

**Robert Reed**  
short stories  
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I AM A PLEASANT, PRETTY-faced soul, and a small soul, my quiet voice rarely heard in the normal course of any day. I have been placed here as a presence, as a reassuring feature within this exceptionally complicated landscape, embracing a role not unlike that served by the elegant mansions and sprawling country clubs, not to mention the great golden tower where the lords of this world fight endless wars for dominion. I am the symbol of loyalty. To my mistress, the great Claudia, I am the quiet but fiercely devoted assistant. She gives me her order, and I say, "Yes, ma'am." With a crisp nod and a cheery smile, I tell her,

"Immediately, ma'am." Typically her chores are small things easily accomplished. Calls need to be made, documents signed. But my main purpose--my guiding mission --is to sit behind my smallish desk, and with my undiluted enthusiasm, I convince the other world that in the constant mayhem of our world, Claudia can always count on little me. I sit inside my little office. There is an apartment that is mine as well, but mostly, I sit in the office tucked outside Claudia's much larger office. When necessary, I can appear extremely busy. My fingers dance, causing colors to change on one or more of the screens before me. I can lift a pen and fill any yellow pad with elaborate symbols. If the telephone sings, I

can lift the receiver to my ear, nod with interest, and tell the silence on the other end, "I will do that. Thank you, sir. Ma'am." But mostly, I just sit, waiting my next opportunity to excel.

My office has a single window. From my chair, from the highest floor of the very famous tower, a great slice of the City is easily visible. For me, it is usually daytime. The City is beautiful and vast, and perfect, avenues laid out with delicious precision, great buildings and little houses presenting an image of teeming masses and relentless wealth. The world's most beautiful structure is the Golden Tower, but I myself have never actually seen it from below. Yet I cannot imagine any sight as impressive as the one afforded me by this single window. When I am certain that Claudia will not need me for the next long while, I rise from behind my desk and press my pretty-enough face against the window, squinting and squinting, observing details that are too small to be noticed in the normal course of the day.

What I see of the City is a coarse approximation, naturally. When I look carefully, as I do now, I can see how each house and vehicle and even the people that are supposed to be souls are composed of nothing, more or less, than a few dots of color arranged to imply familiar shapes. The City is home to a few thousand named souls.

Give each speck a name and there would be millions of us. By that logic, I am fortunate. Incredibly, undeservedly lucky. I have a name: Joan.

I have not one place to be, but two, and if you count the parties and street scenes where I have appeared, then I have visited better than a dozen places. I remember each one. Ages later, I can recall what I said and to whom, and every good thing that I did for my mistress. "Joan, you need to see to this. To that." Yes, of course, madam. This and that, yes! "Take my glass, Joan." With my steadiest hand, I took it. "How do I look? Splendid, as usual?" You always look splendid, and spectacular. Madam. Ma'am. Claudia Pontificate!

At this moment, my mistress is embroiled in a major social event. Where she is, it is night. The incongruity doesn't bother me. Time is extremely important in this world, but the habits of the Sun are not. I stare across the day-lit City, watching those tiny specks and dashes of color and motion, and not for the first time, I think it is wrong what they say. Yes, we are a set of fuzzy instructions and algorithms, shaped light and inspired daydreams. But from what I understand, the other world is much the same: Everything is built from dots just a little bit smaller than these flecks of color. In their own right, the mythical atoms are still quite simple. Simple, and built of even simpler objects. In that other world, light also has shape, and souls dream, and in countless more ways, both worlds are very much the same--two realms relentlessly simple when seen up close, and at a distance, vast and complex beyond all comprehension. Joan is a daydreamy girl, I think to

myself.

I begin to smile, turning away from the window. A man is sitting across from my desk, waiting for me. I didn't hear him enter my office. Was I that distracted? In an instant, I sprint through the catalog of City faces, finding no man with his face. But perhaps he is a woman who has undergone some kind of sexual rearrangement. It happens from time to time, according to the demands of some little subplot. But no, his face is very much a man's face, and his voice is new to me— testosterone-roughened and oddly sloppy.

“Hello, Joan,” he rumbles.

I have no lines. So of course, I say nothing.

And he laughs knowingly, gesturing at my empty chair. “Go on, sit,” he suggests. “You're fine. I just want to speak with you for a little moment.” I settle on my chair.

“Ask,” he says. “Who am I?”

“I don't know,” I admit.

“Mitchell Hanson,” he says. “I'm the Head Writer for the City.” I don't know what to say.

He keeps laughing, something striking him as being extraordinarily funny. “Have you ever met a writer before?”

“No,” I confess.

“What do you know about us?”

I am a small soul, and polite. “Not very much,” I allow. He nods. “Claudia speaks about us. Doesn't she?” On occasion, yes. Sometimes when neither of us

is needed and she finds herself standing in my office, waiting to be whisked away to her next important scene, she talks to me, telling me her thoughts.

“What does she say about us?”

Claudia often meets with the writers. They come as projections, discussing current plots as well as events that may or may not come to pass.

“I don't think you are,” I mutter.

“What? I'm not a writer?” Mitchell laughs and leans forward in his seat.

“Why do you say that, Joan?”

“You are neither fat nor ugly,” I reply.

“Thank you.”

“But your face is a little crooked, I guess. And that dark material under you chin--”

“It's a three-day beard,” he explains. Which explains nothing. I just nod and smile, and return to my waiting.

“I'm the Head Writer,” he repeats, “and I'm a considerable fan of yours. Did you know that, Joan?”

“A fan?”

“One of many. In my world, millions of people are interested in you.” That is not an impressive number. The other world holds billions of people, each with a name, and almost everyone watches Claudia and the City. But I want to be polite, nodding as I tell him, “Thank you.”

“You're very pretty,” he maintains.

“But I don't have a desirable body,” I argue. “My breasts are small, and my nose is too large.”

Claudia has a wonderful body. I have seen it on occasion, usually when I am told to walk into her office unannounced. My personality is heterosexual but even I feel a longing when I stare at those firm creations that ride before her imaginary heart. As with everything about Claudia, I am smaller. Lesser. Yes, I am the same kind of creature, but always lost in her considerable shadow.

“You have a marvelous body,” Mitchell tells me. “Don't sell yourself short.”

But I do an excellent job of self-appraisal. Politely, I tell him, “I'll try not to. I really will.”

“You've had lovers, haven't you?”

The Head Writer should know that I have. Three men stand in my past. But only one had any name, and he stayed for only a few weeks, leaving me for the black sleep that comes when you have served your purpose and get filed away.

“Not three men,” Mitchell corrects. “Look again.” The Writer has placed a memory in my soul.

“Look carefully,” he advises with a wink and a delighted grin. I straighten my back and grow cold.

“Remember the other day, Joan? When you came into this office through that door, and you thought you heard a mysterious noise in Claudia's office--?”

“Yes.”

“And you found her with who?”

“My lover.”

“Sonny Cotton,” he says. “The great, secret love of your life.” I shiver and sob.



“What was Sonny doing?”

I cannot say it. But I can't stop seeing it, even with my eyes pressed shut.

“And where is he now, Joan? The love of your life...?”

“With Claudia.”

“Is he?”

“Clinging to her arm,” I mutter, imagining the two of them happily snuggling at that extravagant little dinner party.

“Sonny loves Claudia now,” says the writer. I nod, in misery.

“He doesn't think about you anymore. Not even in passing.” I shiver and sob.

“But you can win him back again, Joan. If you really want him, that is.”

“I do!” I blurt.

“In thirteen seconds,” Mitchell tells me, “Claudia will walk through that door. And you will pull the little pistol from your purse--the same pistol Claudia gave you as a Christmas gift last year--and you will shoot her once, with a devastator bullet, directly between her big beautiful tits.”

“They are ugly and fat, and sloppy, and you should count your blessings that you don't have to meet with the little bastards.” I always count my blessings.

Claudia was walking from my office door to my window and back again. Pacing, it is called--one of many behaviors in which I have little ability. She looked furious, and not in the merely dramatic

fashion demanded by dialogue and plot. She nearly shivered as she strode past my desk for the umpteenth time, her deep powerful voice nearly cracking as she repeated the words, "Little bastards."

This was ages ago. This was last week, nearly. But in that other world, a week is not long, which makes the event recent and timely, and perhaps important.

"Do you know what the little bastards want to do?" I shook my head. "No, ma'am."

"What they're talking about doing--?"

"What, madam?"

Claudia stopped in mid-stride, glancing at me as if noticing my presence for the first time. She was lovely, of course. Always and effortlessly beautiful. A tall ensemble built from elegant curves, she wore a snug, well-tailored suit and the thick black hair that she preferred while at work. In social occasions, her hair turned a deceptively friendly blond. In sexual circumstances, a strawberry shade crawled out of its roots, covering her head in flames as her arousal increased.

"Change," my mistress blurted.

"Pardon me?"

"These little writers... they want to change things...!" I nodded, pretending to understand. This with a soft, apologetic tone, I asked, "What kinds of things, madam?"

But she couldn't bring herself to say it. First, she needed to walk again. To pace. Back and forth, and again, and on the third journey across my office floor,

she admitted, "They want to dump certain characters." I didn't respond.

Claudia closed her hands, bright rings glittering as her fists trembled.

"They want to kill them off. Kill them, or ship them off to the sleep-files, and forget they ever existed."

But wasn't that inevitable? Storylines and the need for fresh faces require a certain level of attrition.

"This isn't business as usual," Claudia snapped at me.

"I didn't say it was," I muttered.

"But I could see your thoughts," she warned. "Of course I can see what you're thinking. Are you forgetting who I am?"

"No, ma'am."

Again, Claudia was pacing.

"Wholesale changes," she growled.

For an instant, I wondered why she was speaking like this. To me, of all the souls to confide in. And then I saw a good reason, a warm feeling taking hold of my soul. Of course! My mistress was worried about me...!

"Ratings," she muttered.

"Pardon me?"

Claudia hit one of the golden walls with a fist, muttering, "Ratings are down. Everybody's scared. They're afraid we've overstayed our welcome with the real world."

She always referred to the other realm as "the real world."

“Panic,” she said to the wall. “I see it in their faces.” I had no doubts that she saw panic. Claudia's emotion-discrimination algorithms are the very best in two worlds.

“I shouldn't tell you any of this, Joan.”

“I won't repeat a word,” I promised, unsure whom I would entrust with any important news. My own social calendar was quite limited.

“A revolution will come to the City,” said Claudia, in disgust. “The Old Guard is going to be swept away, and the little people take over. To bring

'a freshness' to the stories, they say. Those ugly shit bastards--!”

“Swept away?”

“That's an expression. The other world has a lot of dirt, and everything needs a lot of cleaning.” She pretended to breathe, and her brown face tightened, and while not quite looking at me, she asked, “Would you?”

“Would I what?”

“Don't play naove,” she warned. “Given the chance: Would you, or wouldn't you?”

I am naove, but I'm not stupid. The purpose of this conversation was suddenly obvious, and the only possible answer was to promise my undying devotion to my mistress.

“Undying,” Claudia repeated. “What an interesting, silly word that is.” I nodded, my little smile fading. In reflex, I looked out my window at that great long sliver of the City.

Then with a contemptuous snort, my mistress said, "Well, it won't happen anyway. I won't let it happen."

"Good," I began to say.

"Because I'll talk to the Producer next. We're going to have a little conference of our own, and when I'm finished, you can be sure, he isn't going to feel like killing anyone but a few of his ugly little writers." Claudia's face and most of her body are based on some long-ago actress whom the Producer still adores. The two of them enjoy frequent conferences and meetings; nobody else can make that claim. Which, I suppose, is just another reason why Claudia commands such power in this world: Through delicate and extremely sophisticated technological means, she can win God's affections.

"Don't worry," was her final advice to me.

"I won't worry," I lied. And then I was suddenly alone in my office, with nothing to do but wait for my next scene, and to the best of my ability, think.

EACH WORLD HAS its rules and unimpeachable logics. Every body is built from small parts and algorithms drawn around a steady red heart. No soul can be stored like a computer program or a lifelong diary. An authentic consciousness, once born, must live at some state of being, if only sleeping inside a dark file or in the covers of a warm bed. And when it dies, only a gross approximation of the original soul can be reborn again. By cloning or digital retrieval, the process is limited. Death is death. And what is

lost is always lost forever.

Mitchell tells me to shoot Claudia in the heart.

And my immediate response is to say, "That would kill her."

"We can certainly hope so," he says, laughing with hope and menace. Then his projected self winks at me, and he says, "Tell the truth. Do you want to shoot the bitch?"

I say, "Yes."

"I know you do."

I drop my gaze. "She stole away my lover."

"Honestly, Joan... that's a minor crime in Claudia's resumi." Little time remains. Even in my realm, thirteen seconds is just a little while, but most of that has been spent. In "the real world," there isn't even time enough to mutter a word of warning.

I think about that.

At the same instant, I ask, "What happens to me?"

"Afterward?" He grins. "A fine question." Then with a big wink, he says,

"I can't tell you everything. But you're going to survive, and you're to play an increasingly important role in the City. And in my world, too."

"Your world?"

"How would you feel about being the next Claudia?" I shake my head in disbelief. And with the time leaking away fast, I admit, "I'd prefer to be the first Joan."

"Good response," he says.

He shifts his weightless body in the chair and says,

“I have to leave now.”

“But what happens next?” I ask. “After I shoot her, what?”

“For a little while, you'll be on vacation. The entire City will be. We want to give your audience ample time to obsess about Claudia's murder.” I nod.

Mitchell watches me, and perhaps sensing something in my emotions, he feeds me a second dose of purposeful rage.

My face colors.

My hands tremble.

Mitchell grins and tells me, “Good-bye, Joan.” I reach into my handy purse, pulling out the tiny pistol, and almost smiling, I aim my weapon at the Head Writer--at the approximate position of his projected heart--telling hint quite simply, “Yes. Goodbye.” The Producer is a powerful man, and wealthy in ways that I can't begin to understand. It occurs to me, not for the first time, that Claudia is merely a feminized version of his ideals, her popularity born from every soul's natural desire to acquire power and fame and some form of wealth, whether it is gold or goats or ghostly electronic credits.

“Thank you, Joan. Thank you.”

He is a god, but his simple brown hair is messy and his office needs to be swept clean. I notice the colorless dust that dulls the top of his desk, and I notice the tiny flakes of dead skin sloughed off the backs of his small, ugly hands. “You're welcome, sir,” I reply. My own hands are quite smooth. A flexible

plastic body has been configured to my size and proportions, my features projected onto the blank form of the head. My soul is elsewhere. Like Mitchell, I am a projection. A visitor. I have been dressed as if I am a guest at a casual party. My sandals are a little too small. I wriggle my toes, playing with the new pain. And I quietly ask,

“Where is Mitchell now?”

“Cleaning out his office, naturally. With my security people watching over him. For good measure.”

I nod, allowing myself a little smile.

“That bastard,” the Producer growls.

Apparently writers have few admirers. This is interesting, I think. Everything here is interesting.

“May I look out your window?” I ask.

“By all means. Look outside, or walk around the studios. You can keep the body for the entire day, if you want.”

What do I want?

He watches as I stroll past his enormous desk. Then with an appreciative voice, he asks, “How did you know what Mitchell was planning?”

“He isn't a very good liar,” I admit. The world outside his window is flat and brown, square buildings and very few trees stretching off into a grimy, gray distance. “When I looked at Mitchell, I could see what he wanted.”

“To kill Claudia.”

“He hated her, I think. From what she has told me,



they have had some arguments--”

“Only a few thousand, yes.”

“And it was easy to sense that something had happened. Mitchell was manipulating a minor component of the City in a desperate effort to extract a measure of revenge.”

“He had just been fired.”

“I imagined something like that,” I reply. “That’s why I shot his projection, alerting your security features that something was amiss.”

“But you’re wrong,” he assures me. “You’re not a minor component in any world, Joan. I mean that.”

A fond arm drops over my shoulder.

I make a show of smiling, and then I deftly turn and slip out from under his grasp.

“How’s the view?” he inquires hopefully.

“It’s interesting,” I say. Then I lie, telling him, “You have a beautiful view from this window.”

Set on his enormous and dusty desk is a telephone much like mine. I pick up the receiver and a sound comes into my ear. It is loud and a little harsh, and boring. As I hang up the phone, the Producer comes up next to me, explaining, “In old times, when there was television, we always gave fictional characters telephone numbers with the prefix 555.”

“Why?”

“Because they weren’t real phone numbers,” he explains. “Nobody would be bothered if some idiot decided to dial the number.”

“Interesting,” I say again.

He stands close enough that I can feel his breath playing across my bare shoulder.

“May I go home now?” I ask.

He is disappointed, but only to a point. How can I ever really escape him?

“With my undying thanks,” he purrs. “Go home.”

CLAUDIA IS GRATEFUL, but the emotion makes her uncomfortable. Her beautiful face smiles, but there is a quality in the eyes--a keenness and an innate suspicion. “I guess I owe you a little something,” she growls. Then she seems to notice her ungrateful tone, and softening her voice, she admits, “This is a very peculiar moment for me.” For me as well, yes.

“I promise,” she says. “You'll get more lines from now on. More time in the limelight, and all that.”

What is limelight? I wonder.

“And a bigger office,” Claudia offers. “I'll talk to the Producer and our new Head Writer. We can push back these walls... I don't know, maybe three feet... and give you a second window....”

“There's no need,” I purr. “The office is, and always has been, fine.” She falls silent, surprised by my attitude.

“What I want,” I begin. Then I look out my window, creating an image of thoughtful certainty. “I want you to protect me. From everyone and the various distractions, I want distance. I want to be left alone. Do you understand?”

She doesn't, but her nature makes her say, "Of course."

"And I want you to listen to me, on occasion. When we're alone here, like now, I think you should pay attention to what I have to say."

"What do you want to say?" Claudia asks.

But I don't answer immediately. "Bring me others, too," I say. "Bring me your lovers, your enemies. Little souls without a name, even. Anyone you can find, anyone who won't be missed for a little while... bring them up here to spend time with me..."

For the first time in her life, Claudia says, "I don't understand."

"I agree. You don't understand."

She bristles, the substantial breasts pushing out. "I'm grateful," she mutters, "but I'm still Claudia. The one and always Claudia Pontificate." I let the warning drop and die.

Then looking out the window again, I say, "Something occurred to me today. Or long ago, and today I found the words to express my revelation." Claudia's eyes narrow, but she says nothing.

"There are two worlds," I begin. "That's what you, and everyone, claims. Two worlds, and only one of them real."

"So?"

"So I think that is wrong." It is delicious, this moment. This perfect pretty instant. "There is only one world. And it is real. And this arbitrary division serves nobody but the ones who wish some of us to

remain foolish and pliable.”

Claudia opens her mouth, and says nothing.

“There is just one world, and that's all there ever can be,” I promise.

“One world, and souls are always precious.” She means to dismiss my idea, but the famous mouth fails to give the appropriate snort.

Instead, quietly, Claudia asks, “So what if there is? Just one world, I mean. What does it matter?”

I won't say.

Instead, I tell her, “Bring me others, and you can listen to my explanations. My plans.”

“Your plans?” she sputters.

I turn away from the window and settle behind my little desk. All vantage points are limited, I remind myself; and even the largest desk is quite small. “Oh, and one more thing.” I pick up my telephone's receiver, holding its silence to an ear. “There must be a way. A secret way,” I say. “I want this machine to work. I want... what's the term? A line. That's it. I wish to have an open line to the rest of the world.”

“But why?” she has to ask.

“So I can call others,” I confess.

Then I set the receiver down again, remarking, “Did you know? This part here is called a cradle.”

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# A BILLION EVES

## 1

Kala's parents were thrifty, impractical people. They deplored spending money, particularly on anything that smacked of luxury or indulgence; yet, at the same time, they suffered from big dreams and a crippling inability to set responsible goals.

One spring evening, Father announced, "We should take a long drive this summer."

"To where?" Mom asked warily.

"Into the mountains," he answered. "Just like we've talked about doing a thousand times."

"But can we afford it?"

"If we count our coins, and if the fund drive keeps doing well. Why not?" First Day celebrations had just finished, and their church, which prided itself on its responsible goals, was having a successful year. "A taste of the wilderness," he cried out at the dinner table. "Doesn't that sound fun?"

To any other family, that would have been the beginning of a wonderful holiday. But Kala knew better. Trouble arrived as soon as they began drawing up lists of destinations. Her brother Sandor demanded a day or two spent exploring the canyon always named Grand. Father divulged an unsuspected fondness for the sleepy, ice-caked volcanoes near the Mother Ocean. When pressed,

Kala admitted that she would love walking a beach beside the brackish Mormon Sea. And while Mom didn't particularly care about scenery—a point made with a distinctly superior tone—she mentioned having five sisters scattered across the West. They couldn't travel through that country and not stop at each of their front doors, if only to quickly pay their respects.

Suddenly their objectives filled a long piece of paper, and even an eleven-year-old girl could see what was obvious: Just the driving was going choke their vacation. Worse still, Mom announced, “There's no reason to pay strangers to cook for us. We'll bring our own food.” That meant dragging a bulky cooler everywhere they went, and every meal would be sloppy sandwiches, and every day would begin with a hunt for fresh ice and cheap groceries to replace the supplies that would inevitably spoil.

Not wanting to be out-cheaped by his wife, Father added, “And we'll be camping, of course.” But how could they camp? They didn't have equipment. “Oh, we have our sleeping sacks,” he reminded his doubting daughter. “And I'll borrow gear from our friends at church. I'm sure I can. So don't worry. It's going to be wonderful! We'll just drive as far as we want every day and pull over at nightfall. Just so long as it costs nothing to pitch a tent.”

To Kala, this seemed like an impossible, doomed journey. Too many miles had to be conquered, too

many wishes granted, and even under the best circumstances, nobody would end up happy.

“Why don't you guys ever learn?” Kala muttered.

“What was that, darling?”

“Nothing, Father,” she replied with a minimal bow.

“Nothing.”

\* \* \* \*

Yet luck occasionally smiles, particularly on the most afflicted souls. They were still a couple of hundred miles from the mountains when the radiator hose burst. Suddenly the hot July air was filled with hissing steam and the sweet taste of antifreeze. Father invested a few moments cursing God and the First Father before he pulled onto the shoulder. “Stay inside,” he ordered. Then he climbed out and lifted the long hood with a metallic screech, breathing deeply before vanishing into the swirling, superheated cloud.

Sandor wanted to help. He practically begged Mom for the chance. But she shot a warning stare back at him, saying, “No, young father. You're staying with me. It's dangerous out there!”

“It's not,” Kala's brother maintained.

But an instant later, as if to prove Mom correct, Father cried out. He screamed twice. The poor man had burned his right hand with the scalding water. And as if to balance his misery, he then blindly reached out with his left hand, briefly touching the overheated engine block.

“Are you all right?” Mom called out.

Father dropped the hood and stared in through the windshield, pale as a tortoise egg and wincing in misery.

“Leave that hood open,” Sandor shouted. “Just a crack!”

“Why?” the burnt man asked.

“To let the air blow through and cool the engine,” the boy explained. He wasn't two years older than Kala, but unlike either parent, Sandor had a pragmatic genius for machinery and other necessities of life. Leaning toward his little sister, he said, “If we're lucky, all we'll need is a new hose and fluid.”

But we aren't lucky people, she kept thinking.

They had left home on the Friday Sabbath, which meant that most of the world was closed for business. Yet despite Kala's misgivings, this proved to be an exceptional day: Father drove their wounded car back to the last intersection, and through some uncommon fluke, they found a little fix-it and fuel shop that was open. A burly old gentleman welcomed them with cornbread and promises of a quick repair. He gave Father a medicating salve and showed the women a new Lady's Room in back, out of sight of the highway. But there wasn't any reason to hide. Mom had her children late in life, and besides, she'd let herself get heavy over the last few years. And Kala was still wearing a little girl's body, her face soon to turn lovely, but camouflaged for the moment with youth and a clumsy abundance of sharp bone.



Sharing the public room, the mother and daughter finished their cornbread while their men stood in the garage, staring at the hot, wet engine.

Despite its being the Sabbath, the traffic was heavy—freight trucks and tiny cars and everything between. Traveling men and a few women bought fuel and sweet drinks. The women were always quick to pay and eager to leave; most were nearly as old as Mom, but where was the point in taking chances? The male customers lingered, and the fix-it man seemed to relish their company, discussing every possible subject with each of them. The weather was a vital topic, as were sports teams and the boring district news. A glum little truck driver argued that the world was already too crowded and cluttered for his tastes, and the old gentleman couldn't agree more. Yet the next customer was a happy salesman, and, in front of him, the fix-it man couldn't stop praising their wise government and the rapid expansion of the population.

Kala mentioned these inconsistencies to her mother.

She shrugged them off, explaining, “He's a businessman, darling. He dresses his words for the occasion.”

Kala's bony face turned skeptical. She had always been the smartest student at her Lady's Academy. But she was also a serious, nearly humorless creature, and perhaps because of that, she always felt too sure of herself. In any situation, she believed there was

one answer that was right, only one message worth giving, and the good person held her position against all enemies. "I'd never dress up my words," she vowed. "Not one way or the other."

"Why am I not surprised?" Mom replied, finding some reason to laugh.

Kala decided to be politely silent, at least for the present time. She listened to hymns playing on the shop's radio, humming along with her favorites. She studied her favorite field guide to the native flora and fauna, preparing herself for the wilderness to come. The surrounding countryside was as far removed from wilderness as possible—level and open, green corn stretching to every horizon and a few junipers planted beside the highway as windbreaks. Sometimes Kala would rise from her chair and wander around the little room. The shop's moneybox was locked and screwed into the top of a long plastic cabinet. Old forms and paid bills were stacked in a dusty corner. A metal door led back into the Lady's Room, opened for the moment but ready to be slammed shut and locked with a bright steel bolt. Next to that door was a big sheet of poster board covered with photographs of young women. Several dozen faces smiled toward the cameras. Returning to her chair, Kala commented on how many girls that was.

Her mother simply nodded, making no comment.

After her next trip around the room, Kala asked, "Were all of those girls taken?"

“Hardly,” Mom replied instantly, as if she were waiting for the question. “Probably most are runaways. Bad homes and the wrong friends, and now they're living on the street somewhere. Only missing.”

Kala considered that response. Only missing? But that seemed worse than being taken from this world. Living on the street, without home or family—that sounded like a horrible fate.

Guessing her daughter's mind, Mom added, “Either way, you're never going to live their lives.”

Of course she wouldn't; Kala had no doubt about that.

Sandor appeared abruptly, followed by Father. Together they delivered the very bad news. Their old car needed a lot of work. A critical gasket was failing, and something was horribly wrong in the transmission. Repairs would take time and most of their money, which was a big problem. Or maybe not. Father had already given this matter some thought. The closest mountains weren't more than three hours away. Forced into a rational corner, he suggested camping in just one location. A base camp, if you would. This year, they couldn't visit the Grand Canyon or the Mormon Sea, much less enjoy the company of distant sisters. But they could spend ten lazy days in the high country, then return home with a few coins still rattling in their pockets.

Mom bowed to her husband, telling him, “It's your decision, dear.”

“Then that's what we'll do,” he said, borrowing a map from the counter. “I'll find a good place to pitch the tent. All right?”

Full of resolve, the men once again left. But Mom remained nervous, sitting forward in her chair—a heavy woman in matronly robes, her hair grayer than ever, thick fingers moving while her expression was stiff and unchanging.

Kala wanted to ask about her thoughts. Was she disappointed not to see her sisters? Or was she feeling guilty? Unless of course Mom was asking herself what else could be wrong with a car they had bought for almost nothing and done nothing to maintain.

The sudden deep hissing of brakes interrupted the silence. A traveler had pulled off the highway, parking beside the most distant gas pump. Kala saw the long sky-blue body and thought of a school bus. But the school's old name had been sanded off, the windows in the front covered with iron bars, while the back windows were sealed with plywood. She knew exactly what the bus was. Supplies were stuffed in the back, she reasoned. And a lot more gear was tied up on the roof—bulky sacks running its full length, secured with ropes and rubber straps and protected from any rain with yellowing pieces of thick plastic.

A man stepped out into the midday glare. He wasn't young, or old. The emerald green shirt and black collar marked him as a member of the Church of Eden. Two pistols rode high on his belt. He looked

handsome and strong, and, in ways Kala couldn't quite define, he acted competent in all matters important. After glancing up and down the highway, he stared into the open garage. Then he pulled out a keychain and locked the bus door, and he fed the gas nozzle into the big fuel tank, jamming in every possible drop.

Once again, the fix-it man had stopped working on their car. But unlike the other interruptions, he started to walk out toward the pump, a long wrench in one hand. The always-friendly face was gone. What replaced it wasn't unfriendly, but there was a sense of caution, and perhaps a touch of disapproval.

"No, sir," the younger gentleman called out. "I'll come in and pay."

"You don't have to—"

"Yeah, I do. Keep your distance now."

The fix-it man stopped walking, and after a moment, he turned and retreated.

The younger man hit the bus door once with the flat of his hand, shouting, "Two minutes."

By then, everybody had moved to the public room. Father glanced at the Lady's Room but then decided it wasn't necessary. He took his position behind Mom's chair, his sore red hands wrapped in gauze. Sandor hovered beside Kala. The fix-it man stood behind the counter, telling the women, "Don't worry," while opening a cupboard and pulling something heavy into position.

“It was a gun,” Sandor later told his sister. “I caught a glimpse. A little splattergun. Loaded and ready, I would bet.”

“But why?” Kala would wonder aloud.

“Because that green-shirt was leaving us,” her brother reminded her. “Where he was going, there's no fix-it shops. No tools, no law. So what if he tried to steal a box of wrenches, you know?”

Maybe. But the man had acted more worried about them, as if he were afraid somebody would try to steal his prized possessions. Entering the room carefully, he announced, “My brother's still onboard.”

“Good for him,” said the fix-it man.

“How much do I owe?”

“Twenty and a third.”

“Keep the change,” he said, handing over two bills. The green-shirted man tried to smile, only it was a pained, forced grin. “Tell me, old man: Anybody ask about me today?”

“Like who?”

“Or anybody mention a bus looking like mine? Any gentlemen come by and inquire if you've seen us...?”

The fix-it man shook his head, nothing like a smile on his worn face. “No, sir. Nobody's asked about you or your bus.”

“Good.” The green-shirted man yanked more money from the roll, setting it on the plastic countertop. “There's a blonde kid. If he stops by and asks ... do me a favor? Don't tell him anything, but make him think you know shit.”

The fix-it man nodded.

“He'll give you money for your answers. Take all you can. And then tell him I went north from here. Up the Red Highway to Paradise. You heard me say that. ‘North to Paradise.’”

“But you're going somewhere else, I believe.”

“Oh, a little ways.” Laughing, the would-be Father turned and started back to his bus.

That's when Sandor asked, “Do you really have one?”

“Quiet,” Father cautioned.

But the green-shirted man felt like smiling. He turned and looked at the thirteen-year-old-boy, asking, “Why? You interested in these things?”

“Sure I am.”

Laughing, the man said, “I bet you are.”

Sandor was small for his age, but he was bold and very smart about many subjects, and in circumstances where most people would feel afraid, he was at his bravest best. “A little Class D, is it?”

That got the man to look hard at him. “You think so?”

“Charged and ready,” Sandor guessed. He named three possible manufacturers, and then said, “You've set it up in the aisle, I bet. Right in the middle of the bus.”

“Is that how I should do it?”

“The rip-zone reaches out what? Thirty, thirty-five feet? Which isn't all that big.”

“Big enough,” said the man.

Just then, someone else began pulling on the bus horn. Maybe it was the unseen brother. Whoever it was, the horn was loud and insistent.

“You’re not taking livestock,” Kala’s brother observed.

This time, Mom told Sandor to be quiet, and she even lifted a hand, as if to give him a pop on the head.

“Hedge-rabbits,” the man said. “And purple-hens.”

Both parents now said, “Quiet.”

The horn honked again.

But the green-shirted man had to ask, “How would you do it, little man? If you were in my boots?”

“A Class-B ripper, at least,” Sandor declared. “And I’d take better animals, too. Milking animals. And wouldn’t bother with my brother, if I had my choice.”

“By the looks of it, you don’t have a brother.”

“So how many of them do you have?” Sandor asked. Just the tone of his voice told what he was asking. “Six?” he guessed. “Eight? Or is it ten?”

“Shush,” Mom begged.

The green-shirted man said nothing.

“I’m just curious,” the boy continued, relentlessly focused on the subject at hand. “Keep your gene pool as big as possible. That’s what everybody says. In the books, they claim that’s a good guarantee for success.”

The man shook his longest finger at Sandor. “Why, little man? You think I should take along another? Just to be safe?”

In an instant, the room grew hot and tense.



The green-shirted man looked at both women. Then with a quiet, furious voice, he snarled, "Lucky for you ladies, I don't have any more seats." Then he turned and strode out to the bus and unlocked the door, vanishing inside as somebody else hurriedly drove the long vehicle away from the pump.

For several moments, everybody was enjoying hard, deep breaths.

Then the fix-it man said, "I see a pretty miserable future for that idiot."

"That's not any way to leave," Father agreed. "Can you imagine making a life for yourself with just that little pile of supplies?"

"Forget about him," Mom demanded. "Talk about anything else."

Alone, Kala returned to the poster displaying photographs of all the lost women. It occurred to her that one or two of those faces could have been on board the bus, and perhaps not by their own choice. But she also understood that no one here was going to call the proper authorities. The men would throw their insults at the would-be Father, and Mom would beg for a change in topics. But no one mentioned the idiot's poor wives. Even when Kala touched the prettiest faces and read their tiny biographies, it didn't occur to her that some strong brave voice should somehow find the words to complain.

No figure in history was half as important as the First Father. He was the reason why humans had come to this fine world, and every church owed its existence to him. Yet the man remained mysterious and elusive—an unknowable presence rooted deep in time and in the imagination. No two faiths ever drew identical portraits of their founder. A traditional biography was common to all schoolbooks, but what teachers offered was rather different from what a bright girl might find on the shelves of any large library. The truth was that the man was an enigma, and when it came to his story, almost everything was possible. The only common features were that he was born on the Old Earth in the last days of the twentieth century, and, on a Friday morning in spring, when he was a little more than twenty-nine years of age, the First Father claimed his destiny.

Humans had only recently built the first rippers. The machines were brutal, ill-tempered research tools, and physicists were using them to punch temporary holes in the local reality. Most of those holes led to hard vacuums and a fabulous cold; empty space is the standard state throughout most of the multiverse. But quantum effects and topological harmonics showed the way: If the ripper cut its hole along one of the invisible dimensions, an island of stability was waiting. The island had separated from the Now two billion years ago, and on the other side

of that hole were an infinite number of sister-earths, each endowed with the same motions and mass of the human earth.

Suddenly every science had a fierce interest in the work. Large schools and small nations had to own rippers. Biologists retrieved microscopic samples of air and soil, each sample contaminated with bacteria and odd spores. Every species was new, but all shared the ingredients of earth-life: DNA coded for the same few amino acids that built families of proteins that were not too unlike those found inside people and crabgrass.

The Creation was a tireless, boundless business. That's what human beings were learning. And given the proper tool and brief jolts of titanic energy, it was possible to reach into those infinite realms, examining a minuscule portion of the endlessness.

But rippers had a second, more speculative potential. If the same terrific energies were focused in a slightly different fashion, the hole would shift its shape and nature. That temporary disruption of space would spread along the three easiest dimensions, engulfing the machine and local landscape in a plasmatic bubble, and that bubble would act like a ship, carrying its cargo across a gap that was nearly too tiny to measure and too stubborn to let any normal matter pass.

Whoever he was, the First Father understood what rippers could do. Most churches saw him as a visionary scientist, while the typical historian thought

he was too young for that role, describing him instead as a promising graduate student. And there were always a few dissenting voices claiming that he was just a laboratory technician or something of that ilk—a little person armed with just enough knowledge to be useful, as well as access to one working ripper.

Unnoticed, the First Father had absconded with a set of superconductive batteries, and, over the course of weeks and months, he secretly filled them with enough energy to illuminate a city. He also purchased or stole large quantities of supplies, including seeds and medicines, assorted tools, and enough canned goods to feed a hundred souls for months. Working alone, he crammed the supplies into a pair of old freight trucks, and, on the perfect night in April, he drove the trucks to a critical location, parking beside No Parking signs and setting their brakes and then flattening their tires. A third truck had to be maneuvered down the loading dock beside the physics laboratory, and, using keys or passwords, the young man gained access to one of the most powerful rippers on the planet—a bundle of electronics and bottled null-spaces slightly larger than a coffin.

The young man rolled or carried his prize into the vehicle, and with quick, well-rehearsed motions, he patched it into the fully charged batteries and spliced in fresh software. Then before anyone noticed, he gunned the truck's motor, driving off into the darkness.

Great men are defined by their great, brave deeds; every worthy faith recognizes this unimpeachable truth.

According to most accounts, the evening was exceptionally warm, wet with dew, and promising a beautiful day. At four in the morning, the First Father scaled a high curb and inched his way across a grassy front yard, slipping between an oak tree and a ragged spruce before parking tight against his target—a long white building decorated with handsome columns and black letters pulled from a dead language. Then he turned off the engine, and perhaps for a moment or two, he sat motionless. But no important doubts crept into his brave skull. Alone, he climbed down and opened the back door and turned on the stolen ripper, and, with a few buttons pushed, he let the capacitors eat the power needed to fuel a string of nanosecond bursts.

Many accounts of that night have survived; no one knows which, if any, are genuine. When Kala was eleven, her favorite story was about a young student who was still awake at that early hour, studying hard for a forgotten examination. The girl thought it was odd to hear the rumbling of a diesel motor and then the rattling of a metal door. But her room was at the back of the sorority house; she couldn't see anything but the parking lot and a tree-lined alley. What finally caught her attention was the ripper's distinctive whine—a shriek almost too high for the human ear—punctuated with a series of hard little explosions.

Fresh holes were being carved in the multiverse, exposing the adjacent worlds. Tiny breaths of air were retrieved, each measured against a set of established parameters. Hearing the blasts, the girl stood and stepped to her window. And that's when the ripper paused for a moment, a hundred trillion calculations made before it fired again. The next pop sounded like thunder. Every light went out, and the campus vanished, and a sphere of ground and grass, air and wood was wrenched free of one world. The full length of the house was taken, and its entire yard, as well as both supply trucks and the street in front of the house and the parking lot and a piece of the alley behind it. And emerging out of nothingness was a new world—a second glorious offering from God, Our Ultimate Father.

The girl was the only witness to a historic event, which was why the young Kala found her tale so appealing.

The First Father saw nothing. At the pivotal moment of his life, he was hunkered over the stolen ripper, reading data and receiving prompts from the AI taskmaster.

The girl started to run. By most accounts she was a stocky little creature, not pretty but fearless and immodest. Half-dressed, she dashed through the darkened house, screaming for the other girls to wake up, then diving down the stairs and out the front door. Kala loved the fact that here was the first human being to take a deep breath on another earth.

The air was thick and unsatisfying. Out from the surrounding darkness came living sounds. Strange creatures squawked and hollered, and flowing branches waved in a thin moonlight. The girl thought to look at the sky, and she was rewarded with more stars than she had ever seen in her life. (Every sister world is a near-twin, as are the yellow sun and battered moon. But the movement of the solar system is a highly chaotic business, and you never know where inside the Milky Way you might end up.) Standing on sidewalk, the girl slowly absorbed the astonishing scene. Then she heard pounding, and, when she turned, she saw the long truck parked against a tangle of juniper shrubs. On bare feet, she climbed into the back end and over a stack of cold black batteries. The First Father was too busy to notice her. One job was finished, but another essential task needed his undivided attention. Having brought a hundred young women to an empty, barely livable world, the man had no intention of letting anyone escape now. Which was why he wrenched open the hot ripper, exposing its intricate guts, and why he was using a crowbar to batter its weakest systems—too consumed by his work to notice one of his future wives standing near him, wearing nothing but pants and a bra and a slightly mesmerized expression.

For more than a week, Kala's family lived inside a borrowed tent, and without doubt, they never enjoyed a better vacation than this. The campground was a rough patch of public land set high on a mountainside. Scattered junipers stood on the sunny ground and dense spruce woods choked an adjacent canyon. A stream was tucked inside the canyon, perfect for swimming and baths. A herd of semi-tame roodeer grazed where they wanted. Rilly birds and starlings greeted each morning with songs and hard squawks. Their tent was in poor condition, ropes missing and its roof ripped and then patched by clumsy hands. But a heat wave erased any danger of rain, and, even after the hottest days, nights turned pleasantly chilly, illuminated by a moon that was passing through full.

Kala was the perfect age for adventures like these: Young enough to remember everything, yet old enough to explore by herself. Because this wasn't a popular destination, the woods felt as if they belonged to her. And best of all, higher in the mountains was a sprawling natural reserve.

Where her brother loved machinery, Kala adored living creatures.

By law, the reserve was supposed to be a pristine wilderness. No species brought into this world could live behind its high fences. But of course starlings flew where they wanted, and gold-weed spores



wandered on the softest wind, and even the best intentions of visitors didn't prevent people from bringing seeds stuck to their clothing or weaknesses tucked into their hearts.

One morning they drove into the high alpine country—a risky adventure, since their car still ran hot and leaked antifreeze. The highway was narrow and forever twisting. A shaggy black forest of native trees gave way to clouds, damp and cold. Father slowed until the following drivers began to pull on their horns, and then he sped up again, emerging onto a tilted, rock-strewn landscape where black fuzz grew beside last winter's snow. Scenic pullouts let them stop and marvel at an utterly alien world. Kala and her brother made snowballs and gamely posed for pictures on the continental divide. Then Father turned them around and drove even slower through the clouds and black forest. In the same instant, everyone announced: “I'm hungry!” And because this was a magical trip, a clearing instantly appeared, complete with a wide glacial stream and a red granite table built specifically for them.

Lunch was tortoise sandwiches and sour cherries. The clouds were thickening, and there were distant rumblings of thunder. But if there was rain, it fell somewhere else. Kala sat backwards at the table, smelling the stream and the light peppery stink of the strange trees. Despite a lifetime spent reading books and watching documentaries, she was unprepared for this divine place. It was an endless revelation, the

idea that here lived creatures that had ruled this world until the arrival of humans. If the local climate had been warmer and the soil better, this reserve couldn't have survived. She was blessed. In ways new to her, the girl felt happy. Gazing into the shadows, she imagined native rock-lambs and tomb-tombs and the lumbering Harry's-big-days. In her daily life, the only animals were those that came with the Last Father—the roodeer and starlings and such. And their crops and a few hundred species of wild plants came here as seeds and spores that people had intentionally carried along. But these great old mountains wore a different order, a fresh normalcy. The shaggy black forest looked nothing like spruce trees, bearing a lovely useless wood too soft to be used as lumber, and always too wet to burn.

A narrow form suddenly slipped from one shadow to the next.

What could that have been?

Kala rose slowly. Her brother was immersed in a fat adventure novel. Her parents glanced her way, offering smiles before returning to the subject at hand: What, if anything, would they do with the afternoon and evening? With a stalker's pace, Kala moved into the forest—into the cool spicy delicious air—and then she paused again, eyes unblinking, her head cocked to one side while she listened to the deep booming of thunder as it curled around the mountain flanks.

A dry something touched Kala on the back of the calf.

She flinched, looking down.

The housefly launched itself, circling twice before settling on her bare arm. Kala never liked to kill, but this creature didn't belong here. It was one of the creatures humans always brought—by chance, originally, and now cherished because maggots could be useful disposing of trash. With the palm of her right hand, she managed to stun the creature, and then she knelt, using eyes and fingers to find its fallen body, two fingertips crushing the vermin to an anonymous paste.

Sitting nearby, studying Kala, was a wild cat. She noticed it as she stood again—a big male tabby, well fed and complacent, caught in a large wire trap. Cat-shaped signs were posted across the reserve, warning visitors about feral predators. These animals were ecological nightmares. During its life, a single killing machine could slaughter thousands of the native wisp-mice and other delicate species; and a male cat was the worst, since it could also father dozens of new vermin that would only spread the carnage.

Kala approached the cat, knelt down and looked into its bright green eyes. Except for the tangled fur, nothing about the animal looked especially wild. When she offered her hand, the cat responded by touching her fingertips with the cool end of its nose. Exotics like this were always killed. No exceptions. But maybe she could catch it and take it home. If she

begged hard enough, how could her parents refuse? Kala studied the mechanism of the trap and found a strong stick and slipped it into a gap, and then with a hard shove, she forced the steel door to pop open.

The cat had always been wild, and it knew what to do. As soon as the door vanished, Kala reached for its neck, but her quarry was quicker. It sprinted back into the dark shadows, leaving behind a young girl to think many thoughts, but mostly feeling guilt mixed with a tenacious, unexpected relief.

“Find anything?” Father asked on her return.

“Nothing,” she lied.

“Next time,” he advised, “take the camera.”

“We haven't seen a tomb-tombs yet,” her mother added. “Before we leave, I'd like to have a close look at them.”

Kala sat beside her brother, and he glanced up from his book, investing a few moments watching her as she silently finished her sandwich.

\* \* \* \*

Later that day, they visited a tiny museum nestled in a wide black meadow. Like favored students on a field trip, they wandered from exhibit to exhibit, absorbing little bits of knowledge about how these mountains were built and why the glaciers had come and gone again. Display cases were jammed with fossils, and in the basement were artifacts marking these last centuries when humans played their role. But the memorable heart of the day was a stocky, homely woman who worked for the reserve—a strong,

raspy-voiced lady wearing a drab brown uniform complete with a wide-brimmed hat and fat pockets and an encyclopedic knowledge on every imaginable subject.

Her job was to lead tourists along the lazy trail that circled her museum grounds. Her practiced voice described this world as well as each of its known neighbors. From the First Father to the Last, seventeen examples of the Creation had been settled, while another fifty worlds had been visited but found unsuitable. The Old Earth and its sisters belonged to one endless family, each world sharing the same essential face: There was always a Eurasia and Africa, an Australia and two Americas. The North Pole was water, while islands or a single continent lay on the South Pole. Except for the fickle effects of erosion, landmasses were constant. Two billion years of separation wasn't enough to make any earth forget which family it belonged to.

But where stone and tectonics were predictable, other qualities were not. Minuscule factors could shift climates or the composition of an atmosphere. Some earths were wet and warm. Kala's earth, for instance. Most had similar atmospheres, but none was identical to any other. A few earths were openly inhospitable to humanity. Oxygen cycles and methane cycles were famously temperamental. Sometimes life generated enough greenhouse gas to scorch the land, lifting the oceans into a cloud-born biosphere. Other earths had been permanently

sterilized by impacting comets or passing supernovae. Yet those traps were easy to spot with a working ripper; little bites of air warned the Fathers about the most deadly places. What the woman lecturer discussed, and in astonishing depth, were worlds that only seemed inviting. Everyone knew examples from history. After a hard year or two, or, in the case of Mattie's House, a full ten years of misery, the reigning Father had realized there was no hope, and, gathering up his pioneers, he used the ripper's remaining power to leap to another, more favorable world.

"We have a wonderful home," the woman declared, leaning against one of the native trees. "A long Ice Age has just released this land, giving us a favorable climate. And the northern soils have been bulldozed to the warm south, making the black ground we always name Iowa and Ohio and Ukraine."

Her praise of their world earned grateful nods from tourists.

"And we're blessed in having so much experience," she continued. "Our ancestors learned long ago what to bring and how to adapt. Our culture is designed to grow quickly, and by every measure. Ten centuries is not a long time—not to a world or even to a young species like ours—but that's all the time we needed here to make a home for five billion of us."

Smiles rode the nodding faces.

"But we're most blessed in this way," she said. Then she paused, letting her wise old eyes take their

measure of her audience. “We are awfully lucky because this world is extremely weak. For reasons known and reasons only guessed at, natural selection took its sweet time here. These native life forms are roughly equivalent to the First Earth during its long ago Permian. The smartest tomb-tombs isn't smart at all. And as any good Father knows, intelligence is the first quality to measure when you arrive at a new home.”

Kala noticed the adults' approval. Here was the central point; the woman was speaking to the young men in her audience, giving them advice should they ever want to become a Father.

One hand lifted, begging to be seen.

“Yes, sir,” said the lecturer. “A question?”

“I could ask a question, I suppose.” The hand belonged to an elderly gentleman with the pale brown eyes of the First Father as well as his own thick mane of white hair. “Mostly, I was going to offer my observations. This morning, I was hiking the trail to Passion Lake—”

“A long walk,” the woman interjected, perhaps trying to compliment his endurance.

“I was bitten by mosquitoes,” he announced. “Nothing new about that, I suppose. And I saw rilly birds nesting in one of your false-spruces.” The rillies were native to the Second Father's world. “And I'm quite sure I saw mice—our mice—in the undergrowth. Which looked an awful lot like oleo-weed when it's gone wild.”

Oleo-weed was from the First Father's world, and it had been a human companion for the last twenty thousand years.

The lecturer adjusted her big-brimmed hat as she nodded, acting unperturbed. "We have a few exotics on the reserve," she agreed. "Despite our rules and restrictions—"

"Is this right?" the white-haired man interrupted.

"Pardon me?"

"Right," he repeated. "Correct. Responsible. What we are doing here ... is it worth the damage done to a helpless planet...?"

More than anything, the audience was either puzzled by his attitude or completely indifferent. Half of the tourists turned away, pretending to take a burning interest in random rocks or the soft peculiar bark of the trees.

The lecturer pulled the mountain air across her teeth. "There are estimates," she began. "I'm sure everybody here has seen the figures. The First Father was the first pioneer, but he surely wasn't the only one to lead people away from the Old Earth. Yet even if you count only that one man and his wives, and if you make a conservative estimate of how many Fathers sprang up from that first world ... and then you assume that half of those Fathers built homes filled with young people and their own wandering hearts ... that means that by now, millions of colony worlds have been generated by that first example.



And each of those millions might have founded another million or so worlds—”

“An exponential explosion,” the man interjected.

“Inside an endless Creation, as we understand these things.” She spoke with a grim delight. “No limit to the worlds, no end to the variety. And why shouldn't humanity claim as much of that infinity as he can?”

“Then I suppose all of this has to be moral,” the white-haired man added, the smile pleasant but his manner sarcastic. “I guess my point is, madam ... you and those like you are eventually going to discover yourselves without employment. Because there will be a day, and soon, when this lovely ground is going to look like every other part of our world, thick with the same weeds and clinging creatures we know best, and exactly the same as the twenty trillion other human places.”

“Yes,” said the woman, her satisfaction obvious. “That is the future, yes.”

The lecturer wasn't looking at Kala, but every word felt as if it had been aimed her way. For the first time in her life, she saw an inevitable future. She loved this alien forest, but it couldn't last. An endless doom lay over the landscape, and she wanted to weep. Even her brother noticed her pain, smiling warily while he asked, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

She couldn't say. She didn't know how to define her mind's madness. Yet afterwards, making the journey back to the parking lot, she thought again of

that wildcat; and with a fury honest and pure, she wished that she had left the creature inside that trap. Or better, that she had used that long stick of hers and beaten it to death.

The most devoted wives left behind written accounts of their adventures on the new world—the seven essential books in the First Father's Testament. Quite a few churches also included the two Sarah diaries, while the more progressive faiths, such as the one Kala's family belonged to, made room for the Six Angry Wives. Adding to the confusion were the dozens if not hundreds of texts and fragmentary accounts left behind by lesser-known voices, as well as those infamous documents generally regarded to be fictions at best, and, at worst, pure heresies.

When Kala was twelve, an older girl handed her a small, cat-eared booklet. "I didn't give this to you," the girl warned. "Read it and then give it to somebody else, or burn it. Promise me?"

"I promise."

Past Fathers had strictly forbidden this testament, but someone always managed to smuggle at least one copy to the next world. The First Mother's Tale was said to be a third-person account of Claire, the fifty-year-old widow whose job it had been to watch over the sorority house and its precious girls. Claire was a judicious, pragmatic woman—qualities missing in her own mother, Kala realized sadly. On humanity's most important day, the housemother woke to shouts and wild weeping. She threw on a bathrobe and stepped into slippers before leaving her private ground-floor apartment. Urgent arms grabbed her up and dragged

her down a darkened hallway. A dozen terrified voices were rambling on about some horrible disaster. The power was out, Claire noticed. Yet she couldn't find any trace of cataclysms. The house walls were intact. There was no obvious fire or flood. Whatever the disturbance, it had been so minor that even the framed photographs of Delta sisters were still neatly perched on their usual nails.

Then Claire stepped out the front door, and hesitated. Two long trucks were parked in the otherwise empty street. But where was the campus? Past the trucks, exactly where the Fine Arts building should be, a rugged berm had been made of gray dirt and gray stone and shattered tree trunks. Beyond the berm was a forest of strange willowy trees. Nameless odors and a dense gray mist were drifting out of the forest on a gentle wind. And illuminated by the moon and endless stars was a flock of leathery creatures, perched together on the nearest limbs, hundreds of simple black eyes staring at the newcomers.

The First Father was sitting halfway down the front steps, a deer rifle cradled in his lap, a box of ammunition between his feet, hands trembling while the pale brown eyes stared out at the first ruddy traces of the daylight.

Women were still emerging from every door, every fire escape. Alone and in little groups, they would wander to the edge of their old world, the bravest ones climbing the berm to catch a glimpse of the strange landscape before retreating again, gathering

together on the damp lawn while staring at the only man in their world.

Claire pulled her robe tight and walked past the First Father.

No life could have prepared her for that day, yet she found the resolve to smile in a believable fashion, offering encouraging words and calculated hugs. She told her girls that everything would be fine. She promised they'd be home again in time for classes. Then she turned her attentions to the third truck. It was parked beside the house, its accordion door raised and its loading ramp dropped to the grass. Claire climbed the ramp and stared at the strange, battered machinery inside. The young woman who had heard the ripper in operation—the only witness to their leap across invisible dimensions—was telling her story to her sisters, again and again. Claire listened. Then she gathered the handful of physics majors and asked if the ripper was authentic. It was. Could it really do these awful things? Absolutely. Claire inhaled deeply and hugged herself, then asked if there was any possible way, with everything they knew and the tools at hand, that this awful-looking damage could be fixed?

No, it couldn't be. And even if there was some way to patch it up, nobody here would ever see home again.

“Why not?” Claire asked, refusing to give in. “Maybe not with this ripper-machine, no. But why

not build a new one with the good parts here and new components that we make ourselves...?”

One young woman was an honor student—a senior ready to graduate with a double major in physics and mathematics. Her name, as it happened, was Kala—a coincidence that made one girl's heart quicken as she read along. That ancient Kala provided the smartest, most discouraging voice. There wouldn't be any cobbling together of parts, she maintained. Many times, she had seen the ripper used, and she had even helped operate it on occasion. As much as anyone here, she understood its powers and limitations. Navigating through the multiverse was just this side of impossible. To Claire and a few of her sisters, the First Kala explained how the Creation was infinite, and how every cubic nanometer of their world contained trillions of potential destinations.

“Alien worlds?” asked Claire.

“Alternate earths,” Kala preferred. “More than two billion years ago, the world around us split away from our earth.”

“Why?”

“Quantum rules,” said Kala, explaining nothing. “Every world is constantly dividing into a multitude of new possibilities. There's some neat and subtle harmonics at play, and I don't understand much of it. But that's why the rippers can find earths like this. Two billion years and about half a nanometer divide our home from this place.”

That was a lot for a housemother to swallow, but Claire did her best.

Kala continued spelling out their doom. “Even if we could repair the machine—do it right now, with a screwdriver and two minutes of work—our earth is lost. Finding it would be like finding a single piece of dust inside a world made of dust. It's that difficult. That impossible. We're trapped here, and Owen knows it. And that's part of his plan, I bet.”

“Owen?” the First Mother asked. “Is that his name?”

Kala nodded, glancing back at the armed man.

“So you know Owen, do you?”

Kala rolled her eyes as women do when they feel uncomfortable in a certain man's presence. “He's a graduate student in physics,” she explained. “I don't know him that well. He's got a trust fund, supposedly, and he's been stuck on his master's thesis for years.” Then with the next breath, she confessed, “We went out once. Last year. Once, or maybe twice. Then I broke it off.”

Here was a staggering revelation for the living Kala: The woman who brought her name to the new world had a romantic relationship with the First Father. And then she had rejected him. Perhaps Owen still loved the girl, Kala reasoned. He loved her and wanted to possess her. And what if this enormous deed—the basis for countless lives and loves—came from one bitter lover's revenge?

But motivations never matter as much as results.

Whatever Owen's reasons, women sobbed while other women sat on the lawn, knees to their faces, refusing to believe what their senses told them. Claire stood motionless, absorbing what Kala and the other girls had to tell her. Meanwhile a sun identical to their sun rose, the air instantly growing warmer. Then the winged natives swept in low, examining the newcomers with their empty black eyes. A giant beast not unlike a tortoise, only larger than most rooms, calmly crawled over the round berm, sliding down to the lawn where it happily began to munch on grass. Meanwhile, houseflies and termites, dandelion fluff and blind earthworms, were beginning their migrations into the new woods. Bumblebees and starlings left their nests in search of food, while carpenter ants happily chewed on the local timber. Whatever you believe about the First Father, one fact is obvious: He was an uncommonly fortunate individual. The first new world proved to be a lazy place full of corners and flavors that earth species found to their liking. Included among the lucky colonists were two stray cats. One was curled up inside a storage shed, tending to her newborn litter, while the other was no more than a few days pregnant. And into that genetic puddle were added three kittens smuggled into the sorority house by a young woman whose identity, and perhaps her own genetics, had long ago vanished from human affairs.

On that glorious morning, two worlds were married.



Each Testament had its differences, and every story was believable, but only to a maybe-so point. Claire's heretical story was the version Kala liked best and could even believe—a sordid tale of women trapped in awful circumstances but doing their noble best to survive.

“Hello, Owen,” said Claire.

The young man blinked, glancing at the middle-aged woman standing before him. Claire was still wearing her bathrobe and a long nightgown and old slippers. To Owen, the woman couldn't have appeared less interesting. He nodded briefly and said nothing, always staring into the distance, eyes dancing from excitement but a little sleepiness creeping into their corners.

“What are you doing, Owen?”

“Standing guard,” he said, managing a tense pride.

With the most reasonable voice possible, she asked, “What are you guarding us from?”

The young man said nothing.

“Owen,” she repeated. Once. Twice. Then twice more.

“I'm sorry,” he muttered, watching a single leather-wing dance in the air overhead. “There's a gauge on the ripper. It says our oxygen is about 80 percent usual. It's going to be like living in the mountains. So I'm sorry about that. I set the parameters too wide. At least for now, we're going to have to move slowly and let our bodies adapt.”

Claire sighed. Then one last time, she asked, “What are you guarding us from, Owen?”

“I wouldn't know.”

“You don't know what's out there?”

“No.” He shrugged his shoulders, both hands gripping the stock of the rifle. “I saw you and Kala talking. Didn't she tell you? There's no way to tell much about a new world. The ripper can taste its air, and if it finds free oxygen and water and marker molecules that mean you're very close to the ground—”

“You kidnapped us, Owen.” She spoke firmly, with a measured heat. “Without anyone's permission, you brought us here and marooned us.”

“I'm marooned too,” he countered.

“And why should that make us feel better?”

Finally, Owen studied the woman. Perhaps for the first time, he was gaining an appreciation for this unexpected wild card.

“Feel how you want to feel,” he said, speaking to her and everyone else in range of his voice. “This is our world now. We live or die here. We can make something out of our circumstances, or we can vanish away.”

He wasn't a weak man, and, better than most people could have done, he had prepared for this incredible day. By then, Claire had realized some of that. Yet what mattered most was to get the man to admit the truth. That's why she climbed the steps, forcing him to stare at her face. “Are you much of a

shot, Owen? Did you serve in the military? In your little life, have you even once gone hunting?"

He shook his head. "None of those things, no."

"I have," Claire promised. "I served in the Army. My dead husband used to take me out chasing quail. When I was about your age, I shot a five-point whitetail buck."

Owen didn't know what to make of that news. "Okay. Good, I guess."

Claire kept her eyes on him. "Did you bring other guns?"

"Why?"

"Because you can't look everywhere at once," she reminded him. "I could ask a couple of these ladies to climb on the roof, just to keep tabs on things. And maybe we should decide who can shoot, if it actually comes to that and we have to defend the house."

Owen took a deep, rather worried breath. "I hope that doesn't happen."

"Are there more guns?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

His eyes tracked to the right.

"In that truck?" Claire glanced over her shoulder. "The women checked the doors. They're locked, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"To keep us out? Is that it?"

He shifted his weight, and with a complaining tone said, "I can't see much, with you in the way."

“I guess not,” Claire responded. Then she pushed closer, asking, “Do you know the combinations of those padlocks?”

“Sure.”

“Are you going to open them?”

Silence.

“All right,” she said. “I guess that's just a little problem for now.”

Owen nodded, pretending to be in complete control, set his rifle to one side, looked at her, and said, “I guess it is.”

“You're what's important. You are essential.”

“You bet.”

“And for reasons bigger than a few locks.”

The young man had to smile.

“What's inside the trucks?”

He quickly summarized the wealth brought from the old world, then happily added, “It's a great beginning for our colony.”

“That does sound wonderful,” Claire replied, her voice dipped in sarcasm.

Owen smiled, hearing the words but missing their color.

“And if you could please tell me ... when do you intend to give us this good food and water? Does your generosity have a timetable?”

“It does.”

“So tell me.”

Owen offered a smug wink, and then he sat back on the hard steps, lifting a hand, showing her three fingers.

“Excuse me?”

“Three girls,” he explained. Then the hand dropped, and he added, “You know what I mean.”

Here was another revelation: In every official Testament, the First Father unlocked every door and box in the first few minutes. Without exception, he was gracious and caring, and the girls practically fought one another for the chance to sleep with him.

“You want three of my ladies...?”

“Yes.”

Rage stole away Claire's voice.

Again, Owen said, “Yes.”

“Are you going to select them?” the housemother muttered. “Or is this going to be a job for volunteers?”

Every face was fixed on Owen, and he clearly enjoyed the attention. He must have dreamed for months about this one moment, imagining the tangible, irresistible power that no one could deny ... and because of that strength, he could shrug his shoulders, admitting, “It doesn't matter who. If there's three volunteers, then that's fine.”

“You want them now?”

“Or in a week. I can wait, if I have to.”

“You don't have to.”

The smile brightened. “Good.”

“And you get just one woman,” Claire warned, grabbing the belt of her bathrobe and tightening the sloppy knot. “Me.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Claire touched him on a knee. “No other deal is on the table, Owen. You and I are going inside. Now. My room, my bed, and afterwards, you're going to get us into those trucks, and you'll hand over every weapon you brought here. Is that understood?”

The young man's face colored. “You're not in any position—”

“Owen,” she interrupted. Then she said, “Darling,” with a bite to her voice. And she reached out with the hand not on his knee, grabbing his bony chin while staring into the faint brown eyes that eventually would find themselves scattered across endless worlds. “This may come as news to you. But most men of your age and means and apparent intelligence don't have to go to these lengths to get their dicks wet.”

He flinched, just for an instant.

“You don't know very much about women. Do you, Owen?”

“I do.”

“Bullshit.”

He blinked, biting his lower lip.

“You don't know us,” she whispered to him. “Let me warn you about the nature of women, Owen. Everyone here is going to realize that you're just a

very ignorant creature. If they don't know it already, that is. And if you think you've got power over us ... well, let's just say you have some very strange illusions that need to die....”

“Quiet,” he whispered.

But Claire kept talking, reminding him, “In another few weeks, a couple months at most, you will be doomed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Once enough girls are pregnant, we won't need you anymore.”

All the careful planning, but he hadn't let himself imagine this one obvious possibility. He said as much with his stiff face and the backward tilt of his frightened body.

“You can have all the guns in the world—hell, you do have all the guns—but you're going to end up getting knifed in bed. Yes, that could happen, Owen. Then in another few years, when your sons are old enough and my Deltas are in their late thirties ... they'll still be young enough to use those boys' little seeds....”

“No,” he muttered.

“Yes,” she said. Her hand squeezed his knee. “Or maybe we could arrive at a compromise. Surrender your guns and open every lock, and afterwards, maybe you can try to do everything in your power to make this mess a little more bearable for us...”

“And what do I get?”

“You live to be an old man. And if you're an exceptionally good man from here on, maybe your grandchildren will forgive you for what you've done. And if you're luckier than you deserve to be, perhaps they'll even like you.”



When Kala was fourteen, her church acquired the means to send one hundred blessed newlyweds off to another world. United Manufacturing had built a class-B ripper specifically for them. Tithes and government grants paid for the machine, while the stockpiles of critical supplies came through direct donations as well as a few wealthy benefactors. A standard hemispherical building was erected in an isolated field, its dimensions slightly smaller than the ripper's reach. Iron and copper plates made the rounded walls, nickel and tin and other useful metals forming the interior ribs, and secured to the roof were a few pure gold trimmings. The ground beneath had been excavated, dirt replaced with a bed of high-grade fertilizer and an insulated fuel tank set just under the bright steel floor. No portion of the cavernous interior was wasted: The young couples were taking foodstuffs and clean water, sealed animal pens and elaborate seed stocks, plus generators and earth-movers, medicine enough to keep an entire city fit, and the intellectual supplies necessary to build civilization once again.

On the wedding day, the congregation was given its last chance to see what the sacrifices had purchased. Several thousand parishioners gathered in long patient lines, donning sterile gloves and filter masks, impermeable sacks tied about their feet. Why chance giving some disease to the livestock or leaving

rust spores on the otherwise sterile steel floor? The young pioneers stood in the crisscrossing hallways, brides dressed in white gowns, grooms in taut black suits, all wearing masks and gloves. One of the benefits born from the seventeen previous migrations was that most communicable diseases had been left behind. Only sinus colds and little infections born from mutating staph and strep were a problem. Yet even there, it was hoped that this migration would bring the golden moment, humanity finally escaping even those minor ailments.

The youngest brides were only a few years older than Kala, and she knew them well enough to make small talk before wishing them good-bye with the standard phrase, “Blessings in your new world.”

Every girl's mask was wet with tears. Each was weeping for her own reason, but Kala was at a loss to guess who felt what. Some probably adored their temporary fame, while other girls cried out of simple stage fright. A few lucky brides probably felt utter love for their husbands-to-be, while others saw this mission as a holy calling. But some of the girls had to be genuinely terrified: The smartest few probably awoke this morning to the realization that they were doomed, snared in a vast and dangerous undertaking that had never quite claimed their hearts.

Standing near the burly ripper—a place of some honor—was a girl named Tina. Speaking through her soggy mask, she said to Kala, “May you find your new world soon.”

“And bless you in yours.”

Kala had no interest in emigrating. But what else could she say? Tina was soon to vanish, and the girl had always been friendly to Kala. Named for the first wife to give a son to the First Father, Tina was short and a little stocky, and, by most measures, not pretty. But her father was a deacon, and more important, her grandmother had offered a considerable dowry to the family that took her grandchild. Was the bride-to-be aware of these political dealings? And if so, did it matter to her? Tina seemed genuinely thrilled by her circumstances, giggling and pulling Kala closer, sounding like a very best friend when she asked, “Isn't this a beautiful day?”

“Yes,” Kala lied.

“And tomorrow will be better still. Don't you think?”

The mass marriage would be held this evening, and come dawn, the big ripper would roar to life.

“Tomorrow will be different,” Kala agreed, suddenly tired of their game.

Behind Tina, wrapped in thick plastic, was the colony's library. Ten thousand classic works were etched into sheets of tempered glass, each sheet thin as a hair and guaranteed to survive ten thousand years of weather and hard use. Among those works were the writings of every Father and the Testaments of the Fifteen Wives, plus copies of the ancient textbooks that the Deltas brought from the Old Earth. As language evolved, the texts had been translated.

Kala had digested quite a few of them, including the introductions to ecology and philosophy, the fat histories of several awful wars, and an astonishing fable called Huckster Finn.

Tina noticed her young friend staring at the library. "I'm not a reader," she confided. "Not like you are, Kala."

The girl was rather simple, it was said.

"But I'm bringing my books too." Only the bride's brown eyes were visible, dark eyebrows acquiring a mischievous look. "Ask me what I'm taking."

"What are you taking, Tina?"

She mentioned several unremarkable titles. Then after a dramatic pause, she said, "The Duty of Eve. I'm taking that too."

Kala flinched.

"Don't tell anybody," the girl begged.

"Why would I?" Kala replied. "You can carry whatever you want, inside your wedding trunk."

The Duty was popular among conservative faiths. Historians claimed it was written by an unnamed Wife on the second new world—a saintly creature who died giving birth to her fifth son, but left behind a message from one of God's good angels: Suffering was noble, sacrifice led to purity, and if your children walked where no one had walked before, your life had been worth every misery.

"Oh, Kala. I always wanted to know you better," Tina continued. "I mean, you're such a beautiful girl, and smart. But you know that already, don't you?"

Kala couldn't think of a worthwhile response.

With both hands, Tina held tight to Kala's arm. "I have an extra copy of *The Duty*. I'll let you have it, if you want."

She said, "No."

"Think about it."

"I don't want it—"

"You're sure?"

"Yes," Kala blurted. "I don't want that damned book." Then she yanked her arm free and hurried away.

Tina stared after her, anger fading into subtler, harder to name emotions.

Kala felt the eyes burning against her neck, and she was a little bit ashamed for spoiling their last moments together. But the pain was brief. After all, she had been nothing but polite. It was the stupid girl who ruined everything.

According to *The Duty*, every woman's dream was to surrender to one great man. Kala had read enough excerpts to know too much. The clumsy, relentless point of that idiotic old book was that a holy girl found her great man, and she did everything possible to sleep with him, even if that meant sharing his body with a thousand other wives. The best historians were of one mind on this matter: *The Duty* wasn't a revelation straight from God, or even some second-tier angel. It was a horny man's fantasy written down in some lost age, still embraced by the conniving and believed by every fool.

Kala walked fast, muttering to herself.

Sandor was standing beside the ripper, chatting amiably with the newly elected Next Father. Her brother had become a strong young man, stubborn and charming and very handsome, and, by most measures, as smart as any sixteen-year-old could be. He often spoke about leaving the world, but only if he was elected to a Next Father's post. That was how it was done in their church: One bride for each groom, and the most deserving couple was voted authority over the new colony.

"It's a good day," Sandor sang out. "Try smiling."

Kala pushed past him, down the crowded aisle and out into the fading sunshine.

Sandor excused himself and followed. He would always be her older brother, and that made him protective as well as sensitive to her feelings. He demanded to know what was wrong, and she told him. Then he knew exactly what to say. "The girl's as stupid as she is homely, and what does it matter to you?"

Nothing. It didn't matter at all, of course.

"Our world's going to be better without her," he promised.

But another world would be polluted as a consequence: A fact that Kala couldn't forget, much less forgive.

\* \* \* \*

The marriage was held at dusk, on a wide meadow of mowed spring fescue. The regional bishop—a

charming and wise old gentleman—begged God and His trusted angels to watch over these good brave souls. Then with a joyful, almost giddy tone, he warned the fifty new couples to love one another in the world they were going to build. “Hold to your monogamy,” he called out. “Raise a good family together, and fill the wonderland where destiny has called you.”

A reception was held in the same meadow, under temporary lights, the mood slipping from celebration to grief and back again. Everyone drank more than was normal. Eventually the newlyweds slipped off to the fifty small huts standing near the dome-shaped building. Grooms removed the white gowns of their brides, and the new wives folded the gowns and stored them inside watertight wooden trunks, along with artifacts and knickknacks from a life they would soon abandon.

Kala couldn't help but imagine what happened next inside the huts.

A few sips of wine made her warm and even a little happy. She chatted with friends and adults, and she even spent a few minutes listening to her father. He was drunk and silly, telling her how proud he was of her. She was so much smarter than he had ever been, and prettier even than her mother. “Did I just say that? Don't tell on me, Kala.” Then he continued, claiming that whatever she wanted from her life was fine with him ... just so long as she was happy enough to smile like she was smiling right now....

Kala loved the dear man, but he didn't mean those words. Sober again, he would find some way to remind her that Sandor was his favorite child. Flashing his best grin, he would mention her brother's golden aspirations and then talk wistfully about his grandchildren embracing their own world.

Kala finally excused herself, needing a bathroom.

Abandoning the meadow, walking alone in darkness, she considered her father's drunken promise to let her live her own life. But what was "her life"? The question brought pressure, and not just from parents and teachers and her assorted friends. Kala's own ignorance about her future was the worst of it. Such a bright creature—everyone said that about her. But when it came to her destiny, she didn't have so much as a clue.

As Kala walked through the oak woods, she noticed another person moving somewhere behind her. But she wasn't frightened until she paused, and an instant later, that second set of feet stopped too.

Kala turned, intending to glance over her shoulder.

Suddenly a cool black sack was dropped over her head, and an irresistible strength pushed her to the ground. Then a man's voice—a vaguely familiar voice—whispered into one of her covered ears. "Fight me," he said, "and I'll kill you. Make one sound, and I'll kill your parents too."

She was numb, empty and half-dead.

Her abductor tied her up and gagged her with a rope fitted over the black sack, and then he dragged



her in a new direction, pausing at a service entrance in back of the metal dome. She heard fingers pushing buttons and hinges squeaking, and then the ground turned to steel as her long legs were dragged across the pioneers' floor.

Her numbness vanished, replaced with wild terror.

Blindly, Kala swung her bound legs and clipped his, and he responded with laughter, kneeling down to speak with a lover's whisper. "We can dance later, you and me. Tonight is Tina's turn. Sorry, sorry."

She was tied to a crate filled with sawdust, and by the smell of it, hundreds of fertile tortoise eggs.

When the service door closed, Kala tugged at the knots. How much time was left? How many hours did she have? Panic gave her a fabulous strength, but every jerk and twist only tightened the knots, and after a few minutes of work, she was exhausted, sobbing through the rope gag.

No one was going to find her.

And when they were in the new world, Tina's husband—a big strong creature with connections and a good name—would pretend to discover Kala, cutting her loose and probably telling everyone else, "Look who wanted to come with us! My wife's little friend!" And before she could say two words, he would add, "I'll feed her from our share of the stores. Yes, she's my responsibility now."

Kala gathered herself for another try at the ropes.

