough time, a miserable time, that you'd run me raw over the rough spots. But you didn't. You know, Karl, the first time I saw you, with that close cropped hair, no jewelry, and those damned dark suits of yours, I thought, oh, Christ what kind of hick is this? I was wrong.

"You taught me more than anybody since. You were the best partner I ever had, Karl. You even came to dinner and were decent to Gina, a little nervous, a little awkward, maybe, but decent, kind. I know how hard that must have been. You know how close I came to quitting before I was put with you, Karl?" She raises thumb and finger. "That's how. It meant a lot."

At the stairs she hesitates, "Subjects eluded agents at scene, that the tune?" She sighs. "I'll see if I can get them to buy it." Again she looks at Romy, shakes her head. "You know, Karl, I don't blame you a bit, they're even more incredible in person." And to Romy, "He's not as bad as he seems, you know, a lot better, really, just acts tough. You can trust him—but then you know that, don't you?"

She stows her pistol under an arm, speaks into the air, looks back, appraising them both, "And Karl, if you love her, get her the hell out of L.A."

* * *

Salvation Army Mission, downtown L.A..

Karl follows Romy up the mess line. Next comes Willy, overcoat bulging with Bink. Heaping rectangular pans along the steam tray only vaguely resembling the foods they are meant to, they slide steel trays along to be filled by people with tired faces. A slice of bread like a soiled sponge, a clump of potato, brown gravy with a puzzling aroma, things that if Karl doesn't look too closely might be mixed vegetables, something close to apple pie, but smelling wrong somehow. Just plain food.

"Oh, God...." Karl sighs under his breath, mouth to her ear. Her hair teases his upper lip. "I don't want to eat this."

"It doesn't look so bad," she says.

Behind the counter, an old man with watery eyes sizes her up. Fascinated, he shakes a sticky dollop of potato off his spoon onto her tray, smiles a gap-toothed smile. Romy nails him with crystalline eyes sharp as glass, and his gaze falls away, a severed line.

They find a bench and sit, Romy across from him, Willy at his elbow. Feeling eyes on them, on Romy, still in the same dress, screaming class, screaming money, Karl scans the room around them with unease. Doesn't like being around so many people, so many implants, so many cat's paws for Raj. Food untouched, he watches Romy take a delicate bite of potato, then one of vegetable.

With a face like that she could make eating paste the next fad. With fondness he pictures the meal at

Vici's. He hasn't eaten since. He tastes the gravy, sticks his fork obliquely into it where it stays. "Just like Mom used to make."

He can see she's working up to asking something. He doesn't want to talk, doesn't want to share lives—not the way things stand. He's fighting to keep his view of her from changing. Talking will only make it harder and it's hard enough already. Dreading her question, he waits for it.

"Your mother cooked for you all the time?" she asks as if she's delving into some dark territory.

Relieved, he nearly laughs, "She cooked."

"And, did she wear an apron?"

He nods.

She warms to it, "And did she bake cookies?"

"And bread." He understands what she must feel, and wishes there were something he could say to give her what she wants. "She had a temper, though. Liked her kitchen clean and when I made a mess, I had damned well better have cleaned it up."

Over his head she smiles, eyes alight. "I thought you'd be in Sonora by now."

Villar shrugs, running a hand over his head. "One last thing to do, one last job." He looks Karl over as he circles to sit next to Romy. "Still in L.A.?"

"Surprise after surprise. What about you, I thought you quit."

"I did, this is freelance."

Karl remembers the small man whipping off his balaclava, firing as they rose out of range over the scrub cliff and knows he's right. "It was you."

"Seguro que sí." A smile grows on his hard mouth. "Here I am again."

Throat suddenly dry, Karl tries to swallow. This guy's a killer, a good one, deadly as nightshade and sitting with his hands out of sight not a pace away. They might well be dead in a few seconds. "A job you couldn't turn down?"

Villar nods, mouth drooping sadly. "One always needs money."

Romy watches, eyes filled with doubt.

"You could have done it a hundred times, you could have yesterday. If you hadn't called—"

"They didn't give it to me until today." He points, smiling, and Karl's glad to see his right hand. "You know that was the only time anyone ever got away from me, that old bruja. I can't believe I forgot the stairs. You ruined a perfect record."

So what, now, he's out to fix it?

Karl sneaks a quick glance at the doors. Nothing as far as he can tell. Nobody he wouldn't expect to see in a place like this. The out of luck, out of time, out of work—people like himself. To Villar he says, "Luck."

"Not only that."

"The pilot?"

"No longer employed." Villar nods, "Told before he went away."

That would be right.

Karl keeps his eyes on Villar's, unclipping the 12, sliding it free making sure not to move his shoulders, not to clue him. He lays it across his thigh, pointed at the base of Villar's spine.

Villar's eyes smile directly into his, and Karl knows he knows.

"No te preocupes por eso, compadre. If I were here to do more than talk it would already be over. Erin wouldn't take me back if I did." He nods at the crowded room, the door beyond. "You call this watching yourself? You're getting lazy."

It's true and Karl knows it. He shrugs, wiping his eyes with his gun hand, leaving it balanced on his thigh. "I'm tired. So why you here?"

"To talk."

That doesn't sound good. Genie's still interested enough in her to spend some more money. He'd hoped they might just kiss it off, let her go, though he should have known better. Nearly ten bills he's cost them in organs. They're not about to forgive and forget. That's why Villar's here. Karl's hand rests on the grip balanced on his thigh, index finger on the button safety. "So talk."

"She'll never testify."

This is what they sent him for? "Auri seems to think she will."

He laughs, barely audible, harsh with contempt, "Not if the board of directors has its way."

Karl wonders if he can take him out before he gets Romy, decides it's unlikely, regrets letting him get this close. "What's Swindlehurst have to say about it?"

Villar shakes his head, frowns, "The bung up with Auri panicked somebody on the mainland, that's why the party with the gas. Now there's only Romy and Erin. Neither one will live to get within a klick of a courtroom. Auri knows. I was there when Swindlehurst had her on the horn, offered her a proposition."

Romy says, "What kind of proposition?"

"Auri gets you where they can get an easy shot and she gets a hundred bills, consolation prize. Auri took it, hedging her bets, I guess you could say."

Karl can see in her face she doesn't believe it.

When she sets down her fork, her hand trembles. "You lie."

Villar shakes his head, sadly, "Hey, babe, my mom was no prize either."

She covers her eyes with her hands, looks up, "Vincent will know what to do, he always knows. He made it out, didn't he?"

Villar studies the food on Karl's tray.

"Well didn't he?"

Villar shakes his head again and Romy doubles over as if she's in pain. "But...he said he had it set up so they wouldn't...."

Villar nods, "Oh, yeah, deeded his interest to some God fanatics, didn't he." He shrugs, "Guess they loved money more than they hated Genie: quit-claimed their interest back to the corporation. Heard they made out like bandits. End of that crusade, I guess, huh?"

Face blank, she stares through him. Karl's just seen her lose all of what little excuse for a family she has. The desolation of being absolutely alone is a dark pond on a moonless night, you alone in the middle. He's been there in that deep, still water, been there often in the last five years. Often enough to know exactly what it is she feels.

Romy leans forward, "Auri woudn't ask me to testify if she knows I'd never live to take the stand."

"It's a game to her. One she can't lose. You testify she makes out big. If you have a little accident on the way," he shrugs, "no skin off her ass. She takes the hundred bills and runs crying all the way to the bank. She wins whether you testify or not. Me, I'm paid to see you don't." Karl hears the hair hiss as he runs a hard hand over the stubble on his head. "How—they left up to me."

Villar swivels, eyes always moving—a dangerous man. He turns back, speaks softly, "So, how am I doing?"

She looks hard at Karl, jaw set, before she answers. "Lousy."

Villar looks pained. "You won't, you know."

"Oh, yeah, watch me, I'm with Karl, you know."

Hearing this dumps a cauldron of molten lead into the pit of his stomach. She says it like it means something.

Villar nods appraisingly across the table, eyes cold—business eyes. The eyes he would have met if he and Auri had been a few seconds late to the stairs. The eyes they would have seen for the one long second they would have seen anything at all. "He's good, but he's only one man."

"I could go in, they have eight agents assigned to protect me."

Villar eyes Karl's tray, "Looks good, mind if I..."

Humbled by her faith in him, knowing it's misplaced, Karl slides it over.

"Not good enough." Villar takes a bite of potato, gesturing with his fork as he fights the paste in his mouth, "All it takes is four or five of them to get distracted for a few seconds. Bam, it's over. They'll get the fall guy, they always do. It won't help you any."

She looks across the table at Karl, eyes hopeful. Karl knows he won't like the question.

"You can protect me, can't you?"

"I can try. I'd probably get the first. I may not be around to get the next one—and there will be one. They want you, they'll take you. And what about Raj? The case will be over the Net like the pox. He'll know exactly where you are, exactly where to come for you, and who to ride to get to you."

She glares at him as if he's turned against her.

"Raj?" Villar says, "Who's Raj?"

Romy disentangles long legs from the bench, slams the .44 on the table, heads out into the street.

Villar eyes the gun, smiles, "Damn, nobody trusts nobody, anymore."

Karl snatches it up and barks his knee going after her.

* * *

Dark.

Bad part of L.A.

She's half a block away by the time he catches her. "This isn't very smart," he says to her back.

She keeps walking, long-legged stride making it hard for him to keep up. "Flake off."

He's puffing and she's barely breathing. "I was only telling you the truth. What do you want, you want me to lie?"

"I want you to leave me alone."

"Look, you better come on back."

She keeps going. "So what am I supposed to do, huh?"

They pass three men on the corner. Karl watches them as they pass. Hand inside his jacket, he puts them on notice, meeting their eyes, or trying too—there's only darkness where their faces should be. Masks? He's not sure.

Scenting the air for vulnerability like wolves, they find none, fade back into darkness. Karl can swear she's jacked up her pace. He can't keep up with this gazelle. "Don't ask me what you should do."

She turns on him. "I am asking."

Grateful for the break, he braces hands on knees, sucking air. What does she want to hear? He's got nothing to give. "Look, I gave up on this place five years ago, I'm not the one to ask. Do what you need to. I care about one thing, and one thing only—taking care of number one."

She moves to a lighted storefront, head down, hair liquid fire catching the glare from inside. "You're a liar."

She can think what she wants.

Looking back at him as if she doesn't understand, she moves to the window like a sleepwalker to light. Arms spread wide, she presses hands and face to plate glass. Inside, animated mannequins couple with mindless energy. She moans in frustration. "Oh, God!" she says, voice serrated with desperation, "God, what should I do?"

Behind them, dark shapes hang just beyond the light. Alone out here she'd last as long as a wasp in an ant hill. Afraid she'll run from him, and he won't be fast enough to catch her, he softens his voice, comes up close behind her, close enough to grab her if she bolts. "Why testify?"

Face distorted with pain, she watches him in the mirror opposite gyrating couples, as they keep up their tireless pistoning. "How can you ask that? For them, that's why—for them."

Again, he smells the sleeping Sisters, sees the one he mistook for her, the track of a scalpal. "They're gone. You're alive. To be whacked in some hallway somewhere—is that what they'd want for you?"

He takes her by an arm, turns her to face him, one eye on the predators inching up behind them. Face hateful, hair falling over one eye, she glares. Taking a fistful of her hair, he draws her head back, slamming her shoulders against the glass. Like a drum head it shudders. "Is it? The sisters you loved, the ones that loved you, is that what they'd want for you? A peroxide douche, a slip down steel-edged stairs, China white injected into a femoral artery? There are so many ways.... And all so you can say what?"

"To say they made us!" The words she spits at him, screaming loud enough to echo up the street, loud enough for boats to slow, wakes slapping, heads turning to stare, "Used us, slaughtered us! A thousand of us!"

It's there, he senses. Right there. An open sore out of reach between shoulder blades, a gathering of infection crying out for the lance. Quietly, he says it: "A thousand what?"

"Women..." She whispers it. "...a thousand women." Silently, teeth clenched, she sobs, her pain scalding him, leaving him trembling, wanting to hold her. Instead he props her against cold glass, taking her face in a hand, forcing her look at him. "Auri gets her judgment. Then what? They'll tie it up in appeals, and when the nets have moved on to something juicier, they'll have it quietly overturned. You think you'll hurt them—you won't."

She tries to push away from the glass. He shoves her back hard. "You think this is some novel we're living here? Some bestselling thriller where one spunky guy and gal take on a multinational, the CIA, half the US senate and win? It isn't. This is real life, where people who see things they shouldn't end up assuming ambient temperature."

"You want me to tell you what you're going to do? Okay, I'll tell you. You're going to stay quiet. You're going to stay hidden. And you're going to stay alive. That's what you're going to do. Want to flush your life away, fine, there'll always be time for that."

Hating him for the truth of what he says, she bares her teeth. Nose running, she swipes at it with the back of a hand, stringing a web of mucus. "You think they should get away with what they did? With murdering them, with selling their hearts, their insides like they were animals? You think they should win?"

A wave of hopelessness rises over him, closing over his head, shutting out the light. "They have." He shrugs out of his jacket, drapes it around her bare shoulders. Keeping watch over the dark ebbing about them, right hand on the .44, he leads her, unresisting, back to the light.

"They already have."

* * *

Romy safely in the women's dorm and Willy set on watch at the door, Karl walks Villar to the bus stop.

"So," he says, "will she testify?"

"I don't know."

Villar nods. "It won't be me, but I'm not the only one I can't stop the others. I don't know who they are, just that they're there. You told her that?"

"I told her." A drizzle falls, greasy, stinking of sulfur. Karl turns up his collar, slips on a cap to keep it off his hair. "I talk her out of it, then what?"

Villar stops to adjust the Walther under his arm, shrugs, "She's alive. She's free. If she can stay that way long enough to fall off the edge of the earth, nobody's going to follow her."

Karl remembers the eyes watching from the dark. How much would a Sister bring?

A bus slides up, wake breaking through piers, and Villar offers him a coffee-colored hand. He's never taken a Mexican's hand before, not as a friend. His grip is firm, dry. He's been telling the truth, all he knows.

Villar still in his grip, he says, "What is this about you not taking the job because of Erin? She'd never know, not for sure. The money must be good. You could have hosed us down from the door, I'd never have seen you. So why not?"

Villar looks at him, dark eyes reflecting the lighted windows behind Karl's back, "Vaya con Dios, hombre."

"Yeah," Karl says, not knowing the words, getting the gist through his skin. Villar mounts the burbling behemoth and it roars off, leaving Karl alone.

"Yeah," Karl says to no one, heading back thinking of Romy, of what Villar had said, as the dark, the silence clamps back down.

"If she can stay alive long enough..."

* * *

At dawn Karl wakes.

Air heavy with the sweat of ten men, he dresses quickly in half light. Outside he finds Willy following Bink as he autographs a row of pier posts. Karl follows, street becalmed, squinting as the overcast brightens.

L.A.—the city presses down on him. He wants out. Resentment boiling up into his throat, he watches Willy follow Bink on cat feet. If he were alone, if it were simple, he'd be gone, home as fast as his legs and his thumb could take him. Now...

He could ditch them. Could have done it last night even. Could do it now. What would Willy do here? Genie must know he helped them. The tech would see to that. On the plat he's spare parts. In L.A. what? Bouncer maybe. A quiet, sensitive bouncer. Not too many openings for a man bred to kill with a proclivity for compassion. What about Romy?

If he were to do a fast fade, hop the bus growling its way up the canal right now, where would she be? If she were lucky, sent back to be cannibalized. If not, grabbed off the street, passed gang to gang. Maybe sold into one of the unlicensed houses where the girls are young, and shorter lived. She'd be a draw, all right—for a while.

Feeling trapped, he squats, back to a spray-painted wall. Where can he go? They don't belong in L.A. They don't belong anywhere. He gives her up to Auri. She's dead. Unless...

Romy comes out onto the street and at once he knows what they've got to do. He leads her up the street by her arm to a pay com.

"What's the hurry, who you calling?"

He hustles her on.

Eyes still misted with sleep, she pulls away, "I won't talk to her."

Finding her surprisingly strong, he holds on, "Yes, you will."

"I won't, why should I?"

He keeps her moving. "To tell her what you're going to do, that's why." When Romy hears this, she stops fighting, though she's still not happy.

To buy them some breathing room. To get her to call off the EPA and give them a place to go, that's why.

He calls collect. "Oh," Rick says, scowling, "not you."

"Get Tate."

The screen blanks and it's him, sunk deep in the murk of his office. "Tate" The voice is odd—weak, old, somehow.

"We need to talk to Auri."

"Not here," he says, voice barren as L.A. skyline.

"Where, then?"

"Back to her palace on the hill."

"Why'd she go?"

Tate shrugs, shoulders slumped as he toys with a small sculpture of Quixote on his desk. "Nothing to fear from them now, why not?"

Karl hadn't thought of it that way before, but sees it now. "I'm out of tokens, can you have Rick patch me over?"

"Sure." He tells Rick what he wants him to do, then turns to Karl. "She's used to getting what she wants, that one, better keep your guard up."

A moment later, the screen brightens. It's Auri, on the balcony where they were nearly gunned down a week ago. Can it have been only a week?

"Pronto?"

"Sorry, only me."

Like a cat ready to strike out, she rises. "You! Why hasn't she come in? What are you doing out there?"

"Breathing—we kind of like it."

"Where is she?"

"Right here." He yanks her in front of the sensor.

Auri tenses, takes a rapid breath, "Romy..."

"It's true, isn't it? You want them to kill me."

Auri takes a short step closer, predator edging closer to prey, intent on not spooking it. "Don't be a fool. I told them what they wanted to hear. If you'd come in nothing would have happened to you. With the

others dead, you're my last chance."

"Why not just tell me what my chances were and let me decide for myself? You are my mother."

Auri's head drops, mouth open, "I've never been anybody's mother, Sweetheart." She turns to Karl. "I want her in right now. I'll have you picked up in five minutes, stay right where you are."

Of course they'd be tracing the com. Karl gives himself two minutes to get off and gone. "Look, with her dead you get peanuts. Why not play it smart? Get EPA off my neck and she can give her testimony via com from Anglo-Cali. She wants to testify, let her go and she will."

"Karl, she says, voice a rising thunderhead, "I want her in. Now."

Here it comes. Dreading it, he shakes his head. "Auri, you're being stupid."

"Listen, you did what I wanted you to do. You're done. I've already taken care of that thing we talked about. I want you to bring her in, and that's exactly what you are going to do."

Now is the time. "Romy's got something to tell you." He watches the side of Romy's face, wanting to reach out and tuck the hair behind her ear. "Tell her."

She faces the holo, "I want to testify, I do."

Auri sighs in exasperation, laughs a long bitter laugh. "That supposed to convince me? People do change their minds, Karl. She might change hers. I'll tell you what, she's not in in 48 hours I'll make sure they burn that shack of yours, scatter the ashes to the wind. They'll shoot you down if you try to go back. You hear me?"

Romy watches him. Feathers tickling newly healed scar tissue, her eyes tease his soul. "What do you mean? What's this got to do with Karl?"

"We had a deal. You come in and I make sure he keeps his hog farm."

"If I don't?"

"He's got nothing to go back to but a sanctuary for some endangered slime-tunneling worm."

Close enough for him to scent her, Romy turns her back to the screen, blocking Auri's view, face searching, questioning. "So why won't you let me go in?" Her breath is hot on his face.

Looking into her eyes from so close he realizes that somehow in the last few days the rules of the game have changed. Without those eyes, the land's worth nothing. A drug of phenomenal potency, she's insinuated herself into his system. Now he has the need. Reluctant to see how vulnerable this makes him, he fights her gravity, turns away, searching the street. It's like turning away from a glowing stove to face the dark. "It wasn't safe."

"But—"

"Look...." He can't take much more of this. "I didn't get you off the plat to throw you into a recycling bin. That would be a waste of effort. I don't like waste."

Saying nothing, she raises a tentative hand to his lips as if feeling for heat, hesitating, fingers just over his skin. "I'll never understand you," she says, and walks out and away.

He checks to make sure Willy goes after her. He does.

"Where is she going? You keep her there, you hear me? Do you? I mean what I say, Karl, you know I do. You get her in or you've got nothing. Nothing!" With a frustrated expletive she breaks the connection. Though it's too dim to see much on the filthy screen in the morning sun, he knows Magnus is back. He can feel him. When he has something to say he will.

Just when Karl decides he must have been wrong, that Tate's not there after all, he speaks. "You always were a pushover."

Karl turns away from the street, not trusting himself to speak, tongue prodding a split lip, nods at the eye.

"I take it you've changed your views on recoms?"

Karl turns away, letting his eyes lose focus, spring sun making him want to sleep after a night among snoring drunks and mumblers. Has he? Does he know what he thinks about anything anymore? Karl can picture Magnus nodding the way he does, fingering the figurine on its horse.

"Like her mother, is she?"

Karl thinks it over. "Stubborn, beautiful, strong, other than that, no."

Tate chuckles as if he's too tired to laugh, "That's something, anyway."

Karl glances over his shoulder. Still no one—as if he can tell. It's the worst nightmare of all: the one where no one is who they seem, where no one can be trusted. Tate, however, he trusts.

"Expecting somebody?"

Magnus doesn't need to know—what can he do anyway? "No."

"I wouldn't worry about it. You want to disappear, nobody's going to look too hard. The agency's only out there hustling because she's got a senator leaning on them. He'll lose interest in a few days and so will they." He snaps long fingers. "Almost forgot, I know what a damn Luddite you are, so I took care of something. Sent a worm into Latte's file."

Magnus says it like he expects him to know what he's talking about. It doesn't sound like much of a favor. "A worm, am I supposed to thank you?"

Tate sighs in exasperation at Karl's ignorance. "Anybody calls you up, now, tracks you, traces you, not only will they get nothing, they'll be kissing black death on the mouth. Ever seen what a worm does to an implant?" He laughs slowly, mirthlessly. "Doesn't leave much. '...the invisible worm that flies in the night, / has found out thy bed of crimson joy, / and his dark secret love / does thy life destroy.'"

Karl knows he's smiling there in the dark.

"Blake's little worm." Magnus says. "One thing, though, don't go charging a meal or the whole net could

come crashing down."

Karl's heard of this sort of thing. "They can filter it, can't they, stop it somehow?"

"Not this one, makes Swiss of fire walls. It'll work its way through everything. Latte no longer exists—he's worm castings. I owe you that much, anyway."

"What about you?" Karl says. "Am I causing you some hell?"

"Me? Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Kings go to the scaffold, nations fall, Czars, their wives and children are gunned down in closed rooms. No one hangs whores. Everybody needs whores."

Karl knows he's watching him closely through the dirty eye.

"I wish I could do something about your problem with EPA. I can't. I want you to know she means it. She'll do what she says she will. Think about it."

What's to say? The back of his head throbs like a mashed finger. "I have."

"Company's coming, got to cut this short. Do something for me, though, will you, Karl? Make it—the two of you—make it out of this cesspool."

And he's gone.

* * *

Romy waits with Willy in front of the mission.

Bag in hand, dress wrinkled from two nights as sleepwear, bare legs flashing white. Face childishly open, no pretensions, nothing, just a woman on a street in a bad part of town, maybe angel, maybe whore, standing out like ruby in clay.

Willy lounges on the curb. Bink, stupid mutt, worries a strip of cloth in a hand bigger than he is.

"B..." Willy says, struggling to force out the word. "Bink's hungry."

Romy says, "Me, too."

Catching a reek from inside, Karl nods at the mission, "Smells like breakfast."

Romy makes a face, "I want real food. Let's find a Derby."

Karl holds up the back of his hand, extraction wound still fresh. "Just how do we do that?"

She looks at Willy, "How about it, Willy? You must have something."

Fingers under Bink's chin, Willy nods. "T... T..."

"Ten?" she says.

"T..."

"Twelve," she says.

"Twelve hundred," he says to Bink.

"Hot dog!" Romy smiles. "We're filthy rich, let's eat."

Doubt an itch at the back of his skull, Karl hesitates.

Romy takes his arm, "Come on, aren't you hungry?"

He's weak with it, also worried about using Willy's chip. Raj may have read him at his shop. But right now the emptiness in his belly and her hand on his arm outweigh his instincts, "Yeah, sure."

Ten minutes and a short bus hop later, they take the lift to the rooftop Derby on Sepulveda. Inside, they take a booth in back. Willy smuggles Bink in under his coat. At opposite ends of the booth they sit, Willy between, Bink on the seat. Karl takes in the restaurant, breathing deep, enjoying every bit of it. The normalcy of it, the luxury of clean air, good food cooked at their behest, even the clean table top. After a night at the mission it's just what he wants. At last he'll eat. Whatever comes he won't be facing it on legs wobbly from hunger.

Their waitress, a tough old bird with sharp eyes, burned-down Camel dangling from a corner of her mouth, sets water before them. As she does, an ash falls to hiss in Karl's glass.

"Don't worry, Honey, I'll get you another one." Embroidered in longhand yellow thread over her breast: Lynette.

Karl orders eggs Benedict. Romy the same. Willy decides on pigs in a blanket. Romy tries to explain they're just sausages in hot cakes, but it's caught his imagination and he won't be budged. He's got to have it. She orders him two.

Fascinated, Karl watches Lynette as she takes the order, ash clinging precariously to the bobbing butt as she speaks. Order taken and entered, she winks, sets a saucer in front of Willy, arm on his broad back. "Just in case somebody else gets thirsty," she says in the voice of a woman who's smoked Camels most of her life.

Willy says nothing, only flushes crimson to the top of his scalp like a boy caught in a lie.

She leans close, "Come on, honey, gimme a peak."

Willy opens his coat and Bink pokes his nose out.

"Oh, he's a little'n isn't he? What's his name?"

Willy considers this as he looks her over, then seems to decide, "B..."

She waits patiently. "Take your time, Sweetheart, I'm not paid enough to hurry."

Willy seems to go slack. "Bink."

She chews this over, hand to powdered chin, "You know, that's a damned good name for him, I'll bet."

Face deadpan serious as if fearing the worst, Willy leans close, "C..." He struggles, then by an effort of will, makes himself relax. "Can he stay?"

She laughs, coughs long and dry, "Honey, anybody tells Bink to get out he'll have to do it over my dead body." Shaking her head, she goes away, leaving the bill.

Willy opens a thick hand over the screen, hesitating. Leaning close, he speaks in a voice so breathy and low Karl can barely hear. "Raj m... may have r... may have r..."

With surprise, Karl realizes Willy is much more aware than he'd suspected. "He may have read you. It'll be okay, go ahead." He says it, but he doesn't believe it. It's just that here, now, with the smell of bacon in the air, and Romy so obviously thrilled at the prospect of a good meal, he's not willing to leave without eating.

Willy lays his hand down flat and it comes up green. Romy flashes her teeth, a girl's unaffected smile. Stomach tumbling, Karl looks away.

Romy toys with her spoon, "I can't let Auri do that to you,"

He searches the walls for the picture of Mitchum, doesn't see it, and is vaguely worried by the omen. "You're not letting her do anything."

She looks at Willy, runs a hand over his short-cropped head. "We'll be going in."

Karl feels cold fingers grip his spine. It should be a relief. Then why isn't it? "Why?"

"Where else is there for us to go?"

Appalled by her logic, he searches for something to say, comes up with nothing. She's right. Where else can they go? Nowhere. Of a sudden he's desolate, no longer hungry, stomach aching as though he's swallowed a bellyful of cold stones.

With one finger she moves her spoon on its napkin. "Tell me more about your—what—ranch, farm, I don't know what you call it."

He's got no heart to talk about it. "Homestead."

She watches him as if she's interested. "A what?"

"Homestead, home place, that's all it is."

"You love it," she says, stating fact.

He watches her hand as she toys with her spoon, a hand lovely in motion. What's the use in lying? She says she'll go in and if he knows her at all, she will. She'll be dead in hours, and not even Willy will make any difference. "I do."

She looks down at the table top, not seeing it. "For as long as I can remember I've wanted to see woods, deep woods, with a canopy so dense it keeps out the sun." She grimaces, lets her face go slack.

"L.A.'s as close as I'll come. It must be wonderful living off the fat of the land like that."

"Lot of work is what it is."

She warms to it, leaning forward, hands reaching across the desert of table top toward him, "But you can grow a garden, trees, chickens, all of it. The Earth provides."

He smiles at her naiveté. An image gotten where, Thoreau's few weeks' commune at Walden with laundry sent to town? It reminds him of the way he thought of life in the city at fifteen. No wood to cut, no garden to weed, no animals to feed—a life of ease. She's got a lot to learn. "Between the time when you plant and the time when you bring out the harvest basket, there's a lot to do. It's work, good work, but hard. It doesn't get done, neither does the harvest."

"I'm not afraid of work," she says, without guile, insinuating nothing, just because it's true. He doesn't doubt it.

"Sometimes, even if it does, you get nothing. Rabbits, deer, coyote, turkey, mice, early frost, late frost, drought, cucumber beetles, slugs, aphids—"

"Okay, okay, you've disillusioned me. City life's the thing, life on the land is all drudgery and want, I get it."

Frustrated, he sighs, "I didn't say that."

Her gaze moves to the city below and she sighs, musing. "That's what you like about it, right? The life is hard, so you can be, too."

Offended by the thumbnail analysis, he opens his mouth to protest, but she doesn't give him the chance. "I always wanted to be a part of that down there, to be one of them."

"Why would you want that?"

"Why?" She doesn't understand the question. "Doesn't everyone—don't you?"

"I did—I was—for a while."

"And now?"

"Now I want as far away as I can get."

She stares, mouth open, looking hurt, "You can't mean that."

"Why not? It's true, I want no part of it. I mean, those kids out there, the ones who'll do anything for a few tokens, your sisters, hearts and livers on their way to Asia's elite right now, those like Willy we send off to murder and be murdered wherever the underclass resists being buried alive, the unborn we use like tissue cultures—all of it... I mean, Jesus, we eat our young."

Quiet, in her calm way, implacable as a glacier, she watches him. "Want it or not, you are a part of it."

"No more than you are." And in that instant he sees it's true—they are alike. Both different, both apart from the main, neither able to change what he is, what he must be. His exile is no less complete for being

self imposed. If they knew about him would he be any more welcome than she?

Her eyes pin him to the booth like a beetle to a board. "Oh, yes you are."

Stubborn, God, she's stubborn. "And just how the hell do you know?"

"I know. You're a man. You fit out there like Willy and I never can. Can't you see what a miracle that is—to belong?"

"I see that you and Willy belong as much as I, as much as anyone else."

She studies clean, bare nails—a kid's nails. "You didn't used to think that."

There she goes again, flinging words sharp as knives, worse for being on the mark. Not wanting to look her in the eyes, he scans the breakfast crowd. "I was wrong."

Out of nowhere, she laughs. The tension cracks and is gone.

Seeing her lopsided smile, he can't resist, "What?"

"Us—each arguing the other is a part of life, and that we're not." Again, she laughs, wiping her eyes with the back of a hand. "Funny, isn't it?"

The waitress sets plates before them, fresh lemon in hollandaise bringing water to Karl's mouth. Without warning he feels every hour of the thirty-six since he's eaten. Reaching for his glass of juice, Karl brushes her calloused hand with his, and ice claws its way down his spine. He gets nothing.

Nothing at all.

Her face changes, lips shrinking back from tar-browned dentures. Leaning close, breath reeking of smoke, Lynette hisses into his ear. "How nice to run into you, Karl." Snatching a steak knife off the table, she stabs at his eyes.

Reacting, he clamps her wrist, arresting the blade a centimeter from his iris and levers her arm back down over the edge of the table. Broken bones grate, radius prodding up against taut skin, gopher under a tarp, wanting out. Letting fall the knife, expression crumbling, she screams, shudders, face gone pallid.

Still gripping her, Karl braces himself against the surge of shocked horror that floods him as she surfaces, Raj long gone, fleeing pain. Karl hangs on, feeling every twang of confusion, fear, the deep, unreasoning fear of someone who has looked into a mirror and seen themselves a stranger. Deeper than this wells guilt, regret for having hurt this sad old woman with her plucked eyebrows and cake make-up, for having robbed her of her job, her living. Doing what he can to calm her, he holds her arm set in place on the table, grateful at least that the bone has not pushed its way out.

"I'm sorry," she says through tears and running mascara, still not understanding, "Oh, God, I'm so sorry, I don't know how I could have done that, I really don't."

Combing hair matted with sweat and hollandaise from Lynette's face, Romy calms her, "It's over, now, it's over."

Awatch, Willy pivots on toes, arms loose, dangling as they await paramedics. Bink boldly explores the

ruined dishes on the table, robbing each of its bacon. At last, still confused, still afraid, jabbering, Lynette is gurneyed away.

Falling over himself to appease, the manager offers another meal. Knowing Raj will send more than one, wondering why he hasn't already, Karl refuses. Last to leave, feeling like crying, Karl drains the only standing glass of OJ, dips a finger in a plate Bink missed, and for the first time sees just what kind of a fix they're in.

Raj won't forget, won't quit, won't tire. Unstoppable, unkillable, indefatigable, a digitally encrypted personality substantial as the wind, as airborne plague, he can always find another Lynette. How many bodies does he possess? Karl has no guess—a hundred, a thousand? Somehow warped by banishment from the corporeal world, he's developed a taste for torture, for murder, for Sisters.

He will simply keep after them until by one blunder or another they open themselves up. Then he will use whoever is handy to take what he wants.

Again Karl feels revulsion for what the world has become. Again he feels himself cut off as much as if he were of another kind, another species. How can most see the sickness around them as something good, something to be desired? How—when all he sees is something vile? Is he so far from the main current, is he so uncoupled from the world?

Jerking involuntarily as he sees again the blurred knife point at his eye, he leaves the ruined table, and hungrier now than he was before they came, follows them down to the street.

If they've got a chance, he'll be damned if he knows what it is.

* * *

Still shaking, Karl joins Willie and Romy at water's edge.

A water bus surges to a nearby stop and Karl leads them aboard. Willy pays with his chip. Karl knows what that means and doesn't care. They need to get away, and if he knows the futility of it at least movement is preferable to passivity.

At the rolling dock terminals they transfer to a bus to Hollywood and an hour of stop and go puts them in a seedy section of Hollywood still keeping its head above the sea.

"It was my fault," Romy says, speaking for the first time since the Derby.

"It's nobody's fault. I was as hungry as you were."

Down a hill they find a park, a worn patch of grass in the open. Willy sits, and discouraged, Karl goes down, propping himself on an elbow. Stuck in L.A., they're flitting around like moths in a lantern. Sooner or later they're bound to hit flame. He's tired. God, he's tired. It's good to be out in the sun under broken cloud. It's good to lie, back to the earth. If only he never had to get up.

Five paces away Romy waits. "Willy and I might as well let you be going home."

She's going in. After everything, she's going. And what can he say, what right does he have to tell her what to do? None. He can't seem to meet her eye, the sun's behind her, very bright through the haze. Paralyzed, he keeps his eyes on dirty gray overcast, "Knock it off, will you?"

"Come on Willy, we should get going."

Willy, sitting cross-legged near him, keeps his head down, stroking Bink's freckled snout, not seeming to hear.

"Willy," she says, growing impatient, "it's time we went in."

Face down, lips loose, cropped hair shining damp with sweat, he says, "Bink's asleep."

"You want to come with me, you'll have to wake him." She waits, but Willy doesn't move. Karl can see he has no intention of stirring. Not a foot. Not an inch. God bless him. He looks about as mobile right now as a fire plug. Karl guesses she won't leave without him.

She backs away, lips parted as if she might smile, cry, something. She does neither. "He doesn't want you with him, Willy, you'll have to come."

"No," Karl says, not thinking, not knowing what he should say, "he can do what he wants."

Now it seems to dawn on her—she's going in alone. She swallows, eyes looking hurt, betrayed. Looking awkward, ill at ease, as if she doesn't know what to do with her hands, for an instant she hesitates, and Karl thinks maybe, just maybe she'll change her mind.

"Okay, then." She strides away over grass worn short by foot traffic. Karl watches her go, wanting to bring her back, not seeing how he can.

Willy backhands him with a flick of a spring steel wrist. Pain ignites in his calf. "What the hell? That hurts!"

"She's g..." Willy says to Bink, face down, rubbery lips slack, voice low.

"Going, yeah, I can see that. You'd better hurry if you want to catch her," he says, feeling mean, "and take the dog with you."

Willy swats him again, harder, this time.

"Hey," Karl says, rubbing his leg, "knock it off!" He draws his leg away, out of his reach. Fast as a rattler strike he moves—fury from rest—it's scary. Karl remembers how effortlessly he dropped Pug, and the thought chills him.

