

THE DRAGONS OF SPRINGPLACE

THE PLATEAU WAS AN island of glass, green and warm-- a piece of eternal summer surrounded by the Great Ice. Its jungle was home to many strange creatures, including the famous dragons. But what brought learned people over the Ice were the bizarre, oftentimes lovely statues. What did they mean? Why were they built? And who were the vanished, wondrous masters who must have fashioned them? These were questions over which any good scholar could strip off his or her clothes, then wrestle!

The plateau's most famous statue was its largest -- a vast hunk of smooth pink glass depicting a powerful man battling an ill-defined, many-headed monster. A pair of dragons were etched into the man's bulging forearms. His face was twisted with exertion and titanic pain. His pose was heroic; every scholar, novice, and simple-minded workman was equally certain of the man's heroism. Yet no two observers could agree as to what he was fighting, or if, as some suspected, the man was using his great hands to strangle a host of opponents.

An apocryphal story concerned that dragon-man statue.

Not long after the plateau was discovered, it was said, a young novice saw an unexpected glow in the night. He took it to be another campfire, and naturally, he walked toward the light, assuming that a second party had come across the glacier. Yet instead of scholars and novices, he found only a tiny woman kneeling before the glass hero.

"She wasn't any taller than this," he reported to his companions. His flattened hand reached barely halfway up his calf. Wasn't it said that before the Great Ice, people were smaller than children? "And she spoke to me," he claimed, pressing everyone's patience. "She told me that I was magnificent -- no, really! -- and that she was my friend, and she was happy to see that we had made this plateau into a place of honor. And then with a flash of light, she vanished."

No one believed the young man, of course.

The others challenged him to wrestling matches, but those contests proved unsatisfactory -- he fought like a man who believed his own words -- and the scholars decided to return to the dragon-man and see for themselves.

Tracks smaller than any child's lay scattered before the statue, but no tiny girls were lurking about.

A garland of strange flowers had been hung on the hero's neck, yet not even the wisest scholar knew that the flowers were alien, plucked lovingly from plants on dozens of strange, farflung worlds.

On the dragon-man's throat, melted into the pink glass, was a miniature handprint. The skeptics asked how a waif, or anyone else, could have climbed that high, and more importantly, how she could have left that mark. And worse still, here was evidence that someone had broken the greatest taboo, defacing one of the plateau's statues -- an abomination that left the scholars outraged -- and of course they grabbed the novice, preparing to give him a furious, righteous beating.

But before justice could be done, the statue turned its great head, gazing down at everyone with fire-filled eyes, and a glorious booming voice from across two hundred millennia roared at its trembling audience:

"Listen to me! This is my story!"

Daniel was five when he saw his first dragon.

He didn't know where they were going. It was after Xmas, and his father wanted to take the new car for a drive, and the boy rode with him. Daniel would always remember how the city lay under a fresh Xmas

snow, bright and clean, and how the city gradually grew trees until there was nothing but trees, and the forest dissolved suddenly into an empty plain, and as they drove north there was less snow and somehow the air looked warmer. Then he saw Springplace on the horizon, saw it for the first time, and Dad was laughing, saying it didn't look so special. He said it looked like a fucking office building on steroids, and he gave the boy a pop on the shoulder, then another, then said, "Shit, we'll take a peek anyhow. What do you think?"

Daniel said nothing. The plateau was huge, its smooth glass walls bright in any light, the summit flat and covered with a green-black jungle. He knew very little about Springplace. People had built it; they called themselves Artists. The Artists also built the dragons that lived in that jungle -- he knew about dragons -- and the plateau was hot year round, and very dangerous, and Daniel was thrilled. Which was dangerous, too. Dad liked to change his plans, particularly if the boy was too eager. Which was why Daniel didn't smile or say anything, watching the snow vanish and the glass walls grow taller and brighter, and when the old man was distracted, he would dip his head, watching hard for monsters.

They left the highway and passed through a tall electragel fence. The plain was flat and brown and dead. Smiling holo projections danced on the car's hood, welcoming them to Springplace. Then came the warnings: The Luddite field would begin in another two kilometers. People with artificial hearts, spines, and other vital organs should turn back immediately. Computers and other standard equipment wouldn't operate inside the field. Unshielded engines risked permanent failure. Human DNA and intellectual processes were reasonably safe, but precautionary doses of antioxidants were available at the agency headquarters. Without exception, visitors were to be accompanied by an agency employee, and any attempt to trespass on the plateau would lead to a mandatory sentence of not less than three years.

The headquarters were larger than some towns, but the dormitories and laboratories were abandoned, the roads between almost empty of traffic. Shielded tour buses left on the hour. Dad bought tickets with e-cash that came with his new car. A warm damp wind was blowing off Springplace, and it felt pleasant but dusty. Two men sat in the back of the bus, holding hands. Dad went back and spoke to them, and they said something, and Dad said something else, almost whispering. Then the men stood and left, walking past Daniel, their faces empty and their eyes getting wet.

"Come on, boy," said Dad. "I cleaned things out for us!"

Tourists climbed aboard. Since it was Xmas break, there were plenty of kids with parents, and almost everyone looked into the back before taking the first empty seat. Dad made fun of the kids, particularly the youngest ones. They were Savants, always exceptional at some sweet skill. A few of them were big. Physical Savants, probably. The pretty ones who couldn't stop chattering were Social Savants. The quiet ones with the big eyes were the Intellectuals, which was most of them. But none were worth a good brown shit, Dad promised. He said so until Daniel smiled, feeling better about himself, and he said it loudly enough to be heard everywhere, and sometimes people glanced back at them, but not often and never for long.

The bus had a driver, a man, and their guide was a woman. She arrived late, and as soon as she stepped aboard, one of the big-eyed Savants said, "Ma'am! Why is the ground so dead down here?"

"Springplace needs the water, my dear." Her voice was made loud by hidden speakers, but loud in a soft, close way. "The facility borrows from two rivers and the aquifer," she explained, "and a network of fine tubes lets it absorb whatever snow and rain falls nearby."

Daniel listened to every word.

Their guide was tall and mostly young and sort of pretty. She was wearing bright clothes, a nametag

riding on her left tit, and her face was painted up like a whore's.

The driver had his hands on the steering wheel, which was strange to see. And the bus's engine sounded angry, roaring and shivering and spitting dirty fumes out the back.

With her sort-of loud voice, their guide welcomed them. She couldn't stop smiling, telling them how big "the work" was, and why it was humankind's greatest achievement. When they passed a tall glass marker, she mentioned, "We've entered the Luddite field." Then she was comparing Springplace to pyramids and great walls and other small wonders, and everyone stopped listening, her words tiny next to the simple sight of the plateau.

Springplace began in disaster. Evil men destroyed a nearby reactor, and a sarcophagus of concrete and glass was thrown up around the ruins. But leaks formed, and no one was safe until a wondrous new glass was invented. Poured on site, the glass wouldn't age or ever leak. A glass sarcophagus swallowed the porous one, and to pay its debts, the facility became the world's repository -- old reactor cores and dismantled weapons encased for the ages; each new sarcophagus thicker and taller; the earth's crust eventually bowing under the weight of so much glass and dirty plutonium; and from all that genius and hard work, the modern Springplace was born.

Tourists could see only the newest, outermost sarcophagus.

A humanmade hill stood near the south end, a service road snaking its way up the barren slope. Their bus attacked the grade, and as they climbed, their guide finally got tired of talking, begging for questions.

Dad raised his hand.

She pointed to a closer hand. The big-eyed girl was six, maybe. "Are you by any chance an Artist, ma'am?"

The woman laughed, sort of. "No, I'm much too young to be in their noble ranks."

A few adults thought the question was funny.

"We call them Artists," said their guide, "but do you know why? Why is Springplace considered an artistic masterpiece?"

The girl showed everyone her big eyes, then said, "Those fish."

"Which fish?"

"Coelacanth fish." She had a know-it-all voice and a smirky smile. "There's only one real coelacanth. But the Artists made eleven new species, big ones and little ones, and they took them to museums, in big tanks, showing them off like famous paintings --"

"Exactly. Thank you." The painted face nodded. "Tailoring was new, and the coelacanths were part of a touring exhibit. The best geneticists had crafted them. Like the King James Bible and the first Citizen Kane, they're still considered classics in the field."

Nobody spoke. Then an adult asked, "How many sarcowhatnots are there?"

"Twenty-seven." Their guide leaned back as the bus struggled with the grade. "But only the inner twenty-three sarcophagi have wastes. Hot springs and geysers release the pent-up heat. Which, by the way, is where the name 'Springplace' comes from."

Dad was waving both hands.

A little boy went next. "Will we get to see dragons, ma'am?"

"I'm sorry. No." The answer was quick. A lot of people probably asked the question. "The plateau is huge, and we see only a sliver of its outermost ring."