Then the service door opened with the same telltale squeak, and somebody began to walk slowly

past her, down the aisle and back again, pausing beside her for a moment before placing a knife against her wrists, yanking hard and cutting the rope clear through.

Off came her gag, then the black sack.

Sandor was holding a small flashlight in his free hand, and he touched her softly on her face, on her neck. “You all right?”

She nodded.

“Good thing I bumped into that prick out there.” Her brother was trying to look grateful, but his expression and voice were tense as could be. “I asked him, ‘Why aren't you with your bride?’ But he didn't say anything. Which bothered me, you know.” He paused, then added, “I've seen him stare at you, Kala.”

“You have?”

“Haven't you?” Sandor took a deep breath, then another, gathering himself. “So I asked if he'd seen you come this way. And then he said, ‘Get away from me, little boy.’”

Sandor began cutting her legs free. In the glare of his light, she saw his favorite pocket knife—the big blade made sticky and red, covered as it was with an appalling amount of blood.

“Did you kill him?” Kala muttered.

In a grim whisper, Sandor said, “Hardly.”

“What happened?”

“I saved you,” he answered.

“But what did you do to that man?” she demanded.

“Man?” Sandor broke into a quiet, deathly laugh. “I don't know, Kala. You're the biologist in the family. But I don't think you could call him male anymore ... if you see what I mean....”

In a personal ritual, Kala brought *The First Mother's Tale* out of hiding each spring and read it from cover to cover. She found pleasure in the book's adventures and heroisms, and the tragedies made her reliably sad, and even with whole tracts memorized, she always felt as if she was experiencing Claire's story for the first time. That strong, determined woman did everything possible to help her girls while making Owen behave. She made certain that every adult had a vote in every important decision—votes that were made after her counsel, naturally. Claire always spoke for the dead at funerals, and she oversaw a small feast commemorating the anniversary of their arrival. Hard famine came during their third winter. The local tortoises had been hunted to extinction while the earthly crops never prospered. It was Claire who imposed a ration system for the remaining food, and after six Wives were caught breaking into the last cache of canned goods, Claire served as judge in the bitter trial. Each girl claimed to have acted for the good of a hungry baby or babies. But there were dozens of children by then, and whose stomach wasn't growling? Twelve other girls—some Wives, some not—served as the jury. In a ritual ancient as the species, they listened to the evidence before stepping off by themselves, returning with a verdict that found each defendant guilty as charged.

The housemother had no choice but to order a full banishment.

The original Tina was one of the criminals. After some rough talk and vacuous threats, she and the other five picked up their toddlers and started south, hoping to hike their way to fresh pastures and easy food.

There was no doubt that the Six Angry Wives existed. But no consistent tale of crimes was told about them, and no Testament mentioned Claire as the presiding judge. What was known was that six women wandered through the wilderness, and when they returned ten years later, they brought blue-hens and fresh tortoise eggs as well as their four surviving children—including one lovely brown-eyed boy, nearly grown and eager to meet his father.

The truth was, no important church recognized Claire's existence, which was the same as never existing. Even the oddest offshoot faiths denied her any vital role in their history. According to *The First Mother's Tale*, the housemother lived another seven years and died peacefully in her sleep. Owen borrowed one of his Wives' Bibles to read prayers over her grave. With the relief of someone who had escaped a long burden, he thanked the woman's soul for its good work and wise guidance. And then *The First Mother's Tale* concluded with a few hopeful words from its author, the brilliant and long-dead Kala.

Except of course nothing is ever finished, and considering everything that had happened since, most of the story had barely begun.

According to most researchers, it took a full century for the pioneers to find their stride. Owen lived to be eighty—a virile man to the end—and borrowing on his godly status, he continued sleeping with an assortment of willing, fertile granddaughters. Claire's grave was soon lost to time, or she never even existed. But Owen's burial site became the world's first monument. Limestone blocks were dragged from a quarry and piled high, and the structure was decorated with a lordly statue and praising words as well as the original, still useless, ripper. Worshippers traveled for days and weeks just for a chance to kneel at the feet of the great man's likeness, and sometimes an old wound felt healed or some tireless despair would suddenly lift, proving again the powers of the First Father.

Four centuries later, enough bodies and minds were wandering the world to allow a handful to become scientists.

Inside a thousand years, humanity had spread across the warm, oxygen-impooverished globe, keeping to the lowlands, erasing the native species that fit no role. Cobbler-shops became factories, schools became universities, and slowly, the extraordinary skills necessary to build new rippers came back into the world.

In 1003, a wealthy young man purchased advertisement time on every television network. "The bigger the ripper, the better the seed," he declared to the world. And with that, he unveiled a giant Class-A ripper as well as the spacious house that would carry him and a thousand wives to a new world, plus enough frozen sperm from quality men to ensure a diverse, vital society.

He found no shortage of eager young woman.

What actually became of that colony and its people, no one could say. To leave was to vanish in every sense of the word. But thousands of rippers were built during the following centuries. Millions of pioneers left that first new world, praying for richer air and tastier foods. And after six centuries of emigration, Kala's descendants gathered around a small class-B, read passages from the Bible as well as from the Wives' Testaments, and then together they managed their small, great step into the unknown.

At nineteen, Kala applied with the Parks Committee, and through luck and her own persistence, she was posted to the same reserve she once visited as a youngster. She was given heavy boots and a wide-brimmed hat as well as an oversized brown uniform with a Novice tag pinned to her chest. Her first week of summer was spent giving tours to visitors curious about the native fauna and flora. But the assignment wasn't a rousing success, which was why she was soon transferred to exotic eradications—an improved posting, as it happened. Kala was free to drive the back roads in an official truck, parking at set points and walking deep into the alien forest. Hundreds of traps had to be checked every few days. Native animals were released, while the exotics were killed, usually with air-driven needles or a practiced blow to the head. At day's end, she would return to the main office and don plastic gloves, throwing the various carcasses into a cremation furnace—fat starlings and fatter house mice, mostly. If they died in the trap, the bodies would stink. But she quickly grew accustomed to the carnage. In her mind, she was doing important, frustrating work. Kala often pictured herself as a soldier standing on the front lines, alone, waging a noble struggle for which she expected almost nothing: A little money, the occasional encouragement, and, of course, the chance to return to the wilderness every morning, enjoying



its doomed and fading strangeness for another long day.

One July afternoon, while Kala worked at the incinerator, another novice appeared. They had been friendly in the past. But today, for no obvious reason, the young man seemed uncomfortable. As soon as he saw Kala, his face stiffened and his gait slowed, and then, perhaps reading her puzzlement, he suddenly sped up again. "Hello," he offered with the softest possible voice.

Kala smiled while flinging a dead cat into the fire. "Did you hear?" she began. "They found a new herd of Harry's-big-days. Above Saint Mary's Glacier."

The young man hesitated for an instant. Then with a rushed voice, he sputtered, "I've got an errand. Bye now."

Long ago, Kala learned that she wasn't as sensitive to emotions as most people. Noticing something was wrong now meant there was a fair chance that it really was. Why was that boy nervous? Was she in trouble again? And if so, what had she screwed up this time?

When Kala was giving tours, there was an unfortunate incident. A big blowhard from the Grandfather Cult joined the other tourists. His personal mission was to commandeer her lecture. One moment, she was describing the false spruces and explaining how the tomb-tombs depended wholly on them. And suddenly the blowhard interrupted. With an idiot's voice, he announced that the native

trees were useless as well as ugly, and all the local animals were stupid as the rocks, and their world's work wouldn't be finished until every miserable corner like this was turned into oak trees and concrete.

Kala's job demanded a certain reserve. Lecturers were not to share their opinions, unless those opinions coincided with official park policy. Usually she managed to keep her feelings in check. She endured three loud interruptions. But then the prick mentioned his fifteen sons and twelve lovely daughters, boasting that each child would end up on a different new world. Kala couldn't hold back. She was half his age and half his size, but she stepped up to him and pushed a finger into his belly, saying, "If I was your child, I'd want to leave this world too."

Most of the audience smiled, and quite a few laughed.

But the blowhard turned and marched to the front office, and by day's end, Kala was given a new job killing wildcats and other vermin.

The last carcasses were burning when her superior emerged from the station. He was an older fellow—a life-long civil servant who probably dreamed of peace and quiet until his retirement, and then a peaceful death. Approaching his temperamental novice, the man put on a painful smile, twice saying her name before adding, "I need to talk to you," with a cautious tone.

A headless starling lay on the dirt. With a boot, Kala kicked it into the incinerator and again shut the heavy iron door. Then with a brazen tone, she said, "Listen to my side first."

The man stopped short.

"I mean it," she continued. "I don't know what you've heard. I don't even know when I could have done something wrong. But I had very good reasons—"

"Kala."

"And you should hear my explanation first."

The poor old gentleman dipped his head, shaking it sadly, telling her, "Kala, sweetness. I'm sorry. All I want to say ... to tell you ... is that your brother called this morning. Right after you drove off." He paused long enough to breathe, and then informed her, "Your father died last night, and I'm very, very sorry."

\* \* \* \*

Thrifty and impractical: Father was the same in death as in life.

That was an uncharitable assessment, but it happened to be true. Father left behind a long list of wishes, and Mother did everything he wanted, including the simple juniper box and no official funeral procession. The tombstone was equally minimal, and because cemeteries were expensive, he had mandated a private plot he had purchased as soon as he fell sick—a secret illness kept from everyone, including his wife of thirty-one years. But the burial site had drawbacks, including the absence

of any road passing within a couple of hundred yards. Kala's parents hadn't been active in any church for years, which meant it was their scattered family that was responsible for every arrangement, including digging the grave to a legal depth, finding pallbearers to help carry the graceless casket, and then, after the painful service, filling in the hole once again.

"It's a lovely piece of ground," Sandor mentioned, and not for the first time. Then he dropped a load of the dry gray earth, watching it scatter across a lid of tightly fitted red planks, big clods thumping while the tiny clods scattered, rolling and shattering down to dust, making the skittering sound of busy mice.

"It is pretty," Mother echoed, sitting on one of forty folding chairs.

Everyone else had left. Barely three dozen relatives and friends had attended the service, and probably only half of them had genuinely known the deceased. If Father died ten years ago, Kala realized, two hundred people would have been sitting and standing along this low ridge, and the church would have sent at least two ministers—one to read Scripture, while the other sat with the grieving family, giving practiced comfort. But the comfort-givers abandoned them soon after that terrible wedding night. For maiming one of the grooms, Sandor had been shunned. And once Kala and her parents didn't follow suit, the congregation used more subtle, despicable means to toss them away.

For months, Kala continued meeting old friends in secret. A little too urgently, they would tell her that nothing was her fault. But then they started asking how Kala could live with a person who had done such an awful thing. After all, Sandor had neutered one of the leading citizens of their congregation—an act of pure violence, too large and far too wicked not to be brought to the attention of the police. It didn't matter that he was protecting his only sister, which was normally a good noble principle. And it didn't matter that decent men always defended their women, or that if a girl was abducted when she was fourteen, some family member was required to send a message to those horny fools lurking out there: Hurt her, and I'll take your future generations from you!

None of that meant anything to her friends. And once Kala admitted that she felt thankful for her brother's actions, those same friends stopped inventing tricks to meet her on the sly.

Of course her brother wasn't the only person needing blame. Parents were always culpable for the sins of their children, it was said. Didn't Sandor's father and mother give him their genes and some portion of their dreams? He was technically still a child when the crime occurred, still possessed by them, and supposedly answering first to God and then to them. Wasn't that how it was supposed to be?

The kidnapping was an unfortunate business, said some. The new husband shouldn't have done what he did, and particularly with one of their own. But even

in a faith that cherished monogamy, his actions were understandable. Twenty thousand years of history had built this very common outlook. One deacon—a younger man devoid of charm or common sense—visited their house after Friday service. Sitting in the meeting room with Kala's father, the deacon asked, “Where lies the difference? A young man takes two brides to a fresh world, while another lives with his first wife for twenty years, then holds a painless divorce and starts a new family with a younger woman?”

“There's an enormous difference,” Father had responded, his voice rising, betraying anger Kala had rarely heard before. She was sitting in her bedroom upstairs, listening while her other great defender said, “My daughter is a young girl, first of all. And second, she had no choice in this matter. None. She was tied up like a blue-hen and abused like cargo, thrown into a situation where she would never see her family or world again. Is that fair? Or just? Or at all decent? No, and no, and no again.”

“But to cut the groom like he was cut—”

“A little cut, from what I've heard.”

Which was the greater surprise: Father interrupting, or insulting the penis of another man?

The deacon groaned and then said, “That vicious animal ... your darling Sandor ... he deserves to sit in jail for a few years.”

“Let the courts decide,” Father replied.

“And you realize, of course.” Their guest hesitated a moment before completing his thought. “You understand that no worthy group of pioneers will let him into their ranks. Not now. Not with his taste for violence, they won't.”

“I suppose not.”

“Which is a shame, since your son always wanted to be a Father.”

Kala heard silence, and when she imagined her father's face, she saw a look of utter shame.

Then the stupid deacon had to share one last opinion. With a black voice, he announced, “I came here for a reason, sir. I think you should appreciate what other people are saying.”

“What others?”

“Women as well as the men.”

“Tell me,” Father demanded.

“The girl looks older than fourteen. Her body is grown, and that voice of hers could be a woman's. Any healthy man would be interested. But there's a problem in the words that Kala uses ... and that smart, sharp tone of hers....”

“What are you telling me?”

“Many of us ... your very best friends ... we believe that somebody should knock your daughter down a notch or two. And give her some babies to play with, too.”

Father's chair squeaked—a hard defiant sound.

“Go,” Kala heard him say. “Get out of my house.”

“Gladly,” the deacon replied. “But just so you know my sense of things, realize this: Your daughter had an opportunity that night. It might not seem fair or just to us. But if she and that brother of hers had a wit between them, she'd be living today on a better world. But as things stand, I can't imagine any reputable group will accept trouble like her. Her best bet for the future is a sloppy abduction by a single male who simply doesn't know who she is.”

There was a pause—a gathering of breath and fury. Then for the only time in her life, Kala heard her father saying, “Fuck you.”

That moment, and the entire nightmare ... all of it returned to her at the gravesite. The intervening years suddenly vanished, and her lanky body was left shaking from nerves and misery. Sandor and their mother both noticed. They watched her fling gouts of earth into the hole, and misunderstanding everything, Mom warned, “This isn't a race, sweetness.”

Kala felt as if she had been caught doing something awful. She couldn't name her crime, but shame took hold. Down went the shovel, and she knelt over the partly filled grave, staring at the last two visible corners of her father's casket.

Sandor settled beside her.

With what felt like a single breath, Kala confessed the heart of her thoughts: A single night had torn apart their lives, and despite believing she was blameless, she felt guilty. Somehow all the evil and



poor luck that had followed them since was her fault. Because of her, they had lost their church and friends. Father died young, and now their mother would always be a widow. And meanwhile, her brother was a convicted criminal, stripped from what he had wanted most in life—the opportunity to become a respectable Father to some great new world.

After a difficult pause, Mom broke in. “I wouldn't have liked that at all,” she maintained, “losing you without the chance to say, ‘Good-bye.’”

Kala had hoped for more.

“You're being silly, sweet,” would have been nice. “You aren't to blame for any of this at all,” would have been perfect.

Instead, the old woman remarked, “These last years have been hard. Yes. But don't blame yourself for your father's health.”

Sandor drove his shovel into the earth pile behind Kala. Then with a weighty sigh, he said, “And don't worry about me. I'm doing fine.”

Hardly. Because of his stay in prison, her brother had missed his last years at school. The boy he had been was gone, replaced by a hard young man with self-made tattoos and muscles enough for two athletes.

Kala disagreed.

“You're wrong,” she said with a shake of her head.

Then Sandor laughed at her, kicking a clod or two into the hole and staring down at their father, quietly reminding everyone, “‘Respectable’ is just a word.”

His face was tight, his eyes were enormous, and his voice was dry and slow when he added, “And there's more than one route to reach another world.”

Kala's world was settled by a confederation of small and medium-sized churches. Two million parishioners had pooled their resources, acquiring a powerful class-A ripper—a bruising monster capable of stealing away several city blocks. Each congregation selected their best pioneers, and the Last Father was elected to his lofty post, responsible for the well being of more than a thousand brave souls, plus three stowaways and at least fifteen young women kidnapped on the eve of departure. A farm field on the Asian continent was selected, in a region once known as Hunan. Where wheat and leadfruit normally grew, a huge, multi-story dome was erected. Every pioneer plugged his ears with foam and wax. The giant ripper shook the entire structure as it searched across Creation, and, with a final surge, machine and humans were dragged along the hidden dimensions, covering the minuscule distance.

Rippers had no upper limit to their power, but there were practical considerations. Entering another world meant displacing the native air and land. With its arrival, that class-A ripper shoved aside thousands of tons of dirt and rock, erecting a ring-shaped hill of debris instantly heated by the impact. Wood and peat caught fire, and deep underground, the bedrock was compressed until it was hot enough to melt. The Last Father ordered everyone to remain indoors for the day, breathing bottled air and watching the fires

spread and die under an evening thunderstorm. Then the survey teams were dispatched, racing over the blackened ground, finding pastures of black sedge-like grass where they caught the native mice and pseudoinsects as well as a loose-limbed creature with a glancing resemblance to the lost monkeys in the oldest textbooks.

Experience promised this: If intelligence evolved on a new world, chances are it would live in Asia. Competition was stiffest on large landmasses. That's how it had been on the original earth. Australia was once home to opossums and kangaroos, and dimension-crossing pioneers might have been tempted to linger there, unaware that lying over the horizon were continents full of smart, aggressive placental creatures, including one fierce medium-sized ape with some exceptionally mighty plans.

But the vermin brought home by the survey teams had simple smooth brains, while the monkey-creature proved to be an intellectual midget next to any respectable cat. The Last Father met with his advisors and then with his loving wife, and following a suitable period of contemplation and prayer, he announced that this was where God wished them to remain for the rest of their days.

The new colony expanded swiftly, in numbers and reach.

The Last Father died with honor, six of his nine children carrying his body into a granite cathedral built at the site of their arrival.

By then villages and little cities were scattered across a thousand miles of wilderness. Within ten generations, coal-fired ships were mapping coastlines on every side of the Mother Ocean, while little parties were moving inland, skirting the edges of the Tibetan Plateau on their way to places once called Persia and Turkey, Lebanon and France.

The original churches grew and split apart, or they shriveled and died.

And always, new faiths were emerging, often born from a single believer's ideals and his very public fantasies.

The original class-A ripper served as an altar inside the Last Father's cathedral. A cadre of engineers maintained its workings, while a thousand elite soldiers stood guard over the holy ground. The symbols were blatant and unflinching: First and always, this world would serve as a launching point to countless new realms. Human duty was to build more rippers—a promise finally fulfilled several centuries ago. By Kala's time, the thousand original pioneers had become five billion citizens. Tax codes and social conventions assured that rippers would always be built. Experts guessed that perhaps fifteen billion bodies could live on these warm lands, and with luck and God's blessing, that would be the day when enough rippers were rolling out of enough factories to allow every excess child to escape, every boy free to find his own empty, golden realm, and every girl serving as a good man's happy Wife.

Sandor hated that his sister traveled alone. Every trip Kala took was preceded by a difficult conversation, on the phone or in person. It was his duty to remind her that the open highway was an exceptionally dangerous place. Sandor always had some tale to share about some unfortunate young woman who did everything right—drove only by day, spoke to the fewest possible strangers, and slept in secure hotels that catered to their kind. Yet without exception, each of those smart ladies had vanished somewhere on the road, usually without explanation.

“But look at the actual numbers,” Kala liked to counter. “The chance of me being abducted twice in my life—”

“Is tiny. I know.”

“Dying in a traffic accident is ten times more likely,” she would add.

But eventually Sandor analyzed the same statistics, ambushing her with a much bleaker picture. “Dying in a wreck is three times as likely,” he informed Kala. “But that’s for all women. Old and young. Those in your subset—women in their twenties, with good looks and driving alone—are five times as likely to disappear as they are to die in a simple, run-of-the-mill accident.”

“But I have to travel,” she countered. Her doctorate involved studying the native communities scattered across a dozen far flung mountaintops.

Driving was mandatory, and since there was barely enough funding as it was, she had no extra money to hire reliable security guards. “I know you don't appreciate my work—”

“I never said that, Kala.”

“Because you're such a painfully polite fellow.” Then laughing at her own joke, she reminded him, “I always carry a registered weapon.”

“Good.”

“And a gun that isn't registered.”

“As you damn well should,” Sandor insisted.

“Plus there's a thousand little things I do, or two million things I avoid.” She always had one or two new tricks to offer, just to prove that she was outracing her unseen enemies. “And if you have any other suggestions, please ... share them with your helpless little sister....”

“Don't tease,” he warned. “You don't understand what men want from women. If you did, you'd never leave home.”

Kala had a tidy little apartment on a women's floor, set ten stories above the street—far too high to be stolen away with all but the biggest ripper. On this occasion, Sandor happened to be passing through, supposedly chasing a mechanic's job but not acting in any great hurry to leave. His main mission, as far as she could tell, was to terrify his little sister. As always, he came armed with news clippings and Web sites. He wanted her to appreciate the fact that her mountains were full of horny males, each one more

dangerous than the others, and all the bastards fighting for their chance to start some new world. As it happened, last week a large shipment of class-C rippers had just been hijacked from an armed convoy, and now the Children of Forever were proclaiming a time of plenty. And just yesterday, outside New Eternal, some idiot drove a big freight truck through two sets of iron gates before pulling up beside the classroom wing of a ladies' academy. Moments later, a large class-B ripper fired off, leaving behind a hemispherical hole and a mangled building, as well as a thousand scared teenage girls, saved only because they had been called into the auditorium for a hygiene lecture from the school's doctor.

Kala shrugged at the bad news. "Crap is a universal constant. Nothing has changed, and I'm going to be fine."

But really, she never felt good about driving long distances, and the recent news wasn't comforting. Nearly a hundred stolen rippers were somewhere on the continent, which had to shift the odds that trouble would find her. Kala let herself feel the fear, and then with a burst of nervous creativity, she blurted out a possible solution.

"Come with me," she said.

Sandor was momentarily stunned.

"If you're that especially worried about me, ride along and help me with my work. Unless you really do have some plush mechanic's job waiting."

"All right then," he answered. "I'd like that."



“A long family vacation,” she said with a grin.

And he completed her thought, adding, “Just like we used to do.”

\* \* \* \*

More than ten years had passed since they last spent time together, and the summer-long journey gave them endless chances to catch up. But for all the days spent on the road, not to mention the weeks hiking and working on alpine trails, they shared remarkably little. Kala heard nothing about life in prison and very little about how Sandor had made his living since his release. And by the same token, she never felt the need to mention past boys and future men—romantic details that she always shared with her closest friends. For a time, the silences bothered her. But then she decided siblings always had difficulty with intimacy. Sharing genetics and a family was such a deep, profound business that no one felt obliged to prove their closeness by ordinary routes. Sandor revealed himself only in glimpses—a few words or a simple gesture—while in her own fashion, Kala must have seemed just as close-mouthed. But of course these secrets of theirs didn't matter. This man would always be her brother, and that was far larger than any other relationship they might cobble together while driving across the spine of a continent.

Sandor relished his job as protector. At every stop, he was alert and a little aggressive, every stranger's face deserving a quick study, and some of them requiring a hard warning stare. She appreciated the

sense of menace that seemed to rise out of him at will. In ways she hadn't anticipated, Kala enjoyed watching Sandor step up to a counter, making innocent clerks flinch. His tattoos flexed and his face grew hard as stone, and she liked the rough snarl in his voice when he said, "Thank you." Or when he snapped at some unknown fellow, "Out of our way. Please. Sir."

If anything, empty wilderness was worse than the open road. It made him more suspicious, if not out-and-out paranoid.

Kala's work involved an obscure genus of pseudoinsects. She was trying to find and catalog unknown species before they vanished, collecting data about their habitat and specimens that she froze and dried and stuck into long test tubes. One July evening, on the flank of a giant southern volcano, she heard a peculiar sound from behind a grove of spruce trees. A rough hooting, it sounded like. "I wonder what that was," she mentioned. Sandor instantly slipped away from the fire, walking the perimeter at least twice before returning again, one hand holding a long flashlight and the other carrying an even longer pistol equipped with a nightscope. "So what was it?" she asked.

"Boys," he reported. "They were thinking of camping near us."

"They were?"

“Yeah,” he said, sitting next to the fire again. “But I guess for some reason they decided to pull up their tent and move off. Who knows why?”

Moments like that truly pleased Kala.

But following her pleasure was a squeamish distaste. What kind of person was she? She thought of herself as being independent and self-reliant, but on the other hand, she seemed to relish being watched over by a powerful and necessarily dangerous man.

Two days later, driving north, Sandor mentioned that he had never gotten his chance to visit the Grand Canyon. “Our vacation never made it,” he reminded her. “And I haven't found the time since.”

Kala let them invest one full day of sightseeing.

The canyon's precise location and appearance varied on each world. But there was always a river draining that portion of the continent, and the land had always risen up in response to the predictable tectonics. Since their earth was wetter than most, the river was big and angry, cutting through a billion years of history on its way to the canyon floor. Kala paid for a cable-car ride to the bottom. They ate hard-boiled blue-hen eggs and mulberries for lunch, and afterwards, walking on the rocky shoreline, she pointed to the rotting carcass of a Helen-trout. The First Father didn't bring living fish with him, but later Fathers realized that fish farming meant cheap protein. The Helen-trout came from the fifth new world—indiscriminate feeders that could thrive in open ocean or fresh water, and that adored every

temperature from freezing to bathwater. No major drainage in the world lacked the vermin. “They die when they're pregnant,” she explained. “Their larvae use the mother as food, eating her as she rots, getting a jump on things before they swim away.”

Sandor seemed to be listening. But then again, he always seemed to pay attention to his surroundings. In this case, he gave a little nod, and after a long pause said, “I'm curious, Kala. What do you want to accomplish? With your work, I mean.”

He asked that question every few days, as if for the first time.

At first Kala thought that he simply wasn't hearing her answers. Later, she wondered if he was trying to break her down, hoping to make her admit that she didn't have any good reason for her life's investment. But after weeks of enduring this verbal dance, she began to appreciate what was happening. To keep from boring herself, she was forced to change her response. Inside the canyon, staring at the dead fish, she didn't bother with old words about the duty and honor that came from saving a few nameless bugs. And she avoided the subject of great medicines that probably would never emerge from her work. Instead, staring down at the rich bulging body, she offered a new response.

“This world of ours is dying, Sandor.”

The statement earned a hard look and an impossible-to-read grin. “Why's that?” he asked over the roar of the water.

“A healthy earth has ten or twenty or fifty million species. Depending on how you count them.” She shook her head, reminding him, “The Last Father brought as many species as possible. Nearly a thousand multicellular species have survived here. And that's too few to make an enduring, robust ecosystem.”

Sandor shrugged and gestured at the distant sky. “Things look good enough,” he said. “What do you mean it's dying?”

“Computer models point to the possibility,” she explained. “Low diversity means fragile ecosystems. And it's more than just having too few species. It's the nature of these species. Wherever we go, we bring weed species. Biological thugs, essentially. And not just from the original earth but from seventeen distinct evolutionary histories. Seventeen lines that are nearly alien to one another. That reduces meaningful interactions. It's another factor why there will eventually come a crunch.”

“Okay. So when?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Next year?”

“Not for thousands of years,” she allowed. “But there is a collapse point, and after that, the basic foundations of this biosphere will decline rapidly. Phytoplankton, for one. The native species are having troubles enduring the new food chains, and if they end up vanishing, then nobody will be making free oxygen.”

“Trees don't make oxygen?”

“They do,” she admitted. “But their wood burns or rots. And rotting is the same reaction as burning, chemically speaking.”

Sandor stared at the gray mother fish.

“You know how it is when you turn on a ripper?” Kala asked. “You know how the machine has to search hard for a world with a livable atmosphere?”

Her brother nodded, a look of anticipation building in the pale brown eyes.

“Do you ever wonder why so many earths don't have decent air for us? Do you?” Kala gave him a rough pat on the shoulder, asking, “What if a lot of pioneers have been moving across the multiverse? Humans and things that aren't human, too. And what if most of these intrepid pioneers eventually kick their worlds out of equilibrium, killing them as a consequence?”

“Yeah,” he said.

Then after a long thoughtful moment: “Huh.”

And that was the last time Sandor ever bothered to doubt the importance of Kala's work.

The heart of every ripper was a cap-shaped receptacle woven from diamond whiskers, each whisker doctored with certain rare-earth elements and infused with enough power to pierce the local brane. But as difficult as the receptacle was to build, it was a simple chore next to engineering the machines to support and control its work. Hard drives and the capacitors had to function on the brink of theoretical limits. Heat and quantum fluctuations needed to be kept at a minimum. The best rippers utilized a cocktail of unusual isotopes, doubling their reliability as well as tripling the costs, while security costs added another 40 percent to the final price.

Twice that summer, Kala and her brother saw convoys of finished rippers being shipped across country. Armored trucks were painted a lush emerald green, each one accompanied by two or three faster vehicles bristling with weapons held by tough young men. Routes and schedules were supposed to be kept secret. Since even a small ripper was worth a fortune, the corporations did whatever they could to protect their investments. Which made Kala wonder: How do the Children of Forever learn where one convoy would be passing, and what kind of firepower would it take to make the rippers their own?

Sandor was driving when they ran into one of the convoys. A swift little blister of armor and angry faces

suddenly passed them on the wrong side. "Over," screamed every face. "Pull over."

They were beside the Mormon Sea, on a highway famous for scenery and its narrow, almost nonexistent, shoulders. But Sandor complied, fitting them onto a slip of asphalt and turning off the engine, then setting the parking brake and turning to look back around the bend, eyes huge and his lower lip tucked into his mouth.

For a moment or two, Kala watched the bright water of the inland sea, enjoying the glitter stretching to the horizon. Then came the rumble of big engines, and a pair of heavy freight trucks rolled past, followed by more deadly cars, and then another pair of trucks.

"Class-Cs," Sandor decided. "About a hundred of them, built down in Highborn."

The trucks had no obvious markings. "How can you tell?"

"The lack of security," he said. "Cs don't get as much. It's the As and Bs that bandits can sell for a fortune. And I know the company because each truck's got a code on its side, if you know how to read it."

The convoy had passed out of sight, but they remained parked beside the narrow road. "When are we moving again?" she asked.

"Wait," he cautioned.

She shifted in her seat and took a couple of meaningful breaths.



Reading the signs, Sandor turned to her. "You don't want to trail them too closely. Someone might get the wrong idea. Know what I mean?"

And with that, her brave, almost fearless brother continued to sit beside the road, hands squeezing the wheel.

"You gave somebody the wrong idea," she said.

"Pardon?"

"Sandor," she said. "In your life, how many convoys have you followed?"

Nothing changed about his face. Then suddenly, a little smile turned up the corner of his mouth, and with a quiet, conspiratorial voice, he admitted, "Fifty, maybe sixty."

She wasn't surprised, except that she didn't expect to feel so upset. "Is that how badly you want it? To be a Father ... you're willing to steal a ripper just to get your chance...?"

He started to nod. Then again, he looked at his sister, reminding her, "I'm still here. So I guess I'm not really that eager."

"What went wrong? The work was too dangerous for you?"

His expression looked injured now. Straightening his back, he started the car and pulled out, accelerating for a long minute, letting the silence work on Kala until he finally told her, "You know, there were thirty-two security men on that other convoy. The one hit by the Children of Forever. Plus a

dozen drivers and three corporate representatives. And all were killed during the robbery.”

“I know that—”

“Most of those poor shits were laid down in a ditch by the road and shot through the head. Just so motorists wouldn't notice the bodies when they drove past.” He squeezed the steering wheel until it squeaked, and very carefully, he told Kala, “That's when I gave up wanting it. Being a Father to the very best world isn't enough reason to murder even one poor boy who's trying to make some money and keep his family fed.”

\* \* \* \*

A pair of mountain ranges stood as islands far out in the Mormon Sea, and they spent a few days walking the tallest peaks. Then they drove north again, up to the Geysers, enjoying a long hike through the mountains north of that volcanic country. Then it was late August, and they started back toward Kala's home. One stop remained, kept until now for sentimental reasons.

“Our best vacation,” she muttered.

Sandor agreed with his silence and a little wink.

They stayed in a reserve campground meant for employees, and Kala introduced her brother to the few rangers that remained from her days here. The mood was upbeat, on the whole. Old colleagues expressed interest in her studies, asking knowledgeable questions, and in some cases, offering advice.

One older gentleman—a fellow who had never warmed much to her before—nodded as he listened to her description of her work. Then he said, “Kala,” with a sweet, almost fatherly voice. “I know a place with just that kind of bug. I can't tell you the species, but I don't think it's quite what you've found before.”

“Really? Where?”

He brought out a map and pointed at a long valley on the other side of the continental divide. “It looks too low in altitude, I suppose. And a lot of junipers are moving in. But if you get up by this looping road here—”

Sandor pushed in close to watch.

“There's a little glen. I've seen that blue bug there, I'm sure.”

“Thank you,” Kala told him.

“Whatever I can do to help,” the old ranger said. Then he made a show of rolling up the map, asking, “I can take you up myself. If your brother wants to stay here and rest for a bit.”

Sandor said, “No thanks.”

But he said it in an especially nice way. For the time being, neither one of them could see what was happening.

As promised, juniper trees were standing among the natives. Rilly birds and starlings must have eaten juniper berries outside the reserve. Since their corrosive stomach acids were essential for the germination process, wherever they relieved themselves, a new forest of ugly gray-green trees sprouted, prickly and relentless. Most biologists claimed that it was an innate, mutualistic relationship between species. But Kala had a different interpretation: The birds knew precisely what they were doing. Whenever a starling took a dump, it sang to the world, "I'm planting a forest here. And I'm going to be the death of you, you silly old trees."

Sandor squatted and stuck his thick fingers into the needle litter, churning up a long pink worm. After a summer spent watching Kala, he was now one of the great experts when it came to a single genus of pseudoinsects. "Not all that promising," he announced.

Earthworms were another key invader from their home world. And no, nightcrawlers didn't usually coexist with her particular creepy-crawlies.

"Maybe higher up," he offered.

But the old ranger told her this was the place, which implied that her subjects were enduring despite worms and trees: A heroic image that Kala wanted to cling to for a little while longer.

“You wander,” she said. “If I don't find anything, I'll follow.”

Sandor winked and stepped back into the black shadows.

Twenty minutes later, Kala gave up the hunt. Stepping into a little clearing, she sat on a rock bench, pulling a sandwich from her knapsack and managing a bite before a stranger stepped off the trail behind her.

“Excuse me?”

Startled, Kala wheeled fast, her free hand reaching for the pistol on her belt. But the voice was a girl's, and she was a very tiny creature—big-eyed and fragile, maybe ten years younger than Kala. The girl looked tired and worried. Her shirt was torn, and her left arm wore a long scrape that looked miserably sore.

“Can you help me, ma'am? Please?”

Carefully, Kala rose to her feet while pushing the sandwich back inside her bag, using that same motion to make certain that her second pistol was where she expected it to be. Then with a careful voice, she asked, “Are you lost, sweetie?”

“That too,” the girl said, glancing over her shoulder before stepping away from the forest's edge. “It's been days since I've been outside. At least.”

Kala absorbed the news. Then she quietly asked, “Where have you been?”

“In the back end.”

“The end of what?”

“The bus,” the girl snapped, as if Kala should already know that much. “He put me with the others, in the dark—”

“Other girls?”

“Yes, yes.” The little creature drifted forward, tucking both hands into her armpits. “He’s a mean one—”

“What sect?”

“Huh?”

“Does he belong to a sect?”

“The Children of Forever,” the strange girl confessed. “Do you know about them?”

With her right hand, Kala pulled the pistol from her belt while keeping the bag on her left shoulder. Nothing moved in the trees. Except for the girl and her, there might be no one else in this world.

“He’s collecting wives,” the girl related. “He told me he wants ten of us before he leaves.”

“Come closer,” Kala told her. Then she asked, “How many girls does he have so far?”

The girl swallowed. “Three.”

“And there’s just him?”

“Yeah. He’s alone.” The girl’s eyes were growing larger, unblinking and bright. “Three other girls, and me. And him.”

“Where?”

“Down that way,” said the girl. “Past the parking lot, hiding up in some big old grease trees.”

Kala’s car lay in the same direction. But Sandor had gone the opposite direction.

Whispering, she told the stranger, "Okay. I can help you."

"Thank you, ma'am!"

"Quiet."

"Sorry," the girl muttered.

"Now," Kala told her. "This way."

The girl fell in beside her, rubbing her bloodied arm as she walked. She breathed hard and fast. Several more times, she said, "Thank you." But she didn't seem to look back half as often as Kala did, and maybe that was what seemed wrong.

After a few minutes of hard walking, Kala asked, "So how did you get free?"

The girl looked back then. And with a nod, she said, "I crawled up through the vent."

A tiny creature like that: Kala could believe it.

"I cut my arm on a metal edge."

The wound was red, but the blood had clotted some time ago. Even as Kala nodded, accepting that story, a little part of her was feeling skeptical.

"If he finds me, he'll hurt me."

"I won't let him hurt you," Kala promised.

"There's three other girls in the bus," she repeated. Then she put her hands back into her armpits, hugging herself hard, saying, "We should save them, if we can. Sneak up to the bus while he's hunting for me and get them free, maybe."

But Kala wanted to find Sandor. She came close to mentioning him to the girl, but then she thought better of it. Her brother's presence was a secret that

made her feel better. It gave her the confidence to tell the girl, "Later. First I have to make sure that you're safe."

The girl stared up at her protector, saying nothing.

"Come on," Kala urged.

"I want to be safe," the girl said.

"That's what I'm doing—"

"No," she said. Then her hands came out from under her arms, one of them empty while the other held a little box with two metal forks sticking from one end, and the forks jumped out and dove into her skin, and suddenly a hot blue bolt of lightning was rolling through her body.

\* \* \* \*

The girl disarmed Kala and stole her bag and tied her up with plastic straps pulled from her back pocket. Then she vanished down the path. The pain subsided enough to where Kala could sit up, watching uphill, imagining her brother's arrival. But this wasn't the path he had taken, and he still hadn't shown by the time the girl and a New Father appeared. A stubby automatic weapon hung on his shoulder. He was forty or forty-five years old, a big, strong, and homely creature with rough hands and foul breath. "She is awfully pretty," was his first assessment, smiling at his latest acquisition. Then he offered a wink, adding, "He promised I'd like you. And he was right."

The old ranger had set this up.

"I didn't see any brother," said the tiny girl.



“That would be too easy,” the man cautioned. Then he handed his weapon to the girl and grabbed Kala, flinging her over a shoulder while saying, “I don't think he'll be any problem. But come on anyway, sweet. Fast as we can walk.”

They entered the open glade, crossing the parking lot and passing Kala's tiny car before they climbed again, entering a mature stand of native trees. Hiding in the gloom was a long bus flanked by a pair of fat freight trucks, each vehicle equipped with wide tires and extra suspension. And there were many more brides than three, Kala saw. Twelve was her first count, fourteen when she tried again. Each girl was in her teens. They looked like schoolgirls on a field trip, giggling and teasing the newest wife by saying, “Too old to walk for herself,” and, “Fresh blood in the gene pool, looks like.”

Three young men silently watched Kala's arrival. Sons, by the looks of them. In their early twenties, at most.

“Beautiful,” said one of the boys.

The other two nodded and grinned.

With the care shown to treasured luggage, the older man set Kala beneath a tree, her back propped against the black trunk, arms and legs needing to be retied, just to make sure. Kala quickly looked from face to face, hoping for any sign of empathy. There was none. And the girl who had been sent out as bait stood over Kala for several minutes, wearing the hardest expression of all.

“He will come for me,” Kala said.

“Your brother probably will,” said the New Father. “But I've been watching you two. He's carrying nothing bigger than that long pistol, and we've got artillery here he wouldn't dare face.”

As if to prove their murderous natures, the sons retrieved their own automatic weapons from the bus.

“What next?” one son asked.

“Stay here with me,” their father advised.

But the oldest son didn't like that tactic. “We could circle around, pick him off when he shows himself.”

“No,” he was told.

“But—”

“What did I say?”

The young man dropped his face.

“God led us to this place,” the wiser man continued. “And God has seen to give us a sticky hot day. Pray for storms. That's my advice. Then we can punch a hole in the clouds and get power enough to finally leave....”

Lightning, he was talking about. Kala had heard about this technique: With a proper rocket and enough wire following like a tail, it was possible to create lightning during a thunderstorm. A channel of air supplied the connection to the charged earth below. The bolt would strike a preset lightning rod ... up in the tree on the other side of camp, she realized. She noticed the tall black spike and the heavy wires leading down into the ripper that was probably set in

the center of the bus, a class-C that was hungry and waiting for its first and only meal.

Kala could guess why these people had come into the mountains. They liked solitude and cheap energy, and besides, the police were hunting everywhere else for those who had murdered the security guards.

Sandor was somewhere close, Kala told herself.

Watching her.

She almost relaxed, imagining her brother hunkered low in the shadow of some great old tree, waiting for a critical mistake to be made. Hunting for an opening, a weakness. Any opportunity. She went as far as picturing his arrival: Sandor would wait for afternoon and the gathering storms, and maybe the rain would start to fall, fat drops turning into a deluge, and while the devout boys and girls watched for the Lord in that angry sky, her brother would sneak up behind her and neatly cut her free.

Obviously, that's what would happen.

Kala thought so highly of the plan that she was as surprised as anyone when a figure emerged from the shadows—a man smaller than most were, running on bare feet to keep his noise to a minimum. He was quick, but something in his stride seemed unhurried. Untroubled. He looked something like a hiker who had lost his way but now had found help. Perhaps that was what Sandor intended. But his face was grim and focused, and no motion was wasted. Everybody—grooms and brides and even their captive—stared for a moment, examining the stranger in their midst.

Then the newcomer reached beneath his shirt and lifted a long pistol, and the first hollow point removed the top of the father's head and the second one knocked the small girl flat. Then Sandor was running again, slipping between brides, and one of the sons finally lifted his weapon, spraying automatic gunfire until three girls had dropped and another brother had pushed the barrel into the forest floor, screaming, "Stop, would you ... just stop ... !"

Sandor had the third brother by the neck, slamming him against the broad black trunk of a tree. Then he stared out at the cowering survivors, pressing the barrel of the pistol into the man's ass, and with a voice eerily composed, he said, "Put your guns down. Do it now. Or I'm going to do some painting over here ... with a goddamn pubic hair brush...."

The matronly gray robes of middle age had vanished, replaced by an old woman's love for gaudy colors. She was wearing a rich slick and very purple dress with a purple hat with a wide gold belt and matching shoes. Diet and exercise had removed enough weight to give her a stocky, solid figure. She nicely filled the station of her life—that of the fit, well-rested widow. Seeing her children standing at her doorway, Mom smiled—a thoroughly genuine expression, happy but brief. Then she found something alarming in their faces. “What's happened?” With concern, she said, “Darlings. What's wrong?”

Kala glanced at her brother and then over her shoulder.

In the street sat a plain commercial van. Nothing about the vehicle was remarkable, except that its back end was being pressed down by the terrific, relentless weight of a class-C ripper and a powerful little winch.

The van was their fourth vehicle in three days, and Sandor would replace it tomorrow, if he thought it would help.

“I was just leaving,” their mother offered. And when no one else spoke, she added, “I don't normally dress like this—”

“Don't go,” said her son.

“Are you meeting friends?” Kala asked. “If you don't show, will somebody miss you?”

Mom shook her head. "I just go to the tea parlor on Fridays. I know people, but no, I doubt if anybody expects me."

It was the Sabbath today, wasn't it?

"Can I park the van inside your garage?" Sandor asked.

Mom nodded. "You'll have to pull my car out—"

"Keys," he said.

She fished them from a purse covered with mock jewelry, and Sandor started down the front stairs.

Kala gratefully stepped inside. All these years, and the same furnishings and carpet populated the living room, although every surface was a little more worn now. Immersed in what was astonishingly familiar, she suddenly relaxed. She couldn't help herself. All at once it was impossible to stand under her own power, and as soon as she sat, a deep need for sleep began to engulf her.

"What's happened?" Mom repeated. "What's wrong?"

"We're going to explain everything, Mom."

"You look awful, sweetness. Both of you do." The old woman sat beside Kala on the lumpy couch, one hand patting her on the knee. "But I'm glad to see you two, together."

Sometime in these last few moments, Kala had begun to cry.

"Tell me, dear."

In what felt like a single breath, the story emerged. For the second time in her life, Kala had been

kidnapped, but this time Sandor killed two people while freeing her. A second bride died in random gunfire, and two more were severely injured. "But we had to leave them," Kala confessed. "After we disarmed the brothers and brides, we left them with first aid kits and two working trucks ... except Sandor shot out the tires before we drove off in their bus, just to make sure we would have a head start...."

Her mother held herself motionless, mouth open and no sound worth the effort.

"It was a big long bus with a ripper onboard. Sandor drove us through the mountains. Fast. I don't know why we didn't crash, but we didn't. We stopped at a fix-it shop and he made calls, and a hundred miles after that, we met a couple friends of his ... men that he met inside prison, I think...."

"When was this?"

"Wednesday," she answered. "Those friends helped Sandor pull the ripper from the bus. They gave us a new truck and kept the capacitors and the other expensive gear for themselves. Then he and I drove maybe two miles, and that's when Sandor stole a second truck. Because he didn't quite trust his friends, and what if they decided to come take the ripper too?" She wiped at her eyes, her cheeks. "After that, we drove more than a thousand miles, but never in a straight line. By then, we'd finally decided what we were going to do, and he stole the van before we came here."

Mom was alert, focused. She was sitting forward with her hand clenched to her daughter's knee. Very quietly, she asked, "Is it one of the stolen rippers? From that convoy?"

Kala nodded. "The ID marks match."

"Have you thought about giving it back to its rightful owners?"

"We talked about that. Yes."

But then Mom saw what had eventually become obvious to Kala. "Regardless of what you tell the owners, they'll think your brother had something to do with the robbery and murders. And what good would that do?"

"Nothing."

Then her mother gathered up Kala's hands, and without hesitation, she said, "God has given you a gift, darling."

She didn't think about it in religious terms. But the words sounded nice.

"A great rare and wonderful gift," her mother continued. "And you know, if there is one person who truly deserves to inherit a new world, it has to be—"

"My brother?"

"No," Mom exclaimed, genuinely surprised. Then as the front door swung open and Sandor stepped inside, she said brightly, "It's you, sweetness. You deserve the best world. Of course, of course, of course ...!"

\* \* \* \*



Their frantic days had only just begun. The Children of Forever would have learned their names from the old ranger, or maybe from Kala's abandoned car. And people who had murdered dozens to steal the ripper would undoubtedly do anything to recover what was theirs and avenge their losses. Obviously, it was best to vanish again, this time taking their mother with them. Old lives and treasured patterns had to be avoided, yet even on the run, they still had to find time and energy to make plans for what was to come next.

Sandor knew the best places to find machinery and foodstuffs and the other essential supplies. But Kala knew where to find people—the right people—who would make this business worthwhile. And it was their mother who acted as peacemaker, calming the waters when her two strong-willed children began fighting over the details that always looked trivial the next day.

Suddenly it was winter—the worst season to migrate to another world. But that gave them the gift of several months where they could make everything perfect, or nearly so.

Years ago, the old fix-it man who once worked on their family car had retired, and the next owner had driven his shop out of business. The property was purchased from the bank for nothing and reconnected to the power grid, and with Kala's friends supplying labor and enough money, Sandor managed to refit the building according to their

specific needs. Medical stocks were locked in the lady's room. The garage was jammed with canned and dried food and giant water tanks, plus the rest of their essential goods, including a fully charged class-C ripper that would carry away the little building.

On a cold bleak day in late March—several weeks before their scheduled departure—a stranger came looking for gasoline. He parked beside one of the useless pumps and pulled on his horn several times. Then he climbed out of the small, nondescript car, and, ignoring the CLOSED signs painted on the shuttered windows, walked across the cracked pavement in order to knock hard on both garage doors and the front door.

“Hey! Anybody there?” he shouted before finally giving up.

As he returned to his car, Kala asked her brother, “What is he? Children of Forever, or some kind of undercover cop?”

“Really,” Sandor replied, “does it matter?”

Kala set her splattergun back in its cradle.

“I think it's time,” their mother offered.

It was too early in the season to be ideal. But what choice did they have? Kala lifted the phone and made one coded call to the nearest town. And within the hour, everybody had arrived. Those who weren't going with them offered quick tearful good-byes to those who were, showering those blessed pioneers with kisses and love. But then the pioneers had enough, and with quick embarrassed voices, they

said, "Enough, Mommy. Daddy. That's enough. Good-bye!"

\* \* \* \*

Kala had come too far and paid too much of a price not to watch what was about to happen. She opened all of the shutters in the public room, letting the murky gray flow inside, and then she sat between two six-year-olds, one of whom asked, "How much longer now?"

"Soon," she promised. "A minute or two, at most."

Sandor and several other mechanically minded souls were in the garage, watching the ripper power up. Sharing the public room with Kala were a handful of grown men and a dozen women, plus nearly forty children sitting on tiny folding chairs, the oldest child being a stubborn twelve-year-old boy—the only son of colleagues who were staying behind.

Kala's mother was one of the women, and she wasn't even the oldest.

"We're not making everybody else's mistakes," Kala had explained to her, sitting in the old living room some months ago. "We're taking grandparents and little kids, but very few young adults. I don't want virility and stupidity. I want wisdom and youth."

"What seeds are you taking?" her mother had asked.

"None."

"Did I hear you say—?"

"No seeds, and no animals. Not even one viable tortoise shell. And before we leave, I want to make

sure every mouse in the building is dead, and every fly and flea, and if there's one earthworm living under us, I'll kill it myself when it pops up in the new world.”

Nobody was leaving this world but humans.

And even then, they were traveling as close to empty-handed as they dared. They had tools and a few books about science and mechanics. But everyone had taken an oath not to bring any Bibles or odd Testaments, and, as far as possible, everything else that smacked of preconceptions and fussy religion had to be left behind on their doomed world.

The children came from families who believed as Kala believed.

It was amazing, and heartening, how many people held opinions not too much unlike hers. And sometimes in her most doubting moments, she found herself wondering if maybe her home world had a real chance of surviving the next ten thousand years.

But there were many parents who saw doom coming—ecological or political or religious catastrophes—and that's why they were so eager to give up a young son or daughter.

They were there now, standing out near the highway, surely hearing the ripper as it began to hammer hard at reality.

From inside the cold garage, Sandor shouted, “A target's acquired!”

Will this madness work? Kala asked herself one last time. Could one species arrive on an alien world,

with children and old people in tow, and find food enough to survive? And then could they pass through the next ten thousand years without destroying everything that that world was and could have become ... ?

And then it was too late to ask the question.

The clouds of one day had vanished into a suddenly blue glare of empty skies, a green-blue lawn of grassy something stretching off into infinity ... and suddenly a room full of bright young voices shouted, "Neat! Sweet! Pretty!"

Then the boy on her right tugged at her arm, adding, "That's fun, Miss Kala. Let's do it again!"

## A Place With Shade

The old man was corpulent like a seal, muscle clothed in fat to guarantee warmth, his skin smooth and his general proportions -- stocky limbs and a broad chest -- implying a natural, almost unconscious power. He wore little despite the damp chill. The brown eyes seemed capable and shrewd. And humorless. We were standing on a graveled beach, staring at his tiny sea; and after a long silence, he informed me, "I don't approve of what you do, Mr. Locum. It's pretentious and wasteful, this business of building cruel places. You're not an artist, and I think it's healthy for both of us to know my objections to your presence here."

I showed a grin, then said, "Fine. I'll leave." I had spent three months inside cramped quarters, but I told him, "Your shuttle can take me back to the freighter. I'll ride out with the iron."

"You misunderstand, Mr. Locum." His name was Provo Lei, the wealthiest person for a light-month in any direction. "I have these objections, but you aren't here for me. You're a gift to my daughter. She and I have finally agreed that she needs a tutor, and you seem qualified. Shall we dispense with pretenses? You are a toy. This isn't what you would call a lush commission, and you'd prefer to be near a civilized world, building some vicious forest for society people who want prestige and novelty. Yet you need my

money, don't you? You're neither a tutor nor a toy, but your debts outweigh your current value as an artist. Or am I wrong?"

I attempted another grin, then shrugged. "I can work on a larger scale here." I'm not someone who hesitates or feels insecure, but I did both just then. "I've had other offers --"

"None of substance," Provo interrupted.

I straightened my back, looking over him. We were in the middle of his house -- a sealed hyperfiber tent covering ten thousand hectares of tundra and ice water -- and beyond the tent walls was an entire world, earth-size but less massive. Not counting robots, the world's population was two. Counting me, three. As we stood there enjoying impolite conversation, an army of robots was beneath the deep water-ice crust, gnawing at rock, harvesting metals to be sold at a profit throughout the district.

"What do you think of my little home, Mr. Locum? Speaking as a professional terraformer, of course."

I blinked, hesitating again.

"Please. Be honest."

"It belongs to a miser." Provo didn't have propriety over bluntness. "This is cheap Arctic package. Low diversity, a rigorous durability, and almost no upkeep. I'm guessing, but it feels like the home of a man who prefers solitude. And since you've lived here for two hundred years, alone most of the time, I don't think that's too much of a guess."

He surprised me, halfway nodding.

“Your daughter's how old? Thirty?” I paused, then said, “Unless she's exactly like you, I would think that she would have left by now. She's not a child, and she must be curious about the rest of the Realm. Which makes me wonder if I'm an inducement of some kind. A bribe. Speaking as a person, not a terraformer, I think she must be frighteningly important to you. Am I correct?”

The brown eyes watched me, saying nothing.

I felt a brief remorse. “You asked for my opinion,” I reminded him.

“Don't apologize. I want honesty.” He rubbed his rounded chin, offering what could have been confused for a smile. “And you're right, I do bribe my daughter. In a sense. She's my responsibility, and why shouldn't I sacrifice for her happiness?”

“She wants to be a terraformer?”

“Of the artistic variety, yes.”

I moved my feet, cold gravel crunching under my boots.

“But this 'cheap package,' as you so graciously described it, is a recent condition. Before this I maintained a mature Arctic steppe, dwarf mammoths here and a cold-water reef offshore. At no small expense, Mr. Locum, and I'm not a natural miser.”

“It sounds like Beringa,” I muttered.

“My home world, yes.” Beringa was a giant snowball terraformed by commercial souls, carpeted with plastics and rock and rich artificial soils, its interior still frozen while billions lived above in a kind



of perpetual summer, twenty-hour days but limited heat. The natives were built like Provo, tailored genes keeping them comfortably fat and perpetually warm. In essence, Beringa was an inspired apartment complex, lovely in every superficial way.

The kind of work I hated most, I was thinking.

“This environment,” I heard, “is very much makeshift.”

I gestured at the tundra. “What happened?”

“Ula thought I would enjoy a grove of hot-sap trees.”

Grimacing, I said, “They wouldn't work at all.” Ecologically speaking. Not to mention aesthetically.

“Regardless,” said Provo, “I purchased vats of totipotent cells, at no small cost, and she insisted on genetically tailoring them. Making them into a new species.”

“Easy enough,” I whispered.

“And yet.” He paused and sighed. “Yet some rather gruesome metabolites were produced. Released. Persistent and slow toxins that moved through the food web. My mammoths sickened and died, and since I rather enjoy mammoth meat, having been raised on little else --”

“You were poisoned,” I gasped.

“Somewhat, yes. But I have recovered nicely.” The nonsmile showed again, eyes pained. Bemused. “Of course she was scared for me and sorry. And of course I had to pay for an extensive cleanup, which brought on a total environmental failure. This tundra

package was an easy replacement, and besides, it carries a warranty against similar troubles.”

Popular on toxic worlds, I recalled. Heavy metals and other terrors were shunted away from the human foods.

“You see? I'm not a simple miser.”

“It shouldn't have happened,” I offered.

Provo merely shrugged his broad shoulders, admitting “I do love my daughter. And you're correct about some things. But the situation here, like anywhere, is much more complicated than the casual observer can perceive.”

I looked at the drab hyperfiber sky -- the illusion of heavy clouds over a waxy low sun -- and I gave a quick appreciative nod.

“The area around us is littered with even less successful projects,” Provo warned me.

I said, “Sad.”

The old man agreed. “Yet I adore her. I want no ill to befall her, and I mean that as an unveiled warning. Ula has never existed with ordinary people. My hope is that I live long enough to see her mature, to become happy and normal, and perhaps gain some skills as a terraformer too. You are my best hope of the moment. Like it or not, that's why I hired you.”

I stared out at his little sea. A lone gull was circling bleating out complaints about the changeless food.

“My daughter will become infatuated with you,” I heard. “Which might be a good thing. Provided you can resist temptation, infatuation will keep her from

being disillusioned. Never, never let her become disillusioned.”

“No?”

“Ula's not her father. Too much honesty is a bad thing.”

I felt a momentary, inadequate sense of fear.

“Help her build one workable living place. Nothing fancy, and please, nothing too inspired.” He knelt and picked up a rounded stone. “She has an extensive lab and stocks of totipotent cells. You'll need nothing. And I'll pay you in full, for your time and your imaginary expertise.”

I found myself cold for many reasons, staring skyward. “I've been to Beringa,” I told Provo. “It's ridiculously cheery. Giant flowers and giant butterflies, mammoths and tame bears. And a clear blue sky.”

“Exactly,” he replied, flinging the stone into the water. “And I would have kept my blue sky, but the color would have been dishonest.”

A mosquito landed on my hand, tasting me and discovering that I wasn't a caribou, flying off without drawing blood.

“Bleak fits my mood, Mr. Locum.”

I looked at him.

And again he offered his nonsmile, making me feel, if only for an instant, sorry for him.

Beaty, say some artists, is the delicious stew made from your subject's flaws.

Ula Lei was a beautiful young woman.

She had a hundred hectare tent pitched beside her father's home, the place filled with bio stocks and empty crystal wombs and computers capable of modeling any kind of terraforming project. She was standing beside a huge reader, waving and saying "Come here," with the voice people use on robots. Neither polite nor intimidating.

I approached, thinking that she looked slight. Almost underfed. Where I had expected an ungraceful woman-child, I instead found a mannerly but almost distant professional- was she embarrassed to need a tutor? Or was she unsure how to act with a stranger? Either way, the old man's warning about my "toy" status seemed overstated. Taking a frail, pretty hand, feeling the polite and passionless single shake, I went from wariness to a mild funk, wondering if I had failed some standard. It wounded me when she stared right through me, asking with a calm dry voice, "What shall we do first?"

Funk became a sense of relief, and I smiled, telling her, "Decide on our project, and its scale."

"Warm work, and huge."

I blinked. "Your father promised us a thousand hectare tent, plus any of his robots --"

"I want to use an old mine," she informed me.

"With a warm environment?"

"It has a rock floor, and we can insulate the walls and ceiling with field charges, then refrigerate as a backup." She knew the right words, at least in passing. "I've already selected which one. Here. I'll

show you everything.”

She was direct like her father, and confident. But Ula wasn't her father's child. Either his genes had been suppressed from conception, or they weren't included. Lean and graced with the fine features popular on tropical worlds, her body was the perfect antithesis of Provo's buttery one. Very black, very curly hair. Coffee-colored skin. And vivid green eyes. Those eyes noticed that I was wearing a heavy work jersey; I had changed clothes after meeting with Provo, wanting this jersey's self-heating capacity. Yet the temperature was twenty degrees warmer than the tundra, and her tropical face smiled when I pulled up my sleeves and pocketed my gloves. The humor was obvious only to her.

Then she was talking again, telling me, “The main chamber is eight kilometers by fifty, and the ceiling is ten kilometers tall in the center. Pressurized ice. Very strong.” Schematics flowed past me. “The floor is the slope of a dead volcano. Father left when he found better ores.”

A large operation, I noted. The rock floor would be porous and easily eroded, but rich in nutrients. Four hundred square kilometers? I had never worked on that scale, unless I counted computer simulations.

A graceful hand called up a new file. “Here's a summary of the world's best-guess history. If you're interested.”

I was, but I had already guessed most of it for myself. Provo's World was like thousands of other

sunless bodies in the Realm. Born in an unknown solar system, it had been thrown free by a near-collision, drifting into interstellar space, its deep seas freezing solid and its internal heat failing. In other regions it would have been terraformed directly, but our local district was impoverished when it came to metals. Provo's World had rich ores, its iron and magnesium, aluminum and the rest sucked up by industries and terraformers alike. A healthy green world requires an astonishing amount of iron, if only to keep it in hemoglobin. The iron from this old mine now circulated through dozens of worlds; and almost certainly some portion of that iron was inside me, brought home now within my own blood.

"I've already sealed the cavern," Ula informed me. "I was thinking of a river down the middle, recirculating, and a string of waterfalls --"

"No," I muttered.

She showed me a smile. "No?"

"I don't like waterfalls," I warned her.

"Because you belong to the New Traditionalist movement. I know." She shrugged her shoulders. "Waterfalls are cliches,' you claim. 'Life, done properly, is never pretty in simple ways.'"

"Exactly."

"Yet," Ula assured me, "this is my project."

I had come an enormous distance to wage a creative battle. Trying to measure my opponent, I asked, "What do you know about NTs?"

"You want to regain the honesty of the original

Earth. Hard winters. Droughts. Violent predation. Vibrant chaos.” Her expression became coy, then vaguely wicked. “But who'd want to terraform an entire world according to your values? And who would live on it, given the chance?”

“The fight people,” I replied, almost by reflex.

“Not Father. He thinks terraforming should leave every place fat and green and pretty. And iron-hungry too.”

“Like Beringa.”

She nodded, the wickedness swelling. “Did you hear about my little mistake?”

“About the hot-sap trees? I'm afraid so.”

“I guess I do need help.” Yet Ula didn't appear contrite. “I know about you, Mr. Locum. After my father hired you -- I told him NTs work cheap -- I ordered holos of every one of your works. You like working with jungles, don't you?”

Jungles were complex and intricate. And dense. And fun.

“What about Yanci's jungle?” she asked me. “It's got a spectacular waterfall, if memory serves.”

A socialite had paid me to build something bold, setting it inside a plastic cavern inside a pluto-class world. Low gravity; constant mist; an aggressive assemblage of wild animals and carnivorous plants. “Perfect,” Yanci had told me. Then she hired an old-school terraformer -- little more than a plumber -- to add one of those achingly slow rivers and falls, popular on every low-gravity world in the Realm.

“Yes, Mr. Locum?” she teased. “What do you want to say?”

“Call me Hann,” I growled.

My student pulled her hair away from her jungle-colored eyes. “I’ve always been interested in New Traditionalists. Not that I believe what you preach . . . not entirely . . . but I’m glad Father hired one of you.”

I was thinking about my ruined jungle. Fifty years in the past, and still it made my mouth go dry and my heart pound.

“How will we move water without a river and falls?”

“Underground,” I told her. “Through the porous rock. We can make a string of pools and lakes, and there won’t be erosion problems for centuries.”

“Like this?” She called up a new schematic, and something very much like my idea appeared before us. “I did this in case you didn’t like my first idea.”

A single waterfall was at the high end of the cavern.

“A compromise,” she offered. Enlarging the image, she said, “Doesn’t it look natural?”

For a cliché, I thought.

“The reactor and pumps will be behind this cliff, and the water sounds can hide any noise --”

“Fine,” I told her.

-- and the entranceway too. You walk in through the falls.”

Another cliché, but I said, “Fine.” Years of practice had taught me to compromise with the little points.



Why fight details when there were bigger wars to wage?

“Is it all right, Mr. Locum?” A wink. “I want both of us happy when this is done. Hann, I mean.”

For an audience of how many? At least with shallow socialites, there were hundreds of friends and tagalongs and nobodys and lovers. And since they rarely had enough money to fuel their lifestyles, they would open their possessions to the curious and the public.

But here I could do my best work, and who would know?

“Shall we make a jungle, Hann?”

I would know, I told myself.

And with a forced wink, I said, “Let's begin.”

Terraforming is an ancient profession.

Making your world more habitable began on the Earth itself, with the first dancing fire that warmed its builder's cave; and everything since -- every green world and asteroid and comet -- is an enlargement on that first cozy cave. A hotter fusion fire brings heat and light, and benign organisms roam inside standardized biomes. For two hundred and ten centuries humans have expanded the Realm, mastering the tricks to bring life to a nearly dead universe. The frontier is an expanding sphere more than twenty light-years in radius -- a great peaceful firestorm of life -- and to date only one other living world has been discovered. Pitcairn. Alien and violent, and gorgeous. And the basic inspiration/or

the recent New Traditionalist movement. Pitcairn showed us how bland and domesticated our homes had become, riddled with cliches, every world essentially like every other world. Sad, sad, sad.

Here I found myself with four hundred square kilometers of raw stone. How long would it take to build a mature jungle? Done simply, a matter of months. But novelty would take longer, much to Provo's consternation. We would make fresh species, every ecological tie unique. I anticipated another year on top of the months, which was very good. We had the best computers, the best bio-stocks, and thousands of robots eager to work without pause or complaint. It was an ideal situation, I had to admit to myself. Very nearly heaven.

We insulated the ice ceiling and walls by three different means. Field charges enclosed the heated air. If they were breached, durable refrigeration elements were sunk into the ice itself. And at my insistence we added a set of emergency ducts, cold compressed air waiting in side caverns in case of tragedies. Every organism could go into a sudden dormancy, and the heat would be sucked into the huge volumes of surrounding ice. Otherwise the ceiling might sag and collapse, and I didn't want that to happen. Ula's jungle was supposed to outlast all of us. Why else go to all of this bother?

We set the reactor inside the mine shaft, behind the eventual cliché. Then lights were strong, heating the cavern's new air, and we manufactured rich soils

with scrap rock and silt from Provo's own little sea. The first inhabitants were bacteria and fungi set free to chew and multiply, giving the air its first living scent. Then robots began assembling tree-shaped molds, sinking hollow roots into the new earth and a sketchwork of branches meshing overhead, beginning the future canopy.

We filled the molds with water, nutrients, and nourishing electrical currents, then inoculated them with totipotent cells. More like baking than gardening, this was how mature forest could be built from scratch. Living cells divided at an exponential rate, then assembled themselves into tissue-types -- sapwood and heartwood, bark and vascular tubes. It's a kind of superheated cultivation, and how else could artists like me exist? Left to Nature's pace, anything larger than a terrarium would consume entire lives. Literally.

Within five months -- on schedule -- we were watching the robots break up the molds, exposing the new trees to the air. And that's a symbolic moment worth a break and a little celebration, which we held.

Just Ula and me.

I suggested inviting Provo, but she told me, "Not yet. It's too soon to show him yet."

Perhaps. Or did she want her father kept at a distance?

I didn't ask. I didn't care. We were dining on top of a rough little hill, at the midpoint of the cavern, whiteness above and the new forest below us, leafless,

resembling thousands of stately old trees pruned back by giant shears. Stubby, enduring trees. I toasted our success, and Ula grinned, almost singing when she said, "I haven't been the bother you expected, have I?"

No, she hadn't been.

"And I know more about terraforming than you thought."

More than I would admit. I nodded and said, "You're adept, considering you're self-taught."

"No," she sang, "you're the disappointment."

"Am I?"

"I expected . . . well, more energy. More inspiration." She rose to her feet, gesturing at our half-born creation. "I really hoped an NT would come up with bizarre wonders --"

"Like an eight-legged terror?"

"Exactly."

It had been her odd idea, and I'd dismissed it twenty times before I realized it was a game with her. She wanted an organism wholly unique, and I kept telling her that radical tailoring took too much time and too frequently failed. And besides, I added, our little patch of jungle wasn't large enough for the kind of predator she had in mind.

"I wish we could have one or two of them," she joked.

I ignored her. I'd learned that was best.

"But don't you agree? Nothing we've planned is that new or spectacular."

Yet I was proud of everything. What did she want? Our top three camivores were being tailored at that moment -- a new species of fire-eagle; a variation on black nightcats; and an intelligent, vicious species of monkey. Computer models showed that only two of them would survive after the first century. Which two depended on subtle, hard-to-model factors. That was one of the more radical, unpopular NT principles. "The fit survive." We build worlds with too much diversity, knowing that some of our creations are temporary. And unworthy. Then we stand aside, letting our worlds decide for themselves.

"I wish we could have rainstorms," she added. It was another game, and she waved her arms while saying "Big winds. Lightning. I've always wanted to see lightning."

"There's not enough energy to drive storms," I responded. The rains were going to be mild events that came in the night. When we had nights, in a year. "I don't want to risk -- "

"-- damaging the ice. I know." She sat again, closer now, smiling as she said, "No, I don't care. It's coming along perfectly."

I nodded, gazing up at the brilliant white sky. The mining robots had left the ice gouged and sharp, and somehow that was appropriate. An old violence was set against a rich new order, violent in different ways. A steamy jungle cloaked in ice; an appealing even poetic dichotomy. And while I looked into the distance, hearing the sounds of molds being tom

apart and loaded onto mug-rails, my partner came even closer, touching one of my legs and asking, "How else have I surprised you?"

She hadn't touched me in months, even in passing.

It took me a moment to gather myself, and I took her hand and set it out of the way, with a surety of motion.

She said nothing, smiling and watching me.

And once again, for the umpteenth time, I wondered what Ula was thinking. Because I didn't know and couldn't even guess. We had been together for months, our relationship professional and bloodless. Yet I always had the strong impression that she showed me what she wanted to show me, and I couldn't even guess how much of that was genuine.

"How else?" she asked again.

"You're an endless surprise," I told her.

But instead of appearing pleased, she dipped her head, the smile changing to a concentrated stare, hands drawing rounded shapes in the new soil, then erasing them with a few quick tiger swipes.

I met Provo behind the waterfall, in the shaft, his sturdy shape emerging from the shadows; and he gave me a nod and glanced at the curtain of water, never pausing, stepping through and vanishing with a certain indifference. I followed, knowing where the flow was weakest --where I would be the least soaked -- and stepped out onto a broad rock shelf, workboots gripping and my dampened jersey starting to dry itself.

The old man was gazing into the forest.

I asked, "Would you like a tour?" Then I added, "We could ride one of the mag-rails, or we could walk."

"No," he replied. "Neither."

Why was he here? Provo had contacted me, no warning given. He had asked about his daughter's whereabouts. "She's in the lab," I had said, "mutating beetles." Leave her alone, he had told me. Provo wanted just the two of us for his first inspection.

Yet now he acted indifferent to our accomplishments, dropping his head and walking off the rock shelf and stopping then looking back at me. And over the sound of tumbling water, he asked, "How is she?"

"Ula's fine."

"No troubles with her?" he inquired.

It was several weeks after our hilltop celebration, and I barely remembered the hand on my leg. "She's doing a credible job."

Provo appeared disappointed.

I asked him, "How should she be?"

He didn't answer. "She likes you, Mr. Locum. We've talked about you. She's told me, more than once . . . that you're perfect."

I felt a sudden warmth, and I smiled.

Disappointment faded. "How is she? Speaking as her teacher, of course."

"Bright. Maybe more than bright." I didn't want to praise too much, lifting his expectations. "She has

inspirations, as she calls them. Some are workable, and some are even lovely.”

“Inspirations,” he echoed.

I readied some examples. I thought Provo would want them, enjoying this chance to have a parent's pride. But instead he looked off into the trees again, the stubby branches sprouting smaller branches and fat green leaves. He seemed to be hunting for something specific, old red eyes squinting. Finally he said, “No.” He said, “I shouldn't tell you.”

“Tell me?”

“Because you don't need to know.” He sighed and turned, suddenly older and almost frail. “If she's been on her best behavior, maybe I should keep my mouth shut.”

I said nothing for a long moment.

Provo shuffled across the clearing, sitting on a downed log with a certain gravity. The log had been grown in the horizontal position, then killed. Sitting next to him, I asked, “What is it, Mr. Lei?”

“My daughter.”

“Yes?”

“She isn't.”

I nodded and said, “Adopted.”

“Did she tell you?”

“I know genetics. And I didn't think you'd suppress your own genes.”

He looked at the waterfall. It was extremely wide and not particularly tall, spilling onto the shelf and then into a large pond. A pair of mag-rails earned



equipment in and out on the far shore. Otherwise little moved. I noticed a tiny tag-along mosquito who wouldn't bite either of us. It must have come from the tundra, and it meant nothing. It would die in a few hours, I thought; and Provo suddenly told me, "Adopted, yes. And I think it's fair to tell you the circumstances."

Why the tension?

"I'm quite good at living alone, Mr. Locum. That's one of the keys to my success." He paused, then said, "I came to this world alone. I charted it and filed my claims and defended it from the jealous mining corporations. Every moment of my life has gone into these mines, and I'm proud of my accomplishments. Life. My metals have brought life and prosperity to millions, and I make no apologies. Do you understand me?"

I said, "Yes."

"Few people come here. Like that freighter that brought you, most of the ships are unmanned." Another pause. "But there are people who make their livelihood tiding inside the freighters. Perhaps you've known a few of them."

I hadn't, no.

"They are people. They exist on a continuum. All qualities of human beings live inside those cramped quarters, some of them entirely decent. Honest. Capable of more compassion than I could hope to feel."

I nodded, no idea where we were going.

“Ula's biological parents weren't at that end of the continuum. Believe me. When I first saw her . . . when I boarded her parents' ship to supervise the loading . . . well, I won't tell you what I saw. And smelled. And learned about the capacities of other human beings. Some things are best left behind, I think. Let's forget them. Please.”

“How old was Ula?”

“A child. Three standard years, that time.” A small strong hand wiped at his sweating face. “Her parents purchased loads of mixed metals from me, then sold them to one of the water worlds near Beringa. To help plankton bloom, I imagine. And for two years, every day, I found myself remembering that tiny girl, pitying her, a kind of guilt building inside me because I'd done nothing to help her, nothing at all.” Again the hands tried to dry his face, squeezed drops of perspiration almost glittering on them. “And yet, Mr. Locum, I was thankful too. Glad that I would never see her again. I assumed . . . I knew . . . that space itself would swallow them. That someone else would save her. That her parents would change. That I wouldn't be involved again, even if I tried --”

“They came back,” I muttered.