"She's g..." Willy wrestles to get it out.

"You said that."

"She won't c..."

He's had enough. "Come back, all right, so, God damn it, what do you want me to do about it, huh, what?"

She's a hundred meters away, now.

"Move," Willy says.

Karl looks at the big man, speculating just what's going on behind that meaty face.

Again, without molesting the dog resting on his lap, reaching out farther than anybody can reach, stretching like gum rubber, he flings a big hand so hard Karl's jeans crack like a flag in wind.

"Son of a..." Karl grabs his leg, presses the shin, smothering fire beneath his hand.

"She has a l... a l..."

No rubber hose, no electric cable could hurt more. "Beats me, what's she got, huh, what, a license, a linguini, what? Come on, spit it out for Chrissake."

"A long st..."

"Ah, okay, a long stride, that she does. I know it. I know she does. Now cut this crap out or I'm going to do something about it!" Empty threat and Willy knows it. All he can do is shoot him and he doesn't have the rounds to spare. Or the desire.

Big cat stretching, Willy reaches out again.

"Oh, all right, all right, I'm going, I'm going!" Ribs jarring every step, he's on his feet and moving. Twelve slapping painfully against his side, Karl runs after her, heart a tennis ball slamming off the backboard of his ribs.

Hearing him, she turns, an odd look on her face. Half surprise, half amusement. Looking absurdly palatable, lanky tomboy in wrinkled sheath. Too tall for her weight—a deception he knows, but Christ it makes her look the diamond in tissue.

"You know..." he says, trying desperately to get his breath, now not only from the run, but from her, from seeing her. He fights for air. "You know..." It's all he can seem to say.

She smiles, "Now you're talking like Willy. I know what?"

"How incredibly stupid this is."

She frowns, shaking her head, earrings dangling, single leaves of gold, catching sunlight as they twist and pendulum. "What's so stupid?"

Karl loves those earrings, those ears. "You going back."

Her hand finds her hip again, "And what about what you're doing, huh? What about not sending me in when Auri's got whatever she's got on you? What's that supposed to be, smart?"

A hand presses against his breastbone from the inside, making it hard to breathe. "It's my business what I do."

"Oh, is it? Well what I do is mine."

Not sure how to answer, he watches as a two-year-old boy in sagging wet diapers totters over, fleshy brown face turned up to hers, pudgy hand reaching, pointing. Gracefully, she squats, lips broadening into a smile, hand reaching for his.

Babbling, he gropes for her ear.

"Ah, so that's it. Like gold, do you? ¿Quería tenerlo, m'ijo?"

"Ah," he says, "ah."

Romy slips an earring from her ear, dangles it just beyond his grasp. He gurgles, mouth dyed red from some crap his mother's given him, arm straining. She lets him take it, and with the earring grasped in a chubby hand, he staggers off, cooing to himself, delighted with his booty. Mute, Karl watches as Romy gives away enough gold to feed them for a week. What kind of a woman does something like that?

Smile gone, she stands, waiting for him to say something. When he doesn't she turns, "See you."

He grabs her by the smooth skin of her upper arm. Bracing himself for contempt, he gets desire, shame, a tearing pain that slams the breath out of him. He turns her, "You can't go in, you can't do that."

"Yeah," she nods, eyes hard, "yeah, I can."

"You know what'll happen."

"I know."

"I won't let you."

Head slanted, she looks at him through laughing eyes. Her arm tenses, rocking him. "Tough guy again?"

That's when the ground blindsides him. His heart, still a tennis ball, now served overhand at his ribs five times a second. He looks up at her from the ground, feeling her hands on him, sees the Chinese elm spreading out over her head, sees her kneel, feels her hands entering him, a current spreading out like an electric web, bringing back the rhythm, calming the dove, stroking it.

It's a long minute before he can spare the air to speak. "You did it again." Karl is surprised by the sound of his own voice, so ordinary. "How do you know what to do?"

She takes her hands away and their absence is a dip in water so cold it burns. He wants them back.

"I know, that's all, just know."

From the ground, he smiles, not caring how ridiculous he must look, how weak, not caring about anything but getting her to stay. This he doesn't want to screw up. This, unlike everything else in his life, he wants to work out right. There are words that will do it, he knows there must be. The right words. They must exist. If they do, he can't think of them.

"You'll be okay, now," she says, rising. He gropes for her wrist, misses. She offers her hand and he grabs it. "Stay." That's it, all the eloquence he can muster. Sad is what it is. "Stay."

She sits back on her heels, watching him cynically. Thinking. Tough luck for him. She thinks about him, about what he is, she'll get up and she'll run. Right now he's not sure he could catch her.

"You'll do better without me."

Still weak, he gets up, using her to lean on. Keeping hold of her hand, he walks her back.

"Did you ever think," he says, eyes on the people around them, "that maybe, just maybe," he presses her hand hard into his thigh, "I don't want to do any better?"

He feels her grip tighten in his, and gets a cold flash of something from her that cuts through him. Pressing her hand, giving back all he can, he walks with her across the park under the big Chinese elm, past a softball game to where Willy, a bull-necked guru, sits cross-legged waiting.

Palms pressed tightly enough to mold wax, her thoughts echo cold as spring water through his mind.

* * *

Spring sunshine burns its way through smog.

Head pillowed on his hands, Karl lies soaking it up, feeling lazy, and here in the bright sunlight, untouchable.

He cues up a waiting news article, jumping as it comes over the set way too loud.

"On Netnews tonight..."

Thinking he'll never get the hang of the damned thing, he cranks it down to a bearable level.

Close up of kettle drummer's hands, of flailing mallets, crescendo rising to a roar in low A.

"The last first generation Sister is alive and well and right here in L.A.. Yes, it seems that one escaped the Army of God's slaughter on the plat Tuesday morning only to be kidnapped."

Electrified, Karl sits up, as file footage of Romy's genotype, not her, but close enough, comes up in the air in front of him. He swallows hard. Jesus...they don't give up, these guys.

"Now Genie wants her back. How much do they want her? How much is one billion dollars—that's the reward they're offering for her safe return. So keep your eyes open out there, Angelinos, and you might well find yourself in gel cell, moved on to the latest incarnation, and from there to digital immortality. Happy hunting."

He cuts it off, bends forward, stretching out his back as much as he can with sore ribs.

"Something wrong?" Romy says.

Is there any point in telling? He doesn't think so. "Uh, uh."

Across the diamond, a game breaks up. Several boys come running, gloves skewered on bats, laughing, shoving, all but one. Karl sees, looks away, leans back.

Bink barks and Willy's on his feet, arms hanging loose-jointed, low to the ground as a wolf. Turning to follow his gaze, Karl sees the kid with the bat come with it raised high over his head, eyes calm.

With a forearm across his neck, Willy takes the kid down. As the other boys watch open-mouthed, he writhes in Willy's grasp, spewing filth from a mouth distorted with hate, a font of disease. Unable to contain his gyrations, Willy raises a hand to break his neck.

Karl catches his arm, "No, hold him, just hold him."

As Willy works to keep him still, Karl takes one of his flailing feet in his. Eyes intent on Karl, he stills.

"Raj, stop this."

The kid smiles, a kid he's never seen, the smile familiar, "In here, Karl, it's black, empty."

A man and woman come running, both yelling, screaming. Parents, ready to fight, hear their son speak and stall midstride.

"Without you I have no raison d'etre. Everyone should have a reason for being, don't you think, Karl? Mine's killing you." Impossibly, he cranes his neck to look at Romy. "And making little girls cry."

Savagely, Raj kicks out, clipping Karl's chin, growling, mewling in Willy's grip, finally sagging, played out as his parents stand by, terrified as they are confused.

Karl rubs his jaw where the shoe grazed it. "I can't convince you to leave us alone?"

"I'm used to getting what I want, Karl," Raj says, voice smarmy. "You think I'll reform for you?"

Neck prickling, Karl tries once more. "You were a decent man once, Raj, I thought this was supposed to be the digital you, the real you, what happened?"

"I was tied to the meat, now I'm free. Praise the Lord, I've seen the light and I'm free at last." Suddenly he struggles with such force he nearly pries free of Willy's grip. Willy glances up, worried. Pug didn't give him half the trouble this kid is. Squirming, bare back slick with sweat, Raj not caring how much he hurts him, he's impossible to hold. As suddenly as he began, he stops fighting.

"You don't want to kill this kid, do you, Karl? He's just an innocent boy. That's the only way you'll stop me. Don't you get it? Your scruples are killing you. It's not even going to be an interesting game. I'll have her today or I'll have her tomorrow. Either way..." With a ferocious wrench he frees an arm, flings it out to grab Romy's ankle, making her shriek with surprise. "...I'll have her."

Seeing no other way, Karl grasps the fingers of one of the boy's hands, prying one back hard, snapping it. The kid in Willy's arms screams, a kid again. Willy lets him go to his mother.

Karl gets to his feet, fending off the mother's claws as Willy stays between them and the angry crowd. Though he doesn't understand a word they say, Karl can tell by their eyes he's the object of their affection. Shouting, they push close. Karl smells beer, sweat, hair oil. A kid with hateful eyes shoves him

hard in the ribs and Karl's had enough. Cycling the twelve, he blasts the sod between their legs. Magically the crowd parts. He thought they might. Smokeless powder—the universal language. Romy's arm in his grip, they run.

What drives Karl nuts is how Raj tracks them. Willy's clown suit and Romy's hair are bad, but for Raj to pick them up so fast it must be something else. At the mouth of a canal he gets it.

Angry at himself for being so stupid, he grabs Willy, leads him between buildings, fishes a knife out of the duffel and has him hold out his hand. Unconcerned, he complies.

Seeing the knife, Romy hangs onto his wrist, "What are you doing?"

"Blinding Raj." To Willy, he says, "Okay if I take it?"

Willy nods. That half-smile again. What can he be thinking?

Karl finds the bump under the skin. One slash and out it pops. He looks down at it, a glass rice grain in the middle of his palm, flicks it into the oily water of the canal.

Clenching his fist, a slow smile twists Willy's mouth. Can this all be a joke to him?

"And then there were none." Willy says slowly, easily.

* * *

On a stoop out of the rain they squat to catch their breath.

"What now?" Romy says.

Hunkered behind Willy, hand braced on his solid shoulder, working hard at getting air, he turns to smile a bitter smile, "What, now?" Scared, angry, no idea what to do, he laughs, "Well, let me see. We're broke. We've got no identity, no friends, nowhere to go. Land in my family for two centuries will be gone before I can even get there to put up a fight."

He raises an arm to the street before them, "We're in a bad part of town. Can't even take a bus. A DMI with a lousy attitude about life's riding hard on our ass. You've got feds and Genie contractors looking for you. I'm wanted for grand theft for Sasha and now they say I've kidnapped you. I've got..." He runs a hand through his pockets. "Half a box of buckshot and one strip for the Smith. When they're gone I've got three kilos of dead weight dangling under my arm."

"Okay," she says.

"No, no, wait, there's more. We're in the middle of a city neither of us knows. And now you've got a bounty on your head, enough to put the average jerk in UR heaven. We've got nothing of value to barter for a way out. A stinking, greasy rain's pissing out of the sky, and we've only got two jackets between us. What the hell do you want to do?"

"You're wrong about that," she says.

He thinks about it, sees no mistake, "About what?"

She meets his gaze, eyes clear as the Eel before fall rains turn it to creamed coffee. "About having nothing to sell."

"Hey, hey, hey," he raises a hand, "the guns stay."

She stands, leaning on Karl to steady herself as she slips on her heels. "I wasn't talking about your toys."

He watches her, gets it, sighs, disgusted. "Oh, that's just peachy, that's a great idea. No, no, that's keen. Thirty years old, never been with a man, IQ what, 150, 160?"

She looks at him, eyes frank, no braggadocio there at all, "one-eighty-three."

"And this is the best you can come up with?" Beside himself, he doesn't wait for her response. "This town's a cesspool of disease, more herpes and hepatitis mutations discovered every day, and you're going into business as a whore? Shrewd career move."

"Why not?" She looks at him, eyes hard, smoothing her dress over long thighs, "It's what I always was." She brushes out her hair, glistening even in the gray overcast. "I used to envy the girls who could just go UR and come back when it was over. Me, I used to have to act interested, act enchanted, be pleasant, smile, pretend to be attracted to men who turned my stomach, and politely—always politely—try to keep their hands off me."

She rips the brush through her hair, making it snap with static. "None of them, not even the punks on the quay, were half the whore I was. No, uh, uh, it can't be any harder than what I did for fifteen years. I've gotten you into this, and I'll get you out."

He knows the despair she's talking about. He's felt it. But this is a joke. She won't do it. She can't do it. "Be my guest." Karl raises a hand in the direction of the street. "Let her rip, kid. Let's see what you got." Keeping back a smile, he leans forward to watch the show. First car stops she'll come running back to him. It's only obvious. It's only logic.

Looking better than she has any right to, she goes to the curb, sticks out a thumb, releases her hair in a cascade of platinum. Moments later a Cadillac skids to a halt and she leans—very professionally, he notes with more than a little discomfort—into the window.

Willy turns his eyes on him, and the look unsettles him more. A worm eating its way out of his gut, he waits for her. "She'll be back."

"Will she?"

Of course she will.

He watches, waiting for her to turn away from the car. Head in the window, she nods, laughs.

What can be so funny? There's nothing funny Karl can see.

The back door opens. She slides in. By the time Karl gets to his feet the Caddy is pulling away. He's too late, with his aching ribs, too slow. He makes the curb as the car disappears in stop and go traffic up La

Brea.

Breathing hard, fingers tingling, he stands watching twelve lanes pass by where only a few seconds before she stood. At his side, Willy waits. Karl won't look at him, doesn't want to see the look on his face.

What kills him—is she's doing it for him.

* * *

Able to think of nothing else, Karl runs after her.

Aware of the absurdity, the absolute uselessness of chasing a car along a six-lane throughway, he jogs up La Brea, pacing himself three strides to an inhale, three to an exhale. Willy follows at his heels, and it's good to have him there. It's good not to be alone. Every time a foot touches the walk, jarring his ribs, he curses himself.

How stupid can a man be?

By now he should have learned—what she says, she means. Why is he running? It's hopeless, he knows it is. By now they're on a side street somewhere. By now it's too late.

The thought a hornet sting at the base of his spine, he sprints. Winded, he is about to fall back to a walk when he sees it.

A flood of adrenalin making him dizzy, he picks up speed. Passing stopped cars, he scans them as he goes. Still no Caddy. Then there it is. Up ahead among massed red taillights, second lane over—mauve Cadillac with tinted glass. No mistake. Again the traffic begins to slide.

He pounds on the window of a car in the curbside lane. He won't come this close and lose her. With his hands he attacks the next car, pounding.

As he comes up even with the Caddy, its brake lights darken and it pulls away, tipping back on its springs, boat without a wake. One lane away, barely four meters away and it's leaving him behind. His brain locks up, unwilling to accept what his senses tell him. "No!" he says out loud. The only thing he can think of he does.

He cycles the 12, and through a break in the curb lane flow, fires on the run. The first round pocks a fender. The second leaves long leaden prints in the roof as buckshot caroms off sheet steel. Heart held at bay behind a clamped jaw, he stops, holds his breath, raises the receiver to eye level, waits for a passing van, and lets off a third round. A rear tire flattens with a satisfying whoosh, loose tread thumping on the rim as it rolls.

Again brake lights glow an angry red. It slows, stops, and he can't get to it. The curb lane won't stop to let him through. As cars go by, he slaps front windshields with his open hand. A mirror clips his hip and he nearly goes down on slick asphalt.

Impotent, he stands helplessly four paces away from her, not able to see what's going on inside. Moving

again, if more slowly, rim clanging, the Caddy signals a lane change. He lets it get away across five lanes and he can kiss her goodbye. Desperate, he raises the twelve, points it at the face of an oncoming driver. The car careens to a stop, man at the wheel shielding his face from buckshot with raised arms. Thank you.

Across the lane, Willy pacing him, Karl limps. Gun up, he throws open the door, reaches in, yanks her out by a wrist, the two guys in the car following her out like hornets out of the ground. Big guys—with the Remington, Karl holds them off.

Doesn't understand a word they say. Sounds like Mex cum French. Never been any good at languages, anyway. It doesn't seem to help either when he says he's sorry but she's changed her mind. No help at all. Karl gives her to Willy, backs off staying between them. Romy's new friends follow, crowding him.

Gun up in their faces, they won't get the idea. When he's sure he's going to have to knee one to get them to back off, she says something in their blurred tongue—naturally she'd know it. Maybe it's that, or maybe it's Willy behind him. Either way they give him some room. Cursing Karl in their slippery lingo, they flash Karl the Esperanto of gestures, and tire thumping and smoking, lurch off down La Brea.

Through gathered gawkers he hauls her by a hand to a couple benches adrift in a sea of paper and plastic. On the less filthy of the two benches he shoves her down.

"Now who's being stupid?" he says, doing his best to be angry when what he is is scared. She tries to get up and though Willy's watching, he pushes her back down hard enough to jar her teeth. Seeing he means it, she gives up, folds her feet under the bench, crossing bare arms in the drizzle.

Tingling, dizzy as adrenalin burns out, he shrugs out of his coat, wraps it around her. Gathering her hair with his fingers, as she watches him with deadly eyes, he tucks it inside the leather, zipping it roughly to her chin. "You do that again, I'll..."

"You'll what?" She looks daggers, unzipping the jacket halfway. "Huh, what?"

The nasty tone of her voice chokes something out in him. Out of steam he drops beside her, suddenly too tired to argue. "Just don't, that's all."

Her eyes scald his face. "Why not? I don't want to owe anybody—especially not you."

"You owe me nothing."

"I don't hear you coming up with any better ideas."

Too frustrated, too tired, too disgusted to speak, he sits and stares at traffic. "Just..." God, what was the use? "Just...promise."

"Why should I?"

He looks away across the street, searching among sparse foot traffic for more of them, for anyone, for someone hag-ridden. Worn out, hollowed out by fear, he stares, rain trickling down the nape of his neck and inside the collar of his shirt. When he speaks his voice is low. "Because if that's what it takes to make it, I don't want to."

She looks down at goose-fleshed knees, and he feels her move just a little closer to him on the grimy

bench. Maybe his imagination, he doesn't know. A drizzle lazes down, chilling him, making everything sticky, slick. Willy squats beside her, Bink peeking out, shaken from the jog, snorting vexation.

Romy takes his hand, draws it into the pocket of his jacket, warming it with hers.

It's not his imagination; she is closer.

She watches him, he can tell, though he faces straight ahead, and whispers so low he can barely hear her over traffic.

"I promise."

SEVEN

Salvation Army thrift.

Romy hates it here. It's depressing. The people frighten her; they're not like the people she's known. Their eyes are wrong, too close together, their look too much like those of whipped horses. And it smells—of rancid grease, mothballs, antiseptic, sweat. She's never been to a place like it before, never even knew they existed. All she wants to do is get out and into the open air.

Willy poses in front of a wavy mirror, admiring himself in a pair of worn overalls, wool Pendleton, and an absurd tweed newsboy cap. "N...not bad," he says.

She watches as Karl offers Willy a knit cap. But he's having none of it. Mulishly, he won't be talked out of the hat by either of them. Excitement surges, a current through her veins as she rolls the idea over in her mind. Imagine—her going there, a thousand kilometers from the plat, from L.A..

Karl gives up, comes at her with it.

"Oh, no you don't," she says, but he's too fast and yanks it down over her hair. "Don't do that," she says, throwing it off, but she doesn't mind. Part of her wonders that she doesn't. A man touching her, telling her what to wear, and her putting up with it—how much stranger can things get?

Leading her to a chair, he laces up her boots, ugly a pair as she's seen, has her stand, feeling for her toe.

"They'll do."

Seeing him eye a rack of sleeping bags, she watches, incredulous, as he picks three from the pile.

"I'm not sleeping in one of those filthy things."

He sighs, irritated, "They've been washed, we may need them." Standing back to look her over, he smiles.

She's not so sure she likes the way he does it. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, what?"

Squirming under his gaze, she lets him reach to turn up the collar of the pea coat he's found her, rough wool prickling against the skin of her neck. "Even in these you're conspicuous."

Heat rises to her face and, uncomfortable, she turns to a tarnished mirror. Men telling her she's beautiful has always made her yawn. Him saying even this frightens her. "If you don't look too close, maybe."

Eyes still on her he says, "I am."

"Then don't."

Turning, she considers herself in jeans three sizes too big, bulky sweater, over it all the horrible coat and cap. In it she might be anyone, any sex. The lowest plat laborer wouldn't wear it. She hates the way it makes her look, the musty smell of the wool. She flings off the coat, "I won't wear that thing, it's repulsive, it stinks!"

"Oh, come on," Karl says, retrieving it, smiling, always smiling, "it's not all that bad."

He takes a step for her and she backs away, snatching up her dress and heels. "Oh, yes, it is."

Moving fast, he corners her by a rack of jackets, slips the coat on her, buttons it up, tucks her hair down inside the collar roughly. Like a father might do, she thinks, then wonders why.

"You read, right?"

She nods.

"Think of yourself as the spunky heroine of a ton romance. Here you are costumed as a sailor to escape an evil uncle plotting to marry you off to a syphilitic degenerate named Mustafa with a taste for buggery. You do and I guarantee you it'll become more appealing."

She pulls off the cap, sniffs it, grimaces, tosses it back on the pile. "Don't read that purple drivel, never have."

No longer smiling, he retrieves her hat an instant before a woman pawing through the table can snatch it. "Well, maybe you should start." He jerks it back onto her head, "And leave it on! That hair is skywriting. We need warm clothes, inconspicuous clothes. It doesn't matter if they smell, they just might keep us

alive. You may have noticed we don't have a lot of choices left about where to shop. Look around."

She looks. Drifters, hair molded straw. Young mothers, fretful babies riding their hips. Old women, teeth gone, looking as if they sleep in their clothes. Punks, wasted faces parchment stretched taut over bone.

Karl's face is hard. "This is real life, for most of the world the only life. We'll be lucky if they take our clothes in trade—very lucky."

Not believing, she lets her jaw fall. She couldn't have heard aright. "What? This dress cost ninety thousand dollars! This stuff," she holds open the pea coat, "isn't worth the shine off my shoes."

Looking mean, he jerks her to him by the lapels of the coat, sending a thrill up her spine that has her questioning her sanity. What is she, a woman who needs a belt across the mouth now and again to let her know a man really cares? It's insane, her feeling this way.

Face close, he whispers. "Right now it's worth a lot to us, and this dress of yours, whatever it cost, will get you made again sure as Shinola. If you can keep that mouth of yours clamped, and that hair under your cap, I just might be able to get us out of L.A.."

Jaw clenched, she trembles in his grasp, unsure whether she hates him more for his attitude or for being right.

Looking her over, he seems to approve. "All right, let's see what they say."

Hearing a stifled laugh, she catches Willy watching her. "And you," she says, vexed, "what do you want with that stupid cap."

He squats and Bink bolts up on his thigh. "The c..."

"The cap what?" she says.

"M...makes the man."

So much talk now, and such nonsense. She moves to follow Karl to the front, bringing Willy along, "Well, then, Willy, I guess you're made."

At the counter, he calls for the manager, a woman with a face like a powdered prune and two eyes that see through people as easily as a finger goes through an overripe pear. She holds up Romy's dress, gives it a quick once over, folds it, sweeps it aside, slapping Romy's heels on top like they're nothing. It's all Romy can do not to snatch them back. Her favorite Italian heels... Has the woman never seen good shoes? Can she work with clothing all day every day and not know good shoes when she sees them?

Gingerly, the woman prods the pile containing Karl's slacks, shirt, Willy's coveralls. Looking up, she takes their measure and comes away unimpressed, mouth set tighter than before. Pushing the stack back at them over the glass, she says, "We don't take trades, only donations."

As she turns away, Karl touches her elbow, takes off a worn felt hat, tags dangling from wrist and brim. "All we've got's these clothes. Where we're going it gets wet, it gets cold. They won't get us there, not alive."

Romy watches him, amazed. She's never seen him humble. Can he be sincere? Fascinated, she watches

the woman's face for a reaction. So far no dice.

"We were hoping you'd swap us for them." He moves close to her ear, lowering his voice. "I'm not telling you anything you don't already know, but that dress is a good one. It cost nearly a hundred thousand, you must know that, too."

She hesitates, eyes like razors considering. Romy gets the feeling she's weighing more than the barter of clothing. She gives Romy a close glance, reaches over for the tag at her neck, "How much you got on there?"

Romy gathers tags, passing them to the woman, who totals them. "Fourteen hundred, plus the bags, that's two thousand." She glances nervously at the front door, "You know you can go over to the mission and they'll give you clothes for free, feed you, let you stay."

Karl shakes his head, no. "I have a home, if I can get there. These two are with me."

Her eyes move to Willy, "I thought they were killers."

Romy stiffens. If she knows what Willy is, she knows what she is, too.

Karl nods, "He can kill, so can you, so can I. With a good enough reason, so can anybody."

Romy keeps her mouth from showing the irony she feels. If she only knew who she was talking to, what he is, this humble man begging for rags. If she only knew how easy killing is, dying is. The last few days have taught Romy that, taught her she can kill. She sees now they're not all that different after all.

Karl unzips Willy's jacket. Bink snorts and snuffles fresh air. "That dog's a pretty good judge of character."

Sharp eyes move to Romy. What can this woman think of someone like her? How would she feel in her place? Would she hate this recom come to barter an original for scraps?

"What about this one? Is she what they say they are?"

Romy watches the side of his face, wondering if she can stand to hear his answer, afraid to listen, afraid not to.

Setting the hat back on his head, he leans into the counter, elbows on plate glass, "I came expecting what anybody might, I guess. What the vids, what the net says they are." He shakes his head, "Uh, uh, just people."

Her wrinkled lips the woman purses into a satisfied pucker, "A bill will buy a lot of dresses."

Romy can see the avarice working her eyes the way a steel works a blade. "That's the reward they're offering, one billion dollars. You hear about that?"

"You don't look the Judas type," Karl says.

A slow smile works its way onto her painted mouth, revealing eye teeth smeared with lipstick the tint of blood. "How do you know? I might have made the com soon as I saw you come in. They might be on their way right now while I keep you talking."

He nods, "They might. You better pray they're not."

Her assurance slips, leaving her smile looking false. "Why's that?"

"Well," Karl says, adjusting the old hat on his head as if he'd worn it for years, "because there's bound to be an argument, and if there is, being between us and the door won't be very healthy."

Her eyes flick toward the break in the counter. Karl nods to Willy, who squats to examine some wire potato mashers, plugging her way with his bulk.

Less sure of herself, she frowns, "She's kidnapped, they say, that makes you the kidnapper. Why should I believe anything you say?"

"Because I'm telling the truth. Does she look like she's been kidnapped?"

She looks Romy in the eye. Romy looks back, unable to keep from smiling. Good point it seems to her.

Desperation brims in the woman's eyes. "She's not human and neither is he. I've heard about the way they live, the things they do."

Fighting an urge to run, Romy watches the street outside through the glass storefront. If she did turn them in, how much time can they have, a minute, two? How can he stand here talking about it?

Again Karl takes off his hat, this time dropping it onto the counter, sighing as if he's more than tired, "They are what they are. Perfect, hell no. They're no more that than we are. Because they are what they were made, does that mean God doesn't see them? Is that what you think? A God that counts sparrows can't see them, can't see you right now?"

The woman's eyes, no longer sharp, drop to regard swollen knuckles. Incredibly, it seems to Romy he's reached her. She glances over her shoulder at the street, taps a tar-stained nail on glass. "What'll they do to them if they catch them?"

Karl smiles. "Now just what do you think?"

Horror dawns in her eyes, "No."

"Yeah, that's right."

Her eyes meet Romy's, flooded with guilt, with fear. "That way, through the back room, out the side bay, down the alley, there isn't much time."

Vibrating, needing to be gone, Romy waits for Karl as he stays where he is across the counter. Outside, sirens sing-song closer, louder. He picks up his hat, carefully seats it on his head.

"What are you waiting for?" She is desperate to have them gone. "Can't you hear them?"

"I can hear them," he says. "I just want to know if we're even on the clothes."

"Yes, we're even, of course we are, yes!"

"Okay, then, I just wanted to be sure, that's all."

At last he moves. On his heels she runs, Willy close behind. Through a room piled high with clothing, through a laundry, bleach strong enough to burn her eyes, finally out and away. Three blocks she follows, sirens dropping pitch as they pass, thinking only of the dress and heels she'd last seen bundled under the woman's arm as they headed out the back. That outfit will never see the racks, Romy's sure of that.

When at last they stop, she sits, groaning as she thinks of her things on a woman who had almost killed them all. From his place on the curb, struggling for his breath, Karl says, "You okay?"

Mad enough to spit, she laughs. "A ninety thousand dollar original for some smelly rags—you're quite the wheeler-dealer."

Face maddeningly impassive, he ignores her, chest working.

"We could have sold it for twenty at least! We could have had a proper meal!"

He looks at her as if he never wants to hear her voice again, stands, heads across the tracks to the Interstate.

She follows, wanting to hurt, wanting more than anything to get a reaction, any reaction, to see that what she says can touch him. "Do you hear me, I said we could be eating right now, or doesn't the stone man get hungry either?"

Abruptly, he stops, coming in close so fast he frightens her, "Keep your voice down!" This he hisses, then he whispers. "You say we could have sold it—where? You know this town, know who buys that kind of dress? Do you?"

Confused by the sudden challenge, she stutters. He knows she doesn't. "I..."

"Want to go in? Here, then." He slaps a satcom in her hand. "Put it on, I'll give you the code, they'll be here in three minutes to pick you up. You want to come with me, zip your lip and keep the damned hat on."

He stalks off.

The arrogant bastard! She's terminated time with a client for less. Fear uncoiling in her belly, she watches him go. Making sure Willy's behind her, she looks, really looks at the ugliness around her. How could she have wanted to live here?

Face clear of fear, of worry, of anything, Willy waits patiently. In that ridiculous cap, waiting, patience for her a font never drying. As if he hasn't heard, hasn't understood. For what must be the millionth time since that day in the stands, she wonders just how much he understands.

More than she'll ever know is her guess. She's never been able to find out for sure. Willy—attack dog loyal to the last contraction of his heart. She takes his hand, presses it to her breast, "Oh, Willy, what are we doing? Should we go with him? Wouldn't it be better for him if we didn't?"

Watching her with fluid eyes, he says nothing. Of course he says nothing, that's what he usually says. She looks down at herself with disgust. With her clothing went the last of her life. What is she now? Shapeless in clothing smelling of mothballs and God knows what else, here she stands with nothing. Sisters, life,

home, bonsai—everything gone. Hunted. Alone but for Willy...

Karl recedes down the block, melting into the distance.

And him...

A thrill of fear traces its way up her back even under the sweater and coat as she sees how far away he's gotten. There he goes—the one man in the world she can trust. Not good looking. Not rich. Not brilliant. Oh, God, her dress... No, definitely not brilliant. Not any of the things she'd always dreamed the one meant for her might be. Unlike the others, she had never questioned that for her there would be someone someday. But why this one? Why a man repulsed by what she is? Why must life be so perverse?

Still she can't deny that's who he is. Her first touch, her first scent of him told her that. Knowing kept her from using what she knew to break free the night of the bomb, kept her struggle ineffectual as he pressed her to him like no man had ever done.

Now he risks everything for her. Why? Out of some warped sense of duty, of responsibility. To whom? Certainly not to her.

She should go in, she knows, but having so slightly outdistanced death makes her surprisingly unwilling to come near it again. She is weak, God help her. She wants to live. He does want her to stay—so he says. This assuages the worst of her guilt, but not all. At the moment, on this blasted street corner, it's all too much to consider. With a deep breath, she pushes it away. Later she will figure it all out—later. Right now all she wants is out of L.A., away from the ugliness, the death. All she wants is.... She sighs, giving up. She hasn't any idea what she wants. Looking up the street in the direction of the freeway, she picks him out from the haze, blocks away, now.

"Oh, come on, then," she says, drawing Willy after her, "he's getting away."

* * *

"So where are we going?" Romy asks when she catches him at the ramp.

Not wanting to talk, he points up at the sign: Santa Ana Freeway North.

Her eyes widen as if the idea scares her, "You're going home? But Auri said—"

"I don't care what Auri says." Thumb out, he yells over the roar of ten lanes stretching out below them. "I'm going home."

"I..." Eyes flickering, mouth carefully composed, she nods, backing away, "I understand."

No, she doesn't, and it peeves him as he reaches out for her wrist. She should by now. "You're coming."

Her eyes search his face, uncertain. "But they'll be waiting."

There's nothing to say to that. There's nowhere else for them to go. He's sure as hell not staying here.

"People have been waiting for me my whole life."

She waits, watching him thumb.

Nine hundred sixty-two cars later—Willy counts them aloud—not one has slowed.

Karl can't take any more. "Count on your fingers, will you?"

Three more tides pass, and Romy irritates him by sighing with impatience.

"Sighing doesn't help." He knows exactly why it's taking so long. Nobody picks up three men—and that's what they look like. "Sometimes it takes a while."

"I can't stand any more of this," she says, stepping up to the berm. "Let me."

"What do you mean, let me? A thumb's a thumb."

She smiles, "Didn't you ever see *It Happened One Night*? Colbert, Gable, Wall of Jericho?"

He gives her a blank look and she gives up. "Just stand back." She slips off the cap, letting her hair tumble out and down, flashing her smile at traffic.

He watches her, amazed at the way she can turn it on and off. Even dressed like this she gleams. "This isn't a movie."

Not a minute later a super-hauler taps his brakes, coasting to a stop half a kilometer past them. An old one, only three trailers, it leaves the air behind tainted with burnt clutch. Older yet is the driver.

With a brown-toothed grin, tobacco juice dried in the corners of his mouth, he greets them, "Take you far as Frisco."

Karl hesitates. Inside, there's plenty of room. An old German shepherd bitch rides behind the driver. Right now Karl would take a ride to Goshen if it would get them out of L.A.. "We'll take it."

Romy climbs in first, then Karl. German shepherd in the sleeper growls deep in its throat, hackles rising as he gets in. Without hesitation Willy climbs in back and at once the dog calms, bald tail wagging. Blood-crustured fur on its back patchy from mange, Karl offers her a smell of his hand. When black lips recede over yellow fangs he reconsiders. Every time he opens his mouth for 500 clicks, the dog growls. So much for his way with animals.

In the sleeper Willy curls up between the dogs for a nap. Though he knows it's not contagious, Karl doesn't like Bink anywhere near mange. Right now there's not much he can do.

The tranny chuckles and chatters. Worried it may throw a tooth, Karl watches the old man baby it, humor it, kid it along. Running down the Grapevine to the valley floor the sensation is like sitting on the lid of a pressure cooker as the three trailers do their best to shove the truck out of gear and over the high side.

They blow past Goshen in fifth, day wearing on, heat shimmering on the long dead straight ribbon up the belly of Mexicali. Even at this pace it's good to be making time, every second farther from the deadly dance of the city—from Raj. It's an illusion, but one he enjoys. Of course distance won't help at all. Raj is

an electron's breadth away.

It makes it all so hopeless. If he could go back to finish him he would. But how do you kill something that's not alive, has no body, is everywhere and not really anywhere at all? What a mess it all is. If there's any way to make it right he can't see it. It's too far gone for anything, now. Too late to do anything but run.

North.

Home.

He gets there before EPA, he can make their life tough for a while. Whatever happens he'll be home. He looks down to see Romy asleep, head on his shoulder. Dangerous company. Much in demand. By the agency. By Genie. By Raj. By anybody in want of a billion dollars. A very hot property.

Lulled by heat, by the feel of her against him, the song of chattering gears, the smell of an overheated engine, the rocking cab, he sags, head against window. One hand on the butt of the Smith, he drifts off.

* * *

On the bum.

On the grift.

Karl doesn't like it.

Istanbul, 2009, Karl, seventeen, on a summer rail trip, gives away his travelers checks to a young Slavic blonde whore, chingune, they call them. Baby suckling her breast, she caught his eye, and—so he was stupid—his heart.

A touch of her, all darting animal fear and suspicion, tells him nothing. He gives her everything, all he has, enough to feed them both for half a year. Later that day he sees her back on her spot selling herself for the price of a loaf of peda. This teaches him something about the impossibility of change, of the futility of making even the slightest nail imprint in the lump of clay that is the world.