"Hey, miss," Dad called out. "My arms are getting tired here!"

She hesitated, then said, "Yes, sir?"

A careful pause. Dad smiled and waited for everyone to look at him.

Then with a smooth voice, he said, "You know, I worked for the Artists."

Doubt stiffened every face.

"Honest, folks," he said, laughing off their disbelief. "Hey, someone had to put that nuclear crap in the ground. Am I right, miss?"

Their guide had to nod, saying, "Thousands helped."

"I drove diesel rigs." He was very charming, very certain. "They were shielded, and the Luddite field still wasn't at full strength. Each man did one run each day, then took a big shot of vitamins and whatnot. Every night. In the butt."

The story was a total surprise to Daniel, but he knew better than to look surprised. He just stared at his father, unable to tell what, if anything, was the truth.

Their guide was impressed, sort of. She managed to smile, saying, "Then you should know this hill --"

"And this lousy damned road, too!" He gave a bright long cackle, then told everyone, "The hill was built in a rush. The UN found secret bombs in China, and the plutonium guts had to be put somewhere safe." Everyone was watching Dad, and he was happy. "We drove up the hill, then crossed on a narrow bridge. Put up fast, and only one truck at a time."

The guide was walking along the aisle, hands grabbing at the seats.

"The jungle was short," Dad claimed. "And sometimes we'd see baby dragons. Not much bigger than me."

"Do you remember your unit number, sir?"

He gave it, then named names. "Recognize them, do you?"

Their guide took a deep breath, then told the others, "It's all true. Some very special volunteers made those last runs."

"Is that what I was? A special volunteer?" Dad giggled. "And I thought I was a kid doing five-to-ten for burglary."

It was part confession, part lie. Dad had gone to prison, but for things bigger than taking someone's property.

Yet the people believed him. It showed in their faces, in the way they relaxed and sat easier. The big,

dangerous-looking man had admitted what he was, and it wasn't too awful.

"I drove trucks," Dad told them, "and I paid off my debts to society faster. And, miss, I'd like to think I did some real good, too."

Their guide said, "You did," with her loud-soft voice.

People were smiling back at the two of them.

"A lot of good," she kept saying. And she meant it, stepping up close, the name on her tit suddenly legible.

Jaen. Daniel read it slowly, with a five year old's clumsy care.

"Thank you," she sang, winking at a man more dangerous than any truck full of plutonium. "For helping make all of us sleep better, thank you."

A GLASS-PAVED PARKING LOT covered the hill's windy crest. Jaen lost her praising voice long enough to tell people to stay together and obey every warning, then with a practiced flourish, she opened the door and set them free.

The weak winter sun was at their backs, and the wind blew straight at them, carrying the heat away from a tremendous furnace. Springplace rose up like a great temple, too vast to seem real. Their simple dirt hill wasn't as tall as the plateau. The bridge that Dad may or may not have driven across would have had a steep pitch. Nothing remained of it but tangled girders moored in concrete, a bright red barricade warning the curious to stay back.

Nobody visited Springplace anymore. Except in the most incredible circumstances, Jaen conceded.

The glass wall was seven hundred meters tall, milk-colored and slick, and perched on top, between blocks of scrap glass, were a few brilliantly green ginkgo trees.

Jaen asked everyone to listen, then she spoke only to Dad, talking about the artistry before them. "What if civilization fails?" she asked, her voice full of practiced importance. "Society collapses and dies, and all knowledge is lost. Then in a little while, or a very long while, ignorant souls stumble upon Springplace. How can we keep them from digging up the hazards in the glass?" She paused. "That was the Artists' mission. How can the innocent be kept from harming themselves and their world?"

Young Savants had ready answers: The glass wall was a barrier. And the barren ground below was another barrier. And there was the Luddite field, generated by the plateau itself, disrupting electrical currents and causing refined metals to corrode at a horrendous rate. The Industrial Age couldn't linger here for long, which was the intent.

Yet there was much more. An old man mentioned the statues, and Jaen nodded, telling her audience, "The day's great sculptors all contributed. Psychological barriers, we call them. In fact, one of the works is visible from here. You see? At first glance, it looks like any glass boulder, but it's actually the image of a human head in excruciating pain."

Daniel squinted, seeing nothing but a lump of bright glass.

Then a four-year-old girl, eyes bigger than big, said what everyone already knew. "And there are the dragons, too. They help protect Springplace."

"Absolutely." Jaen smiled, confessing, "I have a special fondness for the biological barriers. Being a

geneticist, by training and by outlook."

Whatever that meant, thought Daniel.

"Genetic tailors have existed for more than a generation," she continued. "But Springplace remains unique. A self-contained, humanmade ecosystem, isolated by climate and other factors. Until we terraform Mars, no one will have the room or resources that were brought to play here."

Jaen named species, stressing their dangers. Every snake was venomous, as were spiders and scorpions and the other vermin. Every plant was inedible or outright toxic to humans. The namesake springs were mineral-laden and undrinkable. The giant central lake was warmer than bath water, saltier than the Atlantic, and filled with foul-tasting lungfish and coelacanths, plus crocodiles bigger than any bus. And finally, the super-heated jungle was full of giants, including the famous dragons --

"Komodo lizards," the Savant interrupted, proud of her knowledge. "They've been tailored to be large and fast, and they're as smart as cats, too. That's what I've read."

Some Savants could read at two years old. Daniel was jealous.

Jaen pretended to listen, then smiled and asked, "Do you know why the Artists used reptiles?"

"They're scary," the girl reported.

"That's part of it. But what else?"

Silence. Daniel realized that the girl hadn't read that answer.

"Reptiles are ectotherms, dear. Cold-blooded." Jaen arched her eyebrows, explaining, "Cold-blooded means a slow metabolism. Slow means that hundreds of full-grown dragons can live on Springplace. They're wondrous predators and efficient scavengers, and they will live up there for the next half-million years, guarding our poisons."

Savants and ordinary people contemplated those words.

"I adore the dragons," Jaen confessed. "They're large. Fearless. Powerful and swift. And when there's something they want, they are relentless."

There was a long pause.

Then an elbow dug into Daniel, and Dad whispered, "What do you think? Sounds a lot like you and me."

Maybe the dragon was always there.

It lay sprawled out on a huge slab of scrap glass, looking dark and very thin and small with the distance, basking happily in the sun. Nobody had noticed it, just as nobody noticed Daniel climbing over the red barricade, walking out on the old glass girder, then sitting with his feet dangling in the air. Squinting, he watched the dragon, waiting for movement. But it was still as stone, and spellbinding, and Daniel looked back over his shoulder, ready to alert his father.

Dad was busy charming Jaen.

Saying nothing, Daniel looked back just as the dragon lifted its head, its mouth opening and its tail swinging over the edge, making it obvious.

The tourists noticed. A few at first, then everyone.

Daniel heard their happy chatter. Then someone said, "Careful," and he looked back again, Jaen stepping over the barricade, not quite smiling, looking down to make certain where she placed her feet.

Watching the dragon was more fun than watching people.

When her shadow fell over Daniel, he asked, "How big is it?" "How big is what?"

Jaen hadn't seen the dragon. Good.

Kneeling, she said, "I'm curious. How old are you?"

Daniel didn't look at her. "Five years, five months."

"Really?" she said.

Then she said, "You must be an exceptional boy."

Every child born today was exceptional. Always.

"You're quite an athlete, I understand." She waited a moment, then added, "I can picture you in the Olympics."

He had a Physical's skills, and other genetics, too.

"You're a quiet boy," she observed. "Not like your father at all."

She wanted to be his friend. Dad's women always tried to be his friend, but usually only after Dad had fucked them once or twice.

"He says that your mother died."

Before he could say it was true, that a pissed-off trick kicked her to death, Jaen told him, "I'm sorry for your loss."

The dragon moved again, sliding out of sight. Daniel watched the long head vanish, then the body, and the tail rose up in the air like a flag pole, then suddenly wasn't there.

"You know, Danny. You shouldn't sit out here."

His name was Daniel. Daniel Costas.

"Let's go find your father. Shall we?"

She touched his shoulder, and he let loose a long wet hiss, grabbing her hand and shoving it into his mouth, then biting down on the meat between her thumb and forefinger, calmly watching the pain reach her face, twisting it into the most amazing shapes.

After that day, awake or asleep, Daniel would dream of Springplace.

He searched the Net for programs about the glass plateau, poring over old videos and photographs, plus images taken by satellites. He couldn't read well, but he attacked every book on the subject, particularly everything written about the fabled dragons. He learned about dragon habits and habitats, and he even struggled with the incomprehensible genetic charts. Anything useful was worth stealing, and he hid his treasures from his father, unsure what the old man would do with them during one of his black moods.