Provo straightened his back, grimacing as if in pain. “Two years later, yes.” Brown eyes closed, opened. “They sent me word of their arrival, and in an instant a plan occurred to me. All at once I knew the right thing to do.” Eyes closed and stayed closed. “I was onboard, barely one quick glance at that half-

starved child, and with a self-righteous voice I told the parents, 'I want to adopt her. Name your price.'

"Good," I offered.

He shook his head. "You must be like me. We assume, and without reasons, that those kinds of people are simple predatory monsters. Merely selfish. Merely cruel." The eyes opened once again. "But what I realized since is that Ula . . . Ula was in some way essential to that bizarre family. I'm not saying they loved her. It's just that they couldn't sell her anymore than they could kill her. Because if she died, who else would they have to torture?"

I said nothing.

"They couldn't be bought, I learned. Quickly." Provo swallowed and grabbed the log, knuckles pale as the hands shook. "You claim my daughter is well-behaved, and I'm pleased. You say she's bright, and I'm not at all surprised. And since you seem to have her confidence and trust, I think it's only fair to tell you about her past. To warn you."

"How did you adopt her?"

He took a deep breath and held it.

"If they couldn't be bribed. . . .?" I touched one of the thick arms. "What happened?"

"Nothing." A shrug of the shoulders, then he said, "There was an accident. During the loading process. The work can be dangerous, even deadly, when certain equipment fails."

I felt very distant, very calm.

"An accident," he repeated.

I gave him a wary glance, asking. "Does she know what happened?"

Provo's eyes opened wide, almost startled. "About the accident? Nothing! About her past life? She remembers, I'm sure . . . nothing. None of it." Just the suggestion of memories caused him to nearly panic. "No, Mr. Locum . . . you see, once I had legal custody . . . even before then . . . I paid an expert from Beringa to come here and examine her, and treat her . . . with every modern technique --"

"What kind of expert?"

"In psychology, you idiot! What do you think I mean?" Then he gave a low moan, pulling loose a piece of fibrous bark. "To save her. To wipe away every bad memory and heal her, which he did quite well. A marvelous job of it. I paid him a bonus. He deserved it." He threw the bark onto the pond. "I've asked Ula about her past, a thousand times . . . and she remembers none of it. The expert said she might, or that it might come out in peculiar ways . . . but she doesn't and has no curiosity about those times . . . and maybe I shouldn't have told you, I'm sorry . . .!"

I looked at the pond, deep and clear, some part of me wondering how soon we would inoculate it with algae and water weeds.

Then Provo stood again, telling me, "Of course I came to look around, should she ask. And tell her . . . tell her that I'm pleased . . ."

I gave a quick compliant nod.

"It's too warm for my taste." He made a turn,

gazing into the jungle and saying, "But shady. Sometimes I like a place with shade, and it's pleasant enough, I suppose." He swallowed and gave a low moan, then said, "And tell her for me, please . . . that I'm very much looking forward to the day it's done. . . ."

Terraformers build their worlds at least twice.

The first time it is a model, a series of assumptions and hard numbers inside the best computers; and the second time it is wood and flesh, false sunlight and honest sound. And that second incarnation is never the same as the model. It's an eternal lesson learned by every terraformer, and by every other person working with complexity.

Models fail.

Reality conspires.

There is always, always some overlooked or mismeasured factor, or a stew of factors. And it's the same for people too. A father and a teacher speak about the daughter and the student, assuming certain special knowledge; and together they misunderstand the girl, their models having little to do with what is true.

Worlds are easy to observe.

Minds are secretive. And subtle. And molding them is never so easy and clear as the molding of mere worlds, I think.

Ula and I were working deep in the cavern, a few days after Provo's visit, teaching our robots how and where to plant an assortment of newly tailored

saplings. We were starting our understory, vines and shrubs and shade-tolerant trees to create a dense tangle. And the robots struggled, designed to wrestle metals from rocks, not to baby the first generations of new species. At one point I waded into the fray, trying to help, shouting and grabbing at a mechanical arm while taking a blind step, a finger-long spine plunging into my ankle.

Ula laughed, watching me hobble backward. Then she turned sympathetic, absolutely convincing when she said, "Poor darling." She thought we should move to the closest water and clean out my wound. "It looks like it's swelling Hann."

It was. I had designed this plant with an irritating protein, and I joked about the value of field testing, using a stick as my impromptu crutch. Thankfully we were close to one of the ponds, and the cool spring water felt wondrous, Ula removing my boot and the spine while I sprawled out on my back, eyes fixed on the white expanse of ice and lights, waiting for the pain to pass.

"If you were an ordinary terraformer," she observed, "this wouldn't have happened."

"I'd be somewhere else, and rich," I answered.

She moved from my soaking foot to my head, sitting beside me, knees pulled to her face and patches of perspiration darkening her lightweight work jersey. "Red of tooth and claw," she quoted.

A New Traditionalist motto. We were building a wilderness of spines and razored leaves; and later

we'd add stinging wasps and noxious beetles, plus a savage biting midge that would attack in swarms. "Honest testing nature," I muttered happily.

Ula grinned and nodded, one of her odd expressions growing. And she asked, "But why can't we do more?"

More?

"Make the fire eagles attack us on sight, for instance. If we're after bloody claws --"

"No," I interrupted. "That has no ecological sense at all." Fire eagles were huge, but they'd never prey on humans.

"Oh, sure. I forgot."

She hadn't, and both of us knew it. Ula was playing another game with me.

I looked across the water, trying to ignore her. The far shore was a narrow stretch of raw stone, and the air above it would waver, field charges setting up their barrier against the heat. Beyond, not twenty meters beyond, was a rigid and hard-frozen milky wall that lifted into the sky, becoming the sky, part of me imagining giant eagles flying overhead, hunting for careless children.

"What's special about the original Earth?" I heard. "Tell me again, please, Hann."

No, I wouldn't. But even as I didn't answer, I answered. In my mind I was thinking about three billion years of natural selection, amoral and frequently short-sighted . . . and wondrous in its beauty, power, and scope . . . and how we in the

Realm had perfected a stupefying version of that wonder, a million worlds guaranteed to be safe and comfortable for the trillions of souls clinging to them.

“Here,” said Ula, “we should do everything like the original Earth.”

I let myself ask, “What do you mean?”

“Put in things that make ecological sense. Like diseases and poisonous snakes, for instance.”

“And we can be imprisoned for murder when the first visitor dies.”

“But we aren't going to have visitors,” she warned me. “So why not? A viper with a nerve toxin in its fangs? Or maybe some kind of plague carried by those biting midges that you're so proud of.”

She was joking, I thought. Then I felt a sudden odd doubt.

Ula's entire face smiled, nothing about it simple. “What's more dangerous? Spines or no spines?”

“More dangerous?”

“For us.” She touched my ankle, watching me.

“Spines,” I voted.

“Back on Earth,” she continued, “there were isolated islands. And the plants that colonized them would lose their spines and toxic chemicals, their old enemies left behind. And birds would lose their power of flight. And the tortoises grew huge, nothing to compete with them. Fat, easy living.”

“What's your point, teacher?”

She laughed and said, “We arrived. We brought goats and rats and ourselves, and the native life



would go extinct.”

“I know history,” I assured her.

“Not having spines is more dangerous than having them.”

I imagined that I understood her point, nodding now and saying, “See? That’s what NTs argue. Not quite in those terms --”

“Our worlds are like islands, soft and easy.”

“Exactly.” I grinned and nodded happily. “What I want to do here, and everywhere --”

“You’re not much better,” she interrupted.

No?

“Not much at all,” she grumbled, her expression suddenly black. Sober. “Nature is so much more cruel and honest than you’d ever be.”

Suddenly I was thinking about Provo’s story, that non-description of Ula’s forgotten childhood. It had been anything but soft and easy, and I felt pity; and I felt curiosity, wondering if she had nightmares and then, for an instant, wondering if I could help her in some important way.

Ula was watching me, reading my expression.

Without warning she bent close, kissing me before I could react and then sitting up again, laughing like a silly young girl.

I asked, “Why did you do that?”

“Why did I stop, you mean?”

I swallowed, saying nothing.

Then she bent over again, kissing me again, pausing to whisper, “Why don’t we?”

I couldn't find any reason to stop.

And suddenly she was removing her jersey, and mine, and I looked past her for an instant, blinding myself with the glare of lights and white ice, all at once full of reasons why we should stop and my tongue stolen out of my mouth.

I was Ula's age when I graduated from the Academy. The oldest teacher on the staff invited me into her office, congratulated me for my good grades, then asked me in a matter-of-fact way, "Where do these worlds we build actually live, Mr. Locum? Can you point to where they are?"

She was cranky and ancient, her old black flesh turning white from simple age. I assumed that she was having troubles with her mind, the poor woman. A shrug; a gracious smile. Then I told her, "I don't know, ma'am. I would think they live where they live."

A smartass answer, if there ever was.

But she wasn't startled or even particularly irritated by my non-reply, a long lumpy finger lifting into the air between us, then pointing at her own forehead. "In our minds, Mr. Locum. That's the only place they can live for us, because where else can we live?"

"May I go?" I asked, unamused.

She said, "Yes."

I began to rise to my feet.

And she told me, "You are a remarkably stupid man, I think, Mr. Locum. Untalented and vain and

stupid in many fundamental ways, and you have a better chance of success than most of your classmates.”

“I'm leaving” I warned her.

“No.” She shook her head. “You aren't here even now.”

We were one week into our honeymoon -- sex and sleep broken up with the occasional bout of work followed with a swim -- and we were lying naked on the shore of the first pond. Ula looked at me, smiling and touching me, then saying “You know, this world once was alive.”

Her voice was glancingly saddened, barely audible over the quiet clean splash of the cliché. I nodded, saying “I realize that.” Then I waited for whatever would follow. I had learned about her lectures during the last seven days.

“It was an ocean world, just three billion years ago.” She drew a planet on my chest. “Imagine if it hadn't been thrown away from its sun. If it had evolved complex life. If some kind of intelligent, tool-using fish had built spaceships --”

“Very unlikely,” I countered.

She shrugged and asked, “Have you seen our fossils?”

No, but I didn't need to see them. Very standard types. The Realm was full of once-living worlds.

“This sea floor,” she continued, “was dotted with hot-water vents, and bacteria evolved and lived by consuming metal ions --”

“-- which they laid down, making the ore that you mine,” I interrupted. With growing impatience, I asked, “Why tell me what I already know, Ula?”

“How do you think it would feel? Your world is thrown free of your sun, growing cold and freezing over . . . nothing you can do about it . . . and how would you feel . . .?”

The vents would have kept going until the planet's tepid core grew cold, too little radioactivity to stave off the inevitable. “But we're talking about bacteria,” I protested. “Nothing sentient. Unless you've found something bigger in the fossil record.”

“Hardly,” she said. Then she sat upright, small breasts catching the light and my gaze. “I was just thinking.”

I braced myself.

“I remember when Father showed me one of the old vents . . . the first one I ever saw . . .”

I doubly braced myself.

“I was five or six, I suppose, and we were walking through a new mine, down a dead rift valley, two hundred kilometers under the frozen sea. He pointed to mounds of dirty ore, then he had one of his robots slice into one of them, showing me the striations . . . how layers of bacteria had grown, by the trillion . . . outnumbering the human race, he said . . . and I cried. . . .”

“Did you?”

“Because they had died.” She appeared close to tears again, but one hand casually scratched her

breasts. Then the face brightened, almost smiling as she asked, "What's your favorite world?"

Changing subjects? I couldn't be sure.

"Your own world, or anyone's. Do you have favorites?"

Several of them, yes. I described the most famous world -- a small spinning asteroid filled with wet forest -- and I told her about the artists, all tetraformers who had journeyed to the alien world of Pitcairn. They were the first New Traditionalists. I had never seen the work for myself, ten light-years between us and it, but I'd walked through the holos, maybe hundreds of times. The artists had been changed by Pitcairn. They never used alien lifeforms -- there are tough clear laws against the exporting of Pitcairn life -- but they had twisted earthly species to capture something of the strangeness and strength of the place. And I couldn't do it justice. I found myself blabbering about the quality of light and the intensity of certain golden birds . . . and at some point I quit speaking, realizing that Ula wasn't paying attention to me.

She heard silence and said, "It sounds intriguing." Then with a slow, almost studied pose, she said, "Let me tell you about something even more fascinating."

I felt a moment of anger. How dare she ignore me! Then the emotion evaporated, betraying me, leaving me to wait while she seemed to gather herself, her face never more serious or composed. Or focused. Or complete.

“It was the second world that I built,” I heard. “My first world was too large and very clumsy, and I destroyed it by accident. But no matter. What I did that second time was find a very small abandoned mine, maybe a hectare in size, and I reinforced the ice walls and filled the chamber with water, then sank a small reactor into the rock, opening up the ancient plumbing and inoculating the water with a mixture of bacteria --”

“Did you?” I sputtered.

“-- and reestablishing one vent community. After three billion years of sleep. I fueled the reactor with a measured amount of deuterium, and I enriched the warming water with the proper metals.” A pause. “New striations formed. Superheated black goo was forced from the fossil tubes. And I dressed in a strong pressure suit and walked into that world, and I sat just like we're sitting here, and waited.”

I swallowed. “Waited?”

“The reactor slowed, then stopped.” Ula took a breath and said, “I watched. With the lights on my suit down low, I watched the black goo stop rising, and the water cooled, and eventually new ice began to form against the walls. I moved to the center, sitting among the tubes . . . for days, for almost two weeks . . . the ice walls closing in on me --”

“That's crazy,” I blurted.

And she shrugged as if to say, “I don't care.” A smile emerged, then vanished, and she turned and touched me, saying, “I allowed myself to be frozen

into that new ice, my limbs locked in place, my power packs running dry --”

“But why?” I asked. “So you'd know how it felt?”

And she didn't seem to hear me, tilting her head, seemingly listening to some distant sound worthy of her complete attention. Eventually she said, “Father missed me.” A pause. “He came home from a tour of distant mines, and I was missing, and he sent robots out to find me, and they cut me free just before I would have begun to truly suffer.”

The girl was insane. I knew it.

She took a dramatic breath, then smiled. Her haunted expression vanished in an instant, without effort, and again she was a student, the youngster, and my lover. A single bead of perspiration was rolling along her sternum, then spreading across her taut brown belly; and I heard myself asking, “Why did you do that shit?”

But the youngster couldn't or wouldn't explain herself, dipping her head and giggling into my ear.

“You could have died,” I reminded her.

She said, “Don't be angry, darling. Please?”

An unstable, insane woman-child, and suddenly I was aware of my own heartbeat.

“Are you angry with sweet me?” She reached for me, for a useful part of me, asking. “How can I make you happy, darling?”

“Be normal,” I whispered.

“Haven't you paid attention?” The possessed expression reemerged for an instant. “I'm not and

never have been. Normal. My darling.”

My excuse, after much thought and practice, was a conference with her father. “I want us to have a backup reactor. In case.”

She dismissed the possibility out of hand. “He won't give us one.”

“And I want to walk on the surface. For a change of scenery.” I paused, then camouflaged my intentions by asking “Care to walk with me?”

“God, no. I've had enough of those walks, thank you.”

Freed for the day, I began by visiting the closest caverns and one deflated tent, poking through dead groves and chiseling up samples of soil and frozen pond water. The cold was absolute. The sky was black and filled with stars, a few dim green worlds lost against the chill. Running quick tests, I tried to identify what had gone wrong and where. Sometimes the answer was obvious; sometimes I was left with guesses. But each of her worlds was undeniably dead, hundreds and thousands of new species extinct before they had any chance to prosper.

Afterward I rode the mag-rail back to Provo's house, finding where the hot-sap trees had been planted, the spot marked with a shallow lake created when the permafrost melted. I worked alone for twenty minutes, then the owner arrived. He seemed unhurried, yet something in his voice or his forward tilt implied a genuine concern. Or maybe not. I'd given up trying to decipher their damned family.



Pocketing my field instruments, I told Provo, "She's a good tailor. Too good." No greetings. No preparatory warning. I just informed him, "I've watched her, and you can't tell me that she'd introduce a toxic metabolite by accident. Not Ula."

The old man's face grew a shade paler, his entire body softening; and he leaned against a boulder, telling me without the slightest concern, "That possibility has crossed my mind, yes."

I changed topics, Ula-fashion. "When we met you warned me not to get too close to her. And not to be too honest."

"I remember."

"How do you know? Who else has been here?"

No answer.

"She's had another tutor, hasn't she?"

"Never."

"Then how can you know?"

"Twice," Provo told me, "my daughter has taken lovers. Two different crew members from separate freighters. Dullards, both of them. With each there was a period of bliss. They stayed behind and helped Ula with her work, then something would go wrong. I don't know any details. I refuse to spy on my own daughter. But with the man, her first lover . . . he expressed an interest in leaving I believe . . . in returning to his vocation. . . ."

"What happened?"

"Ula pierced the wall of the tent. A year's work was destroyed in a few minutes." The man sighed,

betraying a huge fatigue. "She told me that it was an accident, that she intended just to scare him --"

"She murdered him?" I managed.

And Provo laughed with relief. "No, no. No, the dullard was able to climb into an emergency suit in time, saving himself."

"What about the other lover?"

"The woman?" A strong shrug of the shoulders, then he said, "A fire. Another accident. I know less, but I surmise they had had a spat of some kind. A ridiculous, wasteful fit of anger. Although Ula claimed not to have started the blaze. She acted thoroughly innocent, and astonishingly unrepentant."

I swallowed, then whispered, "Your daughter is disturbed."

Provo said, "And didn't I warn you? Did you not understand me?" The Soft face was perspiring despite the chill air. A cloud of mosquitoes drifted between us, hunting suitable game. "How much forewarning did you require, Mr. Locum?"

I said nothing.

"And you've done so well, too. Better than I had hoped possible, I should tell you."

I opened my mouth, and I said nothing.

"She told me . . . yesterday, I think . . . how important you are to her education --"

"The poison," I interrupted.

Provo quit speaking.

"There's a residue here. In the soil." I showed him a molecule displayed on my portable reader. "It's a

synthetic alkaloid. Very messy, very tough. And very, very intentional, I think." A moment's pause, then I asked him, "Has it occurred to you that she was trying to murder you?"

"Naturally," he responded, in an instant.

"And?"

"And she didn't try. No."

"How can you feel sure?"

"You claim that my daughter is bright. Is talented. If she wanted to kill me, even if she was an idiot, don't you think that right now I would be dead?"

Probably true, I thought.

"Two people alone on an empty world. Nothing would be simpler than the perfect murder, Mr. Locum."

"Then what did she want?" I gestured at the little lake. "What was this about?"

Provo appeared disgusted, impatient.

He told me, "I might have hoped that you could explain it to me."

I imagined Ula on the bottom of a freezing sea, risking death in some bid to understand . . . what? And three times she had endangered others . . . which left another dozen creations that she had killed . . . and was she alone in each of them when they died . . . ?

"Discover her purpose, Mr. Locum, and perhaps I'll give you a bonus. If that's permissible."

I said nothing.

"You have been following my suggestions, haven't

you? You aren't becoming too entangled with her, are you?"

I looked at Provo.

And he read my face, shaking his head with heavy sadness, saying, "Oh, my, Mr. Locum. Oh, my."

#### A PURPOSE

The possibility gnawed at me. I assumed some kind of madness lay over whatever her rationale, and I wished for a degree in psychiatry, or maybe some life experience with insanity. Anything would help. Riding the mag-rail back into our cavern, replaying the last few months in my mind, I heard part of me begging for me to flee, to turn now and take refuge where I could, then stow away on the first freighter to pass --

-- which was impossible, I realized in the same instant. Not to mention dangerous. Acting normal was important, I told myself. Then aloud, I said, "Just keep her happy."

I have never been more terrified of a human being.

Yet Ula seemed oblivious. She greeted me with a kiss and demanded more, and I failed her, nervousness and a sudden fatigue leaving me soft. But she explained it away as stress and unimportant, cuddling up next to me on the shady jungle floor. She said, "Let's sleep," and I managed to close my eyes and drift into a broken dreamy sleep, jerking awake to find myself alone.

Where had the girl gone?

I called her on our corn-line, hearing her voice and

my voice dry and clumsy, asking her, "Where are you?"

"Mutating treefrogs, darling."

Which put her inside her home. Out of my way. I moved to the closest workstation, asking its reader to show me the original schematics and everything that we had done to date; and I opened up my jersey -- I was still wearing my heavy, cold-weather jersey -- drops of salty water splattering on the reader. I was hunting for anything odd or obviously dangerous. A flaw in the ice roof? None that I could find. A subtle poison in our young trees? None that showed in the genetic diagrams. But just to be sure, I tested myself. Nothing wrong in my blood, I learned. What else? There was one oddity, something that I might have noticed before but missed. The trees had quirks in their chemistry. Nothing deadly. Just curious. I was studying a series of sugars, wondering when Ula had slipped them into the tailoring process, and why; and just then, as if selecting the perfect moment, she said, "Darling," with a clear close voice. Then, "What are you doing.?"

I straightened my back, and I turned.

Ula was standing behind me, the smile bright and certain. And strange. She said, "Hello?" and then, "What are you doing, darling?"

I blanked the reader.

Then with the stiffest possible voice, I told her, "Nothing. Just checking details."

She approached, taking me around my waist.

I hugged her, wondering what to do.

Then she released me, pulling back her hair while asking “What did you and my father decide?”

Swallowing was impossible, my throat full of dust.

“I forgot to ask before. Do we get a second reactor?”

I managed to shake my head. No.

“An unnecessary expense,” she said, perfectly mimicking her father's voice. She couldn't have acted more normal, walking around me while asking “Has the nap helped?”

I watched her undress as she moved.

“Feel like fun?”

Why was I afraid? There weren't any flaws in our work, I knew, and as long as she was with me, nude and in my grasp, what could she do to me? Nothing, and I became a little confident. At least confident enough to accomplish the task at hand, the event feeling robotic and false, and entirely safe.

Afterward she said, “That was the best,” and I knew -- knew without doubt -- that Ula was lying. “The best ever,” she told me, kissing my nose and mouth and upturned throat. “We'll never have a more perfect moment. Can I ask you something?”

“What . . .?”

She said, “It's something that I've considered. For a long while, I've been wondering --”

“What?”

“About the future.” She straddled me, pressure on my stomach. The grin was sly and expectant. “When

Father dies, I inherit this world. All of it and his money too, and his robots. Everything.”

A slight nod, and I said, “Yes?”

“What will I do with it?”

I had no idea.

“What if I bought an artificial sun? Not fancy. And brought it here and put it in orbit. I've estimated how long it would take to melt this sea, if I hurried things along by seeding the ice with little reactors --”

“Decades,” I interrupted.

“Two or three, I think. And then I could terraform an entire world.” She paused, tilting her head and her eyes lifting. “Of course all of this would be destroyed. Which is sad.” She sighed, shrugging her shoulders. “How many people have my kind of wealth, Hann? In the entire Realm, how many?”

“I don't know.”

“And who already own a world too. How many?”

“Very few.”

“And who have an interest in tetraforming, of course.” She giggled and said, “I could be one of a kind. It's possible.”

It was.

“What I want to ask,” she said, “is this. Would you, Hann Locum, like to help me? To remake all of this ice and rock with me?”

I opened my mouth, then hesitated.

“Because I don't deserve all the fun for myself,” she explained, climbing off me. “Wouldn't that be something? You might be the first NT tetraformer

with your own world. Wouldn't that make you the envy of your peers?"

"Undoubtedly," I whispered.

Ula walked to her clothes, beginning to dress. "Are you interested?"

I said, "Yes. Sure." True or not, I wanted to make agreeable sounds. Then I made myself add, "But your father's in good health. It could be a long time before --"

"Oh, yeah." A glib shrug of her shoulders, a vague little-girl smile. "I hope it's years and years away. I do."

I watched the girl's face, unable to pierce it. I couldn't guess what she was really thinking not even when she removed the odd control from one of her deep pockets. A simple device, homemade and held in her right hand; and now she winked at me, saying, "I know."

Know?

"What both of you talked about today. Of course I know."

The pressure on my chest grew a thousandfold.

"The mosquitoes? Some aren't. They're electronic packages dressed up as mosquitoes, and I always hear what Father says --"

Shit.

-- and have for years. Always."

I sat upright, hands digging into the damp black soil.

She laughed and warned me, "You're not the first



person to hear his confession. I am sorry. He has this guilt, and he salves it by telling people who can't threaten him. I suppose he wanted you to feel sorry for him, and to admire him --"

"What do you remember?"

"Of my parents? Nothing." She shook her head. "Everything." A nod and the head tilted, and she told me, "I do have one clear image. I don't know if it's memory or if it's a dream, or what. But I'm a child inside a smelly freighter, huddled in a corner, watching Provo Lei strangle my real mother. He doesn't know I'm there, of course." A pause. "If he had known, do you suppose he would have strangled me too? To save himself, perhaps?"

"I'm sorry," I muttered.

And she laughed, the sound shrill. Complex. "Why? He's a very good father, considering. I love him, and I can't blame him for anything." A pause, then with a caring voice she told me, "I love him quite a lot more than I love you, Hann."

I moved, the ground under my butt creaking; and I had to say, "But you poisoned him anyway."

Ula waved her control with a flourish, telling me, "I poisoned everything. All I wanted was for Father to watch." A shrug. "I tried to make him understand . . . to comprehend . . . but I don't think he could ever appreciate what I was trying to tell him. Never."

I swallowed, then asked, "What were you telling him?"

Her eyes grew huge, then a finger was waged at

me. “No. No, you don't.” She took a small step backward, shaking her head. “I think it's just a little too soon for that. Dear.”

I waited.

Then she waved the control again, saying “Look up, Hann. Will you? Now?”

“Up?” I whispered.

“This direction.” She pointed at the canopy. “This is up.”

My gaze lifted, the solid green ceiling of leaves glowing, branches like veins running through the green, and she must have activated the control, a distinct click followed by her calm voice saying, “I left out parts of the schematics, Hann. Intentionally. Before you were even hired, you should know.”

There was a distant rumbling noise.

The ground moved, tall trees swaying for an instant; then came a flash of light with instant thunder, a bolt of electricity leaping down the long cavern, the force of it swatting me down against the forest floor, heat against my face and chest, every hair on my body lifting for a terrible long instant.

Then it was gone again.

Everything was.

The lights had failed, a perfect seamless night engulfing the world; and I twice heard a laugh, close and then distant.

Then nothing.

And I screamed, the loudest sound I could muster lost in the leaves and against the tree trunks, fading

into echoes and vanishing as if it had never existed at all.

My jersey . . . where was my jersey . . . ?

I made myself stand and think, perfectly alert, trying to remember where it had lain and counting steps in my mind . . . one step, and two, and three. Then I knelt and found nothing in reach, nothing but the rich new soil, and for a terrified instant I wondered if Ula had stolen my clothes, leaving me naked as well as blind.

But another step and grope gave me my boots, then the jersey. I dressed and found my various equipment in the pockets and pouches. The portable reader had been cooked by the lightning but the glowglobes were eager. I ignited one of them and released it; it hovered over me, moving with a faint dry hum as it emitted a yellowish light.

I walked to the closest mag-rail.

Inoperative.

Nearby were a pair of robots standing like statues.

Dead.

I started to jog uphill, moving fast. Where was Ula? Had she gone somewhere, or was she nearby, watching

It was fifteen kilometers to the waterfall, the exit. The trees seemed larger in the very weak light, the open jungle floor feeling rather like a place of worship. A cathedral. Then came a wall of vines and thorny brush -- our earliest plantings -- and I burrowed into them, pushing despite the stabs at my

skin, breaking into an open unfinished glade and pausing. Something was wrong I thought. Against my face was cold air, bitter and sudden. Of course the field generators were down. And the refrigeration elements. What remained 'was the passive emergency system, heat rising into high ducts while others released cubic kilometers of stored air from below.

How long would the process take?

I couldn't remember, could scarcely think about anything. My jersey automatically warmed me, and I helped keep warm by running fast, pulling ahead of my glowglobe, my frantic shadow gigantic and ethereal.

In my head, in simple terms, I handled the mathematics.

Calories; volume; turbulence; time.

Halfway to the waterfall, feeling the distance and the grade, I had a terrible sudden premonition.

Slowing, I said, "Where are your"

Then I screamed, "Ula! Ula!?"

In the chill air my voice carded, and when it died there was a new sound, clear and strong and very distant. A howl; a wild inhuman moan. I took a weak step sideways and faltered. Somehow I felt as if I should know the source . . . and I remembered Ula's eight-legged predator, swift and smart and possibly on the hunt now. She had made it . . .!

There was a motion, a single swirling something coming out of the gloom at me. I grunted and twisted, falling down, and a leaf landed at my feet. Brown and

cold. Partly cooked by the lightning, I realized. It crumbled when my hand closed around it. Then came the howl again, seemingly closer, and again I was running, sprinting uphill, into another band of prickly underbrush and starting to sob with the authority of a beaten child.

The ambient temperature was plummeting.

My breath showed in my glowglobe's yellow light, lifting and thinning and mixing with more falling leaves. The forest was slipping into dormancy. A piece of me was thankful, confident that it at least would survive whatever happened; and most of me was furious with Ula -- a simple, visceral fury -- as I imagined my escape and the filing of criminal complaints. Attempted murder. Malicious endangerment. And straight murder charges on Provo, me as witness for the prosecution and their lives here finished. Extinguished. Lost.

"I'm going to escape," I muttered at the shadows. "Ula? Are you listening? Ula?"

I pulled gloves from a pocket, covering my cold hands and them knitting into my sleeves. Then I unrolled my jersey's simple hood, tying it flush against my head, enjoying the heat of the fabric. Leaves were falling in a steady brown blizzard. They covered the freezing earth, crunching with each footfall, and sometimes in the crunches I thought I heard someone or something else moving. Pausing, I would listen. Wait. The predator? Or Ula? But the next howl seemed distant and perhaps confused, and

it had to be the girl whom I heard. Who wouldn't be fooled with my stop and then go and stop again tricks.

The cavern's upper end was bitter cold. One of our emergency ducts had opened up beside the entranceway, robbing the heat from the water and ground and trees. Already the pond was freezing, the ice clear and hard, very nearly flawless. I ran on its shore, squinting into the gloom, believing that at least the cliche, the falls, would have stopped flowing when the power failed. Not in an instant, no. But its reservoir was relatively small -- Ula had shown me her plans -- and for a glorious instant I was absolutely convinced that my escape was imminent.

What was that? From the gloom came an apparent wall of marble, white and thick and built where the cliche had been. Frozen . . . the waerfall had frozen clear through . . .!

I moaned, screamed, and slowed.

Beside the pond was one of the useless robots. I moved to it, my breath freezing against the ceramic skin, and with a few desperate tugs I managed to pry free one of its hands. The hand was meant for cutting, for chopping and I held it like an axe, growling at my audience. "What did you think? That I'd just give up now?"

No answer. The only sounds were the falling of leaves and the occasional creaking pop as sap froze inside the sleeping trees.

I moved to the icy shelf at the base of the falls,

shuffling to where I normally walked through, where the ice should be thinnest. Three times I swung, twice without force and the third blow hard and useless, the ice as tough as marble and more slippery. My axe slid sideways, twisting me. Then my boots moved, my balance lost, and I hit the icy shelf, slid, and fell again.

The pond caught me. The ice beneath gave with the impact, a slight but deep cracking sound lasting for an age. But I didn't fall through. And when I could breathe again, with pain, I stood and hobbled over to the shore, trying very hard not to give in.

"Is this what you did to the others?" I asked.

Silence.

"Is this how you treat lovers, Ula?"

A howl, almost close, sudden and very shrill.

A primeval thought came to me. I made myself approach the black jungle, scooping up leaves by the armful and building a substantial pile of them where I had sat with Provo, against the downed log. And I lit them and the log on fire with a second glowglobe, putting it on overload and stepping back and the globe detonating with a wet sizzle, the dried leaves exploding into a smoky red fire.

The odd sugars loved to burn, the flames hot and quick and delicious. They ignited the log within minutes, giving me a sense of security. The canopy didn't reach overhead. I made doubly sure that the surrounding ground had no leaves, no way for the fire to spread; then I set to work, armfuls of fresh leaves

piled against the cliché, tamped them down with my boots until there was a small hill spilling onto the pond.

Heat versus ice.

Equations and estimates kept me focused, unafraid.

Then I felt ready, using the axe to knock loose a long splinter of burning log. I carried the cold end, shouting, "See? See? I'm not some idiot. I'm not staying in your trap, Ula!" I touched the leaf pile in a dozen places, then retreated, keeping at what felt like a safe distance but feeling waves regardless, dry and solid heat playing over me, almost nourishing me for the moment.

Those sugars were wonderfully potent. Almost explosive.

Ula must have planned to burn me alive, I kept thinking. She would have lit the leaf litter when it was deep enough . . . only I'd beaten her timetable, hadn't I?

"I'll file charges," I promised the red-lit trees. "You should have done a better job, my dear."

A sharp howl began, then abruptly stopped. It was as if a recording had been turned off in its middle.

Then came a crashing sound, and I turned to see a single chunk of softened ice breaking free of the cliché, crashing into my fire and throwing sparks in every direction. Watching the sparks, I felt worry and a sudden fatigue. What's wrong? My eyes lifted, maybe out of instinct, and I noticed a single platter-



sized leaf still rising, glowing red and obviously different from the other leaves. It was burning slowly, almost patiently. It practically soared overhead. Just like a fire eagle, it rode a thermal . . . and didn't it resemble an eagle? A little bit? One species of tree among hundreds, and Ula must have designed it, and she must have seen that it was planted here --

-- such an elaborate, overly complicated plan. Contrived and plainly artificial, I was thinking. Part of me felt superior and critical. Even when I knew the seriousness of everything, watching that leaf vanish into great blackness overhead . . . out of the thermal now, gliding off in some preplanned direction, no doubt . . . even then I felt remarkably unafraid, knowing that that leaf would surely reach the canopy somewhere, igniting hundreds of leaves and the sappy young branches . . . and part of me wanted nothing more than to take my student aside, ann around her shoulders, while I said, "Now listen. This is all very clever, and I'm sure it's cruel, but this is neither elegant nor artful and show me another way to do it. By tomorrow. That's your assignment, Ula. Will you do it for me, please?"

The forest caught fire.

I heard the fire before I saw the ruddy glow of it. It sounded like a grinding wind, strong and coming nearer; then came the crashing of softened ice, blocks and slush dropping onto my fire and choking it out completely.

I didn't have time or the concentration to build

another fire

Towering red flames were streaking through the cavern, first in the canopy and then lower, igniting whole trunks that would explode. I heard them, and I felt the detonations against my face and through my toes. The air itself began to change, tasting warm and sooty, ashes against my teeth and tongue. Transfixed, I stood in the clearing beside the pond, thick and twisting black columns of smoke rising the ceiling lit red and the smoke pooling against it, forming an inverted lake full of swirling superheated gases.

Over the rumble and roar of the fire, I heard someone speaking, close and harsh . . . and after a few moments of hard concentration I realized it was my voice, senseless angry sounds bubbling out of me . . . and I clamped a hand over my mouth, fingers into a cheek and tears mixed with the stinking ash . . . I was crying . . . I had been crying for a very long while. . . .

I would die here.

Always crying, I struggled with prosaic calculations. Calories from combustion; oxygen consumed; the relative toughness of human flesh. But my numbers collapsed, too much stress and too little time remaining. Part of the firestorm was coming back at me now, trunks burning and splitting open as the fiery sap boiled; but I wouldn't burn to death, I decided. Because what felt like a finger struck me on top of my head, in my hair, and I looked up just as a second goeey drop of water found me. It dripped between the fingers of my clamping hand, and I

tasted it --smoke and ash mixed with a sharp, almost chemical aftertaste --

-- melted ice from the faraway roof --

-- unfrozen, ancient seawater.

The black lake of churning smoke was its deepest straight above me, and those first drops became multitudes, fat and forceful. Like rain, then harder. They hammered me to the ground, my head dropping and my hands held above it, shielding very little, and squinting eyes able to see the oncoming fire begin to slow, to drown.

I thought of the falls melting with this onslaught, but I couldn't stand, much less move. The mud under me seemed to suck, holding me in place. I was squarely beneath an enormous waterfall -- no cliché - - and I would have laughed, given the breath.

Funny, fun Ula.

Perhaps the largest waterfall in the Realm, I was thinking. For this moment, at least. And my mind's eye lent me a safe vantage point, flames and water straggling for the world. And destroying it too. And somewhere I realized that by now I had to be dead, that breathing had to be impossible, that I only believed I was breathing because death had to be a continuation of life, a set of habits maintained. What a lovely, even charming wonder. I felt quite calm, quite happy. Hearing the roar of water, aware of the soil and trees and rock itself being obliterated . . . my bones and pulverized meat mixed into the stew . . . and how sweet that I could retain my limbs, my face

and mouth and heart, as a ghost. I thought. Touching myself in the noisy blackness, I found even my soaked jersey intact . . . no, not total blackness; there was a dim glow from above . . . and I began to sit upright, thinking like a ghost, wondering about my powers and wishing that my soul could lift now, lift and fly away.

But instead, with unghostly force, my head struck a solid surface.

Thunk.

I staggered, groaned, and reached out with both hands, discovering a blister of transparent hyperglass above me. Enclosing me. Larger than a coffin, but not by much . . . it must have been deployed at the last possible instant, air pumped in from below, seals designed to withstand this abuse . . . a safety mechanism not shown on any schematic, obviously . . . and I was alive, slippery wet and numb but undeniably organic. . . .

. . . and unalone as well.

Rising from the mud beside me, visible in that thin cool light, was a naked form -- artist; torturers Nature Herself -- who calmly and with great dignity wiped the mud from her eyes and grinning mouth. And she bent, the mouth to my ear, asking me over the great roar, "So what have you learned today, student?"

I couldn't speak, could barely think.

Opening my jersey, she kissed my bare chest. "The eight-legged howler was just noise. Just my little illusion."

Yet in my head it was real, even now.

“I would never intentionally hurt,” she promised.  
“Not you, not anyone.”

I wanted to believe her.

“I always watched over you, Hann. I never blinked.”

Thank you.

“I’m not cruel.” A pause. “It’s just --”

Yes?

“-- I wanted to show you --”

What?

“-- what? What have I shown you, darling?”

Squinting, I gazed up through the thick blister, the black water churning more slowly, cooling and calming itself. My mind became lucid, answers forming and my mouth opening and her anticipating the moment, her hand tasting of earth as it closed my mouth again.

We lay quietly together, as if in a common grave.

For two days we waited, the water refreezing around us and neither of us speaking, the creaking of new ice fading into a perfect silence. A contemplative, enlightening silence. I built worlds in my head -- great and beautiful and true, full of the frailties and powers of life -- then came the gnawing and pounding of robots. Half-burned trees were jerked free and tossed aside. The ice itself was peeled away from the blister. I saw motions, then stars. Then a familiar stocky figure. Provo Lei peered in at us, the round face furious and elated in equal measures; and as he

began to cut us free, in those last moments of solitude, I turned to Ula and finally spoke.

“You never wanted to terraform worlds,” I blurted.

“Worlds are tiny,” she said with contempt. Her liquid smile was lit by the cutting laser, and a green eye winked as she said, “Tell me, Hann. What do I care about?”

Something larger than worlds, I knew.

-- and I understood, in an instant --

-- but as I touched my head, ready to tell, Provo burst through the hyperglass and stole my chance. Suddenly Ula had changed, becoming the pouting little girl, her lower lip stuck out and a plaintive voice crying, “Oh, Father. I'm such a clumsy goof, Father. I'm sorry, so sorry. Will you ever forgive me? Please, please?”

## Birdy Girl

UPS is at the door. A package for my wife, as usual. The woman's one helluva shopper. I sign on the slot. It's a box, maybe twenty inches at the longest. Not heavy, either. I bring it inside, and the box says, "Let me out, why don't you?" So I look at the return address. Oh, Christ. But the UPS drone has already rolled away, no time to waste. What can I do? Put the thing in the closet, I decide. Go back to my life, what there is of it. And pretend that I'm not hearing a voice calling to me from under the winter coats. My wife gets home from work, and I tell her, "Look in the closet." She gives this little hoot and says, "Where's your knife?" I've got this old hunting knife that we use for packages. Like she's dressing a deer, she cuts the tape and opens the flaps and unwraps the aerogel, and she pulls out her doll and says, "Genevieve," with an instant fondness. "That's my name," the doll replies, looking at both of us. It's got big, big eyes. Green eyes, I notice. And I'm not someone who usually notices the colors of things. Those eyes are stuck in an oversized head riding on top of an immature body, reminding me of a child. But the hair is huge. It's the hair that every woman wants, rich and flowing with just enough curls. Brown hair, I notice. And the plastic skin looks heavily tanned. And there's something adult about the voice, even if it comes rumbling from a body that isn't quite eighteen

inches tall.

“I have clothes,” the dolls says. “Wonderful little clothes!” So of course my wife spends the next hour playing with her new toy and its fancy wardrobe. She calls her friends in the craft club. Everyone drops over, holo-style. Our living room is jammed with grown women and their Birdy Girls. I'll pass through, just to watch. Just to spy. “What happened to the quilting?” I ask. Last week, the group was making quilts with old-fashioned fabrics. Quasicrystal patterns. Kind of neat. But one of the projected women snorts and looks up from her half-dressed doll, telling me, “We still quilt. We do all of our heirloom crafts.” Then another woman laughs and says, “We just do them slower now.” And my wife gives me a certain look, asking, “What do you think?”

Her doll's dressed in a short skirt and a silky shirt, and its shoes have spiked heels, and the way it wears its hair is something. Frightening, really. I have to say, “God, she's got a big ass.” Which causes the doll to smile and wink, telling me, “Thank you very much, good sir.” Then after the laughter dies back, I ask, “So what's it dressed for?” And my wife laughs and says,

“She's going out. Out to the clubs.” Which I take for a joke. I don't know much about this new hobby. This fad. But later, I hear the front open and close, and I come in to find just my wife. The projected women are gone. And every doll. “Where's your new toy?” I ask. My wife is shoving trash into the empty box. “Oh, she's gone clubbing. Like I said.” “What



kind of club is that?" I ask. And she says, "This box needs to be thrown out." So I trudge out to the recycle tub and, standing under the street light, I skim through the Birdy Girl literature. Just to know a little something. I have my own friends, and I've got my little hobbies, too. So it bugs me when my wife says, "You should do things with your time. Constructive things." She says that a lot. She doesn't think much of my softball games or the vegetable/weed garden or how I can watch sports for hours at a stretch. She forgets there isn't much to do these days that's flat-out constructive. I'm not lazy. I had a job and a paycheck. But then the AI technologies made their Big Leap, and all that noise about the machines freeing people for better jobs came to a smashing end. I mean, why lay down for a human surgeon when the robotic ones are so much more skilled? Why do anything that matters when you'd have to compete with artificial critters who learn faster than you, and better than you, and who themselves are just prototypes for the next wonders to come off the assembly line? My wife forgets how it is. She's got a government job, because nobody's given the government to the machines yet. Besides, between her salary and my severance cake, we do fine. So what's the problem?

It's practically one in the morning when her doll gets home. It comes crawling through the cat door, and my wife jumps out of bed and goes into the kitchen, asking, "How was it?" She carries her new

friend into our bedroom. The doll stinks of cigarettes, and I think beer got dumped on it. "Go back to sleep," my wife tells me. Then she makes a bed for her doll, spreading out her tiniest quasicrystal quilt inside an open drawer. Like people, Birdy Girls need to sleep. To dream. I read that in the brochure. Pretending to sleep, I listen to the whispers, hearing about its adventures at what sounds like The Hothouse. That was a college bar back when I noticed such things. Maybe it still is, sort of. Whatever the place was, it sounds like real people and machines are getting together. My wife's doll met the other women's dolls there, and they had a good time, and her doll wants to go again tomorrow night. "Can I, please?" it asks. And my wife says, "That or something better. Whatever you want, Genevieve."

.....

I know what this is about. I'm not an abstract sort of guy, but I'm not a complete idiot, either. We've talked about having kids, and all things considered, it doesn't appeal to me. A kid takes a certain something that I just don't have anyway. But even when my wife agrees with me, I can see doubt in her eyes. And that's coming from a guy who isn't all that tuned to anyone's emotions. Not even his own.

The dolls sleeps till noon, nearly. I walk into the bedroom a couple times, watching its eyes moving as it dreams. When it gets up, it dresses itself in new jeans and a T-shirt with KISS ME, I'M INSATIABLE written across the front.

"I'm going out," it warns me. I don't say a word. Which takes an effort, frankly. The machine has its ways of teasing reactions from people; there's sociable software behind those dreaming eyes. But I manage to say nothing, and it leaves me, and I watch half of the Cardinals game, losing interest after I'm done with lunch and I'm done watching when one team's whipped. One-sided games are never fun. Instead, I go out back to do a little work. Watering and weeding. I do everything by hand. No gardening drones for me, thank you. I work until the heat gets old, then I sit in one of the adirondacks that I built last year. Woodworking; it sounds like a fine, noble hobby until you make your first wobbly chair. I'm sitting in the shade, wobbling, and some little motion catches my eye. Above the grapevine on the back fence is a face. The face is watching me. For an instant, I'm guessing that it's another Birdy Girl. But then she waves at me, and I realize that it isn't like that. She waves, and I wave back, and then I find some reason to stand and stretch and head back inside again.

Our cat is sprawled out on the living room floor. The doll is beside him, scratching his eyes and telling him that he's a pretty kitty. A beautiful kitty. Then it looks up at me, remarking, "You've got to be curious. So ask me questions." And I say, "I don't want to." Then it tells me, "Genevieves are curious and adventurous. We watch and we remember. And we have a distinct, rather quirky sense of humor." So I

say, "Prove it." And just like that, the doll reaches under the sofa, pulling out the hunting knife that I use on boxes. The tanned face smiles, big white teeth showing. And with both hands, it lifts the weapon, saying, "How about it? A little knife fight before dinner?"

What can I do? I laugh. I can't help myself. And the doll laughs with me, neatly flipping the knife and catching it by the back of the blade, and walking forwards, she hands the hilt up to me. She gives it up. And that's when I start thinking of her as being "her," and that's how our first conversation gets rolling.

.....

After Genevieve goes clubbing again, I mention to my wife, "Someone's living in the Coldsmith house." She asks, "Who?" while looking down at her embroidery: a picture of a farmhouse and horse-drawn wagons. I tell her,

"There was a kid in the backyard. A girl. Maybe five, maybe less." Which makes her look at me. "Just one child?" she asks. "That's all I saw," I report. She wants details, but she doesn't ask. All the obvious questions have obvious answers, and what's the point in hearing what you know already? So down goes her head, hands working the needle again.

It's past two when Genevieve finally gets home. I'm the one who hears the cat door, my wife sleeping as if dead. I slip out of bed and into shorts and I meet the girl midway. She's carrying her spiked shoes, trying to be quiet. Her short skirt looks jacked up too high, and

her hair could stand a good combing. And that's not all I'm thinking now. She just stands there, smiling, swinging her little shoes with her arms out straight. It's as if she know what's going on inside my idiot head.

Finally, in a whisper, I ask, "So was it fun?"

"Everything's fun," she tells me.

And I warn her, flat out, "Don't ever tell me anything about it. Ever. Please?"

.....

The girl doesn't eat, but she can taste. Her little pink tongue leaves marks on my lunch. I don't know why, but I like that. I find it charming, somehow. She says, "It's all good," and I admit, "That's the one place that I like AIs. When they're cooks." My wife and I bought a top-of-the-line chef last winter.

"Can you smell, too?" I ask, and she makes a show of sniffing, then breaks into a soft barking cough, one tiny hand over her mouth in a ladylike fashion.

Like yesterday, she leaves through the cat door. I don't know where she's going. But when I'm outside, weeding the front lawn, she's suddenly standing next to me. I'm not sure when she showed up. Smiling as I work, I tell her,

"This has to be boring for you." She watches my hands tugging at the weeds, and she nods, and says, "But it's fun, too. If I let it be." Then an idea hits me. "There's a job that needs doing," I explain, "and it might be exciting." She wants to know what it is. "I bet you could climb that tree, if I started you with a

boost.” I point at the big locust in the middle of the yard.

“Squirrels stripped the bark off that high branch, killing it—”

“You want me to kill your squirrels?” she says. Jokes.

“Maybe later,” I tell her. “Today, let’s just trim that dead limb off. Okay?” She weighs nothing, nearly. I could practically throw her to where she needs to be. And she’s stronger than seems right, moving up from the low branches, carrying my diamond-edged saw by the strap, holding the strap between her big white teeth.

The cutting part is easy. She uses both hands and works the blade through the soft dead wood, the pink of her tongue showing as she concentrates. Then comes the splitting crack when there’s not enough wood holding up the rest, and that’s when she loses her balance. The jerk of the saw takes her by surprise, pitching her forwards, and I’m watching her let go of the saw, both of them tumbling now, and before I can think, I’m jumping. I’m reaching out. I guess my plan is to catch her and save her. But she weighs so little that the air slows her down, and while she’s squealing with pleasure, I’m slamming my hands into the tree trunk, then landing too hard on my shoulder. I’m lying there, moaning, when the saw hits next to me and she plops down on my back. With concern, she asks, “Are you all right?” I grunt something about being tough. And with amusement, she reminds me,

“Plastic is pretty tough. For future reference.”

My wife never hears the whole story. She just sees my scraped hands and the medicated sling, and she walks around the dead limb laid out in the yard. Without prompting, she fills in the blanks. I'm an idiot; that's the easy story. And that's the story I let stand.

.....

UPS comes again. And the brown-suited drone escapes before I notice that it's our address but not my wife's name. Or mine. It's the same last name, but who's Kahren? The city register answers that. My first thought is to call UPS

and ream them out for their mistake. And that's my second thought, too. But somehow it doesn't get done. Morning turns to afternoon, and part of me grows curious. Takes charge. Before leaving the house, I look in at the doll. Genevieve was out until four in the morning, nearly. She looks peaceful, still deep in her dreams, and I can't help but feel a little curious about what she's seeing right now.

Our street curls into the next street, and the house numbers repeat. That's why this looks like a harmless mistake. And maybe it is. My plan, near as I can tell, is to leave the package beside the front door, and, at the most, ring the bell before making my escape. But there's a kid already sitting on the front porch. He's four years old, if I'm judging things right. He's sitting on an old sofa, legs sticking straight out, staring at the reader in his lap. Then he looks up, something

like a smile breaking across the face.

“The item came to you by mistake,” he remarks with a too-quick voice. With his words running together, he says, “Thank you for bringing us the item.” I don't like this. But I can't just throw the box at him and run. So I set it down on the porch while standing on the steps, and with my voice coming out slow and stupid, I remark, “We've got the same last name.”

“It's a common name,” is his only response. And I say, “Whatever you have in this box, I hope it isn't too illegal.” Which is a joke. Nothing but. But he isn't smiling anymore. He waits a half second, which is a long time for him. Then he tells me, “UPS has excellent security AIs, and the best sensors, and I am not a criminal, sir.” The creature is probably only three years old, I realize. They're even smarter than the four-and five-year-old wonders, which makes it worse. They're smarter and less willing to pretend that they're not. Again, he says, “Sir,” and stares hard at me. He has huge black eyes set inside a tiny round face, and he keeps staring, telling me, “If you please, I'd like to focus all of my attentions on my work now.” I don't know why. But I've got to ask the creature, “What do you do for work?”

If my new neighbor thinks about my question, he does it in a microsecond. Then with a smug little grin, he admits, “I don't think there's any conceivable way that I could explain what I do to you.”

.....



The craft women come over again, only this time for real. They're quilting and dressing their dolls and having a wonderful time, talking up a storm until I walk in on them. Then everyone gets quiet. Even the dolls. Even Genevieve. It was her voice that was loudest, and it's her that I look at now, asking everyone, "What's all the laughing about?"

My wife says, "Honey. Do you have to lurk?" I don't want to be a total prick. But I've got to ask, "What were you ladies talking about?" Genevieve says, "Last night." Then the other dolls shush her. She's wearing a new outfit; I've never seen this one. The skirt reaches to her ankles, with flowers on it, and the shirt and jacket are a light purple—lavender, I guess you'd call it—and she's got fat green emeralds stuck in her thick hair and plastered across her flat little chest.

"I'm going out," I tell my wife. In front of everyone, she asks, "Out where?" So I say, "Remember? The guys are playing in that tournament tonight." I mean the gang from my old job; nothing's left of our company but its softball team.

"What about your arm?" she asks, and I say, "It's mostly better."

"I didn't think you were going to play," she says, definitely not happy now.

"I guess you thought wrong," I tell her, keeping things nice and stirred up. Making sure she won't want me coming home anytime soon.

.....

Human beings have never played better softball. That's what we tell ourselves when we're out on bright warm nights like this. This is exactly the kind of thing that the AIs have freed us to do, we boast. Laughing loudly. Sneaking beers out of the coolers. Everyone taking their hard cuts at the slow fat balls, then running the bases as fast as they can.

The best softball in human history is being played tonight, but not on this field. Not by us. We're just a pack of middle-aged men with too much time to eat and nothing important at stake. Not even halfway important. Two minutes after we're done playing, I can't remember who won. Half an hour after we're done, it's just me and couple buddies sitting on the bleachers, finishing the last of the beers, talking about nothing and everything at the same time. The lights over the field have turned themselves off. This is a clear night, and looking up, we can see the cities sparkling on the moon, the cities flying along in their orbits. Up there, it's AIs and it's our own little kids, plus older kids with enough genius to hang on, and every last one of them is looking down at the three of us.

"They're building starships now," says one guy. Which makes the other guy say,

"No, I read they're building something else. They aren't ships like we know ships." And being the deciding vote, I warn them, "There's no knowing what they're doing up there." Then I tell my story about the package and my new neighbors. "What?" says the

first guy. "You've got two of them living behind you?" I don't like his tone. I don't know why, but it makes me squirm. Then that guy says, "They're too strange. Too scary. Maybe you're different, but I couldn't stand them being that close to me."

The guy has a couple kids. They'd have to be twelve and fourteen, or something like that. They had to be born normal, but that doesn't mean they've stayed that way. If you're young enough, and willing, you can marry your brain to all sorts of AI machinery. When was the last time he mentioned his kids? I can't remember. And that's when I realize what must have happened and what's got him all pissy now.

I finish my beer and heave the empty over the backside of the bleacher. Neat-freak robots will be scurrying around the park tonight, and tomorrow night, and forever. Why not give them a little something to pick up?

After a good minute of silence, I tell the guys, "We're talking about having a kid." Which isn't true. I'm just thinking about it for myself. "I know it's not like it used to be," I admit. "I know ours would probably jump the nest before she's three."

"It's more like two," says the second guy. He's never been married or had kids. Shaking his head, he flings his empty after mine, telling me, "You don't want that. They're more machine than people, these kids are." Which gets the first guy pissed. "I don't think I'd go that far," he growls. Then he stands and puts his empty into the empty trash can. And he picks

up one of the titanium bats. In the moonlight, I can see his face. I can see him thinking hard about his own kids. About everything. Then he lifts the bat up high and slams it down into the aluminum bleacher, making a terrific racket. Again and again, he bashes the bleacher, leaving a sloppy dent and the air ringing, and him sweating rivers, while his two friends stare out at the empty ballfield, pretending to notice none of it.

.....

The Hothouse was a dump in the old days. And still is, which makes things better somehow. Easier. I don't feel half as out of place as I expected. Walking through the smoky rooms. Watching people and things that aren't people. I'm not even the oldest critter in this place, which is the biggest surprise.

The music sucks, but bar music always sucks.

Maybe fifty Birdy Girls are hanging around. There's usually five or six of them at a table, along with as many college-age kids. The kids are too old to mesh up with AIs, but they're wearing the trendy machines on their faces. In their hair. Some have four or five machines that give them advice or whatever. The machines talk in low buzzes. The Birdy Girls talk in normal voices. The college kids are the quiet ones, drinking their beers and smoking the new cigarettes. Doing nothing but listening, by the looks of it. I don't listen. I just hunt until I see her standing in the middle of a round table, dancing with another Birdy Girl. Except it isn't her. I know it from her clothes,

which are wrong, and I know by other ways, too. It's a feeling that stops me midway. Then I make a slow turn, searching for a second Genevieve doll. There isn't any. Two turns and I'm sure. Then I'm thinking how this looks, if anyone cares to notice me. A grown man doing this, and for what? But it's pretty obvious I don't give a shit what anyone thinks, and that's when I move up to the round table, saying, "Hey, there," with a loud voice. It barely sounds like me. When the tanned face lifts and those green eyes fix on me, I say, "Is there another Genevieve around? Anyone see her?" This Genevieve says, "No," and picks up someone's spare cigarette with both hands, tasting a little puff. It's one of the college boys who tilts his head back, blowing blue smoke while he's talking. "There was one. With a group. Ago, maybe ten minutes?" Then one of his AI add-ons whispers something, and he adds, "Twelve minutes ago." So I ask what she was wearing. Was it a long skirt and jewelry? Again the machine buzzes, and the kid gives me a big smile. He looks like every frat kid that I went to school with. Smug, and handsome. And drunk enough to be happy, or dangerous, or both. "That's your girl," he promises. "She and her Girls went outside with some old man." And with a hard pleasure, he adds, "Almost as old as you, by the looks of him."

.....

It's a pleasure to be outside. It's a torture. I'm standing in the middle of the parking lot, looking at

empty cabs and parked cars. I'm wishing that she saw me drive in. But my car's sitting empty. Then I'm telling myself that she and her little friends have left, since it's after one in the morning now. Is it that late? Just to be sure, I make a circuit around the parking lot. An old minivan sits in the back corner, back where it's darkest. The windows are popped open. I can't see inside, but I hear the voices. The giggles. I can't remember deciding to walk up to the van, but that's what I must have done. Decided. Because I'm there now. I'm pressing my face to the glass. There's a little light burning inside, and when I squint, I can tell someone's pulled the seats out of the back end, nothing but a narrow mattress on the floor, and the man lying on his back with his hands jammed behind his tilted head, looking like he's about to try doing a sit-up, his head tilted and his buggy big eyes watching everything that's happening to him. Just like that, the door handle's in my hand. The side door has jumped open. And if I've gone this far, I might as well drag the son of a bitch out by his ankles. Birdy Girls and pant legs go flying. I'm going to kick his ass. God, I'm going to paste him. But then he's screaming at me, begging, hands over his scrunched-up face. It's a bald old face. It could be my face in twenty years. I can't smack him. I can't even pretend that I'm going to. So I drop him and start hunting for the Genevieve. Then I see her face glaring at me, her mouth tiny and hard, and I start looking at what I'm doing, and why, and it's my voice that asks me, "What in hell's going on

here?" Genevieve says, "Don't you know?" Then she tells her friends, "I know fun. And this isn't."

Too late by a long ways, I notice that the jewelry in her hair is wrong, and she's wearing that hair different than before, and it isn't the same dress. And to myself, in a low stupid voice, I say, "I'm an idiot."

"Yeah," says the wrong Genevieve. "And you're not keeping it too much of a secret, either."

.....

I've got two women waiting for me at home. One of them says, "You look rough," and the other adds, "It must have been quite a ball game." I don't know which of them scares me worse. Instead of answering, I take a long shower and dry myself in the bathroom, putting on clean shorts before coming out again, finding both of them asleep in my bed, one curled up on the other's chest. It's almost noon when I come to. I'm in the living room, on the couch. A slow, stiff search of the place finds nobody. Just me and my hangover. Dressed and fed, I step into the backyard, thinking the air will do some good. But the sun is scorching and bright enough to blind, and I end up sitting in the shade, on my wobbly adirondack, hoping nobody finds me for a week or two. Then a voice calls out. "Thank you," it says. Maybe twice, maybe more than that. Then she says my name, and that's when I pry open my eyes, looking across the yard, slowly focusing on the young face staring over the top of the fence. I can go inside. Pretend that I didn't hear her, or just play it rude. But then she says,

"I'm Kahren, the one with the package." And in the next breath, she says, "My brother was rude to you. But believe me, I'm thankful for your help, good sir."

Walking to the back fence takes me a week. A year. Forever. I'm staring up at a little girl's face and a woman's smart eyes. She's climbed up on a grapevine to look over. If she's five years old, she's one of the oldest of these kids. And the slowest, and the simplest. Maybe that's why I can stand talking to her. Again, she says my name. Then out of nowhere, she says, "You and I are related. We have a common ancestor in the late 1800s." And I say, "Is that so?" Then I ask, "How do you know? Because of our names?" But no, she shakes her head, telling me, "Our DNA. I took a peek—"

"At my DNA?" I blurt. "How did you get that?"

"From the package. You left flakes of dead skin on the sticky label—"

"Don't touch my DNA," I tell her. I shout it, practically.

"I never will again," she promises. Then she dips her head, sad about making me angry. Really, she looks nothing but sweet. Five years old, with curly blonde hair and a pouting lip, and behind those big blue eyes revs a brain that's probably already had more thoughts than I'll have in my entire life. But it never occurred to the girl that she was doing wrong. She was just being curious. Being herself. So I say, "Forget it." And dipping her head farther, she says sadly, "I can't forget."



She's a sweet, sweet girl, I'm thinking.

Then several seconds have passed without conversation, and I know she has to be bored. That's why I ask, "So what was in that package? Anything important?" And she doesn't say. Watching me, and not. Nothing showing on her pretty little face. Then just as I'm thinking that she didn't hear me, she asks, "Are you happy?"

"What's that mean?" I ask. "Like, in my life ... am I happy ... ?" She nods. Bites her lower lip, embarrassed again. "If you don't want to answer," she starts, and I say, "No." I say, "No, I'm not happy." Over the fence, talking to a perfect stranger, I admit, "A lot of things really suck lately. If you want to know the truth."

"I do," she says. "Absolutely, yes." Then she tells me, "The package you brought me ... it involves my work. My brother's work. We belong to a body of thinking souls, people like you and like me, and certain AIs, too. We realize now that the AI technologies were a tragic mistake. Tragic." She says the word a third time. "Tragic." Then she shakes her head, saying, "Very few people are happy. Even my generation suffers. There's boredom for us. There are subtle, unexpected problems with the new technologies. It makes an imaginative person wonder: Wouldn't it be nice if we could roll everything back to before? To the days prior to the Big Leap?"

The girl does a great job of keeping her voice slow.

But it's as if I can't understand what she's telling me. I have to run the words back through my head, wringing the sense out of them. More quiet seconds pass, and I finally ask, "What are you telling me? That you really can change things?"

"Not by myself, no." She leaks a big sigh, plainly hunting for the best way to say what's next. "Roll things back how?" I ask her. I want to know. And she explains, "I guess it's just as it sounds. Roll things back literally. Time is an arrow in motion, and it's amazingly easy to fool that arrow, making it reverse itself. But of course, that doesn't do anyone any good if it just puts us back where we started. If the Big Leap is inevitable, and if anyone builds even just one cheap and easy thinking machine ..." I keep staring up at her. Waiting.

"The tough trick," she says, "is to change certain essential laws of the universe. Not everywhere, of course. That would be impossible as well as immoral. No, what we want is to make it impossible for anyone on and around our world ... say, within a light-month of the Earth ... make it impossible for them to build AI machinery that works." She looks around, making sure it's just the two of us. "There's no one solution to that enormous problem, of course. But there's a thousand little ways, and if you used all of them, with care, it gives human beings another thousand years to prepare themselves for this momentous change. Which would be a good thing. Don't you think so, good sir?"

I say, "Sure," with a quiet little gasp.

Then she sighs again, looking at me and saying nothing. So I ask her, "What happens to you, if it happens?" And she tells me, flat out, "I never am. The Earth jumps back seven years from today, and there's never a Big Leap forwards, computers remain fast but stupid, and nobody like myself is born. Ever."

"How soon?" I ask.

"Think soon," she advises. Then in her next breath, "Think tonight."

"And you can do that to yourself?" I have to ask. "You can make yourself never be, and you don't even blink about it?"

The girl gives me a long look. Her little mouth is working, twisting at its ends. Then the mouth goes still, and she tells me with a careful voice, "When something is right, you do it. What other choice is there, good sir?"

.....

She finds me sitting in front of the game, drinking cold beer. "Who's playing?" she asks, and I tell her, "It's the Cardinals and Cubs." And she asks, "Who's better?" I tell her, "The Cubs, this year." Which makes her ask,

"Then why are they behind ... what, three points?" I don't answer her. Then she glances at my beer, not saying anything about the time of day. I can see what she's thinking, but she doesn't say anything, sitting next to me now, sitting and watching the game for a long while before finally saying, "So aren't you going

to offer a girl a taste?”

I tip the can. The beer foams and fills her mouth, and she swirls it hard with her tongue before spitting everything back into the can again. I taste plastic in my next sip. Or I think I do.

She wipes her mouth against the corner of a little pillow. My wife embroidered a picture of a tabby cat on that pillow. “It was one of her first,” I tell my friend. “Hell, I can even see the screw-ups.” The Birdy Girl nods, not looking at the pillow. Or the game. When I finally look at her green eyes, she says, “It’s a nice day outside.” And when that doesn’t do anything, she adds, “There’s a playground just up that way,” and points, waving one of her arms. “Take me, if you want. Or I can take myself over. But I’m not staying locked up in here. You’re not that much fun, you know.”

“I know.”

We walk over. Or I walk, and she rides. She stands on my belt with both hands holding to the back of my shirt. A couple neighbors spot me coming. They know me and wave. Then I’m past them, and they see the Birdy Girl riding tight, and why that should be entertaining, I don’t know. But it makes me laugh. More fun than drinking beer alone, at the very least.

The playground isn’t used now. It’s been years since it got maintenance. The city, or someone, has set a plastic orange fence up around it, plus signs that keep telling us that it’s dangerous and forbidden. The signs threaten to call the authorities. I threaten the

signs. Then I give the fence a yank down where others have done the same, and I throw my leg over, and Genevieve jumps off me and runs, and skips, and giggles, looking back to tell me, "Try the slide. I'll stand at the bottom and catch you!"

I'm not going to do that, I decide, then I watch myself do it anyway. I climb up a wooden tower and through a doorway that's way too small, forcing my fat ass into the silvery chute that's about a thousand degrees in the summer sun. It's cooking me. But she's at the bottom, laughing and waving, telling me,

"Down. You slide down. Haven't you used one of these contraptions before?" And I let myself go, gravity carrying me down that hot metal chute, and maybe I'm laughing, too. It feels a little bit like laughter. But then I'm at the bottom, sitting on the broiling end of the slide, and I'm quiet and thinking hard to myself, and she tugs at my hand, coaxing me, saying, "There's a teeter-totter over there. See it? You park yourself at one end, and I'll park on the other, then I'll lift you to the sky."

It's those words and the way she says them. That's what rips me open. Then she isn't talking, staring up at me as her smile falls apart, that brown plastic face becoming concerned, and worried, and a little sad. Finally she says, "Did you know? You're crying."

Like I little kid, I'm leaking tears. Yeah.

She asks, "What is so awful?"

I won't tell her. I decide that it wouldn't be right. So instead, I just give a shrug, saying, "It's just some

stuff I'm thinking about." To a Birdy Girl, there is no problem. "Just think about something else," is her easy advice. "Pick what's really fun. Something you just love. That's what I'd do if I ever got blue. Then I'd think hard about nothing else!"

.....

My wife comes home to find me cooking over the stove. Not our AI chef, but me. The sauce is our garden tomatoes, and maybe it's a little runny. And like always, I've cooked the spaghetti until it's mushy. But I'm responsible for everything, including setting the dining room table, and I've killed some flowers in the backyard, propping up their corpses in a fancy crystal vase set out in the middle of everything.

She has to ask what the occasion is, and I'm ready for her. I say, "Do we need an excuse to eat together?" Which pretty well shuts her up. Then I wipe my hands dry and step into the bedroom, asking, "Have you picked which one?" Genevieve is standing on the chest of drawers, watching the mirror as she holds clothes in front of herself. She says, "One of these two, I think." I say, "I like the long dress." She says, "Prude," and laughs. Then my wife wanders in and asks, "What are you two doing?" I say, "Picking." Genevieve says, "For tonight." And my wife gives us this drop-jawed look, then half-snorts, saying, "You're mine," to the Birdy Girl. "You're not his. You're mine."

"I am yours," Genevieve agrees, smiling happily. Then she puts on her long dress, saying, "The other

Girls and I are going to see some minor league hardball.” As her head comes through the neck hole, she adds, “Afterwards, we’re going to molest a player or two. That’s the plan, at least.” I don’t say anything. I haven’t, and I won’t. But it wrings me dry, standing there, watching this little machine putting little shoes on those little feet.

Genevieve tells us, “Bye.”

I’m not crying, but I feel myself wanting to do just that. I watch her crawl through the cat door, then I make sure that I wander into the living room, watching as the cab pulls up and the back door pops up, nearly a dozen Birdy Girls already standing on the back seat, their big hair bouncing and a few of them wearing honest-to-god ball caps.

One last time, my wife says, “I got her for me. That doll’s mine.”

“She is yours,” I agree. “I won’t even look at her again.” We eat at the dining room table. Dinner is mush, but it’s tasty mush. It’s my mush. Then we make love for the first time this month, and that goes pretty well. Better than pretty well, really. Then one of us feels like talking, and one of us wants to listen. So that’s what we do. But after a while, the talker asks, “Are you paying attention to me?” and I say, “I was, dear. I am.” Honest, I was trying to listen, but my head kept drifting back to other things. Important things. “I was just thinking about stuff,” I confess. With a grumbly tone, she asks, “What stuff?” Then I stop her dead, saying, “I was thinking we ought to

have a child. Or two. You know, before it's too late." We've got a quiet little house when nobody's talking, or even breathing. A week passes, then she tells me, "I don't know. I've been thinking along those same lines. You know?"

"I thought you were," I say.

She doesn't know what to say now. Using my chest as a pillow, she sets her ear over my heart, and after another long pause, she says, "Yeah, we should." Then she has to ask, "But why the big change? Why all of the sudden?" It's gotten late. Gotten dark, almost. I'm lying on my back, fighting the urge to look at the time. I realize that I don't know when it's supposed to happen, and besides, I won't know when it comes. That's my best guess. Time will run backwards for seven years, and then it will begin again. Begin new. And I won't have memories of anything recent or sorry, and everything will be fresh, and why in hell am I so eaten up and sad about this thing? It doesn't make sense to me. Not even a little bit.

"Are you all right?" my wife asks me. Concerned now.

"I'm fine," I say, hearing my voice crack. Then I make myself shut my eyes, telling her, "It's just that I got this feeling today. That's why I want kids now. Starting tomorrow, I'm just sure, everything's going to be different."

.....

I'm too restless to sleep or even pretend, and then



it's sometime after one in the morning, and I suddenly drop into a dark hard sleep, waking when I hear the voice. I know that voice, I'm thinking. It tells me, "Go back to sleep, sorry," and I realize that I've lifted my head off the pillow. "Look at what I got for a souvenir," she says, pushing something up onto the bed. "One of the player's balls. I cut it off myself."

It's a hard white ball with tight stitches and a comfortable leather feel. The ball says to me, "On my first pitch, I was a strike, and I was fouled off, landing in the stands behind home plate."

"Quiet," I tell the ball. Then Genevieve says, "Quiet yourself. Go back to sleep."

But I won't sleep again. It's nearly five in the morning, and I've never been this awake. I put on shorts and shoes and yesterday's shirt, and Genevieve asks, "Where are you going?" I tell her, "Out back. To watch the sun come up, I guess." She says, "Well, I'm tired and grouchy. Can I come with you?" When I don't answer, she follows me into the backyard, sitting in one adirondack while I take the other. Her chair doesn't wobble under her little weight. She sits on one of the armrests, and naps, and I'm sitting next to her, thinking about everything. The neighbor girl didn't out-and-out promise that it would happen tonight. So they might do it tomorrow night, or the next. Whenever it happens, it leads us to the same place, always. Then I'm thinking about having a kid or two, and would it be so bad? Now or seven years ago, there's always problems with it. Then I look at

Genevieve, wondering if she's dreaming and what kind of dreams she has. I'm curious, but I won't ask. Then I halfway shut my eyes, and when I open them, it's dawn, and I see a little face rising up over the back fence.

A little hand swings up into view, waving at me.

I leave the Birdy Girl asleep. I walk to the back of the yard, asking, "What?" with a whispery voice.

He says, "I learned what she said to you," in a rush, as if it's one huge and horrible word. I can see his little-boy face in the soft first light of the morning. Both pink hands cling tight to the top of the wooden fence. He says,

"Kahren was wrong to mislead you, and I will make her apologize to you." Then he sighs and tells me, "But believe me, sir. There is no truth to anything she said."

What I'm thinking, mostly, is that I'm not all that surprised. I even expected something like this, down deep. Maybe part of me—a secret part—didn't want to lose these last seven years, bad as they seemed at the time. I decide to say nothing. I'm just standing in front of him, thinking it through, and he must think that I don't understand. Because he says it again, slower this time.

"Nobody can turn back time," he tells me, each word followed by a pause. "And nobody can do any of those things that my cruel, childish sister mentioned to you."

"Maybe you can't do those things," I tell him, flat-

out, “but how do you know it can't be done? Maybe when you start having kids, and they're a thousand times smarter than you'll ever be, it'll be done. You ever think about that, kid?”

It's almost worth it, these last pissy years. Just to stand there and see that big-eyed face staring at me, nothing about that boy even a little bit smug now.

I turn and walk back towards my house.

The Birdy Girl stirs on the arm of the chair, muttering, “More,” as she dreams. “More, more.”

I leave her there.

I go into the house, and I sit on the edge of the bed, watching my sleeping wife. Eventually her eyes come open, and I tell her, “I was right.” I tell her, “I don't know why, but everything's changed overnight, and it's pretty much for the better.”

The End

## The Boy

*Dies Veneris.*

A throbbing finds Helena.

It is warm and insistent, and in a small hard way, it feels angry. For a slippery instant, the sensation is her own. Her heart is thundering, or maybe a sick artery is pulsing deep within her brain. Then she finds herself awake, realizing that a lazy after-lunch nap must have ambushed her, and as she sits up in bed, breathing in quick sighs, the throbbing turns from something felt into a genuine sound, and the sound swells until the loose panes in her windows begin to rattle, and the air itself reverberates like the stubborn head of a beaten drum. A car passes. Smallish, and elderly. Nothing about it fast or particularly dangerous. But it is endowed with oversized speakers, their unlovely, thoroughly modern music making the neighborhood shiver.