He begs of American and Australian students to get through the week on mutton tripe soup and day old flat bread. Best pickings he finds outside the dome of Sultan Ahmet, between there and the tower. Beyazit: the old, cheap section of the city where tourists in jeans go to score hash and gash.

That long week he watches her. She never misses a night. He checks on her down near the Bosphorus. Jostled by the crowd, smoke of barbecued lamb gyro tearing his eyes, watering his mouth, he stands with other men peering at her. Eating noodles with her fingers, witless breeding sow, legs folded under her, she sits on a bed in the nude with another girl, goods on display.

The baby hers? Who can know? Borrowed, so they tell him. His money in the pocket of her pimp. Out there in the street the thought of it reddens his face with shame. How could he have been so stupid?

The satcom to California takes the fruit of the day's panhandling. That night he curls up at the gate to the

cistern with nothing in his belly but the smell of smidts the boys carry past still warm from the oven on their tall sticks.

The reply from his father is a thousand U.S. dollars, enough to let him scrape back to London, if he were very careful. Along with it came a note saying he expects him to plant a thousand spruce that spring—one for every dollar. That was Dad. That was him in spades. He'd resented it then, never him giving, but with a price, with a cost. Karl understands it now.

There's always a cost—always.

So, now, here he is. Twenty million in his account and he can't get to it. Half a Q worth of timber on his land waiting to be thinned and here they are in San Francisco begging tokens. Outside the Cannery they hesitate, counting street people lining the walk. With chagrin, Karl realizes he's not the first to think to come here.

"Uh, uh," Romy says, sizing them up. "This is no good. I want a restaurant, the best one." Scanning the directory, she runs a finger down the list, "There, that'll do, third floor. Lets go."

Sensing he's in the company of a pro, Karl tails her up the stairs. "Why a restaurant?"

Without turning she answers, taking stairs two at a time, long legs scissoring effortlessly, "Guilt. They've just eaten, it's a good time. We did a lot of reading in psychology." Looking back at Karl as he struggles to keep up, she smiles as if she had just bitten into a persimmon, "Useful for whores, psychology."

At the door to the eatery, she pauses, turns, "Yeah, this is good." Sternly, she frowns, "I'll do better without you. Work the kebab and creperie outside." She pushes him away, leaving him dazed by the familiarity coming through her hand. When he opens his mouth to protest, she covers it with a cool hand, shakes her head, cap off. "I'll be all right here, we're a long way from L.A.. If I weren't dressed like a tramp I might do better yet, now go and let me work." She shoves Willy at him, and they head down.

He doesn't like it she takes to it so well. Then he remembers she's been in the grift more or less since birth. Bred to it. Born to it. Nearly died in it. What she didn't do is choose it.

Downstairs, bedrolls stacked at his back, Willy sets Bink at his tricks as Karl watches, disgusted. Bink, who couldn't so much as fetch a bone. Willy has him jumping, eager as hell, into his cap, right up into his arms. Karl stands back, playing shill, clapping, tossing tokens into his hat modeling the way for the squares. It works, they toss some in, too. If he's a good gypsy, Willy's better.

Ball rolling, he wanders off to score a pita from an old woman with painted eyebrows and a bracelet of lapiz lazuli that must have made it hard to lift her frail, blue-veined wrist. He thanks her and, feeling too guilty to eat it, spends an hour with it in his inside pocket, the smell of roasted lamb, garlic, and lemon driving him nuts every time he moves.

He hits on another old woman and she looks at him like he's something stuck to the sole of her heel. Okay, so maybe he isn't such a good beggar. Discouraged, he sits. He'd rather starve than face that look again.

A young couple stroll by, heads tilted up reading the overhead menu. He hoists himself up to hit on them. They fill his hand with tokens, and add a chicken and black bean pita onto their order for him. Feeling better, he passes the time while they wait.

"What's up with you, man?" asks the guy. He wears a short trimmed beard, corduroy jacket. The girl hangs on his arm in a loose India print skirt. Small thing, yet vital, Karl imagines her making love like a chinchilla.

She frowns at him. "Why you bumming?"

Karl looks into their young faces, so sure of themselves, in college, no doubt. Not good, not bad, just full of themselves, of their own importance, their own place in the whole mess. "You really want to know?"

They do.

Well, why not? Nothing less believable than the truth.

"Okay, I'll tell you, I'm X-DOJ, freelance now, on the run from the agency, police, a multinational's contractors and an old friend who happens to be dead. I've got twenty million in my account I can't use, a code I can't access, and no chip at all. My traveling companions are a couple recoms with bounties on their heads. One would shame Helen of Troy and the other one's made to kill with his bare hands, but he'd really rather love up a little mutt that lives in his jacket."

Seeing by their faces they aren't buying a word, Karl warms to it, "Now, in Vegas I could read minds to win poker games for food money, but here I've just got to beg. See, we're on our way up to my ranch in Anglo-Cali. Of course the EPA could beat me there. It'll be close. Either way you'll hear about it. My guess is I can get twenty before they gas me."

The kid's smile goes stale, but stays right where it is. Both shrink back, almost imperceptibly, a snail's stalked eye receding. "Yeah?" the guy says, "That must be tough. We did something like that in UR last week didn't we Tish?" He elbows her out of her stupor, "Didn't we?"

She nods uncertainly, "Yeah, uh, yeah, we did."

When the food's shoved over the counter they wave, edging away through the crowd. Watching them go, Karl smiles, pita warm in his hands. The truth is powerful stuff, disturbing stuff, not suitable for all occasions. He's sorry he told them. Just kids, they meant no harm, just trying to be nice. Now they're scared of him, sure he's crazy, and again he's alone. He doesn't like it much.

From the corner of his eye he sees a big man in a tattered field jacket lead two smaller men up the stairs. Just before he disappears, he turns, smiles a broken-toothed smile from behind a full, red beard—Raj's smile gone vicious.

Dropping the pocket bread, Karl bolts for the stairs, moving fast as he can, heart leaping in a prison of membrane, muscle and bone, every pulse drumming the same question.

How did he find them?

* * *

Traffic's bad.

Embarcadero's backed up far as Drew can see, which isn't saying much. His grip on the wheel tightens as he inches along in the fog. Eyes glazed, he has to concentrate to focus on the bumper of the car ahead.

No sleep since the bombing. He keeps seeing her face, hearing her voice. Romy, the Sister he'd taken for an hour walk on the quay. Dead—must be.

All day, all night he prays, and still God is silent. Now he's wondering if maybe he wasn't deceived, if maybe it wasn't all a mistake, the bombing, the Army of God, all of it. He's confused, afraid. For his soul, for the consequences of what he's done.

He tried to get her to come away but, face sober, she had laughed with those coral reef green liquid eyes of hers. Wanting nothing so much as just to hear her speak, to listen to her voice, he'd blathered on about God, about the Spirit—things of which he knows nothing. Talked and talked until she'd stopped listening.

Six killed, the news said—three human, three sisters. No names, but she had to be one. Maybe if he'd been more sure of himself she might have listened. But then, that had always been the problem; he had never been sure, not of anything. Even with ten pounds of C4 in his grip, he came off as a kid expecting to be slapped.

They said Sisters had no souls, and he had believed. Then, on the plat she'd looked at him and he knew it was a lie. He'd felt a soul behind those eyes, a soul throbbing with life—and killed her anyway. Why? For the most witless reason of any—inertia.

The car in front of him brakes and he barely sees it in time, slamming into the harness as he howls to a stop inches from the bumper. Dear God, if he could only forget her face. To do that he would do anything. Anything.

As a man he's a washout, he knows that. Ahead looms the Golden Gate. It's the only way to forget her face, to forget what he's done, to sleep.

And he so needs sleep.

* * *

Eyes level with the next hallway, Karl spots them as they head up the next landing. Moving fast, they head for Romy. Somehow they know where she is. No way he can stop them. Lungs straining he calls. "Raj!"

At the next landing red beard turns on him with mad eyes. Spittle foaming at the corners of his mouth, he doubles back, shakes out a tanto butterfly, dried blood on the blade. Karl wonders as he comes whose it is. Charging down the stairs, dog circling to bite, he lifts his arm for a downward slash. The big Smith warm from its nest under his arm, Karl raises it, sighting on his face as he comes, in his eyes no reaction to looking down the barrel of a .44.

The thought of this obscene thing, this witless marionette straddling him as he bleeds out scares Karl more than dying. Front sight on the man's open mouth, over the path through the cerebellum, brain stem, nowhere to go, Karl waits. What was he before Raj got hold of him? Not much different from what he is

now, Karl guesses.

At the last instant, the gun bucks, his hand taking the recoil in the web of his thumb. Ducking under the slash, Karl goes down hard on his knee, fending off the swipe with upraised left arm, taking the brunt on his jacket, not much force in it, but enough. He feels the blade bite through and into his arm, cold as ice. Pivoting over Karl, dead on his feet, he tumbles to the bottom of the stairs.

Skin crawling from the near miss, Karl gets up massaging an aching knee. Trembling, he looks down at the thing sprawled on the landing—puppet with cut strings, back of his head gaping, blood pooling. A woman screams so long he wonders if she'll ever stop.

How did he find them? Whatever it was, Karl missed it. Up the stairs he limps, calling, knowing they won't come. It's her they want. Him, Raj can kill anytime. Romy's the one he has to have, and he wants her alive, which is good. It means he has time; not much, but a little. At the landing he stops, trying desperately to think.

Will it be enough?

They've got her already. Got her and are taking her down right now. He misses them and she's dead. No, not dead. Worse than dead—she's his. Turning back down, to the stairwell at the opposite end of the floor, knee complaining, gun under his jacket, he waits where he can see three out of four wells. That leaves the elevator and one stairwell open. Three out of five—little better than even odds. Better than Vegas, but not good.

Eyes roving from one to the other, he waits. Icy sweat runs down his ribs. His shirt he presses to the slash on his arm. Can't be too bad if he can still use it. This is taking too long. Can they be implanting her right now?

He won't think about it, he can't. They do, the game's over. She'll be his. Raj wins.

His heart starts the same old thing and he presses the flat of his palm hard against his breastbone, commanding it behave. Oddly enough, it does. Never good at waiting, he's going nuts.

What should he do? What if he misses her? He won't lose Romy the way he lost Kat. The thought smarts like a backhand.

Should he be down in the plaza? Should he check the other well? Stop the lift? What, damn him, what?

Physically impossible for him to stand still, he paces—come on, come on, come on!

SFPD officer shows up at the foot of the far well, and Karl freezes. Tall, gangly, fresh out of the academy, maybe a fast 23, he kneels. Careful to find a spot free of blood, he takes the corpse's pulse.

Karl can only shake his head. Was he ever that green?

Subvocalizing, he spots Karl, pretends to look away, turns, brings a carbine around from behind his back. One of the new sub-lethals Karl thinks, not that it matters. They take him he's just as dead. Karl's sure Raj would have no trouble getting to him in lock up. Too many in too close, all wired.

Karl doesn't want to kill a cop. He takes the .44 out from under his jacket, lets him see it. Around the corner behind him come two couples, young, thirties, late twenties maybe. The cop raises something in

Karl's direction. Karl ducks around the stairwell. Nothing happens.

The four in front of him go mute mid-gerund to coast, toys with dying batteries. They keep their legs under them, but sag, feet dragging, shuffling, sailboats caught in an eddy. Faces slack, they spiral, eyes glass. So that's it—he has something tuned to jam implants, and he thought he was going to put Karl down the same way. Sorry, no dice. Lifting the revolver, Karl sights over it, trigger finger along the frame. The kid's carbine's a slug thrower and Karl's dead.

When he scurries out of sight, Karl knows it's a goo-shooter. He's seen them used. Foam ties a man up, worse the more he fights it. God bless liberals. The crap won't reach this far. Karl can keep him away and out of the equation.

By now the couples recover, stagger away, dazed, confused, wiping drool from their chins. Do they know what hit them?. Do they know their little dream was just a beneficent government minding the flock?

As far as Karl can tell, they find nothing unusual about it. The way they huddle together reminds him of his flock of lambs released from the indignities of the worming ritual.

Dismissing the cop from his mind, Karl scans the three wells he can see, wishing for Superman's eyes to see the forth.

Were Lois' dainties pink? black? Did she favor girdle? garter belt? Did Clark use his X-ray eyes to find out? Was he saintly or just super? Why is Karl even remotely curious?

The lift stops to take on a couple sweet things and Karl sees it's empty. All right—he's batting 800. But there's always that last stairwell.

He itches to go. Run. Do something, anything. Not long and they'll have some guys in to swat him. Guys who'll laugh at his antiques. Just then, he catches movement from the corner of his eye and steps back out of sight.

It's the two, Romy between them, a struggling, cursing hellion. Anything but passive this time, she screams, claws, kicks. Karl smiles. Good girl. Barely able to hold her between them, they drag her by pinioned arms. The cop picks now to peek around the corner and they see him, backtracking up the stairs.

God damn him. Karl considers shooting the dumb bastard. Instead he wills his mind quiet. He's got to think. Okay, he's got maybe three minutes. They know these two wells are covered, so that leaves only the lift and the two far wells. Those he can watch at once. Moving fast, he keeps his eyes on the stuccoed ceiling. She's there, barely a meter over his head on the other side of warp and weave of steel joists, sprayed foam, wire, tubing, optics. So close. Not close enough.

Gun under his jacket for the benefit of strolling tourists still oblivious to the excitement, he makes the lift, presses the down button. He's sure they'll use it, he can feel it. Woman with a little girl comes to wait beside him. He tells her to use the stairs, that it's out of order. Looking back resentfully, she leads the girl away.

He presses his head to the stainless doors to hear by bone conduction. Hears hydraulics vent as the ram descends. Gun out, he waits. Kat he lost by hesitating. He won't lose Romy that way. Stairways still clear. SWAT'll be along any second. They won't be asking questions. Against their armor the .44's a pea

shooter. Gun hand shaking, he waits, back to the wall.

Killed by the good guys—that would be his style.

The elevator slows. He wishes he were in the woods, home. He can smell the shavings in the hen house, feel the smooth warmth of brown eggs gathered from under a broody hen. He'll only have a second to double tap them, her in the middle. He's done El Presidente on the range in just under three seconds—but never with Romy standing between the targets.

Sweat greasing the grip in his hand, he dries his gun hand on jeans, gets set. Five years since he's practiced with a handgun. He doesn't pray for things, but he prays now. Not asking for anything, just opening a line.

Letting his hands hang slack, Karl blanks his mind as if he's on the range, waiting for the buzzer to go. He can feel the car come down, feel her there on the other side of the door. He brings up the gun in an isometric grip, left pulling, right pushing. Raising the hammer with trigger pressure, breath suspended, up on the balls of his feet, he focuses over the sight like a hood ornament, through the door an inch from the muzzle to a point three feet back in the car.

He will not lose her, will not leave here without her.

The shushing cuts off as the valve closes, a thunk as the inside door latch engages.

He will not.

A nearly imperceptible tremor in the floor under his feet, and time runs midnight molasses as stainless doors crease.

* * *

In a story his great-grandmother often retold, Drew remembers the suicide of Uncle Will. Studying to be a doctor, when the sight fails in his right eye, he moderates his dream to pharmacist. When his left eye fades he secures a pint of sulfuric.

His great-grandmother, then a child, waits in her bed to wish him good night. Waits, listening as he showers, changes into new underclothes, comes to sit on the edge of her bed and kisses her, bristled cheeks sanding her face as he clamps her furious hard, then, at the kitchen table, bolts the oily liquid.

Is it the same urge that drives him to buy a fresh suit of clothes before walking halfway across the Golden Gate?

* * *

Romy rushes into Karl's arms, nearly knocking him down. When he can see past her, he sees them both flat on the floor.

"Dead," she says. "Let's go."

Fighting for breath, he stands rooted.

"Come on, I said!" She drags him by his jacket "Let's get out of here, there'll be policia everywhere in a minute, I saw one back there."

Stunned inert, he lets her haul him away, eyes on the two on the floor of the car. "You did that?"

Eyes on the gun, she takes him down the stairs. "Put that away."

He slips it back under his arm. "How?"

She won't look at him, "I'm a freak. You know that already, don't you?"

Down the hallway, past evacuated shops, past a sign marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

"The thing you did when you touched me?"

Saying nothing, she leads him fast through the deserted hallway.

"Something electric.... You can do that?"

She looks at him, ashamed, "I can do it."

"Why now, why not before?"

She straight-arms their way through a swinging door, hustling him along with her, "I don't know why, okay, I don't know. Now shut up and move."

Where the hall T's, she hesitates.

"Know where you're going?"

She takes them left, down, "Out, I'm going out."

A door marked EXIT, she leans out, whistles shrill, hurting his ear. Bags in his arms, Willy comes springing through, and again they're moving.

Down a dim hallway, around and down stairs, past a scared looking Mexican kid in kitchen whites, grease blackened on his thighs where he wipes his hands, and out they go into the haze.

Does the feeling of being joined with her come through her hands or is it his alone? Either way it's there, real as wind off the bay, real as the scent of grilling lamb drifting up from the plaza.

God help him, he aches for it.

* * *

The Cannery is crowded today.

Sure coming here is a mistake, Drew heads up the stairs and three jerks elbow him out of their way as they hurry past. Dirty, smelling of sweat and poppers, urine, Thunderbird, glue. Scary, the one with the red beard. They don't apologize, just keep going, mounting stairs at a run. Picking himself up, he wonders what they're doing here. Nothing good, he's sure.

Now another guy, he doesn't see his face, jostles past him, gun out and he's had enough, goes back down. Let them have the stairs. Four shops down he hesitates. What was that, a firecracker? He strains for another, hears a scream or thinks he does.

Ten minutes later, having found nothing he wants, disgusted, he goes to sit in his van. He wants to go out in style, in something really nice, preferably wash and wear, but he can't do it. Even now, can't throw away money on overpriced made-in-China-by-slave-labor junk. He laughs at himself, at the utter ridiculousness of it—economy when in an hour he'll be dead. That's if he hits the lights right.

Depressed by his own bullheaded frugality, he noses the little van into the afternoon crush. Motor arcing, he thinks again it's time for a rebuild, and smiles at the thought. That doesn't matter now. Let the next owner worry about it. As the light cycles for the third time red, leaving him at the crosswalk, he glances left and forgets to breathe.

Out a fire exit not twenty meters from him they come. It's her, it's Romy and the other one, the one in the leather jacket. The two from the lobby, the ones he killed, there, right there in the street in front of him. Can't be, but it is.

He skins his head on the way out of the cramped van like he does every time he's in a rush and, ignoring the traffic speeding by before and after him, ignoring the shouts, the raised fists and gestures, walks to them, eyes on their faces, afraid to blink, afraid to turn away, even to look down at the ground, afraid the faces will change.

Now the smaller guy, the one in dark leather notices him coming and opens his coat, lifts a gun, a very large gun, to point at his navel, at his raw, naked heart, and he lifts his arms in front of him, finding out in a half second just how much he's been kidding himself about wanting to die.

Very much he wants to live.

* * *

Why he doesn't drop him Karl doesn't know.

But as he comes across traffic, finger poised at half the pressure that'll rock the sear, he waits, scanning the street up and down looking for someone else. If he sees anyone else coming he'll have to kill him. But

it's just this one, just this skinny guy in baggy khakis, a man he's sure he's seen somewhere before.

Romy's hand tightens on his, "It's Drew, the man I was with before the bomb."

Now he remembers. He checks again, finds his hands empty.

"Dear God, you're alive! I'm not dreaming this, am I?"

"Not unless I am, too," Romy says. "Can you give us a ride?"

The other stares blankly back as singsong horns close in.

Karl's hand shoots out, clamps his upper arm, "Can you?"

Slowly, it sinks in. "A ride?" He nods, smiles, looks at Romy, back at Karl, "Sure! Sure I can, my van's right here, come on, get in."

They squeeze into the van, Willy sprawled in back on stacks of Bibles, Karl ducking down in the second seat, Romy up front, head on Drew's lap. "Everybody ready? Here we go." Karl watches from the back seat, shotgun muzzle cold by his forehead. No way will he be taken now.

"Those guys after you?"

"Don't stop," Romy says, "don't look down at me. Watch where you're going!"

From the pitching floor, Karl hears cruisers scream by. A snared hare is what he feels like, nowhere to go if a face looms in the window. No choice but to kill a cop. That or Raj gets to him in lock up. It won't happen that way.

The car lurches, motor whining five thousand RPM as he thrusts them out into traffic. The van weaves, rocks, turns.

Willy slides on his bed of Bibles, rocking the van as he hits the wall, "Ow."

Bink stands on Karl to peer over the back of the rear seat. Karl reaches up to stroke him and he dodges, the little jerk, intent on cars around them. No time for him, now. Too busy. Showbiz gone to his head. Dog stolen by a recom with biceps bigger than his frontal lobe.

Into the open the van accelerates, electric motor changing keys as it gears up. Drew smiles back at him, down at Romy, "You can relax, now."

Romy sits up, wiping hair out of her face, "We owe you."

"You owe me nothing."

Karl sits up. That's true. Breathing dropping back to where it should be, he looks out.

"Where to?" Drew says, glancing back at Karl.

It's him, all right, and Karl doesn't much care for being in the same car with him. Might be crazy. "Drop us anywhere."

Drew looks back over a shoulder, "I don't know where you're going and you don't have to tell me, but I'll take you all the way, wherever it is, if you'll let me."

This is nuts. He plants a bomb then gives them a lift? He wants away from this guy. "You must hate recoms to do what you did."

"I never hated you," he says to Romy. "Never. What I hate is Genie. That's why I did what I did. I haven't slept since."

Watching his eyes in the rear view mirror, Karl believes him.

"So, hey, mi carro es tú carro, where to?"

Karl watches the road, notices drivers gawking as they pass. He reaches up, tucks her hair down the back of her coat. "North."

Drew looks puzzled. "Anglo-Cali, huh? Good choice. Big place. Where you headed up there?"

Jesus freak. Maybe he regrets the bomb, maybe just that they got out alive. Karl doesn't like him, doesn't trust him. But right now the last place they want to be is out there on a ramp. That's exactly where the policía—and Raj—will be looking. "Don't worry about where."

"Yeah, sure, man, relax. North it is."

Karl thinks of something. "You implanted?"

"Sorry, don't believe in it. You need to call I've got a set back there somewhere."

"That's all right," Karl says, nerves keying down a notch. "Just take us north."

* * *

They make it as far as the Russian River.

On a long steep grade on 101 the overtaxed van gives up the fight, smell of melting insulation and red hot copper coming through the floorboards. They coast to a stop. Drew ratchets on the brake, "That's it, she's done."

"You're sure?" Romy says.

He laughs, "I'm sure."

Karl looks down the highway, cars already with lights on, thinning out, now. Too late to start; hitching at night's chancier. He looks around him at hills of upthrust serpentine. Not a bad spot to spend a night. No way Raj can track them here. Nobody to see them.

Willy's already down on the sand bar by a river running high, the color of tea. The sun droops over

oak-studded hills lush from winter rain.

"Good place to stop," Romy says, unloading food Drew bought on the way.

They agree on a sandbar out of view of the road. Karl builds a fire, takes an armload of driftwood from Drew and though he's been dreading it, opens his mind.

At once Karl trusts him absolutely. Wanting to make amends, hagridden with guilt, driven insane with it, he's no threat. Noticing Romy at riverside, he leaves the fire to Drew, follows.

Downstream, she sits cross legged on a slab of eddy-pocked bedrock only a few inches above the water. In deepening shade she watches the river flow, face serene. He reaches in to find the water jarringly cold. Over crags behind them a chill, high fog blows in from the sea. It will be cold tonight. He sits. "Penny for your thoughts."

She answers, her gaze on the river, "What to do next."

A cold hand probes his viscera. There it is again. "Why decide now? Why not see a bit of the world first? Like it here?"

She raises her head, hair skimming sand, to the cliffs above them. "It's magnificent, big as the entire plat, this one hill. I always dreamed of coming to a place like this. None of the others ever saw a river, not in person." She reaches out to slip her bare feet, coated with sand, into fast running current. Lips pressed tight with determination, she holds them immersed.

He observes, amused. "Not cold?"

Arms taut, she keeps her feet where they are. "A river," she says, voice lit with wonder. "My feet in a river."

He admires her toughness, more her capacity to look like she looks and not be possessed by vanity. "You know, the river will be here tomorrow. The sun will come up and it'll be warm. You don't have to soak it all up right now. It'll keep, really it will."

She gasps, gives up, pulls them out, cradling them in her hands, moaning as she rocks.

"Let me see," he says, taking a foot in his hands. Her skin burns, it's so cold. She watches him, wary, as he rubs her instep with his thumbs, working some warmth back into it.

Gaze wandering upriver, Karl sees Willy toss a willow branch to splash in shallow water and, disgusted, sees Bink race madly off and return it to him. Wheedling sod, never once has he ever brought anything back for him, never once. Too stupid, he always thought.

Clouds pass, driven by chill wind. It'll drop down into the low forties tonight. They've got only three bags—somebody's going to get cold, and it sure as hell won't be him. Drew can sleep in his van, wrap himself like a beef Wellington in C4 for all it matters, he's not freezing his ass off for somebody who did his best to blow him up.

The one foot warm, he lets it go, takes up the other. He can't believe she's letting him touch her like this. He looks up to find her watching him speculatively.

"I know what you think I am."

"And what's that?"

"What you see—this." She yanks a handful of her hair. "This is what they made me. It's not me." She presses a fist to her chest. "I'm in here, I'm nothing like what men see when they look at me."

He's intrigued. "What do they see?"

"They see their fantasy, what they want to see."

"But you... I mean, Sisters..." He wishes he'd never opened his mouth.

Her eyes glare as she waits for him to finish. "What?"

There's nothing to do but to go on. "You were...intimate."

She sneers at his stupidity, "You are a prude. Yes, we were intimate. Those that refused disappeared. I did what I had to to stay alive. You think I should be ashamed? I'm not. We had each other; that's all we had." She pulls her foot away, "I don't expect you to understand."

An ache throbs in his gut. Jealousy, moral outrage, he's not sure which.

"So that confirms what you always thought about us, I guess."

Karl reaches out, snatches her bare foot, hauls it back.

"Let go!"

"I'm not done," he says, gripping it hard until the tension goes out of her leg. The feel of her skin in his hands calms him as he works.

She watches him, "And are you a virgin?"

He meets her eye, "I'm forty years old."

"So, you've been intimate with just your wife, that right?"

He sees what's coming. "No."

Her mouth drops in shammed surprise, "There were others?"

"A few."

"Many?"

"I lost my score card."

She looks at him as if he'd just told her he had cut the heads off week old kittens, "You're telling me you fornicate like a mongrel."

"All right, I get the point. I'm no saint. I've never known any. The ones that pretend to be are just more careful about hiding their sins than the rest of us. I've made mistakes, plenty. I mean, what am I? A killer, that's all, a loser, pig farmer, punching bag. Who the hell am I to judge you or anybody else?"

She shakes her head, covers his hand on her foot, holds it there, "You could have turned me over. You didn't."

Not wanting to hear any more, he lets her go. She grabs his arm. "I see the way you miss your dog, yet you let Willy keep him. You let us slow you down when you might have been home. None of this you had to do. And, you know, when you touch me, I feel something...something I've never felt before—a connection."

She has his attention. "What do you mean?"

She shakes herself as if throwing something off, "I don't know, it's like I... You'll think I'm insane."

He's got to hear it, got to know. "Tell me."

She hesitates, face cynical, "It's like I know what you're thinking, what you're feeling." Eyes brimming, she looks away, "I told you, don't you think I know how it sounds?"

Numb, Karl says nothing. It's not true. It can't be true. In forty years, no one, not one person, has ever said anything like this to him.

"It's not that." Unable to look at her, he watches the river. "I was a cop once. They called me a mind reader, joking, you know, just to needle me. They had no idea, but they nailed me."

Her eyes, narrowing with disbelief, pierce him. When she speaks, her voice is barely audible over the rills in the river. "You can do that?"

He watches water loll its way around a swerve of rock, cutting even as it's diverted, adding to the sculpting of thousands of years of hydraulics. He answers, crossing the line he's crossed only once before in the last twenty years. And that with Magnus who'd already guessed.

Laying it out, he opens all he has, the only thing that's really his—his secret—to a woman he's known for hours. He looks up at her, then back down at the water. He can't do it, can't look at her and say it. "I can."

He glances up to see none of the fear he dreads.

Slowly, she nods. "It's not easy being different."

"I told someone once, she broke three fingernails getting away from me. My wife I never told. Still—I knew. It didn't make it fair. Things most women can keep secret she couldn't. Knowing the things I knew and not able to say... It didn't last long."

"And since?"

"Nobody but Tate. Mary's always known."

"Your wife?"

"Sister, Mary's my sister."

What about your wife?"

"Don't have one, haven't for ten years."

Looking punch drunk, she exhales a gust of breath, "Your sister?" She considers, "You care for her very much?"

He has trouble believing they're having this conversation. "Very much."

"Your parents?"

"Uh, uh."

"Ah, I see, is she married?"

"Was."

"Children?"

"Mel."

"The boy you spoke of."

"Sixteen, okay kid most the time."

She gives him a look.

"What?"

"You're an uncle."

He tosses a shard of stone to the far bank. "Not much of one."

Sunlight gone, the river rushes by in twilight. He thinks of her sister, the one in his cubicle. "Were you and Sasha close?"

She opens her mouth, not a smile, eyes flashing, looks past him upriver, "As long as I can remember. Who killed her?"

"It was Raj, they all were."

"How could it have been?"

"Five years ago, I killed a man who slit a little girl's throat. Two days ago I went to see Swindlehurst and it was him. They both said the same thing, Raj said it yesterday. He wanted me to know. The men on the quay. Swindlehurst. The three at the Cannery. The waitress, the boy with the bat—all Raj."

She hugs her knees to her chest as she rocks, eyes on far hills and the deepening turquoise sky beyond.

"I won't let him take me."

"He won't take either of us."

She shivers, looks back at the fire, sparks riding a plume of heated air up into the dark. "I can't stand thinking he's out there waiting, listening, planning. How can he exist like that, no body, only a will? How can we let him do the things he does?"

"He exists because we made him. We made it possible for a good man to survive his own death, to become disembodied intellect. We gave him the power he has. Our cult of technology made him, now we get to enjoy his company."

Drew calls, and grateful for the interruption, Karl follows her up to the fire. They eat, something out of cans heated in the coals, hash he thinks. Not tasting, he bolts it, drains a bottle of water.

Afterward, he backtracks to the van for bedrolls. One he tosses down to Willy near the bank, the second to Romy by the fire. The third he lays out under a live oak far from the fire for himself. Here he can keep his night vision and avoid being back-lit by the fire in case they're surprised. Leaving the bag, he returns to the fire pit.

Full dark, now, blood red coals are the only source of light. The warmth is good. The sight of the coals holds him entranced. Cross legged on the sand, he surrenders to it, wondering as he always has that fire should affect him the same as it has men for millennia. Fire dimming, wood gone, he thinks of getting into his bag but finds the idea unpalatable.

Hunkered silently by the fire in short sleeves, Drew looks cold. As Karl watches, he nods off, catches his lolling head, jerks upright only to sag again. Karl sends him off to his bag under the oak, assuring him he has another for himself. He's slept out with only a jacket for a blanket before, and on harder ground than this.

He turns to the dim to see Bink disappear down into Willy's bag and Drew safely bundled in his. Romy, back to him, sleeps. Later, breath visible in smoky air, he can tell by the sound of their breathing they're out. He's relieved to be alone, yet not. He wouldn't mind company tonight.

Eyes on the coals, he listens to the night. Pygmy owl chattering high in the oak. The river. The odd semi coasting down the grade. With a growing sense of unease, he realizes he's not alone. Sure it makes no sense at all, he feels it all the same. He reaches for a stick to turn a half-burned log and is startled to see her lying, eyes open, watching him from her bag only a few feet away, head pillowed on rolled jeans.

"Aren't you cold?"

He answers without turning, unwilling to tear his eyes from the fire. "I'm fine."

A world of their own, heat shimmering, violet flame dancing among escaping volatiles, the embers tap into a vein of primitive awe. Light, heat, safety, the fire calms, reassures, sweeps away the last three centuries like so much duff.

"You won't sleep like that."

Can't she just shut up? "I'll do all right."

"If I leave you alone, huh?"

Now she's got it.

"I've never..." she says, voice catching.

He takes a long breath. He doesn't want to talk, doesn't want to offend her either. "You've never what?"

She breathes slowly, once in, out. "Never slept alone in my life before last night."

Surprised, he turns. Her eyes catch a glow from the fire. "That's true?"

She nods. "I couldn't sleep. By myself it's no good. All the snoring, moving around, strange smells, I can't stand sleeping where there are strange smells."

He breathes deeply, clean, cold air, wood smoke, the river. "No strange smells tonight."

"There are. The river, this bag, the smoke from the fire. And noises. I'll never be able to sleep."

"So get in with Willy."

"I thought of that, I'd never fit."

What is she getting at?

She can't be trying to lure him into her bag. A breeze sweeps up the river, and he shivers, raising his collar in a futile gesture. It's going to be a long, miserable night. He wishes she would just shut up and go to sleep, just leave him alone with his self-pity so he can get through it. When she doesn't say anything for a minute, he begins to hope maybe she won't.

She works at the zipper, opening the bag, folding it back, and incredibly, climbs out to sit on a log a quarter of the way around the pit. Demurely she sits in a turtleneck sweater just long enough to make a dress, elbows on bare knees.

He watches as goose bumps rise on her arms, thighs. "What the hell are you doing?"

She stares into the coals. "Sitting by the fire."

"Why?"

"If I can't sleep, I may as well let you have the bag."

"I don't want it, get back in."

"No."

Sure as a dog to its bed, Karl's eyes find their way from ankle, to calf, to thigh. He resents her intrusion into his solitary misery. "Hasn't anyone ever told you not to run around like that?"

Offended, she looks down, "Like what? You picked this shirt out."

Can she be that dense?

"I picked out jeans, too."

"We didn't worry about it in the tower."

"You're not in the tower, now, go on, get in."

"Uh uh."

Neither speaks. What's left of a log smolders as fingers of flame claw their way up to take it in their grasp.

"Have you killed many men?"

He's known it was coming, dreaded it nevertheless. The big question—he's been asked before. He knows how she feels about killing, or thinks he does. He won't lie. "I've done it when it needed doing." He considers. "Many? What's many?"

He feels her recoil. "Who, then?"

He stares down at the carcass of log, split at the rings, shimmering with heat. "I don't remember names. Some I never knew."

"No, I mean what were they?"

Dew forming around them, over them, as the temperature dips below dew point, he thinks. The river sends white noise up to them from below. Something drops into his mind. Something he hasn't thought about in fifteen years. "Two days out of the academy I walked in on a robbery. San Francisco, one of the little Korean hole-in-the-wall groceries down in the Tenderloin. Four a.m. I go in and the old man and his wife just sit there, don't say anything, which isn't right. I reach over to grab a pack of gum and brush against her arm and I know. Two kids hiding one aisle over, AK-94's on my back."

"And?"

"They were my first."

Frustration radiates through her skin like light, "What happened?"

He knows perfectly well what she means, what she wants. "I killed them, that's what happened."

She squirms around to partially face him, "No, no, what happened? Don't talk in generalities, they don't say anything."

He meets her gaze, "I didn't think you'd want to know."

"Well, I do."

"The gory details, huh?"

She swallows, clamps her lip between sharp teeth, nods.

Then that's what she'll get.

"Okay. One was in the cold box getting some beer when I came in, the other was behind me in the chips. I mouthed to mama and papa to get down and took off down in front of the dairy case. He opens up on me and glass, milk and tofu fly. When he's on empty I get off the floor, duck around the end of his aisle, sight below his vest and drop him."

"You didn't tell him to surrender?"

"Surrender?" He nearly laughs. "Uh, uh."

"Why not?"

She's serious.

"Because I didn't want him to, that's why. He just did his best to shred me with his first magazine and he's busy digging in his jacket for another. Ever seen what a 94 does to tissue?"

"Not lately."

"Fires a two round burst, bullet under-stabilized, leaves an exit hole you can't plug with a king size bed sheet. And I bet you forgot his buddy in the cold box, didn't you? Well, I can tell you, I didn't. Not for a second."

"I see."

"I'm just getting off a twelve-hour shift, I'm beat, I'm alone. Not a soul knows I'm here and I don't have time to com. I'm not out to rehabilitate these sweethearts. I want one thing: to go home and stand in the shower hot as I can stand it, and hit the sack, see? That's all I want. I want to live. And mamasan and papasan curled up on the floor behind the counter wouldn't mind if they lived, either."