On his ninth birthday, Daniel marched into a body parlor and ordered a matching pair of tattooed dragons. No one questioned his age. The boy was ninety kilos of quick-twitch muscle and heavy bone. His curly black hair was already thinning and a soft beard clung to his bulldog chin and jaw. The tattoos were his own design, every detail authentic. Sitting stoically, never moving, he watched the newborn dragons spread over his huge forearms, scaly black skin lustrous, eyes like night, and flame-shaped yellow tongues tasting the air for delicious anything.

Daniel paid with stolen e-cash and walked home, wondering what his father would say, and if they would fight, and if he would allow the old man to beat on him again.

But as it happened, there was no fight.

One of his dad's ambitious deals had gone sour, and some disappointed partners had visited while Daniel was at the body parlor. Using fishhooks and wire, they had lashed the old man to the floor, then carved him up the middle, extracting guts and information.

Daniel stood in the drying blood, staring at the body for a long while, his face empty and very simple and very calm.

He never wept.

But the tiny brown eyes looked very much like a nine-year-old's, gazing out at a world suddenly made vast and unknown.

FOR TWO YEARS, Daniel bounced between foster families.

His longest placement was with a body builder and his doe-like wife. The wife seduced Daniel, promised to spend eternity with him, then, with calculated vengeance, confessed what she had done and how much she had enjoyed herself. Her husband struck her twice before Daniel interceded, yanking the man's arm out of its socket and shattering his jaw. Yet no one regarded him as the hero. The bloodied couple blamed the boy for their troubles, and his lover even attacked him with a knife. Daniel broke her cheek with a slap, then took to the street, and he lived on his own for several months before the police finally captured him.

Another family agreed to take the feral boy, if only temporarily. It was simple coincidence that their name also was Costas. A soft couple wracked by rich guilt, they gave Daniel an enormous room and spelled out their laws, then rattled on about misfortune and how adversity can always be overcome. As if they'd ever beat anything worse than bad breath. But the boy remained quiet, appreciating his sweet luck. These people were fat with money and possessions, and he intended to wait, hiding his time until he could harvest some of both, knowing they wouldn't miss either.

The couple had one son. Like Daniel, he was eleven, his face boyish, smooth and handsome. And he was tall for any age, maybe not as thick as Daniel but endowed with a graceful, easy strength.

"Call me Mink," he said, offering his hand. And when it wasn't taken, Mink simply pointed at the tattoos, saying, "Pretty well done."

"I know," Daniel told him.

The kid laughed and said, "Come on. Let me show you something."

The world's longest hall ended with a cavernous playroom. A dragon lay at one end of the room, half-grown but still enormous. Daniel stopped in the doorway, astonished. Mink giggled and gave him a sudden shove, then kept giggling as the dragon lifted its head, tasting the air, a slow first step followed by

faster steps, soulless black eyes tracking their quarry.

Daniel jumped for the door, colliding with Mink. It was like striking stone. Then Mink said, "Coward," and shoved him into the open. "Dinner, girl. Come get dinner!"

The dragon trapped Daniel between a VR chamber and a weight machine.

It hissed and squealed, then shut its jaws on a flailing arm. The long white teeth were soft rubber. The dragon was a fancy toy, foam laid over a robotic skeleton. Watching Daniel pound on its snout for a minute, Mink said, "Back, girl," and the toy returned to its corner, lying still as death.

Daniel felt like smacking Mink, but he didn't want to lose two fights in the same day.

"I love those lizards," Mink confessed. "I love to stand on Observation Hill and watch for them."

"Ever see one?"

"Twice," he said, with pride.

"I've been there once, and I saw a dragon." Daniel grinned. "Bigger than your toy, too."

"You're lying," said Mink.

"You're wrong."

"I saw your files. You always lie." The face wore a perpetual smile. "Your dad hired an unlicensed lab to tailor you. He made you ... what's the word? He made you a sociopath."

Daniel didn't answer him. His father used to claim that no matter what changed in the world, no matter how smart or good people got to be, there always was room for a mean son-of-a-bitch. Looking at Mink's angelic face, he changed the subject. "What about you? What did your father pay for?"

"Me? I'm just an ordinary Physical." The humility couldn't hide the cockiness. Suddenly the smile seemed very slick. "Your dad was murdered, wasn't he?"

"And I found him."

"I've never known anyone whose father was murdered."

"Jealous?"

He shook his head, then said, "I bet your dad deserved to die."

For the next week, Daniel would be obedient, and quiet, and glancingly polite, and after some coaxing by Mink, the Costas family would agree to keep him indefinitely. But he wouldn't stay because of their wealth or because Mink shared his fascination with Springplace. It was that one harsh comment that proved to the boy that he belonged there.

"I bet your dad deserved to die."

And without hesitation or doubt, Daniel said, "Yeah, he did." He shrugged his shoulders, then added, "He was a mean-fuck. They're supposed to die messy. Always."

It was Mink's idea to climb Springplace.

At least it seemed like Mink's idea. The boys were fourteen, nearly full grown and tired of hunting digital

dragons in the VR chambers.

Wouldn't it be lovely to kill a real dragon? Daniel would pose the question, then describe cutting off its head and bringing it home as a trophy. They could pry out the white teeth, and what would girls at school do for just one tooth? Daniel knew how much his foster brother liked the girls. Then after mentioning the girls, Daniel would shake his head, smile sadly, and admit, "It's just too bad we can't make that trip."

Mink didn't believe in the "can't" word. After enough times, he got sick of it, shouting at the ceiling, "Who says we can't?"

"Climbing the plateau is illegal," Daniel replied.

"Unless we're not discovered."

"And worse," he pointed out, "it's impossible. Only people who work for Springplace can get up there. And even if we did it, we'd die. In about two seconds, probably."

Mink couldn't let challenges stand. His expensive meat was laced with more than just the best synthetic genes. He also carried DNA pulled from great athletes. And even better, he had talents that no tailor can plan. Mink had never lost any contest of physical skills or will. Long odds just made him work harder, his life one great string of sweet, uninterrupted successes.

Mink gave a snort and half-smacked Daniel on the shoulder, saying, "We'll find a way up. Soon."

"You really think we can?"

"Easily," said Mink. But he wasn't a fool, and after some careful reflection, he amended himself. "Not easily. But eventually. And it'll be even sweeter when we get there."

Buses ran up to Observation Hill on the quarter hour.

Each bus and its passengers were examined by sensors run by paranoid AIs -- the world's best when they were installed. But that was three years ago, and the software hadn't been updated in eight months. The day's last bus held four boys inside its tiny luggage compartment, and the AIs had been selectively blinded until the stowaways were safe inside the Luddite field. The road began to rise, and the boys cracked the hatch. When the bus slowed on the tightest turn, they grabbed their gear and rolled free, hitting the pavement, then bare dirt, tumbling like gymnasts into a deep, wind-worn gully.

The two other boys were Physicals. Big amiable kids, they believed instinctively in sweat, team play, and obeying the quarterback. As a team, everyone lay out of sight until the bus came back again, heading home. Then the October sun set, pulling darkness and the stars out of hiding. And Mink gave a signal, the four of them rising, working their way downhill and across the powdery flat ground, reaching Springplace as two moons rose -- the genuine moon and its reflected twin caught swimming within the towering glass.

Each boy carried a portion of a rocket. Normal rockets wouldn't fly beside the plateau, the field scrambling any computer or gyro. But Mink had hired a Savant, and this rocket was her invention. Tall and narrow, with precise little wings set at odd angles, it held a thousand separate computers sleeping inside shielded chambers, each with its own electronic eye.

Daniel stood watch while the others assembled the rocket.

With a calm little whoosh, it lifted off. Vanished. The first computer was cooked, triggering the next to come on line. Another microsecond, and it was replaced by the third. And the fourth. And the rocket began to fall, its final computer aiming its reinforced nose at a good strong gingko.

At the predicted moment, a black cord dropped at their feet.

Mink grabbed hold with special gloves, then told his team, "Climb like madmen. There's nothing to lose!"

It was relentless hand-over-hand work, and it was scary fun, and it took almost two hours to scale the wall, everyone collapsing into a communal heap afterwards -- easy food for any dragon sauntering past.

But there was no dragon, and young muscles recovered swiftly. The boys rose and huddled up, congratulating themselves before heading for the interior. Each carried a gun. Mink had his father's Italian shotgun, every slug laboriously hollowed out and filled with a neurotoxin. His two buddies had hunting rifles, minus laser sights and computer safeties. But the prize was Daniel's savage weapon -- twin clips and explosive bullets, enough ammunition on board to slaughter a brigade. He had taken the monstrosity from a neighbor's home, and since just holding the weapon was a federal offense, he didn't expect anyone to bitch.

The four boys moved into the wind, into the heat. Trees became tall and full. The air turned tropical, humid and close, the final traces of October dispelled.