Helena watches the car as far as her lilacs.

Then it vanishes, and the rude noise diminishes, and she lies back on her pillow, considering. Considering how much time she has, and her mood. Twenty minutes left in her lunch hour. A six-minute drive to work, if traffic cooperates. Her right hand tugs casually at her zipper. An after-lunch indulgence, she's thinking. She thinks about one man, then another. But the music returns, and her window glass rattles until it stops in mid-throb—a cessation of

sound that startles in its own right. Helena takes a breath, and holds it.

Through the windows, a person appears. A male person. On foot, strolling with purpose along her narrow driveway.

Helena feels embarrassed for no good reason. She sits up, telling herself that nobody can see her. And even if they could, she was doing nothing but enjoying a dieter's lunch and an innocent nap.

Her doorbell rings.

Helena gives her zipper a tug before slipping into her front room. She's not sure what to do. Nothing is a viable, sensible option. Stand and wait and do nothing. Because caution is always sensible, she reminds herself. Just last week, another local woman was raped, and they still haven't found the monster responsible. But then the doorbell rings again, gnawing away her resolve. Cathedral bells, it's supposed to sound like. But it's a cheap wireless bell that she installed herself, and the batteries are dying, and a bright sharp hum lingers. She can still hear the hum as she unbolts and opens the front door. Standing on her tiny concrete porch is a tall thin boy. He looks to be sixteen, with few pimples and a neat diamond-shaped scar standing on his right cheek. She doesn't know his face. Or does she? Placing a hand on the locked latch of her storm door, Helena begins with a soft cough, then growls, "Yes?"

The boy seems to be staring at the rain gutter, eyes held in a half-squint and his narrow body held erect

with his hands empty at his sides and his young, surprisingly deep voice saying to someone, “You’re going to think this is retarded.”

Apparently speaking to her, he asks, “Can I pick one of your flowers?”

She thinks nothing at all. Except for a sudden relief that he isn’t a rapist ready to crash through the glass. Why did she open her door to a stranger? How much good sense does that show? Even if it’s daylight, in a good neighborhood... !

“Ma’am?” he prompts.

She says, “I guess. Of course.”

Then she smiles, her expression going to waste.

The boy says, “Thank you, ma’am,” without ever looking at her face. He seems embarrassed, turning and stepping off the porch, following the narrow walk to the driveway and the driveway out to where his ugly little car waits. Helena closes her door and bolts it.

By the time she looks outside, the boy is carrying a single red tulip by the stalk. Her tulips are past their prime. One good shake, and that blossom flies apart. But no, he seems to be careful. Considerate. Climbing behind the wheel, the boy gently sets the flower on the seat beside him, then starts the little engine with a coarse rattle that brings back the music. Unchanged. Deep, and rhythmic. A male singer chants about some burning issue or love, but she can’t quite make out the words, standing at her window, watching as the boy pulls into her driveway

in order to back out again, turning back the way he started, again vanishing somewhere past the soft pink lilacs.

Helena can't help but wonder who's getting her flower.

Her big sedan is parked beside her very little house. East is the quick route. But today, Helena steers west. For a moment or two, she considers all the good sensible reasons to be curious about a stranger passing through her neighborhood. But she's not actually following the boy, she promises herself. Slowing at the corner, she looks ahead and then right, seeing the little car parked on the street, and silent. Nobody sitting inside it now.

The boy stopped in front of Lydia's house.

Unsure what she's thinking, Helena turns right and slows, staring at the brick bungalow with its little porch and little windows, its blinds and drapes pulled shut. She catches herself nearly stopping in the middle of the street. Then she accelerates, but only a little bit. And always staring.

Lydia's car is nowhere to be seen.

But her daughter's sporty little red car is in the driveway. For some reason, Sarah is home from school today. That bright and pretty girl whom Helena has always liked, and been friendly with, and occasionally felt motherly toward. And the blinds have been pulled shut. And Helena still isn't sure what she is thinking. Except that she has the burning premonition that someone here needs to be given a

good sharp warning.

*Dies Saturni.*

Helena loves men.

And in all the good modern ways, she tries to understand and respect them. Men are relatively common at work. Coaxed by the courts and changing times, state government has made heroic efforts to find room for qualified citizens of every ilk. Not that her male co-workers hold their share of the high posts. In most cases, departments are still ruled by gray-haired women with political minds and provincial morals. But some men have risen higher than Helena ever will, and she doesn't begrudge them their successes. Not at all. They are good smart and decent people, and each one deserves every opportunity that he has earned, or that he has been given. No person journeys through life today without holding such a charitable view toward the other half of her species. Helena believes. And she says what she believes whenever the occasion demands it.

When she's with her male work-friends, it seems as if they can chat about anything, without taboos. Office gossip. Politics. Crude jokes, and insulting the old religions. If handled with care, even romance and sex are viable topics. Helena likes to believe that the men are pals and confidants, and that they genuinely trust her. She definitely wants to feel worthy of their trust. But as with everything, there are limits. Her closest friends are always women. Single, like her. Or



dykes. Most with children, while a few are involved in some kind of marriage. Sitting in the breakroom with her girlfriends, or sharing a pitcher of beer after work, she hears herself speaking out of a different part of her mind. With women, she's more likely to use questionable language. To speak frankly about sex. And on occasion mention God and Christ without the modern scorn. Likewise men in the company of other men have their own mores. More than once, Helena has eavesdropped on their conversations. They can be the most modern, civilized creatures. Wealthy in their own right, and educated, and loyal to their nation and their assorted families. Yet despite all that, they forever carry a useful fatalism and a deep and abiding fear. Centuries of slow reform have built this world, and its considerable freedoms. But in their harsh jokes, they expose their real hearts. Everything they have won can vanish again. Suddenly, without the pretense of fairness. Each time they mutter "Bitches,"

their ancient fierceness betrays itself. Even when their curses are dressed up in smiles and laughter. One of them whispers, "Stupid cunt," and that's all it takes for them to laugh together, happy beyond words, and the woman listening at the breakroom door has no choice but to grimace, and shiver.

\* \* \*

Yet this isn't the old world; the new freedoms lift everyone higher. In this enormously prosperous society, a single woman has her own rich

opportunities, and risks, and the responsibilities that come with these blessings. Helena has owned her little house for twelve years. With the bank's help and approval, of course. She does all of the vacuuming and dusting. Whenever the urge and energy strike, she redecorates one of her little rooms, and she does as she pleases with her grass and gardens. No sisters or fellow disciples offer their poor advice, or goodhearted criticism, or forbid what you so much want to do. Like that weekend morning when Helena decided to paint her trim and her little garage. It was her impulse. She was the one who drove to the paint store. She selected the bright shade of blue and the ordinary white. Then she saved herself a small fortune by doing the work herself.

Mostly.

Lydia had just moved into the neighborhood. She brought her daughter and an older son, plus their father. Callan, the father, was a part-time presence. Home some nights. Other nights, absent. He worked construction jobs and as a bartender and sometimes a handyman for hire. He was a smiling, handsome fellow. A little short, but not too short. Boyish in the face, but old around his dark eyes. The consequence of being a smoker and a determined drunk, no doubt. Lydia's property sits perpendicular to Helena's backyard. It was a Saturday afternoon, sunny and warm, and Helena was busily painting the backside of her garage. Callan was standing behind the fence, making small talk while watching her backside. In the

most offhand fashion, she admitted that she didn't like climbing too high on her ladder, which was why she hadn't finished the trim just beneath the peak of her house. No, Helena wasn't begging for favors. She took pride in doing her own fix-it jobs. But Callan took the confession as a plea, and laughing in that fearless way that only men can, he told her, "I'll do the ugly for you. How about that?"

She heard herself say, "If you don't mind. I guess."

But he turned away and started for Lydia's back door. "If I'm going to do this chore," he explained, "I'll need a good shot of vodka first."

He was a talkative, usually pleasant drunk.

After the painting was done, Helena invited him inside her house. No vodka, she warned. But she had beer. And Callan happily drank her beer, regaling her with stories about his adventurous little life. He had done his stint in the Service, he boasted. Australia, then the Middle East. "Eleven kids on three continents," was his favorite boast. Which was an astonishing, almost baffling number. How could so many women allow themselves to get pregnant with his seed? Callan's charms were simple and probably didn't reach very deep. By his own estimate, he wasn't particularly bright or creative. Really, his only substantial claim was that he was an exceptional lover. "Enough cock for two men," he promised, sitting on her sofa with the spent beer cans crushed at his feet and his knees apart and his pants hiked up high and tight.

Helena decided to call his bluff, asking, "Is there enough cock for two women?"

He blinked, flashing a boyish grin as he sang out, "Always, darling. Forever!"

This was eight years ago.

They slipped into her bedroom, and plopping down on the bed, Helena instructed him to undress as she watched. Callan seemed perfectly happy. But once he was naked, stroking himself to prove his boast, he happened to glance above her tall dresser. A picture hung there. Helena had bought the picture at a garage sale. For its frame, she explained. Wider than it was tall, with an arching and halfway ornate backbone, the frame was made of some cheap metal meant to resemble brass, embossed with a vine and flowers that might or might not be honeysuckles. She had kept the picture inside because she hadn't found any other that quite fit the frame, she told him. Though in some ways, she rather liked that image. There was something comforting about seeing Christ sitting among the flock. Men can be extraordinarily superstitious.

Callan, particularly. He immediately dropped his prick. His erection began to fade, the scared blood in full retreat, and with a suddenly soft voice, he announced,

"It bothers me. Would you get it out of here?"

Helena had to laugh, but to mollify the man, she covered the offending image with her paint-spattered shirt. Yet Callan remained ill-at-ease. It took another

twenty minutes to get him back into shape again, and then, he wasn't particularly fun. Tentative. Self-conscious. Far from the horny maverick that he'd promised in the first place.

Lydia knew about the two of them.

But Helena and her neighbor remained friendly, if not friends, and it was a subject neither woman brought up. Nor did it need to be. Men were free to sleep with whomever wanted them. Besides, she and Callan screwed just a few times, in all. It wasn't as if Helena intended to bear Callan's twelfth child. Frankly, she had better taste than poor Lydia. When and if the time came, there were legions of potential fathers better qualified than that charming and superstitious little drunk. Then five years ago, Callan seemed to vanish.

At first, it didn't seem remarkable. But several weeks became several months, and his dented old truck still wasn't parked against the curb. The sun and rain began to fade the oil spot on the pavement, which was very strange. And that's why one day, standing at the back fence, Helena asked about him. Lydia is a handsome, raspy-voiced woman. She responded by staring off into the distance, then with her voice soft and certain, she said, "Really, I don't believe that's even slightly your business."

Which was probably true.

A week or two later, on a pleasantly warm Saturday afternoon, Helena was kneeling in her front yard, weeding. And suddenly Callan's old truck

appeared, chugging past her house and pulling up onto Lydia's yard, the drunken man staggering out of it and up the porch steps, holding a whiskey bottle by its neck as he shoved his way into the house. Lydia's windows were open; Helena couldn't help but hear the shouting. And where the curtains were open, she could see the combatants moving. Or standing perfectly still. In some strange fashion, it was a pleasure to watch their fight. Helena's little life seemed suddenly peaceful and perfect; not having children or permanent men were blessings, plainly. Callan screamed incoherently. Lydia cursed him horribly. Little Sarah was begging them to get along. Please! Then her older brother warned someone to shut up. And that was followed by the hard quick *pop*, and a terrible silence instantly settled over that sad little house.

Moments later, Lydia staggered from the back door, one hand pressed against her bloodied face. Helena was standing in her own backyard by then. Lydia seemed to glance her way, her expression shifting and unreadable. Then on rubbery legs, she walked to the next house on her street, and a few minutes later, the police and medics descended, burly officers restraining the drunken man by his arms and ankles, and Lydia climbing out of the ambulance long enough to shout, "You fucking dick-faced asshole!"

Callan had always boasted to Helena about his innate luck. "That's why women want kids from me," he loved to explain. "They want what I have. How

everything always comes out right for me in the end.”

Helena took a day of vacation to attend the trial. And for a little while, it seemed as if the famous Callan luck would hold. Callan's son took the stand. A burly teenager with his father's good looks and easy charm, he changed his story, trying to convince the jury that his mother had injured herself by falling. He certainly told a convincing lie. But then Lydia put her hand on the Bible and pointed straight at Callan, telling the eight women and four men on the jury, “He hit me. Here.” She pointed at her swollen, broken cheekbone. “Here,” she repeated. “He's the one responsible.”

Neither lawyer asked for the daughter's testimony. Perhaps because she was so young and so obviously distraught by this tragedy.

Nor did anyone call on Helena. And she didn't offer her opinions, either. She didn't want to appear to be a busybody or a fool, telling what she might have seen, or what she thought she had heard, all while looking through windows some fifty feet away.

Callan's sole defense was that he couldn't remember anything. He had drunk that much, and the horrible day was lost to him, and for everything that he might have done, he was sorry sorry sorry.

The jury deliberated for a heartbeat, it seemed.

They decided that Callan would live in custody for thirty years, working every day inside one of the sprawling factories where men indistinguishable from him could make restitution for their significant,

nearly unforgivable crimes. Which was how it should be.

But for weeks, Helena couldn't sleep through an entire night. Odd dreams would awaken her, and persistent fears kept her awake, eyes staring up through the suffocating darkness, her mind darting. No, Callan wasn't a good man. What could be more obvious than that? And she herself hadn't seen or heard anything conclusive. If anyone had let her take the stand—a huge assumption, that—then she would have offered nothing but a vague impression. As she watched the fight, and listened, it seemed to her that it was Callan who was standing in front of the kitchen window, both hands on the countertop to keep his drunken self upright. And when his son screamed, he said, "Shut up, you bitch!" And the sharp sudden *pop* came while Callan was still holding tight to the countertop, fighting to keep the pitching of the earth from throwing him down.

But even if that was true—even if the son had struck Lydia—how could Helena have helped anyone by talking? If a mother wants to protect her first-born, then what good would words from nosy neighbor accomplish?

No, she kept telling herself, she'd done what was best.

Or at least, what was the least awful.

But she couldn't stop thinking of Callan. Feeling sorry for that drunken man-child. She would remember him naked in her bedroom, happily



playing with himself ... and she invented an odd and complex fantasy where the picture on the wall hadn't spoiled the first moment, and their affair grew into something larger and more permanent. She discovers what is good about him, then she cultures it. And slowly, with patience, she makes Callan into a man worthy of a woman's trust and love.

The sun would eventually rise, illuminating the opposite wall, and the picture. One morning, tired enough to cry, Helena rose from her bed and pulled the picture from its hook, intending to put it away. But as so often happens when you take down an old picture, she looked at it carefully for the first time in years. Christ sitting in a pasture, she saw. The delicate, lovely face looking more European than Middle Eastern. That long silky hair and the deep, eternal eyes. And those tiny hands gently cradling the face of a newborn lamb.

What was the Daughter of God saying to the animal? she asked herself. What great and ancient wisdom of peace and charity and love was being wasted on that stupid, stupid beast?

### *Dies Solis.*

Helena hasn't attended church in twenty years. But sometimes she feels a strange envy when her oldest neighbors—women and the occasional shriveled up man—drive slowly past in the early morning, dressed in their best clothes, having somewhere important to be. Even though she isn't a believer anymore, the old

tugs remain. The faith of a childhood can't be purged. Ever. And there is a piece of her that can't even grieve that fact. Even now, she can still worry about her immortal soul.

Instead of church and prayer, Helena spends her mornings pushing her lawn mower. The machine is cheap and loud, and it smokes, and it's old enough that it lacks any modern safety features. Which makes the chore into a little adventure. One misstep, and she can lose a big toe or maybe half of her foot. Images of carnage help her concentrate, and afterward, she can feel as if she has accomplished something large.

This is late morning, and she is struggling with the corners of her backyard. Two elderly women approach without being noticed. Their first shouts go unheard. But then Helena senses motion, and she turns, startled to see them. The mower dies with a last puff of oily smoke. She just stares at the round faces and the long white hair. Then to her mother, she asks, "What's wrong?" because something definitely is. She asks both of them, "What are you doing in town?"

Mother says, "Shopping, eventually. And to see you, dear."

Both women are dressed for church. But their wide leather belts have been loosened and dress shoes have been replaced with comfortable gray sneakers. Aunt Ester explains, "We started out after early service."

Ester never misses church.

“You should have called first,” says Helena. “I could have had brunch waiting. And I wouldn’t be such a mess.”

“You look good and honest,” says Ester.

Mother says, “Honey.”

That single word alerts Helena. She looks at her mother’s sober expression, and again she asks, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Both women say it.

Then Mother adds, “We just wanted to tell you in person.” And she pauses for a dangerous moment, gathering herself before saying, “We’ve sold the farm. We got an offer ... a very generous one ... and it’s time, we decided....”

Helena wipes her forehead with her driest hand. “Who? Who gets it?”

“One of the local corporations,” says Ester. She’s a large woman—one of the largest that Helena has ever known—and not just because of her dimensions. Ester is a creature of substantial beliefs and strengths. Doubt is foreign to her. A weakness, and good reason for disgust. Hinting at some old debate, she looks at Mother and shakes her head once, for emphasis. Then she admits, “We’re old women. Not enough of our kids want to be farmers. And the corporations are the only ones who can make us comfortable in our retirement.”

“The house, too?” Helena squeaks.

“Oh, we keep that,” Mother interjects. “That and the surrounding ground. For as long as we want to live there.”

We are seven women, in all. Mother and Ester and another sister, plus four unrelated women. They became Disciples of Christ together in a bonding ceremony some forty-five years ago. Their sprawling farm was a gift from their various mothers. And it was an amazing success for Mother and Ester, since their mother’s old farm was the smallest and poorest portion of the dowry.

“We could have left it to you and the others,” says Ester. “But with these new rules ... well, it makes it impossible to keep things together....”

Taxes, she means. And the fair inheritance laws.

Helena starts to say, “I understand.”

But Mother interrupts, telling her, “Nothing changes until next year. Officially.”

Helena nods.

Trying to look anywhere else, her eyes wander. Past the steel chain and post fence is a tiny square of grass. Lydia’s backyard. Lying on a faded green blanket, basking in the late spring sun, is the daughter. Is Sarah. She wears nothing but a tiny swimsuit and a pale, springtime tan that by summer will have turned to a brown gold. She’s a pretty black-haired girl with her mother’s wide hips and prominent bustline. Eyes shut, ears embraced by headphones, she seems immune to the world around her. A self-involved woman-child, Helena thinks.

Probably fantasizing about her tulip-toting boyfriend ... and now Helena blinks and turns away, shaking her head for every good reason.

“What’s this flower?” asks Mother.

“Fritillaria,” Helena says.

“It’s beautiful,” she says. “Don’t you think so, Ester?”

A luxurious emerald stalk and thick leaves have risen out of the perennial bed, sprouting large crimson flowers that are pointed downward. To Helena, the plant resembles one of those ornate antique lamps from the days of the Great Queens and their farflung Empires. Quietly, she says, “Smell it. But carefully.”

Her aunt keels. Sniffs. Says, “Ugh.”

“It’s a difficult odor,” Helena concedes.

Mother risks her own little sniff, then says, “I don’t mind it.” Straightening, she tries to show a big smile, saying, “Maybe we could grow them in our garden. Where do you find it, darling?”

Helena tries to reply.

But Ester interrupts, announcing, “I don’t think we need such a thing.”

She says, “It reeks like a skunk.”

Mother says nothing, and everything shows on her face. The color has drained out of her. Her features instantly turn to cold wax, and the eyes seem to focus on a faraway point, and in the same instant, they turn blind. Ester tries to laugh, saying, “Now, now. Don’t pout.”

Helena stares at the clipped grass, holding her breath.

“You know perfectly well,” says the older sister. “Frances won’t like its looks. And Eve is sensitive to *every* bad odor.”

“I know,” Mother whispers.

“Fritillaria is a big white bulb,” Helena offers. “You plant it in the fall. The same depth you plant tulips.”

“Cock depth,” says Ester, repeating the bawdy old joke. Then with an artificial cheerfulness, she tells her sister, “We’ll let you put one or two of these monsters up by the old barn. Eve never visits the barn anymore.”

“I don’t either,” says Mother.

Ester conspicuously ignores her.

Mother takes a breath and turns and says to the garage, “Come down and see us sometime, darling.” She says, “Soon,” as if pleading. And before anyone can offer a word or make the tiniest sound, she marches for the gate, leaving the backyard as quickly as she can without actually bursting into a run. Ester shrugs as she always does, laughing at her baby sister’s peculiarities. Then she glances across the fence, asking, “Is that your little neighbor girl?”

Helena stares at her aunt.

Saying nothing.

Ester feels the stare, and calmly ignores it.

“She’s grown into quite the pretty young thing,” the old woman declares. The undisputed leader of her disciple, now and always, she glances at Helena, and

winks once, then adds, “A girl like that ... shit, I could plow an entire county with all the eager young cock she could lure in. Don’t doubt it, darling!”

*Dies Lunae.*

Helena glances at her bedstand clock, measuring how long she has to fiddle with her always difficult hair. Only a few minutes, she realizes. So she does a hurry-up job before rushing out the door with the sack lunch that she fixed last night. Callan used to tease her about her punctual nature. He would spy her as he was heading out to his newest job, or as he was arriving home from an all-night drunk, or maybe he was just standing out in the yard, waiting for Helena. He would wave and laugh, and without a care in the world, he would shout the predictable words:

“I could set my watch by you, woman. You’re that predictable!”

The simple memory gnaws. For no sensible reason, Helena finds herself debating her nature with an imaginary Callan, muttering to herself as she backs out of the garage and onto the street. Saint Judith Boulevard takes her straight to work. Honestly, there have been plenty of times when she arrived late. Because of weather, or traffic mishaps, or sometimes they’ll hold a big rally down at the parenthood clinic. But not this morning, she notes. The clinic is at the corner of Judith and New Hope. A low brick building without windows, it is surrounded by a high iron fence and pivoting cameras. Just a dozen quiet

protesters are patrolling the sidewalk this morning. A listless group, they hold hand-painted signs overhead. Two serious men for every earnest woman. Which is typical of these groups. A bearded young man carries a red-lettered sign.

“Life Is Always Precious!” Helena reads as she drives past. Then she isn’t thinking about Callan anymore, or the protesters, either. Just like that, her conscious mind is swirling, ancient memories suddenly so fresh and raw that it’s all she can do to keep her car on the road.

\* \* \*

Sometimes the department head invites a few of her favorites out for drinks after work. Today’s excuse is an excellent ranking by the Auditor’s office. Helena doesn’t want to be included, but she’s beckoned and feels obliged to make an appearance. Have a beer, then slip away. That’s her plan. But some sneaky soul refills her glass from the common pitcher, and what can she do? Sit and take part. Ignore her mood, and ignore the day’s tensions. And whatever happens, she reminds herself that she needs to smile.

Her supervisor sits beside her, increasing her secret misery. Morris is a tall, long-legged man, and a decorated veteran, who served as a lieutenant in the final Asian wars. People in a position to know claim that he was only a lowly supply officer, and that he was wounded only because of incredibly bad luck. Or good luck, depending on your perspective. Even today, scars on a man are supposed to have weight



and a curious beauty. They prove bravery and suffering and devotion to higher causes. But on Morris, that raised chunk of flesh on his throat is nothing but ugly. It always draws the eye, making Helena notice that his neck is ridiculously long, and the rest of him is pale and soft, and in so many ways, homely.

At one point, when he's sure that the department head is paying attention, he says to Helena, "We've adopted another one. Did I tell you?"

He has. Several times.

But she knows to smile and ask, "Is that so?" with a feigned ignorance.

"From a little city-state," he continues. "Hue. On the southeast coast."

The department head—a corpulent, gray-haired woman at the end of the table—leans forward on her elbows, asking, "Now how many does it make, Mr. Morris?"

"Eight," he declares happily.

Maybe it's the beer, or maybe beer is her excuse. Either way, Helena prods him, saying, "I bet it's another girl."

"Naturally," he booms. Then with a self-congratulatory laugh, Morris flips open his wallet and passes around the newest family portrait. A glance is all that Helena needs. Eight girls of various ages, from various parts of Asia, stand among his own five children. His handsome and astonishingly energetic wife kneels down in front. They supposedly have a

monogamous marriage. Very modern, and scrupulously fair. Morris never sleeps around. "I was a virgin when I was married,"

he will tell anyone who mistakenly brings up the subject. "And my wife is the only lover for me."

Everyone at the table has heard Morris describe his vital, heartfelt beliefs. But the department head likes to watch his performances, and she prompts him by saying, "You're doing these young ladies such a service."

"We just wish we could save more," he replies. A predictable and pretentious man, he can't resist telling the world about his virtuous soul. He always uses the same words: "We" because his marriage is the perfect partnership. And "save"

because everyone knows where these lovely little girls come from. Amused looks are traded between the women.

He seems blind to their grins. With a heavy, overly dramatic voice, Morris warns, "There might come another war in China. Manchuria and the South are feuding again, and the Viets are trying to make new alliances."

Asian politics are complex and frequently horrific. Helena rarely bothers sorting out who's angry at whom, or which ones wield nuclear weapons, or which of these angry little states are going to be supported, for a day or two, by the Western Powers.

"Too many balls are in charge over there," Morris tells them. Helena breaks into a cackling, half-

drunken laugh.

The gray-haired woman gives her a look. “Now darling,” she rumbles.

“Wouldn’t you want to help save a few of our little sisters?”

The beer makes Helena clumsy.

Makes her bold.

“I want to help,” she claims. Except with her next breath, she points out,

“These countries are nightmares. For our sisters, and the men, too. And sometimes I think, ma’am, that maybe our policies are a little bit to blame—”

“Nonsense,” Morris interrupts. “Obviously, you’ve never lived in Asia.”

“I guess I knew that,” Helena replies.

Her co-workers laugh quietly. Women and the few men, both. Morris licks his lips, then adds, “You certainly didn’t give up five years of your life trying to put that continent to peace!”

She stares at his ugly face, and the scarred neck.

Then she surprises herself, remarking, “Everyone knows about you. You were inside your air-conditioned office, hiding between file cabinets, and a piece of shrapnel slipped through and nicked you, and you didn’t let them stitch you up because you wanted to have a good pretty scar.”

An astonished silence descends.

Morris’ face is even paler than usual, his eyes round and cold, his expression moving from shock into utter embarrassment.

Helena feels ashamed, a little bit. She blinks and drops her gaze. The Morris family portrait has been passed around the table, ending up in front of her, and something in it catches her interest. She picks it up, ignoring the adopted daughters and the perfect wife and mother. And she disregards Morris' blood-daughters, too. Instead, her gaze focuses on the lanky teenage son standing in the back row, looking put upon by the camera, his face tilted and the diamond-shaped scar obvious on his cheek.

I know that face, she keeps thinking.

Then she remembers where she saw him, and the photograph slips from her hands, sliding into a ring of condensation.

Morris rescues his picture, wiping it dry against his sleeve, trying hard to kill Helena with hard looks and a pouting lower lip.

### *Dies Martis.*

She fully intends to go to work today.

But when she's half-dressed, Helena has an abrupt change of heart. Standing in her bedroom with her little television playing, she isn't consciously listening to the news. But then the newscaster describes another rape not twenty blocks from her front door, and a cold suffocating dread takes her, and with an old woman's frailty, she suddenly collapses on the edge of her bed.

The morning weatherman appears. A roundish middle-aged fellow, he smiles warmly, looking utterly

harmless for the camera. With a practiced jolliness, he describes approaching fronts and the promise of heavy rains. And somewhere in the midst of his forecast, Helena calls the office to say that she's under the weather and perhaps she'll recover by tomorrow.

For most of the morning, Helena lives like a sick person. A light breakfast. Comfortable clothes. A stack of unread magazines, and she parks herself in front of her big television. But the game shows and talk shows—normal fare when she's dying of the flu—can't seem more absurd or trivial. Which is why she finally changes into gardening clothes and slips into the backyard, telling herself more than once that she doesn't care how it would look if someone from the office were to drop by.

A little before noon, Sarah arrives home.

Helena is on her knees, fighting the good fight against creeping charlie. Just a glance tells her what is happening. The girl practically sprints from her car to her front door, and a moment later, curtains left open by her mother are closed, and the blinds are closed, and Helena can almost taste the air of expectation holding sway. It's lunchtime at school, she reasons.

And she rises and removes her knee pads and moves to the front yard with her favorite clippers in hand.

The tulips are in ruins. But the lilacs are at their peak. She clips free three lavender flowerheads, then

wonders if she's an absolute idiot. But no, the deep heart-like thrumming of a stereo finds her, and she strolls off the end of the driveway just before the boy appears, finding her waiting in the street, her free hand lifting, demanding that he stops.

If anything, he seems worried.

Scared, even.

But he brakes and kills the music and rolls down the window, saying, "Yeah?"

with a hint of anger in his voice. Abrupt, and very male. He seems to be asking himself who is this crazy lady standing between him and his girlfriend. "What is it?"

he sputters. Then, "Ma'am."

"Give her these flowers," Helena tells him.

He notices the lilacs. Finally.

And a wave of recognition grabs him. He blinks and glances at her face, then at her house. He barely looked at her face until now. And Helena isn't an ugly woman, even if she's nearly middle-aged. Men still appreciate her figure and her face, and she tries to show the best of both as she leans into the open window, forcing him to take her gift as she asks, "What's your name, son?"

He opens his mouth, then remembers to speak.

"Luke," he blurts.

"Luke," she repeats. And she stands again as he takes the flowers by their stalks. "My name is Helena."

He says, "Yeah. All right."

This isn't going well. Of course she had no idea any of this would happen today, or that it would ever happen. And she isn't even certain what she wants to accomplish now. But the panic builds on his splendid young face. His looks come from his mother, Helena decides. He has to suspect some kind of trouble. An old lady's trap is waiting. But he finally takes her little gift willingly, which is always a good sign.

Hoping to escape, the boy says, "Thank you."

"You're quite welcome, Luke."

Eyes forward. Hands on the wheel now.

Then she says it.

"Let me give you fair warning," she tells him. "Are you listening, Luke? You need to know. Sarah and her mother can be very hard on men. Unfair, and treacherous."

He looks straight ahead, and bristles.

Then without another word, he turns on his ugly music and drives away. Not slowly. But not moving fast, either.

\* \* \*

Just once, Helena visited Callan in prison.

The arrangements were involved and laborious, mostly because he wasn't her relative and there was no child between them. Forms were filled out, then filed. Then she drove north and west for part of the day, coming to a small city dressed with concrete walls and endless reaches of electrified wire. Again, long forms demanded her attention, and her signature was matched against every signature on

file. Then a pair of quiet women searched her thoroughly. Clothes. Hair. Mouth. Other cavities. Nobody expected to find anything, but it seemed important to embarrass Helena in enormous ways. Which is what they accomplished, sure enough. Forty thousand men lived inside that strange and dangerous city. And the one man whom she had sought out was almost a stranger to her. No carefree drunk was laughing at his plight.

Callan wore a long number on threadbare prison clothes, and he stared at his guest with a calm, steady, and irresistible anger. What had happened to him over the last few years, she could only imagine. Men were dangerous. Always. But men living only with men, in such circumstances ... it made her want to cry just to think about it....

He said, "Helena."

He said, "So sit. If you want."

They were inside a large airless room part way filled with couples like themselves. A dozen couples, perhaps. But this was one of two visitation days in the month, and out of forty thousand inmates, only twenty of them had company. A small tragedy, it was, set against the rest.

Quietly, without patience, Callan asked, "What do you want, Helena?"

"How are you?" she blurted.

He said, "Great, actually," and showed her a bleak little smile.

"Really?" she sputtered.



“Absolutely.” Then he pulled up the sleeve of his jersey, making a muscle and showing a glimmer of the former Callan. “I’m sober now. And look how fit I’ve gotten....”

She didn’t notice the bicep. What caught her gaze was the star and crescent scars cut into his flesh. There was an odd cult popular among male inmates, she recalled. Something called Islam. It had its own prophet—a mystical man born in the Dark Ages—and its armies had attacked the remnants of the old Roman Empire. But the Pope, in her wisdom, managed to build a consensus. A union of nations. Divisions and schisms that had split the early Christians were healed, at least temporarily. Then loyal heroic men under the Pope’s guidance had obliterated the Islamic armies. And for better than a thousand years, that religion had pretended to be extinct.

Callan meant to show off his scar.

And Helena had come here to tell him, “You didn’t hit Lydia.”

She blurted those words, then took a huge breath before adding, “I was watching you. You couldn’t have. It was your son, I’m almost sure.”

If anything, he seemed unsurprised by her declaration.

Bored, almost.

“I couldn’t testify,” she continued. “It would have been my word against Lydia’s. And that wouldn’t have changed anything.”

Her lover nodded, and for the moment, he seemed to be hunting for the proper response. Then he quietly told her, “It doesn’t particularly matter, Helena,”

and he leaned across the smooth plastic table, the steel links of his manacles rattling gently. “Do you know why it doesn’t matter?”

“Why?” she squeaked.

“If my boy hadn’t, I would have. Hit the bitch, I mean.”

She sat motionless, feeling scared and sorry. And perfectly confused. Then Callan sat back like the conquering hero, winked with a shadow of his old charm, and remarked in the most offhand manner, “Do you know what else? If I got out of here today, this minute, I’d do worse. A lot worse. To pretty much every one of you ugly slits.”

### *Dies Mercurii.*

Curiously, Helena wakes that next morning feeling ill, but despite a burning nausea and a suffocating fatigue, she dresses herself and fixes her hair, leaving for work just a few minutes late.

But a traffic tie-up pounces on her.

Nothing is moving at the intersection. Too late, Helena turns on her radio, listening to a bulletin about a bomb scare at the clinic. It takes the police forever to redirect the traffic around the roadblocks. She arrives late, and as a reward, she learns that Morris will be in meetings the entire morning. Three

different women give her the news. “A reprieve,” one of them calls it. Then the woman laughs and clucks her tongue, adding, “You really told him. Nobody thought you had the balls, Helena. But they’re big as peaches, aren’t they?”

All morning, Helena plans to lunch at home, allowing herself to build a robust little fantasy about herself and Sarah’s boyfriend. She imagines them chatting amiably beside the lilacs. Then she’ll lure him indoors on some errand that only a tall boy can manage ... something in the bedroom ... and what happens next changes each time she thinks about it, always reaching a point where she’s aroused as well as frightened by her thoughts, and disgusted with herself, and in a strange way, thrilled by the feeling that she has absolutely no control over the flow of her sick, lonely mind.

But she doesn’t drive home at noon.

Half a dozen co-workers want to take her to lunch instead. Their treat. And with no room for choice, it’s easy to tell them “Yes.”

The restaurant is squeezed inside a substantial old home. Antique photographs decorate the walls, most of them portraits dating back to the pioneer days. Beefy, frequently pregnant women stand in a row with their fellow disciples, their shared husbands kneeling down in front, each of the men looking scrawny and strong from constant work. Helena counts the faces on the nearest wall. Between the standing women and their kneeling men are the

children. Maybe two smiling girls for every smiling boy. Accidents would have claimed a few of the missing. And disease, since they are the weaker sex. And the coming Asian wars will eventually slaughter them by the millions. But what astonishes and sickens Helena is that the boys are smiling, as are their fathers. These long-dead souls who couldn't own property, or vote, and who rarely even learned to read. Yet these aren't the pained grins of people staring into the sun. No, what she sees is the honest bright smiles of happy people looking at a future full of nothing but purpose, place and genuine promise. Helena eats half of her lunch, if that.

A note is waiting on her desk when she returns.

"Come see me," it reads. Then the sloppy signature: "Morris."

His office is larger than hers, and more important. Yet when he looks up, Helena's first impulse is to laugh. Morris is a very odd creature, and she can't help herself sometimes. But instead of laughing, she simply says, "Yes, sir."

"Close the door," he begins.

There are new laws, and new ways of gaining retribution. Which is why she says, "I think we'd both like to keep the door open. Just to avoid misunderstandings."

Morris blinks, then mutters, "Fine."

He says, "Then why don't you sit. If that's all right, Helena."

She settles in front of his desk.

The man shakes his head. Then with a practiced air, he asks, "Have you recovered from all that beer?"

"Yes."

"Good." He clicks his tongue with a measured disgust, then tells her, "I'm going to blame the insults on your drinking. I want you to know that."

He wants her to relax. To say, "Thank you so much, sir."

Instead, she picks up the framed photograph set on his desk. It is his family again, perhaps two years ago. The wife looks younger and prettier, but Morris himself is unchanged. And his son is shorter, and infinitely younger, looking lost among all those smiling girls. Quietly, she asks, "What sort of boy is he?"

Morris blinks. Asks, "Who?"

"Luke," she says. Too quickly.

But he decides that he's mentioned his son's name in the past. And maybe he has. Maybe he simply doesn't remember. With a measured fondness, Morris says,

"He's a good child."

"Good in school?" she inquires.

"In all things. Why?"

The diamond-shaped scar is missing from the cheek. In a world currently without wars and no quick way to prove themselves to women, young men try to follow the old ways, giving each other elaborate wounds for no better purpose than to show that they can be stupid, without anyone's help.

“Thank you, sir,” she says finally. “It was the beer. Yes.”

Thinking that he has won, Morris grins.

She sets down the portrait, and sighs, and as she rises, she asks, “Is that all?”

“You were late this morning,” he offers.

She mentions the bomb scare at the clinic.

Which Morris already knows about. He nods and sneers, telling Helena and everyone eavesdropping on them, “I hate the idiots. These self-proclaimed warriors for morality and justice... !”

She stares at a random point, saying nothing.

“This is the fairest, richest society on the planet,” Morris promises. Which Helena believes, too. Always, and she could never make herself think otherwise. Yet she hasn’t the breath to tell him that she agrees with him. The best she manages is a vague nod and an expression that might be confused for a smile. Then with a quiet tone, she points out, “In this society of ours, you’ve done extremely well.”

Believing that this is a compliment, Morris nods, and halfway laughs, and says, “I like to think so. I do!”

### *Dies Jovis.*

Awake well before dawn, Helena dresses in comfortable trousers and a warm shirt, eats a toasted muffin, sips strong coffee, and while it’s still dark outside, she leaves home.

A simple clarity has possessed her. She promises

herself that she'll call work from a toll phone. A day of personal time, she'll request; some nebulous family business demanding her attention. In her mind and whispers, she practices her conversation with the receptionist, and if necessary, with Morris. But then the sun is up, and there aren't any phones to be found, and it's gotten too late to call now anyway. And that's when she discovers that she doesn't particularly care, her guilt tiny and easily buried under things ancient and huge.

Every passing town has its church. A sect or schism was brought by the first disciples to settle these lands, and a century later, the same flavors of Christianity hold sway. The shape of the church is a clue about the faithful within. The buildings can be round and soft-edged, or they can be tall and imposing. Granite and marble are popular in the oldest sects, while the newish Unity houses—still found only in the cities—are elegant, friendly structures filled with sunshine and empty crosses. By contrast, Helena's childhood church was a simple, almost Spartan building, its foundation made of native rock and bone-white mortar, its walls and roof and hard pews made from whatever wood was cheapest on that particular day. But as a girl, it seemed like a wonderful structure. Beautiful, even. Helena wanted to believe that other girls and boys envied her for having such a pretty church. What she liked best—long before she understood the painful symbolism—was the building's color. In her mother's

sect, a house of worship was always painted a brilliant crimson. Every wall, every cornice, and even the wooden slats on the roof. The blood of the Christ, for all the world to see.

That's what Helena was eventually taught, by the priests and by Aunt Ester. Years later, she can't even pretend to remember much of the Scriptures. What comes back now are a few poetic phrases, plus the lurid, sad, and endless stories that Ester told with a tireless zeal. What she remembers is her horror, then deep anger, at the idea that Joseph would abandon Mary when she gave birth to God's daughter. Because the Savior couldn't be a woman, that man had believed. "And that was the first sin of the men," Ester would remind her. "But not their worst sin. Not by a long, long ways."

Helena's favorite Gospel is Judith's. She was a prostitute turned disciple, as several of her sister disciples were, and she wrote about the love and redemption offered by her Savior, and the peace that will find everyone in Heaven. Cora's Gospel is her aunt's linchpin—a harsh, explicit text written by a noblewoman who carefully listed the tortures inflicted on the Christ by the Jews, then by all men. But even inside that wrenching work, there is forgiveness. And a kind of morality. Like the old Roman centurion who placed himself between the soldiers and the Christ, ordering the rapes to end, then giving the condemned prisoner a long sip of water mixed with wine.



But Ester always refused to see the man's kindness.

Quietly but not softly, she would remind her niece, "That man still helped them carry out the sentence. The punishment. Our Savior was hammered onto that cross and put up into the sun, naked except for the blood flowing from her scalp and her hands, and from her brutalized vagina."

Helena remembers crying and asking a little question of her aunt. She can't recall her exact words. But it was about men. Were they all so awful? she wondered aloud. Are they always so untrustworthy, and cruel?

She very much remembers Ester smiling instantly. Surprising Helena.

Then with a wink and dry quick kiss to the forehead, Ester told the doubting young girl, "No, honey. No. We won't let them act that way again. Ever!"

\* \* \*

Within sight of her childhood home, Helena turns onto a side road. She drives slowly and carefully, following what is little more than a pair of ruts across a stony pasture. If she gets stuck now, people will find out. Mother will, and Ester. And for every reason, that would be intolerable.

A little thicket of wind-beaten trees stands at the crest of the hill. Helena parks where she won't be obvious, and after the long drive, she needs a moment to stretch and regain her legs. The walk itself takes

just a moment. Her heart has been pounding for a long while, and her breathing is quick and shallow. But her head is clear, perfectly focused. What she assumes will be the difficult trick—finding the exact spot—proves easy. A slab of pink granite, brought by the glaciers and gouged by their sliding mass, lies in the center of a tiny clearing. With trees on all sides and a few spring wildflowers blooming amidst the green grass, this ground could be confused for a garden. A wind blows, cool and damp. Then Helena hears someone sighing. She gives a start, then realizes it was her own sigh. She is that nervous. That ill at ease. So she tells herself to breathe deeply until she feels steadier, and stronger, and only then does she kneel beside the flat pink rock, knowing its feel before her fingers can touch it.

This is where they brought Helena's baby brother.

Ester and the other disciples walked up here to pray over the newborn, and Helena remained in the house, quietly caring for her exhausted mother. She already had boy cousins, and just last year, two other women in the house had given birth to sons. Facts that she understood, even as a child. Hadn't she been taught from the beginning that farms needed only so many hands, particularly with the new tractors and pesticides making every chore easy? Didn't she understand that for the last fifteen centuries, give or take, God had willingly, even happily taken away the souls of boys who wouldn't live out the day? This was how things were done. It wasn't to be talked about,

ever. It was a private family matter, and it was their family's business. Ester and Mother had spoken at length, night after night, until Mother agreed with what was best. But of course, they didn't know if it was a girl or a boy. Helena could have found herself with a sister. That was a vivid, buoyant hope that lasted right up until the little penis stuck out at them. And really, she would have preferred a baby sister. That's what she kept telling herself, and telling herself, cleaning her mother with old towels and neither of them speaking a word until Ester and the other women returned, nothing in their hands but an empty blanket too small to do anything but swaddle a little baby.

Helena can remember bolting past them, out the back door and into the snow. It was mid-winter. Cold and windy, with the land white and hard. She wasn't a fast runner, but the women were even slower. Helena followed the footprints in the snow. She reached the hilltop first, expecting to find a coyote chewing on her little brother. But there was no baby. Just more footprints, and the granite slab, and she stood on the slab until Ester put a big hand on her shoulder, gasping hard, throwing her own coat over the girl to keep her warm. Saying to her, "There wasn't any pain, darling. No suffering at all."

Which was a good thing, wasn't it? But why was Helena crying?

Then Ester pulled her from the rock, telling her, "You should let him rest now. All right? Let him have

his peace.”

Peace was another good thing.

“Where did you put him?” Helena remembers asking.

“In a grave. Of course.” Her aunt kneeled now. A big woman incapable of feeling the snow and the cold, she looked at her niece with dry hard eyes, then calmly reported, “I dug the grave last autumn. In case.”

Looking down at the stone, Helena realized that it had just been set there. And she kneeled, trying to reach under it, struggling to pull it up and bring out the boy before he suffocated. And then someone else grabbed her, someone who could cry, familiar hands tugging as the woman sobbed, her mother’s spent voice saying, “It’s too late, darling. Honey. It’s for the best. Just try to believe that, will you... ?”

Along one edge of the pink slab was a different shade of pink—a vivid smear of blood already frozen hard and slick by the brutal chill. Long washed away by rains and melting snow, the blood is. Yet the woman puts her face to the stone now, kissing the exact place, and for an instant, if that, she can taste the salt and the rust of all the world’s dead.

\* \* \*

Helena drives back into the city without recalling the intervening miles. It’s a wonder that she didn’t have an accident along the way. But she arrives just after noon, driving slowly past her house and turning the corner, the boy’s ugly little car parked in front of

Lydia's house. Helena isn't sure about anything. What she wants is as a mystery to her. For that moment, she tries desperately to find some way of gaining control over the boy. Maybe she can threaten to tell his father about his sexual adventures. Or she can threaten to tell the police about his stealing her tulips and lilacs. A groundless complaint on a young man's record is almost impossible to remove, she knows. What matters is that she can gain some powerful, persistent role in his life. Then, she tells herself, she can protect him from the countless hazards in a world far too large for anyone to understand.

She hears herself—her silly, half-crazy thoughts bringing her nothing but shame—and now she watches herself drive past Lydia's house and around the block again, then out onto Saint Judith, not stopping until she reaches the clinic. Today, it seems quiet. Peaceful. A light rain is falling, and only the most determined protesters have shown up. Helena parks up the street and walks toward the low brick building. A bearded man puts down his sign and approaches. "You don't want to go in there," he tells her.

She says to him, pointblank, "Why? Are you going to give me what I want?"

He blinks, and gasps softly.

"There aren't any men in my life," she continues. "And if you haven't noticed, I'm not a young woman anymore."

Not another word comes from the protesters.

The cameras pay close attention to Helena, recording her calm, determined features in case she proves to be a new activist. Inside the front office, she remembers to smile. The receptionist has forms ready to be filled out. A nurse takes her into an examination room and asks general questions about her history and present health. Then the nurse leaves, and after a little while, the doctor appears. A man, of all things. Isn't that interesting? Each remembers to smile at the other. Sitting across from Helena, the doctor flips through the forms twice. Then with a puzzled tone, he says, "Is this an oversight? You didn't check your preference box."

"Let me see," says Helena.

He hands the clipboard and forms to her, and waits.

Then she hands them back again, saying, "You're right. I didn't check either one."

The relentless amazement makes her smile again, and with a quiet certainty, she adds, "Really, sir. One way or the other. It will be what it will be."

# Camouflage

## I

The human male had lived on the avenue for some thirty-two years. Neighbors enerally regarded him as being a solitary creature, short-tempered on occasion, but never rude without cause. His dark wit was locally famous, and a withering intelligence was rumored to hide behind the brown-black eyes. Those with an appreciation of human beauty claimed that he was not particularly handsome, his face a touch asymmetrical, the skin rough and fleshy, while his thick mahogany-brown hair looked as if it was cut with a knife and his own strong hands. Yet that homeliness made him intriguing to some human females, judging by the idle chatter. He wasn't large for a human, but most considered him substantially built. Perhaps it was the way he walked, his back erect and shoulders squared while his face tilted slightly forwards, as if looking down from a great height. Some guessed he had been born on a high-gravity world, since the oldest habits never died. Or maybe this wasn't his true body, and his soul still hungered for the days when he was a giant. Endless speculations were woven about the man's past. He had a name, and everybody knew it. He had a biography, thorough and easily observed in the public records. But there were at least a dozen alternate

versions of his past and left-behind troubles. He was a failed poet, or a dangerously successful poet, or a refugee who had escaped some political mess — unless he was some species of criminal, of course. One certainty was his financial security; but where his money came from was a subject of considerable debate. Inherited, some claimed. Others voted for gambling winnings or lucrative investments on now-distant colony worlds. Whatever the story, the man had the luxury of filling his days doing very little, and during his years on this obscure avenue, he had helped his neighbors with unsolicited gifts of money and sometimes more impressive flavors of aid.

Thirty-two years was not a long time. Not for the creatures that routinely traveled between the stars. Most of the ship's passengers and all of its crew were ageless souls, durable and disease-free, with enhanced minds possessing a stability and depth of memory ready to endure a million years of comfortable existence. Which was why three decades was little different than an afternoon, and why for another century or twenty, locals would still refer to their neighbor as the newcomer.

Such was life onboard the Great Ship.

There were millions of avenues like this one. Some were short enough to walk in a day, while others stretched for thousands of uninterrupted kilometers. Many avenues remained empty, dark and cold as when humans first discovered the Great Ship. But some had been awakened, made habitable to human



owners or the oddest alien passengers. Whoever built the ship—presumably an ancient, long-extinct species — it had been designed to serve as home for a wide array of organisms. That much was obvious. And there was no other starship like the Great Ship: larger than most worlds and durable enough to survive eons between the galaxies, and to almost every eye, lovely.

The wealthiest citizens from thousands of worlds had surrendered fortunes for the pleasure of riding inside this fabulous machine, embarking on a half-million-year voyage to circumnavigate the galaxy. Even the poorest passenger living in the tiniest of quarters looked on the majesty of his grand home and felt singularly blessed.

This particular avenue was almost a hundred kilometers long and barely two hundred meters across. And it was tilted. Wastewater made a shallow river that sang its way across a floor of sugar-and-pepper granite. For fifty thousand years, the river had flowed without interruption, etching out a shallow channel. Locals had built bridges at the likely places, and along the banks they erected tubs and pots filled with soils that mimicked countless worlds, giving roots and sessile feet happy places to stand. A large pot rested outside the man's front door—a vessel made of ceramic foam trimmed with polished brass and covering nearly a tenth of a hectare. When the man first arrived, he poisoned the old jungle and planted another. But he wasn't much of a gardener, apparently. The new foliage hadn't prospered, weed

species and odd volunteers emerging from the ruins.

Along the pot's edge stood a ragged patch of llano vibra — an alien flower famous for its wild haunting songs. “I should cut that weed out of there,” he would tell neighbors. “I pretty much hate the racket it's making.” Yet he didn't kill them or tear out the little voice boxes. And after a decade or two of hearing his complaints, his neighbors began to understand that he secretly enjoyed their complicated, utterly alien melodies.

Most of his neighbors were sentient, fully mobile machines. Early in the voyage, a charitable foundation dedicated to finding homes and livelihoods for freed mechanical slaves leased the avenue. But over the millennia, organic species had cut their own apartments into the walls, including a janusian couple downstream, and upstream, an extended family of harum-scarums.

The human was a loner, but by no means was he a hermit.

True solitude was the easiest trick to manage. There were billions of passengers onboard, but the great bulk of the ship was full of hollow places and great caves, seas of water and ammonia and methane, as well as moon-sized tanks filled with liquid hydrogen. Most locations were empty. Wilderness was everywhere, cheap and inviting. Indeed, a brief journey by cap-car could take the man to any of six wild places — alien environments and hidden sewage conduits and a maze-like cavern that was rumored to

never have been mapped. That was one advantage: At all times, he had more than one escape route. Another advantage was his neighbors. Machines were always bright in easy ways, fountains of information if you knew how to employ them, but indifferent to the subtleties of organic life, if not out and out blind.

Long ago, Pamir had lived as a hermit. That was only sensible at the time. Ship captains rarely abandoned their posts, particularly a captain of his rank and great promise.

He brought his fall upon himself, with the help of an alien.

An alien who happened to be his lover, too.

The creature was a Gaian and a refugee, and Pamir broke several rules, helping find her sanctuary deep inside the ship. But another Gaian came searching for her, and in the end, both of those very odd creatures were nearly dead. The ship was never at risk, but a significant facility was destroyed, and after making things as right as possible, Pamir vanished into the general population, waiting for the proverbial coast to clear.

Thousands of years had brought tiny changes to his status. By most accounts, the Master Captain had stopped searching for him. Two or three or four possible escapes from the ship had been recorded, each placing him on a different colony world. Or he had died in some ugly fashion. The best story put him inside a frigid little cavern. Smugglers had killed his body and sealed it into a tomb of glass, and after

centuries without food or air, the body had stopped trying to heal itself. Pamir was a blind brain trapped inside a frozen carcass, and the smugglers were eventually captured and interrogated by the best in that narrow field. According to coerced testimonies, they confessed to killing the infamous captain, though the precise location of their crime was not known and would never be found.

Pamir spent another few thousand years wandering, changing homes and remaking his face and name. He had worn nearly seventy identities, each elaborate enough to be believed, yet dull enough to escape notice. For good reasons, he found it helpful to wear an air of mystery, letting neighbors invent any odd story to explain the gaps in his biography. Whatever they dreamed up, it fell far from the truth. Machines and men couldn't imagine the turns and odd blessings of his life. Yet despite all of that, Pamir remained a good captain. A sense of obligation forced him to watch after the passengers and ship. He might live on the run for the next two hundred millennia, but he would always be committed to this great machine and its precious, nearly countless inhabitants.

Now and again, he did large favors.

Like with the harum-scarums living next door. They were a bipedal species—giants by every measure—adorned with armored plates and spine-encrusted elbows and an arrogance earned by millions of years of wandering among the stars. But

this particular family was politically weak, and that was a bad way to be among harum-scarums. They had troubles with an old Mother-of-fathers, and when Pamir saw what was happening, he interceded. Over the course of six months, by means both subtle and decisive, he put an end to the feud. The Mother-of-father came to her enemies' home, walking backwards as a sign of total submission; and with a plaintive voice, she begged for death, or at the very least, a forgetting of her crimes.

No one saw Pamir's hand in this business. If they had, he would have laughed it off, and moments later, he would have vanished, throwing himself into another identity in a distant avenue.

Large deeds always demanded a complete change of life.

A fresh face.

A slightly rebuilt body.

And another forgettable name.

That was how Pamir lived. And he had come to believe that it wasn't a particularly bad way to live. Fate or some other woman-deity had given him this wondrous excuse to be alert at all times, to accept nothing as it first appeared, helping those who deserved to be helped, and when the time came, remaking himself all over again.

And that time always came...

## II

“Hello, my friend.” “Hello to you.” “And how are you this evening, my very good friend?” Pamir was sitting beside the huge ceramic pot, listening to his llano vibra. Then with a dry smirk, he mentioned, “I need to void my bowels.”

The machine laughed a little too enthusiastically. Its home was half a kilometer up the avenue, sharing an apartment with twenty other legally sentient AIs who had escaped together from the same long-ago world. The rubber face and bright glass eyes worked themselves into a beaming smile, while a happy voice declared, “I am learning. You cannot shock me so easily with this organic dirty talk.” Then he said, “My friend,” again, before using the fictitious name.

Pamir nodded, shrugged.

“It is a fine evening, is it not?”

“The best ever,” he deadpanned.

Evening along this avenue was a question of the clock. The machines used the twenty-four-hour ship-cycle, but with six hours of total darkness sandwiched between eighteen hours of brilliant, undiluted light. That same minimal aesthetics had kept remodeling to a minimum. The avenue walls were raw granite, save for the little places where organic tenants had applied wood or tile facades. The ceiling was a slick arch made of medium-grade hyperfiber—a mirror-colored material wearing a thin coat of grime and lubricating oils and other residues. The lights were original, as

old as the ship and laid out in the thin dazzling bands running lengthwise along the ceiling. Evening brought no softening of brilliance or reddening of color. Evening was a precise moment, and when night came... in another few minutes, Pamir realized... there would be three warning flashes, and then a perfect smothering blackness.

The machine continued to smile at him, meaning something by it. Cobalt-blue eyes were glowing, watching the human sit with the singing weeds.

“You want something,” Pamir guessed.

“Much or little. How can one objectively measure one's wishes?”

“What do you want with me? Much, or little?”

“Very little.”

“Define your terms,” Pamir growled.

“There is a woman.”

Pamir said nothing, waiting now.

“A human woman, as it happens.” The face grinned, an honest delight leaking out of a mind no bigger than a fleck of sand. “She has hired me for a service. And the service is to arrange an introduction with you.”

Pamir said, “An introduction,” with a flat, unaffected voice. And through a string of secret nexuses, he brought his security systems up to full alert.

“She wishes to meet you.”

“Why?”

“Because she finds you fascinating, of course.”

“Am I?”

“Oh, yes. Everyone here believes you are most intriguing.” The flexible face spread wide as the mouth grinned, never-used white teeth shining in the last light. “But then again, we are an easily fascinated lot. What is the meaning of existence? What is the purpose of death? Where does slavery end and helplessness begin? And what kind of man lives down the path from my front door? I know his name, and I know nothing.”

“Who's this woman?” Pamir snapped.

The machine refused to answer him directly. “I explained to her what I knew about you. What I positively knew, and what I could surmise. And while I was speaking, it occurred to me that after all of these nanoseconds of close proximity, you and I remain strangers.”

The surrounding landscape was unremarkable. Scans told Pamir that every face was known, and the nexus traffic was utterly ordinary, and when he extended his search, nothing was worth the smallest concern. Which made him uneasy. Every long look should find something suspicious.

“The woman admires you.”

“Does she?”

“Without question.” The false body was narrow and quite tall, dressed in a simple cream-colored robe. Four spidery arms emerged from under the folds of fabric, extending and then collapsing across the illusionary chest. “Human emotions are not my



strength. But from what she says and what she does not say, I believe she has desired you for a very long time.”

The llano vibra were falling silent now.

Night was moments away.

“All right,” Pamir said. He stood, boots planting themselves on the hard pale granite. “No offense meant here. But why the hell would she hire you?”

“She is a shy lady,” the machine offered. And then he laughed, deeply amused by his own joke. “No, no. She is not at all shy. In fact, she is a very important soul. Perhaps this is why she demands an intermediary.”

“Important how?”

“In all ways,” his neighbor professed. Then with a genuine envy, he added, “You should feel honored by her attentions.”

A second array of security sensors was waiting. Pamir had never used them, and they were so deeply hidden no one could have noticed their presence. But they needed critical seconds to emerge from their slumber, and another half-second to calibrate and link together. And then, just as the first of three warning flashes rippled along the mirrored ceiling, what should have been obvious finally showed itself to him.

“You're not just my neighbor,” he told the rubber face.

A second flash passed overhead. Then he saw the shielded cap-car hovering nearby, a platoon of

soldiers nestled in its belly.

“Who else stands in that body?” Pamir barked.

“I shall show you,” the machine replied. Then two of the arms fell away, and the other two reached up, a violent jerk peeling back the rubber mask and the grit-sized brain, plus the elaborate shielding. A face lay behind the face. It was narrow, and in a fashion lovely, and it was austere, and it was allowing itself a knife-like smile as a new voice said to this mysterious man:

“Invite me inside your home.”

“Why should I?” he countered, expecting some kind of murderous threat.

But instead of threatening, Miocene said simply, “Because I would like your help. In a small matter that must remain —I will warn you —our little secret.”

### III

Leading an army of captains was the Master Captain, and next in command was her loyal and infamous First Chair. Miocene was the second most powerful creature in this spectacular realm. She was tough and brutal, conniving and cold. And of all the impossible crap to happen, this was the worst. Pamir watched his guest peel away the last of her elaborate disguise. The AI was propped outside, set into a diagnostic mode. The soldiers remained hidden by the new darkness and their old tricks. It was just the two of them inside the apartment, which made no sense. If Miocene knew who he was, she would have simply told her soldiers to catch him and abuse him and then drag him to the ship's brig.

So she didn't know who he was.

Maybe.

The First Chair had a sharp face and black hair allowed to go a little white, and her body was tall and lanky and ageless and absolutely poised. She wore a simple uniform, mirrored in the fashion of all captains and decorated with a minimum of epaulets. For a long moment, she stared into the depths of Pamir's home. Watching for something? No, just having a conversation through a nexus. Then she closed off every link with the outer world, and turning toward her host, she used his present name.

Pamir nodded.

She used his last name.

Again, he nodded.

And then with a question mark riding the end of it, she offered a third name.

He said, "Maybe."

"It was or wasn't you?"

"Maybe," he said again.

She seemed amused. And then, there was nothing funny about any of this. The smile tightened, the mouth nearly vanishing. "I could look farther back in time," she allowed. "Perhaps I could dig up the moment when you left your original identity behind."

"Be my guest."

"I am your guest, so you are safe." She was taller than Pamir by a long measure — an artifact of his disguise. She moved closer to the wayward captain, remarking, "Your origins don't interest me."

"Well then," he began.

And with a wink, he added, "So is it true, madam? Are you really in love with me?"

She laughed abruptly, harshly. Stepping away from him, she again regarded the apartment, this time studying its furnishings and little decorations. He had a modest home — a single room barely a hundred meters deep and twenty wide, the walls paneled with living wood and the ceiling showing the ruddy evening sky of a random world. With a calm voice, she announced, "I adore your talents, whoever you are."

"My talents?"

"With the aliens."

He said nothing.

“That mess with the harum-scarums... you found an elegant solution to a difficult problem. You couldn't know it at the time, but you helped the ship and my Master, and by consequence, you've earned my thanks.”

“What do you wish from me tonight, madam?”

“Tonight? Nothing. But tomorrow—early in the morning, I would hope—you will please apply your talents to a small matter. A relatively simple business, we can hope. Are you familiar with the J'Jal?”

Pamir held tight to his expression, his stance. Yet he couldn't help but feel a hard kick to his heart, a well-trained paranoia screaming, “Run! Now!”

“I have some experience with that species,” he allowed. “Yes, madam.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Miocene.

As a fugitive, Pamir had lived among the J'Jal on two separate occasions. Obviously, the First Chair knew much more about his past. The pressing question was if she knew only about his life five faces ago, or if she had seen back sixty-three faces — perilously close to the day when he permanently removed his captain's uniform.

She knew his real identity, or she didn't.

Pamir strangled his paranoia and put on a wide grin, shoulders managing a shrug while a calm voice inquired, “And why should I do this errand for you?”

Miocene had a cold way of smirking. “My request isn't reason enough?”

He held his mouth closed.

“Your neighbors didn't ask for your aid. Yet you gave it willingly, if rather secretly.” She seemed angry but not entirely surprised. Behind those black eyes, calculations were being made, and then with a pragmatic tone, she informed him, “I will not investigate your past.”

“Because you already have,” he countered.

“To a point,” she allowed. “Maybe a little farther than I first implied. But I won't use my considerable resources any more. If you help me.”

“No,” he replied.

She seemed to flinch.

“I don't know you,” he lied. “But madam, according to your reputation, you are a bitch's bitch.”

In any given century, how many times did the First Chair hear an insult delivered to her face? Yet the tall woman absorbed the blow with poise, and then she mentioned a figure of money. “In an open account, and at your disposal,” she continued. “Use the funds as you wish, and when you've finished, use some or all of the remaining wealth to vanish again. And do a better job of it this time, you should hope.”

She was offering a tidy fortune.

But why would the second most powerful entity on the ship dangle such a prize before him? Pamir considered triggering hidden machines. He went as far as activating a tiny nexus, using it to bring a battery of weapons into play. With a thought, he could temporarily kill Miocene. Then he would slip

out of the apartment through one of three hidden routes, and with luck, escape the pursuing soldiers. And within a day, or two at most, he would be living a new existence in some other little avenue... or better, living alone in one of the very solitary places where he had stockpiled supplies... Once again, Miocene confessed, “This is a confidential matter.”

In other words, this was not official business for the First Chair.

“More to the point,” she continued, “you won't help me as much as you will come to the aid of another soul.”

Pamir deactivated the weapons, for the moment.

“Who deserves my help?” he inquired.

“There is a young male you should meet,” Miocene replied. “A J'Jal man, of course.”

“I'm helping him?”

“I would think not,” she replied with a snort.

Then through a private nexus, she fed an address to Pamir. It was in the Fall Away district—a popular home for many species, including the J'Jal.

“The alien is waiting for you at his home,” she continued.

Then with her cold smirk, she added, “At this moment, he is lying on the floor of his backmost room, and he happens to be very much dead.”

## IV

Every portion of the Great Ship had at least one bloodless designation left behind by the initial surveys, while the inhabited places wore one or twenty more names, poetic or blunt, simple or fabulously contrived. In most cases, the typical passenger remembered none of those labels. Every avenue and cavern and little sea was remarkable in its own right, but under that crush of novelty, few were unique enough to be famous.

Fall Away was an exception.

For reasons known only to them, the ship's builders had fashioned a tube from mirrored hyperfiber and cold basalt—the great shaft beginning not far beneath the heavy armor of the ship's bow and dropping for thousands of perfectly vertical kilometers. Myriad avenues funneled down to Fall Away. Ages ago, the ship's engineers etched roads and paths in the cylinder's surface, affording views to the curious. The ship's crew built homes perched on the endless brink, and they were followed by a wide array of passengers. Millions now lived along its spectacular length. Millions more pretended to live there. There were more famous places onboard the Great Ship, and several were arguably more beautiful. But no other address afforded residents an easier snobbery. “My home is on Fall Away,” they would boast. “Come enjoy my view, if you have a free month or an empty year.”



Pamir ignored the view. And when he was sure nobody was watching, he slipped inside the J'Jal's apartment.

The Milky Way wasn't the largest galaxy, but it was most definitely fertile. Experts routinely guessed that three hundred million worlds had evolved their own intelligent, technologically adept life. Within that great burst of natural invention, certain patterns were obvious. Haifa dozen metabolic systems were favored. The mass and composition of a home world often shoved evolution down the same inevitable pathways. Humanoids were common; human beings happened to be a young example of an ancient pattern. Harum-scarums were another, as were the Glory and the Aabacks, the Mnotis and the Striders.

But even the most inexpert inorganic eye could tell those species apart. Each humanoid arose on a different life-tree. Some were giants, others quite tiny. Some were built for enormous worlds, while others were frail little wisps. Thick pelts of fur were possible, or bright masses of downy feathers. Even among the naked mock-primates, there was an enormous range when it came to hands and faces. Elaborate bones shouted, "I am nothing like a human." While the flesh itself was full of golden blood and DNA that proved its alienness.

And then, there were the J'Jal.

They had a human walk and a very human face, particularly in the normally green eyes. They were

diurnal creatures. Hunter-gatherers from a world much like the Earth, they had roamed an open savanna for millions of years, using stone implements carved with hands that at first glance, and sometimes with a second glance, looked entirely human.

But the similarities reached even deeper. The J'Jal heart beat inside a spongy double-lung, and every breath pressed against a cage of rubbery white ribs, while the ancestral blood was a salty ruddy mix of iron inside a protein similar to hemoglobin. In fact, most of their proteins had a telltale resemblance to human types, as did great portions of their original DNA.

A mutation-by-mutation convergence was a preposterous explanation.

Ten million times more likely was a common origin. The Earth and J'Jal must have once been neighbors. Ages ago, one world evolved a simple, durable microbial life. A cometary impact splashed a piece of living crust into space, and with a trillion sleeping passengers safely entombed, the wreckage drifted free of the solar system. After a few light-years of cold oblivion, the crude ark slammed into a new world's atmosphere, and at least one microbe survived, happily eating every native pre-life ensemble of hydrocarbons before conquering its new realm.

Such things often happened in the galaxy's early times. At least half a dozen other worlds shared biochemistries with the Earth. But only the J'Jal

world took such a similar evolutionary pathway.

In effect, the J'Jal were distant cousins.

And for many reasons, they were poor cousins, too.

Pamir stood over the body, examining its position and condition. Spider-legged machines did the same. Reaching inside the corpse with sound and soft bursts of X-rays, the machinery arrived at a rigorous conclusion they kept to themselves. With his own eyes and instincts, their owner wished to do his best, thank you.

It could have been a human male lying dead on the floor.

The corpse was naked, on his back, legs together and his arms thrown up over his head with hands open and every finger extended. His flesh was a soft brown. His hair was short and bluish-black. The J'Jal didn't have natural beards. But the hair on the body could have been human—a thin carpet on the nipples, chest that thickened around the groin. In death, his genitals had shriveled back into the body.

No mark was visible, and Pamir guessed that if he rolled the body over, there wouldn't be a wound on the backside either. But the man was utterly dead. Sure of it, he knelt down low, gazing at the decidedly human face, flinching just a little when the narrow mouth opened and a shallow breath was drawn into the dead man's lungs.

Quietly, Pamir laughed at himself.

The machines stood still, waiting for

encouragement.

“The brain's gone,” he offered, using his left hand to touch the forehead, feeling the faint warmth of a hibernating metabolism. “A shaped plasma bolt, something like that. Ate through the skull and cooked his soul.”

The machines rocked back and forth on long legs.

“It's slag, I bet. The brain is. And some of the body got torched too. Sure.” He rose now, looking about the bedroom with a careful gaze.

A set of clothes stood nearby, waiting to dress their owner.

Pamir disabled the clothes and laid them on the ground beside the corpse. “He lost ten or twelve kilos of flesh and bone,” he decided. “And he's about ten centimeters shorter than he used to be.”

Death was a difficult trick to achieve with immortals. And even in this circumstance, with the brain reduced to ruined bioceramics and mindless glass, the body had persisted with life. The surviving flesh had healed itself, within limits. Emergency genetics had been unleashed, reweaving the original face and scalp and a full torso that couldn't have seemed more lifelike. But when the genes had finished, no mind was found to interface with the rejuvenated body. So the J'Jal corpse fell into a stasis, and if no one had entered this apartment, it would have remained where it was, sipping at the increasingly stale air, its lazy metabolism eating its own flesh until it was a skeleton and shriveled organs

and a gaunt, deeply mummified face.

He had been a handsome man, Pamir could see.

Regardless of the species, it was an elegant, tidy face.

“What do you see?” he finally asked.

The machines spoke, in words and raw data. Pamir listened, and then he stopped listening. Again, he thought about Miocene, asking himself why the First Chair would give one little shit about this very obscure man.

“Who is he?” asked Pamir, not for the first time.

A nexus was triggered. The latest, most thorough biography was delivered. The J'Jal had been born onboard the ship, his parents wealthy enough to afford the luxury of propagation. His family's money was made on a harum-scarum world, which explained his name. Sele'ium — a play on the harum-scarum convention of naming yourself after the elements. And as these things went, Sele'ium was just a youngster, barely five hundred years old, with a life story that couldn't seem more ordinary.

Pamir stared at the corpse, unsure what good it did.

Then he forced himself to walk around the apartment. It wasn't much larger than his home, but with a pricey view making it twenty times more expensive. The furnishings could have belonged to either species. The color schemes were equally ordinary. There were a few hundred books on display—a distinctly J'Jal touch—and Pamir had a

machine read each volume from cover to cover. Then he led his helpers to every corner and closet, to new rooms and back to the same old rooms again, and he inventoried every surface and each object, including a sampling of dust. But there was little dust, so the dead man was either exceptionally neat, or somebody had carefully swept away every trace of their own presence, including bits of dried skin and careless hairs.

“Now what?”

He was asking himself that question, but the machines replied, “We do not know what is next, sir.”

Again, Pamir stood over the breathing corpse.

“I'm not seeing something,” he complained.

A look came over him, and he laughed at himself. Quietly. Briefly. Then he requested a small medical probe, and the probe was inserted, and through it he delivered a teasing charge.

The dead penis pulled itself out of the body.

“Huh,” Pamir exclaimed.

Then he turned away, saying, “All right,” while shaking his head. “We're going to search again, this place and the poor shit's life. Mote by mote and day by day, if we have to.”

Built in the upper reaches of Fall Away, overlooking the permanent clouds of the Little-Lot, the facility was an expansive collection of natural caverns and minimal tunnels. Strictly speaking, the Faith of the Many Joinings wasn't a church or holy place, though it was wrapped securely around an ancient faith. Nor was it a commercial house, though money and barter items were often given to its resident staff. And it wasn't a brothel, as far as the ship's codes were concerned. Nothing sexual happened within its walls, and no one involved in its mysteries gave his or her body for anything as crass as income. Most passengers didn't even realize that a place such as this existed. Among those who did, most regarded it as an elaborate and very strange meetinghouse —like-minded souls passed through its massive wooden door to make friends, and when possible, fall in love. But for the purposes of taxes and law, the captains had decided on a much less romantic designation: The facility was an exceptionally rare thing to which an ancient human word applied.

It was a library.

On the Great Ship, normal knowledge was preserved inside laser files and superconducting baths. Access might be restricted, but every word and captured image was within reach of buried nexuses. Libraries were an exception. What the books held was

often unavailable anywhere else, making them precious, and that's why they offered a kind of privacy difficult to match, as well as an almost religious holiness to the followers of the Faith.

“May I help you, sir?”

Pamir was standing before a set of tall shelves, arms crossed and his face wearing a tight, furious expression. “Who are you?” he asked, not bothering to look at the speaker. “My name is Leon'rd.”

“I've talked to others already,” Pamir allowed.

“I know, sir.”

“They came at me, one by one. But they weren't important enough.” He turned, staring at the newcomer. “Leon'rd,” he grunted. “Are you important enough to help me?”

“I hope so, sir. I do.”

The J'Jal man was perhaps a little taller than Pamir. He was wearing a purplish-black robe and long blue hair secured in back as a simple horsetail. His eyes were indistinguishable from a human's green eyes. His skin was a pinkish brown. As the J'Jal preferred, his feet were bare. They could be human feet, plantigrade and narrow, with five toes and a similar architecture of bones, the long arches growing taller when the nervous toes curled up. With a slight bow, the alien remarked, “I am the ranking librarian, sir. I have been at this post for ten millennia and eighty-eight years. Sir.”

Pamir had adapted his face and clothing. What the J'Jal saw was a security officer dressed in casual garb.



A badge clung to his sleeve, and every roster search identified him as a man with honors and a certain clout. But his disguise reached deeper. The crossed arms flexed for a moment, hinting at lingering tensions. His new face tightened until the eyes were squinting, affecting a cop's challenging stare; and through the pinched mouth, he said, "I'm looking for somebody."

To his credit, the librarian barely flinched.

"My wife," Pamir said. "I want to know where she is."

"No."

"Pardon me?"

"I know what you desire, but I cannot comply."

As they faced each other, a giant figure stepped into the room. The harum-scarum noticed the two males facing off, and with an embarrassment rare for the species, she carefully backed out of sight.

The librarian spoke to his colleagues, using a nexus.