"Okay, I see, what then?"

This part he doesn't want to tell. Not because he's ashamed. Because it will make her hate him. "Forget it."

"Tell me, what then?"

She turns to him and the sight of her legs sets his stomach to smouldering. Why couldn't she have stayed in her bag? He watches firelight reflected off her hair, decides it doesn't matter, that the truth is what matters. "I run up on him where he lies, still doing his damndest to slip in another magazine, I put a round through his neck, that's what I do then."

She swallows, "You killed him."

"I killed him."

"And then?" She says it as if she dreads hearing what he'll say.

Let her. "The other one takes a shot at me from the back. He's smarter than the last one, sends me one

burst at a time, shooting low, knee height right through the snack food aisles. I crawl, face to dirty linoleum all the way across the store to him. When I can see his ankles I lay the pistol down and sweep his legs out from under him. I see him fall. I see his face close as you and I are right now as he turns to look at me under the aisle."

"What then?"

"He tries to get his gun up. I'm faster."

"You shot him."

He swallows, nods, knowing what she must think of him, all her worst suspicions confirmed. It doesn't matter now, he won't lie about it. "I shot him."

"You killed them both. And were you sorry?"

He feels again what he felt when it was over. Glad to be alive, to be able to pick a cold beer out of broken glass, pour it down his throat, let it run down his chin and over his jacket, making a mess. Glad to hear the sobs of the mamasan as she answers the young interpreter's questions. Sorry? Like hell he was. "I wasn't sorry. I was damned glad to be the one standing."

She nods.

Now it's his turn to be curious. After what seems a long time, he says, "So..."

"So, you did what you had to to stay alive. I think if you hadn't, you wouldn't be here now—I wouldn't, Willy wouldn't."

He doesn't get it. "That's what you think."

"That's what I think."

"I thought..."

"A few days ago I might have thought so. A few days ago I wasn't who I am now. Things change."

He notices her shiver, looks back at the bag, at her. "You won't get in the bag."

She won't.

Another gust of wind comes up the canyon, off the river, sends smoke into his eyes. "You're out of you mind, get in and zip up."

She ignores him, eyes on the dying fire.

God, he's tired. He looks at her, at the bedroll, decides. He's not going to sit out here and freeze with a heavy bag lying open collecting dew an arm's reach away. She can sit out if she wants. For all he knows she has some capacity to heat herself the way she can shock him, some strange animal capacity. "You do get cold..."

She gives him a look that makes him feel stupid for asking. "All right, so you do, well I do too. If you're

not getting in, I am."

She doesn't move.

To hell with her, then.

He pulls off his boots and jeans, sets the Remington under cover from the dew and slips into the warmth she left behind. It's good to be warm. No small thing, sitting out in the dark all a misty, spring night with the sea sending its tendrils over the hills. This is more like it. He shuts his eyes, breathes deep, lets it out slowly, the tension in knotted muscles with it. He reaches around him out into the dark, listening, hears only chirring night sounds. At last he can sleep.

The thought of her out there in the cold nags at him, and though he shoves it away, like a starving kitten, comes back. He opens his eyes to find her watching him.

Quickly she turns back to the fire.

Let her sit out there. He closes his eyes again, but it's no good. It's an effort, now, to keep them shut.

Damn her.

He throws open the bag, "Get in."

She's up and moving in an instant, sliding in front of him, skin cadaver-cold, erect velvet of her legs tickling. He shrinks back as far as he can go in the cramped bag, but she backs up against him, sapping heat from him, hair in his face, smelling both exotic and somehow familiar as coffee. A homey, comfortable scent. A scent relentless. A scent that, surely as the pocket at the bottom end of a pinball game swallows the ball bearing, swallows him.

"Warm me up." she says.

"Kid trick sitting out there like that."

"I had to, now warm me up, I said." She grabs his hand, pulls his arm around her, twines her legs in his, the cold skin taking his breath. She's the most pure mind he's ever entered. No envy, no hate, no poison, no darkening whorls of complexity. What he's felt before only in the minds of children.

For him, trust, affection, caring, more than he ever felt in his wife—that and something more. It's been a long time since he felt any part of what he feels now.

"You did that just to get me into the bag, didn't you?"

"Worked, didn't it?"

He feels her smile.

"Know something? I've never had a man friend before, except for Willy, and that's different. Never one I could trust like I trust you."

Her words come to him twice. The first time an instant before she says them and then in her voice. He doesn't mind hearing them twice. Not these. He can feel her thoughts move, like currents along a spit.

She moves against him, snuggling, finding a good fit, and he draws her in close, body responding. Around them a rhythmic chirring. A little flower of panic blooms in her very deep and he waits to hear what it will be.

"I can trust you?" she says, not coy, not put on, just asking.

He smiles into her hair, locking his arms around her, "Little late to ask, isn't it?" Her hair in his face, the smell of her in his lungs, the feel of her body against him, her mind around him, through him.

A glow of comfort warm as the glow of the embers in the sand pit comes to him through the skin of her back.

"I know I can."

Downward she drifts toward sleep, drawing him with her. He follows down into warmth, into darkness, one question in the back of his mind, niggling as beggar's lice against bare skin.

She can trust him, true enough.

But can he?

* * *

Bristly whiskers and an icy nose sniff Karl's cheek.

He turns his face and it comes after him, snuffling. A ghost of thought comes through. Bink, curious about this other nested with him in the bag. He sniffs her, and she stirs, moaning, in his arms. Finding his hand cups her breast, he pulls it away. She draws it back, pressing close. "I slept warm," she says, voice barely more than a moan.

The sand, odiously hard the night before, is now soft as down. On every strand of her hair, beads of dew. The bag, the sand, everything exposed is sopping. Traffic's picked up. Fire's out, cold. Nobody up but Bink.

Lips at the nape of her neck in the hollow formed by her jaw, he smiles, earlobe brushing his lips. He inhales, subtle perfume teasing. "What's that perfume you're wearing?" He scents her again. Good stuff, whatever it is. No wooden mallet to the temple, almost as if you've got to know it's there to smell it.

He feels her pull back into herself as if he's hurt her. What can be wrong?

"It's not perfume."

He's lost. "What is it, then?"

"It's me. Asiatic lily. It's in me, part of me, in my sequence. It's part of what makes me near-human."

He draws her back against him, not sure what to say. He could tell her he could get used to it, could learn to need it, to require this haunting scent to stay alive. But he won't.

They lie together not talking, listening to the river, to stellar jays bickering over the remains of their dinner on the sand.

"So, mind reader," she says, half turning, "what am I thinking?"

Oddly enough, he doesn't resent it. "You're sure you want to know."

"I'm sure."

"I don't want to get up either, but we have to."

Slowly, body electric, half with fear, half with awe, she strains to look back at him. "It's true, then—you can."

"Anybody could tell you what I just did."

"But you really can."

He nods, sorry she asked.

"You can't be ashamed."

"Why not?"

"Don't ever be ashamed of what you are. It's a great gift." Then he can feel her balancing, weaving on the edge between fear and something else he much prefers. "You can read...everything?"

He closes his eyes, nods into the delicious warmth of her neck, breathing deeply of her, not wanting to see, wishing he could shut off the loathing she'll feel when she knows. He would give anything to be able to say no. He won't lie. Not to her. "Yeah. Everything."

He doesn't get what he expects at all. No loathing. No hatred. No fear. No disgust. Instead compassion sweet as rainwater. Can it be? Of course, he sees it, now—nothing to hide gives her nothing to fear.

Lying quietly in his arms, she muses. "That can't have been easy."

Nuzzling her, hiding his head from the gray light outside the world of warmth they have shared for the night, he laughs low. She sees, she knows. No one, not his mother, not his sister, not lovers, not friends—no one has ever seen it from his side. Not one. Like that, she does. "Not always."

"It must...." She hesitates. "It must scare some people."

He nods into her hair, touch all he needs to reach her now.

"That's why, isn't it, why you are the way you are—so hard, so calloused."

"Am I?"

She shrugs, barely a move of her head, still not retreating from him, still not moving away, more a shrug inside her than out. "You were."

Body taut with hope, a man tied to a frame over sharp culms of shooting bamboo, he dares hope they will not grow through him, dares believe this one night the unstoppable groaning canes will hesitate in their man-tall stretch to the sun, dares worship his own existence enough to want it to go on a while longer, to want to taste, eat, drink, excrete—all the forms of ecstasy—a while longer. "And now?"

She looks back, eyes rising to a sky heavy with cloud. "You're different—not the same at all. I wouldn't be here if you weren't."

She believes every word of it, he knows, and he is suddenly afraid. If she's wrong.... "And you, are you the same?"

Now she smiles, breath rank as his own.

"Things don't change."

"You're not a thing."

"I have it on good authority I am."

The words are poisoned thorns deeply embedded in flesh, her mention of them the prodding of a needle. "I was wrong."

She rises, peels her flesh from his, segments of an orange, cloven apart, exposing skin never meant to meet air, a rending. She rises and as the others lay sleeping, stands over him, unrolling, slipping sand caked jeans up goose pimpled legs, eyes on his, reproving. "A gentlemen would turn away."

He doesn't move. "I would if I could."

Her face is hard in a way it hasn't been since the plat. "Don't talk like that, it reminds me of them."

At once he regrets the inane remark. "Them?"

"All of them, the men that paid to be with me. Talking nonsense. I can't stand lies."

"I wasn't lying."

Again she turns those sharp eyes on him, lips opening, closing in indecision, jaw set. "Then that's worse."

* * *

In bare feet she pads to the river.

To Romy the river feels colder this morning. She cups hands, splashes water over her face. She's gone barefoot on the plat, but on resilient decking. Here, sand grates against the soles of her feet, rocks jab, burrs prod. Out here things are hard, messy, dangerous. The complex pool was clean, warm, the air sultry.

She's seen rivers in UR, swam them, too; they were nothing like this. Is it possible people really swim in

water this cold, this fast, this strong? Dipping her feet, they go numb at once. With no one to see, she jerks them out, kneading them until the aching subsides. Last night, not wanting to let him see her courage fail, she'd kept them in until they had gone dead, until she had feared they would never feel again. Karl took them, tingling and prickling, in his hands, rubbing the feeling back. She let him handle her, touch her skin-to-skin as no man but those in the suite on the plat ever had.

She bends to sip of the river, shockingly cold. Tasting of what, rock? stream bed? A new taste, this living water, one she likes. Current so strong, it could suck her away, breaking her against tumbled rock. At the thought of it she shivers. In frustration she clutches a knife-edge of rock inches from a lapping river. There is so much she doesn't know about the world, so much she has to learn. All the texts she has read can't help her now, not out here where river etches rock.

Bending again, she rinses, spits, follows the bubbles as they trail away on the current, embarrassed to think he had smelled the vile breath she woke with. Sleeping next to him had been better than she had hoped, better than with Sasha. Guilt at the thought makes her cringe, but it's true. Somehow he fit her perfectly, hard arms lying so right, so reassuringly, between her breasts near her heart. Never has she felt so safe as she did last night.

All her life she's spent afraid. All her life she's dreaded the next moment—the next opening of a door, the next rise of an elevator, the next summons to Dr. Vici. Few times has she cast it off. The first was for Willy. The second for Auri. The first made her a friend, the second sent her Karl—and kept her alive. Is it possible that fear, instead of preserving her life, has leached it away?

She realizes that for the first time since her memories began she's not afraid of anything. It's as if the world can no longer touch her, hurt her, as if nothing can get close enough with him there. The only fear she has left is of him. She looks back to see him dressing by the fire, Drew up stoking it, Willy by the river.

Men are such fools.

Karl—a man. Like the others, like all the others. Full of pretty words, pleading words, meaningless sophistries—all plied to one purpose. For fifteen years she parried, cajoled, placated. It sickens her to remember. How much easier, how much more honest it would have been to work the quay with a chip scanner around her neck and a well stocked UR library implant.

Of course she will have to leave him—and soon. Before he reveals himself for what he is. Their matrons taught them well. Men were odious, revolting, corrupt. Each had their reasons, their own stories of betrayal, treachery, ill use. What amazes Romy now is that never once had she or any of them wondered at the unvarying view.

The sky is blue.

Men are reprobate.

Both truths had seemed equally obvious.

When at fifteen she went to work as an escort she had no difficulty confirming it. None at all. Now, water streaming by an inch from her nose, for the first time she sees why. What kind of man would pay so much for the small chance at seducing a fifteen-year-old virgin? A man very different from Karl. But men, or so she was taught, are men—one and all the same. Face close to eddy, water smooth enough to pick out her reflection in bits moment by moment, she makes out stones on the bottom, sunk deep in

greenish murk. Is he like the rest? She wants to say no, but can she? What scares her is how much she wants to say it—enough to accept a lie if it's one she wants to hear. No. She won't lie—not to herself. Letting her face hang slack, eyes unfocused, she ponders. He is...what? She has to say a decent man, from what she knows of him so far. The morning of the bomb, he kept her alive. The next day he did it again, not for her, for himself, because of the deal with Auri. But what he did with Lia, with Kara, he didn't have to. Okay that was one thing.

Another is the pressure Auri's putting on him right now to give her up. He hasn't—not yet. Why? She can't say. Then there was last night. Another man might have misunderstood, used her. She'd hardly have been in a position to resist. He did what? nothing. No, that isn't right. He did more than anyone she's ever slept with. Tearing herself away hadn't been easy.

He's decent.... "Decent." She listens to the word as she whispers it, caramel voice low, face close to the water. "Decent." What does it mean? Just a word, and words change nothing. She pushes the thought of last night away, thinks of the river, this living river sweeping along under her nose. A tingling thrill surges to the nape of her neck as she realizes again where she is. She lowers her face into the river, and rises, breath stopped by the cold, hair dripping. Drew calls them for breakfast, and she turns away, mind made up.

She'll let them know where she is, turn herself in to Auri. She has to. Sooner or later she has to. She won't see him lose his land. More she won't wait to see him show himself to be like the others.

That she couldn't stand.

She'd rather let Auri do what she will than see that.

* * *

Karl's forgotten the day.

Can it be Sunday? He counts back, finds it is. Ten days tomorrow he's been away from the land. A pang in his gut reminds him he may never see it again. A man can belong to a piece of ground, to the trees on it, to the deer trails, the creeks, the pastures—and he does.

Pulling on clammy jeans, he scans the sky. High clouds, gone metallic, as a sky before snow. He shivers as he slips into his coat. It's cold enough. April's late for it, but it's happened before. Rolling the bag into a taut bundle, he watches Romy down at the river, mind full of the feel of her against him. That he won't let happen a second time. Feeling when you should be thinking has gotten him into trouble before. It won't again.

They eat, climb the path to the van. Drew insists on hitching with them, leaving his Bibles behind. They catch a ride immediately and an hour later are dropped in Ukiah. There they wait three hours. Nothing. Three men and a woman are too many—three too many. By herself, Romy could catch a ride in a hot minute.

Finally an old man in a Jimmy offers them a ride to Colouza. Karl hesitates. It's out of the way to go east, but they've got to break the jinx. He takes it and by two, they make junction 299.

New construction on the interchange, widening the road to twelve lanes, equipment parked, a kid's toy box fantasy. Belly scrapers, jawed buckets for lifting asphalt, rollers, loaders, track layers, sheep foot, cranes, all waiting for Monday.

They try their luck on the on ramp where they can catch both the traffic coming off 5 and anybody coming back on from the truck stop. An hour later it's three o'clock and still no ride. Willy down the hill tossing Bink a stick. Doesn't he ever get tired, Karl wonders. He sure gets tired of watching. Straddling a concrete lane divider, Drew reads his Bible. Romy thumbs. Traffic is surprisingly sparse; of the many that have stopped to offer her a ride, not one has been willing to take them all. One man perhaps, but three, one Willy's bulk—no way.

They're hungry, thirsty, cold. Karl paces, looks at the sky, stomps his boots to keep warm. Cold, weird for April. Drew's tapped out, they have nothing but water. Light fading from a stainless sky, he heads down to the transport stop to make a call with his last token. Romy he takes with him, not trusting her anywhere near the on ramp without him. She might run, but that's not the only reason.

First to stop was a trucker that agreed to take them, all but Romy riding in the van. Following a hunch, Karl shook his hand and his stomach lurched at the squirming pit yawning before him. Drawing back, he raises the .44, pivots the muzzle between the driver and the drawn curtain to the sleeper where the other waits. They wouldn't have been the first for them. Bodies found stripped of belongings, scattered puppets along a stretch of nowhere. He wants to kill them, maybe he should, but instead, he throws the door shut, backs, watching as the deadly transport pulls away.

No, he won't leave her alone.

The number he has memorized. Karl punches it in, averting his face from the eye. Rick answers sounding put out as always. "Yes?"

Rick always could load the word with disgust. Karl wonders at this facility for hauteur. "Get me Magnus."

"I don't recognize your code, please identify yourself."

He leans against the side of the stall, discouraged more than usual. "The reason you don't recognize my code is because I didn't punch it in. Cut it out, Rick, you know damned well who this is."

"I'm sorry, I don't."

Curious, Karl turns, unable to resist seeing this new, timorous Rick. What he sees puts him on guard. Rick sits facing the eye stiff as a dummy—not at all the Ricky he knows and loves. Something's wrong, wrong as hell. Karl's first thought is he's got a gun to his head. He's never seen Rick act this stiff, this afraid. Faggot or not, he's seen him stand up to some bad actors without flinching. Something's got him scared out of his wits and Karl's finding it catching.

"Ricky," he says, compassion edging out irritation, "what's the deal?"

"I'm sorry, sir," he says, voice quavering, "you have reached the sanitation division of the United States

Justice Department. Your sat com visual seems to be disabled. I'm not getting a visual on you. If you know your extension, please enter it now."

Disgusted, Karl punches it in.

"I'm sorry, you have entered an inoperative code."

Like hell he did. "Rick, what the hell's going on?"

Rick's speaking some agency gibberish, but Karl isn't listening, instead he's watching as he draws a long finger across his neck, shaking his head no with the shortest of movements.

Karl's scared now, scared something's happened to the old man. In spite of knowing how absurd it is, he moves to the side in hopes of seeing beyond into the office, "Magnus?"

Rick looks up off screen, whines like a pup that's come to know the belt. A blast at close range comes over the satcom a tinny crash, and Rick's down, what's left of his skull on the desk.

Magnus comes into view of the conference pickup holding a pistol. "Nice of you to check in, Karl."

With a drop of his heart, Karl understands. "What now, Raj? Why Rick?"

"How now brown cow? Cleaning up some loose ends is all. It seems there's been a tragic accident. The epidemic of handgun violence has claimed yet another innocent victim. A minor government official has just killed his secretary, and an x-lover. Love triangle it seems. A tragic conclusion to a bit of office hanky panky."

Karl's blank. "A lover?"

Tate looks smug, "Didn't you know? Auri. Oh, yes, we were like this," he says, holding up two fingers side by side. "She's in there on the couch. Not very photogenic, just now. Want to see?" He flips a switch and a view of Tate's private quarters come on. Auri on the couch, a long path of arterial blood trailing down one lovely arm to pool on berber. Very dead.

Romy tries to force her way past him and into the booth, but arms braced, he holds her off. He doesn't want Raj to see her.

The view switches back to Tate's office. "No, expect not." Raj drops the 10mm on the desk, dusts off his hands in a gesture he's seen Raj do forever. "Disgusting what these things can do in the wrong hands. I like people so much better empty-handed, don't you? Why do you insist on hauling around that dangerous contraband? Why can't you just allow the police to protect you like everyone else?"

Karl slams a hand against the plexi of the screen, "Let him go, Raj, dammit, let him go!"

Raj seems to consider it, forms a purse-lipped smile, "Not quite yet, but soon, soon."

Karl forces himself calm, "Okay, Raj, okay, but why Magnus? What can he do for you?"

Raj smiles, bared teeth giving him a carnivorous look. "I want her, Karl. She's the last and I want her. Give her to me now and I'll let you live. I'll even give you back your money. It's there waiting for you. Must be hard not to be able to eat properly with that much wealth just out of reach."

He reaches for a glass of wine, brings it to his lips, "Is it?" He drinks, raises a finger, wags it in the air, "Oh, mmm, oh, this is good, good, good. Your favorite, isn't it? Considerate of Magnus...of me, I mean." He giggles, offers the glass, "Like some? No?"

Raj stops, eyes focused on a far point. "I remember what it was like to hunger, to thirst. I miss it, I really do." His eyes come back to Karl, face held in a curious half smile, not like Magnus at all. "Come on, what do you say? See reason, give her to me. If not I'll track down everyone you've ever known, ever satcomed with. I've got access to all of it, you know. I'll work my way through. I know about Petrolia. Eventually I'll find a way in. Don't make me do that."

Karl knows what's coming, can think of nothing to say that will change it.

Raj takes another sip, swallows, "You really should try some of this. I'm looking forward to a little trip to the country, but, you know, Karl, it's the damndest thing. Is anybody wired up there? What are you, a bunch of yahoos or what?"

"Let him go."

Magnus stands, walks to the window.

Dread plucks at Karl. "What are you doing, Raj?"

"You know, he says, opening a long window, tearing away long tendrils of akibia with the swipe of an arm, "I've always wanted to know what it felt like to be a bird. Haven't quite worked that one out yet." He cups an ear dramatically, "Oh, I hear the boys in blue are on their way."

Magnus is in trouble, but he's still alive. Maybe if he can say the right words, something to reach him—it—maybe he can keep him that way. "Raj, you say you don't have a soul, but maybe you do. You can think, you can feel. You can change, too."

"Oh, yes," Raj says, peering down, "fifty stories ought to give me a pretty good taste and still give me time to avoid the grand finale on the water. Of course Tate will be there, won't he?" He steps up on the frame, looks down, clowns losing his balance, fans his arms, catches himself, "Hoo, boy, this is scary."

"Raj, this isn't funny, come back in and let's talk!"

He leans out, catches himself by the frame with a whoop. "Ha! Fooled you, didn't I? Well, what do you say?" He does it again, barely catching himself with one hand, "Oops, almost didn't make it that time."

Romy grips his arm, levering herself around in view of the eye, "Stop it, I'll come, just tell me how!"

Magnus turns, all trace of foolery gone, "Your word?"

She opens her mouth to answer, and Karl covers it with a hand, "Give us time, Raj, just twenty-four hours, time to think. Let him live that long. What can it hurt?"

Magnus smiles from the window, one of the few friends Karl has known in his life. "Promise you'll wait there ten minutes and I'll let him live."

Ten minutes. That means he's already close—very close. Romy pulls at his hand over her mouth, but he

holds her pinned against him. She wrenches free and he lunges at the mute button, holds it down.

"I promise!" she says.

"He didn't hear that."

Frantic, she bores her head into his chest. He fends her off.

"Let me tell him!"

"No."

She looks at him, what on her face? Fear? Confusion? Disgust? "Tate's your friend, let me tell him! I won't let anyone else die for me. I'm not worth it."

Karl blocks the eye with his back, "You think we wait here ten minutes for Raj, he'll show up, whisk you away, then walk out of Tate's office? That what you think?"

Her mouth opens, but nothing comes out. Now she's confused. Good, she ought to be. "That's not what'll happen. Tate's dead already. As dead as Rick or Auri. His heart's just still beating, that's all. He won't leave him behind to talk, or any of us either. He doesn't play that way. Look around," he says, waving an arm at the freeway, he's only a couple minutes away. How does he know that?"

He sees understanding in her eyes, "He knows where we are."

Karl nods, following a car that slows to look at them. He reaches under his coat and it drives on. Somebody looking for a satcom, maybe. "We've got maybe five minutes to get out of here, now will you shut up and let me talk?"

Her eyes say she will.

He opens the line, "We're back. Sorry, Raj, trouble this end."

"Will you wait, or won't you?" Karl hesitates and Raj nods, "Didn't think so." He waves a finger, seeming to think of something, "Oh, I know, I'll bet you'd like to say goodbye, wouldn't you? Far be it from me to stand in the way of true friendship."

Karl opens his mouth to say no, but before he can, Tate's face changes—it's Magnus.

"Karl," he says, voice a croak, eyes harrowed, "It's you?"

Karl's throat constricts painfully. What can he say? Are there words for this? He doesn't know them. "It's me."

The look in Magnus' eyes tells Karl he's been listening, knows precisely what awaits him. Incredibly, he smiles, eyes hopeless. "Auri's dead, then."

Karl nods.

"And Rick."

Karl doesn't deny it.

For a long moment neither speaks, then Tate says, "So, there are demons."

"It looks that way."

"You're the best, you know that."

Karl keeps his jaw clenched tight, but his eyes betray him. "Magnus, I—"

He waves him off, "You remember the favor I asked you to do for me? Do it. And Karl..."

Karl nods.

"Remember your Blake." His face changes. "Ah, ah, ah." Raj wags a finger, "No secrets. Now just what did he mean by that, I wonder?"

Karl thinks he knows.

Raj shrugs, pretends to dab at his eye, "Goodbyes are always so very moving, aren't they?" He turns to face the sea forty stories below. "Be seeing you real soon."

"Raj!" Karl screams at the screen. "In the name of God!"

He turns from the window, smiles, "You forget, I don't believe in God."

He steps out.

* * *

Blindly, Karl walks.

Gravel crunches and rolls under his boots, as he passes equipment lined along a mile-long open-wound in the earth. He's got to get home. Home. There's nothing left but that.

He doesn't know how much time he has before Raj finds a way out there. One strand, that's all he needs, one crack into everything he loves, to his sister, his nephew, his land. All he knows is he's got to get there first.

Romy paces him easily, "You should have let me wait."

He keeps on, "No."

"It's my fault this is happening."

"It's mine."

"We're five hundred kilometers away, what could you have done?"

"I could have killed him, at least I could have tried."

She catches him, hand on his neck, flooding him with compassion he can't ignore, can't walk away from. His foot slips in loose rock and he wrenches his knee, pain bright as crushed mint. He drops to sit on a bank of freshly cut clay.

"What's wrong?"

"Knee," he says through a grimace.

Magnus is gone. Who will be next? Sara? Mary? He knows now he can't run away from this. It's following him like the stench of something foul on the sole of his boot. He's sure, if he can't stop it, it'll get to him, to everything he cares about. He's got to get to Raj somehow, but how?

By his side she sits, elbows on worn jeans too short for her legs, ankles spare as a deer's. "You've never had therapy for them or your heart either—why?"

"I don't want anybody fiddling in here. God made me the way I am. Who the hell am I to change it?"

"That's right, you believe in God."

"No, I don't."

She frowns, "But you said—"

"I know—there's a difference. Not to know—that's the stunt. To see no order, no logic, no meaning, to call love an accident of electrical impulse and chemistry—that demands faith, that needs the true believer."

She smiles, sadly he thinks. "You despise science."

Frustrated, he shakes his head, "No. Not as long as that's what it is, as long as it isn't just another graven image, another tin God. To do something just because we can, that's not science, that's fanaticism sure as flagellation. Science is reason, or it should be."

She looks away, "How you must hate me."

He draws breath to protest when one of the earth movers comes to life with a deep rumbling of a diesel, making speech impossible. When he says nothing, she rises, heading back to where Drew and Willy wait.

He watches her go. Let her think what she likes. Not long ago she would have been right. But not now. Raj is what he hates. Raj and the world that made him, that lets him live—if that's the word. That's what he hates. Wistfully, he smiles at the irony of it—the more advanced we become, the more demons plague us.

Rising painfully, Karl heads down to them, the machine growling behind him. Curious, he sees a tracked hinged-jaw blade moving out of line, remote aerial strobing red in the dim of the cloudy afternoon as it dips and weaves on uneven earth. Across the yard an office trailer sits deserted. Inside it's dark, only one company truck parked outside. Odd. Sunday would be time and a half.

He supposes if they're working, he ought to get out of the way. Eyes on the sky, he heads on down the new grade. What can he do? Raj is a wraith, untouchable, a deadly mirage appearing, disappearing, leaving dead and broken behind. He says there are more like him. How many more?

A cold wind nudges Karl from behind, and he shivers, zipping his jacket. Diesel belching, the track layer follows him down the road bed, narrowing the distance between them. Irritated, he moves to the side, hugging the steep bank. With five clicks of road to lay, why does it have to follow him? Why can't they take the day off like everybody else? It is Sunday for chrissake. Ahead, Drew and Romy wave frantically. The noise at his back grows.

What are they trying to tell him?

To his surprise, Drew comes sprinting. At his back the sound is wrong. Karl turns his head to catch it from the corner of his eye as it passes. It's not where he expected to see it.

Dead behind him, blade gaping low enough to break both his ankles, top one raised to neck level, it bounds for him, throttle wide open. Mouth dry, he gets it, why Raj seemed to think they would see him so soon.

Close enough to feel the heat of the exhaust, he leaps over the embankment, knee giving with a spark of pain, sending him rolling down forty feet of soft clay to the bottom of the incline. All he can think as he shoulder rolls over and over, as the earth rushes up to meet him again and again is that he'll be dizzy for a week.

If he lives.

At the bottom the change in grade hits him hard. When he stops, the pain in his ribs is so bad he doesn't dare move. World looping, he stays where he is. Drew catches him by an arm, drags him standing, ribs grating.

They look up to see the loader stop, pivot, teeter, and tracks clanking, transmission whining soprano, rush down the grade of loose earth in a power slide.

Karl takes an involuntary step back, nearly falls. It's a monster. Ten seconds it'll be on top of them.

Drew yanks his arm, "Can you walk?"

Around Karl the world dips, yaws. Last time he felt this way he was a kid just off the spinning teacup ride at the county fair. "I can walk."

"Then, walk!" Drew leads him away at right angle from the machine's line of descent. "It can't turn or it'll tip. I've driven them, I know."

Stomach roiling, Karl concentrates on the ground at his feet, on the next step, forcing his eyes to focus.

"One of us has to get up in the cab," Drew says as if it's important. "There's a cut-off button under the seat. Press it, it goes to manual and shuts down."

Karl's head throbs as he watches twenty tons of metal slide down the incline, tracks throwing a wake of clods and dust. "How is he doing it? Is there someone in the trailer?"

"He wouldn't need anyone. You know what you're doing, you can do it all by sat."

Entranced, Karl watches it come.

Drew shakes him, earnestness coming through his hands sobering him, making him listen. "Did you hear what I said, about the cut off?"

"Yeah, yeah," Karl says, fighting nausea, wishing he would leave him alone.

"I'm going to take it that way. If it follows me, you get up on the back. There's a ladder there. Remember, button under the seat," and he's away.

Karl watches as it hits level ground. Looking as if it might be considering, it pivots in a slow 180. In front of it Drew runs across a wasteland of bare clay. The behemoth hesitates, then, engine spewing black from rockered exhaust, follows.

Karl watches it go, wanting to turn away, to follow the downgrade to the ramp where Romy waits. Against all reason, he sets off after the reeling machine, limping, gauging distance and speed. What he sees makes him drive himself, doing his best to forget the fire in his knee. It's too fast, he sees that. He can never catch it if it keeps this up.

Drew stops, turns to face it as Karl watches in disbelief. The Komatsu lunges, gearing up, blade working. Drew dodges left and it reels, tracks churning clay. Karl's close. Drew, seeing him, meets his eye. His look Karl thinks he understands.

Drew sprints right and as it pivots to follow, it presents Karl with the ladder. Without thinking, he jumps for it. At precisely the wrong instant it surges forward, sending him face down on hard packed earth. Spitting dirt, he looks up, sees it close on Drew. Up and running again, he goes after it. It pivots on its right tread, sending up a spray of clods stinging like bird shot. Anticipating, Karl swerves to have it veer back. He hits the ladder hard and, broken ribs screaming, hangs on.

It wheels after Drew, slamming Karl against the engine housing as it drags him, light-headed with pain, behind it. Hand over hand, Karl climbs, hands slipping on rungs sticky with dust, with diesel. On top, he can see Drew as he runs, barely keeping ahead of toothed-jaws. Spinning, Drew looks back, spotting Karl clinging to the top of the ladder, compartment with cut off three meters away over a careening deck.

Drew stops, dodges, and as the machine slows, Karl breaks for the cabin. Acceleration throws him back into a ripper blade, and Karl clings with both hands to steel thick as his arm, polished slick as ivory from contact with the earth.

As it jogs, lunges, swerves, Karl, winded, works his way back to the ladder. Another fall like that one and he'll be done.

Drew stops, waves to Karl. "Now!" He screams over the roar of the engine. "Do it now!"

Karl hurls himself forward to the cab, this time making it. Levering open the door, he's inside. Cool, dark, quiet. He drops into the seat and it hisses under him as air shocks adjust. Groping underneath with both hands, he comes up with nothing. Outside, Drew dodges, feints, at the last possible moment springs, but not far enough, not fast enough. The corner of the blade clips him. He falls.

Under the seat, Karl recognizes a knob just as the blade, searching for Drew along the ground, finds

him. Engine gearing down, the blades scissor closed.

Desperately, Karl twists the knob and the timbre of the engine falls to a stuttering rumble. He realizes the machine is waiting for him to tell it what to do. Panic vibrating through him, he finds the jaw levers, opens them, tilts them up, and slapping the kill switch, scrambles down.

The engine dies as Karl's feet hit the ground. "Drew," he says, as he comes around front, knowing there won't be an answer, "Drew!"

What he sees is not Drew, not a man at all. For a moment he stands, not seeing. With Willy, Romy comes. Bink sniffs, backs away on eggshells, nervy from the stink of death.

"Jesus, God," Romy says, dry eyes bleak, "We should..."

Karl turns on her, "We should what?"

"We should bury him, at least we should do that."

Karl heads for the highway, "No time."

She tags after, "No time? What about respect, do we have enough of that?"

Anger boiling over, legs trembling from adrenaline letdown, he stops to face her, "Respect?" He glares, too disgusted to laugh, too hopeless to care what she thinks of him. They've got little chance of losing Raj out here. His guess is one in a hundred they survive the next ten minutes, and she wants to hold a service. "Respect's got nothing to do with it. Raj knows where we are. We've got to go. Now." Want to stay alive?" He takes her hand, jerks her after him. "Then move."

Shouldering the duffel, Karl drives himself on, ribs screaming.

Ranked earth movers hold their places, silent. Dusk thickens as snow sifts down. A little more than a kilometer down 299 they catch a ride as far as Helena, about halfway to the coast. Two hours later they step down on a silent highway.

"Where are we?" Romy says.

"Helena."

She looks up the road, "Where?"

Irked, he repeats the name.

She raises her arms, spins, "No, where?"

He gets her, now. "You're there, couple houses, service station, general store, that's about it."

She shrugs. "Oh."

Silently, in gathering gloom, snow falls, cloaking trees, highway, fir, red clay bank in crystalline white. Lonely highway, no plow, tracks already closing in. Quiet, so quiet, only sound their boots scrunching, squeaking in dry powder. The road snakes on forever ahead of them. Light can't last long. It's two hours

to the coast—if they can get a ride. Looking behind them, he decides they won't. Not on Sunday night, not with the road this bad.

Romy walks, arms wide, step springy, face upturned to falling flakes. She catches them in her mouth, squealing when one falls in her eye. She dances, singing a little ditty under her voice. Good voice, it seems to him, not that he's any judge. He wonders she sings at all.

"God, isn't it beautiful?" she says.

Karl sees again what was left of Drew clamped between the jaws of the Komatsu. There are worse ways to go, he decides. "Seen snow before?"

"No."

He hasn't thought of that. Living on the plat she would never have seen it, never in thirty years. He understands her joy, while he feels none of it.

She falls in beside him, matching his pace, "Don't you like it?"

"No."

"You're thinking about Drew."

For a kilometer they walk in silence. She's wrong. It's not beautiful. What it is is death in small doses. It stays below freezing they'll be okay. But it won't. Too late in the year. When it goes to slop it'll suck warmth out of them.

Romy scoops up a hand of flakes, "So many of the people I've known are dead. I won't let it kill me, too." She raises her face. "Honestly, you can resist this?"

His boots are soaked. Less than a half hour and already he can't feel his toes. "Honest injin."

"But, it's—"

"Cold, and it'll get colder." He's tired, and as snow melts through the shoulder seams of his jacket, growing wet and cold. Light is failing and nobody's on the road. Raj will have guessed where they went and will be sending someone along for them.

Ahead a steep drive winds up through fir. Mailbox, but no tracks. Maybe a house, maybe not—one way to tell. He stops, waiting for them to catch up.

"What?" she says.

"I'm going up to check." Halfway up he finds they're behind him. He considers sending them back down, but thinks better of it. They'll be where he can see them and off the highway.