Mink carried his shotgun in his right hand, toy-fashion. When they found the old truck road -- a narrow, claustrophobic tunnel walled with cycads and towering ginkos--he began pressing the pace, outrunning the others, eventually vanishing into the secret land.

Daniel found himself shouting at his brother, anger mixed with strange, unpalatable fears. Yet Mink was fine, waiting beside a pile of rubble --a dead truck, judging by its outline. The Luddite field and the humidity had obliterated its body and heavy engine. Impressed, Mink wondered aloud, "What's the field do to us?"

Touching the metal grit, Daniel said, "You know, my father probably drove this thing."

He had never mentioned the possibility before. The response was pure Mink. A hand clasped him by the shoulder, squeezed hard, then a grave voice warned him, "Save the lies for later."

Was it a lie? Daniel didn't know, and he didn't argue. What mattered was killing a dragon, then taking the trophy teeth, and he could tell any story he wanted afterwards, and every flavor of Savant would have no choice but to respect him for what he had done.

The boys kept moving, but more slowly. A gentle slope led down toward the central lake. Suddenly over the buzz of insects came a sound, a not-distant, not-loud roar spreading through the canopy.

On its heels, silence.

Even the insects held their voices, Daniel realized.

Drenched in sweat, they drank their first canteens dry, took baths in useless bug spray, then began their second canteens, their water stocks looking rather meager.

The jungle was alive. Biting, stinging nothings came from everywhere. Beetles as big as fists marched underfoot. Tortoises bigger than rooms lay asleep, safe in their knobby shells. On the old road, a giant, achingly slow iguana stood propped against a burly tree, on its hind legs, steadily consuming fan-shaped leaves and tender limbs. The iguana would dwarf an elephant, and the Artists had endowed its ancestors with beautiful spines and intricate horns. Yet despite its costume, the creature was defenseless. One of Mink's friends aimed at an indifferent eye, laughed and said, "Boom."

"Leave it alone," Mink warned. "We came for a fair fight."

A statue of milky glass appeared before them. A warning for the ages, it showed a man in the throes of agony. Poisoned, near death, his flesh and face were melting, his ruined hands raised high, warning the boys to flee and save themselves.

Beyond the statue was a hot spring, water bubbling vigorously in a glass-lined basin. The air stank of mineral salts and sulfurous bacteria; the boys imagined the metallic taste of leaked plutonium. The spring's overflow slid across a long open slope, the jungle opening up around them, and off in the distance they could see the central lake, slick and silvery in the ageless moonlight.

Eventually the water's stink gave way to something more awful. Mink hesitated. Spoke.

"Look there," he whispered.

A second iguana lay in the stream, obviously dead. The boys crept closer, then Mink lifted his free hand and stopped again. Daniel noticed urgency in his stance and heard it in his voice. Then Mink turned slowly, and with a strange slow gentleness, he announced, "We have our dragon."

The monster shuffled out of the jungle. It was low to the ground and looked small until Daniel gauged the distance. A full-grown female or a small male, its head was longer than Daniel was tall, the body and stiff tail making for a creature fifteen meters long, and if well fed, sixteen thousand kilograms, or more.

The wind had fallen off, and the dragon was alert, following their scent through the vivid stinks of water and rot. Long clawed feet splashed and the belly rose and a deep kiss escaped from it, sounding like steam, and then all at once it was running, charging straight for them.

Explosions rang out.

The boys with rifles were firing at the head, aiming for a brain buried deep inside dense bone.

The dragon kept running, then suddenly, without fuss or apparent pain, it collapsed. And the two hunters laughed and slapped each other on the back, then began to run, even when Mink was shouting at them, "Wait! Not yet!"

A second dragon appeared, climbing from behind the dead iguana. It was five meters longer than the first dragon, and it was protecting its dinner. The running boys were too busy celebrating to notice the danger, and their rifles were empty, and they were exactly between the monster and their friends, neither Mink or Daniel having a clear line of fire.

The dragon accelerated, half-galloping, its wagging head allowing one giant eye, then the other, to track its prey.

With detached fascination, Daniel watched the boys die. They finally fled, but it was too late. They kept together, which was stupid, and one boy slipped in the greasy water, falling hard. Then his friend offered a hand, dooming himself. They were running again, and they were dead, and Mink screamed and fired his shotgun for the sake of noise. And the dragon took the nearer boy, shaking him into two unequal pieces, then dropping him only to grab the second boy from behind, repeating the slaughter with deft, amoral precision.

Mink fired a second blast. And a third. His gun sounded distant, ineffectual. Then he turned to Daniel, and with a crazy lost expression on his face, screamed, "Open up on it! Now!"

Daniel saw Mink, and heard him.

But a sudden enormous terror had taken hold of him.

Daniel began to run. It wasn't a decision. He felt like a passenger inside his own body. It took all of his remaining will just to look over his shoulder, just once, and see Mink -- a swifter runner on any day -- charging the dragon, fearless genes or his trust in his brother compelling him to fire until his gun was empty, fighting on with a desperate, incandescent rage to save, of all things, the dead.

SENSORS FAR OUT on the plain felt the concussion of gunshots.

Agency guards were waiting when Daniel reached the plain. He was dehydrated and bruised, his weapon lost in the jungle. The arrest occurred without incident. No attempt was made to rescue the other boys or recover their bodies, even though Mink belonged to an influential family. It was a Springplace policy: The moral codes of the human world, including charity and forgiveness, ended where the high glass began.

The lone survivor seemed distant and icily calm, even when he was sentenced to three years in the state's bootcamp academy.

Daniel Costas served his time without serious incident.

But his barrack mates complained of the boy's periodic nightmares, arms thrown toward the ceiling and a desperate wail coming out of his belly, then lingering in the air like a toxic fog.

Staff psychiatrists found Daniel to be a fascinating subject. When they asked about his dreams, the boy claimed to remember none of them. When they asked about any aspect of his waking life, he spun elaborate and unlikely, yet utterly convincing lies, and no tool at their disposal could separate the truth from his fictions.

"Mink!" he would shout while dreaming. "Run, Mink!"

The other boys guessed what had happened on Springplace, but only one boy risked teasing Daniel about his cowardly flight from a stupid lizard.

That boy was beaten and left crippled, and a hundred others had watched the beating, and not one witness ever came forward.

In later years, there was a lucrative market for dragons and their parts.

Elderly Chinese paid dearly for sexual organs. Nigerian businessmen fashioned charms out of the scales and wore them in secret places. Latin cultures preferred the claws and teeth, adorning themselves with predatory pretties. But the people of the North, too civilized for superstition, simply ate the meat -- lean and exceedingly bitter, but laced with rare antioxidants, plus the chemical harbingers of strength and true courage.

Most product was cultured from tissue samples, usually in one of the world's ten million unregistered labs. But some collectors demanded authenticity, and at most there were a handful of reliable sources.

Daniel worked for years as an enforcer in order to raise the necessary cash, then another eighteen months passed while he made arrangements with one supplier, only to have him arrested days before the final transaction. Another six months passed before he could find a new entrepreneur, and after electronic negotiations and a fat down payment, Daniel's luck seemed to have changed.

The anonymous supplier wanted to meet near the city's north edge, in an anonymous park.

Daniel arrived early.

When he was a boy, this land was forest. Now it was manicured ground surrounded by cylindrical

apartment buildings, a mid-city hustle taking him by surprise.

Only in his late twenties, testosterone had already stolen his hair, and surgery had radically altered his face. His blood signatures and left thumb belonged to an Antarctic rare-earth miner, in case someone demanded cell samples. But Daniel's build hadn't changed, nor had the dragon tattoos, and his eyes regarded the world with the same tireless suspicion, a hundred people enjoying the park and not one of them worth trusting.

Children outnumbered adults at least five to one.

Daniel found himself staring at the youngsters. New genes came on the market every day, and the unborn were being radically tailored. He knew that. But he had been living under the icecap, in a realm without children. He hadn't realized that his species was changing itself so much, and in so many directions at once.

A voice, close and musical, said, "Pretty."

Daniel wheeled, finding a little girl smiling, staring up at him. How old? Judging by her attitude and the wise eyes, he guessed nine or ten. Giving a little growl, he said, "Nothing here's pretty. Go away."

"Oh, sir, but yes. Pretty, yes." She had long hands that didn't quite touch him. "I was referring, sir, to your lovely skin paintings."

The tiny body carried a tall, tall head, and like most of the young children, she wore a protective helmet, thick padding decorated with colorful abstract shapes. A lot of money and hope went into her fancy brain, and her folks obviously didn't want her losing fifty IQ points when she tripped over her own tiny, quiet feet.

"Your dragons are very well done," she assured him.

Another growl. "I know."

She stepped in front of him, utterly fearless. "You seem, sir, a little startled. By us, I think."

"Get away."

"Are you twenty-eight years old?"