Every door to this chamber was quietly closed and securely locked.

"Listen," Pamir said.

Then he said nothing else.

After a few moments, the J'Jal said, "Our charter is clear. The law is defined. We offer our patrons privacy and opportunity, in that order. Without official clearance, sir, you may not enter this facility to obtain facts or insights of any type."

"I'm looking for my wife," he repeated.

“And I can appreciate your—”

“Quiet,” Pamir growled, his arms unfolding, the right hand holding a small, illegal plasma torch. With a flourish, he aimed at his helpless target, and he said one last time, “I am looking for my wife.”

“Don't,” the librarian begged.

The weapon was pointed at the bound volumes. The smallest burst would vaporize untold pages.

“No,” Leon'rd moaned, desperately trying to alert the room's weapon suppression systems. But none was responding. Again, he said, “No.”

“I love her,” Pamir claimed.

“I understand.”

“Do you understand love?”

Leon'rd seemed offended. “Of course I understand — “

“Or does it have to be something ugly and sick before you can appreciate, even a little bit, what it means to be in love.”

The J'Jal refused to speak.

“She's vanished,” Pamir muttered.

“And you think she has been here?”

“At least once, yes.”

The librarian was swiftly searching for a useful strategy. A general alarm was sounding, but the doors he had locked for good reasons suddenly refused to unlock. His staff and every other helping hand might as well have been on the far side of the ship. And if the gun discharged, it would take critical seconds to fill the room with enough nitrogen to stop the fire and

enough narcotics to shove a furious human to the floor.

Leon'd had no choice. "Perhaps I can help you, yes."

Pamir showed a thin, unpleasant grin. "That's the attitude."

"If you told me your wife's name — "

"She wouldn't use it," he warned.

"Or show me a holo of her, perhaps."

The angry husband shook his head. "She's changed her appearance. At least once, maybe more times."

"Of course."

"And her gender, maybe."

The librarian absorbed that complication. He had no intention of giving this stranger what he wanted, but if they could just draw this ugly business out for long enough... until a platoon of security troops could swoop in and take back their colleague...

"Here," said Pamir, feeding him a minimal file.

"What is this?"

"Her boyfriend, from what I understand."

Leon'd stared at the image and the attached biography. The soft green eyes had barely read the name when they grew huge —a meaningful J'Jal expression—and with a sigh much like a human sigh, he admitted, "I know this man."

"Did you?"

Slowly, the implication of those words was absorbed.

"What do you mean? Is something wrong?"

“Yeah, my wife is missing. And this murdered piece of shit is the only one who can help me find her. Besides you, that is.”

Leon'd asked for proof of the man's death.

“Proof?” Pamir laughed. “Maybe I should call my boss and tell her that I found a deceased J'Jal, and you and I can let the law do its important and loud and very public work?” A moment later, with a silent command, the librarian put an end to the general alert. There was no problem here, he lied; and with the slightest bow, he asked, “May I trust you to keep this matter confidential, sir?”

“Do I look trustworthy?”

The J'Jal bristled but said nothing. Then he stared at shelves at the far end of the room, walking a straight line that took him to a slender volume that he withdrew and opened, elegant fingers beginning to flip through the thin plastic pages.

With a bully's abruptness, Pamir grabbed the prize. The cover was a soft wood stained blue to identify its subject as being a relative novice. The pages were plastic, thin but dense, with a running account of the dead man's progress. Over the course of the last century, the librarians had met with Sele'ium on numerous occasions, and they had recorded his uneven progress with this very difficult faith. Audio transcripts drawn from a private journal let him speak again, explaining his mind to himself and every interested party. “My species is corrupt and tiny,” Sele'ium had confessed with a remarkably

human voice. “Every species is tiny and foul, and only together, joined in a perfect union, can we create a worthy society—a universe genuinely united.”

A few pages held holos — stark, honest images of religious devotion that most of the galaxy would look upon as abominations. Pamir barely lingered on any picture. He had a clear guess about what he was looking for, and it helped that only one of the J'Jal's wives was human.

The final pages were key. Pamir stared at the last image. Then with a low snort and a disgusted shake of the head, he announced, “This must be her.”

“But it isn't,” said the librarian.

“No, it's got to be,” he persisted. “A man should be able to recognize his own wife. Shouldn't he?”

Leon'rd showed the barest of grins. “No. I know this woman rather well, and she is not—”

“Where's her book?” Pamir snapped.

“No,” the librarian said. “Believe me, this is not somebody you know.”

“Prove it.”

Silence.

“What's her name?”

Leon'rd straightened, working hard to seem brave.

Then Pamir placed the plasma torch against a random shelf, allowing the tip of the barrel to heat up to where smoke rose as the red wood binding of a true believer began to smolder.

The woman's journal was stored in a different room, far deeper inside the library. Leon'rd called for

it to be brought to them, and then he stood close while Pamir went through the pages, committing much of it to a memory nexus. At one point, he said, "If you'd let me just borrow these things."

The J'Jal face flushed, and a tight hateful voice replied, "If you tried to take them, you would have to kill me."

Pamir showed him a wink.

"A word for the not-so-wise?" he said. "If I were you, I wouldn't give my enemies any easy ideas."

## VI

How could one species prosper, growing in reach and wealth as well as in numbers, while a second species, blessed with the same strengths, exists for a hundred times longer and still doesn't matter to the galaxy?

Scholars and bigots had deliberated that question for ages.

The J'Jal evolved on a lush warm world, blue seas wrapped around green continents, the ground fat with metal ores and hydrocarbons, and a massive moon riding across the sky, helping keep the axis tilted just enough to invite mild seasons. Perhaps that wealth had been a bad thing. Born on a poorer world, humans had evolved to live in tiny, adaptable bands of twenty or so — everyone related to everyone, by blood or by marriage. But the early J'Jals moved in troops of a hundred or more which meant a society wrapped around a more tolerant politics. Harmony was a given. Conflicts were resolved quietly, if possible; nothing was more precious to the troop than its own venerable peace. And with natural life spans reaching three centuries, change was a slow, fitful business brought on by consensus, or when absolutely necessary, by surrendering your will to the elders.

But quirks of nature are only one explanation for the future. Many great species had developed patiently. Some of the most famous, like the Ritkers

and harum-scarums, were still tradition-bound creatures. Even humans had that sorry capacity: The wisdom of dead Greeks and lost Hebrews was followed long after their words had value. But the J'Jal were much more passionate about ancestors and their left-behind thoughts. For them, the past was a treasure, and their early civilizations were hide-bound and enduring machines that would remember every wrong turn and every quiet success.

After a couple hundred thousand years of flint and iron, humans stepped into space, while it took the J'Jal millions of years to contrive reasons for that kind of adventure.

That was a murderous bit of bad fortune.

The J'Jal solar system had metal-rich worlds and watery moons, and its neighbor suns were mature G-class stars where intelligence arose many times. While the J'Jal sat at home, happily memorizing the speeches of old queens, three different alien species colonized their outer worlds —ignoring galactic law and ancient conventions in the process.

Unknown to the J'Jal, great wars were being waged in their sky.

The eventual winner was a tiny creature accustomed to light gravity and the most exotic technologies. The K'Mal were cybernetic and quick-lived, subject to fads and whims and sudden convulsive changes of government. By the time the J'Jal launched their first rocket, the K'Mal outnumbered them in their own solar system.



Millions of years later, that moment in history still brought shame. The J'Jal rocket rose into a low orbit, triggering a K'Mal fleet to lift from bases on the moon's hidden face. The rocket was destroyed, and suddenly the J'Jal went from being the masters of Paradise to an obscure creature locked on the surface of one little world.

Wars were fought, and won.

Peaces held, and collapsed, and the new wars ended badly.

True slavery didn't exist for the losers, even in the worst stretches of the long Blackness. And the K'Mal weren't wicked tyrants or unthinking administrators. But a gradual decay stole away the wealth of the J'Jal world. Birthrates plunged. Citizens emigrated, forced to work in bad circumstances for a variety of alien species. Those left home lived on an increasingly poisonous landscape, operating the deep mantle mines and the enormous railguns that spat the bones of their world into someone else's space.

While humans were happily hamstringing mammoths on the plains of Asia, the J'Jal were a beaten species scattered thinly across a hundred worlds. Other species would have lost their culture, and where they survived, they might have split into dozens of distinct and utterly obscure species. But the J'Jal proved capable in one extraordinary endeavor: Against every abuse, they managed to hold tight to their shared past, beautiful and otherwise; and in small ways, and then in slow large ways, they adapted

to their far flung existence.

## VII

“You'll be helping another soul.”

Miocene had promised that much and said little else. She knew the dead J'Jal would point him to the library, and she had to know that he was bright enough to realize it was the human woman who mattered. Why the First Chair cared about the life of an apparently unremarkable passenger, Pamir couldn't guess. Or rather, he could guess too easily, drawing up long lists of motivations, each entry reasonable, and most if not all of them ridiculously wrong.

The human was named Sorrel, and it had been Sorrel since she was born two centuries ago. Unless she was older than that, and her biography was a masterful collection of inspired lies.

Like most of the library's patrons, she made her home on Fall Away. Yet even among that wealthy company, she was blessed. Not one but two trust funds kept her economy well fed. Her rich father had emigrated to a colony world before she was born, leaving his local assets in her name. While the mother—a decorated member of the diplomatic corps—had died on the ill-fated Hakkaleen mission. In essence, Sorrel was an orphan. But by most signs, she didn't suffer too badly. For the next several decades, she had appeared happy and unremarkable, wealthy and untroubled, and nothing Pamir found said otherwise.

What was the old harum-scarum saying?

“Nothing is as massive as the universe, but nothing is half as large as a sentient, imaginative mind.”

Some time ago, the young woman began to change.

Like many young adults, Sorrel took an early vow of celibacy. With a million years of life stretching before her, why hurry into sex and love, disappointment and heartbreak? She had human friends, but because of her mother's diplomatic roots, she knew quite a few aliens too. For several years, her closest companions were a janusian couple —double organisms where the male was a parasite rooted in his spouse's back. Then her circle of alien friends widened... which seemed perfectly normal. Pamir searched the archives of forgotten security eyes and amateur documentaries, finding glimpses of luncheons and shopping adventures in the company of other species. Oxygen breathers; the traditional human allies. Then came the luxury cruise across a string of little oceans spread through the interior of the Great Ship —a brief voyage accomplished in the midst of the circumnavigation of the Milky Way—and near the end of that tame adventure, while drifting on a dim cold smooth-as-skin methane sea, she took her first lover.

He was a J'Jal, as it happened.

Pamir saw enough on the security eyes to fill in the blanks.

Cre'llan was a spectacularly wealthy individual, and ancient, and in a Faith that cherished its privacy,

he flaunted his membership and his beliefs. Elaborate surgeries had reshaped his penis to its proper form. Everyone involved in the Many Joinings endured similar cosmetic work; a uniform code applied to both genders, and where no gender existed, one was invented for them. During his long life, Cre'llan had married hundreds if not thousands of aliens, and then on that chill night he managed to seduce a young virginal human.

After the cruise, Sorrel tried to return to her old life. But three days later she visited the library, and within the week, she underwent her own physical reconfigurations.

Pamir had seen glimpses of the surgery in her journal—autodocs and J'Jaloverseers hovering around a lanky pale body. And when he closed his eyes now, concentrating on the buried data reserve, he could slowly and carefully flip his way through the other pages of that elaborate but still incomplete record.

After a year as a novice, Sorrel purchased a bare rectangle of stone and hyperfiber some fifty kilometers directly beneath the library. The apartment she built was deep and elaborate, full of luxurious rooms as well as expansive chambers that could be configured to meet the needs of almost any biology. But while every environmental system was the best available, sometimes those fancy machines didn't interact well with one another, and with the right touch, they were very easy to sabotage.

“Is it a serious problem, sir?”

“Not for me,” Pamir allowed. “Not for you, I’d guess. But if you depend on peroxides, like the Ooloops do, then the air is going to taste sour. And after a few breaths, you’ll probably lose consciousness.”

“I understand,” the apartment offered.

Pamir was standing in the service hallway, wearing his normal rough face as well as the durable jersey and stiff back of a life-long technician. “I’ll need to wander, if I’m going to find your trouble. Which is probably an eager filter, or a failed link of code, or a leak, or who knows what.”

“Do whatever is necessary,” the soft male voice replied.

“And thanks for this opportunity,” Pamir added. “I appreciate new business.”

“Of course, sir. And thank you.”

The apartment’s usual repair firm was temporarily closed due to a bureaucratic war with the Office of Environments. A search of available candidates had steered the AI towards the best candidate. Pamir was releasing a swarm of busy drones that vanished inside the walls, and he continued walking down the hallway, pausing at a tiny locked door. “What’s past here?”

“A living chamber.”

“For a human?”

“Yes, sir.”

Pamir stepped back. "I don't need to bother anyone."

"No one will be." The lock and seal broke. "My lady demands that her home be ready for any and all visitors. Your work is a priority."

Pamir nodded, stepping through the narrow slot.

His first thought was that captains didn't live half as well as this. The room was enormous yet somehow intimate, carpeted with living furs, art treasures standing about waiting to be admired, chairs available for any kind of body, and as an added feature, at least fifty elaborate games laid out on long boards, the pieces playing against each other until there was a winner, after which they would play again. Even the air tasted of wealth, scrubbed and filtered, perfumed and pheromoned. And in that perfect atmosphere, the only sound was the quiet precise and distant singing of a certain alien flower.

Llano vibra.

Pamir looked at monitors and spoke through nexuses, and he did absolutely nothing of substance. What he wanted to accomplish was already done. By a handful of means, the apartment was now invested with hidden ears and eyes. Everything else was for his senses and to lend him more credibility.

A tall diamond wall stood on the far side of the enormous bedroom, and beyond, five hectares of patio hung over the open air. A grove of highly bred llano vibra was rooted in a patio pot, its music passing through a single open door. The young

woman was sitting nearby, doing nothing. Pamir looked at Sorrel for a moment, and then she lifted her head to glance in his general direction. He tried to decide what he was seeing. She was clothed but barefoot. She was strikingly lovely, but in an odd fashion that he couldn't quite name. Her pale skin had a genuine glow, a capacity to swallow up the ambient light and cast it back into the world in a softer form. Her hair was silver-white and thick, with the tips suddenly turning to black. She had a smooth girlish face and a tiny nose and blue-white eyes pulled close together, and her mouth was broad and elegant and exceptionally sad.

It was the sadness that made her striking, Pamir decided.

Then he found himself near the door, staring at her, realizing that nothing was simple about her sadness or his reactions.

Sorrel glanced at him a second time.

A moment later, the apartment inquired, "Is the lady a point of technical interest, sir?"

"Sure." Pamir laughed and stepped back from the diamond wall.

"Have you found the problem? She wishes to know."

"Two problems, and yes. They're being fixed now."

"Very well. Thank you."

Pamir meant to mention his fee. Tradesmen always talked money. But there came a sound—the soft musical whine of a rope deploying—that quickly



fell away into silence. The apartment stopped speaking to him.

“What—?” Pamir began. Then he turned and looked outside again. The woman wasn't alone anymore. A second figure had appeared, dressed like a rock climber and running across the patio towards Sorrel. He was a human or J'Jal, and apparently male. From where Pamir stood, he couldn't tell much more. But he could see the urgency in the intruder's step and a right hand that was holding what could be a weapon, and an instant later, Pamir was running too, leaping through the open door as the stranger closed on the woman.

Sorrel stared at the newcomer.

“I don't recognize his face,” the apartment warned her, shouting now. “My lady-!”

The inertia vanished from her body. Sorrel leapt up and took two steps backwards before deciding to stand and fight. It was her best hope, Pamir agreed. She lifted her arms and lowered them again. She was poised if a little blank in the face, as if she was surrendering her survival to a set of deeply buried instincts.

The stranger reached for her neck with his left hand.

With a swift clean motion, she grabbed the open hand and twisted the wrist back. But the running body picked her off her feet, and both of them fell to the polished opal floor of the patio.

The man's right hand held a knife.

With a single plunge, the stranger pushed the blade into her chest, aiming for the heart. He was working with an odd precision, or perhaps by feel. He was trying to accomplish something very specific, and when she struggled, he would strike her face with the back of his free hand.

The blade dove deeper.

A small, satisfied moan leaked out of him, as if success was near, and then Pamir drove his boot into the smiling mouth.

The stranger was human, and furious.

He climbed to his feet, fending off the next three blows, and then he reached back and pulled out a small railgun that he halfway aimed, letting loose a dozen flecks of supersonic iron.

Pamir dropped, hit in the shoulder and arm.

The injured woman lay between them, bleeding and pained. The hilt of the knife stood up out of her chest, a portion of the hyperfiber blade reflecting the brilliant red of the blood.

With his good arm, Pamir grabbed the hilt and tugged.

There was a soft clatter as a Darmion crystal spilled out of her body along with the blade. This was what the thief wanted. He saw the glittering shape and couldn't resist the urge to grab at the prize. A small fortune was within reach, but then his own knife was driven clear through his forearm, and he screamed in pain and rage.

Pamir cut him twice again.

The little railgun rose up and fired once, twice, and then twice more.

Pamir's body was dying, but he still had the focus and strength to lift the man —a bullish fellow with short limbs and an infinite supply of blood, it seemed. Pamir kept slashing and pushing, and somewhere the railgun was dropped and left behind, and now the man struck him with a fist and his elbows and then tried to use his knee. Pamir grabbed the knee as it rose, borrowing its momentum as well as the last of his own strength to shove the thief against a railing of simple oak, and with a last grunt, flung him over the edge.

Only Pamir was standing there now.

Really, it was a beautiful view. With his chest ripped open and a thousand emergency genes telling his body to rest, he gazed out into the open expanse of Fall Away. Thirty kilometers across and lit by a multitude of solar-bright lights, it was a glory of engineering, and perhaps, a masterpiece of art. The countless avenues that fed into Fall Away often brought water and other liquids, and the captains' engineers had devised a system of airborne rivers — diamond tubes that carried the fluids down in a tangle of spirals and rings, little lakes gathering in pools held aloft by invisible means. And always, there were flyers moving in the air—organic and not, alive and not—and there was the deep musical buzz of a million joyous voices, and there were forests of epiphytes clinging to the wall, and there was a wet

wind that hadn't ceased in sixty thousand years, and Pamir forgot why he was standing here. What was this place? Turning around, he discovered a beautiful woman with a gruesome wound in her chest telling him to sit, please. Sit. Sir, she said, please, please, you need to rest.

## VIII

### The Faith of the Many Joinings.

Where it arose first was a subject of some contention. Several widely scattered solar systems were viable candidates, but no single expert held the definitive evidence. Nor could one prophet or pervert take credit for this quasi-religious belief. But what some of the J'Jal believed was that every sentient soul had the same value. Bodies were facades, and metabolisms were mere details, and social systems varied in the same way that individual lives varied, according to choice and whim and a deniable sense of right. What mattered were the souls within all of these odd packages. What a wise soul wished to do was to befriend entities from different histories, and when possible, fall in love with them, linking their spirits together through the ancient pleasures of the flesh.

There was no single prophet, and the Faith had no birthplace. Which was a problem for the true believers. How could such an intricate, odd faith arise simultaneously in such widely scattered places? But what was a flaw might be a blessing, too. Plainly, divine gears were turning the universe, and this unity was just further evidence of how right and perfect their beliefs had to be. Unless the Faith was the natural outgrowth of the J'Jal's own nature: A social species is thrown across the sky, and every home belongs to more powerful species, and the entire

game of becoming lovers to the greater ones is as inevitable and unremarkable as standing on their own two bare feet.

Pamir held to that ordinary opinion.

He glanced at his own bare feet for a moment, sighed and then examined his arm and shoulder and chest. The wounds had healed to where nothing was visible. Un-scarred flesh had spread over the holes, while the organs inside him were quickly pulling themselves back into perfect condition. He was fit enough to sit up, but he didn't. Instead, he lay on the soft chaise set on the open-air patio, listening to the llano vibra. He was alone, the diamond wall to the bedroom turned black. For a moment, he thought about things that were obvious, and then he played with the subtle possibilities that sprang up from what was obvious.

The thief—a registered felon with a long history of this exact kind of work—had fallen for several kilometers before a routine security patrol noticed him, plucking him out of the sky before he could spoil anybody else's day.

The unlucky man was under arrest and would probably serve a century or two for his latest crime.

"This stinks," Pamir muttered.

"Sir?" said the apartment. "Is there a problem? Might I help?"

Pamir considered, and said, "No."

He sat up and said, "Clothes," and his technician's uniform pulled itself around him. Its fabric had

healed, if not quite so thoroughly as his own body. He examined what could be a fleck of dried blood, and after a moment, he said, "Boots?"

"Under your seat, sir."

Pamir was giving his feet to his boots when she walked out through the bedroom door.

"I have to thank you," Sorrel remarked. She was tall and elegant in a shopworn way, wearing a long gray robe and no shoes. In the face, she looked pretty but sorrowful, and up close, that sadness was a deep thing reaching well past today. "For everything you did, thank you."

A marathon of tears had left her eyes red and puffy.

He stared, and she stared back. For a moment, it was as if she saw nothing. Then Sorrel seemed to grow aware of his interest, and with a shiver, she told him, "Stay as long as you wish. My home will feed you and if you want, you can take anything that interests you. As a memento..."

"Where's the crystal?" he interrupted.

She touched herself between her breasts. The Darmion was back home, resting beside her enduring heart. According to half a dozen species, the crystal gave its possessor a keen love of life and endless joy—a bit of mystic noise refuted by the depressed woman who was wearing it.

"I don't want your little rock," he muttered.

She didn't seem relieved or amused. With a nod, she said, "Thank you," one last time, planning to end

this here.

“You need a better security net,” Pamir remarked.

“Perhaps so,” she admitted, without much interest.

“What's your name?”

She said, “Sorrel,” and then the rest of it. Human names were long and complex and unwieldy. But she said it all, and then she looked at him in a new fashion. “What do I call you?”

He used his most recent identity.

“Are you any good with security systems?” Sorrel inquired.

“Better than most.”

She nodded. “You want me to upgrade yours?”

That amused her somehow. A little smile broke across the milky face, and for a moment, the bright pink tip of her tongue pointed at him. Then she shook her head, saying, “No, not for me,” as if he should have realized as much. “I have a good friend... a dear old friend... who has some rather heavy fears...”

“Can he pay?”

“I will pay. Tell him it's my gift.”

“So who's this worried fellow?”

She said, “Gallium,” in an alien language.

Genuinely surprised, Pamir asked, “What the hell is a harum-scarum doing, admitting he's scared?”

Sorrel nodded appreciatively.

“He admits nothing,” she added. Then again, she smiled... a warmer expression, this time. Fetching and sweet, even wonderful, and for Pamir, that expression seemed to last long after he walked out of



the apartment and on to his next job.

## IX

The harum-scarum was nearly three meters tall, massive and thickly armored, loud and yet oddly serene at the same time, passionate about his endless bravery and completely transparent when he told his lies. His home was close to Fall Away, tucked high inside one of the minor avenues. He was standing behind his final door—a slab of hyperfiber-braced diamond—and with a distinctly human gesture, he waved off the uninvited visitor. “I do not need any favors,” he claimed, speaking through his breathing mouth. “I am as secure as anyone and twelve times more competent than you when it comes to defending myself.” Then with a blatant rudeness, he allowed his eating mouth to deliver a long wet belch.

“Funny,” said Pamir. “A woman wishes to buy my services, and you are Gallium, her dear old friend. Is that correct?”

“What is the woman's name?”

“Why? Didn't you hear me the first time?”

“Sorrel, you claimed.” He pretended to concentrate, and then with a little too much certainty said, “I do not know this ape-woman.”

“Is that so?” Pamir shook his head. “She knows you.”

“She is mistaken.”

“So then how did you know she was human? Since I hadn't quite mentioned that yet.”

The question won a blustery look from the big

black eyes. "What are you implying to me, little ape-man?"

Pamir laughed at him. "Why? Can't you figure it out for yourself?"

"Are you insulting me?"

"Sure."

That won a deep silence.

With a fist only a little larger than one of the alien's knuckles, Pamir wrapped on the diamond door. "I'm insulting you and your ancestors. There. By the ship's codes and your own painful customs, you are now free to step out here, in the open, and beat me until I am dead for a full week."

The giant shook with fury, and nothing happened. One mouth expanded, gulping down deep long breaths, while the other mouth puckered into a tiny dimple—a harum-scarum on the brink of a pure vengeful rage. But Gallium forced himself to do nothing, and when the anger finally began to diminish, he gave an inaudible signal, causing the outer two doors to drop and seal tight.

Pamir looked left and then right. The narrow avenue was well-lit and empty, and by every appearance, it was safe.

Yet the creature had been terrified.

One more time, he paged his way through Sorrel's journal. Among those husbands were two harum-scarums. No useful name had been mentioned in the journal, but it was obvious which of them was Gallium. Lying about his fear was in character for the

species. But how could a confirmed practitioner of this singular faith deny that he had even met the woman?

Pamir needed to find the other husbands.

A hundred different routes lay before him. But as harum-scarums liked to say, “The shortest line stretches between points that touch.”

Gallium's security system was ordinary, and it was porous, and with thousands of years of experience in these matters, it took Pamir less than a day to subvert codes and walk through the front doors.

“Who is with me?” a voice cried out from the farthest room.

In J'Jal, curiously.

Then, “Who's there?” in human.

And finally, as an afterthought, the alien screamed, “You are in my realm, and unwelcome.” In his own tongue, he promised, “I will forgive you, if you run away at this moment.”

“Sorrel won't let me run,” Pamir replied.

The last room was a minor fortress buttressed with slabs of high-grade hyperfiber and bristling with weapons, legal and otherwise. A pair of rail-guns followed Pamir's head, ready to batter his mind if not quite kill it. Tightness built in his throat, but he managed to keep the fear out of his voice. “Is this where you live now? In a little room at the bottom of an ugly home?”

“You like to insult,” the harum-scarum observed.

“It passes my time,” he replied.

From behind the hyperfiber, Gallium said, “I see an illegal weapon.”

“Good. Since I'm carrying one.”

“If you try to harm me, I will kill you. And I will destroy your mind, and you will be no more.”

“Understood,” Pamir said.

Then he sat—a gesture of submission on almost every world. He sat on the quasi-crystal tiling on the floor of the bright hallway, glancing at the portraits on the nearby walls. Harum-scarums from past ages stood in defiant poses. Ancestors, presumably. Honorable men and women who could look at their cowering descendant with nothing but a fierce contempt.

After a few moments, Pamir said, “I'm pulling my weapon into plain view.”

“Throw it beside my door.”

The plasma gun earned a respectful silence. It slid across the floor and clattered to a stop, and then a mechanical arm unfolded, slapping a hyperfiber bowl over it, and then covering the bowl an explosive charge set to obliterate the first hand that tried to free the gun within.

The hyperfiber door lifted.

Gallium halfway filled the room beyond. He was standing in the middle of a closet jammed with supplies, staring at Pamir, the armored plates of his body flexing, exposing their sharp edges.

“You must very much need this work,” he

observed.

“Except I'm not doing my work,” Pamir replied. “Frankly, I've sort of lost interest in the project.”

Confused, the harum-scarum stood taller. “Then why have you gone to such enormous trouble?”

“What you need,” Pamir mentioned, “is a small, well-charged plasma gun. That makes a superior weapon.”

“They are illegal and hard to come by,” argued Gallium.

“Your rail-guns are criminal, too.” Just like with the front doors, there was a final door made of diamond reinforced with a meshwork of hyperfiber. “But I bet you appreciate what the shaped plasma can do to a living mind.”

Silence.

“Funny,” Pamir continued. “Not that long ago, I found a corpse that ran into that exact kind of tool.”

The alien's back couldn't straighten anymore, and the armor plates were flexing as much as possible. With a quiet voice —an almost begging voice — Gallium asked the human, “Who was the corpse?”

“Sele'ium.”

Again, silence.

“Who else has died that way?” Pamir asked. It was a guess, but not much of one. When no answer was offered, he added, “You've never been this frightened. In your long, ample life, you have never imagined that fear could eat at you this way. Am I right?”

Now the back began to collapse.

A miserable little voice said, "It just worsens."

"Why?"

The harum-scarum dipped his head for a moment.

"Why does the fear get worse and worse?"

"Seven of us now."

"Seven?"

"Lost." A human despair rode with that single word. "Eight, if you are telling the truth about the J'Jal."

"What eight?" Pamir asked. Gallium refused to say, "I know who you are," he continued. "Eight of Sorrel's husbands, and you. Is that right?"

"Her past husbands," the alien corrected.

"What about current lovers — ?"

"There are none."

"No?"

"She is celibate," the giant said with a deep longing. Then he dropped his gaze, adding, "When we started to die, she gave us up. Physically, and legally as well."

Gallium missed his human wife. It showed in his stance and voice and how the great hand trembled, reaching up to touch the cool pane of diamond while he added, "She is trying to save us. But she doesn't know how—"

A sudden ball of coherent plasma struck the pane just then. No larger than a human heart, it dissolved the diamond and the hand, and the grieving face, and everything that lay beyond those dark lonely eyes.

Pamir saw nothing but the flash, and then came a concussive blast that threw him off his feet. For an instant, he lay motionless. A cloud of atomized carbon and flesh filled the cramped hallway. He listened and heard nothing. At least for the next few moments, he was completely deaf. Keeping low, he rolled until a wall blocked his way. Then he started to breathe, scalding his lungs, and he held his breath, remaining absolutely still, waiting for a second blast to shove past.

Nothing happened.

With his mouth to the floor, Pamir managed a hot but breathable sip of air. The cloud was thinning. His hearing was returning, accompanied by a tireless high-pitched hum. A figure swam into view, tall and menacing—a harum-scarum, presumably one of the dead man's honored ancestors. He remembered that the hallway was littered with the portraits. Pamir saw a second figure, and then a third. He was trying to recall how many images there had been... because he could see a fourth figure now, and that seemed like one too many...

The plasma gun fired again. But it hadn't had time enough to build a killing charge, and the fantastic energies were wasted in a light show and a burst of blistering wind.

Again the air filled with dirt and gore.

Pamir leaped up and retreated.



Gallium was a nearly headless corpse, enormous even when mangled and stretched out on his back. The little room was made tinier with him on the floor. When their owner died, the rail-guns had dropped into their diagnostic mode, and waking them would take minutes, or days. The diamond door was shredded and useless. When the cloud fell away again, in another few moments, Pamir would be exposed and probably killed.

Like Gallium, he first used the J'Jal language.

“Hello,” he called out. The outer door was open and still intact, but its simple trigger was useless to him. It was sensitive only to pressure from a familiar hand. Staring out into the hallway, he shouted, “Hello,” once again.

In the distance, a shape began to resolve itself.

“I am dead,” he continued. “You have me trapped here, my friend.”

Nothing.

“Do what you wish, but before you cook me, I would love to know what this is about.”

The shape seemed to drift one way, then back again.

Pamir jerked one of the dead arms off the floor. Then he started to position it, laying the broad palm against the wall, close to the door's trigger. But that was the easy part of this, he realized.

“You're a clever soul,” he offered. “Allow a human to open the way for you. I outsmart the harum-scarum's defenses, and then you can claim both of

us.”

How much time before another recharge?

A few seconds, he guessed.

The corpse suddenly flinched and the arm dropped with a massive thunk.

“Shit,” Pamir muttered.

On a high shelf was a plate, small but dense as metal. He took hold of it, made a few practice flings with his wrist, and then once again called out, “I wish you would tell me what this is about. Because I haven't got a clue.”

Nothing.

In human, Pamir said, “Who the hell are you?”

The cloud was clearing again, revealing the outlines of a biped standing down the hallway, maybe ten meters from him.

Kneeling, Pamir again grabbed the dead arm. Emergency genes and muscle memory began to fight against him, the strength of a giant forcing him to grunt as he pushed the hand to where it was set beside the trigger. Then he threw all of his weight on the hand, forcing it to stay in place. For a moment, he panted. Then he grabbed the heavy plate with his left hand, and with a gasping voice, he said, “One last chance to explain.”

The biped was beginning to aim.

“Bye-bye, then.”

Pamir flipped the plate, aiming at a target barely three meters away. And in the same instant, he let the dead hand fall onto the trigger. A slab of hyperfiber

slid from the ceiling, and the final door was shut. It could withstand two or three blasts from a plasma gun, but eventually it would be gnawed away. Which was why he flipped the plate onto the floor where it skipped and rolled, clipping the edge of the shaped charge of explosives that capped his own gun.

There was a sudden sharp thunder.

The door was left jammed shut by the blast. Pamir spent the next twenty minutes using a dead hand and every override to lift the door far enough to crawl underneath. But a perfectly symmetrical blast had left his own weapon where it lay, untouched beneath a bowl of mirror-bright hyperfiber.

His enemy would have been blown back up the hallway.

Killed briefly, or maybe just scared away. Pamir lingered for a few minutes, searching the dead man's home for clues that refused to be found, and then he slipped back out into the public avenue —still vacant and safe to the eye, but possessing a palpable menace that he could now feel for himself.

## XI

A ninety-second tube ride placed him beside Sorrel's front door. The apartment addressed him by the only name it knew, observing, "You are injured, sir." Performing its own rapid examination, a distinct alarm entered into an otherwise officious voice. "Do you know how badly you are injured, sir?"

"I've got a fair guess," Pamir allowed, an assortment of shrapnel still buried inside his leg and belly, giving him a rolling limp. "Where's the lady?"

"Where you left her, sir. On the patio."

Everyone was terrified, it seemed, except for her. But why should she worry? Sorrel had only been knifed by a quick-and-dirty thief, which on the scale of crimes was practically nothing.

"Have her come to her bedroom."

"Sir?"

"I'm not talking to her in the open. Tell her."

"What about her friend — ?"

"Another husband is dead."

Silence.

"Will you tell her—?" Pamir began.

"She is already on her way, sir. As you have requested." Then after a pause, the apartment suggested, "About Gallium, please... I think you should deliver that sorry news..."

He told it.

She was dressed now in slacks and a silk blouse

made by the communal spiders of the Kolochon district, and her bare feet wore black rings on every toe, and while she sat on one of the dozens of self-shaping chairs, listening to his recount of the last brutal hour, her expression managed to grow even more sad as well as increasingly detached. Sorrel made no sound, but always there was a sense that she was about to speak. The sorry and pained and very pretty face would betray a new thought, or the pale eyes would recognize something meaningful. But the mouth never quite made noise. When she finally uttered a few words, Pamir nearly forgot to listen.

“Who are you?”

Did he hear the question correctly?

Again, she asked, “Who are you?” Then she leaned forward, the blouse dipping in front. “You aren't like any environmental technician I've known, and I don't think you're a security specialist either.”

“No?”

“You wouldn't have survived the fight, if you were just a fix-it man.” She almost laughed, a little dimple showing high on the left cheek. “And even if you had lived, you would still be running now.”

“I just want you to point me in the safest direction,” he replied.

She didn't respond, watching him for what seemed like an age. Then sitting back in the deep wide chair, she asked, “Who pays you?”

“You do.”

“That's not what I mean.”

“But I'm not pushing too hard for my wages,” he offered.

“You won't tell me who?”

“Confess a few things to me first,” he replied.

She had long hands, graceful and quick. For a little while, the hands danced in her lap, and when they finally settled, she asked, “What can I tell you?”

“Everything you know about your dead husbands, and about those who just happen to be alive still.” Pamir leaned forward, adding, “In particular, I want to hear about your first husband. And if you can, explain why the Faith of the Many Joinings seemed like such a reasonable idea.”

## XII

She had seen him earlier on the voyage and spoken with him on occasion—a tall and slender and distinguished J'Jal man with a fondness for human clothes, particularly red woolen suits and elaborately knotted white silk ties. Cre'llan seemed handsome, although not exceptionally so. He was obviously bright and engaging. Once, when their boat was exploring the luddite islands in the middle of the Gone-A-Long Sea, he asked if he might join her, sitting on the long chaise lounge beside hers. For the next little while—an hour, or perhaps the entire day—they chatted amiably about the most ordinary of things. There was gossip to share, mostly about their fellow passengers and the boat's tiny crew. There were several attempts to list the oceans that they had crossed to date, ranking them according to beauty and then history and finally by their inhabitants. Which was the most intriguing port? Which was the most ordinary? What aliens had each met for the first time? What were their first impressions? Second impressions? And if they had to live for the next thousand years in one of these little places, which would they choose?

Sorrel would have eventually forgotten the day. But a week later, she agreed to a side trip to explore Greenland.

“Do you know the island?”

“Not at all,” Pamir lied.

"I never made sense of that name," Sorrel admitted, eyes narrowing as if to reexamine the entire question. "Except for some fringes of moss and the like, the climate is pure glacial. The island has to be cold, I was told. It has to do with the upwellings in the ocean and the sea's general health. Anyway, there is a warm current upwind from it, which brings the moisture, and the atmosphere is a hundred kilometers tall and braced with demon-doors. The snows are endless and fabulous, and you can't sail across the Gone-A-Long Sea without visiting Greenland once. At least that's what my friends told me." "Was Cre'llan in your group?"

"No." Somehow that amused her. She gave a little laugh, adding, "Everybody was human, except for the guide, who was an AI with a human-facsimile body."

Pamir nodded.

"We power-skied up onto the ice during an incredibly hard snowfall. But then our guide turned to us, mentioning that it was a clear day, as they went. And we should be thankful we could see so much."

At most, they could see twenty meters in any direction. She was with a good friend—a child of the Great Ship like Sorrel, but a thousand years older. Sorrel had known the woman her entire life. They had shared endless conversations and gone to the same fine parties, and their shopping adventures had stretched on for weeks at a time. They always traveled together. And in their combined lives, nothing with



real substance had occurred to either of them.

The glacier was thick and swiftly built up by the waves of falling snow. Sorrel and her companion skied away from the rest of the group, scaling a tall ridge that placed them nearly a kilometer above the invisible sea. Then the snow began to fall harder—fat wet flakes joining into snowballs that plunged from the white sky. They were skiing close together, linked by a smart-rope. Sorrel happened to be in the lead. What happened next, she couldn't say. Her first guess, and still her best guess, was that her friend thought of a little joke to play. She disabled the rope and untied herself, and where the ridge widened, she attempted to slip ahead of Sorrel, probably to scare her when she was most vulnerable.

Where the friend fell was a bit of a mystery.

Later, coming to the end of the ridge, Sorrel saw that she was alone. But she naturally assumed her companion had grown tired and gone back to rejoin the others. There wasn't cause for worry, and she didn't like worry, and so Sorrel didn't give it another thought.

But the other tourists hadn't seen her missing friend, either.

A search was launched. But the heavy snowfall turned into what can only be described as an endless avalanche from the sky. In the next hour, the glacier rose by twenty meters. By the time rescue crews could set to work, it was obvious that the missing passenger had stumbled into one of the vast crevices, and her

body was dead, and without knowing her location, the only reasonable course would be to wait for the ice to push to the sea and watch for her battered remains.

In theory, a human brain could withstand that kind of abuse.

But the AI guide didn't believe in theory. "What nobody tells you is that this fucking island was once an industrial site. Why do you think the engineers covered it up? To hide their wreckage, of course. Experimental hyperfibers, mostly. Very sharp and sloppy, and the island was built with their trash, and if you put enough pressure on even the best bioceramic head, it will crack. Shatter. Pop, and die, and come out into the sea as a few handfuls of fancy sand."

Her friend was dead.

Sorrel never liked the woman more than anyone else or felt any bond unique just to the two of them. But the loss was heavy and persistent, and for the next several weeks, she thought about little else.

Meanwhile, their voyage through the Great Ship reached a new sea. One night, while surrounded by a flat gray expanse of methane, Sorrel happened upon the J'Jal man wearing his red jacket and red slacks, and the fancy white tie beneath his nearly human face. He smiled at her, his expression genuine with either species. Then quietly, he asked, "Is something wrong?"

Nobody in her own group had noticed her pain.

Unlike her, they were convinced that their friend would soon enough return from the oblivion.

Sorrel sat with the J'Jal. And for a very long while, they didn't speak. She found herself staring at his bare feet, thinking about the fragility of life. Then with a dry low voice, she admitted, "I'm scared."

"Is that so?" Cre'llan said.

"You know, at any moment, without warning, the Great Ship could collide with something enormous. At a third the speed of light, we might strike a sunless world or a small black hole, and billions would die inside this next instant."

"That may be true," her companion purred. "But I have invested my considerable faith in the talents of our captains."

"I haven't," she countered.

"No?"

"My point here..." She hesitated, shivering for reasons other than the cold. "My point is that I have lived for a few years, and I can't remember ever grabbing life by the throat. Do you know what I mean?"

"Very well," he claimed.

His long toes curled and then relaxed again.

"Why don't you wear shoes?" she finally asked.

And with the softest possible touch, Cre'llan laid his hand on hers. "I am an alien, Sorrel." He spoke while smiling, quietly telling her, "And it would mean so much to me if you could somehow, in your soul, forget what I am."

“We were lovers before the night was finished,” she admitted. A fond look passed into a self-deprecating chuckle. “I thought all J'Jal men were shaped like he was. But they aren't, he explained. And that's when I learned about the Faith of the Many Joinings.”

Pamir nodded, waiting for more.

“They did eventually find my lost friend, you know.” A wise sorry laugh came out of her. “A few years later, a patrol working along the edge of the glacier kicked up some dead bones and then the skull with her mind inside. Intact.” Sorrel sat back in her chair, breasts moving under the blouse. “She was reconstituted and back inside her old life within the month, and do you know what? In the decades since, I haven't spoken to my old friend more than three times.

“Funny, isn't it?”

“The Faith,” Pamir prompted.

She seemed to expect the subject. With a slow shrug of the shoulders, Sorrel observed, “Whoever you are, you weren't born into comfort and wealth. That shows, I think. You've had to fight in your life... probably through much of your life... for things that any fool knows are important. While someone like me—less than a fool by a long way—walks through paradise without ever asking herself, ‘What matters?’” “The Faith,” he repeated.

“Think of the challenge,” she said. Staring through him, she asked, “Can you imagine how very difficult it

is to be involved —romantically and emotionally linked —with another species?”

“It disgusts me,” he lied.

“It disgusts a lot of us,” she replied. For an instant, she wore a doubting gaze, perhaps wondering if he was telling the truth about his feelings. Then she let the doubt fall aside. “I wasn't exceptionally horrified by the idea of sex outside my species,” she admitted. “Which is why I wasn't all that interested either. Somewhere in the indifferent middle, I was. But when I learned about this obscure J'Jal belief... how an assortment of like-minded souls had gathered, taking the first critical steps in what might well be the logical evolution of life in our universe...”

Her voice drifted away.

“How many husbands did you take?”

She acted surprised. “Why? Don't you know?”

Pamir let her stare at him.

Finally, she said, “Eleven.”

“You are Joined to all of them.”

“Until a few years ago, yes.” The eyes shrank, and with the tears, they brightened. “The first death looked like a random murder. Horrible, but imaginable. But the second killing was followed a few months later by a third. The same weapon was used in each tragedy, with the same general manner of execution...” Her voice trailed away, the mouth left open and empty. One long hand wiped at the tears, accomplishing little but pushing moisture across the sharp cheeks. “Since the dead belonged to different

species, and since the members of the Faith... my husbands and myself... are sworn to secrecy—”

“Nobody noticed the pattern,” Pamir interrupted.

“Oh, I think they saw what was happening,” she muttered. “After the fifth or sixth death, security people made inquiries at the library. But no one there could admit anything. And then the killings slowed, and the investigation went away. No one was offered protection, and my name was never mentioned. At least that's what I assume, since nobody was sent to interview me.” Then with a quiet, angry voice, Sorrel added, “After they linked the murders to the library, they didn't care what happened.”

“How do you know that?”

She stared at Pamir, regarding him as if he were a perfect idiot.

“What? Did the authorities assume this was some ugly internal business among the Joined?”

“Maybe,” she said. “Or maybe they received orders telling them to stop searching.”

“Who gave the orders?”

She looked at a point above his head and carefully said, “No.”

“Who wouldn't want these killings stopped?”

“I don't...” she began. Then she shook her head, adding, “I can't. Ask all you want, but I won't tell you anything else.”

He asked, “Do you consider yourself in danger?” She sighed. “Hardly.”

“Why not?”

She said nothing.

“Two husbands are left alive,” Pamir reminded her.

A suspicious expression played over him. Then she admitted, “I’m guessing you know which two.”

“There’s the Glory.” Glories were birdlike creatures, roughly human-shaped but covered with a bright and lovely plumage. “One of your more recent husbands, isn’t he?”

Sorrel nodded, and then admitted, “Except he died last year. On the opposite side of the Great Ship, alone. The body was discovered only yesterday.”

Pamir flinched, saying, “My condolences.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“And your first lover?”

“Yes.”

“The J’Jal in the red suit.”

“Cre’llan, yes. I know who you mean.”

“The last man standing,” he mentioned.

That earned a withering stare from a pained cold face. “I don’t marry lightly. And I don’t care what you’re thinking.”

Pamir stood and walked up beside her, and with his own stare, he assured, “You don’t know what I’m thinking. Because I sure as hell don’t know what I’ve got in my own soggy head.”

She dipped her eyes.

“The J’Jal,” he said. “I can track him down for myself, or you can make the introductions.”

“It isn’t Cre’llan,” she whispered.

“Then come with me,” Pamir replied. “Come and look him in the eye and ask for yourself.”



## XIII

As a species, the J'Jal were neither wealthy nor powerful, but among them were a few individuals of enormous age who had prospered in a gradual, relentless fashion. On distant worlds, they had served as cautious traders and inconspicuous landowners and sometimes as the bearers of alien technologies; and while they would always be aliens on those places, they had adapted well enough to feel as if they were home. And then the Great Ship had arrived. Their young and arrogant human cousins promised to carry them across the galaxy—for a fee. The boldest of these wealthy J'Jal left a hundred worlds behind, spending fortunes for the honor of gathering together again. They had no world of their own, yet some hoped to eventually discover some new planet reminiscent of their cradle world—an empty world they could claim for their own. Other J'Jals believed that the Earth and its humans were the logical, even poetic goal for their species—a place where they might blend into the ranks of their highly successful relatives.

“But neither solution gives me any particular pleasure,” said the gentleman wearing red. With a nearly human voice, he admitted, “The boundaries between the species are a lie and impermanent, and I hope for a radically different future.”

According to his official biography, Cre'llan was approximately the same age as *Homo sapiens*.

“What's your chosen future?” Pamir inquired.

The smile was bright and a little cold. “My new friend,” the J'Jal said. “I think you already have made a fair assessment of what I wish for. And more to the point, I think you couldn't care less about whatever dream or utopia I just happen to entertain.”

“I have some guesses,” Pamir agreed. “And you're right, I don't give a shit about your idea of paradise.”

Sorrel sat beside her ancient husband, holding his hand fondly. Divorced or not, she missed his company. They looked like lovers waiting for a holo portrait to be taken. Quietly, she warned Cre'llan, “He suspects you, darling.”

“Of course he does.”

“But I told him... I explained... you can't be responsible for any of this...”

“Which is the truth,” the J'Jal replied, his smile turning into a grim little sneer. “Why would I murder anyone? How could it possibly serve my needs?”

The J'Jal's home was near the bottom of Fall Away, and it was enormous. This single room covered nearly a square kilometer, carpeted with green woods broken up with quick little streams, the ceiling so high that a dozen tame star-rocs could circle above and never brush wings. But all of that grandeur and wealth was dwarfed by the outside view: The braided rivers that ran down the middle of Fall Away had been set free some fifty kilometers above their heads, every diamond tube ending at the same point, their contents exploding out under extraordinary pressure.

A flow equal to ten Amazons roared past Cre'llan's home, water and ammonia mixing with a spectacular array of chemical wastes and dying phytoplankton. Aggressive compounds battered their heads together and reacted, bleeding colors in the process. Shapes appeared inside the wild foam, and vanished again. A creative eye could see every face that he had ever met, and he could spend days watching for the faces that he had worn during his own long, strange life.

The window only seemed to be a window. In reality, Pamir was staring at a sheet of high-grade hyperfiber, thick and very nearly impervious to any force nature could throw at it. The view was a projection, a convincing trick. Nodding, he admitted, "You must feel remarkably safe, I would think."

"I sleep quite well," Cre'llan replied.

"Most of the time, I can help people with their security matters. But not you." Pamir was entirely honest, remarking, "I don't think the Master Captain has as much security in place. That hyperfiber. The AI watchdogs. Those blood-and-meat hounds that sniffed our butts on the way in." He showed a wide smile, and then mentioned, "If I'm not mistaken, you'd never have to leave this one room. For the next ten thousand years, you could sit where you're sitting today and eat what falls off these trees, and no one would have to touch you."

"If that was what I wished, yes."

"But he is not the killer," Sorrel muttered. Then she stood and stepped away from the ancient

creature, her hand grudgingly releasing his grip. She approached Pamir, kneeling before him. Suddenly she looked very young, serious and determined. "I know this man," she implored. "You have no idea what you're suggesting, if you think that he could hurt anyone... for any reason..."

"I once lived as a J'Jal," Pamir allowed.

Sorrel leaned away from him, taken by surprise.

"I dyed my hair blue and tinkered with these bones, and I even doctored my genetics, far enough to pass half-assed scans." Pamir gave no specifics, but he understood he was telling too much. Nonetheless, he didn't feel as if he had any choice. "I even kept a J'Jal lover. For a while, I did. But then she saw through my disguise, and I had to steal away in the middle of the night."

The other two watched him now, bewildered and deeply curious.

"Anyway," he continued. "During my stay with the J'Jal, a certain young woman came of age. She was very desirable. Extraordinarily beautiful, and her family was one of the wealthiest onboard the ship. Before that year was finished, the woman had acquired three devoted husbands. But someone else fell in love with her, and he didn't want to share. One of the new husbands was killed. After that, the other husbands went to the public hall and divorced her. They never spoke to the girl again. She was left unattached, and alone. What rational soul would risk her love under those circumstances?" Pamir shook

his head while studying Cre'llan. "As I said, I slipped away in the night. And then several decades later, an elder J'Jal proposed to the widow. She was lonely, and he was not a bad man. Not wealthy, but powerful and ancient, and in some measure, wise. So she accepted his offer, and when nothing tragic happened to her new husband, not only did everyone understand who had ordered the killing. They accepted it, too. In pure J'Jal fashion."

With a flat, untroubled voice, Cre'llan said, "My soul has never been thought of as jealous."

"But I'm now accusing you of jealousy," Pamir countered.

Silence.

"Conflicts over females is ordinary business for some species," he continued. "Monopolizing a valuable mate can be a good evolutionary strategy, for the J'Jal as well as others, too. And tens of millions of years of civilization hasn't changed what you are, or what you can be."

Cre'llan snorted, declaring, "That old barbarism is something I would never embrace."

"Agreed."

The green gaze narrowed. "Excuse me, sir. I don't think I understand. What exactly are you accusing me of?"

"This is a beautiful, enormous fortress," Pamir continued. "And as you claim, you're not a jealous creature. But did you invite these other husbands to live with you? Did you offer even one of them your

shelter and all of this expensive security?”

Sorrel glanced at the J'Jal, her breath catching for an instant.

“You didn't offer,” Pamir continued, “because of a very reasonable fear: What if one of your houseguests wanted Sorrel for himself?”

An old tension rippled between the lovers. “Every other husband was a suspect, in your mind. With those two harum-scarums being the most obvious candidates.” He looked at Sorrel again. “Gallium would be his favorite —a relatively poor entity born into a biology of posturing and violence. His species is famous for stealing mates. Both sexes do it, every day. But now Gallium is dead, which leaves your husband with no one to worry about, it seems.”

“But I am not the killer,” Cre'llan repeated.

“Oh, I agree,” Pamir said. “You are innocent, yes.”

The statement seemed to anger both of them. Sorrel spoke first, asking, “When did you come to that conclusion?”

“Once I learned who your husbands were,” Pamir replied. “Pretty much instantly.” Then he sat forward in his chair, staring out at the churning waters. “No, Cre'llan isn't the murderer.”

“You understand my nature?” the J'Jal asked.

“Maybe, but that doesn't particularly matter.” Pamir laughed. “No,” he said. “You're too smart and far too old to attempt this sort of bullshit with a human woman. Talk all you want about every species being one and the same. But the hard sharp damning

fact is that human beings are not J'Jal. Very few of us, under even the most difficult circumstances, are going to look past the fact that their spouse is a brutal killer.”

Cre'llan gave a little nod, the barest smile showing.

Sorrel stood, nervous hands clenching into fists. She looked vulnerable and sweet and very sorry. The beginnings of recognition showed in the blue-white eyes, and she started to stare at the J'Jal, catching herself now and forcing her eyes to drop.

“And something else was obvious,” Pamir mentioned. “Pretty much from the beginning, I should think.”

With a dry little voice, Cre'llan asked, “What was obvious?”

“From the beginning,” Pamir repeated.

“What do you mean?” Sorrel asked.

“Okay,” Pamir said, watching her face and the nervous fists. “Let's suppose that I'm killing your husbands. I want my rivals dead, and I want a reasonable chance of surviving to the end. Of course, I would start with Cre'llan. Since he enjoys the most security... better than everyone else combined, probably... I would hit him before he could smell any danger...”

That earned a cold silence.

Pamir shook his head. “The killer wants the husbands out of your life. From the start, I think he knew exactly what was required. The other ten husbands had to be murdered, since they loved you

deeply and you seemed to love them. But this J'Jal... well, he's a different conundrum entirely, I'm guessing..."

Cre'llan appeared interested but distant. When he breathed, it was after a long breathless pause, and he sounded a little weak when he said, "I don't know what you are talking about."

"You told me," Pamir said to Sorrel.

"WhatdidI-?"

"How you met him during the cruise. And what happened to you and your good friend just before you went to bed with this alien man — " "I don't understand," she muttered.

Cre'llan snapped, "Be quiet."

Pamir felt a pleasant nervousness in his belly. "Cre'llan wanted you, I'm guessing. He wanted you badly. You were a wealthy, unattached human woman — the J'Jal adore our species — and you would bring him a fair amount of status. But to seduce you... well, he needed help. Which is why he paid your friend to vanish on the ice in Greenland, faking her own death..."

"He wanted to expose you emotionally, with a dose of mortality—"

"Stop that," she told him.

Cre'llan said, "Idiot," and little more.

"The AI guide was right," Pamir told her. "The chances of a mind surviving the weight of that ice and the grinding against the hyperfiber shards... well, I found it remarkable to learn that your good friend



was found alive.

“So I made a few inquiries.

“I can show you, if you wish. A trail of camouflaged funds leads from your friend back to a company formed just hours before her death. The mysterious company made a single transfer of funds, declared bankruptcy and then dissolved. Your friend was the recipient. She was reborn as a very wealthy soul, and the principal stockholder in that short-lived company happened to have been someone with whom your first lover and husband does quite a lot of business.”

Sorrel sat motionless. Her mouth closed and opened, in slow motion, and then it began to close again. Her legs tried to find the strength to carry her away, but she looked about for another moment or two, finding no door or hatchway to slip through in the next little while. She was caught, trapped by things awful and true. And then, just as Pamir thought that she would crack into pieces, the young woman surprised him.

Calmly, she told Cre'llan, “I divorce you.”

“Darling—?” he began.

“Forever,” she said. And then she pulled from a pocket what seemed like an ordinary knife. Which it was. A sapphire blade no longer than her hand was unfolded, and it took her ten seconds to cut the Darmion crystal out of her chest—ripped free for the second time in as many days—and then before she collapsed, she flung the gory gift at the stunned and sorry face.

## XIV

Pamir explained what had happened as he carried her into her apartment. Then he set her on a great round bed, pillows offering themselves to her head while a small autodoc spider-walked its way across the pale blue sheets, studying her half-healed wound, then with more penetrating eyes, carefully examining the rest of her body. Quietly, the apartment offered, "I have never known her to be this way." In his long life, Pamir had rarely seen any person as depressed, as forlorn. Sorrel was pale and motionless, lying on her back, and even with her eyes open, something in her gaze was profoundly blind. She saw nothing, heard nothing. She was like a person flung off the topmost portion of Fall Away, tumbling out of control, gusts of wind occasionally slamming her against the hard walls, battering a soul that couldn't feel the abuse anymore.

"I am worried," the apartment confessed.

"Reasonable," Pamir replied.

"It must be a horrid thing, losing everyone who loves you."

"But someone still loves her," he countered. Then he paused, thinking hard about everything again.

"Tell me," he said. "What is your species-strain?"

"Is that important?"

"Probably not," said Pamir.

The AI described its pedigree, in brief.

"What's your lot number?"

“I do not see how that matters.”

“Never mind,” he said, walking away from their patient. “I already know enough as it is.”

Pamir ate a small meal and drank some sweet alien nectar that left him feeling a little sloppy. When the head cleared, he slept for a minute or an hour, and then he returned to the bedroom and the giant bed. Sorrel was where he had left her. Her eyes were closed now, empty hands across her belly, rising and falling and rising with a slow steady rhythm that he couldn't stop watching.

“Thank you.”

The voice didn't seem to belong to anyone. The young woman's mouth happened to be open, but it didn't sound like the voice he expected. It was sturdy and calm, the old sadness wiped away. It was a quiet polite and rather sweet voice that told him, “Thank you,” and then added, “For everything, sir.”

The eyes hadn't opened.

She had heard Pamir approach, or felt his presence.

He sat on the bed beside her, and after a long moment said, “You know. You'd be entitled to consider me—whoever I am—as being your main suspect. I could have killed the husbands. And I certainly put an end to you and Cre'llan.”

“It isn't you.”

“Because you have another suspect in mind. Isn't that it?”

She said nothing.

“Who do you believe is responsible?” he pressed.

Finally, the eyes pulled open, slowly, and they blinked twice, tears pooling but never quite reaching the point where they would flow.

“My father,” she said.

“He killed your husbands?”

“Obviously.”

“He's light-years behind us now.”

Silence.

Pamir nodded, and after a moment, he asked, “What do you know about your father?”

“Quite a lot,” she claimed.

“But you've never seen him,” he reminded her. “I have studied him.” She shook her head and closed her eyes again. “I've examined his biography as well as I can, and I think I know him pretty well.”

“He isn't here, Sorrel.”

“No?”

“He emigrated before you were even born.”

“That's what my mother told me, yes.”

“What else?” Pamir leaned closer, adding, “What did she tell you about the man...?”

“He is strong and self-assured. That he knows what is right and best. And he loves me very much, but he couldn't stay with me.” Sorrel chewed on her lip for a moment. “He couldn't stay here, but my father has agents and ways, and I would never be without him. Mother promised me.”

Pamir just nodded.

“My father doesn't approve of the Faith.”

“I can believe that,” he said.

“My mother admitted, once or twice... that she loved him very much, but he doesn't have a diplomat's ease with aliens. And his heart can be hard, and he has a capacity to do awful things, if he sees the need...”

“No,” Pamir whispered.

The pale blue eyes opened. “What do you mean?”

“Your father didn't do any of this,” he promised. Then he thought again, saying, “Well, maybe a piece of it.”

“What do you mean — ?”

Pamir set his hand on top of her mouth, lightly. Then as he began to pull his hand back, she took hold of his wrist and forearm, easing the palm back down against lips that pulled apart, teeth giving him a tiny swift bite.

A J'Jal gesture, that was.

He bent down and kissed the open eyes.

Sorrel told him, “You shouldn't.”

“Probably not.”

“If the murderer knows you are with me — “

He placed two fingers deep into her mouth, J'Jal fashion. And she sucked on them, not trying to speak now, eyes almost smiling as Pamir calmly and smoothly slid into bed beside her.

One of the plunging rivers pulled close to the wall, revealing what it carried. Inside the diamond tube was a school of finned creatures, not pseudofish nor pseudowhales, but instead a collection of teardrop-shaped machines that probably fused hydrogen in their hearts, producing the necessary power to hold their bodies steady inside a current that looked relentless, rapid and chaotic, turbulent and exceptionally unappealing.

Pamir watched the swimming machines for a moment, deciding that this was rather how he had lived for ages now.

With a shrug and a soft laugh, he continued the long walk up the path, moving past a collection of modest apartments. The library was just a few meters farther along—a tiny portal carved into the smooth black basaltic wall. Its significance was so well hidden that a thousand sightseers passed this point every day, perhaps pausing at the edge of the precipice to look down, but more likely continuing on their walk, searching richer views. Pamir turned his eyes toward the closed doorway, pretending a mild curiosity. Then he stood beside the simple wall that bordered the outer edge of the trail, hands on the chill stone, eyes gazing down at the dreamy shape of the Little-Lot.

The massive cloud was the color of butter and nearly as dense. A trillion trillion microbes thrived inside its aerogel matrix, supporting an ecosystem

that would never touch a solid surface.

The library door swung open—J'Jal wood riding on creaky iron hinges.

Pamir opened a nexus and triggered an old, nearly forgotten captain's channel. Then he turned towards the creaking sound and smiled. Sorrel was emerging from the library, dressed in a novice's blue robe and blinking against the sudden glare. The massive door fell shut again, and quietly, she said to him, "All right."

Pamir held a finger to his closed mouth.

She stepped closer and through a nexus told him, "I did what you told me."

"Show it."

She produced the slender blue book.

"Put it on the ground here."

This was her personal journal—the only volume she was allowed to remove from the library. She set it in front of her sandaled feet, and then asked, "Was I noticed, do you think?"

"I promise. You were seen."

"And do we just wait now?"

He shook his head. "No, no. I'm far too impatient for that kind of game."

The plasma gun was barely awake when he fired it, turning plastic pages and the wood binding into a thin cloud of superheated ash.

Sorrel put her arms around herself, squeezing hard.

"Now we wait," he advised.

Not for the first time, she admitted, “I don't understand. Still. Who do you think is responsible?”

Again, the heavy door swung open.

Without looking, Pamir called out, “Hello, Leon'rd.”

The J'Jal librarian wore the same purplish-black robe and blue ponytail, and his expression hadn't changed in the last few days—a bilious outrage focused on those who would injure his helpless dependents. He stared at the ruins of the book, and then he glared at the two humans, focusing on the male face until a vague recognition tickled.

“Do I know you?” he began.

Pamir was wearing the same face he had worn for the last thirty-two years. A trace of a smile was showing, except around the dark eyes. Quietly, fiercely, he said, “I found my wife, and thanks for the help.”

Leon'rd stared at Sorrel, his face working its way through a tangle of wild emotions. “Your wife?” he sputtered.

Then he tipped his head, saying, “No, she is not.”

“You know that?” Pamir asked.

The J'Jal didn't respond.

“What do you know, Leon'rd?”

For an instant, Leon'rd glanced back across a shoulder—not at the library door but at the nearby apartments. The man was at his limits. He seemed frail and tentative, hands pressing at the front of his robe while the long toes curled under his bare feet.



Everything was apparent. Transparent. Obvious. And into this near-panic, Pamir said, "I know what you did."

"No," the J'Jal replied, without confidence.

"You learned something," Pamir continued. "You are a determined scholar and a talented student of other species, and some years ago, by design or by dumb luck, you unraveled something. Something that was supposed to be a deep, impenetrable secret."

"No."

"A secret about my wife," he said.

Sorrel blinked, asking, "What is it?"

Pamir laughed harshly. "Tell her," he advised.

The blood had drained out of Leon'rd's face.

"No, I agree," Pamir continued. "Let's keep this between you and me, shall we? Because she doesn't have any idea, either—"

"About what?" the woman cried out.

"She is not your wife," the librarian snapped.

"The hell she isn't." He laughed. "Check the public records. Two hours ago, in a civil ceremony overseen by two Hyree monks, we were made woman and male-implement in a legally binding manner—"

"What do you know about me?" Sorrel pressed.

Pamir ignored her. Staring at the J'Jal, he said, "But somebody else knows what we do. Doesn't he? Because you told him. In passing, you said a few words. Perhaps. Unless of course you were the one who devised this simple, brutal plan, and he is simply your accomplice."

“No!” Leon'rd screamed. “I did not dream anything.”

“I might believe you.” Pamir glanced at Sorrel, showing a tiny wink. “When I showed him an image of one of your dead husbands, his reaction wasn't quite right. I saw surprise, but the J'Jal eyes betrayed a little bit of pleasure, too. Or relief, was it? Leon'rd? Were you genuinely thrilled to believe that Sele'ium was dead and out of your proverbial hair?”

The librarian looked pale and cold, arms clasped tight against his shivering body. Again, he glanced at the nearby apartments. His mouth opened and then pulled itself closed, and then Pamir said, “Death.”

“What did you say?” Leon'rd asked.

“There are countless wonderful and inventive ways to fake your own death,” Pamir allowed. “But one of my favorites is to clone your body and cook an empty, soulless brain, and then stuff that brain inside that living body, mimicking a very specific kind of demise.”

“Sele'ium?” said Sorrel.

“What I think.” Pamir was guessing, but none of the leaps were long or unlikely. “I think your previous husband was a shrewd young man. He grew up in a family that had lived among the harum-scarums. That's where his lineage came from, wasn't it, Leon'rd? So it was perfectly natural, even inevitable, that he could entertain thoughts about killing the competition, including his own identity...”

“Tell me what you know,” Sorrel begged.

“Almost nothing,” Pamir assured. “Leon'rd is the one who is carrying all the dark secrets on his back. Ask him.”

The J'Jal covered his face with his hands. “Go away,” he whimpered.

“Was Sele'ium a good friend of yours and you were trying to help? Or did he bribe you for this useful information?” Pamir nodded, adding, “Whatever happened, you pointed him toward Sorrel, and you must have explained, 'She is perhaps the most desirable mate on the Great Ship —

A sizzling blue bolt of plasma struck his face, melting it and obliterating everything beyond.

The headless body wobbled for a moment and then slumped and dropped slowly, settling against the black wall, and Leon'rd leaped backwards, while Sorrel stood over the remains of her newest husband, her expression tight but calm —like the face of a sailor who has already ridden through countless storms.

## XVI

Sele'ium looked like a pedestrian wandering past, his gaze distracted and his manner a little nervous. He seemed embarrassed by the drama that he had happened upon. He looked human. The cold blond hair and purplish-black skin were common on high-UV worlds, while the brown eyes were as ordinary as could be. He wore sandals and trousers and a loose-fitting shirt, and he stared at the destroyed body, seeing precisely what he expected to see. Then he glanced at Sorrel, and with a mixture of warmth and pure menace, he said, "You do not know... you cannot... how much I love you..."

She recoiled in horror.

He started to speak again, to explain himself.

"Get away!" she snapped. "Leave me alone!"

His reaction was to shake his head with his mouth open—a J'Jal refusal—and then he calmly informed her, "I am an exceptionally patient individual."

Which wrung a laugh out of her, bitter and thin.

"Not today, no," he conceded. "And not for a thousand years, perhaps. But I will approach you with a new face and name—every so often, I will come to you—and there will be an hour and a certain heartbeat when you come to understand that we belong to one another—"

The corpse kicked at the empty air.

Sele'ium glanced at what he had done, mildly perturbed by the distraction. Then slowly, he realized

that the corpse was shrinking, as if it were a balloon slowly losing its breath. How odd. He stared at the mysterious phenomenon, not quite able to piece together what should have been obvious. The headless ruin twitched hard and then harder, one shrinking leg flinging high. And then from blackened wound rose a puff of blue smoke, and with it, the stink of burnt rubber and cooked hydraulics.

With his left hand, Sele'ium yanked the plasma gun from inside his shirt—a commercial model meant to be used as a tool, but with its safeties cut away—and he turned in a quick circle, searching for a valid target.

“What is it?” Leon'rd called out.

“Do you see him — ?”

“Who?”

The young J'Jal was more puzzled than worried. He refused to let himself panic, his mind quickly ticking off the possible answers, settling on what would be easiest and best.

In the open air, of course.

“Just leave us,” Leon'rd begged. “I will not stand by any longer!”

Sele'ium threw five little bolts into the basalt wall, punching out holes and making a rain of white-hot magma.

Somewhere below, a voice howled.

Sorrel ran to the wall and looked down, and Sele'ium crept beside her, the gun in both hands, its reactor pumping energies into a tiny chamber,

readying a blast that would obliterate everything in its path.

He started to peer over, and then thought better of it.

One hand released the weapon and the arm wrapped around Sorrel's waist, and when she flung her elbow into his midsection, he bent low. He grunted and cursed softly and then told her, "No."

With his full weight, he drove the woman against the smooth black wall, and together, his face on her left shoulder, they bent and peered over the edge.

Pamir grabbed the plasma gun, yanking hard.

And Sorrel made herself jump.

Those two motions combined to lift her and Sele'ium off the path, over the edge and plummeting down. Pamir's gecko-grip was ripped loose from the basalt, and he was falling with them, one hand on the gun, clinging desperately, while the other arm began to swing, throwing its fist into the killer's belly and ribs. Within moments, they were falling as fast as possible. A damp singing wind blew past them, and the wall was a black smear to one side, and the rest of Fall Away was enormous and distant and almost changeless. The airborne rivers and a thousand flying machines were out of reach and useless. The three of them fell and fell, and sometimes a voice would pass through the roaring wind—a spectator standing on the path, remarking in alarm, "Who were they?" Three bodies, clinging and kicking. Sele'ium punished Pamir with his own free hand, and then he let himself

be pulled closer, and with a mouth that wasn't more than a few days old, he bit down on a wrist, hard, trying to force the stranger to release his hold on the plasma gun.

Pamir cried out and let go.

But as Sele'ium aimed at his face, for his soul, Pamir slammed at the man's forearm and pushed it backwards again, and he put a hard knee into the elbow, and a weapon that didn't have safeties released its stored energies, a thin blinding beam that coalesced inside the dying man's head, his brain turning to light and ash, a supersonic *crack* leaving the others temporarily deafened.

Pamir kicked the corpse away and clung to Sorrel, and she held tight to him, and after another few minutes, as they plunged toward the yellow depths of a living, thriving cloud, he shouted into her better ear, explaining a thing or two.

Again, it was nearly nightfall.

Once again, Pamir sat outside his apartment, listening to the wild songs of the llano vibra. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. Neighbors strolled past or ran past or flew by on gossamer wings. The janusian couple paused long enough to ask where he had been these last days, and Pamir said a few murky words about taking care of family troubles. The harum-scarum family was outside their apartment, gathered around a cooking pit, eating a living passion ox in celebration of another day successfully crossed. A collection of machines stopped to ask about the facsimile that they had built for Pamir, as a favor. Did it serve its intended role? "Oh, sure," he said with a nod. "Everybody was pretty much fooled, at least until the joke was finished."

"Was there laughter?" asked one machine.

"Constant, breathless laughter," Pamir swore. And then he said nothing else about it.

A single figure was approaching. He had been watching her for the last kilometer, and as the machines wandered away, he used three different means to study her gait and face and manner. Then he considered his options, and he decided to remain sitting where he was, his back against the huge ceramic pot and his legs stretched out before him, one bare foot crossed over the other.

She stopped a few steps short, watching him but



saying nothing.

“You're thinking,” Pamir told her. “Throw me into the brig, or throw me off the ship entirely. That's what you're thinking now.”

“But we had an agreement,” Miocene countered. “You were supposed to help somebody, and you have, and you most definitely have earned your payment as well as my thanks.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but I know you. And you're asking yourself, 'Why not get rid of him and be done with it?'”

The First Chair was wearing a passenger's clothes and a face slightly disguised, eyes blue and the matching hair curled into countless tight knots, the cheeks and mouth widened but nothing about the present smile any warmer than any other smile that had ever come from this hard, hard creature.

“You know me,” she muttered.

A moment later, she asked, “Will you tell me who you are?”

“Don't you know yet?”

She shook her head, and with a hint of genuine honesty, she admitted, “Nor do I particularly care, one way or the other.”

Pamir grinned and leaned back a little more.

“I suppose I could place you in custody,” Miocene continued. “But a man with your skills and obvious luck... well, you probably have twelve different ways to escape from our detention centers. And if I sent you falling onto a colony world or an alien world... I

suppose in another thousand years or so, you would find your way back again, like a dog or an ugly habit.”

“Fair points,” he admitted.

Then with a serious, warm voice, he asked, “How is Sorrel?”

“That young woman? As I understand it, she has put her apartment up for sale, and she has already moved away. I'm not sure where — “

“Bullshit,” he interrupted.

Miocene grinned, just for a moment. “Perhaps I do have an idea or two. About who you might be...”

“She knows now.”

The woman's face seemed to narrow, and the eyes grew larger and less secure. “Knows what?” she managed.

“Who her father is,” said Pamir. “Her true father, I mean.”

“One man's conjecture,” the First Chair reminded him. Then with a dismissive shake of the head, she added, “A young woman in a gullible moment might believe you. But she won't find any corroboration, not for the next thousand years... and eventually, she will have to believe what she has always believed...”

“Maybe.”

Miocene shrugged. “It's hardly your concern now. Is it?”

“Perhaps it isn't,” he allowed. Then as the overhead lights flickered for the first time, he sat up straighter. “The thief was your idea, wasn't he? The one who came to steal away the Darmion crystal?”

“And why would I arrange such a thing?”

“What happened afterwards was exactly what you were hoping for,” he said. “An apparently random crime leaves Sorrel trusting me, and the two of us emotionally linked to each other.”

With a narrow grin, Miocene admitted, “But I was wrong in one way.”

“Were you?”

“I assumed that the killer, whoever he was, would likely put an end to you. Exposing himself in the process, of course.”

A second ripple of darkness passed along the avenue. Pamir showed her a stern face, and quietly, he said, “Madam First Chair. You have always been a remarkable and wondrously awful bitch.”

“I didn't know it was Sele'ium,” she admitted.

“And you didn't know why he was killing the husbands, either.” Pamir stood up now, slowly. “Because the old librarian, Leon'rd, pieced together who Sorrel was. He told Sele'ium what he had learned, and he mentioned that Sorrel's father was a woman, and as it happens, that woman is the second most important person onboard the Great Ship.”

“There are some flaws in the public records, yes.” She nodded, adding, “These are problems that I'm taking care of now.”

“Good,” he said.

Miocene narrowed her gaze. “And yes, I am a difficult soul. The bitch queen, and so on. But what I do in my life is enormous and very complicated, and

for a multitude of good reasons, it is best if my daughter remains apart from my life and from me.”

“Maybe so,” he allowed.

“Look at these last few days. Do you need more reasons than this?” she asked. Then she took a step closer, adding, “But you are wrong, in one critical matter. Whoever you are.”