A cabin, small, overgrown with anemic grapevine, clings to a steep hillside. Mounded needles on the roof make it look a thatched cottage. Shrugging off a chill, he pushes himself forward.

The porch, four foot off a falling grade doubles as a workshop, judging from benches and tools stacked there. Gas, chain saws, come alongs, chaps, hardhats—a logger lives here. Inside, children laugh. This

he's happy to hear. Where children are there is love, warmth, decency—if only it were true. Unzipping his jacket, he raps at the glass in the door and stands back.

A woman, little mousy thing with a pinched nose, clips pinning dishwater blond hair flat to either temple, looks up at him, in a small voice says, "Yes?"

He steps back, sensing her fear, not wanting to frighten her, knowing he has. "Pardon me, ma'am, the three of us are on our way to Petrolia. We've got no money for a room, no ride." He crooks a thumb over his shoulder. "The two of us could split some of that stack of wood for you, if you thought maybe we could sleep on the floor by the fire."

A two-year-old boy, face smeared, appears clutching her leg. Inside, a baby cries. Yet another boy, this one more like four, comes to peek around her. Romy leans a bare hand on the edge of the porch, boards soaked with melted snow, "I'll help with housework if you'll let me."

Wonder kindling in her eyes, the woman cocks her head, "Take your cap off."

Romy looks at Karl, hesitates. What can he say, this may be the only house for kilometers. She turns them in they'll have to lose themselves in the woods.

"Come on," she says to Romy, cajoling, "Let me see your hair."

Romy slips it off and her mane sparks as it reflects the light from inside.

Slowly, the woman raises a hand to her mouth. "Sweet Mary, you're the one they're talking about."

Romy nods.

"You're the last."

Again she sends Karl a glance.

From the doorway, the woman looks Karl over, eyes wide with suspicion, fear. "They said you were kidnapped."

"They're my friends."

"Everybody's looking for you—feds, police, all of them."

Karl stands back, watching something happen between them, what he's not sure. It's like watching two strange she-wolves circle, scent, take each other's measure. Something's going on, a communion of some kind that he's deaf to, shut out of. Between Romy and this woman with red hands he can feel the air alive with tension.

He knows how women feel about Sisters, how they despise them. How hard can it be to predict what this one will do? He never should have come up the drive. Now they're worse off than before. Karl's been tracked by dogs—the bay of a hound hasn't sounded the same since. Still those hounds haunt the twilight landscape of his nightmares.

Karl backs off, turning away. Why wait for it?

"I'm Clio."

Stunned, Karl turns back to see them clasp hands.

"Romy."

Another moment and Clio cups the cheek of the two year old at her thigh, guiding him in, "You're soaked, you all better come on in by the stove."

* * *

Through the window Karl watches Willy split cedar rounds as Bink yaps, dancing crazed around him in powder deep as he is tall. Wearing one of Clio's muslin shirt waists, Romy burps the baby over a shoulder. Fascinated, Karl watches. He's never thought of her as being good with babies. He's never thought of her being with them at all. Yet obviously she knows what she's doing.

"Where'd you learn to do that?"

She moves her body in rhythm to her palm on the small back, swooping slightly from the knees, humming something he can barely make out. "The nursery, I helped there a lot."

The baby seems content, belches, coos. He's never held a baby, has always thought of them as ugly little things. But in Romy's arms, this one doesn't seem too bad. "You're good at it."

She shrugs, "Practice is all."

Karl moves to stand close to the stove, soaked jacket and jeans steaming. Unable to relax, he paces, clothes turning clammy. Husband due any minute. Clio keeps checking out the window for him. Something about the way she does it makes him think he may not be too thrilled with what he finds waiting in his living room.

She brings him dry jeans and shirt, and he thanks her but lets them lie. He'll wait to hear what the man says. Karl in his clothes he doesn't need to see as soon as he comes through the door. Taking an offered mug of coffee, he warms numb hands over it. Chaffing with frustration, he sips, burns his tongue. It turns out they've accomplished nothing. It's the husband who must approve.

A truck hammers up the drive, muffler long gone, throwing gravel. Karl steps out. Ancient Jimmy, fifty years old at least, more Bondo than steel, knobbies big as the wells can take, it comes to rest at the top of the drive, dies. The door squeals open, steel on steel. Her husband steps down.

Big man, eyes flashing warily, mouth hidden by a beard the size of a kestrel's nest. Hair long, streaked with gray, in chaps, suspenders, hardhat, he sizes Karl up, staring hard, keeping the door open where Karl's sure he's got something behind the seat.

"And just who the hell are you?"

Not a good beginning. Hands in plain sight, he begins. "Name's Karl. We're on our way to my place in Petrolia. We're broke, afoot. Your wife said we might be able to spend the night out of the snow in

exchange for some work."

Ignoring them, Willy splits wood as if it were a game, tossing cedar rounds his girth as if they were balsa. Slamming down the maul with one hand, they peel back along straight, aromatic grain. Between swings he tosses a stick for Bink.

The husband watches him work, tired, snow in his beard, dirt-caked furrows creasing his brow. "Your friend likes splittin' wood, does he?"

Karl smiles, not sure how to answer. "That he does."

He moves his gaze back to Karl and his eyes narrow. "Petrolia, you say?"

Karl's got a feeling the next few seconds will decide how he spends the night—or if he spends it. He hopes he's had a good day, because there's no way he'll gun this guy down on his drive in front of his wife and kids. "That's right."

"Then you know John Rock."

This is good, this is very good. "Went to school with him, tough SOB."

This brings a smile. "Still poaching deer from his pickup at dusk?"

This guy gets around. "He wouldn't want me to say so, but his teriyaki jerky is far and away the best on the cape."

He seems to relax. "Pretty little thing, Heather, isn't she?"

Karl smiles, understanding. "Ashley's her name and I'll never understand what she wanted to marry him for."

He offers a grease-blackened hand, smile real this time. "Don't mind me being sure. Eli."

Karl takes it, feeling the grip of a man who wrestles choker cables and a chain saw all day. At first he holds his own, then, losing it, concentrates on not wincing as his hand is slowly vised to mush.

Eli's eyes smile as he lets up, "Not bad, better'n most. Go on in out of the cold, I'll be in in a minute."

Inside, Karl feels a weight off his neck—tonight, they'll be dry, warm, fed. Tomorrow, with any luck at all, home. At the table he sits. Fishing a box of buckshot out of the duffel, he lays the Remington across his lap. Slipping sabot rounds out the trapdoor, he drops them into a pocket. Nothing as calming as fiddling with ammunition. Peeling back the top of the box of shells, he smiles. They've got it made.

Eli blows in, hangs his hat and coat, "God, Clio, you wouldn't believe the mud out there today." Turning, he sees Romy. "Sweet Jesus," he says, voice booming, "what's she doing here?"

He tears the baby from Romy's arms as if she were poison, leaving her sitting on her feet in the middle of the rug, arms out, a pleading Madonna. "Get that whore out of here!"

Wondering at the speed with which his hopes for a decent night topple, Karl stays where he is. Right now she's not in any danger he can see. He wants to keep it that way.

Slowly, eyes brimming, Romy gets to her feet. Karl's never seen her look less wanton. She looks straight at the man with eyes clear as blue sky and says, "All right, I'll go."

Clio rises to stand between them, taking the baby from his arms, "I won't let you do this."

Clio's a woman Karl can't imagine standing up to a man like Eli—a small, submissive woman, wiry as wild grapevine. But in her voice is fire.

"What do you mean, no?" he says, rising voice a threat.

She doesn't waver, doesn't shrink. "I mean, I won't let you. We will not refuse them shelter."

"Clio, listen to yourself, she's not even human, she's... Well, look at her, she's the one everybody's looking for, isn't she?"

The baby frets at the tone of his voice and Clio jostles it on her hip to keep it from crying. "That's right, she is."

"I won't have a thing like that in my house, in front of the boys, holding Zeke... holding him, for God's sake?"

She puts the baby back into Romy's arms, and at once he quiets. The Madonna, he thinks again, the Madonna repeated ever and always when woman loves child.

Clio turns to face him, "Is this what Jesus would do?"

"Clio, for the love of God!" He says it loud enough to rattle windowglass.

Clio does not flinch. "Yes!" The intensity of her voice is shocking. A whisper aspirated as if her whole body were the instrument. The word comes out under pressure, "Yes," she says again, glaring up at him. "For the love of God, Eli, we will not turn them out."

Karl's throat swells with respect. He was wrong—she's not weak. Not at all.

"Clio," Eli says, rumbling voice building as he raises an arm in Romy's direction, "she's all that's sick in the world, all that's evil. You want her here touching the boys, holding the baby?"

Other than the hissing kettle on the stove and the cracking of the maul coming from outside, the cabin is silent. The two boys sit frozen on the braided carpet near Romy, plastic cars unmoving, eyes saucer wide.

Wishing he had somewhere to hide, Karl keeps his eyes on the gun, the shells. He shoves one after another into the trapdoor until they click in place. He knows what it's like to feel this way, knows how easily fear changes to anger, to cruelty. Eli he doesn't blame. A man does what he has to to protect what's his.

Clio straightens shoulders habitually bowed, peers up at him, "Look at her."

Eli keeps his eye on Clio.

She reaches up, takes his beard in her hand, jerks his head around, "I said look at her!"

"I'm looking."

"Is it her fault she's been made the way she is? Is it? Must we despise the slave to despise slavery? Does Paul not write to Philemon: '...no longer a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother...'

Frustration lining his face, he raises big hands, drops them onto his thighs, "You're quoting out of context, Clio, you always do that."

She takes his work shirt in two fists, yanking herself up into his face, "I don't care. It says it, Eli, it says it, and you're wrong, you're wrong. Oh, God, don't do this!"

At the emotion in his mother's voice, the baby whimpers. Silently, the two boys watch, tears coursing down their faces.

Karl looks at his jacket dripping melting snow onto the slate by the door, thinks about how it'll feel to put it back on. Jesus knows he's not looking forward to it. But he will. It's Eli's house. No way he'll go against him. He thinks maybe he can talk him into letting them sleep in the shed. He'll try, anyway.

The big man looks down at his woman, and Karl thinks of a bobcat holding a hound at bay as she protects her kittens.

"If you make them go," she says, voice barely above a whisper, "I go too. I'll take the boys with me, I will, so help me God, I will, I'll take them."

This hits Eli hard. His mouth falls open, arms at his sides, inert.

All on the table, all at risk, everything he has—she's just pushed it all into the pot. Karl looks at the pattern of braid in the rug, wishing he were somewhere else, anywhere else, wishing he could spare the man an audience.

The kettle pops, sizzles, drying. A small avalanche of snow slides from the roof with a thump. The tarnished brass pendulum on the clock dips, hesitates, dips again.

"You'd do that?"

Intensely embarrassed, for Eli, for himself, for all of them, Karl moves head down to the door. It's all he can do for him right now. Being challenged in front of strangers in his own house has to hurt. At the door he puts on his hat, sodden and heavy, clipping the twelve back under his arm, feeling the cold reach in through the closed door to claw at him, prodding him for any trace of warmth. He slips into slick ostrich skin, leaden with melted snow. Romy rises, stepping carefully over the tangle of cars and legs to take the baby to its mother.

Clio won't take him, won't let go of Eli, won't give up. Hands red with work, veins dark through opalescent skin of her arms, she shakes him. "No man of mine would do this. Jesus wouldn't do this."

She points. "Do you see him, he's got a gun, and the one outside, did you see those arms, you don't think they could make us let them stay?" Voice ragged with emotion, with frustration, she tugs at him with every word. "But they won't. They'll go if you say, and I'll go with them." Turning loose of him, she calls to the children. "Abe, Josh, get your coats, we're going."

Karl opens the door, letting in a wall of frigid air, and turning back to thank her, sees something give in Eli's face. Shoulders sagging, his eyes close as if he's hurting bad somewhere down in his gut.

"Close the door, you're letting the heat out." Rising, he takes Clio, struggling, onto his lap. "I was wrong, honey, I was wrong," he says, soothing, stroking her head as she sobs into his grime-blackened undershirt, boys pressing close. "The jawbone of an ass is a dangerous thing."

Storm blown out, Karl shuts the door, "You sure?"

Through Clio's hair, he answers. "Hell, yes, I'm sure, take your pack off."

Hanging his jacket, Karl warms himself by the stove as Romy jostles the baby beside him. Casually she brushes her arm against his, eyes searching his face, and through the round, hazy feeling of content he gets from the baby, he gets her question as she intends him to. Would you have gone?

Wordlessly, they watch the family before them. Steam rising off damp jeans, he nods. "Oh, yeah."

She snatches the hat off his head, tosses it on a stack of alder by the stove. "Tough guy," she says in a whisper.

She presses nearer yet, and he can read all she feels. Though they say nothing, only stand side to side, to her he's closer than he's been with any woman.

They watch as Clio pulls free of his arms to stir the soup, and Eli sweeps his sons up to ride grimed chaps. The boys squeal their delight as he jogs them roughly on his knee, steadying them with big hands.

They both feel it—a sense of what's right with the world, of what's meant to be, of a sum more than its parts—of family. Here in this cabin perched on termite eaten posts is love.

Sudden as a blow, sadness swells in Romy as she pats the baby over her shoulder, sadness cold and sterile as the alloy grid of the quay. Confused, he turns and sees it in her face. Loss is there, scalding cold, loss of all she knew, all she loved. As if these were his own thoughts he feels what he sees there, and he wonders.

He wonders.

* * *

After supper, dry and warm in Eli's jeans and flannel shirt, Karl follows him out on the porch.

He smokes as Karl stands upwind. They watch snow melt, dripping from the low porch tin overhang in dribbling streams.

"So," Eli says at last, "what's she like?"

Karl knows why he asks, why any man would want to know.

Raised with more hoopla than the Dionne Quints, spending their lives in front of net cams, the subject of an endless series of docudramas, melodramas, UR fantasies. Sisters in Heat. Sisters in Love. Sisters on the Moon. My Sister Friday. Precocious, yet inaccessible, an endless seep of purple prose cemented them as the subject of a world's fetish for perfection.

Touchstones for female attractiveness, women hate them. Men, a whole generation of men, grew up with Sisters imprinted in their minds as quintessential woman—an ideal no randomly encoded woman could ever reach. Fetish of a jaded world, Karl has spent half his life despising them. Now here he is trying to explain why he feels the way he does about the last of them. Oh, yeah, Karl knows why he asked. How to answer? "I don't know how to tell you what it is you want to know, I really don't."

"I was glad when I heard about them," Eli says. "I don't think they were meant to be."

Karl smiles to hear his thoughts echoed so clearly, a little ashamed, too. "I think you're right about that. They weren't meant to be—not in this world. Uh, uh, not in this one. They're too good for us."

Eli looks up, surprised.

Karl goes on. "I saw them sleeping once, the last of them, fifty in one room. Floor solid with them. Heads on laps, spooned together, a sleeping pride. The scent of them... Not perfume, them: lily, buddleia, glorybower..." he sighs in frustration, "I can't describe it."

Eli drags his pipe, waiting, eyes sharp behind his beard.

"I saw them die. They weren't afraid, they waited for it. Romy had to learn to want to live. They waited for the gas to come to them, holding hands, no rush for the door, no screaming, no pushing, no reaction at all, just acceptance." Karl goes to squat on his haunches on the edge of the porch, eyes on snow, blue-white under moonlight filtered through trees, cold air burning his nose. "No, they didn't belong here."

"And this one?"

Karl looks up, "What about her?"

"Is she human?"

"At least."

"But," Eli worries the idea the way Bink worries a rag, unwilling to let it go, "does she have a soul, you think?"

Karl smiles at the absurdity of the question. Bink's got more soul than half the hominids he's met in forty years. Karl looks him in the eye, seeing himself. "If anyone has."

"Are you and her..."

"Friends."

Eli nods, "Clio and I are friends. It's good for a man and a woman to be friends."

Talked out, Karl nods.

Later, chilled bone deep, Karl gives up his vigil on the porch to slip into a dark, silent house.

Inside he finds two bags zipped together in front of an ebbing stove. Reflecting firelight, Romy's eyes glisten up at him from the floor. He steps out of his clothes and slips inside. She nests into his arms, head at his neck, as if she's always belonged there, as if she always will.

As he cradles her body, she cradles his mind—in warmth, honesty, safety. With her he feels secure as he has never felt with a woman. No need to hide what he is, be something he isn't. Not with her.

She turns her head to whisper to him, hair an ocean of silk across his neck, breath on his cheek. "I didn't think you were ever coming."

"Too tired, kept drifting off. Raj is coming tonight he'll have to wake me when he gets here." Breath drawn through her hair, the scent of her filling his lungs, mouth against her neck, he needs to tell her something. What he's not sure. "Romy..."

"No," she stops his mouth with a hand warm from the bag, "don't say anything, just...." She whispers, fingers tickling his lips, body a brand against his skin. "Just be with me."

Humbled speechless, he squeezes his eyes shut, straining to stop the rhythmic noise of the clock over their heads as it marks the passing of what little time they have.

In the warm darkness the pendulum keeps up its rocking.

EIGHT

At six, they load into Eli's rust-pocked Jimmy, smelling of two-stroke oil and gasoline.

On his way to a cut, he'll take them as far as Arcata.

Emerging from under firs into open flat land is for Karl a homecoming. Only two hours, now—they're that close. Even the wet paper bag stench from the paper mill straddling the bay smells good to him, now.

Eli drops them in the square near the post office, "If I didn't have to work I'd take you the whole way." He rolls down a window to peer up at brooding, high overcast. "At least the weather's fine."

Karl smiles at the joke, scanning cloud. Not knowing what to say, he waves, starts to turn away, but Eli catches him by the arm, "Tell her for me, tell her I'm sorry about what I said, that I was wrong. Nobody's that good with the baby, tell her that."

Karl says he will, laughs at his proffered hand, and follows them out on to the ramp. Two rides and a long walk along 101 later, they're dropped across the bridge in Ferndale.

Up Main Street Karl leads, passing Victorian storefronts, bright gingerbread façades bristling with cut shingles. Romy, hand locked in a belt loop of his jeans, follows, head up, agog. People pass. None look at them twice. At the end of the block he hesitates.

"Such a beautiful place," she says, breathless.

"The perfect tourist," he says teasing.

She looks hurt, "You don't like it?"

"I grew up here."

She nods.

To the right the Wildcat snakes up the coast range—the way home. Karl thinks it over, decides, takes her left across Main street. Might as well take her to see the peach palace while they're here. There might not be another chance. They round the block and she gasps, face lifted in wonder. Across the street waits a three story rainbow monstrosity of towers and cut shingles—a housepainter's nightmare in cedar.

"Like it?"

Topiary elephants and bears stand guard out front as spires ward off a zinc-plated sky. Christmas lights wink as they do every day all year long.

To him she holds out her hand, a blind woman's gesture, eyes busy with the kitsch monstrosity looming over them. "Oh..."

He takes it, getting a jolt of pure distilled awe through her trembling hand.

"It's..."

"Ugly?"

She looks offended, "Oh, no, it's the most beautiful house in the world."

So strong is her conviction, he has to check, but, no, it's the same—just an overdone, over painted Victorian. Not incredible at all.

But she is.

Watching her run her hands over box topiary, he changes his mind. If the palace can inspire such awe in her it can't be as ugly as he's always thought. He looks at her and has to fight off an urge to reach out to touch her right there on the street.

"It's not just for show? People live in it?"

"Have for a hundred years."

"Good." She nods, solemn, "It should be a home."

Funny town, Ferndale, Karl muses as they head back up the high street. Half artsy types, refugees from Frisco, from Sonoma, the other half townies who've lived there for generations, cattle families, sheep ranchers, dairymen from the floodplain along the Eel. They coexist, peacefully for the most part, but never mix.

Trudging up the steep grade at the base of the Wildcat, the road that will take them out and along the cape, a loaded hay truck stops for them. On top of the bales they ride, air warmer here near the sea, particles of alfalfa whirling in the wind about them. Ten miles out, he turns off to deliver his load and drops them.

No more than a mile from the crest, Karl can barely resist running. From there it's all downhill to the sea. He can smell it, see it in the cant of the spruce. She paces him, Willy trailing.

"Why such a hurry?"

"Want to get home."

Effortlessly, she keeps up. "We could wait for a ride."

"There's something up here I want you to see."

They round the last slow bend and a stench hits them a blow. Rotting meat, ripe as it gets.

She gasps, making a face, "What is that?"

She wouldn't know, would she? On 66 they cleaned up after themselves.

"Death."

"Of what?"

He puffs through his mouth, a trick he learned as a cop, "Deer, I hope."

They see the carcass as they come abreast of it, legs twisted at impossible angles. Romy squats by the corpse.

Karl, irritated at the delay, goes back, "What?"

"It was a deer?"

Its matted coat heaves and falls, maggots teeming just under the skin. "Doe, looks like."

She reaches out to touch the carcass and he snatches her wrist, "Don't do that."

She looks up, eyes puzzled.

"We don't touch dead things," he says, conscious of how it must sound—like an admonition to a two year old. But isn't that what she is? At thirty, never having been off the plat but once, despite her age, her intelligence, what does she really know about the world? Only what she learned on the net—nothing. With a rush of compassion he realizes what a warped view that must be.

"What killed her?"

He shrugs, "Car, truck maybe."

She looks back, letting him hang onto her wrist, flooding him with leaden sorrow. "Did she suffer, do you think?"

He follows her glance, skin drawn taut over ribs, pelvis, vertebra sharp and protruding. "No," he says, pointing, "neck's broken, see there?"

Noticing flies blackening the air in the salmon berry just beyond the right of way, he points. "There's a fawn."

She looks at him, eyes trusting, desolate. "It was hit, too?"

He stands, lets her go. "Maybe, maybe it starved."

She goes to hunker down by the small body.

Bink comes to sniff at the doe's hollow eye, backs off. Willy's seen enough, heads up the road, Bink close at his heels.

Karl takes her by the hand, pulls her to her feet, "Come on."

They take the long pull up the hill in silence. Near the top she finally says what's been on her mind. "You don't care when things die?"

"I care. Look, I raise animals. I kill them. I eat them. Things live, things die, new things live—life from death. It's the way it works. Getting all broken up about it doesn't change it."

"I know you're right."

A souging overhead and they look up to see two herons pass over, wingspans a man's arms outstretched.

"They're so big, what are they?"

"Pair of great blue, headed for my ponds, I bet."

"Is that bad?"

He'd smile if he weren't working so hard to get his breath. "Bluegill can use thinning."

"You don't shoot them?" she asks, perfectly serious.

"Bluegill, no," he says, knowing exactly what she means, "I use a pole."

He gets a frustrated look, "The heron."

"If you're around me long enough you'll find out there are a few things I don't shoot."

Before she can answer, they crown the hill. This is it—what he wants her to see. Here, spruce open up, the hill falls away to rolling, tall grass whipped by wind from the sea. The road meanders its way over, around and down. Where land ends, sea reaches out, gray, scaled with cats paws driven by the wind.

Wind rocks him where he stands, keening through sitka overhead, pressing grass flat as it passes. He watches her for a reaction.

Her eyes, gray in this light, brim with tears, mouth slack with awe. He knows what he'll get if he touches her now, he feels it himself, has always felt it. Especially here. The sea, nothing between him and it now but a downhill stroll, nothing but a spreading of wings and a soar, an easy glide.

As if drawn irresistibly, she moves through waist high grass to the verge of a steep drop. Arms wide, cap off, hair snapping, she rocks. Eyes on her, he follows.

"God, oh, God how beautiful it is. And you live here?"

He nods.

"Tell me something," she says, voice raised against the wind.

"If I can."

She faces him, hair streaming, "In a world where there is a place like this, how can there be so much pain, so much cruelty, so much ugliness?"

He wonders she should ask. He's asked himself the same thing many times. "I don't know."

With the ghost of a nod, she turns back to the horizon. "Have you ever wished you could fly?"

It's as if he's having a conversation with himself. It scares him a little, thrills him too. "In dreams."

She turns, sadness and wonder on her face, "I'd give my life to fly right now."

I'd give mine to let you is what he wants to say. He doesn't. Teeth clenched to stop his tongue, to keep from making a fool of himself, he says nothing. Instead, eyes closed, he lets the wind rock him.

Home—he's home.

A growling catches his attention. Turning, Karl sees a coffee-colored truck labor up the hill behind them, round-faced driver at the wheel. Karl raises an arm, shouts, bounding back up to the road. It's Jack—got to be.

Senior year they spent Friday nights telling each other what big men they were going to be. Wasn't too much later Jeannie turned up pregnant, and Jack's been a brown-shirt ever since.

The engine drops to idle as it coasts to a rest beside them, big tires crunching decomposed granite. Door wide open in the cold, Jack looks them over from his throne wearing a smart ass smile. Slowly his eyes rove. Willy, Romy, Karl, then back at Romy, long enough to tell Karl he knows. He shakes his head, smiles, "Well, I will be damned."

"Hey, Jack."

"You and your friends use a lift?"

Willy finds a seat at the rear of the van on stacked boxes. Romy chooses to stand. On the way, Karl tells him what he can. Listening, Jack sneaks awed glances at Romy.

"Jesus," he leans close to whisper, "isn't that—"

"It is, watch the road."

"Jesus, Karl, Jesus," he says, hands white on the wheel, "You claiming the billion, that it?"

"No, Jack, that's not it."

Jack turns to watch him long enough that Karl thinks about grabbing the wheel. Somehow they stay on the road.

"Why the hell not?" he says soto voce.

Debating his answer, Karl watches the edge of the road fly by. "She's a friend, that's why. She goes back she's dead."

This time Karl's sure he'll go off the road before he looks back, "Then they were lying when they said she was kidnapped, huh?"

Karl nods.

"Jesus!" Another look back at Romy and he whistles low and long. When he looks at Karl, admiration is in his eyes. He laughs, the same laugh Karl remembers from twenty years before. "Well, I'll say this for you, buddy, you sure make some interesting friends. Mary know you're bringing her home?"

Karl hangs onto the doorframe as they wind their way down through pasture and rolling meadow.

He hadn't thought of that.

* * *

Eyes mated to land unrolling before her, Romy stands braced between two posts behind the driver, as the van carries them down the hills toward the sea.

"Incredible."

Over and over under her breath she says it. Never has she imagined a place so open, so empty. It frightens her, too. She's sure that's part of what she loves about it.

They pull up before what might be a century old store, clapboard siding faded to fog-gray. A sign painted in white on window glass tells her it's the Petrolia General Store and Cafe.

Under a giant cedar, they wait while Jack makes his delivery. Drawn to it, she runs her hands over flaking bark, remembering the bonsai she left behind. She understands, sees them now for what they were: stunted travesties of what they might have been. This magnificent being under her hands is how trees are meant to be.

Against the trunk, she presses her cheek, feeling the solidity of it, the strength. A tap on her shoulder and opens her eyes.

"Come on in, meet Mary," Karl says.

She fights the urge to run, to get back on the truck, to catch a ride out and not look back. With regret, she watches the truck pull away.

Karl heads up the boardwalk, motioning her after him.

She takes a step back, presses her hands against cool bark. She's not ready to meet his sister, not ready to meet anyone. "I'll wait out here, you go in."

"Come on, I'm waiting."

Still, she hesitates. What is she doing here? Why did he bring her? No good can come of it. Why won't he see that? "I've got a billion dollar bounty on my head and you want these people to see me? Are you out of your mind?"

He seems to consider, shrugs, "I grew up with them."

Can he be insane? "What's that suppose to mean?"

"It means I'm not worried about it."

"Why should you? It's not you they'll turn in."

As soon as she sees the look on his face she's sorry she said it. After what he's done for her, for them, it wasn't only mean, it was stupid. She expects him to turn away. He doesn't.

"Out here people don't much like government sticking its nose into everything. They won't turn in a friend of mine."

She thinks of Auri. "Not even for a bill?"

By his eyes she sees he's read her mind.

"Everybody isn't like Auri." He comes to get her, "Come on, I want you to meet her."

Though she's worried and afraid, she's relieved he brings her along. She doesn't want to be left alone here—not for a moment.

Dread hoarfrost on her heart, she follows him up the boardwalk. This will not be easy. It will not be pleasant. She wants to break free, to run, to go—anywhere. If only she had slipped back on the truck when she had the chance.

Chimes on the door clang as Karl pushes it open, leading her inside.

* * *

The smell of country sausage, hashed browns and Vermont maple hangs heavy on the air

It looks like they just missed breakfast. Behind the counter, Mary, back to them, washes dishes. Over a shoulder, she calls out. "Too late, griddle's cold, come back at twelve."

The cafe's quiet. Karl doesn't answer. She goes on with her washing, utensils clanking in the sink. Six or seven guys waste time over coffee, cattlemen mostly, sheep men. Guys he went to school with. A couple hands Karl knows by sight. They all know him—crazy guy up on the hill, Mary's younger brother. They watch. Nobody says a thing.

Childish joy cold as ice cream crystallizes under his breastbone as he sneaks up behind her. Of all the games they played as kids, this was the sweetest.

At the counter sits John Rock. In fifth grade he bloodied Karl's nose. Head taller, twenty kilo heavier, he looks on, amused. Three stools over, Karl slides into a seat. The bearing creaks as it turns, air hissing out of the cushion.

Exasperated, Mary sighs, "I said we're..." Seeing who it is, her hand goes to her mouth, voice trailing off, "closed."

Eyes brimming, she reaches over the counter to draw him roughly to her. "Oh, Karl." She slaps him hard on the back with the flat of her hand.

"Ow!"

"You jerk, why didn't you call? I thought something happened! That's for letting me worry like that."

"Glad to see you, too, Mare," he says, rubbing his back.

She sees Romy by the door, Willy outside with Bink. "And who are these two?"

Karl goes to get her, pulls her away from the collection of old potato mashers and eggbeaters Mary keeps by the door for tourists. The men at the counter follow Romy with their eyes. Mary dries red hands on an apron she's due to change for the lunch crowd.

"That's Willy out there with Bink, and this is Romy. Romy, this is my sister, Mary."

Romy takes her hand, smiling like she expects to be swatted too.

"Welcome," Mary says and fetches the coffee pot. "So you made it, huh?"

He nods. "Made it."

She wipes her eyes with the back of a work-roughened hand. "For chrissake sit down. I'll fire up the grill and make you some breakfast. You look starved, both of you," she says, wiping the counter with a towel.

"I'll help," Karl says, going behind the counter.

Romy follows. "What can I do?"

Mary gives him a look that tells him he'll hear more about this later. She's never liked another woman in her kitchen. Karl can only wait to see what she'll do.

Mary slides the glass coffee pot across the counter, "You can top them off, if you want."

Romy takes the pot, every eye in the cafe following her as she goes. It's quiet enough to hear the coffee pot gurgle as she makes the round. At the sink, Karl dips his hands in to the elbows, hot water scalding.

Mugs are what she has in there, now. He brushes a mug clean, dips it in rinse water, sets it on the mat to drain. Scrub, dunk, drain. Done it since he was twelve. Always liked it. Must be the hot water—calming. He glances up and sees it coming.

Romy on her way back, in the mirror he catches the look in Rock's eye and knows he's going to do something. Sees it come like you can see a curtain of rain blow in from the sea. Rock follows her with eyes that say he can't believe his good luck, watches her move, the dip of her hips as she walks. From across the room Karl knows what he's thinking. No ESP, just his face. It says he's been waiting for a chance like this his whole life.

He turns, dries his hands, unhooks the Remington from its harness, lets it drop into his hand below the counter. Useless. Can't use it here—not on Rock.

What can he do? Can't fight the ox, can't make him human either. Rock is Rock—always has been. Karl moves close, wiping the counter with his left hand, Remington hanging by his thigh.

Romy turns to come back around the far end of the counter, gauging the space by the big man at the last stool, hesitates, then with a quick look at Karl, heads through.

Rock traps her wrist, "Come here, Sis."

Across the room, Willy slips in through the door light on his feet as a dancer, face primed for a deadly ballet. Afraid he won't be quick enough to stop him, Karl shouts, "No, Willy, no!"

Romy swings back, arm taut, turns, and without hesitation, tosses the pot in Rock's face.

Rock's up, bellowing like a steer, wiping his eyes.

Still in his grip, Romy stands her ground.

Eyes clear, he raises a big hand to slap her.

Mary screams. "Rock!"

By the barrel, Karl swings the scatter gun like a bat, Rock's wrist an easy target. Radius giving, Rock cries out, hugging wrist to chest like a wounded kitten, letting her go free as Willy waits behind him, arms poised to break his neck.

"No," Karl says again, and he backs off a little.

Squinting through burned eyes, Rock hurls a hackneyed litany.

Turning his back, Karl tosses the gun down on the back counter where it caroms mustards in need of refilling, goes back to work on the mugs.

"Dammit, Karl!" Rock half yells, half whines to his back, "You broke my goddam arm! What the hell'd you do that, for? It's busted! She's just one of those bitches from the plats, ain't she?"

Karl sets a mug to dry, turns, drying his hands, "Her name's Romy. She's a friend of mine. Anybody with the brains of a flying squirrel would have picked that up."

Rock tries a laugh, "Oh, yeah, I'll just bet she is."

"Rock..." Karl shakes his head, giving up. "Just get out. Go on in and get that taken care of."

With his left hand he snatches his cap off the counter, ducks around Willy, throws back the door, sending the bell off its hook to clang across the board floor. At the door, the big man hesitates. Karl isn't worried about him shooting him in the back. He may be a jerk, he's a neighbor too. "I could kick your ass right now with one hand."

Arms braced on the sink, Karl waits.

"And would have too, back in sixth grade, if they hadn't stopped me."

Karl smiles. "Fifth, Rock, and you're right." Nothing else to say, Karl goes back to washing.

"I didn't know she was your friend," he says as he goes out, door banging behind him. It's the closest thing to an apology he'll ever get, more than he would have hoped for in a thousand years. Guilt hot on him, Karl slams down the last mug. Drying his hands, he follows him out.

Rock's just climbing into his truck. "You need help getting down the hill?"

Rock slams the door to the old Chevy, rolls down the window as a mist drifts down out of a pewter sky. "I'm all right, but tell me something, will you?"

Karl steps out onto gravel, glad Rock's got a broken wrist, wondering if he could take him even now. He can guess what's coming. "What's that?"

"What's she like?"

For the first time in years he thinks about Kath. Rock's kid sister, so pretty, so headstrong, so smart, so attracted to trouble. Twenty years ago, fifteen, she ran off to L.A. with a Colombian white dope dealer. Never came home.

"A lot like Kath."

Rock's eyes darken and for a second Karl thinks he may climb back out of the cab and clobber him, but they change and he nods, seeing he means nothing but the truth.

"Then I understand why you did what you did."

Rock's tires spit gravel as he guns it onto the highway.

* * *

Regulars filter out, leaving them alone with Mary.

Tired, Karl slumps on a stool. Romy grabs a rag, rinses it in hot water, wipes down tables. She wants Mary to like her, she's on the right track.

Mary queries him with a raised eyebrow, "I thought she'd been kidnapped."

Karl doesn't know how much to tell. "Not by me."

Mary frowns, "But there's a bounty on her."

He nods.

"And you bring her in here? Is that smart?" She says it just loud enough for him to hear, sliding a tall stack of dinner plate size griddle cakes across the counter in front of Willy. He rolls one up, tears off a piece for Bink, feeds himself the rest whole.

Karl watches him eat. "I'm not worried about it."

"So, she's the last one, then."

He sees no reason to bring up Erin. "Yeah."

Mary watches Willy eat in awe. "Would you like some milk with that?"

Head down, he chews.

"Can he hear me?"

"He can hear. Frugal with words is all," Karl says. "Milk will be fine."

Watching Willy over her shoulder, she milks the box. Half the stack is gone. "Nice to see a man enjoy his food."

Karl's not sure it's worth the effort, but decides to give it a try. "Willy, this is my sister."

At the word, he raises his head, peers at her through small eyes, swallows, "S..."

"My sister, yeah, this is Mary."

He considers, lays down his fork to offer a deadly hand over the counter, "An honor to m...make your acquaintance, Mary."

Karl hides a smile, wondering where that came from.

Mary sets the milk in front of him, offers her hand. As Karl watches, the instrument of destruction that is Willy's hand wraps itself around Mary's small one. Willy shakes her hand gently, lets it go, "Good food, th..." he says, struggling, tongue against incisor.

Mary lays a hand on his, "You're welcome."

He goes back to his cakes.

With a smile sneaking into the corner of her mouth, Mary's eyes move from Willy to Karl, and back. Karl would give much to know her thoughts. He notices the gray in her hair, more than he remembers. He's glad to be back.