"No," he lied. Immediately, without flinching.

The girl had a narrow and oddly pretty face with enormous almond-shaped eyes. When Daniel was a boy, he believed in flying saucers piloted by aliens wearing that face. "Then perhaps," she said brightly, "you are twenty-nine, perhaps."

"Why should you care?"

"This is my hobby," she replied.

"Guessing ages?"

"Not precisely. I like to identify famous genes." A long finger pointed. "Your baldness and the dimple in your left ear, and that peculiar knuckle hair ... they are indicators of the PU99/585 gene. A powerful strength enhancer."

"I'm thirty-one," he assured.

"You're mistaken," she assured. "The crenulations in your nails are a clear sign of KU112/31, which was used for just a few months. It helps with muscle repair, but not very well."

"Listen," Daniel began, ready to threaten.

"Did you, sir, know? This is not your thumb!"

In exasperation, he asked, "What's your age?"

"In a week," she replied, "I will be five and a half."

Shock seeped out of his face. In frustration, Daniel confessed, "I didn't know you little shits were so smart."

"Oh, sir, but I'm not smart."

He glared at her.

"Oh, no! My little sister is going to be much smarter than me. She has nothing but the new triple-G series of neural enhancers."

"Yeah? How old is she?"

With pride and sibling jealousy, the girl reported, "She will be born in three weeks."

Daniel didn't speak for a long while.

"You have other genes," the girl observed. "Artificial, I mean. But frankly, I don't recognize them. Which is interesting."

A woman was strolling into the park, alone, carrying a small box in both hands, navigating with too much caution between the running, screeching geniuses. And with a genuine smile, Daniel told his new friend,

"I have to go now. I've got business."

"With that lady over there?"

"No," he lied, by reflex. Then with his best intimidating voice, he added, "And leave us alone, stupid girl."

She gave a giggle, then jumped. "Okay, dragon man!" she sang. "If that's what you want!"

The woman was new to the business, and her heart still wasn't in it. Wary eyes tried not to look at Daniel, and she held the precious box on her lap, hands clinging to the plastic handle. Sealed and locked, the box appeared boobytrapped. With a nervous flinch, she could incinerate its contents, leaving nothing but ash for prosecutors to use as fertilizer.

"First," Daniel told the woman, "I need to look inside that box. Before you get another dollar."

She was sitting on a bench, gray-haired, gray-fleshed, the face still recognizable and nearly sick with worry. "No," she whispered, "I don't think that's a good idea."

He sat beside her, the park bench twisting to accommodate his enormous frame. Then Daniel slowly and gently placed a hand on her nearest hand, prying it off the handle and holding it toward the sun.

"What's wrong?" she sputtered.

"No scar." He released the hand, adding, "I would have thought my teeth would still show."

Her face turned to wax, pale and slick.

"Open the box, Jaen."

A punched code and her thumbprints deactivated the self-destruct mechanism. Inside the box, nestled in a bed of moldy ginkgo leaves, was a long white leathery egg.

"Good," he muttered.

"I want my money," she said, her voice tight. Frightened.

"What would happen, Jaen? An anonymous complaint to the Springplace agency, and a lifelong employee is suddenly under suspicion --"

"No," she gasped.

"Today," he said, "you're having a half-price sale."

She wasn't meant for this work. Staring at Daniel, she whispered, "It's nearly impossible to get a viable egg. I earned the money!"

"Lady," he said, "you owe me."

"Owe you? Why?"

"If I hadn't bit you, you would have screwed my father. Which would have been a nightmare, believe me." He laughed and closed the box, leaving it unlocked. "Half-price. Or I'll pay full. But if I do, you have to let me chew on your hand again. Huh? Which'll it be?"

The dragon was born yellow and black, and capable, and with mice or slow fingers, it was vicious.

An abandoned salt mine became the nursery. Xenon lamps ran on timers, the heat flowed from the surrounding salt, and plastic foliage stood around pools of mineralized water, lending shade. As the dragon grew, Daniel moved barricades to give it more room, and he found larger prey. Rabbits and small pigs worked well. Speed and intelligence were no match for instinct and patience. Daniel used cameras to keep tabs on the dragon, and he recorded its attacks, playing and replaying them at all speeds, studying the angles of the head and how the slashing teeth tore at the living meat.

Small animals died immediately. But the largest boars would escape into the fake jungle, their wounds laced with a wide array of patient, murderous bacteria.

Daniel never spoke to the dragon, or pretended it was sentient, nor did he make the mistake of naming it.

He lived in the mine's old machine shop, the surroundings spartan, and appropriate. Twice each week, he went to the surface for supplies and diversions. With his remaining savings, he could afford clean hotel rooms and whores. They were his only luxuries. For the most part, the whores were his age. Younger girls didn't work his haunts, though he assumed they were somewhere, giving perfect pleasure to the brilliant babies.

Daniel's favorite whore was a Social Savant. She wasn't just lovely, she was synchronized to his moods, sensing his desires before he knew them, and with a Social's mystical skill, improving his mood with the right word or touch or the respectful silence.

He would pay to keep her for the entire night, and because he wasn't young anymore, he sometimes slept.

Sometimes the old dreams came.

Suddenly he would scream and leap to his feet, hands raised high.

The Social asked about the dream. Just once. He told her that he didn't remember it and it was nothing, and besides, he was working on the cure. Then he warned her to never mention it again.

One early morning, Daniel found the Social in his belongings. There was no e-cash or jewelry to steal, but that didn't matter. He took her lovely face, another man's thumb pressed against the cheekbone, then with chilling precision, he described what he was prepared to do.

She crumbled. Begged. Explained.

She had a sponsor. A Physical, powerful and violent. The Physical had decided that Daniel was rich and too interested in her time. She was under orders. Come home with something of value, she was told, and what choice did she have?

Daniel conceded that there was a dilemma. Then he smiled and gave her a story to tell, and before releasing her, Daniel lent the story authenticity, carefully and thoroughly bruising her entire face.

He waited for a while in the hotel room, then rose and dressed, leaving by the likeliest route. In the pre-dawn streets, the Physical was easy to see -- a younger man, smaller than Daniel but certainly stronger. In the last few years, Daniel had butted against those exact genetics, and he respected them, if not the idiots they carried.

In the darkness, Daniel rounded a corner and sprinted, then hid in the first alcove.

The Physical had no chance. One moment, he was a tough little pig marching in the forest, and the next brought misery, blood, and a pitiful thirst for a quick, merciful death.

A robot patrol found the battered man and took him to the nearest clinic on life support.

Three days later, the Social was praising her hero, saying it would be a long time before the bastard could walk again, and Daniel was amazing, and she would gladly work for him instead, giving him her body for free ...

He shrugged and half-grimaced. "No, thanks."

But she kept staring at his face, enthralled. With a quiet, knowing voice, she told him, "I think you are a good person."

What was that?

"You heard me," the Social chimed.

Daniel threw her on the hotel floor. Then, for emphasis, he kicked her, just once and almost softly, shattering three ribs and a vertebra.

The dragon reached five meters and nearly five hundred kilos.

Daniel found more difficult prey: stray dogs, guard dogs, two cougars, and a full-grown grizzly stolen from a private collector. The bear was the last meal, and for the next few weeks, the dragon feasted and

slept; its wounds healed before it was hungry again, before it began to prowl the confines of the salt cavern, searching for its next challenger.

In those last weeks, the dream came more often. Every night, then several times in a night.

Daniel wasn't surprised. The dream was a living thing, a monster in its own right, and it was being threatened. Lashing out, the dream intended to rob Daniel of his courage, his fortitude. Which he wouldn't let happen, he vowed. He waited, keeping his focus until the dragon was crazy with hunger, then stripped down and entered its lair with no weapon but a knife, the serrated blade as long as his forearm, glittering in the bleak glow of the xenon lamps.

The dragon caught his flavor, and without stealth or the smallest caution, began to hunt him.

Daniel let loose an enormous, piercing scream.

The dragon accelerated, lifting its head in the standard bluff.

The moment was syrupy-slow. Daniel began to run at the dragon, watching its nearest foot step and plant, step and plant, and he leapt and took a hard swipe at the long scaly neck, a sweet resistance slowing the blade.

A roar; a purging fountain of blood.

Then the tail found Daniel, delivering a mammoth blow and dropping him, shattering his free arm, and the jaws spread over him as the body shoved him flush against the smooth white floor. But he kept slashing, kicking hard and slipping under the dragon, and with a desperate focus, he placed the blade's tip against a likely spot, driving it upward with his good arm, probing and probing until the cold heart was punctured and the dragon was slumping, dying with a peaceful smoothness.

Daniel felt free. Weightless. Supercharged.

He managed to crawl out from under the carcass and reach the elevator that carried him to the surface. Clothed in two kinds of blood, he drove himself to the nearest clinic, then collapsed, a dozen robot nurses struggling to save his life, then his arm.