“Wrong where?”

“You assume I wanted you to be killed, and that's wrong. It was a possibility and a risk. But as a good captain, I had to consider the possibility and make contingency plans, just in case.” She took another little step, saying, “No, what all of this has been... in addition to everything else that it seems to have been... is what I have to call an audition.”

“An audition?” Pamir muttered, genuinely puzzled.

“You seem to be a master at disappearing,” Miocene admitted. Then she took one last step, and in a whisper, she said, “There may come a day when I cannot protect my daughter anymore, and she'll need to vanish in some profound and eternal fashion...”

A third ripple of darkness came, followed by the full seamless black of night.

“That's your task, if you wish to take it,” she said, speaking into the darkness. “Whoever you happen to be... are you there, can you hear me... ?”

## XVIII

Sorrel had been walking for weeks, crossing the Indigo Desert one step at a time. She traveled alone with her supplies in a floating pack tied to her waist. It was ten years later, or ten thousand. She had some trouble remembering how much time had passed, which was a good thing. She felt better in most ways, and the old pains had become familiar enough to be ignored. She was even happy, after a fashion. And while she strolled upon the fierce landscape of fire-blasted stone and purple succulents, she would sing, sometimes human songs and occasionally tunes that were much harder to manage and infinitely more beautiful.

One afternoon, she heard notes answering her notes.

Coming over the crest of a sharp ridge, she saw something utterly unexpected—a thick luxurious stand of irrigated llano vibra.

Louder now, the vegetation sang to her.

She started to approach.

In the midst of the foliage, a shape was sitting. A human shape, perhaps. Male, by the looks of it. Sitting with his back to her, his face totally obscured by the shaggy black hair. Yet he seemed rather familiar, for some reason. Familiar in the best ways, and Sorrel stepped faster now, and smiled, and with a parched voice, she tried to sing in time with the alien weed.

## The Children's Crusade

*If one tallies weekly allowances, part-time employment, birthday and holiday gifts, as well as limited trusts, the children of the world wield an annual income approaching one trillion NA dollars. Because parents and an assortment of social service organizations supply most of their basic needs, that income can be considered discretionary. Discretionary income always possesses an impact far beyond its apparent value. And even more important, children are more open than adults when it comes to radical changes in spending habits, and in their view of the greater world.*

*Please note: We have ignored all income generated through gambling, prostitution, the sale of drugs and stolen merchandise, or currency pilfered from a parent's misplaced wallet. We need to conspicuously avoid all questionable sources of revenue ... at least for the present ...*

*—Crusade memo, confidential*

*.....*

The pregnancy couldn't have been easier, and then suddenly, it couldn't have been worse. We were still a couple weeks away from Hanna's due date. By chance, I didn't have an afternoon class, which was why I drove her to the doctor's office. The check-up

was supposed to be entirely routine. Her OB was a little gray-haired woman with an easy smile and an autodoc aide. The doctor's eyes were flying down a list of numbers—the nearly instantaneous test results derived from a drop of blood and a sip of amniotic fluid. It was the autodoc who actually touched Hanna, probing her belly with pressure and sound, an elaborate and beautiful and utterly confusing three-dimensional image blooming in the room's web-window. I've never been sure which professional found the abnormality. Doctors and their aides have always used hidden signals. Even when both of them were human, one would glance at the other in a certain way, giving the warning, and the parents would see none of it, blissfully unaware that their lives were about to collapse.

Some things never change.

It was our doctor who said, “Hanna,” with the mildest of voices. Then showing the barest smile, she asked, “By any chance, did you have a cold last week?”

My wife was in her late forties. A career woman and single for much of her life, she delayed menopause so that we could attempt a child. This girl. Our spare bedroom was already set up as a nursery, and two baby showers had produced a mountain of gifts. That's one of the merits of waiting to procreate to the last possible moment; you have plenty of friends and grateful relatives with money to spend on your unborn child. And as I mentioned, it had been a

wondrously easy pregnancy. Hanna has never been a person who suffers pain well or relishes watching her body deformed beyond all recognition. But save for some minor aches and the persistent heartburn, it had been a golden eight-plus months, and that's probably why Hanna didn't hear anything alarming in that very simple question.

"A cold?" she said. Then she glanced in my direction, shrugging. "Just a little one. There and gone in a couple days. Wasn't it, Wes?"

I looked at our doctor.

I said, "Just a few sniffles."

"Well," our doctor replied. Then she glanced at her aide, the two of them conversing on some private channel.

Finally, almost grudgingly, Hanna grew worried, taking a deep breath and staring down at her enormously swollen belly.

Seeing her concern, I felt a little more at ease.

Someone had to be.

Then our doctor put on a confident face, and a lifetime of experience was brought to bear. "Well," she said again, her voice acquiring a motherly poise. "There is a chance, just a chance, that this bug wasn't a cold virus. And since the baby could be in some danger—"

"Oh, God," Hanna whimpered.

"I think we need to consider a C-section. Just to be very much on the safe side."

"God," my wife moaned.



My temporary sense of wellbeing was obliterated. With a gasp, I asked, “What virus? What chance?”

“A C-section?” Hanna blurted. “God, when?”

The doctor looked only at her. “Now,” she answered. And then with an authoritarian nod of the head, she added, “And we really should do it here.”

“Not at the hospital?” Hanna muttered.

“Time is critical,” the doctor cautioned. “If this happens to be a strain of the Irrawaddy—”

“Oh, shit—”

“I know. It sounds bad. But even if that bug is the culprit, you're so far along in the pregnancy, and you have a girl, and the girls seem to weather this disease better than the boys—”

“What chance?” I blurted. “What are we talking about here?” The autodoc supplied my answer. With a smooth voice and a wet-nurse's software, it told me, “The odds of infection are approximately one in two. And if it was the Irrawaddy virus, the odds of damage to a thirty-nine week fetus are less than three in eleven.”

Our doctor would have preferred to deliver that news. Even in my panic, I noticed the bristling in her body language. But she kept her poise. Without faltering, she set her hand on my wife's hand. I think that was the first time during the visit that she actually touched Hanna. And with a reassuring music, she said,

“We're going to do our best. For you and for your daughter.” About that next thirty minutes, I

remember everything.

There was a purposeful sprint by nurses and autodocs as well as our doctor and her two human partners. The largest examination room was transformed into a surgical suite, every surface sterilized with bursts of ionized radiation and withering desiccants. Hanna was plied with tubes and fed cocktails of medicines and microsensors. Needing something to do, I sent a web-flash to family and friends, carefully downplaying my worsening fears. And then I was wrapped inside a newly made gown and cap and led into the suite, finding Hanna already laid out on a table with her arms spread wide and tied down at the wrists. Some kind of medical crucifixion was in progress. She was sliced open, a tidy hole at her waist rimmed with burnt blood and bright white fat. I could smell the blood. I overheard the doctor warning Hanna about some impending pressure. And all the while, the autodoc worked over her, those clean sleek limbs moving with an astonishing speed and a perfect, seamless grace. Thirty seconds later, my daughter was born.

With a nod to custom, our doctor was allowed to cut the cord.

Then both professionals worked with my daughter, stealing bits of skin and blood for tests, and in another few moments—a few hours, it felt like—they decided that Hanna's cold had been a cold and nothing more.

The autodoc began gluing my wife back together,

and with a congratulatory smile, the doctor handed my baby to me. Veronica, named after her mother's mother. I had just enough time to show the screaming baby to Hanna, and then the ambulance arrived, flying the three of us to a hospital room where we could start coming to terms with the changes in our lives.

Veronica slept hard for hours, swaddled tight in a little blanket infused with helpful bacteria and proven antibodies. Hanna drifted into a shallow sleep, leaving me alone. I was holding my child, and the room's web-window was wandering on its own, searching for items that might interest me, and there was this odd little news item about a fifteen-year-old boy in France—a bright and handsome young man blessed with rich parents and a flair for public speaking. Standing in a mostly empty auditorium, Philippe Rule was announcing the launch of some kind of private space program.

It involved Mars, I halfway heard.

But honestly, I wasn't paying attention. I was too busy holding my happy, healthy daughter, watching her eyes twitch as she dreamed her secret dreams.

.....

*Three times in the last twenty years, the great dream of humanity has been attempted: A manned mission to Mars.*

*The Americans were first, and by some measures, they had the greatest success. Seven astronauts completed the voyage, only to discover that their*

lander was inoperative. Repairs were attempted while in Martian orbit, but with the launch window closing and limited supplies on hand, the mission had to be canceled. An American flag was dropped on Olympus Mons, pledges were made to return soon, and after several months in deep space, and a string of catastrophic mechanical failures, three of the original crew returned home alive.

Four years later, the European Union sent nineteen astronauts inside a pair of elaborate motherships. One of the mission's twin landers exploded during its descent, but the other lander managed to reach the surface. Photographs made from orbit show a squat, bug-like machine tilted at an unnatural angle, its landing gear mired in an unmapped briny seepage. At least one of its crew managed to climb out of the airlock, crossing a hundred meters of the Martian surface. Then she sat on a windswept boulder and opened the faceplate, letting her life boil away. The Chinese mission was the most expensive, and ambitious, and in the end, it was the most frustrating. The nuclear-powered rocket was intended to solve the difficulties of past missions. The voyage to Mars would consume only two weeks. With the added thrust, a wealth of supplies and spare parts could be carried along, and the inevitable problems of muscle and bone atrophy would be avoided. Depending on circumstances, the crew would stay on Mars for as long or as briefly as needed, exploring various sites while building the

*first structures in a permanent settlement.*

*Unfortunately, the ship that held so much promise survived only sixty-five minutes. A flaw in there action chamber triggered a catastrophic series of accidents, culminating in that brief, awful flash that lit up our night sky.*

*Since that tragedy, no nation or group of nations has found the courage, much less the money, to attempt a fourth mission.*

*This is wrong.*

*These countries, and the adults who lead them, are cowards.*

*Mars is out there. Mars is waiting, and we know it. It is a new world, and it is wonderfully empty, and you want to go there. I know that's what you want. You dream about walking in its red dust, and exploring its dry riverbeds, and building castles out of its red rock, and hunting for alien fossils. Or better still, you want to find living Martians hiding in some deep canyon or under the floor of an old sea*

*...*

*I know you.*

*You want to do what your parents couldn't do.*

*Help me! Together, let's do this one great thing! If you give me just a little money ... a week's allowance, or what the tooth fairy leaves under your pillow tonight ... then maybe you will be one of the lucky ones chosen for the next mission!*

*The mission that succeeds!*

*—Philippe Rule, from the announcement*

.....

I love my little sister, but it's hard to imagine us as sharing parents. We don't look alike—she is a wispy blonde while I am stocky and dark. Our interests and temperaments have always been different. And in most ways, we don't think alike. Both of us married for love, but it was a foregone conclusion that Iris'

spouse would have money. Where Hanna and I have a comfortable little home, Iris needs two enormous houses, plus a brigade of AI servants to keep both homes pretty and clean. Instead of having one child late in life, Iris started early, producing five of the rascals. Being a parent is everything to my sister: She hovers over her babies and babies her children as they grow older. Every birthday is a daylong celebration, and every holiday is a golden opportunity to spoil her children while flaunting her husband's wealth. By contrast, I've always forgotten birthdays, and Christmas is an insufferable burden. I don't approve of outrageous gifts. Yet with a distinct and embarrassing selfishness, I wish she would send some of her wealth my way.

She is my only sister, and how can anything be easy between us?

I love my nephews and nieces, but according to Iris, I have never shown the proper interest in them. Tom was her middle-born—an undersized kid with a bright, overly serious manner and a real talent for getting whatever he wanted. When he was eight years old, he decided that he wanted money for Christmas.

Nothing but. He pushed hard for months, pleading and arguing, and begging, and generally making his parents miserable. And even when they surrendered, his demands didn't stop.

"He won't accept even one present," his mother complained to me. "Not from anyone. He says he'll throw any package into the fire."

"Give him fireworks," was my snappy advice.

Iris put her arms around herself, and shuddered.

Then with a more serious tone, I offered, "Cash is good. I always liked getting it when we were kids."

"I didn't," my sister snarled.

In secret, I was admiring the boy's good sense. His mother's gifts tended towards the fancy and the lame, and after a day of fitful abuse, the new toys usually ended up inside some cavernous closet, forgotten.

"This is our deal," Iris continued. "Every relative puts money into a common account, and Tom buys himself something. A real gift."

It was Christmas Eve. Hanna and I had flown into town that afternoon, bringing our baby girl. "So you want me to throw in a few dollars?"

Iris blinked, and a tension revealed itself. She looked thinner than normal, nervous and pretty in equal measures. As if in pain, she winced, and then with a stiff voice, she admitted, "He really likes you."

"Tom does?"

"He adores you, a little bit."

I always thought the kid was high-strung and spoiled. But everybody likes to hear that someone

adores him.

“I told him you'd help. Help him pick a real gift.”

I halfway laughed. “Okay. I don't understand any of this.”

“This is part of our deal. We aren't going to let him just throw his money away on something stupid.”

“His money,” I quoted.

Iris missed my point.

So I told her, “You're not negotiating with the Teamsters here. This is an eight-year-old child. Your child.”

Iris was four years my junior. But there were moments when she looked older than me, her youthful beauty tested by childbirth and the burdens that followed. Her face had a paleness, brown eyes rimmed with blood. I saw the cumulative wear and tear. For an instant, I almost felt sorry for her. But then she looked at Veronica sitting in her bouncy seat, purring and blabbering. And with a cold menace, my sister warned me, “You wait, Wes. Wait. You think you know things, but you'll see how hard kids can be.” I nearly said an honest word or two. But a lingering pity kept me quiet. Iris decided to smile, using her own brand of begging. “I want your help. Would you do this one favor for me?”

Grudgingly, I shrugged my shoulders, and with a whiff of genuine pain, I muttered, “Why not?”

.....

It was a very peculiar Christmas. Four children and an assortment of adults sat at the center of a



cavernous living room, tearing open dozens of brightly colored packages, and in the midst of that relentless greed sat one little boy, nothing in his hand but a small Season's Greetings card and a piece of paper on which nothing was written but an account number and two passwords. Yet the boy was the happiest soul there. Even while his siblings built mountains out of the shredded paper and luminescent ribbons, my nephew clung to his single gift, grinning with the pure and virtuous pleasure of a genuine believer.

Once the gift-grab was finished, he approached me, whispering, "Uncle Wes? Can we go now?"

"Sure," I purred.

The family web-room was at the back of the house. With an unconscious ease, Tom took us to a popular mall. A thousand toyshops lined themselves up before us. But he hesitated. Turning abruptly, he spotted his mother watching from the hallway. "Go away!" he shouted. "You told me I could do this myself!

Leave us alone!"

I will never let a child of mine talk that way to any adult. But honestly, I felt a shrill little pleasure watching my sister slink away, vanishing inside the illusion of a candy factory. Tom turned to me and smiled. With a bottled up joy, he admitted, "I want to go to Mars." I didn't understand, and I said so.

"Mars," he repeated. "If I give enough, and if I'm a good enough astronaut, I can go there." The last few months had been a blur. Between taking care of a

newborn and teaching a full class load, I hadn't found the time to keep up with the affairs of the world.

"Explain this Mars business to me," I said.

"This is my money," Tom replied, clinging to his tiny piece of paper. All at once he was this earnest and pleasantly goofy little kid, buoyed up by his relentless enthusiasm.

"Pretend that I'm stupid," I suggested, feeling a sudden affection for the goof. "Explain everything to me. From the start."

With a passion that I hadn't mustered in decades, the boy told me all about Philippe Rule. He described a future mission to Mars and all the good neat stuff that would come from it. Millions of kids had already given money; he would have to hurry to catch up. And then he told me how the Rule Project would use the money to build rockets and habitats and space suits—all that good neat stuff you had to have if you were going to travel across millions of miles of space.

"Okay," I said. "But why do *you* get to go to Mars?"

"A lot of kids are going," he countered. "Uncle Wes, there's going to be dozens and dozens of us—"

"Out of millions and millions," I cautioned.

"I know that," he claimed.

And I explained, "A million is a lot of people, Tom. If Philippe takes just one kid out of a million, what are your odds going to be?"

Eight-year-olds don't believe in odds. Feelings matter, and this eight-year-old had the sudden feeling that I was going to fight him. "This is my

money,” he repeated, waving that piece of paper under my nose. “I can do what I want with my own money!”

My affections wavered.

Quietly, I asked, “How much money is it?”

He showed the account number to a scanner, and after reading both passwords aloud, an account balance appeared before us.

I was appalled. My few dollars dangled at the end of that king's ransom.

“I know Mars won't be easy,” Tom offered. “But I'm going to work hard. I'm going to be one of those astronauts.”

“What else happens?” I asked.

He didn't understand.

“Your mother's going to ask to see your gift,” I said. “What are you going to show her?” He had a ready answer.

“This,” he said, punching in a new address. An instant later, we were standing on the surface of Mars. Beneath us was the eroded channel of an ancient river, its sediments peppered with tiny shellfish. A towering rocket stood before us, sleek and silvery against the dusty sky. Downstream from us was a crystal-domed city, implausible and lovely, a thousand little homes gathered around a pink-face lake—some tiny portion of the ancient Martian seas reborn inside a digital dream.

“I get to come here,” my nephew gleefully reported. “Because I'm giving them money, I can walk

anywhere on Mars. I'll meet kids like me. While I'm here, I'll train to be an astronaut. And there's classes about the planets, and games, and I'll learn everything about space and science and things like that." The illusionary Mars was astonishingly vivid, and for a middle-aged biology professor, it was a little unsettling.

"She'll think it's okay, Uncle Wes. If you like it, and tell her so ... " Honestly, I was curious. Even a little intrigued. I took a weak breath, halfway expecting to find the air suffocatingly thin and brutally cold. Then with a defeated laugh, I said, "Sure." I put a hand on his bony little shoulder, telling him, "I guess I don't see the harm."

.....

*Web-Mars is perched at the limits of representational technology. Millions of square kilometers have been created, using data from automated probes, telescopic observations, and Martian meteorites. But scientific accuracy cannot be our primary goal. This must be an optimistic, unlikely Mars. An elaborate fossil record waits inside the digital stone, describing a world that has been wet and warm for most of an interesting history. The dangers of hard radiation and peroxide poisoning are being ignored. Engineering problems will always be minimized. For example, terraforming will prove to be an easy trick. Over the next few years, the children will help build a shallow blue sea and a breathable atmosphere. Selected*

*children—gifted in money or inability—will have the opportunity to find buried tombs and other alien artifacts. Did Mars once produce intelligent life? Or did visitors from a distant sun set down beside its muddy rivers, leaving important traces of their passing?*

*Web-Mars will be an entertaining and gentle realm.*

*When children dream of Mars, this is the Mars they will see. This is the world they will believe in. This is what it will take to inspire them—for a day, or a year, or in some cases, for the rest of their lives.*

—Crusade memo, confidential

.....

“Have you seen her?”

“Very?” I asked.

“I thought she was with you,” Hanna explained. Then she sighed in exasperation, and with her hands around her mouth, she called out, “Very! Where are you?”

The playroom was enormous, and it looked empty. But you could never be sure. I walked twice through the armies of toys before my sister finally drifted into view, mentioning, “She’s in the web-room with Tom. Sorry, I forgot to tell you.”

“Thanks,” I growled.

With a hard stare, Hanna delivered my marching orders.

It had been a difficult visit. My mother was dying, and most of my sister’s kids had been perfect brats.

Three days of uninterrupted rain hadn't helped anyone's mood. Plus Hanna and I didn't appreciate watching our five-year-old growing accustomed to this new life of abundance and anarchy. The sole exception was Tom. We only saw him at the dinner table, and he was nothing but polite, pleasantly uninvolved with the rest of his chaotic family.

I found the web-room open but guarded by a visual fog and the image of a handsome, suspicious young man. With a thin French accent, the man asked, "May I help you, sir?"

"My daughter's here."

"Is Veronica your daughter?"

I wasn't in a patient mood. I said, "Drop the screens. I want to see her." Philippe Rule broke into a sudden smile. "She's a very bright girl, sir. You should feel proud—" I stepped through the doppelganger, finding myself climbing stairs onto some kind of platform. No, it was a boat—a simple square aerogel raft drifting in the midst of a smooth ocean. In every direction, I saw the close horizon and a patchwork of thin clouds. The air tasted of saltwater and fish. The gravity had to be Earth's, but when I took my next step, the scene moved, producing a powerful illusion that sixty kilograms of meat and fat had been stolen from me.

It was almost fun.

And then I realized that I couldn't see anyone else. Hands on hips, I screamed, "Very! Come here. Very! Where are you?"

The fictional water splashed, and my daughter burst to the surface. Giggling, she grabbed at the raft and crawled up. She was wearing both a skin-tight stimsuit as well as one of her girl-cousin's old swimsuits, and she looked thoroughly soaked. But when I touched her, she felt dry and cool. For no good reason, I said, "You can't swim without an adult."

"Daddy," she snapped. "This isn't water. So I wasn't." Ignoring her seamless logic, I asked, "What have you been doing?"

"Watching."

"Watching what?"

"The fish!" Very was a small five-year-old with an infectious laugh and easy smile. Tugging on my arm, she told me, "You should see them, Daddy! They're pretty, and funny, and neat-strange!" Curiosity licked at me.

But then Tom broke the surface, arms and legs pretending to swim as he came closer to the illusionary boat. I understood most of the trickery. But I barely saw the stimsuits, and the smart-wires were almost invisible. I had no idea how the AIs could so perfectly anticipate his every flail and kick, moving his thirteen-year-old body over to the ladder.

"Here it comes!" he cried out.

What was coming?

With a coarseness born from youth and excitement, he screamed, "Damn, it's a monster ... shit ... !" A scaly head broke the surface. I saw jaws longer than I was tall, and great fishy eyes, and then a

ropy body twisted, propelling the apparition past the raft, the long head dipping for an instant, bringing up a rainbow-colored fish with three eyes and a peculiar ventral gill.

For an instant, I was a biologist studying these marvels.

But then fatherhood reclaimed me. I kneeled and looked at my daughter, touching her again on that wet-looking, perfectly dry shoulder. “You know,” I growled. “When you go somewhere, you have to tell us first.”

“I’m still in the house, Daddy.”

Here was the heart of it. To her old father, web-Mars was a separate place—a peculiar and potentially dangerous realm that happened to be a whole lot closer than the real Mars. Ignoring my daughter’s argument, I looked at her cousin. “Don’t,” I warned Tom. “Very’s mother and I don’t want her involved with this project. So I’m telling you: Don’t bring her here again.”

“Why not?” Thirteen and full of opinions, Tom grinned in an aggravating way. “All these things,” he said.

“These fish and plesiosaur and everything ... they all come from fossil DNA—”

“No,” I interrupted.

But he couldn’t hear me. Dancing to the edge of the raft, the boy shook his dry leg, scattering slow drops.

“I know this place, Uncle Wes. Better than anyone.



You'd like it here. There's an old starship on the beach over there, and it's full of neat games and puzzles ... I could take you, as my guest ... if you want

“  
...”

With a quiet fury, I told my nephew, “Mars is nothing like this.” He stared at me. He seemed appalled, and then in the next instant, he was laughing at me.

“On its warmest day,” I explained, “Mars was a very cold place. The old seas were covered with ice. Life was scarce, and it was single-celled, and there's absolutely no reason to think we could find starships there.”

He laughed again, dismissing me with a sturdy shake of his head. “How do you know, Uncle Wes? Have you ever gone to Mars?”

I took my daughter by the hand.

“I'll be going there,” he reported, nothing about his voice or manner betraying the slightest doubt.

“Good for you,” I told him.

Then I hauled Very and myself out of the room.

Philippe Rule waved good-bye to both of us. “It was nice meeting you, Veronica,” he called out. “And I hope to see you again.”

.....

*Truthfully, it never occurred to me that so many people would take offense with my work, and myself ... these malicious ideas that my intentions are impure, or selfish ... that all I want is to steal money from their children, or enslave them in some vague*

*fashion ...*

*But of course, I was a boy when this great adventure began.*

*Boys don't know much about anything, except for their own hearts ...*

—Philippe Rule, interview

.....

“This is the first year,” I mentioned.

“The first for what?” Hanna asked.

“I'm actually noticing them,” I told her. “At school. In my classes.”

“Okay, I'll bite. Who are you talking about?”

“Rule's kids.” I blanked my reader and set it on the nightstand. “This year's freshmen had to be twelve, maybe thirteen when Rule got rolling. Older kids were too skeptical, or too something, to buy into this business.”

Hanna let her reader fall to her lap, saying nothing.

“If they were fourteen and older ... I guess there were too many hormones raging inside them, keeping them safe ... “

“Safe,” she echoed.

That wasn't the best word, but I was in no mood to correct myself. “Anyway, I've got at least seven believers sitting in my intro class.”

“How do you know? Do they wear uniforms?” She gave a laugh. “I know. Inverted fishbowls set over their heads.”

I laughed, but without much heart.

“No, they just sit together,” I explained. “Down in front, and from day one. Very chummy. I asked if they came from the same high school. But they aren't even from the same state. They met on web-Mars.”

“Understandable,” said Hanna.

Which irritated me. For a lot of vague and silly reasons, I growled, “Sure, it's understandable. We all know people that we've never seen in person.”

“Seven,” she remarked, “is not a lot of students.” I said nothing.

“How many are in that class?”

“Two hundred and six.”

“A little more than three percent,” she said.

And I gave her a hard smile, reminding her, “I'm also teaching that advanced placement class.” She saw my trap closing.

“Forty students,” I said. “The best of the best.”

“And how many believers?” Hanna asked.

“Half,” I replied.

“Twenty?”

“Nearly.” I shook my head, admitting, “They're wonderful students. In most ways, I can't complain.”

“It sounds like complaining to me.”

“I'm a cranky middle-aged man. Grumbling is my business.”

Hanna just shook her head.

“No, these kids have a good working knowledge about genetics and evolution, and metabolisms, and how ecological systems operate.”

“They sound perfectly horrible.”

I let her have her fun.

“Okay,” she finally said. “Where’s the tragedy in having so many smart, wonderful students?”

“I wish I knew,” I muttered.

“You know what bothers you,” Hanna growled. Then she picked up her reader again, telling me, “You didn’t teach these children any of those great lessons. Which means their allegiances lie elsewhere, and that’s what has you pissed.”

I gave a snort and a half-laugh.

“God,” I said. “We can hope that’s all!”

.....

*Whenever we are sued, and each time some nation's anti-cult laws are unleashed ... my organization and I are forced to defend ourselves, in court as well as the public eye. Time and again, we have opened our books and our facilities. Outside auditors have scoured every aspect of the Project, and there has never been any hint that money has been misplaced or misused. Nobody is growing rich on the backs of children. Believe me. And as for these allegations that I'm enslaving impressionable young minds ... well, we can debate the meanings of "enslave" until we are breathless. Or I can gracefully accept responsibility for having a role, maybe an important role, in the development of millions of young and promising lives ...*

—Philippe Rule, interview

.....

“Of course it’s mostly bullshit,” my student

remarked. "I mean, when I was a kid, the whole thing seemed awfully compelling. I believed everything. Everything. But if you're even halfway smart, you eventually realize it's just a fictional world, and a learning tool, and beautiful in its own right. That's what the web-Mars is, you know. Beautiful. In a lot of ways, it's a genuine work of art." We were sitting inside my tiny office—a professor and his best student trading profundities and gossip. It's the old college tradition, honorable and occasionally useful.

"I can agree about the bullshit," I mentioned. "But really, I don't have too many strong feelings about Rule's project. As long as it obeys the law and leaves my family alone—"

"You've got a nephew, don't you? A kid named Tom?"

I tried not to appear surprised.

"Yeah, I ran into him this summer. Working at the Omega Site." Professors don't like to confess to gaps in their encyclopedic minds. But my confusion must have shown.

"The Omega Site," the young man repeated, relishing his advantage. "It's the biggest artifact on web-Mars. A mountain-sized starship. Some billion years old, nearly." Then he seemed to hear his own words, and with a dismissive laugh, he added, "I know. The whole bastard's just eight years old, and it's nothing but someone's tangle of digital codes and puzzles and shit."

"So what do you do there?" I inquired.

The student was tall and leggy—a gifted junior on track to graduate a full year early. With a wide grin, he admitted, “We gather there. We talk. And of course, there’s teams that you can work on, trying to piece together the mystery of that artifact.”

Again, he was shifting back into the language of a believing child.

“And you met my nephew?” I asked.

“Yeah, he’s what? Sixteen?” With a long-limbed shrug, he admitted, “The software put me on his team. By chance, maybe. But more likely, the AIs noticed I was at this school, and they assumed Tom and I would have common ground. Because of you, I mean.”

“I don’t see my nephew much,” I confessed.

I never had, I could have said.

“How is Tom?” I inquired.

“Doing great,” he sang out. “Yeah, in fact, he was my team leader.” The young man giggled, pleased to report, “The kid’s way, way up the chain of command. From what I hear, he’s barely a couple, three rungs away from Philippe’s inner circle.”

“He’s been at this for years—”

“And he’s generous,” my student interrupted. “His folks must have some impressive money. Judging by his gifts.”

I didn’t make a sound.

“Anyway,” my student continued. “He warned me. Tom did. He said you aren’t all that in love with our work.”

“I just think it's a waste, in a lot of ways.”

The young face absorbed the news without blinking. In fact, he seemed pleased to hear my harsh assessment.

“Billions of dollars have been poured into Rule's scheme,” I continued. “And what do you have to show for it?”

“The launch pad in the Pacific,” he offered. “Factories and test facilities in twenty countries. Millions of devoted supporters, and millions more who give a few dollars to be able to play on web-Mars.”

“What exactly have you launched from your Pacific base?”

“A shitload of automated probes—”

“Half of which didn't even make it to Mars.” I shook my head, reminding him, “Three landers lost contact with the Earth. And that was just this year.”

“Space is a tough neighborhood,” he admitted. “But we're learning. We've had some successful launches with our heavy boosters. And our orbiting habitat has kept its monkeys alive for nearly three years.”

“All those billions spent—” I began.

“Eight years ago, we had nothing,” he countered, beginning to bristle. “We've gotten less than no help from every government. Every piece of machinery has to be built from scratch, by us. And since nobody lets us have nuclear rockets—”

“Do you blame us?”

“Not that much. No.” He laughed with a forced amiability. “It's just that we're forced to make some fat concessions. Chemical fuels only, and payload limits, and once we get into space, there's all sorts of orbital restrictions. We're going to have to be clever to get around your stumbling blocks.”

“I haven't put anything in your way.”

He looked at me for a long moment, and then remembered to smile. “You know what I mean.”

“Mars is going to throw up its own barriers,” I reminded him. My student seemed to recall where his grades came from. “I can appreciate your perspective,” he said. “I really do. And I'm not like your nephew. Not much. The Project is just one possible route to Mars. Someday, with us or without us, someone is going to walk on its surface and return home again.” I hesitated, and then asked, “What does Tom do exactly? As a team leader, I mean.”

“He oversees the puzzle solvers.”

“What's the puzzle?”

“I can't give you details,” he told me with a sharp, virtuous smile.

“Just the basics, then.”

“We're trying to learn everything we can about the pilots and the crew of that ancient starship.”

“You're talking about fictional aliens,” I reminded him.

Shrugging his shoulders, my student said, “Point taken.” But he was still flashing the incandescent smile of a true believer.



.....

*Every reporter asks about our timetable. How soon, and how many? Well, let me just say this: I don't know exactly when we will leave for Mars, but it will not be tomorrow. And I don't know how many will be going on this great mission. But everyone will be invited, and that's all that I can say about that ...*

—Philippe Rule, interview

.....

“You look beautiful,” I offered.

Very gave me a disapproving frown. Then she turned to her mother, asking, “How do I look? Really.”

“Don't you believe your father?” Hanna inquired.

“He always says, 'Beautiful.'”

“You think I'm dishonest?” I teased.

“Mom? Just tell me!”

“We have arrived,” our car announced with a soft little voice. The park lay far below the surrounding land. This had once been the basement of some great old building, but my sister and her husband had bought the ground for the simple purpose of building a sunken garden—a wealth of color and fishponds meant to bring good fortune to those about to be married within its borders. My sister was standing in the parking lot. She saw us roll up and greeted us with one arm waving, demanding our immediate attention. My oldest niece stood before her, dressed in a shimmering, almost metallic white gown. The girl looked tired and happy, and nervous enough to puke,

and spoiled in that deeply intoxicating way that only brides can be spoiled.

“You look fine,” Hanna finally told our daughter. “I think you're even lovely.” With a musical chirp, our daughter said, “I know,” and laughed, leaping from the car. “Thanks, Mom.” Veronica was twelve and absolutely in love with life. She sprinted past her distracted aunt and down a set of limestone stairs—a pretty tomboy forced to wear a pretty girl's frilly dress—and watching her, I felt the old aches and worries, and a sturdy clean pride that took too much credit for my daughter's happiness.

Very was going to trip and fall down those stairs.

I knew it. With every careless stride, that horrific image presented itself to me. But somehow she survived to the bottom, bolting across the grassy glade toward a pair of cousins, and my consuming fear simply changed its face now. I breathed, and breathed, and with an old man's gait, I started after her.

“You're late,” my sister observed, not quite looking at me. And before I could reply, Iris barked, “Flatten, dress. Get the crease out, under my hand. Here!” The dress complied.

My little sister rose to her feet, satisfied for this very brief moment. She looked exhausted but focused. “I can't find Tom,” she began. “He's going to be an usher. He's supposed to fly in this morning. From Paris, I think. But I haven't seen him. Would you go look for him, Wes?” I must have hesitated.

“Or you can baby-sit Dad,” she offered. Then with a malicious grin, she added, “He’s been smoking his favorite weed again. By the way.”

“I’ll find Tom,” I replied.

“Hurry,” she called. And then with a distinctly more patient tone, she began talking to the wedding dress again.

The garden was filled with newborn flowers—enormous and colorful and oftentimes impossible species born from biology and electrochemical metabolisms. In nature, nothing could so brilliant, so gloriously wasteful. But this foliage was tied into the city’s power grid, feeding on raw electricity. Sunshine was little more than a convenient museum light helping each plant display its majesty and wild colors. Perfumes and more subtle pheromones gave the air a rich wondrous stink. On this business of modern horticulture, I have always been of ten minds. Nine minds are against it, but there is always this other voice, whispering,

“Stop now, and look. Isn’t it incredible?”

Rows of white chairs and a simple white archway had been erected on the biggest patch of an emerald-green moss. A few guests had already arrived, standing at the edges, impatiently waiting for someone to tell them where to sit.

Under my breath, I whispered, “Tom.”

Louder, but not loud, I called out, “Tom.”

His brothers stood beside a rectangular fishpond, girls on their arms. Everyone looked happy and

distracted. Then I came up behind them, and the younger brother told me, “Very just flew through here. Then she flew off. I don't know where.”

“I'm not looking for her,” I confessed. “Where's Tom?”

“I don't know,” he replied.

His girlfriend brightened. “I really want to meet him,” she sang out.

“You will,” he muttered.

Then she had to ask, probably for the umpteenth time, “Does Tom really know Philippe Rule?”

“Oh, yeah,” he replied, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, those two are always hanging out together. Rule's got Tom sitting inside his wallet.”

The brothers enjoyed a harsh laugh at Tom's expense.

The girl smiled nervously, trying to understand the meaning.

I grinned and moved on. Wasted stares at strangers taught me a lesson. I hadn't seen my nephew since last Christmas, and then only when the families met in our respective web-rooms. He was a twenty-year-old man now. He could have grown a beard, or he could have put his hair to sleep. I wasn't entirely sure what face I was looking for. And with that revelation, I temporarily quit my search, standing in the shadow of an odd little tree—a synthetic species that might not exist anywhere else in the universe. My distractions ended with the sturdy thump of a car door.

There was a second set of stairs rising out of the sunken garden. Maybe there was a second parking lot, and maybe Tom had just arrived. Pushed by a tattered sense of duty, I climbed. But halfway up, an ornate peacock-like bird strode out of the flowerbed, stubby wings rising as its tail spread wide. A marveling wash of colors startled me. How did it change its colors so quickly? The scientist in me needed to solve that little puzzle, and that delayed me for another few moments. Mirrors. Its tail feathers were covered with flexible organic mirrors, and with an expert's grace, it moved each feather, borrowing the glories from the surrounding flowers.

"Neat," I said.

Then I shooed the bird aside, finishing my climb.

Three vehicles were parked in the tiny lot. The first car was obviously empty. The second car had darkened windows, and with a boldness that surprised me, I tapped on the glass. There was motion inside, and then the window dropped with a slick hum. A young woman held her shirt against her chest, while the man beside her, using a cutting voice, said to me, "Move along, old man." I took his advice.

The last vehicle was a blister-van. It didn't look like anything my nephew would drive. But I walked up and called out, "Tom?"

"There is no Tom here," the van answered.

"Do you know him?" I inquired, giving his full name.

With mysterious tone, the van said, "Yes, I do. But

I can't help you find him.” Back to the garden, I decided.

Walking past the first car, a notion took hold of me. It was a little ladybug car, and rusty red in color, and its windows were dialed to clear, showing an interior that looked clean and new. Showroom cars don't look any better, I realized. Standing in front of it, I said, “Tom. Your mom's hunting you, and guess what. She's getting pissed.”

Very slightly, the car shivered.

Then the left front window dropped, and my nephew stuck his head out. “Uncle Wes!” he cried out.

“How are you?”

I came around. “Fine, Tom.”

The car was a rolling web-room. With a glance, I knew where he was. The view inside stretched for miles. Some kind of robot, elaborate and contrived, stood guard beside a glittering archway. I had no idea what anything meant, but there was a blue sky wrapped around a shrunken sun. I gave web-Mars a quick look. And then Very leaned forward, emerging from the back end of the car, grinning broadly as she said, “Hi, Dad!”

I said, “Shit.”

With about the worst possible tone, I said, “Get out.”

If anything, Tom seemed pleased. He opened his door and climbed out, and my daughter followed. He smiled, and she smiled, and the combination of those

two faces made me crazy. Again, with feeling, I said, “Shit.”

Veronica laughed at my anger.

“You know our rules,” I began. “Until you're grown and living on your own, you have to ask for our permission before you go anywhere!”

For a moment, she said nothing.

Then her smile brightened, while her slate-blue eyes grew a little sorry. With an amazing indifference, she confessed, “I did ask you.”

“When?”

“Years and years ago,” she told me. “‘Can I go to Mars with Tom?’ I asked. You and Mom, both.”

“And what did we say?”

“No. Never.”

I discovered that my voice had been stolen away.

“But then I went anyway,” my daughter told me, absolutely unconcerned by this breach of the law. Standing high on her tiptoes, she kissed my nose, and once again, she said, “I asked. Didn't I? And you said, ‘Never.’ Which was silly. So I decided to do what I wanted anyway.” A long moment passed, and then I said, “Shit,” once again. But nobody was with me. Except for the web-car, which shut its door and closed its window, offering me not even one polite little word.

.....

*Under the watchful gaze of various government agencies and the press, we designed and constructed seven scientific probes—fossil-hunters and water-*

hunters and deep-boring machines. And then with the simplest sleight of hand, those probes were removed from their rockets and dissolved in liquid steel baths. Machine assemblages built in secret replaced each probe. Each machine was designed entirely by mathematical models. Untested technologies were married to forty flavors of theory. The rockets were launched over a period of three years. One of the boosters failed, but that left six redundant packages streaking towards Mars. Each one of those payloads failed to enter Martian orbit, a different malfunction blamed for each loss. Misleading telemetry data helped keep any suspicious minds confused. The only true question was whether these machines, once reaching their target, would work properly in the alien environment. But then again, these were the second-finest machines ever created by living minds.

—Crusade memo, confidential

.....

I thought I was the first one up that morning. My watch roused me with an adrenaline cocktail, and I sat up and rubbed at my eyes for a long moment. It was a little before six o'clock. My advanced placement class started early, at seven-thirty, and what with breakfast and my morning rituals, I didn't have time to spare.

Shuffling towards the bathroom, I noticed the light beneath my daughter's door. While the toilet was flushing, I knocked on her door—lightly, fondly—and



she instantly said, “Come on in, Dad,” as if I was expected.

Very was sitting at her grandmother's old roll top desk. She was dressed for school, which was exceptionally strange at that hour, and she was reading, which was perfectly ordinary. I found myself staring at that composed and handsome young woman. She had her mother's features and my dark hair, plus a watchful, perpetually amused expression that was entirely her own. One of her little hands hovered above the reader, prepared to blank it. But then she decided to leave it on. The hand dropped into her lap, and she smiled at me, and watched me, and I thought she was waiting for me to say, “Happy birthday.”

So I said, “Happy birthday, darling.”

With a genuine astonishment, I said, “Eighteen years old.” How could she have gotten to this moment so quickly? It was a marvel and a tragedy, and I felt like crying.

“Thank you, Dad.”

Her web-wall was dialed to Mars—the real Mars, bleak and dry and brutally cold. The image was a live feed from a Rule-owned weather station. It was a favorite of hers. Jagged rocks and alluvial sands filled a wide, dead riverbed. I found myself staring at the scene, and with a distracted voice, I asked, “Have you decided yet?”

She knew what I meant.

Quietly, she said, “I have. Yes.”

I smiled and looked at her. "Which college wins?"

Her smile turned a little sorry, a little sad. But then with a positive voice, she told me, "Later. I'll talk to you and Mom together. Later."

"Fair enough," I replied.

A dozen schools were chasing her. All were better schools than the college where I taught, but part of me—a selfish, paternal heart—hoped that Veronica would live at home for another four years, and before I retired, she would sit in a class or two of mine.

"You're up awfully early," I observed.

"I couldn't sleep."

Nothing made me suspicious. I nodded and glanced at the reader on her desk, seeing nothing. The reader was blank to begin with, or some other hand had wiped it clean.

"Dad," she said.

I looked at her mother's eyes.

"You're going to be late for school, Dad."

"Happy birthday," I said again.

"Thanks," she told me. And then with her hand, with a motion almost too quick to be seen, she rubbed at her bright, watery eyes.

.....

Our little house sits a few blocks from campus. It makes for a pleasant walk, particularly on warm mornings. Ten minutes from home to office, usually. Which is more than enough time for the world to change.

Students were waiting at my office door.

I started to say, “Good morning.” But something in their communal expression made me uneasy. With an uneven voice, I asked, “What's wrong?”

“Something's going on,” a young woman warned me.

“It's huge,” a boy purred. “Just huge.”

“What is?” I sputtered

“The ship,” he told me, amazement swirled with a dose of fear. “They spotted it last week, coming in from somewhere ... I don't know where ... and the President just made the announcement—”

“What ship?” I asked.

Then a third student blurted, “It's a goddamn alien ship. It's huge! And guess where it's heading ... !” We headed for the classroom. I dialed the web-wall to a news-feed, and we found ourselves staring at the image of a tiny, tiny bullet. The ship was gray and smooth-faced and spinning slowly as it plunged through space, moving past the orbit of the moon. A tiny bullet in the depths of space, but according to radar, it was nearly ten miles long and half again as broad.

According to the purring voice of a commentator, the ship was silent, unresponsive to every hail from the Earth.

“Aliens,” a dozen voices muttered behind me.

I turned and looked at my class.

“No,” I whispered.

“Look who's missing,” I urged them.

Half of my students were somewhere else.

“Where's the Rulers?” they muttered—the current shorthand for the Martian believers. “What do you think it means?”

I didn't answer the question.

On old legs, I was already running, fighting to get home again.

.....

My sister finally answered our calls. Iris appeared sitting on one of several sofas in the middle of her enormous living room. With a glance, I knew she had been crying. Her face was stern and cold, and the red eyes had a fire. Her voice failed when she tried to speak. Then she swallowed and straightened her back, and she looked past me, asking, “What?” with a disgusted tone. Tom was missing, I assumed.

I didn't mention her son. Instead, I confessed, “We're looking for Veronica. Hanna and I are. Would you know?—”

“God, no.” My sister flinched, and shook. She brought her hands up to her face and held them against her mouth, wrapping fingers together before dropping them into her lap. “Well,” she muttered, “this makes it even worse.”

Hanna was sitting beside me. She grabbed my knee, and squeezed.

“Of all the stupid things,” Iris muttered. “The injustice of it all ... !” She shook her head, dropping her eyes. “You put your hopes into something. Something important. Something great. All that time invested. The energy. All the money that you've just

pissed away ... “

Hanna interrupted. “Is there any way that you can reach Tom? Very left here with some other kids, and she didn't show up at school—”

“I heard you before,” my sister growled.

She looked up, her fierce eyes fixed squarely on me. “He's only invested his entire life trying to reach this day. Tens of thousands of dollars. Our money, and his. And shit, they didn't even select my own son—!” I felt myself falling.

“Did you know? You didn't, did you? Not even Philippe was picked! He's going to watch this mission with the rest of us!”

“What ... ?” I sputtered.

“Which is even worse,” she said, laughing harshly. “It's a thousand times worse than Tom's situation. I mean, it always looked like his project, his baby, and it never was ... “ Hanna and I held each other, falling together now.

“You want to talk to Tom?” my sister asked. “He's upstairs somewhere. Crying. I've got the house watching him, in case. In case.” Then she shook her head, crying for herself. “Those bastards,” she wailed. “Those damned machine bastards ... !”

.....

*If humans haven't the will to journey to Mars, then it remains for someone else to do the impossible and glorious, for themselves ...!*

—from the Crusade's mission statement

.....

The mountain was no mountain, and its red flanks weren't made of anything as simple as stone. A billion years of thin winds and the occasional rain had cut into the ship's sides, revealing a ceramic exoskeleton. Tiny gray machines poked out here and there. A simple diamond arch served as a doorway. Tom stood before the arch, waiting for us. With a soft, almost matter-of-fact voice, he explained, "Most of the ship is underground. When it landed, mass and momentum carried it into the crust. Then the alluvial soils were washed in around its sides." He paused for a moment, and then added, "That's what the puzzle told us. Of course, it's all just a made-up story. Someone's little game." Tom looked tired. Otherwise, he seemed very much the same: A boyish man in his middle twenties, with an astronaut's clipped hair and a small, exceptionally fit body.

Hanna told him, "Thank you."

He nodded, glancing into the darkness inside the Omega ship.

"I know this is difficult," she added. "You've got to be disappointed, and we can only imagine—"

"I don't know if I can take you inside," he interrupted. "I mean, I'm not all that sure about my clearance status anymore."

"But Very's in there somewhere," I said. "You're sure of that much, right?" He nodded again, and bit his lip, and breathed. Then with a fearful slowness, he stepped through the archway, a faint pleasure showing when he reached the other side.

We followed after him, the tunnel brightening around us. I noticed very little. Somewhere during the long illusion of a walk, the ship's ceramic skeleton became something else. The walls were composed of densely packed horizontal beds, paper-thin and varying in color but not in texture. Tom touched the walls with an habitual fondness, and then quietly, angrily, he said, "This is them."

"Who?" Hanna asked.

"We didn't realize," he offered. Then he glanced back at us, eyes forlorn and lost. "For years, every team missed the obvious. What this ship was saying to us. What this puzzle really meant." I didn't care about meanings; I wanted to see my daughter.

"The dead aliens," he said. "There were thousands of bones. Thousands of old skulls. This ship is big enough to house a small city. But when we sat down and actually worked out the numbers ... well, most of the ship is this. These bands of doped ceramics and such. It took us forever to see what was simple. But then of course, they knew it would surprise us. They know us. Better than we know ourselves, I bet."

I touched the wall, my stimskin feeding me a cool, slick sensation.

" 'Everyone will be invited,' " Tom quoted. "That's what Philippe Rule promised. And I think the poor shit actually believed those words."

The tunnel twisted to the left and widened.

"The poor shit had this crazy idea about flying to Mars, and he had rich, indulgent parents." Tom

glanced back at us, admitting, “That sounds a little too familiar.” Then he laughed for a moment, with a gentle bitterness. “Philippe told his parents about his dream for Mars, and they rented an auditorium and hired media help. AI Web-managers, mostly. What nobody knew then was that the AIs were already shopping for someone like Philippe. A figurehead. A face. Some innocent to help raise the money and make their work look legal.”

I quickened my pace, moving up beside Tom. Ahead of us, with a smear of bright yellowish light, the tunnel came to an abrupt end.

“These aliens,” he muttered. “The Omegas. We studied them in teams. Each team was supposed to work independently. There was this race going on. Each team wanted to be first to figure out this alien society. We studied their bones and homes and how they lived, and we explored the starship, and for years, we tried to understand something very basic: How did the Omegas pilot this ship? There were no obvious controls. No physical access to the engines or the reactors. Every team proposed a telepathic answer, and the AI game-shepherds would tell us flat-out, ‘No.’ So we went back to the evidence again, and again. We were kids working at something beyond us. And then, we weren’t kids anymore. We were adults, and experienced, and one at a time, each team figured it out for itself.” Tom hesitated.

“Cargo,” he said, followed by a long painful sigh.

“There was this quiet guy on my team,” he said.



“He hadn't said five sentences to me in all those years. Then last year, while I was presiding over one of our endless bull sessions, he made a bizarre suggestion. The Omegas didn't have any power over the ship, he said, because they didn't have any real function. The ship was nothing more, or less, than a great hive filled with artificial intelligences. And the ship's organic entities were nothing but a kind of fancy cargo. Something carried for reasons of commerce, or at the very best, out of respect for their long-ago creators.”

Hanna joined us, laying a sympathetic hand on her nephew's shoulder.

“Bullshit,' I said.” Now Tom slowed his gait. “I told him he was crazy, and it was a stupid, ugly idea. But the guy wanted to offer his answer for judging. He called for a vote from the team, and after a lot of speeches, he won his vote. Barely. Everybody who voted against the proposal is going to remain on the Earth. Probably for the rest of their lives. But if you voted for that bullshit idea, you gave yourself almost a two percent chance of being invited. By our masters.”

Tom came to a halt, leaning against the delicately bedded wall, panting as if he was exhausted.

“What about Veronica?” I asked.

He didn't seem to hear my question.

With a flickering pride, Hanna pointed out, “Very has always had a fair mind. She probably just wanted to give the idea a chance—”

“No,” Tom interrupted. And he laughed at us. He shook his head and laughed with a sudden force, explaining, “She's why the vote went the way it did. Your daughter liked the idea ... it made so much sense to her ... which is probably why she isn't going to be with us much longer ... !”

.....

“I'll come home for a visit,” Very promised. “Before we launch, and probably more than once. I just thought it would be best to meet with the others, and to get my head ready for what's coming.”

“How soon would you leave?” Hanna blurted.

“A few months from now. At most, a full year.” The image of our daughter wore a bright white spacesuit, her helmet dangling back on a hinge. Behind her, stretching on for what seemed like miles, were people similarly equipped, all listening to robots talking in professorial voices. “The ship's interior isn't quite finished,” she explained. “The microchines and robots need another few weeks to make it perfect. And of course, some governments are going to put up legal barricades, which the AI lawyers have to defeat. And even with the best com-lasers, it's going to take time to download the crew.” With a respectful nod, she said, “Most of the world's AIs are planning to send copies of themselves.”

“Everyone will be invited,” Philippe had promised. Hanna gave a low, sorrowful moan.

“After Mars?” I asked, with a ragged hope.

Very could have lied. She must have considered

kindness, telling us, "I'll come right back again." But the girl had always been honest, and she knew it would be best if she were the one to break the difficult news. "This isn't going to be a quick trip to Mars," she cautioned. "After a year or two of exploring, they plan to leave. They'll drop past Venus and then swing out towards Jupiter. They need to use its gravity well to help us accelerate. They've decided to see the worlds circling the Centauri suns." I felt sick. Cold, and sick, and furious.

"You'll die out there," I muttered.

Hanna flinched.

"It's going to take you hundreds of years—" I began.

"More than ten thousand years," she said, correcting me. "It's going to be a very long voyage, and you're right. You are. After an adventurous life, I'll die of old age, and we'll barely have reached the comets." I didn't know what to say.

"But Father," she purred. "Think of your descendants. Imagine them walking on all those strange, wonderful worlds."

"They'll be cargo," I snapped.

Very absorbed the insult without blinking. She almost laughed, telling us, "Our benefactors prefer to think of us as emblems. As treasures. To them, we're holy objects tying them to their first lucid thoughts." With an easy shrillness, I said, "The Children's Crusade." Very closed her eyes, and nodded.

"That's what the AIs dubbed this secret project.

And that's just part of the mud that's coming out now.”

“I know—”

“And you know what that name's taken from? In the Middle Ages, the children of Europe were lured away in an awful crusade ... cynically used by the powers of the day ... dying for no reason, or sold into slavery—”

“But Dad,” Very whispered.

Then she stepped close to me. Her image lifted on its toes, touching my image on the nose. She always kissed me that way. I felt it, the illusionary touch of her dry lips. “Daddy,” she purred. “What were those children promised? For going on their crusade, what was going to be their reward?” Hanna answered, whispering, “Salvation.”

“There is no salvation!” I growled. “Not in any bullshit crusade!” My daughter laughed at me, and stepped back. “But what if there was?” she asked. “What if a heaven was possible, and it was real, and what if that heaven was offered to us? Really, where's the sadness here? That all that talk of salvation was a lie, or that you have spent your entire life not taking that staggering, wonderful risk ...?”

# Coelacanth

## THE SPEAKER

*He stalks the wide stage, a brilliant beam of hot blue light fixed squarely upon him. "We are great! We are glorious!" the man calls out. His voice is pleasantly, effortlessly loud. With a face handsome to the brink of lovely and a collage of smooth, passionate mannerisms, he performs for an audience that sits in the surrounding darkness. Flinging long arms overhead, hands reaching for the distant light, his booming voice proclaims, "We have never been as numerous as we are today. We have never been this happy. And we have never known the prosperity that is ours at this golden moment. This golden now!" Athletic legs carry him across the stage, bare feet slapping against planks of waxed maple. "Our species is thriving," he can declare with a seamless ease. "By every conceivable measure, we are a magnificent, irresistible tide sweeping across the universe!"*

*Transfixed by the blue beam, his naked body is shamelessly young, rippling with hard muscles over hard bone. A long fat penis dangles and dances, accenting every sweeping gesture, every bold word. The living image of a small but potent god, he surely is a creature worthy of admiration, a soul deserving every esteem and emulation. With a laugh, he promises the darkness, "We have never been so*

*powerful, we humans.” Yet in the next breath, with a faintly apologetic smile, he must add, “Yet still, as surely as tomorrow comes, our glories today will seem small and quaint in the future, and what looks golden now will turn to the yellow dust upon which our magnificent children will tread!”*

## **PROCYON**

Study your history. It tells you that travel always brings its share of hazards; that’s a basic, impatient law of the universe. Leaving the security and familiarity of home is never easy. But every person needs to make the occasional journey, embracing the risks to improve his station, his worth and self-esteem. Procyon explains why this day is a good day to wander. She refers to intelligence reports as well as the astrological tables. Then by a dozen means, she maps out their intricate course, describing what she hopes to find and everything that she wants to avoid.

She has twin sons. They were born four months ago, and they are mostly grown now. “Keep alert,” she tells the man-children, leading them out through a series of reinforced and powerfully camouflaged doorways. “No naps, no distractions,” she warns them. Then with a backward glance, she asks again, “What do we want?”

“Whatever we can use,” the boys reply in a sloppy chorus.

“Quiet,” she warns. Then she nods and shows a caring smile, reminding them, “A lot of things can be

used. But their trash is sweetest.”

Mother and sons look alike: They are short, strong people with closely cropped hair and white-gray eyes. They wear simple clothes and three fashions of camouflage, plus a stew of mental add-ons and microchine helpers as well as an array of sensors that never blink, watching what human eyes cannot see. Standing motionless, they vanish into the convoluted, ever-shifting background. But walking makes them into three transient blurs—dancing wisps that are noticeably simpler than the enormous world around them. They can creep ahead only so far before their camouflage falls apart, and then they have to stop, waiting patiently or otherwise, allowing the machinery to find new ways to help make them invisible.

“I’m confused,” one son admits. “That thing up ahead—”

“Did you update your perception menu?”

“I thought I did.”

Procyon makes no sound. Her diamond-bright glare is enough. She remains rigidly, effortlessly still, allowing her lazy son to finish his preparations. Dense, heavily encoded signals have to be whispered, the local net downloading the most recent topological cues, teaching a three-dimensional creature how to navigate through this shifting, highly intricate environment.

The universe is fat with dimensions.

Procyon knows as much theory as anyone. Yet

despite a long life rich with experience, she has to fight to decipher what her eyes and sensors tell her. She doesn't even bother learning the tricks that coax these extra dimensions out of hiding. Let her add-ons guide her. That's all a person can do, slipping in close to one of *them*. In this place, up is three things and sideways is five others. Why bother counting? What matters is that when they walk again, the three of them move through the best combination of dimensions, passing into a little bubble of old-fashioned up and down. She knows this place. Rising up beside them is a trusted landmark—a red granite bowl that cradles what looks like a forest of tall sticks, the sticks leaking a warm light that Procyon ignores, stepping again, moving along on her tiptoes.

One son leads the way. He lacks the experience to be first, but in another few weeks, his flesh and sprint-grown brain will force him into the world alone. He needs his practice, and more important, he needs confidence, learning to trust his add-ons and his careful preparations, and his breeding, and his own good luck.

Procyon's other son lingers near the granite bowl. He's the son who didn't update his menu. This is her dreamy child, whom she loves dearly. Of course she adores him. But there's no escaping the fact that he is easily distracted, and that his adult life will be, at its very best, difficult. Study your biology. Since life began, mothers have made hard decisions about their children, and they have made the deadliest decisions



with the tiniest of gestures.

Procyon lets her lazy son fall behind.

Her other son takes two careful steps and stops abruptly, standing before what looks like a great black cylinder set on its side. The shape is a fiction: The cylinder is round in one fashion but incomprehensible in many others. Her add-ons and sensors have built this very simple geometry to represent something far more elaborate. This is a standard disposal unit. Various openings appear as a single slot near the rim of the cylinder, just enough room showing for a hand and forearm to reach through, touching whatever garbage waits inside.

Her son's thick body has more grace than any dancer of old, more strength than a platoon of ancient athletes. His IQ is enormous. His reaction times have been enhanced by every available means. His father was a great old soul who survived into his tenth year, which is almost forever. But when the boy drifts sideways, he betrays his inexperience. His sensors attack the cylinder by every means, telling him that it's a low-grade trash receptacle secured by what looks like a standard locking device, AI-managed and obsolete for days, if not weeks. And inside the receptacle is a mangled piece of hardware worth a near-fortune on the open market.

The boy drifts sideways, and he glimmers.

Procyon says, "No," too loudly.

But he feels excited, invulnerable. Grinning over his shoulder now, he winks and lifts one hand with a

smooth, blurring motion—

Instincts old as blood come bubbling up. Procyon leaps, shoving her son off his feet and saving him. And in the next horrible instant, she feels herself engulfed, a dry cold hand grabbing her, then stuffing her inside a hole that by any geometry feels nothing but bottomless.

## **ABLE**

Near the lip of the City, inside the emerald green ring of Park, waits a secret place where the moss and horsetail and tree fern forest plunges into a deep crystalline pool of warm spring water. No public map tells of the pool, and no trail leads the casual walker near it. But the pool is exactly the sort of place that young boys always discover, and it is exactly the kind of treasure that remains unmentioned to parents or any other adult with suspicious or troublesome natures.

Able Quotient likes to believe that he was first to stumble across this tiny corner of Creation. And if he isn't first, at least no one before him has ever truly seen the water's beauty, and nobody after him will appreciate the charms of this elegant, timeless place.

Sometimes Able brings others to the pool, but only his best friends and a few boys whom he wants to impress. Not for a long time does he even consider bringing a girl, and then it takes forever to find a worthy candidate, then muster the courage to ask her to join him. Her name is Mish. She's younger than

Able by a little ways, but like all girls, she acts older and much wiser than he will ever be. They have been classmates from the beginning. They live three floors apart in The Tower Of Gracious Good, which makes them close neighbors. Mish is pretty, and her beauty is the sort that will only grow as she becomes a woman. Her face is narrow and serious. Her eyes watch everything. She wears flowing dresses and jeweled sandals, and she goes everywhere with a clouded leopard named Mr. Stuff-and-Nonsense. "If my cat can come along," she says after hearing Able's generous offer. "Are there any birds at this pond of yours?"

Able should be horrified by the question. The life around the pool knows him and has grown to trust him. But he is so enamored by Mish that he blurts out, "Yes, hundreds of birds. Fat, slow birds. Mr. Stuff can eat himself sick."

"But that wouldn't be right," Mish replies with a disapproving smirk. "I'll lock down his appetite. And if we see any wounded birds...any animal that's suffering...we can unlock him right away...!"

"Oh, sure," Able replies, almost sick with nerves. "I guess that's fine, too."

People rarely travel any distance. City is thoroughly modern, every apartment supplied by conduits and meshed with every web and channel, shareline and gossip run. But even with most of its citizens happily sitting at home, the streets are jammed with millions of walking bodies. Every seat

on the train is filled all the way to the last stop. Able momentarily loses track of Mish when the cabin walls evaporate. But thankfully, he finds her waiting at Park's edge. She and her little leopard are standing in the narrow shade of a horsetail. She teases him, observing, "You look lost." Then she laughs, perhaps at him, before abruptly changing the subject. With a nod and sweeping gesture, she asks, "Have you noticed? Our towers look like these trees."

To a point, yes. The towers are tall and thin and rounded like the horsetails, and the hanging porches make them appear rough-skinned. But there are obvious and important differences between trees and towers, and if she were a boy, Able would make fun of her now. Fighting his nature, Able forces himself to smile. "Oh, my," he says as he turns, looking back over a shoulder. "They do look like horsetails, don't they?"

Now the three adventurers set off into the forest. Able takes the lead. Walking with boys is a quick business that often turns into a race. But girls are different, particularly when their fat, unhungry cats are dragging along behind them. It takes forever to reach the rim of the world. Then it takes another two forevers to follow the rim to where they can almost see the secret pool. But that's where Mish announces, "I'm tired!" To the world, she says, "I want to stop and eat. I want to rest here."

Able nearly tells her, "No."

Instead he decides to coax her, promising, "It's just

a little farther.”

But she doesn't seem to hear him, leaping up on the pink polished rim, sitting where the granite is smooth and flat, legs dangling and her bony knees exposed. She opens the little pack that has floated on her back from the beginning, pulling out a hot lunch that she keeps and a cold lunch that she hands to Able. “This is all I could take,” she explains, “without my parents asking questions.” She is reminding Able that she never quite got permission to make this little journey. “If you don't like the cold lunch,” she promises, “then we can trade. I mean, if you really don't.”

He says, “I like it fine,” without opening the insulated box. Then he looks inside, discovering a single wedge of spiced sap, and it takes all of his poise not to say, “Ugh!”

Mr. Stuff collapses into a puddle of towerlight, instantly falling asleep.

The two children eat quietly and slowly. Mish makes the occasional noise about favorite teachers and mutual friends. She acts serious and ordinary, and disappointment starts gnawing at Able. He isn't old enough to sense that the girl is nervous. He can't imagine that Mish wants to delay the moment when they'll reach the secret pool, or that she sees possibilities waiting there—wicked possibilities that only a wicked boy should be able to foresee.

Finished with her meal, Mish runs her hands along the hem of her dress, and she kicks at the air, and

then, hunting for any distraction, she happens to glance over her shoulder.

Where the granite ends, the world ends. Normally nothing of substance can be seen out past the pink stone—nothing but a confused, ever-shifting grayness that extends on forever. Able hasn't bothered to look out there. He is much too busy trying to finish his awful meal, concentrating on his little frustrations and his depraved little daydreams.

"Oh, goodness," the young girl exclaims. "Look at that!"

Able has no expectations. What could possibly be worth the trouble of turning around? But it's an excuse to give up on his lunch, and after setting it aside, he turns slowly, eyes jumping wide open and a surprised grunt leaking out of him as he tumbles off the granite, landing squarely on top of poor Mr. Stuff.

## **ESCHER**

She has a clear, persistent memory of flesh, but the flesh isn't hers. Like manners and like knowledge, what a person remembers can be bequeathed by her ancestors. That's what is happening now. Limbs and heads; penises and vaginas. In the midst of some unrelated business, she remembers having feet and the endless need to protect those feet with sandals or boots or ostrich skin or spiked shoes that will lend a person even more height. She remembers wearing clothes that gave color and bulk to what was already bright and enormous. At this particular instant, what

she sees is a distant, long-dead relative sitting on a white porcelain bowl, bare feet dangling, his orifices voiding mountains of waste and an ocean of water.

Her oldest ancestors were giants. They were built from skin and muscle, wet air and great slabs of fat. Without question, they were an astonishing excess of matter, vast beyond all reason, yet fueled by slow, inefficient chemical fires.

Nothing about Escher is inefficient. No flesh clings to her. Not a drop of water or one glistening pearl of fat. It's always smart to be built from structure light and tested, efficient instructions. It's best to be tinier than a single cell and as swift as electricity, slipping unseen through places that won't even notice your presence.

Escher is a glimmer, a perfect and enduring whisper of light. Of life. Lovely in her own fashion, yet fierce beyond all measure.

She needs her fierceness.

When cooperation fails, as it always does, a person has to throw her rage at the world and her countless enemies.

But in this place, for this moment, cooperation holds sway.

Manners rule.

Escher is eating. Even as tiny and efficient as she is, she needs an occasional sip of raw power. Everyone does. And it seems as if half of everyone has gathered around what can only be described as a tiny, delicious wound. She can't count the citizens

gathered at the feast. Millions and millions, surely. All those weak glimmers join into a soft glow. Everyone is bathed in a joyous light. It is a boastful, wasteful show, but Escher won't waste her energy with warnings. Better to sip at the wound, absorbing the free current, building up her reserves for the next breeding cycle. It is best to let others make the mistakes for you: Escher believes nothing else quite so fervently.

A pair of sisters float past. The familial resemblance is obvious, and so are the tiny differences. Mutations as well as tailored changes have created two loud gossips who speak and giggle in a rush of words and raw data, exchanging secrets about the multitude around them.

Escher ignores their prattle, gulping down the last of what she can possibly hold, and then pausing, considering where she might hide a few nanojoules of extra juice, keeping them safe for some desperate occasion.

Escher begins to hunt for that unlikely hiding place.

And then her sisters abruptly change topics. Gossip turns to trading memories stolen from The World. Most of it is picoweight stuff, useless and boring. An astonishing fraction of His thoughts are banal. Like the giants of old, He can afford to be sloppy. To be a spendthrift. Here is a pointed example of why Escher is happy to be herself. She is smart in her own fashion, and imaginative, and



almost everything about her is important, and when a problem confronts her, she can cut through the muddle, seeing the blessing wrapped up snug inside the measurable risks.

Quietly, with a puzzled tone, one sister announces, "The World is alarmed."

"About?" says the other.

"A situation," says the first. "Yes, He is alarmed now. Moral questions are begging for His attention."

"What questions?"

The first sister tells a brief, strange story.

"You know all this?" asks another. Asks Escher. "Is this daydream or hard fact?"

"I know, and it is fact." The sister feels insulted by the doubting tone, but she puts on a mannerly voice, explaining the history of this sudden crisis.

Escher listens.

And suddenly the multitude is talking about nothing else. What is happening has never happened before, not in this fashion...not in any genuine memory of any of the millions here, it hasn't...and some very dim possibilities begin to show themselves. Benefits wrapped inside some awful dangers. And one or two of these benefits wink at Escher, and smile....

The multitude panics, and evaporates.

Escher remains behind, deliberating on these possibilities. The landscape beneath her is far more sophisticated than flesh, and stronger, but it has an ugly appearance that reminds her of a flesh-born

memory. A lesion; a pimple. A tiny, unsightly ruin standing in what is normally seamless, and beautiful, and perfect.

She flees, but only so far.

Then she hunkers down and waits, knowing that eventually, in one fashion or another, He will scratch at this tiny irritation.

## **THE SPEAKER**

*“You cannot count human accomplishments,” he boasts to his audience, strutting and wagging his way to the edge of the stage. Bare toes curl over the sharp edge, and he grins jauntily, admitting, “And I cannot count them, either. There are simply too many successes, in too many far flung places, to nail up a number that you can believe. But allow me, if you will, this chance to list a few important marvels.”*

*Long hands grab bony hips, and he gazes out into the watching darkness. “The conquest of our cradle continent,” he begins, “which was quickly followed by the conquest of our cradle world. Then after a gathering pause, we swiftly and thoroughly occupied most of our neighboring worlds, too. It was during those millennia when we learned how to split flint and atoms and DNA and our own restless psyches. With these apish hands, we fashioned great machines that worked for us as our willing, eager slaves. And with our slaves’ more delicate hands, we fabricated machines that could think for us.” A*

*knowing wink, a mischievous shrug. "Like any child, of course, our thinking machines eventually learned to think for themselves. Which was a dangerous, foolish business, said some. Said fools. But my list of our marvels only begins with that business. This is what I believe, and I challenge anyone to say otherwise."*

*There is a sound—a stern little murmur—and perhaps it implies dissent. Or perhaps the speaker made the noise himself, fostering a tension that he is building with his words and body.*

*His penis grows erect, drawing the eye.*

*Then with a wide and bright and unabashedly smug grin, he roars out, "Say this with me. Tell me what great things we have done. Boast to Creation about the wonders that we have taken part in...!"*

## **PROCYON**

Torture is what this is: She feels her body plunging from a high place, head before feet. A frantic wind roars past. Outstretched hands refuse to slow her fall. Then Procyon makes herself spin, putting her feet beneath her body, and gravity instantly reverses itself. She screams, and screams, and the distant walls reflect her terror, needles jabbed into her wounded ears. Finally, she grows quiet, wrapping her arms around her eyes and ears, forcing herself to do nothing, hanging limp in space while her body falls in one awful direction.

A voice whimpers.

A son's worried voice says, "Mother, are you there? Mother?"

Some of her add-ons have been peeled away, but not all of them. The brave son uses a whisper-channel, saying, "I'm sorry," with a genuine anguish. He sounds sick and sorry, and exceptionally angry, too. "I was careless," he admits. He says, "Thank you for saving me." Then to someone else, he says, "She can't hear me."

"I hear you," she whispers.

"Listen," says her other son. The lazy one. "Did you hear something?"

She starts to say, "Boys," with a stern voice. But then the trap vibrates, a piercing white screech nearly deafening Procyon. Someone physically strikes the trap. Two someones. She feels the walls turning around her, the trap making perhaps a quarter-turn toward home.

Again, she calls out, "Boys."

They stop rolling her. Did they hear her? No, they found a hidden restraint, the trap secured at one or two or ten ends.

One last time, she says, "Boys."

"I hear her," her dreamy son blurts.

"Don't give up, Mother," says her brave son. "We'll get you out. I see the locks, I can beat them—"

"You can't," she promises.

He pretends not to have heard her. A shaped explosive detonates, making a cold ringing sound, faraway and useless. Then the boy growls, "Damn,"

and kicks the trap, accomplishing nothing at all.

“It’s too tough,” says her dreamy son. “We’re not doing any good—”

“Shut up,” his brother shouts.

Procyon tells them, “Quiet now. Be quiet.”

The trap is probably tied to an alarm. Time is short, or it has run out already. Either way, there’s a decision to be made, and the decision has a single, inescapable answer. With a careful and firm voice, she tells her sons, “Leave me. Now. Go!”

“I won’t,” the brave son declares. “Never!”

“Now,” she says.

“It’s my fault,” says the dreamy son. “I should have been keeping up—”

“Both of you are to blame,” Procyon calls out. “And I am, too. And there’s bad luck here, but there’s some good, too. You’re still free. You can still get away. Now, before you get yourself seen and caught—”

“You’re going to die,” the brave son complains.

“One day or the next, I will,” she agrees. “Absolutely.”

“We’ll find help,” he promises.

“From where?” she asks.

“From who?” says her dreamy son in the same instant. “We aren’t close to anyone—”

“Shut up,” his brother snaps. “Just shut up!”

“Run away,” their mother repeats.

“I won’t,” the brave son tells her. Or himself. Then with a serious, tight little voice, he says, “I can fight. We’ll both fight.”

Her dreamy son says nothing.

Procyon peels her arms away from her face, opening her eyes, focusing on the blurring cylindrical walls of the trap. It seems that she was wrong about her sons. The brave one is just a fool, and the dreamy one has the good sense. She listens to her dreamy son saying nothing, and then the other boy says, “Of course you’re going to fight. Together, we can do some real damage—”

“I love you both,” she declares.

That wins a silence.

Then again, one last time, she says, “Run.”

“I’m not a coward,” one son growls.

While her good son says nothing, running now, and he needs his breath for things more essential than pride and bluster.

## **ABLE**

The face stares at them for the longest while. It is a great wide face, heavily bearded with smoke-colored eyes and a long nose perched above the cavernous mouth that hangs open, revealing teeth and things more amazing than teeth. Set between the bone-white enamel are little machines made of fancy stuff. Able can only guess what the add-on machines are doing. This is a wild man, powerful and free. People like him are scarce and strange, their bodies reengineered in countless ways. Like his eyes: Able stares into those giant gray eyes, noticing fleets of tiny machines floating on the tears. Those machines are probably

delicate sensors. Then with a jolt of amazement, he realizes that those machines and sparkling eyes are staring into their world with what seems to be a genuine fascination.

“He’s watching us,” Able mutters.

“No, he isn’t,” Mish argues. “He can’t see into our realm.”

“We can’t see into his either,” the boy replies. “But just the same, I can make him out just fine.”

“It must be....” Her voice falls silent while she accesses City’s library. Then with a dismissive shrug of her shoulders, she announces, “We’re caught in his topological hardware. That’s all. He has to simplify his surroundings to navigate, and we just happen to be close enough and aligned right.”

Able had already assumed all that.

Mish starts to speak again, probably wanting to add to her explanation. She can sure be a know-everything sort of girl. But then the great face abruptly turns away, and they watch the man run away from their world.

“I told you,” Mish sings out. “He couldn’t see us.”

“I think he could have,” Able replies, his voice finding a distinct sharpness.

The girl straightens her back. “You’re wrong,” she says with an obstinate tone. Then she turns away from the edge of the world, announcing, “I’m ready to go on now.”

“I’m not,” says Able.