Mary serves Karl eggs on a hotcake and he minces them with a fork as she watches him from behind the counter. "So you were there when you called? I should have known when I heard about everything happening down on the plat that you'd be in the middle of it. Some people died out there, didn't they?"

He sops up a bit of yolk with a wedge of cake, "Yeah."

Exasperated, Mary sighs, "That's it? yeah? People are dropping like flies after a frost out there, you're right there in it up to your elbows, and that's what I get out of you? yeah? Well, I give up. I get you any more?"

He hands her his plate and she cocks her head across the room at Romy, "What'll she have?"

"Ask her."

This gets him one of her looks. "What'll you have, Romy?"

Eyes on her work, she shrugs, "You needn't bother."

"Griddle's hot, no bother."

Romy says nothing, looks at Karl.

"Give her same as me."

Mary sets her up at the stool next to Karl's.

He calls her over, but she keeps on working. Karl goes to get her, sits her down, feeling her

embarrassment, a curious hesitance, an urge to run that scares him. "Eat. She's a good cook, best buttermilk cakes on the cape."

Back to them, Mary drops dishes into the deep sink and they clunk as they shilly-shally to the bottom. She snorts, "Only cakes on the cape."

Eyes down, Romy takes a bite. Smiling, Karl watches her eat. The way she eats reminds him of a cat. Dainty little bites as if she's afraid to get any on her. He half expects her to stop to wash up.

"I'm sorry," Mary says, "about your sisters."

Romy only nods.

"I heard about the bombing and the gas. Terrible. Fanatics, they said."

Not looking up, she sets down her fork, gets up, goes out, bell ringing behind her. Willy follows, Bink at his heels.

"What'd I say?"

"Nothing." He doesn't want to go into it. "Melvin take good care of the animals?"

She goes back to the dishes. "As good as he ever does anything other than cruise the ether. Nothing died, nothing got out, nothing starved."

Mary pauses, crockery clacking in the sink. "She staying long?" she asks, really asking so much more, asking about him, about his feelings, his life, about the scar inside him, about his loneliness, about what neither has talked about in five years.

He swivels on his stool, doesn't see her. From the window he sees her out under the cedar. Bands of panic loosen around his chest, letting him breathe. When did he start being so afraid? "I don't know."

"I mean, Karl, it's none of my never mind, but I guess I'm just slow or something. You've never been able to mention a Sister without spitting, and now you show up with one? I don't get it."

He wants her to understand, to feel what he feels. She's the only person in the world he needs approval from. "You'd like her, Mary."

She looks at him doubtfully, mouth a taut half-smile. "Oh, yeah?" Now she stops her scrubbing, turns, "You run away from it all, hide from it for five years, then bring home, right here into my diner, the sickest part of it all, the heart of all the Godlessness, the perversion, and you expect me to be happy about it? You know how people out here feel about things like her."

He keeps his eyes on his mug and his voice down, "Don't call her that."

"Why not? It's what you've always called them."

"I was wrong."

She goes back to her washing. "I think you need to start thinking with your brain, is what I think."

Karl drains his coffee cup, goes around the counter, drops it into hot suds. "I know it doesn't make sense, I know that."

"Not that it matters. When they make the cape another one of their wildlife preserves we'll all have to move off anyway."

"So you heard."

"We all heard. They came to visit. So, hey, why not have a good time? I don't blame you."

"Mare, it's not—"

Mel clomps downstairs, "Hey, Unc!"

Mary drops another stack into the suds, "Someone send up a flare, Mel got his butt out of bed before noon."

Halfway to the door, he sees Romy and turns to waxwork. "What is she doing here?"

"Down boy," Mary says, "she's a friend of Uncle Karl's."

By Mel's look, Karl can tell his stock just split four ways and doubled on the same day. "Uncle Karl's?"

"That's what I said," Mary says, annoyed at Mel ogling Romy from the window.

"Does he know she's worth a bill?"

"I know, Mel, I know."

"They need a ride out," Mary says. "You mind taking them?"

"Mind?" Mel's eyes haven't left the window. "You're kidding, right?"

"I want you back here in half an hour."

"Is she really..."

"Yeah, Mel." Karl follows him out, "Really."

From the door, Mary calls. "You hear me, Mel? Half an hour."

* * *

Romy rides up front with Mel.

Karl, Willy and Bink in back.

At first, Mel says nothing, just drives. Romy can read men—in Mel she reads nerves. "There's something you want to ask, don't be afraid."

He looks back at Karl, then at her. "Did you know the ones that were killed?"

She nods.

"Is it..."

The last fifteen years of her life she's been around men. Men of all ages, all types, all personalities. The direct approach is the one she prefers. That's what she likes about children, about Willy, about Karl. "Go on, ask it whatever it is."

He works his hands, tight on the wheel as he guides the pick up along washboarded gravel, "It's not true what they say about you is it?"

Her heart sinks. This again. Is there no escaping it?

Resigned, she waits to hear it. "What?"

"All that about you falling in love with only one man, one man in a billion? It's just a come-on isn't it?"

She smiles at the surprise she feels, expecting something about sexual appetites, or the lesbian thing, but it's only this—the one question she can't answer. "A come-on?"

"Yeah, a gyp, a scam, you know, something to draw the squares in."

"Ah," she says, "might be."

He frowns, doubting. "You don't know?"

She smiles, understanding his surprise. "I've known sisters who fell in love, but just a few. For most it's just something we've heard of. Maybe it's true, maybe the others just haven't met the right one, I don't know."

"These guys are probably like really big, really smart, really rich, huh?"

She smiles at this, thinking of Villar, "No, they are quite normal looking really, like anyone. It's not looks, it's what's on the inside."

He stares, amazed.

Stomach wrenching, she reaches to guide the wheel around a curve. Ranchero fishtailing, he recovers, "They're not models, not geniuses or something?"

"Well, smarts counts for a lot, sure, kindness, too."

He watches her, eyes soaking her up. "Have you..."

There are limits to what she is willing to share, to admit—to him—or to herself. Romy watches out the window as they climb higher into the hills, "No."

He turns to look at her, "Really?"

"Really."

"Not even Uncle Karl?"

She swallows, looking closely at the teenager beside her. She must take care. "I like him."

"A lot?"

She nods.

He warms to it, "Like that?"

She wishes she could lie. It would be so much more convenient to lie. "Have you ever felt that way about someone?"

He nods.

"Did you always know for sure exactly how you felt?"

He looks at her and away. She can tell by his face he gets it.

"No."

She reaches to pinch the muscle behind his knee, making him jump, "Me neither."

He drives on in silence, and with relief, Romy sees the interrogation is past.

* * *

Karl thanks him for the ride, asks him not to mention Romy to his buddies on the net and sees his face fall. "I know it's a lot to ask, but I'd appreciate it, Mel. I'd rather some people not know we're here."

This catches his attention. His eyes widen. His hair seems to stand even straighter on the top of his head. "What kind of people?"

Here we go. "Some unpleasant ones."

Melvin looks from one of them to the other. "What would they do if they knew, kill you?"

Karl knows telling him anything is like putting up a bulletin board, but what choice does he have? He has to trust him. He knows it all already. "They might."

"No crap?" he says, amazed. "But you could kick their butt, huh, Uncle Karl?"

This isn't going the way he hoped it would. "I could really use your help on this, Mel."

"Hey," he says, hurrying to the Ranchero, "You can count on me, Unc, I won't tell a soul."

Not reassured, Karl watches him as he heads down gravel, leaving them alone on the hill. Karl starts for the house but notices Romy's not following. Willy heads for the woodpile. "Hey, Willy, make that last a while, will you?" To Romy, he says, "What is it?"

As if she's listening for a sound, she looks around her. "This is where you live, have lived?"

"Born in that house right there."

"So close to the sea." She takes in hill, pasture, timber, "How much is yours?"

He shrugs, "What you see, all but what lies past the creek down there, that's Rock's place."

She frowns.

"Don't worry about Rock. In his way, he's all right. He won't bother you again."

She nods, reassured, "All the way to the sea?"

To him it's just the place, nothing to get out of joint over, but it's a thrill to see her moved by it. "All the way."

She looks at him, eyes sad, "Too much to lose."

A quill working its way through living flesh, the memory bites. She's right. It is. He may only have a few days. "Come on."

The house is quiet, cold. Dirty dishes wait in the sink where he left them only ten days ago. It seems more. Much more. In the fridge he finds milk gone sour and wishes he'd thought to get some out of the cold box at Mary's. He'll have to fire up the truck and go in tomorrow. He turns to find her watching him from the open door. "Come on in, stay a while. And close the door, it's cold."

She has to shove the door closed against the resistance of a swollen jam. "This house is old, isn't it."

"Only eighty, not too old—as houses around here go anyway. Been meaning to fix that, just give it a good shove."

A noise outside and she freezes, "What's that?"

He has to smile. "Willy's found the maul."

Relaxing, she works her way around, opening doors, peering into rooms, switching lights on and off as if fascinated by the old hardware.

A pace behind, he follows as she explores. It's a bit like following a new cat through the house. Up narrow stairs, he follows, treads creaking under them. "You're not going to hide in a closet are you?"

She frowns. "Why do you say that?"

"I had a cat did once, only came out to eat the first month."

She gives him a look that reminds him of one of Mary's, "I don't claw furniture, either."

He likes having her here. "That's good."

Upstairs, she leads him, snooping, and oddly, he doesn't mind.

Three bedrooms before them, she stops, "Willy and I sleep where?"

He opens his old room, slides up the window. "He can sleep here."

She opens his sister's room, peers inside at the bed, wallpaper, bare bulb hanging by woven cord from the ceiling. "What about me?"

"In here if you like."

She doesn't move, keeps her eyes on him. He's first to look away. What he needs is to be outside, in the wind, in the woods, in the quiet. At the door he hesitates, "You be okay alone for a while?"

She will.

Karl heads out to check on the sheep, the sow, and from there up into the spruce. There, in a trance-like state of lackadaisical effort, he thins saplings with a bow saw. Eyes, ears, pores soaking up mist, quiet, the citrus scent of pitch, he remains until the sun sags low in the sky.

Back inside, he sees she has gathered plates, and is running water for dishes. "You don't have to do that."

"Someone does." Curiously she watches him, "What?"

"I'm getting to sound like my mother."

"What was she like?"

Most people ask things just to ask, to make conversation. Romy asks because she wants to know. He takes down a photo of all four of them taken about thirty years ago. He's a gopher-toothed kid, head shorter than Mary, who's twelve.

His mother's got her arm around them both. His Dad sits in his arm chair, the one still by the stove. Same worn maple arms, same threadbare upholstery in hunter green. "That's the whole gang."

She turns off the water, braces a hand on the counter, reaches for the frame with a wet hand. Afraid to touch, she points, "You were so young."

"Ten."

"And that's Mary. My God, it looks just like her. And your mother, she had a wonderful smile. Mary looks a lot like her, doesn't she?" He laughs, and she smiles back defensively. "Well, she does. And your Dad, oh, he's got his pipe just like fathers are supposed to. Was he tall?"

"Same as me."

"I knew he would be. You were..." She turns back to rattle dishes in the sink, "...you were lucky."

All this, he thinks, all this is just stuff everybody says when they look at old pictures if they want to bother about it, so why does he believe she means it? He remembers she's spent her life telling people what they want to hear, acting interested when she's not, and he feels a stab of hurt. "Still acting, still saying what people want to hear?"

Her face he can see reflected in the window as it slams closed like a vault. Eyes holding his in the reflection, she lays down the dishrag. Before he can draw a breath she's out the door.

Spring pinging, the screen slams closed behind her. He lets his head hang, arms braced on the sink, water still running. Viciously, he slams it off.

He is such a jerk. He knows it's not true, knew it wasn't when he said it.

Breathless, he catches her down the hill from the house.

Her pace does not slacken.

"Slow down for a sec, will you?"

"Get away from me."

He reaches for her arm, brushes it as she yanks it away, gets a blast of hate. If anything was there before, it's gone now. "I didn't mean that."

She keeps walking, gravel crunching under her boots. They come to where the road swoops down past a stand of salmonberry and she heads down faster, if anything. "Yes you did, you're no different. You can't forget—what I was, what I am. I'm not listening to that. Screw that. And screw you, too."

Willy follows, not far behind, Bink dancing ahead nose to the ground, overjoyed at the chance for a walk.

He tries for her arm again, and she stops, turns on him, hands fists. "Don't touch me! Willy, don't let him touch me."

Willy stops, waits, squatting to give Bink a pat.

"Willy, what's the matter with you?"

"We've got an understanding," Karl says.

Disgusted, she heads away.

"What are you going to do?"

Ice. "Don't worry about it."

"Where will you go?"

The look. "Away from you."

She's moving. They're nearly to asphalt now. It's a long way back up—all uphill.

He hurries ahead, cuts her off.

She halts, waiting. "Will you get out of my way?"

"I'm sorry."

She laughs, "Sure you are." She heads around.

Getting the feeling he's treading dangerous ground, he blocks her again, "You can't go away like this."

"Watch me."

He can't let her get rolling again down the hill. Already he's winded. She gets away, he knows out of pure mulishness she'll go. He'll never find her, never see her again. He reaches for her wrist, "Come back up and we'll talk."

Effortlessly, she slips from his grasp, "I'm going, I said."

"I won't let you."

A smile twists the corners of her mouth, "Try and stop me."

A dare. Ire blinds him, makes him mean. He reaches for her upper arm, faster this time. She moves, does something, and the ground knocks the wind out of him, leaves him looking up at overcast.

Willy stands over him, points. "She's going."

"I can see that." He rolls over, sees she's already fifty yards down the hill. Fast as aching ribs will let him, he's after her.

A fluke. Whatever it is she did, she'll never do it again.

He grabs her wrist from behind, left one this time. Sensing only blind rage, before he can blink she's moving, twisting, and it's she who has his wrist. Down he goes again, gravel hurting him worse than he's hurt since being a football on the quay.

On his haunches, Willy waits. "She l...learned well."

"You taught her that?"

Willy nods.

Karl's longer getting up this time. His head throbs. Warmth spreads as the slash on his arm reopens. "Could you stop her?"

Willy barely smiles.

"Then why don't you?"

He shrugs, arms big as thighs braced on knees, "Free country."

"Yeah, sure it is."

Willy raises a finger, pointing after her.

Karl sits up, "I know, I know, don't say it—she's going."

He goes after her again, one hand cradling his ribs as he runs right on past her to give himself time to get set. There he waits, crouched in a wrestler's stance, aware of how ridiculous he must look out there on the hill, a woman half his weight striding for him. This time, he promises himself, she will not get by. Whatever it was she did, and he's never seen anything like it, she won't throw him this time.

He's breathing hard as she comes on, stride unbroken as if she expects to walk right over him.

This isn't good, but though he knows he could hit her, elbow her, kick her knee, flat palm her in the mush under her guard, he won't do that, won't hurt her. All he's got is his hands, soft holds, and he was never any damn good at them.

And she comes on so fast.

Same sky. Still like the inside of a tarnished silver pot. Gravel is no more comfortable here than it was back up the hill. He's done. His heart has started its thing. He can't breathe fast enough to keep up. His ribs creak like the farmhouse stairs with every breath, as her boots crunch gravel on down the road.

Not ten paces away, Willy squats, not precisely a smile on his face, giving Bink a good scratching, the little hedonist arching his back into thick nails, teeth bared in ecstasy.

Karl raises his eyes. "Romy," he says as loud as he can, which isn't very. "Stay."

When he can get his breath he says it again, no hope of her hearing. She's gone. He knows it and says it anyway.

"Please... Stay."

* * *

Melvin's a world away with the biggest news of his life by the time he hits the pavement.

Oh, sure, he feels guilty about telling, but he can't really believe his uncle would expect him not to. He can't be that stupid. He must have known he would go with it. He has to. It'll put him, and Petrolia, on the map. And he's not going to say anything about it? That's just plain nuts.

He runs it through his mind, savoring it like hard candy rolled over the tongue, the last Sister here in the middle of what everybody calls podunk. No more they won't. Not with news like this. And he knows about it. Melvin laughs out loud, wind blowing the sound away as he negotiates the curves while with another part of his mind negotiating cyberspace.

He clears his throat, lets them know who he is, and then, like it's nothing, like he's making conversation, he lets it drop.

He waits.

Nothing.

They think he's having them on.

He spells it out, letting them know he means it, letting them know he's clueing them in, doing them a favor, including them in even before the net's got it.

They kid him along, pump him for particulars, hoping to trip him up, firing questions from seven continents at him fast as he can take them. When they can't shake his story, they blow him off.

Mel's hands go white on the wheel. This is too much. The one time in his life he's got something to say and the stupid SOB's don't believe him!

By the time he's home, he's tried every hangout he can visit while behind the wheel and sent messages to those he can't.

It's like dropping pebbles down a well and never hearing them hit bottom. It's impossible. Somebody has to care, to listen—somebody.

Mary says something to him as he goes by her door, but he doesn't hear what it is, doesn't care. She wouldn't understand anyway, old cow with her dirty dishes and dishrags.

God, how he wishes he could get the hell out of here. If he didn't live in a hole like this somebody might believe him.

He slams his door, shutting her out. Still nothing. The biggest thing he's ever heard of happening right here, and nobody cares. There is no justice, he decides—none. As he throws himself on his bed, desolate with disappointment, he gets one tentative reply. An avatar he's never contacted before.

At last someone is interested.

Eagerly, he responds. Now, at last he'll be able to tell the story to someone who'll take him seriously. He'll show them who's a nobody from the sticks. Smiling in anticipation, Mel comes face to face with the the interested entity and, alone in his room, his smile fades to a twitch.

Stiffening on bare mattress, mouth open, eyes sightless, wide, Mel trembles in grand mal. Spit trails from the corner of his mouth. Talons of fear tightening his chest, he wants to ask what it is that has him, but he can't say it, can't say anything, can't scream, though he'd give his life to.

It's like touching live cable—he can't let go. And as he lies paralyzed, something very big, very dark, very strong stabs its way into his mind. Panicked by the unwelcome intimacy of penetration, he can do nothing about it.

He wants to scream, but from his mouth comes only a chokingwhine. Paralyzed, he can only wait for it.

Oh, yes, someone is very interested.

* * *

That's it.

His mind's made up for him.

She's gone. All because he said something so stupid he can't believe it.

Karl can no longer hear her. Ribs on fire, he can't roll over, so he lies where he is, watching blood cells tool around on his retina like bumper cars at the fair. A rock bores into his shoulder blade as he waits for his heart to slow. He's almost sorry when it does. If he could die here he wouldn't have to climb back up the hill to the house.

Bink sniffs at his ear, whiskers tickling, darts back to Willy before he can reach up to get him. "Sure, Benedict Arnold, go on, run away."

He's too old for this, being thrown around like he hasn't been since the academy. He didn't like it then. He thinks he hears something. Willy, he'll bet, come to get a good swift kick in. Why not, he deserves it.

"Come on," he says, "get yours in, too. Don't be bashful, better hurry if you want to catch her. And take the mutt with you."

Karl can hear him coming, boots on gravel. "Come on, God damn it, give me your best shot, I've got it coming. Then get your arse on down the hill after her, she'll need you."

Steps come nearer and a face blocks out a particularly interesting cloud. He squints, sees it's Romy, closes his eyes, concentrating on keeping his heart where it belongs. "Come to gloat?"

She looks down as if she wishes he'd get up so she could throw him again. It won't work, he's staying right where he is.

"Nothing to say? Fine, I'll do the talking." He looks up at the darkening sky, moon rising over the hill to the east. "Ever seen City Lights? Silly stuff, most of it, but the end, what did you think? When she knows him for a tramp? It matters to her, doesn't it? I think it does. I think it matters. I don't think that, even knowing who he is makes any difference. He's a tramp, that's all she has to know. Oh, never mind, I'm sure you've never seen it, it's old."

"His hands," she says.

"What?"

"That's how she knows him, the feel of his hands. And I think you're wrong about her, I don't think it matters to her what he is. She loves him."

He mulls this over, thinks of something, "When those guys grabbed you, you could have gotten away. Why didn't you?"

It's hard for him to read her face against the sky. "I guess I just didn't care that much. It would have been me, or another of us."

"And what about when I hauled you out of the lobby just before the bomb went off? Why not then?"

"I recognized you, the feel, the smell of you." She looks away through the dusk. "They say we're programmed chemically to accept one man—the one with the right code." Her eyes send a chill through him. "I thought it was a lie."

Slowly it dawns on him what this means, and he is afraid to breathe.

She offers a hand, "Come on."

He takes it and she pulls him to his feet.

Insides gone hollow, he walks with her up the road in rapidly fading light.

* * *

In the orchard a peahen flaps its way to a high roost, honking as it goes. He turns away from the path to the house.

She hesitates, "Where are you going?"

"To put the animals away." He closes in the pigs, then the lambs, tempting them inside with cob as she watches from outside the fence.

"Why lock them up?"

"There's an old panther up here with abscessed teeth can't catch deer any more, and a young cat looking for a territory of his own. Rock had six lambs torn up pretty bad one night last month. Dumb luck they weren't mine."

She glances around them, up into the branches of a big wolf spruce, "Lions? Aren't they dangerous?"

"Can be."

At the chicken coop she waits at the door as he lights an overhead bulb. "Come on in."

She squats next to him by an overturned barrel with a hole cut in the wall. Inside a cream-colored hen watches them suspiciously.

"See that hen?"

She nods.

"She's setting on our breakfast."

"So?"

"Reach under her and get them."

One black eye focuses on Romy.

She looks at him doubtfully. "Me?"

"Go ahead."

Tentatively, she reaches.

The hen pecks her hand and she jerks it away. "She pecked me."

Overhead, a dozen hens and a single cock cackle nervously. Karl hides a smile. She's afraid. He knew she would be. Face serious, concerned, he says, "Hurt?"

She rubs the back of her hand. "No."

"Okay, get the eggs."

Her look is an appeal. "But..."

"We let her set them overnight the yolks will be runny."

Romy looks at the hen, brow creased with worry. "She doesn't want me to."

"That's right."

Seeing he's not going to relent, she sighs, and under an alert pea-sized eye, moves her hand.

"Ow!"

He checks her hand, feigning alarm, "Any blood?"

Not finding this funny, she yanks her hand away. "There's no blood."

"Good. Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you, if you hold your palm up till you get under her it won't hurt when she pecks."

Incredulous, she stares, "Thanks for the advice."

"Hey," he says, hiding a smile, "that's what I'm here for."

Romy frowns, "She wants to hatch them, right? Did you ever think that maybe you should just let her?"

This is funny. The hen's really got her goat. "Uh, uh, I want to eat those eggs. She can hatch some other ones. Come on, let's go, I think I hear a cougar out there."

Eyes wide, she sees he's kidding, "Ha ha."

"She can't hurt you, go ahead."

She turns, annoyed, "I am."

This time she gets her hand under. The hen clucks resentfully, adjusting her stance over the intruding hand like a matron hiking her petticoats.

Romy smiles at him, face filled with wonder, "It's hot under here. Ah, found one."

She sets it in his hand, warm, smooth, dry, returning eight times for more. "That's all."

He rises, knees popping, "Let's go."

Still, she stays where she is, stroking the hen under her chin with a finger. "What will she do now?"

"About what?"

"Without her babies."

"She'll wait for some of the other hens to lay some eggs tomorrow and see you tomorrow night." He offers a hand, "Let's go in."

They climb the path to the house, where sparks from Willy's fire sail out the stove pipe.

In the dark, he can barely make out the pale glow of her face as she scans hills, sky, trees.

"Does it get lonely here?"

He tears his gaze from her face, haunting in last light, to seek the horizon out over the Pacific. How long will they be allowed to live? How long? It can't last like this. He climbs the stairs to the porch, holds the door wide.

"I didn't used to think so."

* * *

Sometime after the wind picks up he feels her next to him in something short and nylon slick. The feel of it sliding over her skin spurs him awake.

"Romy?" He faces her, sharing her breath, unable to do more than whisper. "Romy?"

Lips frantic birds on his face, chest, neck, she answers, voice breathy. "What?"

He holds her off, holds her still. "I can't be your sister."

"I don't want you to."

"I..."

"You what?"

"I don't want to do anything you don't want me to."

Her eyes reflect moonlight from the window. "You won't."

He smooths the hair from her face, and what he gets drives the breath from his lungs. "You want to leave?"

She teases his upper lip with a finger, sending shocks through him, "No."

Her shirt rends. Buttons popcorn off, skittering across the board floor. "Don't ever."

She's starving, desperate, careful of his arm, his ribs as she moves. "I won't, I won't."

He isn't careful, isn't thinking. Not about consequences. Not about tomorrow. Not about Raj. Not about EPA. What he does is feel—her under his hands, her mouth on his, the warmth of her breath on his skin, the smell of her hair tenting his face—all of it. And under it all he senses her mind, her life entwined with his, tendrils of thought, of emotion weaving their way around him, through him.

He holds her face in his hands. Mouth open for her, he strains against her, needing her inside him. He calls her name, begging, pleading as she moves on him. Not enough. Not nearly enough. Eyes tearing, he suckles at her tongue, moaning his soul into her mouth.

For her he's a junkie grown tolerant. She moves, he lives; she stops, he dies. With her name he begs. From afar he sees release. Not wanting it, not daring to turn away, heart, lungs, spine—he loses them all through his mouth on hers.

They lie as they fall. Over them he draws covers. Romy moans. Past the need for words, he answers with like. No words are as eloquent, as loaded with meaning. He won't move, won't let her. As long as they don't move it won't be over, and he doesn't want it to be over.

He's afraid—of what they've done, of what she'll do now, of his need for her—mostly of that.

Romy nestles to his neck, belly against his hip, breathing the long, low, rhythm of sleep against him.

Eyes wide, he thinks.

Now that it's too late, he thinks.

* * *

At dawn Karl reaches for her and skims empty mattress.

Gravel-eyed, he stumbles downstairs. Her he finds in the kitchen in one of Mary's long dresses, hair done up at the back of her head in a mess threatening to fall.

"You're here," he says.

Eyes sleepy, she drags around in a pair of his mom's slippers, shushing over linoleum. She sets a bowl on the table, "Yup."

He watches her work. What he sees is a good looking woman making oats and tea—the first woman

he's been able to be himself with in a very long time.

"Sit," she says, and he does. She pours him a cup of tea. Too hot to drink, he tents his hands over it, steam venting through cold fingers. She slides a bowl of oatmeal in front of him, dry, solid, lovely, the way he likes it.

"Where'd you learn to make oatmeal?"

She dishes hers. "Watching the cooks in the kitchen. Vincent always had them make it like this. Too dry for you?"

He knows she's thinking about leaving. The thought makes him feel as if he's drowning. He was sucked under a waterfall once. This is like that. No way to fight it. "I like it fine."

"No milk."

Dread rises like flood water around him, tickling his upper lip. Last night, the touch of her abraded the top layer of his skin, leaving him raw and smarting in the cold air. The only cure, the only respite from pain is her skin against his. "We'll have to go in to get some."

She sits, cup of tea cradled between her hands. "Is it always this cold in the morning?"

"It's the humidity, the sea so close." He reaches for her hand and finds it stone-cold. She pulls away but he holds on. "You're not going."

She trembles in the thin dress, slipping her hand from under his. "I have to."

Rage a fist inside him, with his right hand he puts the bowl as one puts a shot, sending it to shatter in the sink. Chips of crockery chitter across the floor.

She jumps, sits stiffly, watching him with amused eyes, "Today."

"Why leave?"

She holds his gaze, "Why stay?"

He gets up, paces, awkwardly. Why must women talk about what doesn't need talk? It's redundant. It's stupid. It's hard—it's damned hard. "Where?"

In answer she shrugs.

"Raj will find you."

"It's best."

He stands still, looks around. At the run down house, the threadbare rug, the jeans he wears. In his mind he sees the luxury she came from, the gowns, the jewelry, the Tower, Vici's flat. And he knows why she's going. "It's hardly the plat, I know that."

"Don't be a fool."

"Can't help it."

"You think that's why I'm going?"

He laughs, bitter, "What am I supposed to think?"

"You're a fool."

"You said that."

She sighs in frustration, "I'll only bring them to you."

Numbly he faces her. So that's it.

"Get it, now?"

For him. She's going so he can keep the land. She'll die so he can keep it. That's the kind of woman she is. When he answers, his voice is quiet. "I get it." Karl rises, slips a hand behind her neck, another under her knees.

She watches his face. "What are you doing?"

Lifting her off the chair, he takes her to the couch where he wraps her in a wool Afghan his mother made right there in front of the stove. He can see her hands working. He warms Romy's feet in his hands.

"You're ice, why didn't you make a fire?"

She looks at him, ashamed, then away, "Couldn't get it to light."

"You could have got me up."

"You were sleeping."

Gently, he runs a hand over her brow, down her hair, drawing her head back with every stroke.

Her eyes stay on him, unimpressed by his attempts at diversion. "I'm still leaving."

He knows she means it. She'll go the first chance she gets. He breaks kindling over his knee for a fire. "I won't let you leave." He lights it, squats, back to her, listening to the fire roar as it draws.

"I want you to stay, no matter what happens, no matter what, understand? I want you to stay."

"You hate me, what I am, what I was."

"You're wrong."

"You're lying."

He looks down at her, frustrated beyond what he can stand. She looks away and he sees it's him she doesn't want. Of course. Rising, he tosses his tea, already cold, down the sink, pours himself another from the pot, spout cracked and stained at the tip. Despair wells up out of him, dark blood out of an entrance wound.

How stupid can he be? How delusional to think she would want to stay with him. With him? A joke is what it is.

Arms braced on the cold rim of the sink, he gives up. "I understand. At least let me take you where you want to go. I've got a chip for you, money—you'll need them."

Behind him, he hears couch springs groan. She snakes cool arms around him and he sees how far off he is. He closes his eyes as what she is, what she feels, what she wants surges through him with the throb of arterial blood. Reaching back, he presses her hard to him. He'd forgotten how much it hurts, how much it tears at the insides. Now he remembers.

Welcome back to the world of the living.

"You understand nothing," she says, "nothing at all."

She's right, he doesn't.

Understanding isn't what this is about.

Not anymore.

* * *

The satcom hums.

Karl tries to think of who it might be, comes up empty. There's nobody he wants to talk to after yesterday, not even Mary.

He wonders, should he answer it at all. He shrugs. What does it matter? If they know the code they know where he is. "What?"

The wall lights and big as life Auri looks out at him pissed off as he's seen her. "Hello, Karl."

He stands transfixed. "You're dead."

She smiles, "Am I?"

"I saw you with a hole in your head a band could march through."

Auri stands at the rail, back to the sea, "You ignorant ass!"

Romy comes close behind him, "You're DMI, aren't you, Mother?"

"Don't call me that, I'm no one's mother."

Romy laughs. "You did it. I knew you would. If anybody would, I knew you would."

She's right, of course she's right. Karl can see that.

Romy smiles. "Mother's love outlives the grave? That why you commed?"

From Auri's look Karl can tell she's pricked her.

"I should have known no daughter of mine would ever do as she's told. If you had, I would be alive, now, you know that."

Romy expels a breath, neither a laugh, nor a sigh, "And I'd be dead."

Auri's image seems bewildered by Romy's reaction. He certainly is. And glad to see it.

"After all the heartache you've caused me, I just wanted you to know they're on their way."

"You bitch!" Romy says, voice the growl of a tiger.

"Now, now."

Though Karl knew it was coming, it's still no fun to hear. "Who?"

"Who do you think?"

"Genie," Romy says.

"You'd do that, turn in your own daughter?"

"She's not my daughter. More like donated tissue, a pint of blood, not even that—she's been tampered with, hasn't she?"

She disgusts him. "You couldn't need the money, not now. Why then?"

"I don't like being defied, that's why. And, Karl, don't be difficult. We both know how difficult you can be, don't we? They'll get her anyway."

"Why do you care what happens, now?" Romy says, "You're dead!"

Auri smiles, the kind of smile boys get squatting over cats they torture, "I don't feel dead."

"What happens if they get her?" Karl says.

Auri shrugs, leaning back, "What does it matter? She'll go away, be forgotten."

"They'll pluck her organs. That's what you want, isn't it? You want her dead, gone, as if she never were."

"You know," Auri says, "something I've never understood is why in the name of Christ you care." An idea seems to strike her and she regards Romy through narrowed eyes. "You aren't forgetting your vows of celibacy, are you, my dear?"

"Why, Auri?" Karl asks. "Why now? Why not let it be over?"

She eyes them, first one then the other, "What a touching domestic scene. You two make me want to puke. I think it's revolting."

Eyes alight with wonder, with understanding, Romy smiles. "You're jealous."

Auri snarls. "What?"

"You heard me—jealous—of me, of us."

"I've never heard such tripe."

Karl sees it's true. It's the link that ties everything together, explains it all.

"Because in all the years," Romy says, "with all the money, with all the men, the women, all of it, there's never been one, not even one that wouldn't have sold you out if the price were right."

"You little tramp," she says, the words freshly steeled knives.

"Not even your companion," Karl says. "She set you up, you know that, don't you? Locked you out on the veranda. She knew they were coming, didn't she? Not even her. That's why you can't stand the possibility she might be happy."

Auri comes closer, face filling most of the wall, anger making her a crone. "They're on their way, do you hear me, on their way this second!"

Karl laughs, "They can take a number."

Romy drops onto a sway-backed couch, burgundy velvet worn bare on arms and seat. "No, you go ahead, do what you can to hurt us. It's what I'd expect. I won't say goodbye because there's no one here to say goodbye to." She snaps her fingers and the wall opaques.

Proud of her, Karl flops by her on the couch, springs groaning. So that's the way it is. Paolo and his bunch, the EPA, and Raj. They all know where he is. He sighs, losing himself in the flames behind the glass. Hopeless. All that running, and for what? For nothing. If anything they're an easier target here.

But for the crackling roar of the stove, the house is still. Outside, it blows. Low branches drag across the roof. Bink barks excitedly as Willy plies the maul.

"God, he's at it again, I'll have to fell a forest to keep him busy. Does he know how to do anything else?"

Slouching down, she nods, "He can do anything, just show him once." She comes to him, presses her face to his shoulder, sending waves of a vague happiness flooding through him. A contentment without hope, an odd mixture of despair and elation. It makes no sense. He knows that, savors it anyway.

"Tell me about your mother."

She's brooding over Auri, and he doesn't want her to. He smiles, running a hand over hair soft as moth wings. "Mom was very clean, always scrubbing the floor, that's why the linoleum's worn through in places in the kitchen. She loved us but she hated the messes we made. You know, if she were to come back from the dead right now, walk in that door, the first words out of her mouth would be, 'You slob, just look at my kitchen.'"

"She got mad at you?"

"Did she get mad?" He laughs. "Sure, she did. Dad was pretty good at calming her down, though, most times anyway, made her laugh."

A bitter sadness filters through her skin. "If only I were...I don't know...."

"It's not you, it's Auri. It's not anything you did, or didn't do, are, or aren't—it's just the way she is."

"I know it shouldn't matter, I know that. I've never known her and I'm thirty years old. It shouldn't matter, it's just..."

"It matters. To all of us. It never stops mattering."

* * *

Outside, it's damp, dripping with dew, the air heavy with the tangerine scent of spruce.

Dressed in Mary's jeans and cowboy boots, Romy follows him out, "Where are you going?"

"Let the animals out."

"I'm coming."

Willy they pass in the orchard scattering feed from both hands, hens and peafowl pecking round his big boots. Bink dances, chasing birds twice his size.

"Willy found the birds," she says.

Her hand in his, he leads down to the lower meadow. The gravel road they walk leads through a fold in the hills densely overhung with alder, limbs hanging with dripping moss. Around them droplets fall, slapping a harp of matted leaves and ferns below. Those from high branches strike forte, those from lower, mezzo or piano—a percussion ensemble of subtle syncopation. In patterns both utterly simple and incomprehensibly complex, it patters on the brim of his hat, on Romy's hair.

Squinting, she looks up, "Is it raining?"

He shakes his head, "Just mist coming off the trees."

He watches her as she walks, head up, eyes on the branches roofing the path. Curious, he stops her, "Close your eyes. Hear it?"

By her face he sees she does.

"It's music," she says, whispering. "It's jig, it's adagio for Irish finger drum." She cants her head, combing sodden hair away from her ears with her fingers, listening. "It's raga, salsa, reggae—it's every rhythm ever played."

A dewdrop slips down her nose to span the crevasse between her lips. He tastes it. "You're wet."