The euphoria passed.

Exhaustion pulled him under, and he found himself on the dream plateau once again.

Mink was waiting for him there, still firing his father's shotgun, still pleading for Daniel's help. The dragon was missing, replaced with a borderless night. But if anything, the terror was worse than before. Mink still charged the blackness, thinking that his brother was with him. And in the dream, Daniel fled again. And in life, he kicked and wailed, soaking his clean sheets with urine while the nurses pumped him full of chemical wonderlands that did nothing but make the dream last all night.

JAEN SAW HIM COMING.

She was meeting with a client -- a tiny Chinese man, older than old, probably desperate for a hard-on. When she spotted Daniel, she rose and began to run, dropping the precious box in her panic.

Even battered and with his arm in a therapy cast, Daniel caught her easily. Both the client and box had vanished. No matter. "Listen to me," he told Jaen. "Are you listening?"

"Go away," she whispered.

Children stood around them, quiet and curious faces trying to decipher the bizarre scene.

"Please," she mouthed, her face stricken. Pitiful.

"Listen," Daniel repeated. Then he leaned close, speaking into her ear.

"You don't like this work. What you need is a partner, which is me --"

"No."

"Pay attention." With his good hand, he took her by the neck, gently, and assured her, "You have one choice now. One. Which is more choice than I need to give you."

"A partnership," she whispered, as an experiment.

"Fifty-fifty. And you're going to teach me. And whenever I want, I'm free to buy out your fifty share."

"Teach you what?"

"All your secrets. What else?"

With the help of his hand, Jaen nodded.

Daniel gave her a few more instructions, then sent her home. Then with a certain majestic finality, he sat on the bench, smiling to himself and watching the park return to its normal vibrance.

"Mr. Dragon," said a familiar voice.

He hadn't heard her approach. Turning, Daniel said, "Stupid Little Girl." She was six and a half years old now. Taller, but still tiny. Surely smarter, but he realized that he had no way to measure the skills that lay behind those vast, seemingly wise eyes.

"I'm glad, sir, that you got my message."

He had asked the girl to call a certain number when she saw the old woman in the park. A hundred e-dollars seemed like too much, but Daniel was in a charitable mood, placing the chip into her delicate long hand. "I'm glad you decided to help."

"And might again, sir. If you need."

For an instant, against his nature, Daniel considered telling her, "You'd be smart to stay away from me."

But instead he grinned, asking both of them, "Why not?"

The children in the park knew him as the Dragon,

Sometimes he spoke to them, weaving spells of half-truths and utter lies. The Dragon told them that he lived on Springplace, inside a dragon's abandoned burrow, and that he came down to the world only to sell his humble wares. He ate nothing but raw turtle meat and fat kicking beetles, and in place of water, he drank berry juice and bat urine. He wasn't even pure human, he claimed. Reptile genes made him grow like a dragon, becoming larger and stronger as the years passed, and he promised he would someday be five meters tall, and the ground would tremble as he walked.

Sometimes, particularly after a lucrative sale, Daniel allowed an audience to gather around his park bench, then with his flat, always serious voice, he would tell them true stories about his brother dragons.

The babies lived in the trees because their larger siblings would eat them without blinking. Adolescent dragons, too large to climb, dug temporary burrows and hunted in the heat of the day. The giants slept in deep caves dug over the decades, and they rose at dusk to hunt and to screw. Daniel told quiet, riveting stories about the adult monsters --the chilling look of their eyes and their easy anger and how if the agency didn't catch him someday, he would certainly die in a dragon's gaping jaws, swallowed whole and digested at its leisure.

The children thought the Dragon was scary and fun, but most important, he was utterly unlike everyone else in their world.

The Dragon changed Stupid Little Girl to Little, which evolved into Lilt. Lilt became his assistant and chief lookout, and she was in charge of recruiting help from among her friends. With the years, she also became paymaster for their burgeoning staff, handing out money and what the children liked best -- the anonymous, untraceable gifts of dragon scales and the enormous shearing teeth.

Daniel never inquired about the girl's family. He didn't want to know or appear to care. Yet he had the impression that Lilt's sister -- smarter by plenty -- was her parents' favorite, which was why she had the time and freedom to help the Dragon.

One good day, he mentioned the old road on top of the plateau, and how he had just finished walking it from end to end. Then, on a whim, he told Lilt to research the road and the men who used it. He expected nothing, which was why he offered a fat reward; but when he returned to the park, Lilt handed him a thick collection of prison and agency records, including a photograph of a man with Daniel's hard little eyes. It was his father leaning against the fender of a massive truck, rust already gnawing at the metal, a wall of young ginkgos standing behind him. The story had been true after all. Who would have guessed? Daniel paid in full, added a bonus, and with a dose of true feeling, thanked Lilt.

That next year, Daniel got careless and let a young dragon chew on him. Despite antibiotics, his wounds became infected, and in a feverish daze, he staggered into the park, threw an elderly couple out of his bench, then fell like a big tree.

He woke in his own bed, under clean sheets. Of course he didn't live in a dragon's burrow, instead keeping a very ordinary apartment in one of the nearby towers. His home was supposed to be a secret. Yet Lilt came into the bedroom smiling, happy to see him feeling stronger, and she told how she had found him on the bench and hired two Physicals to carry him, and she'd paid them out of petty cash, then hired a med-student whom she met in one of her advanced classes, and he wouldn't tell anyone, either. Then she shut her big eyes and held them closed, asking, "Did I, sir, do anything wrong?"

How did she know where he lived?

Astonished, she opened her eyes. "I've always known," she replied, hurt that the Dragon would underestimate her. "I never, sir, tell what I know. But it's in my head nonetheless."

She loved him. It had taken Daniel a long time to notice her feelings, but when he was done being disgusted, he began to culture that love. He offered winks and smiles, and sometimes he allowed her the honor of sitting next to him on the bench. Sometimes she was mothering; sometimes she was a little girl trying to be alluring. Daniel let her play her games. And in turn, she ignored the professional young beauties whom he hired, the best of them tailored to offer men wondrous distractions worth any price.

Eventually Lilt found a genuine boyfriend; Daniel was furious.

He had his reasons, most revolving around his own security. But when she sat on the park bench, talking about the boy, a genuine rage began to build. He didn't understand the feeling or even give the problem

the simplest reflection. Instead, he staked out the boy's home and waited, and when his rival appeared, walking back from Lilt's after dark, Daniel squatted in the shadows, ready to ambush him. He fully intended to shatter his body and leave him for dead. But at the last instant, he hesitated, and the boy was past him and safely home, never aware of his incredible fortune.

Eventually, the boyfriend was gone. Another boy replaced him, and after him, another. Lilt might be a genius, Daniel realized, but she also was an adolescent girl who barely knew her own mind -- an insight he found useful, and oddly troubling.

Lilt remained his lieutenant and a constant flirt, happy for his attentions and the occasional half-compliment. Looking at her, Daniel would secretly marvel at the knotted ways that his life had organized itself. Who could have guessed that he would make a living through Springplace? Or that every week or two, he would sit with his gang of babies in the public park, entertaining them with stories? And how could he have known that the constant in his life would be a tiny, severely mutated girl-creature who would sit on the bench beside him, legs kicking as she discussed where they would put his profits and if they should put up a jamming field in the park, and what pretty boys she liked today, and why he should be careful tomorrow when he returned to the plateau, going home again to see his brothers ...

"I want to walk on Springplace," said the prospective client.

"Fat fucking chance."

"And I want to slay a dragon, too."

"Now, that," said Daniel, "I can help you with. Maybe."

The prospective client stood before him, laughing gently, a bright smile beneath dark, impenetrable eyes. Then with a careful pride, the young man said, "I can pay. Don't doubt it. What would be a reasonable fee for a guided tour of the plateau?"

"I'm not a guide," said Daniel.

"I know exactly what you are, Mr. Costas." A pause. "Ten years of selling stolen biological materials. Two arrests, no convictions. As it happens, your competitors weren't as fortunate. That's why you enjoy your current monopoly in this very specific industry." Another pause. "Yet the sad truth, Mr. Costas, is that your client base has shriveled. Fashions change faster than genes these days, and the new generations don't share the traditional awe for Springplace."

Daniel shrugged, saying nothing.

It was early spring, damp and chill, but that didn't keep several dozen children from enjoying their park. The youngest were incandescent wonders, the metabolisms of hummingbirds coupled with tiny swift minds. Lilt and the other teenagers looked ancient by comparison, sitting together on a nearby bench, their skulls nestled inside helmets adorned with painted iguanas and cobalt blue coelacanths. There were also a trio of twenty-plus-year-old men: Physicals as large as Daniel, brought by the prospective client and standing at attention, indifferent to the children's screams and songs, but watching their rubber balls and carbon gliders with a sleek, professional suspicion.