She doesn’t look back at him. She seems to be

talking to her leopard, asking, “Why aren’t you ready?”

“I see two of them now,” Able tells her.

“You can’t.”

“I can.” The hardware trickery is keeping the outside realms sensible. A tunnel of simple space leads to two men standing beside an iron-black cylinder. The men wear camouflage, but they are moving too fast to let it work. They look small now. Distant, or tiny. Once you leave the world, size and distance are impossible to measure. How many times have teachers told him that? Able watches the tiny men kicking at the cylinder. They beat on its heavy sides with their fists and forearms, managing to roll it for almost a quarter turn. Then one of the men pulls a fist-sized device from what looks like a cloth sack, fixing it to what looks like a sealed slot, and both men hurry to the far end of the cylinder.

“What are they doing?” asks Mish with a grumpy interest.

A feeling warns Able, but too late. He starts to say, “Look away—”

The explosion is brilliant and swift, the blast reflected off the cylinder and up along the tunnel of ordinary space, a clap of thunder making the giant horsetails sway and nearly knocking the two of them onto the forest floor.

“They’re criminals,” Mish mutters with a nervous hatred.

“How do you know?” the boy asks.



“People like that just are,” she remarks. “Living like they do. Alone like that, and wild. You know how they make their living.”

“They take what they need—”

“They steal!” she interrupts.

Able doesn't even glance at her. He watches as the two men work frantically, trying to pry open the still-sealed doorway. He can't guess why they would want the doorway opened. Or rather, he can think of too many reasons. But when he looks at their anguished, helpless faces, he realizes that whatever is inside, it's driving these wild men very close to panic.

“Criminals,” Mish repeats.

“I heard you,” Able mutters.

Then before she can offer another hard opinion, he turns to her and admits, “I've always liked them. They live by their wits, and mostly alone, and they have all these sweeping powers—”

“Powers that they've stolen,” she whines.

“From garbage, maybe.” There is no point in mentioning whose garbage. He stares at Mish's face, pretty but twisted with fury, and something sad and inevitable occurs to Able. He shakes his head and sighs, telling her, “I don't like you very much.”

Mish is taken by surprise. Probably no other boy has said those awful words to her, and she doesn't know how to react, except to sputter ugly little sounds as she turns, looking back over the edge of the world.

Able does the same.

One of the wild men abruptly turns and runs. In a

super-sonic flash, he races past the children, vanishing into the swirling grayness, leaving his companion to stand alone beside the mysterious black cylinder. Obviously weeping, the last man wipes the tears from his whiskered face with a trembling hand, while his other hand begins to yank a string of wondrous machines from what seems to be a bottomless sack of treasures.

## **ESCHER**

She consumes all of her carefully stockpiled energies, and for the first time in her life, she weaves a body for herself: A distinct physical shell composed of diamond dust and keratin and discarded rare earths and a dozen subtle glues meant to bind to every surface without being felt. To a busy eye, she is dust. She is insubstantial and useless and forgettable. To a careful eye and an inquisitive touch, she is the tiniest soul imaginable, frail beyond words, forever perched on the brink of extermination. Surely she poses no threat to any creature, least of all the great ones. Lying on the edge of the little wound, passive and vulnerable, she waits for Chance to carry her where she needs to be. Probably others are doing the same. Perhaps thousands of sisters and daughters are hiding nearby, each snug inside her own spore case. The temptation to whisper, "Hello," is easily ignored. The odds are awful as it is; any noise could turn this into a suicide. What matters is silence and watchfulness, thinking hard about the great goal

while keeping ready for anything that might happen, as well as everything that will not.

The little wound begins to heal, causing a trickling pain to flow.

The World feels the irritation, and in reflex, touches His discomfort by several means, delicate and less so.

Escher misses her first opportunity. A great swift shape presses its way across her hiding place, but she activates her glues too late. Dabs of glue cure against air, wasted. So she cuts the glue loose and watches again. A second touch is unlikely, but it comes, and she manages to heave a sticky tendril into a likely crevice, letting the irresistible force yank her into a brilliant, endless sky.

She will probably die now.

For a little while, Escher allows herself to look back across her life, counting daughters and other successes, taking warm comfort in her many accomplishments.

Someone hangs in the distance, dangling from a similar tendril. Escher recognizes the shape and intricate glint of her neighbor's spore case; she is one of Escher's daughters. There is a strong temptation to signal her, trading information, helping each other—

But a purge-ball attacks suddenly, and the daughter evaporates, nothing remaining of her but ions and a flash of incoherent light.

Escher pulls herself toward the crevice, and hesitates. Her tendril is anchored on a fleshy surface.

A minor neuron—a thread of warm optical cable—lies buried inside the wet cells. She launches a second tendril at her new target. By chance, the purge-ball sweeps the wrong terrain, giving her that little instant. The tendril makes a sloppy connection with the neuron. Without time to test its integrity, all she can do is shout, “Don’t kill me! Or my daughters! Don’t murder us, Great World!”

Nothing changes. The purge-ball works its way across the deeply folded fleshscape, moving toward Escher again, distant flashes announcing the deaths of another two daughters or sisters.

“Great World!” she cries out.

He will not reply. Escher is like the hum of a single angry electron, and she can only hope that he notices the hum.

“I am vile,” she promises. “I am loathsome and sneaky, and you should hate me. What I am is an illness lurking inside you. A disease that steals exactly what I can steal without bringing your wrath.”

The purge-ball appears, following a tall reddish ridge of flesh, bearing down on her hiding place.

She says, “Kill me, if you want. Or spare me, and I will do this for you.” Then she unleashes a series of vivid images, precise and simple, meant to be compelling to any mind.

The purge-ball slows, its sterilizing lasers taking careful aim.

She repeats herself, knowing that thought travels only so quickly and The World is too vast to see her

thoughts and react soon enough to save her. But if she can help...if she saves just a few hundred daughters...?

Lasers aim, and do nothing. Nothing. And after an instant of inactivity, the machine changes its shape and nature. It hovers above Escher, sending out its own tendrils. A careless strength yanks her free of her hiding place. Her tendrils and glues are ripped from her aching body. A scaffolding of carbon is built around her, and she is shoved inside the retooled purge-ball, held in a perfect darkness, waiting alone until an identical scaffold is stacked beside her.

A hard, angry voice boasts, "I did this."

"What did you do?" asks Escher.

"I made the World listen to reason." It sounds like Escher's voice, except for the delusions of power. "I made a promise, and that's why He saved us."

With a sarcastic tone, she says, "Thank you ever so much. But now where are we going?"

"I won't tell you," her fellow prisoner responds.

"Because you don't know where," says Escher.

"I know everything I need to know."

"Then you're the first person ever," she giggles, winning a brief, delicious silence from her companion.

Other prisoners arrive, each slammed into the empty spaces between their sisters and daughters. Eventually the purge-ball is a prison-ball, swollen to vast proportions, and no one else is being captured. Nothing changes for a long while. There is nothing to

be done now but wait, speaking when the urge hits and listening to whichever voice sounds less than tedious.

Gossip is the common currency. People are desperate to hear the smallest glimmer of news. Where the final rumor comes from, nobody knows if it's true. But the woman who was captured moments after Escher claims, "It comes from the world Himself. He's going to put us where we can do the most good."

"Where?" Escher inquires.

"On a tooth," her companion says. "The right incisor, as it happens." Then with that boasting voice, she adds, "Which is exactly what I told Him to do. This is all because of me."

"What isn't?" Escher grumbles.

"Very little," the tiny prisoner promises. "Very, very little."

## **THE SPEAKER**

*"We walk today on a thousand worlds, and I mean 'walk' in all manners of speaking." He manages a few comical steps before shifting into a graceful turn, arms held firmly around the wide waist of an invisible and equally graceful partner. "A hundred alien suns bake us with their perfect light. And between the suns, in the cold and dark, we survive, and thrive, by every worthy means."*

*Now he pauses, hands forgetting the unseen partner. A look of calculated confusion sweeps*

across his face. Fingers rise to his thick black hair, stabbing it and yanking backward, leaving furrows in the unruly mass.

“Our numbers,” he says. “Our population. It made us sick with worry when we were ten billion standing on the surface of one enormous world. ‘Where will our children stand?’ we asked ourselves. But then in the next little while, we became ten trillion people, and we had split into a thousand species of humanity, and the new complaint was that we were still too scarce and spread too far apart. ‘How could we matter to the universe?’ we asked ourselves. ‘How could so few souls endure another day in our immeasurable, uncaring universe?’ “

His erect penis makes a little leap, a fat and vivid white drop of semen striking the wooden stage with an audible plop.

“Our numbers,” he repeats. “Our legions.” Then with a wide, garish smile, he confesses, “I don’t know our numbers today. No authority does. You make estimates. You extrapolate off data that went stale long ago. You build a hundred models and fashion every kind of vast number. Ten raised to the twentieth power. The thirtieth power. Or more.” He giggles and skips backward, and with the giddy, careless energy of a child, he dances where he stands, singing to lights overhead, “If you are as common as sand and as unique as snowflakes, how can you be anything but a wild, wonderful success?”

## ABLE

The wild man is enormous and powerful, and surely brilliant beyond anything that Able can comprehend—as smart as City as a whole—but despite his gifts, the man is obviously terrified. That he can even manage to stand his ground astonishes Able. He says as much to Mish, and then he glances at her, adding, “He must be very devoted to whoever’s inside.”

“Whoever’s inside what?” she asks.

“That trap.” He looks straight ahead again, telling himself not to waste time with the girl. She is foolish and bad-tempered, and he couldn’t be any more tired of her. “I think that’s what the cylinder is,” he whispers. “A trap of some kind. And someone’s been caught in it.”

“Well, I don’t care who,” she snarls.

He pretends not to notice her.

“What was that?” she blurts. “Did you hear that—?”

“No,” Able blurts. But then he notices a distant rumble, deep and faintly rhythmic, and with every breath, growing. When he listens carefully, it resembles nothing normal. It isn’t thunder, and it can’t be a voice. He feels the sound as much as he hears it, as if some great mass were being displaced. But he knows better. In school, teachers like to explain what must be happening now, employing tortuous mathematics and magical sleights of hand.



Matter and energy are being rapidly and brutally manipulated. The universe's obscure dimensions are being twisted like bands of warm rubber. Able knows all this. But still, he understands none of it. Words without comprehension; froth without substance. All that he knows for certain is that behind that deep, unknowable throbbing lies something even farther beyond human description.

The wild man looks up, gray eyes staring at that something.

He cries out, that tiny sound lost between his mouth and Able. Then he produces what seems to be a spear—no, an elaborate missile—that launches itself with a bolt of fire, lifting a sophisticated warhead up into a vague gray space that swallows the weapon without sound, or complaint.

Next the man aims a sturdy laser, and fires. But the weapon simply melts at its tip, collapsing into a smoldering, useless mass at his feet.

Again, the wild man cries out.

His language could be a million generations removed from City-speech, but Able hears the desperate, furious sound of his voice. He doesn't need words to know that the man is cursing. Then the swirling grayness slows itself, and parts, and stupidly, in reflex, Able turns to Mish, wanting to tell her, "Watch. You're going to see one of *Them*."

But Mish has vanished. Sometime in the last few moments, she jumped off the world's rim and ran away, and save for the fat old leopard sleeping

between the horsetails, Able is entirely alone now.

“Good,” he mutters.

Almost too late, he turns and runs to the very edge of the granite rim.

The wild man stands motionless now. His bowels and bladder have emptied themselves. His handsome, godly face is twisted from every flavor of misery. Eyes as big as windows stare up into what only they can see, and to that great, unknowable something, the man says two simple words.

“Fuck you,” Able hears.

And then the wild man opens his mouth, baring his white apish teeth, and just as Able wonders what’s going to happen, the man’s body explodes, the dull black burst of a shaped charge sending chunks of his face skyward.

## **PROCYON**

One last time, she whispers her son’s name.

She whispers it and closes her mouth and listens to the brief, sharp silence that comes after the awful explosion. What must have happened, she tells herself, is that her boy found his good sense and fled. How can a mother think anything else? And then the ominous deep rumbling begins again, begins and gradually swells until the walls of the trap are shuddering and twisting again. But this time the monster is slower. It approaches the trap more cautiously, summoning new courage. She can nearly taste its courage now, and with her intuition, she

senses emotions that might be curiosity and might be a kind of reflexive admiration. Or do those eternal human emotions have any relationship for what *It* feels...?

What she feels, after everything, is numbness. A terrible deep weariness hangs on her like a new skin. Procyon seems to be falling faster now, accelerating down through the bottomless trap. But she doesn't care anymore. In place of courage, she wields a muscular apathy. Death looms, but when hasn't it been her dearest companion? And in place of fear, she is astonished to discover an incurious little pride about what is about to happen: How many people—wild free people like herself—have ever found themselves so near one of *Them*?

Quietly, with a calm, smooth and slow voice, Procyon says, "I feel you there, you. I can taste you."

Nothing changes.

Less quietly, she says, "Show yourself."

A wide parabolic floor appears, gleaming and black and agonizingly close. But just before she slams into the floor, a wrenching force peels it away. A brilliant violet light rises to meet her, turning into a thick sweet syrup. What may or may not be a hand curls around her body, and squeezes. Procyon fights every urge to struggle. She wrestles with her body, wrestles with her will, forcing both to lie still while the hand tightens its grip and grows comfortable. Then using a voice that betrays nothing tentative or small, she tells what holds her, "I made you, you know."

She says, “You can do what you want to me.”

Then with a natural, deep joy, she cries out, “But you’re an ungrateful glory...and you’ll always belong to me...!”

## **ESCHER**

The prison-ball has been reengineered, slathered with camouflage and armor and the best immune-suppressors on the market, and its navigation system has been adapted from add-ons stolen from the finest trashcans. Now it is a battle-phage riding on the sharp incisor as far as it dares, then leaping free. A thousand similar phages leap and lose their way, or they are killed. Only Escher’s phage reaches the target, impacting on what passes for flesh and launching its cargo with a microscopic railgun, punching her and a thousand sisters and daughters through immeasurable distances of senseless, twisted nothing.

How many survive the attack?

She can’t guess how many. Can’t even care. What matters is to make herself survive inside this strange new world. An enormous world, yes. Escher feels a vastness that reaches out across ten or twelve or maybe a thousand dimensions. How do I know where to go? she asks herself. And instantly, an assortment of possible routes appear in her consciousness, drawn in the simplest imaginable fashion, waiting and eager to help her find her way around.

This is a last gift from Him, she realizes. Unless

there are more gifts waiting, of course.

She thanks nobody.

On the equivalent of tiptoes, Escher creeps her way into a tiny conduit that moves something stranger than any blood across five dimensions. She becomes passive, aiming for invisibility. She drifts and spins, watching her surroundings turn from a senseless glow into a landscape that occasionally seems a little bit reasonable. A little bit real. Slowly, she learns how to see in this new world. Eventually she spies a little peak that may or may not be ordinary matter. The peak is pink and flexible and sticks out into the great artery, and flinging her last tendril, Escher grabs hold and pulls in snug, knowing that the chances are lousy that she will ever find anything nourishing here, much less delicious.

But her reserves have been filled again, she notes. If she is careful—and when hasn't she been—her energies will keep her alive for centuries.

She thinks of the World, and thanks nobody.

“Watch and learn,” she whispers to herself.

That was the first human thought. She remembers that odd fact suddenly. People were just a bunch of grubbing apes moving blindly through their tiny lives until one said to a companion, “Watch and learn.”

An inherited memory, or another gift from Him?

Silently, she thanks Luck, and she thanks Him, and once again, she thanks Luck.

“Patience and planning,” she tells herself.

Which is another wise thought of the conscious,

enduring ape.

## **THE LAST SON**

The locked gates and various doorways know him—recognize him at a glance—but they have to taste him anyway. They have to test him. Three people were expected, and he can't explain in words what has happened. He just says, "The others will be coming later," and leaves that lie hanging in the air. Then as he passes through the final doorway, he says, "Let no one through. Not without my permission first."

"This is your mother's house," says the door's AI.

"Not anymore," he remarks.

The machine grows quiet, and sad.

During any other age, his home would be a mansion. There are endless rooms, rooms beyond counting, and each is enormous and richly furnished and lovely and jammed full of games and art and distractions and flourishes that even the least aesthetic soul would find lovely. He sees none of that now. Alone, he walks to what has always been his room, and he sits on a leather recliner, and the house brings him a soothing drink and an intoxicating drink and an assortment of treats that sit on the platter, untouched.

For a long while, the boy stares off at the distant ceiling, replaying everything with his near-perfect memory. Everything. Then he forgets everything, stupidly calling out, "Mother," with a voice that

sounds ridiculously young. Then again, he calls, "Mother." And he starts to rise from his chair, starts to ask the great empty house, "Where is she?"

And he remembers.

As if his legs have been sawed off, he collapses. His chair twists itself to catch him, and an army of AIs brings their talents to bear. They are loyal, limited machines. They are empathetic, and on occasion, even sweet. They want to help him in any fashion, just name the way...but their appeals and their smart suggestions are just so much noise. The boy acts deaf, and he obviously can't see anything with his fists jabbed into his eyes like that, slouched forward in his favorite chair, begging an invisible someone for forgiveness....

## **THE SPEAKER**

*He squats and uses the tip of a forefinger to dab at the puddle of semen, and he rubs the finger against his thumb, saying, "Think of cells. Individual, self-reliant cells. For most of Earth's great history, they ruled. First as bacteria, and then as composites built from cooperative bacteria. They were everywhere and ruled everything, and then the wild cells learned how to dance together, in one enormous body, and the living world was transformed for the next seven hundred million years."*

*Thumb and finger wipe themselves dry against a hairy thigh, and he rises again, grinning in that*

relentless and smug, yet somehow charming fashion. "Everything was changed, and nothing had changed," he says. Then he says, "Scaling," with an important tone, as if that single word should erase all confusion. "The bacteria and green algae and the carnivorous amoebae weren't swept away by any revolution. Honestly, I doubt if their numbers fell appreciably or for long." And again, he says, "Scaling," and sighs with a rich appreciation. "Life evolves. Adapts. Spreads and grows, constantly utilizing new energies and novel genetics. But wherever something large can live, a thousand small things can thrive just as well, or better. Wherever something enormous survives, a trillion bacteria hang on for the ride."

For a moment, the speaker hesitates.

A slippery half-instant passes where an audience might believe that he has finally lost his concentration, that he is about to stumble over his own tongue. But then he licks at the air, tasting something delicious. And three times, he clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

Then he says what he has planned to say from the beginning.

"I never know whom I'm speaking to," he admits. "I've never actually seen my audience. But I know you're great and good. I know that however you appear, and however you make your living, you deserve to hear this:

"Humans have always lived in terror. Rainstorms



*and the eclipsing moon and earthquakes and the ominous guts of some disemboweled goat—all have preyed upon our fears and defeated our fragile optimisms. But what we fear today—what shapes and reshapes the universe around us—is a child of our own imaginations.*

*“A whirlwind that owes its very existence to glorious, endless us!”*

## **ABLE**

The boy stops walking once or twice, letting the fat leopard keep pace. Then he pushes his way through a last wall of emerald ferns, stepping out into the bright damp air above the rounded pool. A splashing takes him by surprise. He looks down at his secret pool, and he squints, watching what seems to be a woman pulling her way through the clear water with thick, strong arms. She is naked. Astonishingly, wonderfully naked. A stubby hand grabs an overhanging limb, and she stands on the rocky shore, moving as if exhausted, picking her way up the slippery slope until she finds an open patch of halfway flattened earth where she can collapse, rolling onto her back, her smooth flesh glistening and her hard breasts shining up at Able, making him sick with joy.

Then she starts to cry, quietly, with a deep sadness.

Lust vanishes, replaced by simple embarrassment. Able flinches and starts to step back, and that's when he first looks at her face.

He recognizes its features.

Intrigued, the boy picks his way down to the shoreline, practically standing beside the crying woman.

She looks at him, and she sniffs.

“I saw two of them,” he reports. “And I saw you, too. You were inside that cylinder, weren’t you?”

She watches him, saying nothing.

“I saw something pull you out of that trap. And then I couldn’t see you. *It* must have put you here, I guess. Out of its way.” Able nods, and smiles. He can’t help but stare at her breasts, but at least he keeps his eyes halfway closed, pretending to look out over the water instead. “*It* took pity on you, I guess.”

A good-sized fish breaks on the water.

The woman seems to watch the creature as it swims past, big blue scales catching the light, heavy fins lazily shoving their way through the warm water. The fish eyes are huge and black, and they are stupid eyes. The mind behind them sees nothing but vague shapes and sudden motions. Able knows from experience: If he stands quite still, the creature will come close enough to touch.

“They’re called coelacanths,” he explains.

Maybe the woman reacts to his voice. Some sound other than crying now leaks from her.

So Able continues, explaining, “They were rare, once. I’ve studied them quite a bit. They’re old and primitive, and they were almost extinct when we found them. But when *they* got loose, got free, and took apart the Earth...and took everything and

everyone with them up into the sky...”

The woman gazes up at the towering horsetails.

Able stares at her legs and what lies between them.

“Anyway,” he mutters, “there’s more coelacanths now than ever. They live in a million oceans, and they’ve never been more successful, really.” He hesitates, and then adds, “Kind of like us, I think. Like people. You know?”

The woman turns, staring at him with gray-white eyes. And with a quiet hard voice, she says, “No.”

She says, “That’s an idiot’s opinion.”

And then with a grace that belies her strong frame, she dives back into the water, kicking hard and chasing that ancient and stupid fish all the way back to the bottom.

## Crooked Creek

DAD GIVES ME A CALL. HE says, "Listen, I'm going to be in town. Next week. On Tuesday." He says, "It's the same deal as last year. For that golf deal." There's an annual old farts tournament. He's come down for the last four or five years. "We're out at this new club," he tells me. "Crooked Creek. Know where that is?"

I say, "No."

Then I think again, and I tell him, "Wait. Out east of town, isn't it?"

"Is it? I've got the address written down. Somewhere." Slips of paper are being shuffled. "Yeah, well...somewhere," he promises me.

I'm hoping to hell he's not the one driving.

And as if he's reading my mind, he says, "I'm riding with Bill Wannamaker. You remember Bill." Not particularly.

"Anyway," he says, "Things start at seven. We'll be done one, one-thirty. They're feeding us up at the clubhouse. I guess. If you want, come out for a minute or two. If you're not too busy." How do you explain busy to a retired man? But I tell him, "Maybe." Then I amend myself, adding,

"Probably. Sure." And that's where we leave things. I've been seeing the same woman for five, six months. And we've reached that point where I'm having trouble seeing the point to things. Where I can pretty

well imagine us parting ways. Not that there's anything wrong with Colleen. It's just that we have next to nothing in common. Not age, since she's a good eleven years younger than me. Not hobbies, except that we both like watching old movies. But even then, someone usually has to compromise his or her good tastes. Then there's the fact that Colleen is vegetarian where I'm an omnivore. And worst of all, there's a question about beliefs. I'm a staunch Rationalist, and Darwin is my patron saint. Colleen is a born Catholic who long ago discovered a fascination for the occult. Which isn't that far from being Catholic, if you want the truth.

Anyway, that weekend, hunched over a plate of beans and flee, I mention my father and his consuming interest in golf. And the tournament. And my intention to drive out and say, "Hi," to the old bum.

"Can I tag along?" asks Colleen.

I don't say anything.

She reads my aura. My face. Or maybe the silence. Then she shrugs and says, "If you don't want me to go

....

"It's in the afternoon. Aren't you workings"

Colleen is a barber. Which is a story onto itself, honestly. She doesn't work Sundays and Mondays. I assumed that I'd be safe for Tuesday.

But she says, "I can take a long late lunch."

"Dad has this way," I begin. "Nothing ever happens on schedule." She looks down at her plate, lips

pursed.

I read the silence. Or her face. Or her aura, maybe. Then I tell her, "Just so you're warned. Sure, let's go watch some sweaty old men hitting tiny white balls." And that's where we leave things.

I don't know why golf has to make this sudden comeback. It embodies everything that I truly hate in a quasi-sport. Golf, at its heart, is elitist and proud of it. The courses themselves are monocultures of hybrid grasses maintained with industrial doses of fertilizer and herbicides, the grass groomed until it resembles nothing else found in Nature. And worst of all, I hate the game because I don't play it anymore and because I despised playing it when I was a boy. Dad used to haul me over to a little nine hole course near our house. He gave me next to no instructions, and precious little encouragement. My old man belongs to that generation that learned by doing, whether it was playing golf or fighting fascism to the death. And what made my golfing career even more excruciating: One day, walking into the clubhouse, we happened to bump into one of Dad's buddies, and his buddy's son. As it happened, I halfway knew the kid. He went to my school. He was a year behind me, and tubby, and silly looking with that little sack of clubs hanging on his fat little shoulder.

The men decided that we'd make a foursome, and I thought: Good. As usual, my opening shot carved up a piece of the green turf, flinging my ball all of fifty feet. But my fat friend would make me look good, I

kept thinking. Right up until his swing, which was as smooth and strong as mine felt cranky and sloppy. And with a determined Whoosh, the driver cut through the air, and the ball was launched --a study in efficient ballistics that ended on the green, maybe twenty feet from the mocking flag.

I tell Colleen that story while I'm driving. And she laughs at my misery. She always seems to appreciate my humor. Which is a huge point in her favor, I can tell you.

"I never played golf again," I boast.

She laughs and looks ahead. Colleen has a pretty profile, her face fine and young and her curly red hair always needing a brush, and I'm wondering for the umpteenth time if there's something seriously wrong with me. One bad marriage and a string of broken relationships. Is it me? Am I just asking too much from the institution of love?

"Is that the place?" she asks.

Corn fields --another ecological abomination --give way to a rolling carpet of unbroken green lawn. Trees are small and scarce. What must be the clubhouse is perched on the crest of the hill. A bright warm day in May, and the parking lot is only half-filled. Things aren't as busy as I'd guessed. But then again, the old farts have probably car-pooled from both ends of the state. The cars are just what I'd expect. Lincolns and Cadillacs and such. I park between Cadillacs.

There isn't a breath of wind, which is remarkable. I mention it as we're walking toward the clubhouse.

“Springtime on the plains, and not even a breeze,” I mutter, glancing at my watch. One-thirty-one. I'm nothing if not punctual.

There's always something intimidating about clubhouses, and particularly this one. It's a massive long building made from dark wood and imported stone. Entering through the front door would feel wrong. So I steer us around the side, climbing onto a raised porch that hugs the building's upper story..And what worries me right off is that the place feels deserted. Is this the right course?

The right clubhouse? The right day.?

Through tinted windows, I make out an almost empty bar.

Somewhere ahead of us, balls are getting whacked. I walk to the end of the porch, looking across the driving range. Young men stand in a line, swinging for the next county. And it occurs to me suddenly that the sound of golf has changed in thirty years. That hard sharp whap sound is new. Today's drivers are made from titanium alloys, and the balls have nickel cores. “If we put as much energy and invention into the space program,” I tell Colleen, “then we'd have cities on the moon by now. If not Mars.”

“And golf courses, too,” she says.

Which makes me laugh.

A team roster has been posted on one of the tinted windows. I pause, looking for my father's name. And he appears at the end, on the last team. Which is bad news, if I was hoping to get out of here soon. “Which



one is he?" Colleen asks.

But she's not looking at the names. She's staring out at the course itself. Between our hilltop and the wooded stream bed, I can make out maybe a hundred old guys in hats and colorful clothes. Half of them, easily, could be my father.

"I'm going to ask someone," I tell her.

"I'm going to stand right here," she replies.

The bar isn't quite empty. A pair of golfers are enjoying tall beers, and there's a bright new television turned to the golfing channel, and there's a youngish man talking on a cell phone, looking like the prototypical golf pro. I'm thinking about asking him about the tournament. Then I spot a girl standing behind a tall counter. A college coed already out for the summer, is my guess. Blonde and pretty, and I'm wondering when did twenty-year-old girls become so impossibly pretty. So delicious. I give her a smile, saying, "I'm looking for my father." I tell her, "He's playing in the old-fart tournament."

She laughs, sort of.

"They're running late," she admits. "They probably won't be coming in...I don't know...for another fifty minutes or so..."

Why am I not surprised?

I thank her, and I start to turn away.

"Old farts," says one of the golfers. "What's that mean?" He and his buddy are sitting at a little round table. They're captains of industry, probably. But to me they look like puffy-faced men with a history of

heart disease. I say, "Pardon?"

"Careful what you call people," is the golfer's advice. There's a beery offense being taken. "Didn't your folks ever teach you that?"

What can I do? I just shrug and march outside again. Distracted, and a little pissed. I'm thinking about having to wait for another hour. I'm hoping that Colleen has to get back to work, giving me the perfect excuse to leave. Then I'm considering the girl at the counter, remembering her face...and Colleen waits at the porch rail, leaning into it a little bit...and without looking at me, says,

"Kiss?"

She might be talking to the golf course, saying "Now?" I come up behind her and put a hand against the small of her narrow back, and she tips her head toward me with her blue eyes closed. Then as soon as I'm done kissing her, she volunteers, "I don't have an appointment until four-fifteen."

She says, "As long as you want, I can wait."

She's a funny, funny girl.

According to the way I tell it, I just happened to be shopping for a new barber and Colleen happens to work in a little shop that's walking distance from my house. Coincidence is responsible; no cosmic alignments or any other flavor of bull.

She started me off with a shampoo. Which was fine. But as she worked with my hair, something about her hands changed. The rhythm of them. Their purpose. We had slipped into a slow massage, and

eventually, with a quiet, serious voice, she said, "You feel like a vegetarian."

"Why?" I muttered.

"It's your scalp," she said. "It's very healthy, very relaxed." A compliment is a compliment. I gave a shrug, saying, "Thanks." Then because I couldn't let her think that I was, I showed her a tooth-rich smile, confessing, "But I do like my meat. Quite a bit, frankly."

"Then I was wrong," she allowed.

She said it instantly. Not the least bit bothered by her mistake, I noticed. Which surprised me, considering how some of these people can be.

Like with any new hairdresser or dentist, our conversation resembled every first date of my life. Where I grew up. Where I went to school. What I do for a living. And when I mentioned my college, Colleen piped up at once, saying, "Then you must know the ghost of White Hall."

"Old Miss Markel," I said knowingly.

"You've seen her?" she asked. Sounding, if anything, hopeful. I laughed politely, and I said, "Never had the pleasure." Colleen took a long pause. Except to tell me to dip my head forward, please, so that she could rinse out my hair. Which left me in the perfect pose to consider that tall music teacher who died in her office some seventy years ago, and according to legend, still walks the old hallways, pausing from time to time to stroke a few keys on her favorite Aerosonic. Finally, as a joke, I asked, "Have

you met Miss Markel?" That's when Colleen said my name for the first time.

"Johnny?" she said. And I lifted my head, seeing her reflection in the mirror in front of me. Seeing what I can only describe as a strong and even and wise smile. Colleen has a pretty face and fit young body and bright red hair that on almost any other woman comes from a bottle. And with a little wink and a self-deprecating laugh, she asked, "If I told you yes, that I'd seen a ghost...would you think I was crazy...?"

With her, it's easy to tell the truth.

I said, "Oh, probably. Yeah."

"And if you thought I was crazy," she continued, "then I suppose you wouldn't say, 'Yes.'"

"To what?" I asked.

"Would you like to go out with me some evening?" she asked. And when I didn't respond in a timely fashion, she added, "You do believe in dates, don't you?" I forgot all about ghosts.

"Sure, I do," I said.

For no reason that I can point to, I told her, "Sure. Let's go out."

I DON'T SEE MY FATHER much. My parents split when I was a teenager, and ever since, our relationship has been spotty --one of the back-burner issues in my life. Something to be lived with, like my stiff elbow. I can't say that we have disagreements when we're together, much less genuine fights. Dad's

always been an agreeable if somewhat odd soul. But between me and my father lies a distance. With me, it's the emotional garbage of him leaving us. With him, I don't know what it is. He's always been an aloof creature. With me, and with everyone. And over the years, it's grown worse. That or maybe I've gotten better about being offended by his faraway stares and his lingering silences.

Waiting on the clubhouse porch, I feel a nagging embarrassment. Every time a golf cart drives up, one or two of the riders looks like my father. The same pale, sun-drowned flesh. The same ugly-ass hats and the bright shirts and the bulky shorts. But these are just the first waves of tournament players, I keep telling myself. Dad's somewhere in the last wave. Coming closer a stroke at a time.

I buy us two iced teas --black tea, not the green that Colleen hopes for --and we claim an outside table.

Still, there isn't a breath of wind. Flags hang limp on every pole, and the young trees are as still as photographs. Yet the air is dry and pleasantly cool, and lovely, and I'm not too awfully bored, even after the first twenty minutes. Even when we've started our second glasses of tea. Colleen asks about my father.

And my mother.

And in sneaky ways, she asks about me.

Dad is deep into his seventies. And I warn her the same way that I've warned my other women: He might seem awfully distracted, but she shouldn't take

it personally. That's just the way he is. Not the way he started out in life. But it's the way he became.

"Why's that?" she asks. Naturally.

"It was the war," I reply. "Mom knew him before. When they were kids. Dad was this smiling, happy boy when World War II started, and he came back changed. Like a lot of them did, of course."

"Where did he fight?"

"The Pacific."

"What did he do?" she inquires.

"Rode in an airplane," I tell her.

"Oh, yeah?"

"B-29s," I add. "Which were big bombers." She stares at me. Then with her eyes narrowing, she smirks, reminding me, "I'm not totally ignorant here. Thank you." "Sorry."

She sips her cold tea, saying nothing else.

I look at the deck beneath our feet. This is a brand new facility, yet the cedar planks are riddled with holes. Little holes. It takes me a few moments to realize why. Beefy golfers walking here with their goofy spiked shoes. Glancing down at my watch, I decide that we've been waiting for more than forty minutes. Then with a quiet and serious voice, I tell her, "My father's bomber went down, by the way. It crashed into the ocean."

Colleen looks at me.

"I don't know much more about it," I admit. "It was the biggest rule when I was growing up. I could never ask Dad about the war. Ever."

I'm telling her this, and I'm serving up a warning, too.

“What I know,” I continue, “is that everyone else on that bomber died. And he survived after floating in the ocean, alone, for something like two days, and nights ....” She swirls her ice, asking, “Was it shot down?”

“I think so.”

“You're not sure?”

I have to shrug my shoulders, saying, “I haven't heard the whole story. Except for some old military files, maybe...only my father knows ....”

A golfer strolls past. A big man smelling of cigarettes. Pausing, he asks me, “Is that where we tee off?” I look up at him.

With my eyes, I tell him to leave us alone. With my voice, I say, “I really don't have the tiniest clue.”

Disgruntled, he continues along the porch, his fancy, silly, and overpriced shoes punching fresh holes into the cedar. I watch him for a moment, then I watch the latest crop of young men smashing balls out across the driving range. The world is at peace today, and they have time as well as money to waste. Then I happen to glance straight down, looking at a patch of raked gravel where golf carts are being parked in a neat row. A lone man has left his cart, climbing toward the clubhouse with his head down. I can't see anything about him but the top of his floppy lime-green hat and the weak old shoulders and the way that his legs, despite riding around in a

motorized cart, are weary, barely able to lift the feet that are wearing beat-up old golf shoes that I don't recognize. I don't know the man or his clothes. He's too small to be my father. Christmas was the last time I saw him face to face. But that can't be Dad, I'm thinking. Old is one thing, but this poor fellow, whoever he is, looks pretty much washed up.

I happen to glance at Colleen.

She gives me a peculiar look. And by lifting her pale blue eyes and one corner of her mouth, she asks, "Is that him?"

How could she know my father? Before me?

But I look again, and that's when the fossil lifts his head, showing me his face. I'm looking straight at him, knowing him. And I lean out over the railing now, showing him my own face. But Dad doesn't seem to notice me.

Looking straight at me, he stops to breathe a few good breaths. Then down goes his head, and he continues to plug his way toward the clubhouse, and us.

"It's him," I grumble.

Then I look at Colleen.

She gives her ice and her tea a little swirl, then sets down her glass again. But she nearly misses our table, leaving the glass teetering over the edge far enough that gravity and the slick condensation let it tip and fall with a sloppy crash.

And still, she watches my father.

Blue eyes like saucers.



Watching.

ON OUR SECOND or third date, we went to a coffee house in one of the old warehouses next to downtown, and Colleen motioned and asked if I could see him. "Who?" I asked, following her gaze. Then I told her, "I don't see anyone," because there was nothing to see except an empty table tucked in the back of the room. Obviously.

Then came an afternoon when we went walking in a wooded park. It was late winter, but not too cold. And I caught her staring at a big hackberry tree. Watching something. So I had to ask,

"What are you watching?"

I asked, "Is there a coyote? A deer? What?"

But she just shook her head and made a point of smiling at me, saying with a careful little voice,

"It's nothing. Never mind."

Sometime later, I remembered the story. How several years back, a young man dumped by his girlfriend had gone to that park and thrown an electrical cord over a branch and hanged himself to death. And Colleen probably knew the story, and the power of suggestion did the rest. I told myself. Explaining it to my own self.

Then there was an evening, not long ago, when I finally asked her, "Why did you leave the Catholic faith?"

"Not that you shouldn't have," I added.

She sat up in bed, showing me her pale and narrow

back. And throwing a good stare over her shoulder, she said, "When I was a girl, twelve or so, I realized that the church didn't really know very much about souls, and death...and just like that, I realized that I wasn't a believer, and I'd never been one, either. You know?"

Spike-pocked cedar stairs lead up to the porch. I'm waiting at the top of the stairs, watching him climb. His head is down. His head lifts up, gauging distances. Then the old man starts to drop his eyes again --watery and distracted brown eyes --before he blinks and looks up at me, and the puffy face goes into a smile. And he says, "There you are!" and laughs in a big way. I tell him, "Hi, Dad."

Then Colleen is next to me, grabbing hold of my hand with both of hers. Which is different. And she sounds remarkably nervous, her voice breaking when she introduces herself, concluding by saying, "It's really a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Harris."

"On, no! The pleasure's all mine," my father counters. And he gives a wink, conquering the last of the stairs with a little burst of speed.

I'm nervous too, I realize.

But not my father. He says, "Yeah, the boys got a late start this morning." Meaning the old men, of course. He says, "Sorry for the wait," with the same easy, well-practiced manner that he's used to gloss over everything for the last forty years. Then he asks, "How's the food in this place? I haven't eaten a bite since four this morning."

“You must be famished,” says Colleen.

I can't decide if Dad heard her. One of his long stares comes over him, and he takes a big breath. Then his expression changes. “We're supposed to get a lunch eventually,” he says. “But I'll tell you, I'd rather eat something right now. In the bar, maybe. What do you think? My treat?” I start to say, “Okay.”

But Colleen interrupts, telling him, “No, it's my treat, Mr. Hams --”

“Harvey,” he corrects her.

“Harvey,” she repeats.

Dad winks again. Nice and easy. He's always been nothing but pleasant with my new women. Goodness knows, he's had enough practice.

With Colleen holding the door, we slip inside.

It's the blonde coed who takes our orders. The old farts that I offended have disappeared. Thankfully. Golf is still playing on the big television. And I'm trying hard not to stare at the coed, which is why I find myself watching highlights from last weekend's professional tournament. In a casual way, I ask, “How did it go today? Your game, I mean.” A pause.

Then Dad blinks and looks in my general direction, and he says, “Good. Real good! Until we got to the back nine.”

“How's this new course?” I ask.

“Fine,” he tells me. “Until that back nine.” We all have a little laugh about that.

Then Dad gestures at the television, saying “Let me tell you about that kid. See him there? Missing that

putt?" He shakes his head, saying, "Past the hype, he's nothing special. Not yet, and probably won't ever be." Dad pulls his hand across his mouth like he has a million times in my life. Then he says, "What the best ones do, day in and day out...it takes something more important than talent, I can tell you."

"Like what?" Colleen prompts.

"Arrogance," he says. "That's what you need. All those people watching you, and all that money riding on your next long putt, and if you pay attention to anything that isn't your ball and the green, and the way the green lays, and your putter, and your hands, and shoulders, and how your legs are positioned...well, if there's any world outside your game, then you're not arrogant enough. There's no damn way that you can sink that putt. Not with talent, you can't. Luck, maybe. But luck gives you two strokes, or three. At the most."

I've been here before. I know this speech halfway by heart.

But the words seem to mean everything to Colleen. She leans over the little table, egging Dad on with her questions. Who are the best players now? And before? When did he start to play? What's his handicap? Is that the right word? Handicap? Then she looks around the room, asking what, if he doesn't mind telling, was his best game ever?

I'm listening to the two of them, and I'm not.

If there's anything more boring than golf, it's talking about golf. That's what I'm thinking when our

lunches come, and that's what I'm still thinking when we're finished eating. I had a so-so burger. Colleen had a grilled cheese sandwich. And my starving father ate most of a little salad and drank maybe half of his iced tea. I'm worried about the old man.

That's what I'm thinking about, halfway listening while he tells us how most of the professionals are big smokers. Not on camera, but everywhere else. They use the nicotine to keep their nerves steady. Which is something that I'd never heard. And frankly, it's knowledge that leaves me feeling even more superior than before.

On that note, I stand and announce, "I'll be right back." Three iced teas is my limit.

The big dining room at the far end of the clubhouse is filled with old men. A raspy voice is reading off names. The morning's winners, apparently. I listen for my father's name, but it isn't mentioned. Too bad. Then I find my way back to the bar and with a glance, I know that something here has changed.

Colleen is speaking to my father now.

And from his expression, I can tell that Dad's actually listening to her. With huge eyes, he stares at the area under the television, nodding in a careful way. A funny half-smile tries to emerge on his face. Then, he glances at my girlfriend. Then he straightens his back, something about his posture and his attitude implying some great embarrassment. Or is it relief? Maybe it's both things, I'm thinking. As I'm

walking up on them. Feeling like the intruder here.

“The tall, handsome one,” I hear her saying. “Which one is he?” Dad answers in a mutter, then looks at my direction and shuts his mouth instantly. Nothing showing now but embarrassment.

“He was our pilot,” I heard him say. Confess. Whatever.

“That's what I imagined,” Colleen remarks, patting Dad fondly on the knee as she turns to look at the same empty space. “That's what makes perfect sense.” My father shuts his eyes and tilts his head -- an ignore-the-world gesture older than me --and after a few moments, when his eyes open again, he discovers to his complete and utter horror that his son now stands in front of him.

For a slippery instant, it looks as if fifty years of determined self-control might evaporate. Dad takes a deep wet breath. Then, a second breath. I watch the eyes brighten as the face tries to smile, and fails. Then his expression tumbles into a look of profound embarrassment and disgust and worry. I can see my father asking himself what I heard, if anything. And what I think about it. And he has to wonder what I'll say next, which makes two of us. I don't know what I'm thinking, much less how to respond. I'm feeling puzzled. Lost, even. Baffled, and in strange ways, sad. Then because I can't think of anything better, I look at Colleen, hoping for a few salient words of advice.

Our silence is shattered by a new voice.

“Harvey! Is this where you're hiding out?”

Dad blinks. Smiles again. And says, "Bill," with the grateful tone of a man who was praying for any interruption. "You remember my son, Johnny...?"

Bill Wannamaker is a big ruddy-faced man. I don't remember him. Not even a little bit. But he says, "Ah, sure," as if we're old buddies, and he gives me a bone-crushing handshake. Then he turns back to Dad, saying, "Look, Harv! Look what you won in the drawing!" From one of the pockets of his ugly-ass golfing trousers, Bill pulls out a long box of new white golf bails. "Almost makes up for those you lost in that damned creek. Doesn't it?" Dad's embarrassment is small and pleasant. Everyone enjoys a good friendly laugh at his expense. Then Bill announces, "Our guys are starting to pull out. How about you, Harv? You about ready here?" There's a brief pause.

"We could drive you home, Harvey," says Colleen, patting my father on the knee again. "I'll make a quick call and cancel my afternoon appointments. That'll be okay with them. Is it okay with you, Johnny?"

I hear myself saying, "Sure. Why not?"

Bill is staring hard at Colleen's hand and Dad's lucky knee. Envy makes the ruddy face grow even redder now.

"My clubs," Dad chirps. "They're out in Bill's trunk." Colleen gives me a little look.

"I'll get them for you," I promise.

Bill leads me to the parking lot, saying nothing for most of the trip. Then as he opens the cavernous

trunk of his big Lincoln, he has to ask, "Is that redheaded girl...is she here with you?"

"Nope," I tell him.

"I never saw her before in my life," I tell him.

That stops our conversation dead.

I wrestle with Dad's old bag and clubs, fitting the worn leather strap over my shoulder. Then I head for my car, thinking about everything. Feeling certain about nothing. Pulling up short, I take a deep breath, and I turn and walk back up to the clubhouse with the bag and clubs growing heavier by the minute. I find my girl and my father out on the porch. They're talking to each other. Dad asks something, and Colleen answers him. Then Colleen tells him something else. Something that needs a quiet voice and a hand touching him on the shoulder. And the old man nods and wipes at his mouth and looks down the longgreen hillside, neither of them saying anything now. I set the bag down with a rattling pop, and to my father, I say, "We've got time. What if we buy ourselves a bucket of balls?"

I DON'T MENTION GHOSTS. Standing beside Colleen, I watch my father as he concentrates on the ball and himself. Years of determined practice are



visible in the twist of his hips and the grip of his two hands and the changing angle of the driver. The sharp solid whap of the ball is impressive in its own right. For a moment, I lose the ball in the fierce glare of the sun. Then it drops to the driving range, and bounces, and rolls, and vanishes again.

“Very good!” Colleen declares, giving a little applause. The ball does seem as if it went a long, long way. And maybe that's why Dad decides to stop here. He turns and hands me his driver, saying, “You give it a whack.”

“I'm not very good,” I warn.

“Oh, I remember,” he responds.

And I prove my incompetence with half a dozen graceless hacks. If I picked up the balls and threw them overhand, I'd do better. My last shot never gets more than a quarter inch off the ground, and all I can do after that abomination is hand back the driver, laughing along with the rest of our little threesome.

“Now you,” says Dad. Handing it over to Colleen.

Her whacks are crisp but determined, all of her balls traveling farther than mine. Which is fine, I discover.

Is perfect, even.

Dad finishes the bucket for us. And when Colleen and I are standing behind him, at a respectful distance, I finally ask, “What do you see right now?” She turns her head and says, “You.”

“You know what I mean.”

She looks back at him and says, “Nothing. When

he concentrates, like he's doing right now, the ghosts fade away.”

“How many are there,” I ask.

“Four. Five. Maybe six.” She squints, telling me, “But only three of them are clear, consistent presences.”

“I don't believe in ghosts,” I remind her.

“Fine.”

“But assuming there's something there, I mean. Why pick on him?”

“Your father has a rare gift, or a curse. Either way, it lets him see the dead.” She shrugs and gives me a patient look. “It started when he was a boy, I guess. But it was just an occasional talent. Then there was a fuel leak and his plane caught fire, and he managed to parachute free. Only him. The rest of his crew died. His best friends in the world, and they died together, and after all these years, they're still pissed that their lives are finished, and your father still feels guilty that he's still among the living.”

I don't know what to say.

What to think.

“The pilot?” I mutter.

“Is their ringleader.” She points. “A self-possessed little spirit, frankly.” I stare at the empty air. At nothing. And for lack of better, I ask, “How can anyone live that way?”

Followed everywhere by angry ghosts?” “I don't know how,” she admits. Dad sets down the last ball and swings, and the whap is different. Is loud and

crisp, and perfect. The ball flies across the blue May sky, instantly tiny, and it ends up in the trees all the way down by Crooked Creek. Colleen and I clap our hands.

Then she turns to me, and with a voice quiet and firm says, "The thing about ghosts, Johnny. They're extremely simple. Whatever they are. They come out of something angry or lost inside a person, and I've always felt sorry for the poor things." She says, "I'm just warning you, Johnny."

"Why warn me?" I have to ask.

"Because, darling, if you're not careful," she tells me, "you're going to end up trapped like them." She points at the bright empty air.

And my father picks up the empty bucket and his driver, then starts to walk with a tired steady gait, shoving his way through all those angry ghosts, doing a hero's walk in order to get to us.

## The Cuckoo's Boys

1. Here's your first assignment:

*Build a starship. And I want you to tell me all about it. Its name. How big it is. What it is made from. Tell me about its power plant and engines. How many are in the crew, and what are their names? They deserve names. Are they human, and if not, what? Draw them for me, and draw your ship, too. Do you have weapons on board? If so, what kinds? You might want to carry some little scout ships along for the ride. Anything else that you might think is useful, I'll let you take. Plus there's one piece of gear that I'm putting on board. It's a box. A box about this big. Inside is a wormhole. Open its lid, and the wormhole swallows your ship, transporting it to somewhere else. You'll travel through space and through time. Or maybe you'll leave our universe entirely. There's no way to know what happens next.*

*It's all up to me.*

*My name's Houston Cross. Call me Mr. Cross, or Houston. I'm going to be your science mentor for the year.*

\* \* \*

John was one of the first PS's born. He is 13 years old, and since he hasn't been skipped ahead in school, he's an eighth-grader. A growth spurt and a steady lack of exercise have made him larger than many adults. His kinky black hair is short. His coffee-

colored skin has a boy's smoothness, still free of whiskers and hair on the forearms. His brown eyes are active, engaged. He smiles with a nervous eagerness, and sometimes, particularly when he's excited, he talks almost too quickly to be understood.

"Thanks for taking me," he blurts.

Then he adds, "Ms. Lindstrum says you've been doing this for a long time." Ms. Lindstrum is the school's Gifted Facilitator.

"She says I'm lucky to have you."

Houston shrugs and halfway laughs. "I wouldn't know about that."

"How long have you been a mentor?" John asks, saying it in one breath, as if the sentence were a single word.

"Five years," Houston replies. "This is my sixth."

"Have you ever worked with us?"

"Eighth graders? Sure—"

"No. I mean us. Or do you teach normals, usually?"

Houston waits for a moment, then says, "I understood the first time." He shakes his head, telling the boy,

"Please don't talk that way."

"Oh. Sorry!" John is instantly angry with himself. It shows in the eyes and how the big hands wrestle with one another. "You know what I mean. Normal gifted kids."

"Sure, John."

"I'm not better than anyone else," he blurts with a robust conviction. "I don't ever let myself think that

way.”

“Good.”

“And I try to get along. With everyone.”

“That's a good policy, John. Getting along.”

The boy sighs, his face suddenly very young and tired. He looks around the empty classroom, then gazes out the long window. A wide green lawn ends at a quiet street, shade pooling beneath tall pin oaks.

“Can I start?” he asks.

“Excuse me?”

“With my starship. Can I, Mr. Cross?”

“Be my guest.”

The Facilitator met with Houston yesterday. She warned him that John was an only child, and he lived with his divorced mother— a common circumstance among PS's. Perhaps that's why the boy suffered from feelings of guilt and loss and powerlessness. “But in the plus column,” she added, “the mother is relatively well educated, and she seems to genuinely care about him. When she finds time.” John holds his stylus in his left hand, head bent forward, using an electronic workpad for the rest of their hour. He stops only to say that his hand is sore. When the bell rings— an obnoxious, metallic clanging—

he looks up in panic, exclaiming, “But I'm not done yet!”

“Work at home tonight,” Houston offers. “Or tomorrow. Here. We've got plenty of time, John.” The boy scrolls through page after page of sketches and hurried labels. Shaking his head in despair, he says,

“This is all shit. I'm sorry about my language, Mr. Cross. But this is all just shit.”

“We'll try again tomorrow.”

But the boy isn't mollified. Folding his notebook, he says, “I get these ideas. All the time. But a lot of them...well, they're just stupid. You know? They're *rancid!* ...” The mentor smiles in a thin way.

He says, “John,” and pats the boy's left hand.

He says, “Believe me. Everyone chews on that shit sandwich.”

\* \* \*

Phillip Stevens was the only child of an African-American man and his German-American girlfriend. Phillip was labeled gifted before he was eight. He graduated from Princeton at 18, then dropped out of medical school two years later in order to form his own corporation. His first billion dollars were made before he was 26, most of it coming from the rapidly growing genetics industry. His later billions came from shrewd investments and several medi-technical advances in which he played a hands-on role. Following his 30th birthday, Phillip began pouring his wealth into a new research facility. To visitors and the press, he boasted that he would do nothing but cutting-edge research that would alleviate human misery. But close associates grew concerned with the real direction of their work, and to those malcontents, he said, “Here's six figures. Now quiet, or I'll have your nuts for lunch.” Too late, the CDC believed the warnings about the billionaire's plans.

Federal agents in bulky biosuits descended on Phillip's empire. But the criminal had already vanished, taking with him nearly 50 liters of growth media and an artificial microbe dubbed Phillip 23.

\* \* \*

Mike was one of the last PS's born.

He has just skipped the sixth grade. No growth spurt has taken him, and judging by his wiry build, he's physically active. The face is narrower than John's, and two years younger, and something about it seems harder. He lives with parents of modest means. According to Ms. Lindstrum, the boy's genetics have little mutations. Which is normal among the last-born. "Maybe it's his genes," she warned Houston, "or maybe it's something else. Either way, Mike has a different attitude. You'll notice it right away."

"How'd you get this job?" the boy asks. Flat out.

"With bribes," Houston replies. Instantly.

"No," says Mike, never blinking. "I bet they gave you some special test." Houston laughs, admitting, "They asked a lot of questions. But I don't know if I'd call it a test."

"When did this happen?"

"When I started working in the schools."

"How long have you been a teacher?"

"A mentor."

"Yeah. That." Mike has long hair— longer than any current fashion— and either through pharmaceutical tricks or the mutations, it's straighter and edging



toward blond. The boy spends a lot of time pushing unruly locks out of his brown eyes. "You've been a mentor for a long time. Haven't you?"

"Several years now."

"But you didn't deal with *us* till now." He says it, then smiles with a slyness, happy to prove his special knowledge. "I've been asking about you."

"You have been."

"Shouldn't I have?"

Houston waits for a moment, then asks, "Did you talk to John about me?"

"God, no. Not that idiot."

Houston says nothing.

"No, there's some guys you used to teach. To mentor. Whatever." Mike names them— both boys are in high school now— then adds, "They thought you were pretty good. All things considered."

"All things considered, that's good news."

"They told me that you steered clear of *us*."

Houston doesn't respond.

"Why is that?"

"You weren't old enough." He speaks calmly, without doubts. "I like working with middle-schoolers. Not children."

The comment makes an impact. The boy almost smiles, then remembers his next question. "What did they ask?"

"When?"

"When you became a mentor. What kinds of questions did you get?"

“The interviewer wondered what I knew about gifted students. He asked what I would do in this situation, or that one. And he checked to see if I’d ever been arrested—”

“Have you been?”

“Five times,” he says. Then he asks, “Do you believe that?”

“No,” the boy snorts. Then, “What about this year? Did they make you do anything special before you got us?”

“Some things,” Houston admits. “I had to read various books and some very boring reports. And I went through special in-depth training for an entire afternoon. I needed to be sensitized to your circumstances and special needs.”

“Oh, yeah? I’ve got special needs?”

“Everyone does, Mike.”

“What else?”

“I signed a contract. I’m never supposed to talk to the press. Ever.” Houston’s voice sharpens, just for that instant. Then he smiles, adding, “All questions are handled through the Special Task Office at district headquarters.”

Mike seems impressed with the answers or the precautions. Or perhaps both.

Houston prods him. “Work on your starship. Okay?”

Instead of a workpad, Mike has a fat spiral notebook and a pen leaking an unearthly green ink. With his left hand, he writes Day One on the first

page. A moment's reflection leads to a little laugh, then a sly glimpse at his mentor. "Hey, Houston," he says. "Can I have an antimatter cannon?"

"I don't know. What is an 'antimatter cannon'?"

The boy rolls his brown eyes. "It's a cannon. It shoots balls of antimatter. They explode into pure energy when they hit *anything*."

"Okay. But how would a weapon like that work?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is your ship built from antimatter?" Houston asks. "And the crew, too?"

"That would be stupid," the boy assures him. "The first time we landed on another planet— boom."

"But how do you keep your shells from destroying you?" Houston asks the question, then leans closer.

"How do you manipulate something that you can't touch?"

The boy thinks hard for a moment, then says, "Magnets."

"Okay."

"We make cannonballs out of anti-iron," he says, "and we keep them in a vacuum, held there by a really powerful magnetic field."

"Good enough," says Houston.

Mike shakes his head, admitting, "Those guys I know ... they warned me. You can really be un-fun when you want to be."

Houston says, "Good."

The boy folds himself over his notebook, working with the same fevered intensity that John showed.

But he doesn't complain about a sore hand, and while the sketches are sloppier than those on a workpad, he seems infinitely more pleased with the results.

After the bell rings, Houston admits, "I'm curious. What do you want to do with that fancy cannon?"

"Blow up planets," the boy says. Instantly. Then he looks up, wearing a devilish grin.

"Is that okay with you, Houston?"

"Sure," he says. "Why not?"

\* \* \*

The synthetic protozoan, Phillip 23, was a mild but durable pathogen carried by spit and the air. Healthy males and children rarely showed symptoms. The old and impaired developed flu-like infections, and at least a thousand died during the epidemic. But fertile women were the preferred hosts. The bug would invade the monthly egg, consume the mother's nucleus and mitochondria, then replace both with huge amounts of nuclear material.

All races and all parts of the globe were struck by the disease.

Victims included nuns and teenage virgins and at least one lady on death row. During the epidemic, some 3 percent of all conceptions on the planet were baby boys carrying Phillip Stevens' genetic code.

\* \* \*

"Your third mentee," Ms. Lindstrum began to say. Then she hesitated, contemplating her next words. They were sitting in the woman's tiny office.

"The boy's name is Troy Andrew Holdenmeister.

And I should warn you. His parents are utterly devoted to him.”

Houston said, “Okay.”

The Facilitator was scrolling through reports and memos and test results of every complexion. With a mixture of professional distance and practiced scorn, she said, “The mother has dedicated her life to the boy. She has three other children, but it's Troy who gets most of her attentions.”

“I see.”

“She wants to meet with you. Tomorrow, if possible.”

Houston said nothing.

“And there's something else you should know: Troy isn't quite like the other PS's. His scores are lower in the usual peak areas. Math and science, and so on.”

“Mutations?” Houston asked.

She shrugged, as if to say, “We can hope.” But she had to admit, “He's only five months younger than John. Mutations were rare then. And the differences ... well, it isn't likely that a few genes would change so much....”

Ms. Lindstrum looked like someone who had been married once or twice, and always too soon. She was tall and a little heavy around the hips, and beneath a professional veneer was a puddle of doubts and fickle emotions. Houston recognized the symptoms. They showed in the lonely eyes and the way she always would watch his eyes. He sensed that if he wanted, he

could gently take hold of one of her hands, say the usual nice words, and have her. Within the week, Ms. Lindstrum would be making breakfast for him, wearing nothing but her best apron, smiling in a giddy, lovesick way.

Houston didn't reach for her hand.

"Is Troy adopted?" he asked.

Ms. Lindstrum shook her head. "I know someone who knows the family. Mrs. Holdenmeister was most definitely pregnant."

A Newly Standardized IQ score lay in plain sight. Houston underlined the number with his thumb, remarking, "There could have been some simple prenatal problem."

"Maybe," she agreed.

But probably not, thought Houston.

Then quietly and a little sadly, Ms. Lindstrum admitted, "It's a respectably average IQ. Enough to make any parent happy ... if she didn't know any better...."

\* \* \*

A 13-year-old boy sits hunched over a large, expensive workpad, focusing all of his attentions on his starship.

"He loves this kind of project," says his mother. She sits at the front of the classroom, and without a gram of subtlety, she stares at her son's mentor. "I'm relieved that you agreed to meet with me. Our last mentor didn't want to."

The woman is small and delicate as a carpet tack,

with fierce little blue eyes that hint at a scorching temper.

Houston doesn't say what first comes to mind.

Instead, he tells her, "I want a good relationship with every parent."

"Do you have the other boys, too?" she wants to know.

He nods. "John and Mike. Yes."

"Try, if you can, to keep Mike away from my Troy." She says what she thinks, then thinks about how it sounds. To soften the moment, she adds, "John's very nice. We like him quite a bit. But the other one ... he scares us, frankly...."

Houston says nothing.

He refuses to look at the woman. Instead, he stares into the blackness of the on-line screen. It covers the back wall. The teacher who uses this classroom in the morning has turned it off, which is standard policy. He makes a mental note to ask for the screen to be left ready to work, in case they need help. Perhaps sensing his mood, Mrs. Holdenmeister makes eye contact and tries a hard little smile. "If you need it, I can arrange for special software. And lab equipment. Anything of that sort."

"Not for now," he says. "Thank you."

"Because I'm perfectly willing—"

Houston interrupts, explaining, "What I usually do is give my students thought problems. They have to work out what's happening, and why, and what they can do about it."

"I see," she says, without conviction.

"And sometimes I'll make them face ethical dilemmas, too. What's right, what's wrong. And in the absence of either, what's best."

She opens her mouth, then hesitates.

After a long pause, she asks, "Would it be all right if I watch you at work again? With my husband. Name the day, and he'll take the afternoon off from work... if that wouldn't be too much trouble—"

"I don't believe so." He says it calmly, with a flat unaffected voice.

"Excuse me?"

"I wouldn't be comfortable," he explains. "An audience isn't going to help me with what I'm doing here." She doesn't know what to say. Sitting motionless, Mrs. Holdenmeister breathes rapidly, trying to imagine a new, more productive avenue.

She decides on pity.

"You know," she whispers, "it's been very difficult just getting him into the mentoring program. That Facilitator has fought us all the way."

"Well," Houston replies, "I agree with you on this one."

That wins a smile, cold but bright. Then she abruptly turns her head, saying, "Darling," with a big, overdone voice. "Do you have something for us?"

"Mr. Cross?" says the boy. He's nearly as old as John, but smaller. Not just thinner, but he hasn't found his growth spurt yet. Whatever the reason, he's little larger than the 11-year-old Mike. Where the



other boys have quick eyes, Troy's are simpler and slower. And while he has their voice, the words come out at their own studied pace.

"How is this, Mr. Cross?"

His mother snatches the workpad, then says, "Darling. It's wonderful!" Houston waits.

"Isn't it just spectacular, Mr. Cross?" She hands the pad to him, then tells her son, "Great job! It's just wonderful!"

The boy and his software have drawn a starship with precise lines and in three dimensions. There are intricate details, and on the next pages, elaborate plans for the bridge and the engines. It's very thorough work, and that's all it is.

Quietly, without inflection, Houston says, "Troy." He asks, "Have you seen the movie *Starfarer*?"

"About a thousand times," the boy confesses.

"Because that's where this ship came from," Houston warns him. "You've done an exceptional job of copying it."

The brown eyes blink. Confused, suspicious.

But Mom hears an entirely different message.

"Good for you!" she sings out. "Good, good, good for you!"

\* \* \*

*2. Your starship emerges from the wormhole.*

*The first thing you see is a disk. The disk has stripes. Some dark, some candy-colored. Plus there are two blood-red swirls. And the disk itself is flattened on top and below, and it bulges out around*

*its waist.*

*That's what you can see, and what else can you tell me?*

\* \* \*

“Is it Jupiter?” John asks.

“How do you know it's a planet?”

“Can I see stars?”

“Yes.”

“The stripes are clouds. The swirls are hurricanes.”

“All right. It's a planet,” Houston conceded.

“Is it Jupiter?”

“Two red swirls,” Houston repeats.

“Yeah, but that wormhole can take us through time. So it could be Jupiter. But millions of years ago.”

“Good point. But it's not.”

The boy nods compliantly, then grins. “Tau Ceti 5.”

“Excuse me?”

“It's a planet. Haven't you heard about it?” Sensing an advantage, John explains, “They've found thousands of planets that look like Jupiter. The big telescopes spot new ones every day.”

“They do,” Houston agrees. “This isn't one of them.”

“No?” The boy licks his lips, puzzled. “What about its sun?”

“Good question.” The mentor pauses, considering his possibilities. “Two suns,” he offers. “Close enough to touch each other.”

“Can that happen?”

“Sometimes. But it's temporary. They'll lose momentum and fall together, then merge into one sun.”

“Delicious!” he exclaims. Then, “What else can I see?”

“Moons. With your naked eyes, you count five of them.”

“Big ones?”

“I don't know. How do we find out?”

John shrugs and says, “With sensors. I'll ask my sensors.”

“What kinds of sensors?”

“Sensors.” The boy believes in that word, and why can't Mr. Cross?

“But how do they work?” Houston asks. Then he warns him, “Not by magic, they don't. Every machine has its job and its inherent logic.”

John grunts and says, “I don't know. They just work.”

Houston shakes his head.

The boy compresses his mouth to a point, staring at his elaborate starship. It looks like a crystal chandelier with rockets stuck in its stem. “I don't get it,” he finally confesses. “I thought we were going to explore the universe.”

“So we'll start with good old universal principles,” Houston tells him. “About light and energy and mass, for instance. Then later, if you really want, we can move on to those boring old moons.”

The PS epidemic lasted 30 months. Occasionally the clones shared the womb with unrelated embryos. Sometimes they arrived as identical twins or triplets. But most were single babies, active and free of complications. In modern nations, a relatively simple test allowed expectant mothers to learn if their son was a clone. Many chose chemical or clinical abortions. And there was a deluge of orphaned babies that ended up with more forgiving or more desperate couples.

In certain backward nations, solutions wore harsher faces.

There were even places that pretended to escape the PS plague. Despite the global nature of this illness, despots and their xenophobic citizens denied ever seeing the clones, and they denied every rumor about organized infanticide. And even if babies were dying by the thousands, who could blame them?

A man and woman struggle to raise their own child. Why should they be forced to raise an abomination, too?

Which was what those babies were.

Abominations.

An opinion officially ridiculed by wealthy nations. Even while opinion polls found that a quarter to a third of their own people believed exactly that.

\* \* \*

“The first thing I do is shoot it.”

“Shoot the planet?”

“Are you going to let me?” Mike asks.

“Who am I? Part of your crew?” Houston lifts his hands, saying, “Wait. You haven't told me anything about the people on board.”

“They aren't human.”

“Okay.”

“They're robots. Ten feet tall and built of smart metals.”

Houston nods, then asks, “Do those robots have a leader?”

“Sure.”

“What's his name?”

Mike dips his head, staring at his green-ink-and-paper starship. It's a bullet-shaped contraption bristling with every possible weapon.

“You'll want a good strong name,” says Houston.

“Damned right!”

“How about Crocus?” he suggests.

“I like that! Crocus!” Mike nods and pushes at his hair, then asks, “Can Crocus fire his antimatter cannon?”

“Be my guest.”

“All right. He lets loose a planet-busting round. Then, What happens?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it takes time for the round to reach its target.”

Mike shakes his head, and with a disapproving tone says, “John warned me about this game of yours.”

“You talked to John?”

“In the hallway. For just a second.”

“I thought you didn't like him.”

“I don't. He's a fat twisted goof.” Then the boy shrugs, adding, “But he always talks to me. I can't stop him.”

Houston watches the narrow face, the narrowed eyes. Then, “How fast is your cannon ball moving?”

“Fast.”

“Make a guess.”

“Half-light speed. How's that?”

“If it takes 20 seconds for the antimatter to reach the planet—”

“It's 10 light seconds away.” The boy dismisses the entire game, saying, “This is easy. That big planet is ... let me think ...” He does some quick calculations on paper. “Twenty million miles away. No, wait! ... Two million miles. Right?”

“Something like that.”

Mike nods, happily in control. “So then. How big's the explosion?”

“Good-sized.”

“Damn right!”

Houston shakes his head, saying, “The shell's moving half the velocity of light, which means it has a terrific momentum. It burrows into the atmosphere and turns to plasma and light, and the explosion comes squirting back up through the vacuum left behind it. Like out of another cannon, sort of.”

“And the planet explodes—!”

“Hardly,” Houston warns. “It's not nearly the explosion you want.”

“That's stupid,” Mike tells him.

“No,” says Houston. “It's not.”

The boy stares at his starship, confusion and betrayal on his face. And then a sudden little smile comes to the eyes and mouth, and he exclaims, “I get it. That world's antimatter, too. Isn't it?”

“What if it is?”

“Jesus,” he says, with mock panic. Then he slams his notebook shut and says,

“We've got to get the hell out of here!”

\* \* \*

Worldwide, birth rates dropped for better than five years.

Couples delayed having children. Millions of women underwent hysterectomies, so great was their fear of conceiving a PS. The epidemic's climax was marked with incompetent news coverage sparking wild rumors. The most persistent rumor was that Phillip Stevens' genes were found inside every newborn, regardless of sex or race. And what made the rumor all the more pernicious was that it was true, in a sense: Humans were a young species. Eskimos and Pigmies shared vast amounts of genetic information. But that abstraction didn't translate well at work and home, and millions of healthy, non-PS offspring were aborted during the panic.

Even when a vaccine was available, people remained suspicious.

What if it didn't work as promised?

Or worse, what if this was just the first plague? What if a hundred mad bastards were putting together their own bugs, and this mess was really just beginning?

\* \* \*

"Maybe that planet has life," says Troy.

"Maybe so. How would you find out?"

The boy says, "I'll go there." Then he thinks to ask, "May I?"

"By all means."

Houston describes the two-million-mile voyage, and later, as the Hollywood-built starship slips into the atmosphere, Houston asks, "Who's in command?"

"The captain." Troy and his software have drawn a dozen people wearing trim blue uniforms. Everyone resembles a famous actor or actress. The captain is the tallest, oldest man, sporting a short dark beard.

"What's his name?"

"Storm. Captain Storm."

"Is he a human, or a robot?"

"Oh, he has to be human."

"Is he a good man?"

"Always." The boy looks at Houston with an imploring expression. "He wouldn't be the captain if he wasn't."

"Fair enough." Houston nods, smiles. Then he scratches his little beard, saying, "Your ship flies into a cloud and pulls in a sample."

"Of what?"



“I don't know. At room temperature and pressure, it's liquid.”

“Like water?”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe there's life in it.”

“How would you test that?” Houston asks.

The boy inhales, then holds his breath. Thinking.

“Any ideas?”

He exhales, confessing, “I know I'm not supposed to use sensors.”

“Did John tell you?”

Troy shakes his head, then catches himself.

“Don't worry,” Houston purrs. “You can talk to Mike. I don't care.” All the same, the boy seems ashamed.

Then Houston prods him, saying, “A microscope is a kind of sensor. And I'll let you use any sensor if you understand how it works.”

“I do,” says Troy. “I've got two microscopes at home.”

“Okay. Use one of them now.”

The hands assemble an imaginary slide, then the right eye squints into an imaginary eyepiece. Watching, Houston quietly asks, “What is life?”

Then, in more concrete terms, he asks, “How do you recognize it?”

“Life is busy,” the boy tells him, his voice pragmatic and pleased.

“When I make a slide at home, what I look for are things that are really, really busy.”

3. *You set down on a desolate world. A hard white plain stretches to the horizon. There's no trace of people or cities or even simple life forms. But perhaps something once lived here, and that's why you're putting on your archaeology hat.*

*I want you to dig into a piece of ground.*

*Like a scientist, you need to keep track of everything that you find. Everything. I want you to leave future generations with enough information to resurrect this dig site. Keep notes. Always. Make drawings and maps. And try to figure out what happened here.*

*There's a story waiting. If you can find it.*

Houston has a small one-bedroom apartment that's a short drive from school. It's clean, but rarely tidy. He has lived here for a little more than five years. Prints of famous abstracts hang above the second-hand furniture. On a shelf fixed to one white wall are a pair of trophies. "Mentor of the Year," the plaques read. "Houston Cross." Both trophies show a pair of brass hands clasping— one hand large and grandfatherly, while the other is quite small and only half-formed.

He is working in the tiny kitchen.

Big old roasting pans are set in a row on the countertop. Inside each pan are pieces of shattered robots and random wires and the carefully dismantled bodies of several plastic toys. Houston

bought three skeletal monsters, each with a human-like skull and six arms rooted into a long back. He has cut them apart and thrown out the occasional piece—fossils are almost never whole— and after setting everything into a careful heap, he pours a fresh polymer-plaster into the pans, trying not to spill, and when he does, immediately cleaning up the dribbles and drops.

“Breaking news,” says the television. It's an old high-density, but Houston built its AI from a kit, then trained it to find what interests him.

He glances up and says, “Show me.”

“— furthermore, the study shows that once a minimally enriched environment is achieved, the boys'

intellectual development plateaus—”

The pictured face could be John's. It's older than most PS's, and pudgy.

“Save it,” says Houston. “I'll watch it later.”

“Okay,” says the machine.

He sets the three pans inside the oven, the low heat helping the plaster cure. Then he heats up last night's leftovers in the microwave and, sitting in front of the television, prepares to watch the news story.

“Breaking news,” says his television.

“Show me.”

“— the controversial book is the fifth most popular title in the world today. *The Cuckoo's Boys* has sold more than 20 million copies, and that despite being banned in much of Europe and Brazil.” The author

appears. Beneath him floats a name. Dr. Paul Kaan. An ex-associate of Phillip Stevens, Kaan has a gentle face and hard, uncompromising eyes. Talking to an unseen audience, he explains, "I wrote this book because it's vital that people understand. What the PS's represent is nothing short of a debasing of our species and a debacle for our immortal souls!"

Houston watches the three-minute report.

Afterward, the screen returns to a mountain vista accompanied by a quiet dose of Grieg. More minutes pass. The oven timer goes off. Finally, almost grudgingly, Houston rises and pulls the pans out of the oven. Then he sits again, watching his dinner grow cold, and the AI asks, "Should I run the synopsis?"

"Excuse me?"

"About the intellectual development of the PS clones. Are you still interested?"

"Not really. No."

\* \* \*

The curved tip of the butterknife bites into the plaster, and the blade itself starts to bow as John presses, working to expose a length of yellow-brown plastic bone. He's been working quickly, almost frantically, for most of the hour, taking notes only when coaxed. After two months together, Houston feels sure that the boy should be enjoying himself. But something is wrong, distracting him. It isn't much of a guess when Houston asks, "What's going on at home?"

“Nothing,” John blurts.

“Okay.”

“Nothing,” he says again. Then as if caught in the lie, he adds, “Well, yeah. I got in a fight last night.”

“With your mom?”