She stays put, watching him, "Am I?"

Karl drops his hat on her head, "You asked me once if I went to church, remember?"

"I remember." Understanding, she raises her eyes, "This is it, isn't it."

He scans the canopy over them, "No one to get in the way. No noise. No words. Just God. Feel it?"

Slowly, she nods, "Here I do..."

In her he feels inadequacy. "You don't have to be anything, know anything, say anything. All the rules, all the names, all the rigmarole—that's man's. This...this is God's."

A faint bleating reaches them, insistent, grating.

Face close, she smiles, "Somebody's hungry."

At the pen, he hands her a scoop of molasses cob and she kneels, offering it. He watches as lambs nose their way in, toppling her in the straw in their eagerness to get at the feed. She rights herself, laughing, hands on the thick wool of their backs to steady herself. In her he sees none of the squeamishness, none of the fear, none of the silliness he's seen in city people around animals. He can see she was made for this, made to live a real life, made for the country.

Moving through lambs intent on their feed, he takes her around the waist, "Okay?"

Eyes on him, her mouth makes a slight up tick, "I'll live."

"Let's get back. I'll see if I can get the Ford running and we'll go on in for some milk. If we hurry we can get the breakfast dishes."

"I'd like that."

She takes his hand and they walk back up the hollow.

"Mary's okay," he says, "it just takes her a while, that's all."

She thinks before she answers. "She must have missed you very much."

That's what she says. What she thinks is that Mary wasn't counting on him bringing two recombinants home with him.

Poor Mary. He didn't even call ahead. Just walked in with them. How can he blame her? A few days ago he would have reacted the same way.

"Don't worry," he says, thinking it's a damned odd thing to say.

He worries. He worries about Villar, he worries about the EPA, mostly he worries about Raj. Running his hand lightly down her hair, taking it in his fist, he tells her again, no idea who he thinks he's fooling.

She's not stupid. She knows the score as well as he does.

The only question is who gets to them first.

* * *

Tuesday morning.

In the pickup they head on down.

The last of the lunch crowd heads out, leaving Mary at the sink washing dishes.

"Ah, thought I might see you. No milk, am I right?"

"Thought we might help you clean up."

Willy gets a tray from under the counter and buses tables. Romy wipes them down. Karl takes Mary by wet hands, leads her away from the sink to her stool behind the counter, sits her down, "I'll wash."

He plunges his arms in the sink and just as fast jerks them out. He can't figure how she can stand the water so hot. He adds cold, fishes around in the bottom for silverware.

From her stool, Mary watches. "I could get used to this." She goes to the door, flips the hanging sign in the glass so the OPEN side shows inside. "I'm taking the rest of the day off. Feel like some pasta?"

"You don't have to do that," Karl says.

"Oh, don't give me that. I've got to eat anyway." To Romy she says, "Hungry, Honey?"

Elbow to elbow with Karl, Romy pauses wringing her towel, opens her mouth. She is, Karl can tell, but doesn't want to say so. He smiles down at the suds. She'll learn soon enough that with Mary the direct way is the only way.

Mary sends Karl a crafty glance. "Sure you are."

He has no idea what Mary's thinking, but it seems an improvement over the day before and he'll play along. It's possible she's changed her mind about her. She's done it before, turned on a dime on something. Mary's never felt any compunction about changing mounts mid-river. Arguing with her has always been likely to give him whiplash.

Let this be one of those times.

Karl slides a heavy stack of plates away under the counter, "Mel at school?"

Mary shrugs, "Not there, they called. First day he's missed this year."

"Still here?"

"Not in his room, I checked. Been gone since before five."

"Kind of early for him, isn't it?"

"Anything before noon's early for Mel." She watches Romy clean salt and pepper shakers, putting the place in order. "You know, you wipe tables better'n anybody I ever had in here. Ever waitress?"

"No," Romy says, flushing, "but I don't mind it."

"Get here tomorrow morning at six and you'll learn real fast. I'm getting too old to be cooking and playing step 'n' fetch it to those yokels out there, too. I pay twenty an hour."

Romy finishes, hangs the towel neatly over the sink to dry. He nearly reaches out for her. She gives him a look warning him off, and he keeps his hands in the water. He's not sure how much Mary's guessed, not sure how much he wants her to know.

Mary calls her over to the big stove, "Come here, I'll show you how to make sun dried tomato pasta." Mary takes down a big pot, "Ever made it?"

At the stove, Romy hesitates, shakes her head no.

Karl watches, thinking Romy looks maybe a fast fifteen standing there in Mary's dress.

Does she recognize it?

He remembers last night and draws a slow, shuddering breath, eyes shut. Mary can be tough. She can be kind, too.

Mary nods, "Haven't cooked a lot, huh?"

"When I was young I wanted to learn. We weren't allowed in the kitchen."

Karl holds his breath. This is it—everything Mary despises. The life of privilege, immorality, the whole meddling with humanity thing. Everything he's heard her rail on for hours. It's right here in front of her in the shape of Romy. A woman with looks Mary has never had. He'll know in a second how it'll go. He watches Mary's hands go to her hips—not a good sign. He flinches.

Romy hangs back, smile failing, "I've never cooked anything but oatmeal."

Mary looks his way.

What does he see in her eyes?

Something gives in her face. "Well, don't go looking like that, it's no crime," Mary says, laying an arm around her neck. "None of us can help how we've been raised, not Karl, not me either. There's nothing you can hurt here." She glances at Karl, "Everybody's got to learn, don't they, Karl?"

Jaw clenched, eyes not cooperating at all, thanking God she's his sister, Karl scrubs at dried egg yolk. "Yeah."

"Come on, Honey, fill this pot half full with water and let's get cracking."

Filling the pan, Romy gives him a quick upturn at the corner of her mouth, and his stomach flutters. She carries away the pot and, elbow deep in scalding water, he gives thanks. For last night. For today. For Romy. For Mary. For every breath. They may not have long, but they have now.

"Okay, get us down an iron fry pan and pour in a dollop of oil."

Romy hesitates, "A dollop?"

"Go ahead, I'll tell you when."

She pours.

"That's a dollop. Now you know what this is, don't you?"

"A knife."

"A chef's knife. Take it and press it down flat over the garlic cloves. It breaks them out of their skins. There, you see?"

She does.

"When you've got a dozen or so cloves done, chop them small."

Painstakingly, Romy begins to slice as Karl watches. No longer worried, he hides a smile. He knows what's coming.

Mary sighs. "You weren't kidding, were you? You don't know anything. Here," she says, taking the knife, "this is how to chop."

Past them Karl sees Mel's truck pull up out front. Curious, Karl watches as with a shuddering jerk, it dies in gear. Funny. Mel worships that truck, rebuilt it from a rusted hulk. Karl's never seen him stall it before. If he did he'd probably spend a month taking the tranny apart just to make sure he didn't hurt anything.

Mary demonstrates how to keep the point of the knife on the block, chopping with the belly of the blade. Romy watches, intent. With the blade, Mary scoops up garlic, dropping it into hot oil where it sizzles and pops.

Up the stairs Mel pounds, hair wild, face pale. He bounds in, bells clanging back against the jamb as he throws open the door.

"Why aren't you in school?" Mary yells as he charges past, a small parcel clutched under his arm. The door to his room slams behind him.

"Nice seeing you, Mel," Karl says.

Mary frowns, sighs. "Now, we just want to sauté it, soften it up a little with the parsley and tomatoes. Grab that colander and you can drain the noodles. Then you can crumble in the feta."

Watching her, Mary steps back, leans against the counter, turns to Karl, a certain look he recognizes on

her face, a look he loves her for.

Crumbling feta with her fingers, Romy flashes him a thrilled smile.

Mary looks around, "Where'd Willy get to?"

Karl heads for the door, "I'll get him." He finds him out in the steer's stall, feeding it spring grass out of his hand, Bink happily rolling in fresh muck. Back inside, they move two tables together. Mary throws a big tablecloth over them both. In the center Romy, eyes alight, sets a steaming bowl of pasta.

Mary calls for Mel. They sit. Romy serves. Plates full, they wait.

"Mel, we're not waiting!" Mary says.

The cafe's quiet.

"Let's say grace without him," Mary says.

Unwilling to leave Mel out of the circle, Karl shakes his head no.

"Oh, all right, then." Irritated, Mary heads for his room.

She never makes it.

NINE

Mary screams.

Mel has her by the hair, red-handled ice pick slim as a needle through the skin of her neck close by the jugular, blood welling out around it. A flick of his wrist will end it.

Karl bolts, chair scraping maple, "Mel, what the hell are you doing?"

A slow smile squirms on Mel's mouth, and Karl's heart falls down a well.

"Missed you, Karl," Mel says. It's his voice, but it's not. It's Raj's snarl, Raj's insinuating laugh. "Didn't think I could find you out here, did you? But I did, I sure did."

Karl knew this had to happen. Now it has, he's relieved. What he has to do now is stay cool. That pick's sharp—spring steel, not the plastic junk around now. Must have come out of her collection of antique gewgaws. "How you been, Raj?"

There's nothing funny about his laugh. "How you think? I'm dead, Karl. How do you think I've been?" He shakes his head. "People can be so insensitive."

Karl scrambles to think of something to say. If he can keep him talking, keep him relaxed, just long enough to get close, he might be able to get it away. "Okay, so help me out, Raj, what is suitable DMI small talk?"

He laughs short and sharp. "We don't make small talk, Karl, we're too busy having fun."

Karl nods, moving a step closer, "Always another life to destroy, another murder, another abduction, a digitally mastered immortal's work is never done, that it?"

"That's it, yeah, that's precisely it."

Karl takes another step, "And now you've found us."

"You're so quick, Karl, so astute," he says, shaking his head in amazement. "I told you I would." Raj eyes the table, edges Mary close reaches out to snag a pinch of pasta, tastes it, spits out the noodle, furiously, wiping his mouth with a sleeve. "What is the matter with you people?" He screams. "Don't you stay abreast of the news? This is olive oil, am I right?"

Karl stands mute.

"Am I?"

Karl points at Mary, "Ask her, she made it."

He takes his hand off her mouth, "Is it?"

Terror in her eyes, she watches, saying nothing.

"Don't be bashful, speak up. Is it? is it olive oil?"

She trembles so badly Karl thinks she may start crying. She knows this isn't Mel. She swallows, takes a deep breath. "O...olive oil?"

Raj shakes her, "Yeah, you know, the stuff they squeeze out of olives? Is it or not?"

"Cold pressed, extra virgin."

Raj clucks, appalled, "What in heaven's name is wrong with you people? Don't you care about your health? You want to clog your arteries? You want to die young? Do you?"

Mary looks at Karl, seemingly unsure whether she's expected to answer. "No...."

"Haven't you heard that stuff's bad for you?"

"It...." She hesitates.

"Well?" Raj waits, "It what?"

"It is not bad for you," Mary says.

"Sure as hell is, bad as butter."

Amazed, Karl looks on.

Mary warms to it. "What about the Greeks, the Italians? They live to be in their eighties. It's supposed to

be good for you."

Raj is unconvinced, "It's terrible, it's death, I'm telling you, death. Hell, you might as well slit your throats."

Romy laughs, covers her open mouth.

Raj turns to her, "And what, if I might inquire, is so funny, you recom whore?"

She swallows, "Nothing."

He waves her on, "Oh, no, I want to hear it, what, what, what?"

"What do you care about what you eat, I mean..."

He glares, "Go ahead, say it."

Romy glances at Karl. He has no help for her. "Well, I mean, you're dead."

"As a matter of fact, I am. Does that mean I can't discuss an issue of urgent health concern to all Americans? Does it?"

Romy shrugs, "Well, no."

"Okay, then, that's what I thought."

"That's bunkum," Mary says. "Margarine's the worst. It's the hydrogenation. That's what makes a fat saturated. I heard it on Reader's Digest."

"You just shut up!" Raj clamps his hand back over her mouth, jerks her head back hard, stretching her throat. "I can't talk sense to someone like you, go ahead, harden your arteries, kill yourselves, see if I care." He makes an effort to calm himself, takes a deep breath.

"Now to business..." Raj slams an implant gun down on the table, "Do her, Karl."

Karl gets it. That's where he's been since before light, getting the implant gun up in Eureka. He's seen them before. He picks it up. It's brand spanking new, implant chambered, charged and ready to send the twenty centimeter micro-strand through the base of the skull. Once in, tricky to get out. Also illegal. Few doctors will attempt it.

"Do it now, or I rip her a new smile."

Karl takes a step forward. Mary grunts, pulls Mel's hand away far enough to say, "Don't hurt him, Karl!"

He stops. She'd read him right. Now what?

Romy sheds her apron, comes to stand in front of him, eyes on his, deadly serious, reaches back to draw her mane over a shoulder, baring her neck. "Go ahead."

Suddenly Willy's there, breath on his neck. Karl wonders if he'll jump him just in case he's thinking about it.

Romy tells him to go sit and, looking at Karl long and hard, he decides, sits, eyes dangerous. Twisting the pick like a screwdriver, Mel presses it in and Mary whines through gritted teeth as the shank sinks another millimeter into her neck.

"Little more and I can sever her spinal cord," Raj says. "How would that be, just leave her a basket case right here. It's easy, I've done it before."

Rage rising, Karl readies himself to spring, seeing himself snapping the arm holding the pick.

Mary's eyes are on him, sharp and stern, "Don't do it, Karl, don't you dare."

Romy whips around, slaps Karl hard on the mouth, cutting his lip. Blood floods his mouth and he tastes salt. His impulse is to strike back, but he keeps his fist at his thigh.

"Now!" she says, "Get it over with!"

"I'll do her, Karl! She'll die right here, and for what? A near-human whore? My God, Karl, how can you be such an ass? When I knew you, you were a pretty sharp cookie. Hey, come on, man, I'll get her now or I'll get her later. You can't stop me, why not get me off your back? Look at her, she wants it, don't you, sweetheart?"

"Yes," Romy says, eyes on Karl, "I want it."

"What'd I tell you? I could have done this back in L.A., saved us all a lot of trouble, but, no, you had to butt in, didn't you, you sanctimonious little..." Face red, he stops, trembling like a boiler about to crack open. "I wish I'd had time to kick your brains out on the plat, truly I do."

Karl catches the wisp of an idea as it snakes through his mind, sets the implant tool down on the table by the platter of pasta. Pinning Willy to his chair with a pointed finger, he draws the .44, presses it to the nape of Romy's neck hard enough to bow her head, chin to breastbone.

Raj sees this and his hand goes tense on the red handle. Mary moans.

Gun to the back of Romy's head, finger alongside the frame, thumb pressing the hammer down, as safe as he can make it—still he can barely stand to do it. He realizes Mary has no idea what is happening. She must think her own son has a pick planted in her neck. He hopes she'll live to find out differently. Things are moving way too fast.

Raj is confused, "What are you doing?"

"I'll do her right now, then what'll you have, nothing."

He stops, thinks, "So, what? Talk."

"I want my money back, then you can have her."

Mel laughs, a throaty, chicken squawking kind of laugh. "You want what?"

Romy squirms and Karl grabs her arm to keep her where she is. She won't understand. She'll think he's selling her out. She'll hate him. All this he knows. He can't help any of it. He's got one chance to stop Raj.

This is the only way he can think of to do it. "My twenty million."

A slow smile grows on his face. "That's what you want? Money? Your freakin' money?" Incredulous, he laughs, "You want your freaking money? Sure, why not? When it's done I'll give you a billion, screw it, ten billion."

Romy squirms in his grasp and he wrenches her hard by the arm, "Hold still!" She turns her head, hurt in her eyes, mouths, "bastard," frigid under his hand. For a minute he thinks she might call for Willy. She stays quiet.

"Not good enough." Karl pushes her down into a chair, says to Raj, "I want mine."

"Yours, wha...what do you mean, yours? Dough's dough, money's money, what's the difference? What? Tell me, I want to know, what?"

"What was in my account, I want that money."

"You out of your freakin' mind? What's the difference who's money it is? It doesn't exist. It's nothing but a cipher in electron shorthand, a magnetic mote in some server in Topeka, for chrissake."

"Call it up, Karl Latte, I want it transferred, right now, right here, or you'll never get her."

Raj watches him as if considering his options. He sighs, "Well, why the hell not?" His eyes go vacant.

Karl considers edging closer to Mary, closer to that red wooden handle in her throat, so maddeningly close he can almost feel it in his hand. Before he can he's back.

"Ah, ah, ah." He shakes a finger. "Don't go doing anything I wouldn't, now, Karl. Got it, and..." A slow, smile of disbelief grows on his face, "What's this? Karl, you naughty boy, playing tricks on Uncle Raj."

Karl thinks about rushing him, shooting him in the arm, something. He knows he's blown it. It's over. Why hadn't he ever taken the time to learn more about worms, viruses, all of it. Maybe if he had, he'd have understood what it was Magnus was trying to do for him—and what to do with it.

"A virus?" Raj says it like it's a joke. "Really, Karl, I might have expected something a little more creative from you. I mean, come on..." He frowns, looks inward, "I..." He swallows.

Karl doesn't breathe, won't let himself hope. "What is it, Raj?"

"Nothing, it's nothing, I just thought I got it, is all, I..." He laughs as if uncertain about the joke.

Romy's out of the chair and has her hand on the implant gun before Karl can reach out to stop her. Eyes on his, she brings it up, presses it to the back of her neck. For a moment she pauses, eyes accusing.

"Romy, don't." He wants to tell her it was just a ruse, just a way to get him to access the worm, but there's no time. "Please..."

For an instant he thinks she may not, then her eyes go hard as he's seen them. In that moment he knows he's lost her.

The gun spits. Romy's knees buckle and she falls, limp. Karl catches her, eases her to the floor.

"Ha," Raj says, "see how bad she wants it?"

Needing to reach him, to hurt him, Karl takes a step closer. Raj bears down on the needle in Mary's throat. "Stay back, now, while I get a handle on this. You're smarter than I thought, but have no fear, Raj is here. I'll get the..." Suddenly, Raj looks confused, holds out an arm to keep Karl at bay. "No, no, just a minute, oh, all right, then, got it now."

Karl watches, waiting for an opening, "I'm not moving, Raj, but come on, I want my money."

Mel looks as if he forgot something and desperately wants to remember what it was. "Money?"

"Yeah," Karl says, a tendril of hope rising, groping for support inside him. "My money for Romy, that's the deal. You've got her, so where is it?"

Mel gazes at a spot in the air above Karl's head, face twitching like a man feeling a yard-long worm eat its way through him. "Oh," he says, "oh..."

Karl edges closer. "What is it, what's wrong, Raj?"

Raj looks at him, terror in his eyes, mouth hanging open, sinew standing out from his neck. "I can feel it, Karl." His mouth stays open. Though he strains, no words come. Raj stares, eyes blind, fixed.

Karl sweeps in, clamps his wrist, draws out the pick. Cracking Mel's hand open, he hurls the tool across the room where it clangs off the base of a stool, sticking in the floor. That fast Willy takes Mary to a chair, presses a towel to her neck.

Mel sags and Karl sits him down, keeping tight hold of his wrists. It's hard to be this close to Raj. He hates this thing that's brought so much misery to so many. Karl's relieved he can't feel anything, that he can't read what's recorded back in Van Nuys. If he could, he couldn't stand to touch him.

Raj stares into empty air, face twitching.

Could it be working?

"What do you feel, Raj?"

Voice low, breathy, his mouth moves as if he's very cold or speaking new words, "The worm..."

"What about it, Raj, tell me."

"I can't remember anything," he says, voice breathless. "I'm losing them, all of them."

Fascinated, Karl searches his face, wanting to know. "Who, Raj, who are you losing?"

Startled, he turns to see Karl as if seeing him for the first time. "Karl, is it you?" His voice is the old Raj, gentle, no sarcasm, no bitterness.

Wary, Karl answers. "It's me."

Raj takes his hands in his, "Ah, God is great, I never thought I would see you again." His voice is weak,

his face puzzled. "But, I remember, I was sick. Am I now cured?"

This is the Raj he knew, the Raj with whom he passed many an hour poring over a chessboard in his quiet flat, anise-hyssop tea scenting the air. He thinks of all that's happened in five years, all the suffering brought by this one digital entity before him, and sends Magnus thanks. "Yes, Raj, I think you are."

"Then tell me, my friend, why do I feel so strange?"

Karl finds it difficult to look his old friend in the eye. "I don't know, Raj, I don't know, but there's nothing to worry about now, not now."

He sits quietly for a time, much the way he sat once on his couch, teacup perched on his knee. He was a man Karl had been content to sit with in amiable silence, no need for chatter, a good man.

"You know, Karl," he says finally, voice calm, serene, "I was sure I was dying. How is it I am yet alive?"

How can he explain? "You're not, Raj."

"Not alive," he says, head tilted. "And how can that be?"

How does he tell him he's just a pattern of electrons on a hard drive somewhere—and that rapidly disintegrating? "Raj, I need your help."

Face brightening, he lays a hand over Karl's, "Anything, my friend, anything."

Afraid to go on, Karl hesitates. Does he have any right to ask this, any right to ask anything? Perhaps he shouldn't do it at all. "Can you access the net?"

"The net..." Raj pauses, turns his head the better to see with unseeing eyes, "oh, yes, the door is wide."

"I need you to go there, to find others like you."

"Others no longer alive, the ones they call, how is it, DMI?"

"That's right, can you find them?"

"Ah..." He laughs, the laugh Karl remembers, an easy chortle devoid of self-consciousness, sightless eyes moving about the café, blind to everything but dimensionless dark. "There is no need, my friend—they have found us."

His answer sends a shiver from Karl's scalp to his tailbone. "How many?"

"Many..." he says seeing them in the air about them, "many."

"God, this is so goddam weird," Mary says.

"And," Karl hesitates, unsure how to say this, "can you touch them?"

"Touch them?" Raj grimaces as if repulsed by the idea. "But they are filth, they are corruption, why should I want to touch them?"

Karl leans forward, hands on Mel's knees, "I need you to touch them, Raj, every one of them, can you do that for me? Can you?"

His smile returns looking sad. "I am dead as well, you say?"

"Yes, Raj, you are."

"Then why is it I am not like them, not stinking of death, of evil?"

Karl senses he's losing his chance to do this thing, and he can't. He can't lose it. Not with Romy out there somewhere. "Raj, please, just touch them, right now, please, Raj. I'm asking you, as a friend."

Raj looks directly at him, seeing his face, "Not for anyone, not even for you, will I touch creatures so vile."

Disappointed, Karl lets out the breath he's been holding. He might have known it wouldn't be this easy. One last question he has to ask, though he knows the answer. "Is Romy there?"

A smile lights his face, "Ah, she is truly a creature of great beauty."

Karl stands, trembling. He knows what he has to do. Knows all at once in an incandescent flare why he is the way he is. Freakish talent and all, unsuited to a life in the 21st century, unsuited to life anywhere. He can do this. At least he can do this.

He shoves tables apart, toppling glasses, kicking chairs to skud across oak planking. One chair he grabs, dropping it in the middle of the space he's made. He pulls the towel away from Mary's neck, sees she's not bleeding, "You going to be all right?"

Eyes on Mel, she nods, "Will he?"

"Yeah, yeah, he will."

Karl gets some duct tape, tapes Mel to his chair using up most the roll.

"What's that for?"

"Just to make sure he doesn't get in trouble. It's not quite over yet, it will be soon."

He fetches an old pair of cuffs out of the drawer behind the counter, his pair from SFPD, ratchets one around Romy's wrist, cinches it tight. The other cuff he closes around the base of a stool bolted to the floor. He covers her with his jacket, cushioning her head with a sleeve. Not a very good setup—it'll have to do.

Calling Willy over, he stands him behind the chair at the center of the floor. "Don't move, and if you want to keep Romy safe, keep me in this chair. You know choke holds?"

Willy nods, face puzzled.

"Okay, use one. Let me have just enough blood to keep from going out, and no matter what I say, no matter what I do, don't let me up. You think you can do that?"

He sets Bink down, arms hanging loose, "I can do it."

"I mean it, don't trust me. If I can, I'll hurt you. I'll say anything to get you to let go. Don't. It won't be me talking. I start to get away from you, put me out, understand?"

Willy's eyes bore into his. Slowly he nods.

"And, Willy, one more thing. You remember the girl in L.A.."

He nods.

"You remember the way she felt about him taking her back, you remember the things Raj said?"

With his eyes he says he does.

"Then do me a favor, will you, Willy? Do Romy a favor. If they win, kill us. Kill us both. It's what she wants, too."

He looks at Romy, then back at Karl, answers with a nod.

Grateful, Karl unclips the shotgun, unholsters the revolver.

Mary looks on, worried. "What are you planning? I want to know."

Karl racks the twelve dry, drops the cartridges out of the .44, tosses them onto the table. "Hide these."

She looks worried. "What you doing, Karl?"

He ignores her. No time. He goes to Willy, lays two hands on shoulders round and bulky as a boar hog's, "Trust me?"

He nods.

"Well, don't, not now. You let me go, I'll kill you." He nods at Romy, "And don't trust her either. You won't let me down?"

"No."

"Will you please tell me what's going on?" Mary says, voice rising.

"Going after her." He reaches for the implant gun, clears Romy's code, enters his own on the small keypad, indicators glowing ready. He lifts Mary to her feet, slaps it in her hand, "And you're going to do me."

She looks at him, sets it down as if it were hot. "No I'm not."

He puts it back in her hand, sits in the chair in front of Willy. "Now, Willy."

He takes him in a lock that nearly snaps his head off. Karl grunts. He wants Willy to take him seriously, but not this seriously. "Christ, Willy, not so hard, huh?" He chokes out the words through a constricted trachea, "I want to live long enough to get there."

He can't look at her with his head forced down by the steel bar of Willy's arm. "We don't have much time, Mare." To Mel he says, "Can you still see them, Raj?"

"They're here, but Karl, I'm afraid, I'm afraid of them." It's the voice of a sleepy child.

"It's okay, Raj, I'll be there in a minute. Can you look for me, find me?"

"Yes," he says, as if answering from a dream, "I can find you, I can do that."

Mary squats by him, looks up into his eyes, "You can't do this."

Karl, beyond fear, now, says, "There's no time, I need you to do it now."

"Why?"

If he had time he could tell her all the things he has to say—the way he feels about Romy, the way he can't stand the thought of living here, or anywhere, without her.

He doesn't.

"Mare, I need you to do this—right now, please...."

"You won't come back."

He wishes she hadn't said it quite that way. For all he knows, she's right. He's never been where he's asking her to send him, never wanted to. Something about being in a place that isn't real has always scared him. As fears go, he has none more potent than his fear of losing hold on reality. It was that, not the moralizing, not the fear tactics, not the threat of prosecution, which kept him away from drugs. UR's the same.

If reality is land, UR is rip-tide beach. Getting in is easy, even attractive—it's getting out that's hard. "I have to try."

She watches his face, and there comes a dawning in her eyes, "I should have known. You do, don't you? You love her that much?"

Breaking her gaze, he reaches out to slap Mel's knee, "Still with me, Raj?"

With apparent effort, he answers. "I'm very tired, Karl, very sleepy."

He's losing him, his chance is slipping away. "Do it," he says, whispering, her face inches from his. "Please, Mare, please, do it."

Uncertainly, she moves behind him. He feels a cold pressure at the base of his skull.

"God, forgive me, I know this is a mistake."

There's no time. "Mare!"

"I'm happy for you, Karl, I'm happy you've found that with someone."

"Mare, I may not have too long."

She sighs, "Here?"

She needs to do it soon—before he loses his nerve, before he starts thinking about what it is he's doing. "Yeah, yeah, right there, now do it, do it."

He feels a quick, sharp bite at the nape of his neck, and quick as hitting water after a leap into space—nothing.

* * *

At EPA, Northwest Division, Arcata office, Karl's name comes up in a to-do briefing.

This is Harvey Milkerson's 11th month in the sticks punching his ticket before moving on up the ladder, and he can't wait to be out and on to the next rung. He calls Karl's case up on his tablet and smiles. Harvey likes the drive out to The Cape. Good land, tired, overused, worn out, but beautiful, just the same, in its own stark way.

It'll be good to see it recover when it comes under UN protection. Should spring back pretty fast once they get the sheep and cattle off it. He has to say though, looking over the ruling, that it strikes him as a bit unusual. But then in his year paying dues in a regional office he's learned not to look for consistency, or logic, when deciphering these things. Even considering that, this one's eccentric.

Another thing he likes about the drive to Petrolia, it gets him out of the office. He calls up the time, noon. No way is he starting down there this time of day. Nothing that won't last until tomorrow morning, anyway. Milkerson goes out into the boonies, he wants backup. Nothing like a couple flachette carbines at your back for encouraging polite discourse with the locals. He's had guns pulled on him before—he won't again. Gun control laws or not, there's no telling what the yokels have got buried up there. No, better safe than sorry. He'll take a second hummer when he goes.

Leaning back in his chair, he plans his day. Pull out of the yard at nine and he can milk it for a whole day. Two-and-a-half hours out, take care of business—one guy, shouldn't take too long. Of course that depends on whether or not he decides to be a jerk. There are so many out there in flyover country.

Then catch lunch at the cafe—now that gal can cook. Another thing he likes about eating there is that sitting at the counter, there's no way she can doctor the food. The way some of the locals feel about EPA a guy can't be too careful. He's heard stories about the laxatives and hot peppers in the food, throwing steaks on the floor and the rest. It isn't happening to him.

After a good long lunch, if he can get the driver to hold his speed down, they'll roll in at a quarter to four—too late to be sent out on anything else. Not a bad day at all.

He's looking forward to it.

* * *

Confused, Karl stands on the roof of the cafe under midday overcast.

The makers of portable implant guns he damns to the lowest level of hell. He should have known it wouldn't work. He looks around the eaves for a ladder, sees none. This gets stranger still. He covers his face with his hands, presses his eyes into their sockets, takes his hands away. No change. Still the roof. But wait.

He looks down at the shingles under his feet and sees something he hadn't noticed. They are new. The shingles on the cafe are forty-year-old cedar and much too far gone with moss and dry rot to hold his weight. Mary's been on him for a year now to reroof the place with asphalt, and now here it is done. He nearly laughs out loud. Okay, now he gets it.

It did work—this is UR.

Slowly, carefully, he looks around him. He looks up at the cedars and they're just how he knows they look from up high, last years seeds and all, and he wonders if this is all coming out of his own mind, out of the way he knows the world to be.

A group of martins cuts the air overhead air shushing over wings. That's another thing. Most people have never heard the hiss of air over wings. He has; therefore, he does. Makes sense.

He can feel wind, cool enough so he wishes he had his coat. He can smell sea, spruce, cedar, wood smoke from Mary's stove in the cafe. He can hear, too—wind, a pickup downshifting as it climbs the grade up the coast, an angry band of jays in the cedar overhead. If there's a flaw he can't see it.

But it's not real, that's easy to see. He looks for the rusting cars and trailers on Leyland's place down by the creek and finds them buried in alder thicket. This he knows is a lie. Leyland, who never changes his shirt. Leyland who's got a pile of beer bottles on his place big as the trailer he lives in. Leyland, who grazes sunken-hipped cattle over his five trampled acres year round. Leyland's cattle, so desperate for feed, would never let a tree get more than a few inches tall before cropping it off at the stump.

Yet here under alder, full girthed white faces stand amid lush rye tall as themselves. He almost laughs. Leyland's pasture not grazed to stubble—pure fantasy.

So this is UR...

He smiles, not taken in. This, all this—sky laden with a great pregnancy of cloud, hills, roof under his feet, all of it—UR. He—his body—is pinned in a chair in the cafe. A little more he understands what it is sustains the kids under the boardwalk, the girl on the quay, the punks lining the streets of L.A. and every other city big enough to offer them shelter. UR offers them what life never can—perfection.

So, where is Raj? He calls his name and he's right there behind him, sitting cross-legged on the roof peak. He has to laugh when he sees this. Raj in his paisley robe and slippers perched there, as if it were the most natural place for him to be, as if he were on his couch. Even after everything, his sad dark face with its wrinkles is good to see.

Karl looks up to find the sky threatening rain. He remembers Romy and feels a weight of stone in the pit of his stomach. Will he be too late? "Where are they, Raj?"

"They?"

"The ones you're afraid of."

"By the sea—they are waiting for you."

Karl looks down to where the land falls away into spruce near the cliff face. He yearns to go, to do what he has to.

Behind him Raj calls. Turning, he finds him lying, hands outstretched. Raj raises a hand, an old man's hand, quaking with age. "Karl, don't leave me. I was alone last time."

Karl takes it and feels a solid hand in his, skin cool, but not cold, no thoughts to read. Can simulacrum feel, or is he just doing what Raj would do—did—in the same circumstance? Too many questions. Karl doesn't like it here, doesn't like not being able to believe what he sees, hears, feels.

Again he looks down slope.

Again he feels a thrill of fear.

What is happening to Romy while he hesitates?

He needs to go. Now. Right now.

"I'm afraid," Raj says.

Karl isn't surprised. He's heard it before. Some say it, some not—everybody feels it. There's not much he can say. "I'm here."

"Karl, is it too late to regret the things I've done? The terrible things? I remember. If only I did not."

Karl watches his eyes, sees sincerity, fear, regret. He forces himself to remember this is not the Raj he knew. Or is it? It's too confusing.

"I remember what I did to that little girl, and I, I..." He grimaces as if in pain, "It doesn't seem like I could have done that. Did I, did I really?"

Is this a confession, an avatar's confession? "Yeah, Raj, you did."

"I'm glad you stopped me, Karl. I am." Pain distorts his face, "And the Sisters, I remember them, as well. I was a monster, wasn't I?"

Karl sees no need to affirm the statement.

Eyes laden with grief, he looks up at Karl. "Is it too late for redemption, do you think?"

Redemption. That again. How can he answer for Raj what he can't for himself?

"Oh, I know, you're thinking it doesn't matter. I'm not even real, am I?"

He remembers the look of surprise on the girl's face as he slit her throat, the Sister up on her knees, Sasha still warm in his cubicle. Revulsion washes over him. "You're real enough."

He looks up, hope in watery eyes. "Then I can repent, can't I?"

This is taking too long. He should be down at the beach right now. "How do I know?"

"They say you can."

"They say it." Karl's never believed a man can repeat a few words with his last breath and erase the harm he's done. If that's so, then the system stinks.

"But you don't believe it."

Impatient, he sighs. "Look, Raj, I've got to go."

He clutches at his hand, "Karl, I have trillions of credits that need to go back. I'm transferring account codes to your old chip. You still have it?"

Karl's heart skips a beat., "You remember that?"

A smile flickers on his mouth, "Karl Kleiner? I remember. There, it's done. Hundred fifty trillion, if it's a dime—all my plunder. See it goes to help them. The ones I hurt. Do that, will you?"

So much money. Blood money. Money from the dead, from those Raj used, ruined, cast aside. He wants no part of it. "Raj, I..."

"There's no one else. Do good with it. Please. Not for me. I know you hate me. Do it for the Raj you knew. We used to get along pretty well, you and I, didn't we?"

Raj groans, his hand goes limp and heavy in Karl's. Then he's holding air. He's just plain not there. More like a dream than anything else.

Karl stands at the edge of the roof, over packed gravel thirty feet below. No way he can get down without a ladder and expect to walk away. He doesn't know the rules or if there are any, and he has no time to learn. He thinks, decides.

Heart fluttering, he sucks in a lung full of air, lets it out and, eyes kept purposely open, lets himself fall forward.

* * *

It's the dream of flying.

Sleeves a flag in a gale, with a sensation like a toboggan in snow, he glides. Eyes tearing in cold wind, he drops toward the coast. Better than any dream, it's complete. He moves a hand and yaws, raises the other, trims. Breast flooded with pure joy, he understands now why they'll do anything for it. Sell themselves, their chips, their identities, their lives for it. Selling your body would be easy, he sees, if you

could be here while it happened. So easy it scares him.

It's not real, it's better. It's a drug—no, it's more—it's dreams, wishes, fairy tales. It's the world according to his desire. It's what everyone wants. It's perfection. It's Heaven, it's Hell, it's perdition in paradise, and at the moment it all makes a peculiar brand of sense. Stomach leaden with worry, he sees her.

On a bit of pasture at the edge of the drop off Karl comes to ground with a shock like a step off a stair. Not too far away, a huge live oak clings to a sandstone bluff above the sea, huge knobby branches meandering overhead. He's always loved this oak. Here it crouches, waiting.

On a cushion of moss at its base, Romy sits. Knees hugged to chest, eyes distant, unseeing, she rocks.