"You're awfully young," Daniel observed. "Why do you care about the big lizards?"

"I hunt. An authentic Springplace dragon, acquired in authentic surroundings, would make a stellar addition to my collection."

"What's your name?"

"You need to know your clients' names?"

Daniel stared at the boyish face, his tall skull covered with Brazilian armor and a necklace of dragon claws. "In this case, absolutely."

"Portion. Portion Kalleen."

The name felt genuine, and vaguely familiar.

"If we can agree on a fee, you get a third now. And a third more when we reach Springplace. 'We' includes my assistants to help carry home the skull, of course." Portion showed Daniel his best smile, then added, "The last payment comes with a successfully slain dragon."

Daniel glanced at Lilt. With a look and a whisper, the girl urged him toward caution.

He quietly and firmly named an impossible figure, one that would allow him to retire.

Immediately, Portion said, "Agreed."

Then Daniel put up another wall, adding, "I'll need that down payment before we can start planning --"

"It's being done." Amusement and a worrisome light showed in the eyes. "I know about your orbital accounts, Mr. Costas."

"You know almost everything."

"If that were the case," said the amiable voice, "why would I have use for you?"

THERE WERE FLAWS in the great plateau. Mammoth projects are destined to suffer the occasional flaw, materials and workmanship falling short of lofty goals. Springplace was built as a series of concentric rings, most flaws buried deeply; and the agency, to its credit, had done a superlative job of patching the exterior. But years ago, Jaen reopened an old patch, knowing that the glass behind it held a labyrinth of bubbles, and if someone climbed with determination, making the correct turns, she would eventually reach the green summit.

The hunting party stood in the reopened patch, and when one of Portion's bodyguards began to hang back, Daniel had simultaneous thoughts: "I'm getting careless in my middle-age," and "This trip hasn't shit to do with hunting dragons."

Daniel faced the man, asking, "What do you want?"

Save for a contemptuous glance, there was no answer.

Daniel turned to his employer, and with his hardest voice asked, "Who else is coming?"

"A few more associates. Is that a difficulty?"

Each man carried a bioluminescent lamp, the feeble glow of bacteria focused into blue-green beams. Daniel shone his beam into Portion's face, telling him, "You're going to explain this to me. What are you really chasing?"

Like a little boy who enjoyed his games, Portion said, "Guess."

Something biological? But every endemic species had been smuggled off the plateau. Daniel had removed hundreds of them. There was nothing left that was unique, except the crap buried in the glass . . .

. and with an amused scorn, he laughed and said, "What would you want with plutonium?"

Again, in delight:

"Guess."

Daniel couldn't. "You can't pry it out by hand, and machines don't work in the field. And even if they did, you can't just walk out of here with nuclear bombs strapped on your backs."

Portion blinked, then said, "I know what you are, Mr. Costas. As long as you're paid, and as long as it's enough money, you won't care what I'm doing."

Daniel almost spoke, almost agreed.

Then he saw something move on the empty plain. Rising up out of the barren ground came a platoon of armed men, each wearing a ghost suit and a bulky pack. And between two of the men was a familiar figure. Tiny. Probably exhausted. And no doubt terrified.

He was very careful with his voice, asking "What's she doing here?"

"What do you call her? Lilt?" Portion shook his head. "She's been investigating me, which I don't like. Bringing her seemed like the responsible precaution."

Lilt had done research, but what had she learned? Almost nothing, the truth told. Portion was a Savant's Savant. He had hobbies beyond number, including blood sports. But there was no criminal past. And, of course, he was wealthy. The sole heir to a famous tailor's fortune, he was likely the richest twenty-two-year-old in history.

"Bringing the girl," said Daniel. "Why go to the trouble?"

The young man smiled, then admitted, "It's possible that I might not know you as well as I thought." Then he glanced at his bodyguards, saying, "Mr. Costas looks weary. Carry his weapons for him, please."

Daniel avoided Lilt: her piercing gaze. The reaching hand. Then the sound of her voice, ragged and slow, answering a question that he hadn't asked, telling him, "I am, sir, pretty much fine."

Even in his thoughts, she wasn't welcome.

Obedying Portion, Daniel led the little army to the summit. Then at Portion's insistence, he changed into self-cooling overalls, sprayed himself with odor-masks, and crept out into the first light of morning, unarmed, making sure that the dragons and agency guards were elsewhere.

Standing alone, gazing up at a tall old gingko, Daniel considered running. But without water or a weapon, his chances were poor. Which was the only reason not to escape, he told himself.

Portion opened an agency map, his destination already marked.

"The last of the plutonium went here," he explained. "What's the best route?"

Daniel drew a curved line with his fingernail.

"Not straight across?"

"We want open ground. Clear skies mean plenty of heat, and the dragons will be keeping to the shade."

"Stupid, primitive lizards," said Portion scornfully.

Daniel remained silent.

"Lead away. I want to be there by this evening."

The group followed a cycad-studded ridge. Below them, the forest was broken with hot sulfurous ponds and the occasional geyser. Claw-winged hoatzins circled above something dead. Daniel paused to watch them and to let the others catch up, then he turned to look for Lilt, unaware that he was doing it until too late. The girl was just managing to keep up. A tiny body, but tough enough. Tougher than he would have guessed, and he felt something, and he stood there wrestling with whatever he was feeling. It made no fucking sense. Lilt wasn't useful to him anymore. And when he made his break, he wouldn't look over his shoulder again ...

He wouldn't make that mistake a second time ...

The day passed without major trouble. A few young dragons lashed out from the shadows. Some men were bit, but not deeply. The dragons were killed swiftly with silent guns, the wounds were treated with clotting agents and preprogrammed antibodies, and just in case they smelled of blood, the injured were ordered to walk behind the others, keeping a safe distance.

Portion's goal was a large clearing, smooth glass unmarred by vegetation or soil. A statue -- one of the vaunted psychological barriers -- stood at the far end of the clearing. Abstract and intentionally ugly, its twisted angles and gibbous rings were intended to warn the future of the dangers underfoot. But Portion thought the statue was beautiful. While his men began unloading their packs, he strode over to the artwork, fondling the malevolent red-black glass as Daniel was brought to him. Then with genuine curiosity, he asked, "Have you ever been here?"

"No," Daniel lied.

"Never?"

"It's a big plateau."

"Isn't it?"

The old truck road lay behind a stand of dawn redwoods. Daniel didn't look in its direction. Instead, he turned just as Lilt collapsed on the glass, thoroughly spent. His face remained calm and indifferent. Perhaps even a little scornful. Gesturing at the very peculiar contents being pulled from the nearest pack, he risked the obvious question:

"What do your toys do?"

Portion was amused, and proud. He picked up what looked like a piece of ornate jewelry, allowing his guide to hold it. Dense and cold to the touch, the object was at least as unsettling as the statue behind them.

"Its housing contains a hot superconductor," said Portion. "Carefully shaped, fully charged. That's what protects the machine's guts from the Luddite field."

"What do the guts do?"

"Ingest plutonium, of course." He took back his treasure, then with great care said, "What this 'toy' is, in fact, is an unfueled nuclear weapon. It can burrow through almost any substrate. It absorbs fissionable

materials, swelling a thousand fold. And once fueled, it waits. Patiently. A coded seismic shockwave would cause it to detonate. If I wish."

Daniel glanced at the girl, for an instant.

"And now you know everything about me, Mr. Costas."

"No." He shook his head, adding "I'm just a stupid lizard."

Portion appreciated the humor. He was grinning his face very young and utterly simple. "What happens if an individual gains control of these plutonium stocks? The proverbial finger is on the light-switch, and there are no limits to what he can demand."

Daniel stood motionless, saying nothing.

Prodded by silence, Portion added, "A few hundred atomic weapons will be buried in the glass, protected by Springplace's own defenses ... and if they're detonated, at once, and all of the surrounding glass and poisons are vaporized ..."

Under his breath, with feeling, Daniel said, "The dragons, too."

"Oh, it won't happen. For the most part, people act in their own self-interest."

Daniel waited for a few moments, then made a pistol with his hand.

He lifted his hand, pointing at Lilt. "She could be a problem for you."

"Do you think so?" Portion asked doubtfully.

"She may have warned her parents, or the other children."

"There's a cover story explaining her absence, and besides, those people are being watched." Portion shook his head. "I know how to take precautions, too, Mr. Costas."

But Daniel pretended not to hear him. "Let me ask her some questions. If the kids back home are worried, they'll contact the agency."

Portion hesitated, then said, "I don't believe you."

With a dry, angry voice, Daniel said, "Listen. I'll keep helping. I will.

But you have to give me a bonus."

"What sort of bonus?"

"Life. Let me out alive."

"That's always been my plan, sir."