He goes to her, reaching out, but she holds him away. As their skin makes contact something like static leaps between them and they both jump.

"Damn!" She shrinks back as far as she can, eyes wary. "Stay away from me. What was that?"

"I don't know." He kneels in front of her—not too close, "What's wrong?"

Eyes filled with pain, she smiles, "What's wrong? Not a thing, what could be wrong? They have me, that's what's wrong, they have me."

For a second he doesn't understand, then it feels as if his insides sprout bristles, as if his heart grows a mantle of hoarfrost. He's too late.

This is all that's left of her now, this avatar marooned on a net scape. Did he cuff her tightly enough to the base of the stool? Does it matter?

"I didn't want that."

She looks at him as if she might spit in his face, "This probably isn't even you, anyway."

"It's me."

She looks sharply at him, eyes narrowing on his face, his hands. She takes one in hers, examining it, and he feels nothing. He doesn't like it.

She looks up into his face, "I can't be sure."

"It's me," he says again.

Dropping his hand, she shakes her head, "You can't be here, you'd never come."

"I did." Not much, but all he can tell her for now, all he can give. Not enough.

In her eyes, wonder turns to comprehension. "How did he make you do it?" Venom taints her voice. "Did he threaten not to give you your money?"

So, that's what she thinks. He can't blame her after what he did. The worst part is he can't explain, not now. "No."

"Then, why?"

He wants to tell her. That he came for her. That he came for them. That he may have a way. He aches to tell her, and can tell none of it. He scans the hillside behind them, the rocky shore below, sees no one. "Raj said they'd be here."

Her mouth turns bitter as she rocks on knotted roots anchoring the spreading tree above them. "Want them, do you? Well, you won't be disappointed. Oh, no, I promise you that."

Sensing movement overhead, he looks up. What he sees contracts every follicle on his body.

The live oak hangs ponderous with cougar. Among a tangle of limbs the girth of a man they crouch. Impossible. There aren't that many on the cape. There aren't that many in the state. Then he knows—DMI.

The digital patterns of the most egotistical, most selfish, most powerful humans to die in the last five years. Haunch to haunch, hunched forward, heads hanging between paws, they wait impatiently, tails cutting air. A select group waits above, those that will spend a trillion dollars to create a digital simulacrum of themselves rather than pass quietly away. A new race of predators, they're here for him.

As if by signal, they begin a low growling which reverberates in the chamber of his ribs. Flinching before the weight of the sound, he wonders the tree can support them. Their hips sway in eagerness, and Karl realizes he's come to a feast where one plate is set before a multitude—him on it.

He could run, but he won't. It's a joke, anyway, the thought of fleeing them.

They quiet. The only sound, surf on rock 100 meters below and the wind souging overhead.

It's time. He can feel it. Their 80 kilo pounce from the limb he can feel, too. More than anything, he wants to put the moment off. "What are you?"

"The welcoming committee," one says, voice a woman's. "We welcome all the new ones, show them around."

He's got to keep her talking. "Why panther?"

"That's your doing, we've been SS, IRS, roaches, lawyers, crocodiles, inquisitors, you name it. It's all the same, really, just an individual thing," she says, voice melodious, clear. "I rather like your choice. I've never been a lion," she says, long, lazy yawn exposing yellow fangs. As if reveling in the power of their voices they scream a raspy chorus.

The hair on the back of Karl's neck prickles. It repulses him that he can possibly think her voice pleasing. "Who are you?"

"I'm your first friend on the net. We shall get on well together." She purrs in anticipation.

He doesn't have long. "And if I don't want a friend?"

This starts them up again, and he covers an ear with a hand until they quiet. Something about her gnaws at his mind, something about her voice. He's beginning to see that UR need not always be pleasant.

"Who are you to decide? If you're smart you'll just lie back and enjoy it."

Near enough what he intends to do, but it won't do to show it. "If I don't?"

Claws score bark overhead. "It'll do you no good to be difficult. The ones that fight only get hurt. You don't want that."

He's got it, now. "I know you. I saw you on the net just before you died, that was you, wasn't it?"

"It was me—a very long time ago."

"Like it as much as you thought you would?"

A long tongue curls up and over a broad nose. If cats can smile, she smiles, eyes holding him where he is. "More."

He doesn't want to ask her why, doesn't want to know. "Why so many?"

"Competition—we all want to help, you see."

"I see. I'm lucky, then, I guess, aren't I?"

She hesitates, "You're not afraid?"

Will he be able to get them all? Will Magnus' worm tire, wear out somehow, cease to replicate? How can he know?

"I'm afraid." It's true. "That good?"

The bass rattling in her throat grows more fierce. "Oh, yes..." She edges forward on her limb, deep chest dropping, claws out. "Very good."

Hands at his sides, he waits for her.

* * *

Sore.

God, Karl's sore.

He hurts all over—head, arms, hands. Worst his neck. "Willy, for God's sake, you're breaking my neck."

Romy says, "Don't, Willy, don't let him go!"

Willy eases up, but doesn't free him. Karl strains to see Romy seated cross-legged on the floor still cuffed to her stool. Mary holds Mel wrapped in her arms, and for once he stands for it. "Christ on a

crutch, what's going on here?"

Karl smiles up at Romy, wincing at the pain in his neck, "How you feel?"

Warily, she watches him, "Is it you?"

"Who else?"

Seeing it's true, she sags.

"When did you get rid of it?" he says.

"Not long after you touched me it just seemed to fade away. It was odd."

Willy's face he sees reflected in glass behind the counter. Blood drips from a cut over one eye. "What happened to you?"

Willy smiles as if he's enjoyed it, whatever it was, "You f... You struggled."

Romy rattles her chain on the chrome stool post, "Will somebody let me go, please?"

"Hey, what about me?" Karl says.

Mary gets the key off the counter, opening the cuff. Contempt distorting her face, Romy massages the red indentation it left on her wrist, "You put them on too tight."

Karl shrugs, "I had to be sure."

Scooping the twelve off the table, loads a shell, racks the slide, "Well now I want to be sure." She hands the gun to Mary, says to her, "He gets free, you kill him. You kill him or for the rest of your life you'll wish you had."

Mary hesitates, "I can't."

Romy nods at Mel, "Want him to live? Then do it."

Slowly, Mary reaches out for the gun, "I'm sorry, Karl, I—"

"It's all right, do what she says, she's right, Mare."

Now, as if she's putting it in fire, Romy offers Karl her hand, "Read me."

From the counter, Mary watches. It's not something he does for an audience.

"Read me." Impatiently, she moves closer, "Do it, if it's you, do it!"

"Now?"

"If you can."

Still fast in Willy's grip, he strains to reach her and is amazed. The view he gets of himself repulses him.

Language filthy as he's heard runs from his mouth. He spits, writhes, scratches, nearly reaches a knife on the table. Time after time, he transforms, different voices, different expressions, never tiring, again and again. When he's had as much as he can take, he drops her hand, "That bad?"

"Bad?" She laughs. "You were possessed—serially." Romy nods, and Willy turns him loose.

Sobbing with relief, Mary drops the gun on the counter, "Jesus, Karl, whatever they were, they sure as hell hated not getting their way."

He's always loved Mary's talent for stating things simply. "That they did."

"One of those things had Mel, didn't it?" Mary says.

He nods.

"How many of them were there? It seemed to go on forever. One would come, and then another and another."

Karl sees again the laden oak and shivering, stands. "Too many to count."

He tests the pasta with his fingers, finds it stone cold. Tearing away a noodle, he trails it into his mouth, tasting fresh garlic strong enough to light his tongue, "I'm hungry, can we eat?"

She comes to take the platter, "I'll heat it up, it'll be ready in five."

Taking Romy's hand, Karl tugs her after him toward the door, keeping her thoughts blocked, not wanting them, not wanting to feel her hate.

"What are you doing?"

It's cold, now, nearing dark. He waits until he has her outside and well down the road to answer, "I'm walking."

Keeping pace beside him, letting him take her, she keeps her eyes straight ahead. "You are strange."

That's it. He stops her on the shoulder of the road, jerking her to face him. He waits to regain his breath, anger shaking him. His palm crawls, so strong is his urge to slap her. If he thought he could get away with it, he might. God knows she deserves it.

"What?" she says, hands on hips, "what?"

"What an idiot trick that was! For somebody that's supposed to have some smarts you sure pull some stupid stunts."

A smile hovers at the corners of her mouth. "I know it."

"Oh, you know," he says, stalled, recovering. "Then you must know why I did what I did with the gun."

She nods.

"You do?"

"Sure, you had to get him to bite, to take the worm, I figured that out. What I can't figure is why you implanted yourself. Why did you?"

It's not a question he expected.

"Well," she says, daring him to answer, "why?"

Breathing hard, Karl holds her eyes with his for a long moment. She knows damn well why. Why should he tell her?

"Well, come on, I know you can't stand the thought of being there, of having that thing in you, so why, huh? Tell me."

In the back of his mind pictures run, sound drones. He turns to look at it and it swells to violent life, making him jump. He moves his mind away and it shrinks, withers to a ghost, but stays.

"What's wrong?"

He presses the heels of his hands to his temples, keeping his head together, "This damned noise, how do you turn it off?"

"You don't, down yes, off, no."

Curious, he looks closely at her, "How do you know that?"

"I haven't been as busy as you." She smiles, a wry turn of her mouth, "I've tried." She reaches up to press his temples between hands cool as porcelain.

A pickup hauling an impossible burden of baled oat hay rounds the curve, passes and is gone.

"So are you going to tell me?"

"You know why."

"I think I do."

"You do."

The intensity of her gaze burns him.

She takes his hand. "Let's go back, I'm hungry, you hungry?"

He thinks. "Yeah, I'm hungry."

They head back.

* * *

Karl looks around the waiting room.

He wonders if doctors made patients wait in the day when the leech was king. Teeth clenched, he tries ignoring the prattle, the faces moving before his eyes. Implants can be subdued, but never muted, visuals made vague, not cut off. Once implanted, reality is never quite the same. He can't stand much more of it.

Never to be alone, never to know silence—the last few hours have been hell. He doesn't get it out soon, he'll go nuts. He hears something that makes him curious, and he opens his mind to it.

"Special!"

Newsbabe Omy Wataqiuti in form-fitting fuchsia body suit leans forward on an elbow, cleavage threatening at any moment to break like surf over the neck of her top.

What throws Karl is that her hair's a mess. She would never get through newsbabe school with a coiffure like that.

"On streets across America and the world, people are going home. People long given up for dead are showing up at doorsteps of loved ones. It's as if a war has ended and POW's are straggling back. The stories are pouring in here by the thousands. Stories of returning husbands, wives, children, parents, some missing for as long as five years. It's the strangest story I've ever seen.

"In an unrelated story, a major shakeup at Genie today has sent the multinational's stock tumbling, off an incredible thirty percent since noon, dragging other technology stocks down with it."

The way she says it, Karl is sure she's got some of it herself. Poor Omy.

"In fact so many heads are rolling this reporter hasn't been able to contact a spokesperson for comment. And to the chagrin of shareholders assembled on Plat 66 for a shareholders meeting, the entire board of directors of Genesistems rose en masse and walked out, unwilling even to discuss their policies. Visibly shaken, unwilling to speak to reporters, they boarded water taxis and roared off for the mainland. Claire Saylene is there. Claire?"

Saylene stands on the quay, hands on the rail. Karl knows the spot. Not too far from where he did his imitation of a soccer ball. The angle of the visual, from up and out, makes it impossible for the camera to be anywhere except a hovering helicopter. "That's right, Omy, Genie's stockholders are in turmoil right now amid the precipitous resignation only moments ago of two thirds of the board of directors. At the moment, the largest genetic technology giant is rudderless. This is Claire Saylene, Plat 66."

"Thank you, Claire, and now to untangle this intriguing situation for us is the indefatigable, the inimitable, the exquisite, Morgana..."

Full face shot as Morgana raises a single slender eyebrow—her trademark—and begins in a voice that could slither its way under an elevator door on its knees.

"A society can be only as great as it is willing to be mature, and maturity is what is wanting, here. Does this latest rash of turnings up mean the sky is falling?"

Trademark smile here, really more of a smirk, currently what passes for sophistication, widely imitated. "I think not. Reports are coming in now of some poor lost souls demanding their implants be removed. Others are requesting biocoms be made dysfunctional."

She laughs through a button nose, "Absurd. Obviously what is called for is to put all of this in perspective. There is no evidence this has anything to do with the net. Come on boys and girls, enough with the primitive superstitions, let's get on with our lives, shall we?"

Karl feels a hand on his wrist and he jumps, shocked back to the waiting room. Romy entwines her fingers with his, "You all right?"

Concentrating on the far wall, keeping a handle on it, on himself, just barely, as if pitching in heavy sea, concentrating on a point on the horizon to keep from being sick, he nods, "Yeah, sure."

She lays her other hand on his, "You can do this, it's almost over, you can make it."

Not daring to take his eyes off the wall, he doesn't look at her as he takes two vials out of his jeans, hands one to her.

She rolls the plastic tube in her fingers, holds it up to the light, slips it out of sight under the curious gaze of a waiting patient. "This is the one Raj picked out for me. You palmed it?"

He nods.

She sets it back in his hand, "I can't take it."

It figures. He would have been surprised if she had accepted with no argument. "Yes, you can."

"It's worth what, ten million? You can't be giving that away."

He almost laughs, "Forget the money, right now I've got too damned much of it. I'm giving back what I lost you, that's all. Now take it, have him put it in, and forget about it."

She considers, takes it back, slipping it away, not happy about it.

He hands Willy the second and he drops it into a bulky coat pocket. He gives Karl a nod a high speed vid might miss, making it clear he knows exactly what it is and what to do with it.

Romy watches him curiously, "What about you?"

A nurse carrying an extra thirty kilos comes to the door in skin tight white. "Mr. Kleiner, we're ready for you."

Romy looks at him, puzzled.

He waves, "Be there in a minute."

When the door swings shut behind her, he says, "That's my name, Kleiner." He holds up a vial of his own, sealed in blood red plastic.

"That's not Raj's."

"No, mine, really mine, buried under the front stoop for fifteen years. Guess it's time to be me again."

"But it's against the law. He won't—"

"This old bird delivered me, took out my tonsils. I went to school with his daughter."

"I still don't see—"

"Twenty years ago she got in some trouble. I got her out. He'll do it. He'll do us at the same time he takes out the implant. Now I've got to get this thing out of my head before I go nuts. Will you just do this for me?"

"You take therapy for your heart I will."

He falls back into his chair. "It's that important to you?"

"It's important."

He thinks it over, thinks what it means that she would ask, likes the way it makes him feel. He goes to the door.

"Deal."

* * *

Saturday night ritual.

Dusk, out front of the café, they sit in folding beach chairs on the gravel drive, watching the sun drop into the Pacific.

A thermal whispers up from the sea making it shirt sleeve weather.

Mary motions with a long neck bottle in at Willy who's busy mopping, "Does he ever rest?"

Romy smiles, leaning back against Karl's legs, "Rather work than sit, he's fine."

"I'm not worrying. He's my kind of guy. I just don't want to chase him off. Doesn't drink. Doesn't talk too much." Mary sips, swallows, looks at Karl, "Perfect. I guess that gene manipulation stuff works after all, huh?" She takes another pull.

Karl smiles into the dusk. He likes Mary, really likes her, wouldn't change her if she'd let him—which she wouldn't. He's lucky to have a sister like her, he knows that. Luckier that Romy and she seem to get along, sometimes so well he's a little worried they might gang up on him.

No one speaks for a while and it's all right. By now, they're comfortable just being in each other's company.

"God, will you look at that sky," Mary says. "You paint that they'd call you a damned liar."

Romy finishes her bottle, sets it down.

"Honey, you want another one, you go right on in and grab one out of the cooler. I'd get it for you but an earthquake wouldn't get me out of this chair."

Romy goes inside. Karl watches her talk to Willy. Though he knows it can't last, he thanks God for every second of what he's had with her, for what he has right now.

"You going to marry that woman?"

Shocked, he looks up. In five years, she's never put pressure on him to do anything. Not once. It's been a pact between them, a truce that allowed him to see her when he couldn't see anyone else. She's broken it.

"Oh, and don't look so PO'd. I'm just asking is all. You don't want to answer, just tell me to go right to hell. Go on."

Hiding a smile, loving this woman, his sister, his family, Karl sips his beer. Bitter, not something he likes the taste of at all—it's the ritual he likes. Puzzled, he looks over, squinting to make out her face through the gloom, "Now wait just a goddam minute, here, I remember specifically that you said—"

"I'm a woman, I can change my mind if I want to. So are you?"

It's nuts.

Any minute Villar and his compañeros or the EPA Gestappo will drop in and she's asking about marriage. "Go to hell." He says it because she expects it, because they've always talked that way, because their dad talked that way—a family tradition.

He watches as she tries to stay still, struggles, gives up with a sigh. "I have to ask because, God dammit Karl, she's the best thing ever happened to you, and I'm not sure you're smart enough to know that." She takes a pull, lets it go with a little pop as it breaks suction. "Are you?"

He gets up slowly, closes his eyes for a moment to get his balance. God knows why he drinks the stuff. "Not smart enough, huh?"

"That's what I said."

He folds his chair, tosses it into the back of his pickup with the bottle where they bounce around. He's not touching this one—isn't even going to start down the road. She doesn't know how tight things are. Why tell her? She'd just worry. She's better off not knowing.

"Oh, sure, run off mad."

He leans on the truck, the fender cold, beaded with dew, sighing, exasperated. He never could out-argue her. Against her he's a lightweight, always has been. "I'm not mad, dammit!"

"Yes you are."

Damn her. Nobody can nag like she can. "I am not."

She blows air through pursed lips, "What, I'm supposed to say I'm sorry for saying what we both know is true, that what I'm supposed to say?"

He wishes Romy would get out here. There's no way he can win this one. "No you're not."

Romy comes out carrying a bottle, stops when she sees him by the truck.

"Let's go."

On the edge of the porch she hesitates, "We're going?"

He slides behind the wheel. "Get Willy and hop in."

Mary laughs, "No you don't. He and Bink stay. He can sleep in the third bedroom. I'm getting to like this having help around, and he likes my cooking." She winks. "We had a little talk, it's a done deal."

Stunned, Karl hesitates one foot on the ground, the other on the starter switch. Jesus, he's slow. Romy thanks her for the beer, climbs in, slams the door behind her. Mary waves, calls from her chair as a cat might tease a vole it torments. "See you later, little brother."

Karl's sure she smiles—too dim to see.

"You be sure and think about that, now."

He doesn't answer, just backs out. She had to say it, to put it in words. Now how can he go on ignoring it? The truth is more than obvious. On the cape, among these people, it's the only way. He wants nothing else as much. The question is, what's the point? He's got maybe 24 hours. Not nearly long enough to worry about a future.

As they hit the road, she frowns, face lit by lemon dash light. "Think about what?"

"Nothing," he says, gunning it up the gravel. "Nothing."

* * *

That night the wind changes.

Karl can feel it in his knees, see it in the dial thermometer nailed to the porch post as it edges down. By nine it's crowding 20. Low as he's ever seen it.

Stove roaring, ticking, kettle rolling, they cuddle side by side on the couch before it.

"All the upstairs doors closed off and it's still cold enough to hang meat," he says. "Lousy dump takes forever to warm up."

"Don't call it that, it's our fault for letting the fire burn out."

Her affection for the farmhouse pleases him, though it puzzles him as much.

"Why won't you tell me?"

It's been two hours since they left the café, but he knows exactly what she's brooding about. "You want to know what she said?"

Romy says nothing.

He knows damn well that's what she wants. "She asked when I was going to marry you."

She stares at the flames.

"I think it's a swell idea. Big crowd over here is all we need when teams start dropping out of the sky. We can issue everybody a vest and flachette carbine at the door of the church."

A tear courses its way down one perfect cheek, to hang at the corner of her mouth. Too late, he shuts his mouth. Slipping an arm around her, he reaches out to wipe her cheek.

She catches his wrist hard, sets it firmly in his lap, wipes her face roughly with the back of her hand. "She said that?"

"She said it."

"She's kind."

He shrugs, "She's my sister."

She looks at him, curious, "And that means..."

"It means she's a good woman, it means I love her."

There in front of the stove, it's as if every window in the house is thrown open, so cold is the feeling he gets.

"I loved my sisters, too."

"I know."

"And I left them."

What can he say? Through her skin he feels appalling emptiness. He knows no magic words to send it away. Logic is all he has to fight it. "If you'd stayed you'd be dead, too. That's the only thing you would have changed." He reaches out to smooth her hair and she lets him. "I'm selfish. I'm glad you didn't. You want to be sorry, go ahead, just don't expect me to be."

She faces him, eyes glistening in firelight.

"You hear me?"

She opens her mouth to answer and the Satcom chirps. "Who now?"

"What?" he says, annoyed.

It's Villar bigger than life, smiling, bumpy head glistening.

Karl drags Romy to the rug, cuts off the satcom eye, whistles off the lamp. Villar's smile can only be bad. He's here, outside, got to be. Why hasn't Bink warned them? He remembers he's at Mary's.

"Karl, you there? All I'm getting is dead air."

Remington in hand, Karl's afraid to answer, afraid to give him any more than he has already. If he knows they're here they're dead already. "I'm here. Be a man, come in yourself, I'll be waiting."

Villar shakes his head, runs a hand over stubble as if he's trying to smooth out the bumps, "That's the thing about you, Karl, you always assume the worst about people. You really got to work on that, man. It's pathological, this cynicism, you know? You've got to live every day like it's your last. Es lo que hago."

"We're happy for you," Romy says.

Karl wishes he were here in the room, wishes it could be over, wishes he could end it all one way or the other in a burst of fire, of noise. "Do you have something to say? Because I'm not listening to you give me suggestions on how I should keep a bright outlook on life while you have an entry team moving up."

Villar looks hurt, "Now there you go again. I com with good news and you treat me like that," he shakes his head sadly. "That's the problem with the world today—everybody assuming the worst about everybody else. No trust, no belief in humanity."

Karl's heard enough. "Spare me, will you?"

Romy reaches for the Smith, slides to the floor. In the glow of the screen, Karl can see her eyes on him. "What good news? You fell and broke your neck?"

"¡Ay, chingao!" He laughs, "I tell you, Karl, these women of ours have tongues like razors. Sorry, no, other good news. Listen...." He drops his voice, drawing nearer the eye, as if that gave any measure of privacy. "Got a com."

"From who?"

"Forget who." He waves the question away impatiently. "From Genie, said to forget it. They won't be using anybody any more. New people in charge after the shake up. No more of this kind of thing, strictly on the level from now on. New image."

Karl lets the muzzle of the twelve rest on the rug, suddenly exhausted, still wary, "Not to seem cynical, but how do we know this is for real?"

Paolo shakes his head, motions out of range and Erin comes to sit on his lap, "Romy, you there?"

She swats on the pickup, throws herself on the couch, "Erin, my God, where are you?"

"Somewhere in Mexico, along the shore in the middle of nowhere, nothing but sand, turtles and palo verde for clicks. It's lovely, Romy, I wish you could see it. You okay?"

Karl sits, feeling excitement trill through her.

"Yes, oh, yes, I'm fine, now."

"And how is... " Erin's eyes flit to Karl, "Everything?"

Romy smiles at Karl, then says to the screen, "You knew, didn't you."

"Ah..." She sighs, hand to breast, "I'm so glad."

Karl watches, not understanding, not expecting to, recognizing the shorthand conversation of twins.

"So it's true, then, they've forgotten me?"

Villar nods, smiles, "I'm a killer, not a liar." And to Karl, "I'm afraid we may never see each other again, my friend."

Karl smiles, "I'll try and get over it."

Villar raises a hand, "Ah, there, you see how he is. One last thing."

"What's that?"

"Look outside."

Heart leaping, Karl jerks her down on the floor by him. God, he was stupid to fall for this. Any second come the flash-bangs.

Villar sighs, "There you go again, assuming the worst, I tell you, you're hopeless!"

Erin laughs, "It's a present. "

Realizing what this means, Karl turns back to the wall, "How? When?"

Ignoring the question, Villar smiles. "You're pretty lax up there."

"It's okay, Rome," Erin says, "Go look, they won't hurt you."

They?

Revolver on the floor, Romy starts for the door. Karl pulls her back. She turns to regard him with indulgent eyes. "She's my sister. You know what that means. You know what it means to have a sister."

He knows. He knows it means he has to let her go. Chambering a round, he follows, accepting. Whatever waits outside, he won't try to break her faith. Erin's the last of her family. If it's broken trust that waits, neither of them will survive long. He'll kill her himself before he lets them take her. Him he won't have to worry about. Anticipating the impact of a burst of high velocity slugs, he follows her out. What he sees he doesn't understand.

On the gravel drive, arranged in a perfect half-moon are a score of venerable bonsai, arrayed among them as many glow sticks planted in gravel like candles. Mouth agape, Romy stares. Her breath catches, and in the light of the glow he sees her eyes fill.

Erin says, "For you, Romy, for you."

"Karl!" Villar calls. "Hey, Karl."

He turns back to see a smile grow slowly on Villar's face. "What I should have done is cut off the lift and gone up the stairs, that's what I should have done. Then where would you have been, huh? Be seeing you."

With a wave, he's gone.

* * *

Karl's just back in from feeding lambs when they come.

Slipping into the house through the back, he slips into his harness, clips on the twelve.

So soon.

That's all he can think. It's over so soon. Before they really had much of a chance to get to know each other it's over. He could take her and leave. Go to live in the city. It's an option, a chance—if he wants it.

He cycles the action, slips into his jacket.

He doesn't want it.

Romy is down the stairs and beside him, "Who is it?"

"EPA, two hummers." He takes down her coat, wraps her in it, hustles her to the door, "I want you to go out right now, head on down to the highway, don't even stop to talk to them."

She resists, face suspicious, "Why, why should I go?"

There's no time for this, now. He pushes harder. She gives in to his force unexpectedly, what Willy taught her so well, and he almost loses his balance. He stops, stares at her, realizing if she doesn't want to go he can't make her. "Dammit, will you just go?"

Watching him with eyes that look a century old, she stays where she is. "I asked you what you are going to do."

"What I have to, that's all, they're not taking this place."

She comes close, slipping a hand inside his jacket, "We both know that, so don't ask me to leave." She takes the .44 out from under his arm, "Don't ever tell me to leave again, you understand me?"

He understands. She's more than he deserves. And now it's over. Like that it's gone.

Sweeping up her coat, slipping the gun into a deep pocket, she opens the door, "Let's hear what they have to say."

Outside, they stop halfway to the lead hummer, watching as four agents climb out. Karl sees three carry carbines, the fourth, has only a tablet.

"Karl Kleiner?"

Karl steps a pace to the left, opening a field of fire to all three, and putting the guy with the tablet between him and the second two if he should need cover. It'll be quick. Two seconds, is his guess. If he can get the first shots in, he's got a chance. The first one he'll take out will be the one closest to Romy. He doesn't miss she might make it through it. "That's me."

"Agent Milkerson, EPA," he says, taking in the view. "You're way out here, aren't you?"

Karl doesn't want to talk, doesn't want to get to know the man he's going to kill, doesn't want anything but to get it over with. "Yeah."

Romy keeps the revolver out of sight. "What brings you out here?"

He consults the tablet, "I need a decision."

This isn't what Karl expected. From the corner of his eye Karl sees the three agents lean relaxed on the hood of the second hummer. One is actually turned away. Where they are he can take them all out in a second. "A decision?"

Milkerson nods. "That's right. According to what I've got from D.C., you've got a choice to make. I've come out here to find out what it is."

Karl looks at Romy, sees she's as confused as he is. He debates opening his coat and finishing the discussion right now, but forces his hand away from the shotgun under his arm.

Romy steps closer, "The answer's no."

Milkerson looks confused. He laughs, "No? I'm afraid that's not on the list of options."

Romy says, "I just put it there."

Something in her tone makes Milkerson take a step back, hands out, one still holding the tablet, "Hey, hey, let's understand each other. I'm here to set up rates on the cabin or whatever it is you've got to rent to wilderness trekkers. You with the program on that?"

Karl thumbs the safety back on under his coat, "Rates?"

"That's right, I mean it's one thing to say you've got a wilderness site for rent, but people got to know how much and what you've got to offer if you want to get it in the guides, so let's see what you got."

Numb, Karl stares, "Rent?"

"Yeah, here, look for yourself. You are Kleiner, you said, right? I've got the right place?" He hands Karl the tablet.

Romy edges close and a butterfly trembling in his chest, Karl sees that's what it says.

"Auri," she says into his ear. "Before she died, she fixed it."

At the time he didn't believe her. Now he sees it must have been true.

"So, what do you say, you show me the cabin and I get on down to that cafe for lunch, huh?"

"Yeah," Karl manages to say, leading him down to it, Romy with him.

When Milkerson sees it, he stops, "Christ on a crutch, there are pigs in there, it's a mess."

"It's a pigsty," Romy says.

"Well, I don't know," Milkerson says, "that's a bit too rustic even for nature freaks."

"We'll clean it," Romy says, "It'll be ready."

Doubtful, he scratches his head, "Whatever you say." He leads the way back up the path to the hummer, opens the door, scrapes mud off his shoes on the inside of the door. "I don't know who you know, but they must have one hell of a lot of juice is all I can say. Passing up the whole damned cape, leaving you all right where you sit when for two hundred miles around you..." He shakes his head. "Nobody. You must live right, huh?"

Karl says, "Maybe so."

Milkerson's eyes narrow, he raises a finger to Romy, "Know who you remind me of?"

Romy smiles, makes a face, "Everybody says that. Sorry, to disappoint you."

Karl says a silent prayer of thanks he cut her hair.

Milkerson marvels, "It's incredible."

Bored, Romy laughs, "So they say."

A final narrow look and he slams the door behind him, "See you, now."

They watch them go.

"Well," she says, guiding him back up the hill, "it looks like we have some cleaning to do."

* * *

Rattling down the road to town in the pickup, Karl drops a tablet in Romy's lap.

"What's this?"

"Just some coms for Mary to send."

"I can see that, but to whom?"

"To all my old girlfriends. Go ahead and look."

She scrolls through one by one, reading the names aloud.

"Who's this?"

"Raj's little helper, remember?"

She smiles, "Ah, I remember, cute little thing."

"Cut it out."

"What's in the file?"

"An account number."

"Let me guess, a bill each, am I right?"

He downshifts as they churn their way down the grade. "You are."

"Lynette, poor thing, won't have to sling hash any more." At the next one she frowns. "Gladys Guttenick?"

"The woman at the thrift store."

She gasps, "She turned us in!"

He shrugs, "She warned us, too."

"So, she gets a billion and my shoes, too? No fair. What about this one?"

"Tate's daughter, PI found her for me."

"Eli and Clio, ah, so you remembered them. How about your neighbor, the one with the broken arm?"

Karl laughs. "Rock? What's he want money for? It'd just ruin him."

He sees mischief in her eyes, "And how much are you keeping?"

"What he took from me."

"What about the rest?"

He pulls up in front of the café, jerks the brake on from under the dash. "I'll think of something."

They go in. Mary slaps them on some sausage. Karl looks around for something to do and comes up empty. He notices Mel working over a tray, busing tables and stands, transfixed. "Jesus, what happened, Mel see the light?"

"As a matter of fact," Mary says, "he did."

From the sink, Willy looks over his shoulder, and Karl understands.

Turning links, Mary tilts her head, eyes narrow, "Read something in the paper about that nice old man came up to check on you five years ago. Was wondering if you knew anything about it."

Conscious of Romy's eyes on him, he shrugs.

With wet hands, she grabbed a tablet, propped it against some mugs. "Here it is: 'Financial markets reeled today with news of the creation of the Magnus Tate Endowment. With its funding source thus far remaining anonymous, the endowment dwarfs the MacArthur Foundation by sheer magnitude of principle. Named for a minor functionary in the Justice Department recently deceased in a murder suicide, the Tate endowment is to have as its sole purpose the elimination of implant and Biocom technology.'" She turns suspicious eyes on Karl as he hauls Romy to the door.

"You wouldn't have anything to do with that, now would you little brother?"

"Be right back, want to show Romy the cove."

"Hey, your links..."

"Keep them warm."

"You didn't answer my question."

The door clangs shut behind them and Karl waves to her through the glass as they go.

At the door she calls after them. "Thought that was you. Mind the sneaker waves now."

* * *

Live oak swaying overhead, Karl follows Romy down a path winding to the sea.

Unable to resist, he glances up, searching the limbs overhead and is reassured to find them empty, lichen hanging in long tresses, undisturbed.

"It's the place in UR," she says, hesitating.

He takes her hand, urging her on, "No, it's not the same at all."

"How do you know this place?" she says, voice raised against sea and wind as they pick their way down steps worn deep in sandstone.

"Came here as a kid. Carved these steps with a hatchet."

"You and Mary?"

He never brought anyone here. It was where he came when at his lowest, his most humiliated. His place of refuge. "Just me."

She stops ahead of him so that he nearly runs her over, nuzzling her face against his neck. "No girls, then, I suppose?"

"Only one," he says, passing by her glare.

Close on his tracks, she follows, "Who? Who did you bring?"

He smiles into the wind, elated by mischief. "What's it matter who?"

At the bottom, a small cove opens before them, barely a hundred paces wide, a private outlook on the sea. Wind peppers them with every surge of surf. Polished pebbles grate and slide under their feet as they move closer to where sea claws land.

"I want to know, tell me."

He loves this place. More than any other place on the earth, it's where he belongs, where he has to be. Without it there would be no reason to eat, sleep, rise. Stupid, he suspects to feel that way about one particular speck of land on an endless coast—or about one particular woman.

He stops, turns, yells over the roar, "What do you want to know?"

She presses herself against him, skin of his jacket in her fists, "What was she to you?"

He can see the jealousy in her eyes, hatred, too. Oh, yes, she's a woman all right. It's mean to go on, but the kick he gets teasing won't let him quit, "A friend, closest I've ever had, a lover, all I've ever needed."

Her face falls. When she turns away, he catches her arm. For a second he's afraid she'll throw him but she doesn't. She lets herself be caught and held, keeping sea-green eyes on breakers as they roll in, thundering on rocks only paces away.

Why is he being so cruel? Why can't he stop?

A gust of wind slaps them with cold spray and she doesn't even flinch. Though salt must sting her eyes, she keeps them on the sea. He wipes water from his eyes with the back of a hand, blows a droplet off the end of his nose.

"It must be nice to have a friend that close," she says.

Ashamed, he wraps her in his arms, watches her face, trying to do what he hasn't tried to do for twenty years. Trying to do what he's afraid to, what he's promised himself he never will: he sends.

A long moment she stands, face to the horizon. At last, slowly, her eyes move to his face. Shaking with cold, she laughs, eyes brimming, "You jerk."

What he asks her then she gets as soon as he forms the question. Her arms snake around him under his jacket, and deep into his marrow.

Wind rocking them, she says nothing.

Her hold on him is her answer.

* * *

Bright overcast morning two years hence.

Romy scrubs dishes at the sink. Eggs, dried hard, scalding water, her mug of tea—all part of the routine—one she loves. Out the window, she watches Karl follow the rototiller. Overhead valves droning, he breaks ground for spring seed.

Reaching for her mug, she finds it empty, a few peppermint leaves awash at the bottom. Setting the kettle on to boil, she is suddenly conscious of quiet. In a breath she panics—Aria!

Running for the door, icy hand at the nape of her neck, she stops, breathing again, halfway out the screen.

Aria, barefoot, in diaper and shirt barely reaching her navel, teeters, face all rapt concentration. Balancing on curled toes, fists clutched to her chest, she trails Karl, leaving small prints in freshly turned earth.

Sensing Romy behind her, she turns and, at once, loses her balance, falling forward to kiss dirt. Up she comes with blackened lips. Unconcerned, even delighted, she sees Romy and at once, her face crumbles.

With a startlingly keen sense of déjà vu, Romy goes to her, falls to her knees in pillowy earth. Sweeping her up, she presses Aria to her heart, laughter that is more than laughter tightening her throat.

Turning the tiller, Karl sees them, kills it, lets it fall forward, silent. "Exploring is she?"

"Oh, yeah," Romy says, jostling her on her hip, "Aria fell, didn't she?"

Karl drops beside them, wrapping them both in dust-blackened arms. Together they laugh as Aria, secure between them, reveling in the heat of the love-crush, does her best to justify their concern with wailing and tears.

On their knees they rock, Romy rooted—to man, to child, to earth.

And, at this moment, eyes raised to overcast sky, Romy knows.

The dream—finally she knows how it ends.

THE END

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