The young man was lying, but he did a pretty job of it.

"The thing is," Daniel lied, "if Lilt managed to warn anyone, then my kids will contact the agency. They're supposed to invent any crazy story that'll put a thousand armed soldiers up here, hunting for me." He waited for an instant, then added, "My standing orders: Prison time is a lot sweeter than dead time."

"The girl is a little burden," Portion allowed.

"I'll ask her questions," Daniel said. "Then, I'll unburden us."

"Would you do that for me?"

He nodded.

"Right now," Portion urged.

"But not here." Daniel scratched his bald scalp with his huge hands. Then with an expert's omniscient authority, he announced, "It's evening, and that's when the big dragons come hunting. A whiff of blood is all it takes to put them in a mood."

In delight, the monster said, "So I have heard."

"I'm thirsty," said Lilt. Twice.

Daniel was leading the murderous group into the jungle, paralleling the old road. Two bodyguards hung behind him, Portion between them, and a third walked point, helping to block Daniel's escape route. The girl was directly behind Daniel, close enough to touch. "I'm thirsty," she said, and he pretended not to hear her. Pointing in a likely direction, he said that the underbrush there looked easier. But Portion was suspicious, or at least unwilling to leave him with every decision. "No," he said, "keep going. Just a little farther, I should think."

Again, louder this time, Lilt said, "I'm thirsty."

And Daniel said, "Too fucking bad."

A pair of canteens rode his belt. When she grabbed a canteen and pulled, he spun and slapped the hand away. And for the first time that day, he found himself staring at her face.

It was worse than he could have guessed. Lilt was bruised beneath the left eye, and she looked very angry and tired but not scared. She looked like a kid on a long uncomfortable hike. Her padded helmet with its iguanas and coelacanths was ridiculous. He felt sick and very nearly weak when he looked at the helmet and at her purpled face, and he responded by taking his left hand and smacking her once, in a clean crisp motion, driving her into thorny brush, a matching bruise blossoming and Daniel standing over her, telling, "Don't touch my goddamn water."

Everyone was impressed, including Daniel.

It was Portion who helped her up, playing the role of the understanding ally. "Don't look so mortified," he advised the girl, draping a friendly arm over her shoulder. "You have no right to feel surprised."

She was stunned, and terrified.

Daniel had won a measure of latitude. He said, "Up there would work.

Up in that bowl, out of the wind."

Portion agreed.

The light was fading. Shadows had spread and merged, obscuring whatever lay inside the bowl.

It had been years since Daniel last walked here.

He couldn't be sure what was waiting in the shadows. He barely knew what he was planning. One

moment, Daniel was walking, the lead bodyguard almost reaching the bowl's earthen cusp, and the next moment he reached back and grabbed the girl, shaking her like a doll as he screamed, "Did you warn anyone?"

"Warn who?"

"Does the agency know? Did you tell them?"

"No," she promised. "I would never -- !"

He slapped Lilt's helmet, then tossed her to the ground. Then she was crying, which just about ruined him. He watched her curl up and weep, hating that sound. Break her neck, and he would be done with her. Why not? He grabbed the girl by that frail thread of meat and spine, and he lifted her, something in his face utterly convincing, wild hot eyes blazing as Lilt dangled before him, tears coming fast. And that was when Daniel did a half turn, spying a sudden smooth motion from inside the bowl.

From the shadows came a tongue, yellow-as-fire and impossibly long, rising higher than a man, tasting the night's first air.

Daniel took Lilt's ear into his mouth, biting down, hard enough to make her wince.

Everyone watched him, spellbound.

Into the bruised ear, Daniel whispered, "The old road. Run."

"What'd you say?" asked Portion.

Then Daniel grabbed the girl's tiny bottom with his right hand, and he wheeled suddenly, using his arm and legs, and with a solid grunt, he threw Lilt, a long smooth arc carrying her out of sight.

The bodyguards seemed curious. Was this part of the interrogation?

Then the dragon exploded from its burrow, roaring, a thunderous crimson voice splitting the air, the world trembling.

I'm dead, thought Daniel.

Help me, Mink ... !

Then he leaped, grabbing Portion by his armored helmet, and with thick hard fingers, Daniel stabbed upwards, piercing the toy jaw and the sinuses, then the tissue-thin skull, reaching deep inside the cavernous skull.

Here's where the real dragons lived.

The first tourists of the day spotted Lilt.

Exhausted and badly dehydrated, Lilt stood beside the Miserable Man statue, waving her arms and shouting out a warning. Some of the tourists waved back. Wind-thinned voices said, "Hello, darling!" They couldn't hear her. Perhaps if she climbed higher, she thought with a fatigued logic; but halfway up the anguished glass face, she lost her grip, and it was as though she fell for hours, ending up inside a warm black nowhere.

Agency officials raised a narrow prefabricated bridge, medics found Lilt in the statue's mouth, and the ranking officer grudgingly sent armed patrols into the interior, on the unlikely chance that her incredible

story was even partly true.

The unfueled bombs and a few terrified young men were found. But the only trace of Daniel and Portion were bone fragments in a dragon's wastes, both of their DNA identified by forensic experts.

The girl was subsequently arrested and given a quick trial.

As the main accomplice in a string of felonies, she was threatened with a fifty-year sentence. But as her heroic role in a much greater crime became apparent, the public forgave Lilt. She was given a ten-year sentence as a compromise, and it was reduced to time served, and for a little while, without her consent, the bright and very fortunate young woman was subject to an international fame.

In the aftermath, the agency strengthened its Luddite field, plugged every minuscule gap in the plateau, then trucked away the entire Observation Hill; the public forbidden to pass within ten kilometers of the nuclear repository. And in a final, excessively paranoid gesture, Lilt was placed under permanent observation, her movements and transactions studied in depth, investigators looking for any sign of Daniel's missing wealth or any warning that the girl, despite outward appearances, was returning to her old ways.

Lilt continued living quietly in her home city.

She eventually married and gave birth to twins, and on occasion, for private reasons, she would visit the little park, sitting on one of its new benches, watching her children play the mysterious, indecipherable games popular among their generation.

It was twenty years after Daniel's death when a team of Savants found the means to easily and cheaply marry the human mind to immortal AI machinery, freeing memory and intellect from the limits of genetics and the vagaries of death.

The Age of DNA was finished.

Within six months, the public were being transformed by the new process.

Within two years, the world's sentient organisms had come to the obvious conclusion: The Earth was too small and too dull to hold their interest any longer.

The sole exceptions were a community of Luddite-inspired ultra-Physicals. Funded by a secret sponsor, they were able to win the right and public approval to remain behind, serving as caretakers for the home world. Everyone else packed and began to board the bright new starships. People working for the Springplace agencies were the same as anyone else, excited by the prospects, their attentions divided by change and opportunity. Which was why on a cool autumn morning, Lilt could leave home, scheduled to finally undergo her marriage with the machines, but she somehow slipped away from her usual watchdogs, never arriving at the clinic.

A general alert was called, as a precaution.

Even so, Lilt reached the plateau without incident.

Unobserved, she returned to the place where Daniel had died, the scene thoroughly unremarkable, nothing left to show that here, on this ground, her species and the world averted disaster. In one hand, she carried a shapeless lump of pinkish glass. On tiny quiet feet, Lilt walked up to the dragon's vast burrow, and she paused, watching the darkness, listening hard until it seemed that she could hear the monster's slow strong breathing. Then she threw the lump of glass, threw into the darkness, and she turned, walking away slowly, pushing tears back up into the big almond-shaped eyes.

"Listen to me! This is my story!"

Without pause or the illusion of breath, the dragon-man statue spoke through the night. Then at first light, it told how Lilt emigrated with her children; and how the ultra-Physicals -- the noble ancestors of today's noble giants -- had encased the Earth in a powerful Luddite field, dooming every conceivable machine; and how Lilt's apparently simple lump of pink glass was actually coated with tailored diatoms that accreted new layers over the centuries, the statue emerging gradually, shaped with nothing but patience and the cells' own sturdy genetics.

Then with a last flourish, the statue's voice grew soft, announcing, "I will talk no more. My story is done."

The machinery installed by Lilt, bathed in the withering Luddite field, died quietly.

True or not, the statue's tale would have been an enthralling thing to share with others. Eventually the entire world would have heard it told and retold.

Yet as it happened, the scholars and novices heard nothing more than those first thundering words.

"Listen to me! This is my story!"

It was impossible, insane. A statue was speaking to them! As one, they turned away, and in utter panic, they ran through the jungle like scared little pigs.

No one heard the story. Except, that is, for a single passing dragon that paused just long enough to taste the air, finding nothing there worth eating.

Today, and forever, the dragon-man statue stands mute and motionless, the dimensions of its heroism left to the imagination of the young.

But, of course, that may be for the best.

With heroes and with children, it usually is.