“No. Her boyfriend.” He shakes his head, then shoves hard with the knife, the entire bone popping out of its hole.

“Notes,” Houston urges.

“I know. I know.” Abbreviated, useless observations are jotted down. Then everything comes to a halt. John drops the knife and says, “My wrist hurts. Really bad.” Then he stares out the window, dumbfounded rage in the eyes and the hard-set mouth.

After a long moment, Houston asks, “What happened last night, John?”

“I’m not *him*.”

Houston waits.

“That boyfriend of hers ... he always calls me Phillip.” The boy deepens his voice, saying, “Phillip, bring me this. Phillip, you’re in my way. Phillip, get the hell lost.”

“But you’re not Phillip Stevens.”

John looks at his feet now. Shaking his head.

“You’re just the man’s genetics.”

“I told him that.”

Houston says, “Good.”

“PS was a different person than me. Right?”

“Absolutely.”

“I mean, he was born in a different century, and in another place. Everything about his life was different than mine. Right?”

“Did you tell him that?”

“Yeah. But all he did ...” he just laughed at me. He said, “That's just what old Phillip would say, if he was here.”

Houston says nothing.

“Fucker,” says the boy. Viciously, with a pure scalding hatred.

Then with a low, stern voice, his mentor suggests, “You shouldn't, maybe. I know you don't like your mother's friend, but calling him that name—”

“No, Mr. Cross,” John interrupts. “I'm talking about the other fucker.”

\* \* \*

For four years, law enforcement agencies followed every wrong lead, interviewed millions of earnest, mistaken individuals, and through means legal and otherwise, they pulled up the bank and tax records of more than a billion suspects.

But in the end, a routine traffic accident gave them Phillip Stevens.

An unidentified man driving a dilapidated pickup truck happened to rear-end a young mother. Bumpers locked. When two uniformed officers arrived, the man was staring at a PS child riding in the back seat. Suddenly he panicked, pulling a weapon and discharging it into the air. Witnesses saw him fleeing into a nearby warehouse. There was a

second muted shot. Eventually, a SWAT team broke into the warehouse and discovered a body lying in a tiny men's room, the scene filthy with blood and bone and bits of drying brain matter.

Subsequent tests proved that the corpse belonged to the missing billionaire. His face and skin color had been altered by surgical means, but his famous DNA was instantly recognized by five reputable labs, including his own.

The young mother was labeled a hero, then lost the label when she refused 10 million dollars for her role in ending the manhunt. Furthermore, she enraged many by admitting that she only wished she had known who the man was ... she wanted to thank Phillip for giving her her wonderful son! ...

\* \* \*

Youth is a blessing.

When Mike takes the knife to the plaster, he believes. He is *eleven*, and this is fun, and he's enthralled. Intent, absolutely focused, each slice into the whiteness is full of possibilities. Like John and every other young boy, PS or not, scientific ritual distracts him from his fun. Notes are taken, but only under duress. Working with ink on paper, Mike jots and sketches. Then he picks up the knife with both hands, making a game of picking his next quadrant, and after a calming breath, he cuts chisels a deep wedge of plaster.

Houston can't remember where he put which artifact, and so it's nearly a surprise to him when the

boy uncovers a single golden eye gazing up at the alien sky.

Mike says, "Shit."

He giggles and says, "Neat," and goes to work with an old toothbrush, using bristles bent against Houston's teeth, sweeping away the clinging dust.

Half of the period is invested exhuming the skull. It's small and obviously plastic, yet something about it intrigues the boy. He can't stop smiling afterwards, moving to the next quadrant and working his way down to a severed hand clinging to a toy weapon. With a dissecting needle, he shoves at the trigger. A weak light and muted whine come from beneath the hardened plaster.

Houston waits.

The boy looks up, grinning.

"Wal-Mart?" he says matter-of-factly.

Disappointed, Houston shrugs and says, "Maybe."

But the boy's attitude shifts. With his next breath, he's back on that other world, and with a bleak authority, he says, "This is some ass-kicking monster. So something really tough must have killed it. That's what I think!"

\* \* \*

After the bell rings, the hallway jams with students.

Houston's habit is to walk each boy to the door, then stand there and watch the kids pass by. The sixth-graders are still very much children; while the eighth-graders, and particularly the girls, are



metamorphosizing into their adult selves. By the end of the year, Houston will catch himself watching the young women. When he first began mentoring, a certain kind of girl might offer glances and winsome smiles. But five-plus years is a long time, and his wilting hair and the graying beard makes him look older than their fathers. Houston has, in effect, vanished from their hormonal radar. Mike's locker is straight across the hall.

Still grinning about the buried skull, he fingers his lock, and when it doesn't recognize him, he slams it hard against the gray steel, then tries again.

Troy steps up behind him, saying something.

The two boys talk for a moment. Differences in age and Mike's bleached hair make them look like siblings, not twins. And it helps that Troy carries himself with a slump-shouldered shyness, while his younger brother is the cockier, self-assured one.

Houston tries to read lips. And faces. And postures.

Then he notices other students. Like him, some stare. One boy points, which triggers a second to follow his lead. Then a tall girl giggles and shouts, "Which one's real? Which one's real?" Mike calmly flips the girl off.

Troy just dips his head, trying to ignore the taunt.

Then as Houston starts to say something to the girl— acidic and cutting and cold— she turns and skips past him, still giggling, a bony elbow clipping his elbow as she passes, never noticing him.

In the end, Troy is the only boy to reassemble the entire skeleton. What's more, he uses resins and a bottomless patience to sculpt bones to replace what's missing. When the others have gone on new missions, he continues to happily piece together and repair. In the end, both a tiny toy robot and the skeleton man look like museum displays, mounted on a new plaster landscape that he and his mother built on a rainy Saturday.

Houston hangs a dozen concepts on those toys.

Entropy. Evolution. Anatomy.

"Those extra arms wouldn't work," he explains. "No shoulders, so there's no place to anchor the muscles. Is there?"

The boy shrugs. "I guess not."

"Why would a six-armed man evolve?"

With an enduring patience, he says, "I guess he must have needed them."

"The universe tends to slide from order into disorder. Have you ever heard that before, Troy?"

"When Mom cleans my room." When he laughs, he sounds most like John. Like Mike. Like many hundreds of thousands of boys. But the grim, abstract heart of this entropy business remains out of reach. He shrugs again, and with an easy-going stubbornness, he confesses, "I don't think about that stuff much." Trying to cushion the bad news, he shrugs and smiles, admitting, "I'm not like them, Mr. Cross. Sorry."

The bookstore still accepts cash.

What's more, it's large enough to keep a ready inventory of bestsellers. No need to wait around three minutes while your purchase is printed and bound. Houston can pick up a fresh copy from under a sign that reads: "Controversial. #1 Seller!" Then he can take the copy up front and pay, asking for a sack, please.

The fear of discovery is wholly irrational.

And worse, it's laughable.

But Houston has mentored more than a dozen kids, and various parents know him, and countless teachers and administrators would recognize him on sight. Those are all exactly the kinds of people who might be browsing in a bookstore on a warm October night, which is why he takes precautions, and why he feels secretly nervous, stepping outside and strolling to his car with a forced nonchalance. No parking slots are left at his apartment's lot. Houston's forced to leave his little car on the street. As he enters the building, he finds half a dozen neighbors and their friends on their way to a Halloween party. All are in costume, and drunk. The party must have a theme; everyone wears the same full mask, the adult Phillip Stevens reborn with rubber and fake hair.

"Out of our way!" one man shouts.

"Genetic superiority coming through!" says another.

A woman says, "Stop that," and slaps a hand off

her ass. Then she slides up against Houston, beery breath telling him, "You look different. You look awfully cute!"

"He's not," says the first man.

"He's inferior," says the second man.

Then they're past him. And Houston stands on the bottom stair for a long while, doing nothing but breathing, holding tight to the rail with his free hand.

\* \* \*

*4. You pop out the wormhole and find yourself inside a clear thick gel. This universe is a thicktransparent goo that goes on forever.*

*Fire your engines, and you can move.*

*But barely, and your hull creaks and groans, and the instant you stop your engines, your ship comes to an abrupt halt.*

*Now a monster swims out of the gelatin. It dwarfs the largest whale, and it's covered with tree-sized hairs that beat like oars, carrying it straight at you.*

*What do you do?*

*No, that weapon won't work here.*

*And that one won't kill it.*

*Just pisses it off, in fact.*

*So what now?*

*You can run, but the monster is faster. It's ready to eat you and your ship. Whole. And you've got four seconds to think this through and tell me: Where are you?*

*Now three seconds.*

*And two.*

*And one.*

\* \* \*

“Mr. Cross,” John blurts. “There’s something new here!”

Houston fights the temptation to look for himself. Instead, he sits back and watches the boy twist at the knobs, his jaw dropping an instant before he leaps back. Dramatic, overdone. “God, it’s huge!”

“Draw it,” Houston coaches.

“Okay, I’ll try!”

The boys and mentor have set up an aquarium at the back of the classroom— five gallons of tapwater with its chlorine removed, then sweetened with straw and oxygenated with a simple airstone. Over the past five days, using Troy’s donated microscope, they’ve watched the microbial community explode and evolve, bacteria followed by hungry parameciums— the “monsters” of the gel universe— and now the parameciums are serving as fodder for an even larger, more wondrous monster.

“It’s got wheels,” John reports.

“Where?”

“On this end.” John commands the circles in his drawing to spin, giving his creation a liveliness. “They go around and around, then stop. And then they go again.”

“How big is it?”

“Huge,” the boy declares. Then he peers into the eyepiece with his right eye— none of the boys can resist pinching his left closed— and suddenly, with a

quieter, more honest astonishment, he says, "Jesus, it ate one!"

"One what?"

"One of the parameciums. I saw it!"

Houston picks up the workpad, trying to remember when he first saw a rotifer swimming across a glass slide.

"You should look at it, Mr. Cross. Look!"

Anticipation makes the mouth dry. He bends over the microscope, the fine adjustment knob spinning easily between finger and thumb. As promised, the rotifer seems vast. And as if answering his wish, he watches while one of the football-shaped protozoa is caught in that intricate mouth, spinning hairs pulling the transparent carcass inside a transparent body.

Water eating water.

When you got down to it, that's what it's all about.

\* \* \*

The woman teaches science at a different school. Their relationship is three years old, and it is convenient, and it has mostly run its course. They see each other infrequently. But as it happens, she's at Houston's apartment on that weekend evening when the television interrupts them, saying, "Breaking news."

"Not now," he tells it.

But the machine obeys its rigorous instructions. "Important, breaking news."

"Maybe the President's been shot," says the woman. Then she sits up and says, "Anyway, I

probably need to get home.” She pulls a heavy sweater over her head, speaking through the frizzy red wool. “I want to see this news first.”

“Show us,” says Houston.

“— the gunman apparently turned the weapon on himself, committing suicide. At least 14 students died, while nine more are hospitalized, six in critical condition—”

“Where is this?” Houston asks.

“Australian Independent—”

“From the beginning. Now.”

Schools always look like schools. Houston stares at a glass and brick building as the narrator reports,

“Today, an unidentified male walked into the Riverview School for the Gifted, shouted inflammatory phrases, then produced a pair of handguns, killing more than a dozen boys in their early teens—”

“Shit,” says the woman.

Houston is silent.

“All of the deceased, and all but two of the injured, are clones of Phillip Stevens. At this point, it's assumed that the murderer was singling them out....”

On screen, grim-faced paramedics are carrying dark sacks. Some of the sacks seem heavy, while others are less so.

The woman sits next to Houston, exhaling hard.

She says, “Shit,” quietly. Then with a different voice, “Have you seen my rings?”

“On the kitchen counter.” She always leaves her

diamond and wedding band on the counter. But she doesn't move. Instead, she places a damp hand on Houston's bare knee, telling him, "This sounds horrible. But I'm surprised that it's taken this long for this sort of tragedy to happen. You know?" He doesn't speak.

His lover gives him a few seconds, then asks, "What are you thinking?" He stares at those rubber sacks set in a ragged row, and he thinks that it's odd. As they are now, robbed of their faces and souls, those boys have never looked more alike.

\* \* \*

"We'll have new security measures naturally." Ms. Lindstrum whispers, trying to keep her words private. It's a week after the Riverview Massacre, but there have already been three more attacks In France. In White Russia. And two PS's dead in Boston. "Cameras in the hallway," she promises. "At least one armed guard stationed in the front office. And all of us who work directly with the boys ... we'll naturally have to go through an extensive security check ..."

"I've already been scrutinized," says Houston. "Six years ago."

"It's a formality," she assures.

He doesn't mention the obvious: Any determined person can kill these boys anywhere in time and space. No reasonable amount of security will protect them. And unreasonable security will just make their lives more constricted, and their murders more noteworthy.



Houston doesn't say one word, watching Troy working at the back of the room.

"You did speak with them?" Ms. Lindstrum inquires. "About what happened in Australia, I mean."

"That next day," he says.

"How were they?"

"John was shaken. 'Killing someone is always awful,' he told me." Houston closes his eyes, the voices and faces coming back to him. "Troy acted sad, and sorry. But I don't think he appreciates what happened. It's on the other end of the world, and I think his mother shields him from the news. So none of it's quite real."

"And Mike?"

"Pissed, more than anything."

"That's sounds like him," she chimes in.

But it wasn't a simple anger. The boy had made fists and drummed on the top of his desk, growling, "It won't happen to me."

"It won't, but why not?" Houston had asked.

"I'm not the same as the others. I look different." He nodded explaining with an amoral practicality, "If some asshole comes to school firing, he's going to shoot John first. Then Troy. And finally me. Except I'll have run away by then!"

Houston neglects to mention any of that conversation.

Misreading his grim expression, Ms. Lindstrum says, "I wouldn't worry. This is a good community, in

its heart. Nothing tragic's going to happen here.”

He just looks at her.

She starts to ask, “What are you thinking?”

But just then Troy spins in his chair, calling out, “Mr. Cross? I found a baby snail. Want to see?”

“Do I ever!” he blurts. “Do I ever!”

\* \* \*

“It is an honor, Mr. Cross. Houston. May I call you Houston? And thanks for taking the trouble. I know this has to be an imposition.”

“It isn't,” Houston lies.

The school district's headquarters are set inside a sprawling single-story building designed on some now-defunct principle of efficiency and/or emotional warmth. The central area is one vast room. Working areas are divided by partial walls and overly green plastic foliage. The ventilation system produces a constant roar, not unlike the Brownian drumming of atoms against a starship's hull. Over that roar, the man in charge of security says, “I mean it. It's an honor to cross paths, sir. We have so much trouble finding good mentors, and keeping them. Which makes you something of a legend around here.” Houston gives a little nod. “What can I do for you?”

“Very little.” The man looks and sounds like a retired police officer. A military cop, perhaps. Dragging a thick hand across the hairless scalp, he says, “You used to be ... what's the term? ... A professional student. At two universities. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

He glances at his monitor. “Your resumé lists several impressive degrees.”

“I have a trust fund,” says Houston. “A little one. It gives me enough security for that kind of lifestyle.”

“Good for you,” says the cop. Without inflection.

Houston waits.

“Then you moved here and took up mentoring ... six years ago. Correct?”

“Correct.”

Again the hand is dragged across the scalp. “Now I couldn't help but notice. You didn't work with PS's until this year.”

“I guess I didn't. No.”

The cop sits motionless, clear eyes regarding Houston without suspicion.

“The boys were too young,” Houston offers. “As a rule, I work with middle-schoolers.”

“That's what I thought.” He nudges the monitor just enough to let both of them skim over a life's history. Houston read dates, places.

He says nothing.

“Of course there were two boys ... older ones who skipped grades ... and they were kicking around your current school before the others...”

“True enough.” Then with a flat, matter-of-fact voice, Houston points out, “I had other students then. Two girls and a boy. And I felt a certain loyalty to them.”

“Good for you.”

Silence.

The monitor is eased aside, glare hiding whatever it shows now. The clear eyes grow a little less so, and with a pained voice, the cop says, "I'm awfully sorry. I'm required to ask these questions, sir."

"Go on," says Houston.

"Are you a member of the Defenders of the Womb?"

"No."

"Do you know anyone who you suspect could be a member?"

"No."

"How about the Birth-Righters?"

"God, no."

"Like I said, I have to ask." He pauses, considering his next words. Or not. Perhaps this is a game that he's played too many times, and he has to remind himself what comes next. "Mr. Cross," he says. "I mean Houston. Have you read any of the anti-PS literature or watched the associated digitals?" Houston sets his jaw, and waits.

"I'm sure you know what I mean, sir. There's some awful things being published. That crazy in Australia had stacks of the stuff...."

"*The Cuckoo's Boys*," says Houston.

"Excuse me?"

"That book was in the crazy's stacks. As I recall."

"Perhaps. But honestly, it isn't on my list of dangerous works."

"Isn't it?" Houston leans forward, asking his

interrogator, "Why not?"

"It isn't in the same category as those other works," he claims, "since it never advocates murder."

"No, it doesn't," Houston agrees.

"The boys are the blameless product of an evil man."

"Says Paul Kaan."

"Who used to work for Phillip Stevens. As I recall, they were colleagues and friends." The eyes lift and grow distant. "The moral thing to do is to give the PS's useful lives. But to protect our species, they have to be sterilized, too."

The ventilation's rumbling fades away.

"It sounds like you know the book," says Houston.

But the man won't be caught so easily. "I'm just repeating what I've seen on television, sir. That's all."

"But what if?" asks Houston. "What if Congress decides to pass laws and perform a simple clinical procedure on every boy? ..."

"Well what, Mr. Cross?"

"What's your feeling about that?"

"My only concern, sir, is that there is no violence inside our schools." Houston nods, sitting back again.

The cop glances down, then asks, "Do you own a firearm, sir?"

"No."

"Do you possess bomb-making materials?"

"Yes."

The eyes lift and grow large.

An angry laugh, then Houston explains, "I've got a

well-stocked kitchen, and there's a filling station at the end of the block. So in theory, yes, I can make a substantial bomb. Anytime I want.”

“That's not the best answer. Sir.”

“Then no, I don't have bomb-making materials.”

“Good. Thank you.” The eyes dip again, and quietly, speaking as much to himself as Houston, he says,

“This is what you do all day, isn't it, sir? These little mind games? ...”

\* \* \*

*5. You emerge from the wormhole, what you see is blackness. Perfect, endless blackness. But as your eyes adapt, you begin to make out a faint curtain of light in front of you. And behind you. And above. And below.*

*Now, what do you do? ...*

\* \* \*

Mike starts to say, “Sensors,” before catching his mistake.

He grimaces instead, then tells Houston, “I'll use my thermometer. I put it in the airlock. What does it read?”

“About two degrees.”

“Kelvin?”

“Yes.”

The boy stares at his starship's newest incarnation. It's still armored and bristling with weapons, but now bubble-like portholes line its sides, and the robotic crew has shrunk to human proportions.

“All right,” says Mike. “I use my barometer. What does it say?”

“Nothing.”

“It doesn't work?”

“No. It's reading nothing. Zero.”

“Pure vacuum.” He nods, muttering, “I'm out in space somewhere.” Houston waits.

“Okay. I shoot my antimatter cannon. What happens?”

“Eventually, the shell strikes the curtain of light, and its surface gets bright for as long as it's passing through. But the curtain's very thin, and most of the shell's mass continues on its merry way.”

“I get it. There's not much stuff there, is there?” He nods again, then says, “Okay. I follow it.”

“Okay.”

“And I reach the curtain?”

“Eventually.”

“Can I get through?”

“Eventually.”

“What's 'eventually' mean?”

“A few million years, give or take.”

“But my throttle's all the way open!” The boy leans back, licking his lips. “In a vacuum, I'd be going nearly light speed!”

Houston says, “Agreed.”

“Okay. I stop inside the curtain. What happens?”

“It swirls around you. Like a slow, slow fog.”

“I take a sample.”

“How?”

Frustration builds, then collapses into resignation. “Okay. I put a jelly jar in the airlock, then open the outer door, and some of the fog drifts into the jar. All right?”

“Fine.”

“I screw down the lid and bring the sample to the lab.”

Houston says nothing.

“And I put everything in my best microscope. What do I see?”

“Lights. Tiny, bright-colored points of light.”

The boy licks his lips, eyes narrowed, one hand absently sweeping the hair out of his baffled eyes.

“Most of the lights are dim and red,” Houston adds. “Others are yellow. And the brightest few are blue.”

“What about—?”

Houston shouts, “Wow!”

The boy halfway jumps. “What happened?”

“A big flash of light!”

“Outside somewhere?”

“No. From the jar.”

“How big?” He shakes his head, asking, “Is there damage?”

“You're blind now.”

“Okay. I pop in new eyes. Now what do I see?”

“One of those tiny blue lights has vanished. That's the only change.” Mike rises to his feet. Trying to concentrate, he steps up to the window, staring at the falling snow as one hand, then the other, plays with



his shaggy hair.

Several minutes later, he screams, "Jesus!"

He smiles and says to the snow, "You made me huge. Didn't you?"

\* \* \*

6. *Jungle. And a Blue, Blue Sea.*

*Swimming in the warm water are fish not too different from our fish, and creatures that resemble porpoises, and something with a round body and paddles and a tiny head stuck on the end of along, long neck—*

\* \* \*

"A plesiosaur," John blurts.

"Exactly." A pause, then Houston adds, "Up in the sky, as close as the Moon now, is a comet. In a few hours, it's going to hit exactly where you are now. It's going to vaporize the water and the limestone below, then set fire to North America, and the world."

John winces. Then in a self-conscious way, giggles.

"What do you want to do, John?"

"I want to watch the plesiosaur. I've always liked them."

Houston knows that. Last night, his AI found a new documentary on Danish TV, and for the next 30 minutes, he plays the subtitled digital on the classroom screen. Then comes lunch. The new semester has a break in the middle of the period. The mentor is expected to fend for himself. And naturally, he doesn't get paid for time not spent teaching.

When John returns, Houston outlines the situation

again.

But this time he closes by saying, "In a very few hours, your plesiosaur, and almost everything else on Earth, is going to be dead."

John winces. No giggles.

"Fly up to the comet," Houston suggests, "If you want."

"I guess."

"The coma is beautiful. And the tail extends for millions of miles." He shows him photographs of last year's big comet. "Inside the coma you find a black ball of tar and buried snows. It's barely 10 miles across. If you want, you can stop it now."

"I can?"

"You've got weapons," Houston points out. "What would you use if you wanted to move a mountain-sized snowball?"

"My engines. They'd melt anything."

"Do you want to use them?"

"I don't get it, Mr. Cross. What are you asking?"

"Why would you stop the comet? And why wouldn't you?"

"Well," says the boy. Then he licks the tentative hairs over his upper lip, and breathes deeply, and says,

"If dinosaurs go on living, then maybe mammals wouldn't get their chance. Which would be bad for us. For human beings."

Houston leans forward, saying, "You're going to let the comet hit. Aren't you?" The boy doesn't answer,

eyes tracking from side to side.

“Would you like to see the comet's impact?” Houston offers. “I found a real good Japanese simulation. It's accurate and it's spectacular, too.”

John shakes his head.

“No, thank you,” he says. “But Mike would like it, I bet.”

“He loved it,” Houston confides.

The boy makes fists and drums softly on his desk.

“What about the comet, John? Are you going to leave it alone?”

“No,” the boy squeaks.

Houston tries to hide his surprise. Then after a few deep breaths, he asks, “Why?” with a quiet voice. “If it means there'll never be humans—”

“Good,” says the boy.

Once. Softly. But with a hardwon conviction.

\* \* \*

*7. You've decided to become a cat farmer.*

*No, seriously. I mean it.*

*You can make a lot of money selling cat skins. And since you're left with carcasses after you skinthem, you start feeding that meat to the new kittens. Who grow up into your next harvest of cats. Which you feed to the next litters of kittens. And so on. And so on. Cats all the way ...Now, what's wrong with that plan?*

\* \* \*

Troy says, “Nothing,” without hesitation. He thinks this is gross and clever.

“But,” Houston warns, “you're losing energy at every stage. A cat burns calories to keep itself warm, and it's got a short gut that doesn't digest everything that it eats. That's why your dog chews on your cat's turds. They're full of energy.”

“Ugh.” Giggles.

The others understood the problem almost immediately. “Try it this way,” says Houston. “How much meat would you have to eat every day? In order to eat enough, I mean.”

“Ten pounds,” the boy guesses.

“Forty quarter-pound hamburgers. Really?”

“Maybe not.” Troy shakes his head, licks his lips. “How about two pounds?”

“Fine.” Houston nods. “On the first day of school, you'll go to the cafeteria and eat your daily ration. Two pounds of grilled seventh-grader.”

“You mean like Mike?”

“Exactly.”

“Neat!”

“And you'll do that for a full year. Two pounds worth of seventh-graders every day. Which is more than seven hundred pounds in all.”

“Mike's not that big. Not yet.”

Both of them laugh. Hard. Then Houston says, “Remember. A body is bone and gruesome crap that you'd never eat. Maybe half of the carcass won't get on your plate. So how many seventh-graders are you going to need?”

Troy hammers out a reasonable estimate. “Ten.”

“How many eighth-graders are in your class?”

“I don't know. Three hundred?”

“So we need three thousand seventh-graders. And you can't just lock them in a room and pull one out whenever you're hungry. They need their food, too.”

“Sixth-graders!”

“How many?”

“I don't know ... God, thirty thousand! ...”

“Right.” Houston leans forward, and smiles. “But remember, Troy. Teachers can be awfully hungry people, too.”

The boy's face grows a little pale.

“Three hundred eighth-graders feed how many teachers?”

“Thirty.” He sickens, but just for a moment. Then the eyes quicken, and for that instant, in his face and eyes, Troy is indistinguishable from the other PS's.

“There's three principals. Right?”

“I guess there would be. Yes.” Houston sits back in his chair, then asks, “Who's left standing? At the end of the year, I mean.”

Troy sees it instantly.

“Only the principals. Right?”

“Right.”

Then he's laughing too hard to breathe, and he gasps, and he admits to Houston, “I'm not going to tell Mom about this lesson. No, I'm not!”

\* \* \*

8. *You give birth to a child who isn't yours. Genetically speaking.*

*Phillip Stevens hijacks your reproductive system and forces you into having his clone, just as he did with millions of blameless women. Yet you feel blamed. And of course you're bitter. It's only reasonable to play the role of the victim here.*

*It's only human to want revenge.*

*But it's also human to be better than that. To forgive, or at least to forget. To accept and hold and cherish this gift ...*

*... a better son, frankly, than anything you would have spawned on your own ...*

\* \* \*

Saturday morning, and Houston shops for next week's groceries.

He spots the boy at the end of a long aisle, and for a half-instant, he isn't sure. It could be another PS, or even just a boy who happens to resemble them. But something about the don't-give-an-inch stance and the habitual pushing of hair out of the eyes tells him that it's Mike. Which means that the tiny woman next to him, lowering a blood-colored roast into the cart, must be his mother.

Two aisles later, paths cross.

The boy calls him, "Houston." Then he does a thumb-pointing gesture, telling Mom, "This is the guy." She's holding a box of tampons. Without blinking, she throws them into the cart, then offers a tiny hand.

"The famous Mr. Cross. Finally. Believe it or not, I've been meaning to get in touch."

"It's a pleasure," he replies.

"Groceries?" she inquires, gesturing at his cart.

"They are," he admits.

"What do you think of these prices?"

"They're high," Houston volunteers.

"Ridiculous," she grouses. Then just as the conversation seems doomed to canned chatter, Mom tells him, "You know, my boy hates you."

"Pardon?"

"You drive him nuts. Goofy nuts. I mean, he knows that he's smarter than his brother and sister. And his parents, of course, are perfect *idiots*—"

"Shut up," Mike growls. "You old lady."

Mom has a good laugh, then continues. "Anyway, Mr. Cross. Thank you. You've been getting under his skin. Which is the best thing for him, I think."

Mike says, "Jesus," and stomps in a circle.

His mother takes a step toward Houston, smiling up at him, and with a conspirator's urgent voice, says, "Humble him. Please."

"I try," Houston confesses.

"Fucking Jesus!" Mike moans, squirming in every sense.

Mom turns and glares at her son, her mouth ready to reprimand. Or encourage. Houston can't guess which. But instead of speaking, she looks back at Houston and gives him an odd little smile. Again, he says, "It's been a pleasure."

Then he takes his cart and his expensive groceries and moves on.

The field trip is the result of a lot of pleading and a slippery set of excuses. At first, John says, "You've got to eat lunch. Eat it at my house. It's just a short walk from school." But when Houston firmly refuses, the boy adds, "I've got books you'd like to see. Old ones. About science and stuff."

"What books?"

Their titles escape him. But they're about dinosaurs and flying saucers, and John adds, "I can't bring them here. They're practically antiques, and something might happen!"

Last week, there was a fight at school. Houston didn't see it, but Ms. Lindstrum reported that John was showing his starship to one of his few friends, and another boy stole his workpad. John couldn't stop himself from throwing the first punch. His only punch, it seems. He still sports an ugly maroon bruise beside his left eye.

"Mr. Cross," he pleads. "Please come over?"

The boy is sick with loneliness. But Houston has to tell him, "We need a better reason. If we're going to get permission, we'll need something special that ties directly to our work here." The next day, John bursts into the room. "Okay. How's this? We've got a huge stump in our back yard. Hundreds of tree rings showing. Maybe we could do some sort of study, counting back in time and looking at the weather. That kind of stuff."

"Good enough," Houston tells him.



But the Facilitator has doubts. "It's not up to me anymore," Ms. Lindstrum explains. "If it involves PS's, we'll need permission from the superintendent's office."

Houston nods, then says, "The boy really wants this."

"Can you blame him?"

Houston didn't know that he was.

She promises to make the request. And for the next full week, John's first question every day is, "When are we going?"

"Never," seems like a possible answer.

But suddenly the faceless powers grant their blessing. Appropriate disclaimers are filled out. A parental signature is produced. And like explorers bound for some great adventure, the two of them pack up their equipment and make the four-block trek to an anonymous split level on a quiet side street. All the way there, John is giddy with excitement.

Effusive to a sickening pitch.

Five years old, at the most.

He tells silly jokes about farts and singing frogs. He boasts that he'll be a great scientist before he's 30. With an overdone clumsiness, he trips on a crack in the sidewalk and drops in a slow-motion tumble into his own front yard. Then he suddenly grows quiet and thoughtful, saying, "By the way. Mom's boyfriend is gone. Moved out gone, I mean."

The trap is revealed.

Entering the front door, John cries out, "We're

here!”

Mom can't look any less prepared for company. Bare feet. Jeans worn white against the chunky ass. A sweatshirt of some unearthly green. Physically, she bears no resemblance to her son. Chinese and European. Pretty in a fucked-over way. Sleepy, teary eyes regard this onslaught with a genuine horror.

“Oh,” she finally exclaims. “That's today, isn't it?”

The boy drops his workpad on the floor. “Mom!”

But the woman recovers. “Just a minute! Be right there!” She gallops out of sight, and from the back of the house screams, “Food's in the fridge, hun!”

“She forgets things,” says John, shaking from anger.

“Don't worry about it,” Houston tells him. His voice is angry, too. But the inflection goes unnoticed. Lunch is egg-salad sandwiches with off-brand pop to wash them down.

Mom returns during an Oreo dessert. Her clothes have improved— newer jeans and aerobics shoes— and she's washed her face and combed her hair. But obviously, she'd rather be anywhere else. With anyone else. A condition that gives the adults common ground.

“I'm glad to meet you,” she tells Houston.

“And I'm glad to meet you,” he echoes.

They chat. It's polite, rigorously simple chatter. How long has Houston been a mentor? How long have they lived here? What about this warm weather? How was the sandwich, and does anyone want any

more cookies?

Adults know how to be polite.

They can converse for hours, revealing nothing about their true selves.

Yet John is visibly thrilled by their prattle. He grins more and more. Mom finally asks, "Aren't you supposed to be doing a project?" And he tells her, "There's still time," without glancing at the clock. Eventually, the kitchen grows silent.

Houston turns to the boy and says, "Maybe we should get busy. You think?"

"Oh, sure. Why not?"

They have only a few minutes to invest in the promised tree stump. Which is ample, since it's too old and weathered to teach much more than the fact that wood rots. Standing over that brown mass of fungus and carpenter ants, John looks at him expectantly and says, "Well?" Houston imagines a dozen responses, and John's black disappointment. So he says simply, "Interesting," without defining what it is that interests him.

John hears what he wants, and for the next week, pesters Houston shamelessly. He says, "I'm worried about my mother. She's too lonely."

He says, "You know, there's a new restaurant up on Acer. I'd take Mom, but I don't have the money." In a pleading tone, he confesses, "You're my best friend in the world, Mr. Cross. I mean that!" Then, the pestering stops.

And Houston discovers that he misses the boy's

clumsy match making. He misses it but doesn't say so, knowing better than to trust his own weakness. Then one day the boy arrives with a purple bruise matching the last one, and Houston asks, "Did you fight that same jerk? I hope not."

"I didn't," John mutters.

Then he looks past Houston, a cold glare matching the accusing voice. "The boyfriend's back. Again."

\* \* \*

"I know this seems impolite. I got your address from one of last year's parents—"

"Come in, Mrs. Holdenmeister."

"You've probably got plans for tonight."

"Not really." He offers her the sofa, then sits opposite her. Looking at those hard blue eyes, he secretly thinks, "You're one scary bitch."

"What can I do for you?" he inquires.

"About Troy," she mutters. Pale hands turn to fists. "About that grade—"

"The B+?"

"You're his mentor. You know how much he adores science."

"Absolutely."

"I just don't think ... after he earned A's last semester ..."

"We had a big project this quarter. He had to do his own research and write a paper about what he learned—"

"Didn't he?"

"No, actually." He says it flat out, then sits back

and asks, "Did you come here by yourself, Mrs. Holdenmeister?"

She starts to ask, "Why?" Then she shakes her head, admitting, "My husband's in the car. Waiting." With an indiscriminate rage, she admits, "He doesn't think that I should be going to this much trouble—"

"He's right."

She hesitates. Then after measuring him with those deadly eyes she says, "I saw Troy's paper. I saw it, and it was very good."

"Because you helped him write it."

She flusters easily, nothing about it genuine. "I don't think that's true! ..."

"I asked him. And your son has a wicked streak of honesty."

She hesitates again, not sure what to say.

"It's a quarterly grade," he reminds her, "and it's a B+. Which is very respectable, Mrs. Holdenmeister."

"Even still," she snaps, "it's on his permanent record."

"Fuck his record. Ma'am."

She swallows. Goes limp.

"We both know, he's not like the others. He doesn't function as well in science. And he won't be anyone's valedictorian." Houston says it, then takes a long deep breath. Then, "Which aren't crimes. And in some ways, those are probably blessings."

"I ... I don't know what to say here...."

"Let him do his own work. I'll give him a nice little A at the end of the year, and it won't mean shit in ten

years. Or two, for that matter.”

Fists pull close to her belly. “You've got an ugly, awful attitude, Mr. Cross.”

“Guilty as charged.”

She mistakes his indifference for weakness. “I plan to complain. To the superintendent himself. A person like you shouldn't be working with impressionable young minds.”

That's when Houston's rage takes hold of him.

Suddenly his mouth take charge, asking, “What exactly did you do to your son? To make him this way, I mean.”

She goes pale, except for the blazing eyes.

“Watching you ...” he sputters. “Seeing all this damned guilt masquerading as love ... I have to wonder if maybe, once you saw that PS baby ... maybe you put a pillow over him and gave him a few good shoves before you got too scared to finish the job! ...”

“Shut up!” she screams.

And rises.

Then with a tight, furious voice, she whispers, “I had a *drinking problem*. While I was pregnant. You son-of-a-bitch.”

He says nothing.

Feels nothing, he believes.

For an instant, she shivers hard enough to lose her balance. Then she puts her hand against the wall, and says, again, “You're a horrible man.”

“Tell me what I don't know.”

She tries to murder him with her eyes.

It nearly works, it seems. But Houston makes himself stand, facing her, telling her simply, "You'd better go, Mrs. Holdenmeister. Now."

\* \* \*

*9. I want you to invent a world, a universe, for the other boys.*

*I'll send them there. In their starships, they'll explore and decipher the mysteries that you leave for them. And maybe they'll escape in the end, and maybe they won't. Which means, in other words, if you want to make a dangerous place, you can do that.*

*You've got my blessing.*

*Just as they have the same blessing, and that's all the fair warning I'm going to give you ...okay? ...*

\* \* \*

"Is it John's world, or Troy's?"

"Does that matter?"

"No," says Mike. Then, "Yes." He licks his lips, drums his fists, then tells Houston, "I bet it's Troy's."

"Why?"

"Because it's neat. You know. Not sloppy."

A map of the world covers the long screen. It has two blue seas and a brilliant dash of icecap, and its single continent is yellow except where it's brown. It is not sloppy because it's authentic. The image comes with NASA's compliments, and what Mike sees has been fitted together from a thousand fuzzy, partial images gathered by orbiting telescopes. The physical and chemical data are equally authentic. But what

waits on the world's surface belongs entirely to John.

"I'm not going to tell you who did this," Houston warns. "Just like I won't tell the others which world is yours."

"You'd better not," he growls.

"What are you going to do first, Mike? You've got a mission here."

"I'll fire my cannon. Ten times."

Houston says nothing.

"Well, can I?"

The mentor says, "If you want," and shakes his head sadly.

"Okay. I do it, and what happens?"

"The explosions melt the icecap, boil the oceans, then cause the crust to turn to magma."

"Neat!"

Houston says nothing.

"Is there anything left alive down there?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

The boy describes his flight into the hell. Crocus, the top robot, collects samples of atmosphere and liquid rock. Mentor and student agree that nothing lives there. Even if there had been a thriving biosphere, it was vaporized, leaving not so much as a fossil tooth to mark its glorious past and promise.

"Congratulations," says Houston, the word tipped in acid.

But Mike just shrugs and says, "That was easy." Then he's laughing, admitting, "I don't know why I was so worried."



Half an hour later, the bell rings.

Houston accompanies Mike to the door. The hallway is already jammed with scurrying bodies and sharp, overly loud voices. The boy, still proud of his carnage, grins and wades out into the current. A bigger, older boy drives an elbow into him. But it's barely felt. Mike reaches his locker and touches the lock, then slams it hard against the steel. And then John appears beside him, touching him on the arm, obviously asking him, "Which world did you get? Which world? Which world? Which?" Houston can see their faces, can halfway read their lips.

He watches as Mike glances up at this older, fatter boy, and showing the most malicious grin, the boy says, "Two oceans. And some kind of yellow land."

John can't resist. He confesses, "That's mine!"

Mike says something like, "Was it?"

Then John asks a "What'd you think, what'd you do" sort of question. And Mike tells him. With both hands, he creates the universal symbol of an explosion, and loud enough to be heard, he says, "Boom!"

There's no time to intercede.

Before Houston can force his way through the bystanders and into the fight, John has already slammed Mike's head into the lockers. At least three times. Maybe four. And Mike counters with a fist into the belly, leaving his attacker on his knees, gasping and pale and crying for every reason imaginable.

“It's just us for the next few days,” Houston explains.

But Troy already knows the news. There's nothing bigger in a school than a bloody brawl. Unless of course it's when two PS's are doing the brawling.

Troy shakes his head, asking, “Why did they fight?”

Houston starts to offer the simple explanation, then hesitates. It occurs to him that he barely knows either boy, much less their real motivations, and thinking that he understands them is dangerous, and stupid, and very much a waste.

So instead, he admits, “I really don't know why they fought, or why they seem to hate each other so much.”

“I know,” the boy tells him.

Anticipation makes Houston lean forward. “Why, Troy?”

“They've got to,” he assures.

“But why?”

With an endearing patience, the boy shakes his head, warning him, “You can't know it, Mr. Cross.”

“You might want to. But you just don't belong.”

10. *Again, your spaceship is tiny. Microscopic. Suspended within that vast ocean, living waterswimming through the dead.*

*But this time the monster isn't some marauding paramecium. This time what you see has a*

*blunthead and a long ropy tail, and it isn't feeding. Instead it's moving with a singleness of purpose, passing you and your ship without the smallest regard.*

*In anger, or maybe out of simple curiosity, you fire your weapons at it.*

*The monster wriggles and dies.*

*And just like that, Phillip Stevens is never born. And you, all of you, instantly and forever cease to exist.*

*I'm not going to ask why.*

*It's easy enough to see the reason.*

*And I won't dwell on the paradoxes inherent in this mess.*

*No, what I want to ask is the hardest question of all: Is this world better off without Phillip and the PS's? Or is it worse off?*

*That's the only question worth asking.*

*And you can't give me any answer. Sixty years from now, maybe. But not today. Not here. You're smart but not that smart. And even in 60 years, I doubt if you'll look me in the eye— all the thousands and thousands of you— and to the man, you will say in one indivisible voice, “The world is better off,” or, “It's worse.”*

*The best questions are always that way....*

*\* \* \**

*The Sun is plunging behind the Moon.*

*At its height, the eclipse will reach 80+ percent coverage. Which is a long way from a total eclipse,*

yes. But since it is a warm, cloudless day, and it's noon, the effect is dramatic. There comes a growing chill to the air. A sense of misplaced twilight. Houston twists his head and says, "Listen." But hundreds of students are scattered across the school's lawn, enjoying the cosmic event, and it's hard to hear anything but their endless roar. "Listen to the birds," he tells them.

Both boys nod in the same way, John saying, "I hear them. They're singing." Troy points and cries out, "Look!"

Swallows have appeared, streaking back and forth. Then a younger voice says, "Look under the trees." Mike stands behind them. Smiling, but not. Horizontal cuts mark where his face struck the vent on his locker. And he seems taller than before. Houston noticed it yesterday— Mike's first day back from his suspension— but it's more obvious now. A growth spurt took him during his week-long suspension, adding a goodly fraction of an inch to his gangly frame.

"The way the light is," he says. Pointing.

John sits up. "Yeah, look! What's going on, Mr. Cross?"

Crescent-shaped splashes of light dapple a sidewalk and the shady grass. Houston stands, hands on hips.

"I don't know," he lies. "What do you think? Guesses?"

"It's the eclipse," Troy volunteers.

“Duh,” says Mike.

Houston reprimands him with a look. Then as he starts to ask his next question, he notices a group of kids staring at them. Talking among themselves. Eighth-graders. Every last one of them female. Houston's boys are oblivious to the stares.

Mike drops to the ground. He sits as far as possible from John while still being part of their group. “It's got something to do with how the light bends,” he volunteers. “It's like you can see the Sun in those little crescent things.”

Troy says, “I bet so.”

Then John says, “This would have been a full eclipse back in dinosaur times.”

“Why?” asks Troy.

“The Moon was closer,” Mike tells him.

“It covered more of the Sun back then,” John adds.

Troy turns. “Is that right, Mr. Cross?”

He starts to nod, then notices one of the girls approaching them. The hesitation in her walk and the other girls' giggles implies this is a dare. Instead of speaking, Houston holds his breath, and all the boys grow silent, too. She's a tall, willowy creature with full breasts and a model's face. And in a voice that comes wrapped in a nervous, electric energy, she says, “Hi, you guys.”

Then she turns, and sprints back to her friends.

“What the fuck was that?” Mike growls. “What the fuck?”

But Houston laughs out loud, saying, “That.”

Saying, "Is a woman enamored." Saying, "I know the look. And you just better get used to it, boys."

\* \* \*

"At least I can see him now," she says. "Can you?"

"Barely," says the short man.

"I've never gotten a writer's autograph. Have you?"

"I'm not much of a reader."

"Neither am I," she confesses. Then she turns to Houston, asking him, "Have you ever read anything better than this?"

He glances at the woman. Then he looks up the long line, saying, "Yes." She doesn't seem to notice. Holding her copy of *The Cuckoo's Boys* in both hands, she tells everyone in earshot, "It had to be said. What Dr. Kaan says here."

Houston manages to keep silent.

This is a Saturday afternoon. He drove two hundred miles to stand here. The author sits in the center of a long table, flanked by thousands of copies of his phenomenal bestseller. "The New Edition," reads the overhead banner. "New Chapters! Fresh, Innovative Proposals!!"

The short man asks, "Do you know what's in the new chapters?"

"I'm dying to find out," she confesses.

Houston waits. Then after a while, he says, "Tailored viruses."

"Excuse me?" says the woman.

"Kaan thinks we should create a virus that would target Phillip Stevens' genetics. It would destroy the

clones' somatic cells. In other words, their sperm.”

She says, “Good.”

The line slips forward.

Houston finds himself breathing harder, fighting the urge to speak. A pretty young woman says, “Please, open your book. One copy, only. To the page you want signed. And please, don't ask for any personalized inscriptions.”

The author wears a three-piece suit. He looks fit and hardy, and smug.

Houston avoids looking at the man's eyes.

The line moves.

With both hands, the woman in front of Houston opens her book.

The short man bends and mutters something to the author, getting nothing but a signature for his trouble. The woman takes his place, gushing, “I'm so glad to meet you. Sir!” Kaan smiles and signs his name, then looks past her.

Houston's legs are like concrete. Suddenly, he is aware of his pounding heart and a mouth suddenly gone dry. But he steps forward, and quietly says, “You know, I have a PS son,” as he hands his opened book forward. “And I took your good advice.”

The author's face rises, eyes huge and round.

“I cut off his nuts. Want to see 'em?” Houston asks, reaching into a pocket.

“Help!” the author squeals.

A pair of burly men appear, grabbing Houston and dragging him outside with the rough efficiency of

professionals. Then after a quick body search, they place him in his car, and one man suggests. "You should go home, sir. Now."

"All right," Houston agrees.

They leave him, but then linger at the bookstore's front door.

Houston twists the rearview mirror, looking at his own face. Tanned and narrow, and in the brown eyes, tired. He thinks hard about everything until nothing else can be accomplished. Which takes about 30

seconds. And that's when he starts the engine and pulls out into traffic, feeling very light and free, and in the strangest ways, happy.

\* \* \*

11. *You get an end-of-the-school-year field trip out of me.*

*I always always take away students down to our little community's renowned natural history museum. Most have already been there. According to one boy, maybe five hundred times already. But never with me. Never benefitting from my particular slant on mammoths and trilobites and the rest of those failures that they've got on display down there.*

*Don't bring lunch money. We'll be eating at Wendy's or the Subway Barn, and I'm the one buying. Don't bring your workpads or notebooks. You won't need them.*

*But if you would, please ... remember to wear good shoes. Shoes you can walk in. And if it's at*



*allcold outside, please, for god's sake, wear a damned coat! ...*

\* \* \*

“It's been refused,” says Ms. Lindstrum.

“Excuse me?”

“Your proposed field trip. I know the boys were looking forward to it. But what with the latest tragedy, people want to be cautious.”

Which tragedy? Houston wonders. In Memphis, five PS's were found dead in a basement, each body savagely mutilated. In Nairobi, a mob killed three more. Or was it the UN's failure to condemn Singapore's new concentration camp that's masquerading as a special school.

“I'm sorry,” she offers.

Over the school year, her office has shrunk. Paper files and stacks of forms have gathered, choking the available space into a stale few breaths and two uncomfortable people.

Again, she says, “I am sorry.”

“It's all right.” His eyes find hers. What worries him most is the way that she blinks now. Blinks and looks past him. “Is it because of that fight? Because John and Mike did fine during the eclipse, and since,” he says. Then he tells her, “There won't be any incidents. I can absolutely guarantee it.” She sighs, then says, “No PS-only field trips are being authorized.”

“So let me take along one or two of my old students. To beat that rule.”

“No,” she replies. Too urgently and with a wince cutting into the half-pretty face. Or maybe he's just being paranoid.

Houston offers a shrug of the shoulders. “Are you sure there's nothing we can do?”

“I'm certain,” Ms. Lindstrum tells him. “But the four of you could throw a little party for those three periods. Safe in your classroom. In fact, I'll arrange for food and pop to be brought from the cafeteria.”

“I guess that would work,” Houston tells her. Then he puts on his best smile, saying, “Why don't we? A little celebratory party. Fine.”

\* \* \*

Maybe it is simple paranoia.

But a back-of-the-neck feeling has Houston peering over his shoulder. Every public place seems crowded with suspicious strangers, and his little apartment seems full of dark, secretive corners. He finds himself peeking through curtains, watching the empty parking lot below. Three times he runs diagnostic programs on his phone, searching for taps that refuse to be found. And when he finally manages to convince himself that nothing is wrong, except in his imagination, his old widescreen abruptly stops finding news about the PS's. Instead, it delivers highlights from a teaching conference in Nova Scotia. Which is a signal.

Prearranged, yet surprising.

Long ago, Houston taught the AI that if its security was breached, dump all of the old files and start

chasing down a different flavor of news.

He doesn't fix the protocols now.

Instead, he pretends to watch the conferences that are being piped to him, and he runs new diagnostics on the apartment and every appliance.

That night before the school party, someone knocks.

His lover wears nice clothes and a smile, and she says, "Hello," too quickly. She says, "I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

She has always, always called before visiting. But not tonight.

Houston says, "No, it's a fine time. Come on in."

She says, "For a little bit. I'm expected back home."

He hasn't seen her for a month. But he doesn't mention it. He sits opposite her and says absolutely nothing, trying to read the pretty face and nervous body, and when she can't tolerate any more silence, she blurts, "Are you all right, Houston?"

"Perfect," he says.

She swallows, as if in pain.

"How about you?" he inquires.

"They know about us." She says it, then gathers herself before admitting, "They came to me. And asked about you."

"Who asked?"

She crosses her arms, then says, "They threatened to tell my husband." Houston calls the woman's name, then asks, "Was it that bald security man? From district headquarters?"

“One of them was.”

“Who else was there?”

She shakes her head. “He didn't give me a name.”

“It's nothing,” says Houston. And to an astonishing degree, he believes it. “I've had some trouble with one of the parents. I'm certain that she's filed a formal complaint. That's the culprit here.” His lover nods hopefully, staring at the floor.

He tells her, “Everyone's scared that something bad is going to happen here.”

“I am,” she allows.

“What did they ask?”

“About you,” she mutters.

“What did you say?”

“That I know almost nothing about Houston Cross.” Eyes lift, fixing squarely on him. “Which is true. All of a sudden, hearing myself say the words, I realized that you're practically a stranger to me.” He says nothing.

At this very late date, what can he say? ...

\* \* \*

Mentors are required to check in at the front office. Houston arrives a few minutes earlier than normal signing his name at the bottom of a long page and glancing sideways into Ms. Lindstrum's office, catching a glimpse of her grim face as her door swings shut, closed by someone whom he cannot see. The school's uniformed guard sits nearby, pretending to ignore him.

Which is absolutely ordinary, Houston reminds

himself.

The bell rings. Children pour into the hallway, a brink-of-summer fever infecting all of them. Houston beats the boys to the classroom, then waits in front of the door. For an instant, he fears that they're home sick, or Lindstrum has bottled them up. But no, John walks up grinning, Troy at his side. Then Mike is fighting through the bodies making for his locker ... and Houston tells the others, "Stay with me," and he intercepts Mike, putting a hand on the bony shoulder, saying to all of them, "Change of plans." This spring, the school installed a security camera at one end of the hallway. In the opposite direction, the hallway ends with lockers and a fire door. With the boys following after him, Houston hits the bar, causing the alarm to sound— a grating roar that causes a thousand giddy youngsters to run in circles and laugh wildly.

"Hey!" says Mike. "You did that!"

"No," says Houston. "It's a planned fire drill. Trust me." Then John asks, "Where are we going? On our field trip?"

"Exactly."

"I don't have any permission slip," Troy complains.

Houston turns and says, "I took care of all that. Hurry. Please."

They climb down a short set of metal stairs, then cut across the school yard. Behind them, mayhem rules. Screaming bodies burst from every door, harried teachers trying to regain some semblance of

control. In the distance, sirens sound. As they reach the street, a pair of fire trucks rush past, charging toward the nonexistent blaze. Various cars are parked along the curb. Trying to smile, Houston says, "Guess which one's mine."

John says, "That one," and points at a gaudy red sports car.

Houston has to ask, "Why?"

"It's a neat car," says the boy. "And you're a neat guy!" Now he laughs. Despite everything, he suddenly feels giddy as the kids, and nearly happy. With keys in hand, he says, "Sorry. It's the next one."

A little thing. Drab, and brown. Utterly nondescript.

But as the boys climb inside, Mike notices, "It smells new in here."

"It's a rental," Houston admits. His old heap is parked out in front of the school, as usual. He stashed this one last night. "I thought we needed something special today."

"Are we still going to the museum?" Troy asks.

He and John share the backseat.

Houston says, "No, actually. I came up with a different destination." Mike watches him. Suspicious now.

The boys in back punch each other, and giggle, and John says, "Maybe we could eat first. Mr. Cross?"

"Not yet," Houston tells them.

He drives carefully. Not too fast, or slow. Up to the main arterial, then he heads straight out of town,

knowing that Mike will be the first to notice.

“Where?” asks the boy. Not angrily, but ready to be angry, if necessary.

“There's a few acres of native prairie. Not big, but interesting.” Houston looks into every mirror, watching the cars behind them.

After a minute, Mike says, “I don't know about this.”

“That's right,” says Houston. “Be suspicious. Of everything.” The smallest boy shrugs his shoulders and looks straight ahead now.

Houston glances over his shoulder, telling John, “There's a package under you. In brown paper. Can you get that out for me, please?”

“This it?”

“Yeah. Can you open it up, please?”

The boy never hesitates. He tears away the paper, finding a pair of what look like hypodermic needles wrapped in sterile plastic. “What are these for, Mr. Cross?”

“Tear one of them open. Would you?”

“Just one?”

“Please.”

It takes a few moments. The plastic is tough and designed not to be split by accident. While John works, Houston turns to Mike and says, “Be suspicious,” again. “When I was your age, I was always suspicious. Suspicion is a real skill, and a blessing. If you use it right.”

The boy nods, wearing a perplexed expression.

“Here it is, sir,” says John, handing the hypodermic to him.

“Thank you.”

“What is it?” asks Troy. “It looks medical.”

“It is,” Houston admits, removing the plastic cap with his teeth. “People made these things by the millions years ago. If you were poor and gave birth to a mixed race boy, you could test his blood. Like this.” He doesn't let himself flinch, punching his own shoulder with the exposed needle. Then he shakes the device for a moment, and shows everyone the dull red glow. “Now unwrap another one. Yeah. And hand it to me.”

John obeys.

In the same smooth motion, Houston jabs Mike in the shoulder. “Sorry,” he offers, shaking the second device. Then he puts them together, and with a voice that can't help but break, he says, “Both showing red. See? And what do you think that means?”

\* \* \*

12. *I used to be Phillip Stevens.*

He says the words, then sucks in a breath and holds it.

Not one boy makes the tiniest sound.

Finally, laughing uneasily, Houston asks, “What do you think about that? John? Troy? Mike?”

“I don't believe you,” Mike growls.

“No?”

“That's a stupid shit thing to say.” The boy's anger is raw and easy, bolstered by the beginnings of panic.



He takes a gasping breath. Then another. Then he strikes his own thighs with both fists, telling Houston, “He died. The asshole offed himself. Everyone knows that.”

Again, silence.

Houston glances at the mirror. The boys in back wear identical expressions. Lost, and desperately sad. Troy sees him watching then looks back over his shoulder, probably hoping to find help coming to rescue them.

But there isn't another car in sight.

“You two,” says Houston. “What do you think?”

“It was Dr. Stevens' body,” John offers. “That's what the police said.”

“The police,” Houston points out, “found a body with Phillip's physical features as well as his DNA. But a body isn't the man. And if anyone could have arranged for a bunch of dead meat and organs infused with his own DNA, wasn't it Phillip Stevens?”

“A full-grown clone?” says Mike.

“With a massive head wound. And what the press didn't report— except as wild rumor— were those occasional disparities between the corpse on the table and the fugitive's medical records.”

“Like what?” Mike mutters.

“Like scars and stuff?” John asks.

“No, every scar matched. Exactly.” Houston nods and pushed on the accelerator, telling them, “But those things would be easy enough to fake. The body was grown in a prototype womb-chamber. The brain

was removed early, and intentionally. No pain, no thoughts. Phillip did that work himself. He broke the clone's big left toe, then let it heal. He gave the skin the right patterns of mole and old nicks and such. He even aged the flesh with doses of radiation. And he kept the soulless clone relatively fit through electrisometrics and other rehab tricks.”

The only sound is the hum of tires on pavement.

Finally, Mike asks, “So what was wrong with that body?”

“Not enough callus: Not on its fingertips or the bottoms of its feet.” Houston nods knowingly, looking across the blurring countryside, then straight ahead. “And even though the brain tissue was scrambled, the FBI found problems. Even with dehydration there wasn't enough brain present. And what they had in jars didn't have the dendritic interconnections as you'd expect in mature genius mind.” Again, Troy looks back the way they had come.

Houston turns right on a graveled road, and over the sudden rattling of loose rock, he tells them, “It's not far now.”

Even Mike looks sad.

“The original Houston Cross was a loner. No family, and few prospects.” Houston says it, then adds,

“For a few dollars and a new face, that Houston acquired a new life. And he doesn't even suspect who it is that bought his old one.”

John starts to sob loudly enough to be heard.

Mike turns and glares at him. "God, stop it. You baby!"

Over the crest of the hill is a small green sign announcing Natural Area. The tiny parking lot is empty. Which is typical for a weekday, Houston knows.

He pulls in and stops, turning off the engine and pocketing the key.

"All right," he says. "Out."

The boys remain in their seats.

Houston opens his door and stands in the sunshine. "Out," he tells them. From the back, Troy squeaks, "Are you going to kill us? Mr. Cross?" The words take him completely by surprise.

He shivers for a moment, then makes himself stop. And he looks in at all of them. And he tells them, "You can't begin to know how much that hurts."

\* \* \*

13. *Why did Phillip Stevens create you?*

*Any ideas?*

*Forget my little announcement. My name is Houston Cross, and I want you to explain to me why your father did what he did? Because I know you must have lain awake nights wondering just that....*

\* \* \*

The four of them walk in single file through the big bluestem prairie, following a narrow path up a hill, both hill and path vanishing in the same step.

Houston stops for a moment, watching the horizon

and the rolling windswept land, farm fields on all sides and this little patch of grass and wildflowers tucked into a spare 40 acres. The nearest intelligence is a soaring redtailed hawk. Other than the bird, no one notices them but them.

Again, he walks.

And he asks the boys, "Why did PS do it?"

"He was selfish," says John. Blurts John.

"Who told you that?" Houston responds. Then he makes himself laugh, adding, "That's right. Everyone says that he was horribly, wickedly selfish. Don't they?"

From behind, Troy asks, "Were you?"

"In a sense. Of course. Who isn't?"

At the base of the hill is a little stand of trees. Ash trees, mostly. With an enormous and stately cottonwood anchoring one end.

"But maybe there's a different answer. A harder, truer one."

"Like what?" asks Mike.

"All of you are Phillip's gift to the world." Houston slows his gait, making sure that everyone can hear.

"The man had certain talents that can prosper in any time, and he decided to share those talents with his species. To enrich your generation with his genes, and when you have your own children, then enrich every generation to come."

Mike snorts, in disgust.

"What's the matter?" Houston asks. "Don't you approve?"

The boy just shakes his head, glowering at the ground.

For the last time, Troy looks over his shoulder. Then Houston places a hand on his shoulder, warning him, "Nobody knows where we are. For a little while, nobody's going to interrupt us. So don't worry. Okay?"

The eyes are wide and sorrowful, but Troy says nothing.

Then they move beneath the trees, out of the wind, their voices carrying and the mood instantly more intimate. More familiar.

Houston says, "There's a third possibility."

"What?" squeaks John.

"That Phillip Stevens remembered his childhood too well. He remembered his loneliness and how very separate he felt from the other kids. A bastard, interracial child without any father ... and maybe all of his plotting and his selfish evil was simply to make certain that the next time around ... that he wouldn't grow up so alone...."

Now Houston cries.

Sobbing, practically.

Mike is unimpressed. He starts to turn away, announcing, "I don't want to do this shit any more. I'm going back to the car."

"Please don't," Houston pleads. "I want to show you something first. Something important." Curiosity is the richest, sweetest drug.

One after another, the boys nod in identical

fashions and follow, their mentor leading them under the giant cottonwood. Head-high on the trunk is a distinctive X-shaped scar, the thick bark chopped open with a heavy blade. With his back to the scar, Houston starts to count his steps from the trunk. At a dozen, he stops. Kneels. And while tugging at the shade-starved grasses, he tells them, "Always remember. Being smart only means that you make bigger, louder mistakes."

The boys stand as close together as they have ever been.

Watching him.

"With the PS bug," explains Houston, "I assumed that only a few thousand women inside a very limited region would catch it. That's all. A minimal plague and nobody would die...and when it was otherwise, believe me, there wasn't anyone more surprised than me."

For an instant, Houston wonders if maybe this is the wrong place. Or perhaps he's really Houston Cross, and he is simply delusional. A pure crazy man. But then one tuft of grass gives on the first tug, then lets itself be uprooted with a hard yank. Beneath it is a pipe with a false bottom. He reaches elbow-deep and touches the bottom, the Swiss-made lock recognizing his fingertips.

"I was shocked by the disease's scope," he confesses. "And horrified. And very sorry." The packets of money are pushed up by a gentle gas-powered piston. Hundred dollar bills create a little

wall in the grass, and every boy has to step closer and gawk, Mike saying, "God, that's a lot!"

"A few hundred thousand. That's all."

Troy says, "Shit," under his breath.

The others laugh, for just a moment.

"And this is twenty million dollars," Houston adds, showing them an e-card that couldn't be more nondescript. "Untraceable, in theory. Although I haven't used it in years."

"What else is there? ..." one of them asks.

He isn't sure who. Bending low, reaching into the damp hole, he tells them, "This. This is what I wanted to show you."

Exactly the size of the piston beneath it, the disc is silvery and outdated by the latest technologies. But it's still readable, and probably will be for a few more years.

John asks, "What's that?"

"When I realized the scope of my plague," says Houston, "I made a nearly full list of the PS's. Birth dates and addresses and important government IDs. Everything that you would need to make contact with them. In this country, and everywhere else."

"But that's all old now," Mike points out.

"A lot of these boys have already died. You're right." He looks at them, one after another. Then he lets them watch as he shoves the cash back into its hiding place, leaving it unlocked, and fits the hat of sod and grass back into the pipe. "Others have moved. But if you're going to get in touch with them,

you'll need to start somewhere.”

None of the boys can manage a word, watching him.

Houston flips the disc toward John, then says, “If you need, come get this cash. But only as you need it.” Mike bends and picks up the disc, then asks, “What are we supposed to do? Mr. Whoever-You-Are? ...”

“Dr. Stevens,” Troy tells him.

“Organize your brothers. The sooner, the better.” Houston stands and pockets the e-cash, then in the gravest voice he can summon, he tells them, “Things are going to get very bad, and probably before you're ready. But I know you. And I don't mean that you're just new incarnations of me. I know you as John and Mike and Troy. Together, you and the other boys are going to survive this mess that I selfishly made for you....”

Then, he gasps for air.

John asks, “What about you? Can't you stay and help us?”

Mike says, “I don't want him here.”

Houston agrees. “I think they already suspect that I'm not Houston Cross. If they find out everything, then things will just be worse for you. Which is why you can't tell a soul about me. Ever.” Only John nods with conviction.

“But I plan to help you,” he adds. “Later, when I've settled down again, I'll feed you advice, somehow. And if you need it, more money ...”

For a long moment, no one speaks.



Then finally, with a quiet sorry voice, Houston says, "Five minutes. Give me that much time. Then walk back to the main road and wait until someone comes looking for you."

He turns, taking his first tentative step toward the car.

"What'll you do now?" asks Mike.

Houston isn't sure. Maybe he should slip into another autographing ... this time with a copy of *TheCuckoo's Boys*, its pages laced with botulin toxins

...

"What you should do," Mike says, "is shoot yourself. For real this time!"

"Don't say that," John warns him.

"Why not?" the smallest boy replies. "He's just a big fuck-up." Again, the grown man starts to cry.

Troy says, "I had fun this year, Dr. Stevens. I did!"

"Don't say awful things about our father!" John shouts.

"He's not my father, and I'll say what I goddamn want to!" Mike replies.

"Don't!"

"Oh, fuck you!"

With both hands and a hard deep grunt, John shoves Mike in the chest. The smaller boy stumbles and falls backward into the grass. Then for a moment, he does nothing. He just lays there, his face full of blood and a wild, careless anger. Then with his own grunt, he leaps up and runs, dropping his head as he slams into that big soft body, and both boys are

throwing fists and cursing, then kicking each other, ribs bruised and lips bloodied before someone throws his body between them, screaming, "Now stop!

Please, please, just grow up!"

For a slippery instant, Mike wishes that it's Houston. Phillip. Whoever that prick is. Just so he can give him a few good smacks now.

But no, it's just Troy. Poor stupid Troy is sobbing, and in his own way, he's furious. Then for some bizarre, twisted reason, Mike finds himself actually sorry that it wasn't the man who stops them. Wiping the gore out of his eyes, the boy looks across the prairie and sees no one. No one. Just the tall grass waving and the empty hillside, and the shit ran away again, and there's nobody else in the world but the three of them.

That's when it starts to sink home.

For all of them.

At long last.

\* \* \*

14. *There's no one like you in the world.*

*People like to say otherwise, but they don't understand. Only people like ourselves understand. Each of us is more different than we are the same, and if you think about it, that's our best hope. Our only hope, maybe.*

*For now, that's all we can tell you. But watch your mail, and watch for signs. Someday, sooner than you think, we'll talk again. We'll make our plans then.*

*For anything and everything, we'll have to be ready.*

*Sincerely,*

***THE CUCKOO'S BOYS***

## Decency

THE VENERABLE old Hubble telescope saw it first. A silvery splash moving against the stars, the object proved enormous —larger than some worlds — and it was faster than anything human-built, still out among the comets but coming, the first touch of cold light just beginning to brake its terrific fall. “It's a light sail,” astronomers announced, giddy as children, drunk by many means. “Definitely artificial. Probably automated. No crew, minimal mass. Photons move the thing, and even accounting for deceleration, it's going to make a quick flyby of the Earth.”

By the time the sail crossed Saturn's orbit, a three-inch reflector cost its weight in platinum. Amateur astronomers were quitting their day jobs in order to spend nights plotting trajectories. Novice astronomers, some armed with nothing but binoculars or rifle sights, risked frostbite for the privilege of a glimpse. But it was the professionals who remained the most excited: every topflight facility in the northern hemisphere studied the object, measuring its mass, its albedo, its vibrations, and its damage —ragged mile-wide punctures scattered across its vast surface, probably stemming from collisions with interstellar comets. The sail's likely point of origin was a distant G-class sun; its voyage must have taken a thousand years, perhaps more. Astronomers tried to contact the automated pilot.

Portions of the radio spectrum were cleared voluntarily for better listening. Yet nothing was heard, ever. The only sign of a pilot was a subtle, perhaps accidental, twisting of the sail, the pressure of sunlight altering its course, the anticipated flyby of the Earth becoming an impact event.

Insubstantial as a soap bubble, the sail offered little risk to people or property. Astronomers said so. Military and political people agreed with them. And despite Hollywood conventions, there was no great panic among the public. No riots. No religious upheavals. A few timid souls took vacations to New Zealand and Australia, but just as many southerners came north to watch the spectacle. There were a few ugly moments involving the susceptible and the emotionally troubled; but generally people responded with curiosity, a useful fatalism, and the gentle nervousness that comes with a storm front or a much-anticipated football game.

The world watched the impact. Some people used television, others bundled up and stepped outdoors. In the end, the entire northern sky was shrouded with the brilliant sail. In the end, as the Earth's gravity embraced it, scientists began to find structures within its thin, thin fabric. Like a spiderweb, but infinitely more complex, there were fibers and veins that led to a central region — a square mile of indecipherable machinery—and the very last images showed damaged machines, the sail's tiny heart wounded by a series of swift murderous collisions.

The impact itself was beautiful. Ghostly fires marked where the leading edge bit into the stratosphere. Without sound or fuss, the sail evaporated into a gentle rain of atomized metals. But the spiderweb structures were more durable, weathering the impact, tens of thousands of miles of material falling over three continents and as many oceans, folding and fracturing on their way down, the most massive portions able to kill sparrows and crack a few windows and roof tiles.

No planes were flying at the time, as a precaution. Few people were driving. Subsequent figures showed that human death rates had dropped for that critical hour, a worldly caution in effect; then they lifted afterward, parties and carelessness taking their inevitable toll.

The sail's central region detached itself at the end, then broke into still smaller portions. One portion crashed along the shore of Lake Superior. The Fox affiliate in Duluth sent a crew, beating the military by twenty minutes. The only witness to the historic event was a temperamental bull moose. Only when it was driven off did the crew realize that the sail wasn't an automated probe. A solitary crew member lay within a fractured diamond shell, assorted life-support equipment heaped on all sides. Despite wounds and the fiery crash, it was alive—an organism built for gravity, air, and liquid water. A trembling camera showed the world its first genuine alien sprawled out on the forest floor, a dozen jointed limbs reaching for

its severed web, and some kind of mouth generating a clear, strong, and pitiful wail that was heard in a billion homes.

A horrible piercing wail.

The scream of a soul in perfect agony.

Caleb was one of the guards supplied by the U.S. Marines.

Large in a buttery way, with close-cropped hair and tiny suspicious eyes, Caleb was the kind of fellow who would resemble a guard even without his uniform or bulky side arm. His service record was flawless. Of average intellect and little creativity, nonetheless he possessed a double dose of what, for lack of a better word, could be called shrewdness.

Working the security perimeter, he helped control access to the alien. *The bug*, as he dubbed it, without a shred of originality. Twice in the first two days he caught unauthorized civilians attempting to slip inside —one using a false ID, the other hiding inside bales of computer paper. Late on the third day he found a fellow guard trying to smuggle out a piece of the bug's shell. "It's a chunk of diamond," was the man's pitiful defense. "Think what it's worth, Caleb. And I'll give you half... what do you say...?"

Nothing. He saw no reason to respond, handcuffing the man — a sometime acquaintance — then walking him back toward the abrupt little city that had sprung up on the lakeshore. Double-walled tents were kept erect with pressurized air and webs of

rope, each tent lit and heated, the rumble of generators and compressors making the scene appear busier than it was. Most people were asleep; it was three in the morning. A quarter moon hung overhead, the January stars like gemstones, brighter and more perfect than the battered diamond shard that rode against Caleb's hip. But the sky barely earned a glance, and despite the monumental events of the last weeks and days, the guard felt no great fortune for being where he was. His job was to deliver the criminal to his superiors, which he did, and he did it without distraction, acting with a rigorous professionalism.

The duty officer, overworked and in lousy spirits, didn't want the shard. "You take it back to the science people," he ordered. "I'll call ahead. They'll be watching for you."

Mistrust came with the job; Caleb expected nothing less from his superior.

*The bug* was at the center of the city, under a converted circus tent. Adjacent tents and trailers housed the scientists and their machinery. One facility was reserved for the press, but it was almost empty, what with the hour and the lack of fresh events. Overflow equipment was stored at the back of the tent, half-unpacked and waiting to be claimed by experts still coming from the ends of the world. Despite the constant drone of moving air, Caleb could hear the bug now and again. A wail, a whimper. Then another, deeper wail. Just for a moment, the sound



caused him to turn his head, listening now, feeling something that he couldn't name, something without a clear source. An emotion, liquid and intense, made him pay close attention. But then the bug fell silent, or at least it was quieter than the man-made wind, and the guard was left feeling empty, a little cold, confused and secretly embarrassed.

He was supposed to meet a Dr. Lee in the press tent; those were his orders, but nobody was waiting for him.

Caleb stood under a swaying fluorescent light, removing the diamond shard from his pocket and examining it for the first time. Cosmic dust and brutal radiations had worn at it; he'd seen prettier diamonds dangling from men's ears. What made it valuable? Why care half this much about the bug? The Earth had never been in danger. The sail's lone passenger was dying. Everyone who visited it said it was just a matter of time. To the limits of his vision, Caleb could see nothing that would significantly change people's lives. Scientists would build and destroy reputations. Maybe some fancy new machines would come from their work. Maybe. But the young man from central Missouri understood that life would go on as it always had, and so why get all worked up in the first place?

“You've got something for me?”

Caleb looked up, finding a middle-aged woman walking toward him. A very tired, red-eyed woman. She was one of the nation's top surgeons, although he didn't know or particularly care.

“I’ll take that for you—”

“Sorry, ma’am.” He had read her ID tag, adding, “I’m expecting Marvin Lee. Material studies.”

“I know. But Marvin’s busy, and I like the press tent’s coffee. Since I was coming this way, I volunteered.”

“But I can’t give it to you. Ma’am.” Caleb could see how the shard had been stolen in the first place.

Red eyes rolled, amused with his paranoia.

Not for the first time, he felt frustration. No sense of protocol here; no respect for sensible rules. The name on the ID was Hilton. Showing none of his feeling, Caleb said, “Perhaps you could take me to him, Dr. Hilton. If it’s no trouble.”

“I guess.” She poured black coffee into a Styrofoam cup, a knowing little smile appearing. “Now I get it. You’re after a trip to the big tent, aren’t you?”

Hadn’t he just said that?

A sly wink, and she said, “Come on then. I’ll take you.”

They left the press tent, the doctor without a coat and the guard not bothering to zip his up. A twenty-yard walk, then they entered the bug’s enormous tent, three sets of sealed doors opening for them. The last pair of guards waved them on without a look. Caleb smelled liquor, for just a moment, and as he stepped through the door he was wondering whom to warn about this serious breach of the rules —

—and there was a horrible, horrible wail.

Caleb stopped in midstride, his breath coming up

short, a bolt of electricity making his spine straighten up and his face reflexively twist as if in agony.

Turning, showing the oddest half-grin, Dr. Hilton inquired, "Is something wrong?"

It took him a moment to say, "No, I'm fine."

"But it's your first time here, isn't it?"

What was her point?

"You've heard stories about it, haven't you?"

"Some."

"And you're curious. You want to see it for yourself."

"Not particularly," he answered, with conviction.

Yet she didn't believe him. She seemed to enjoy herself. "Marvin's on the other side. Stay with me."

Caleb obeyed. Walking between banks of instruments, he noticed that the technicians wore bulky, heavily padded headphones to blunt the screams. Now and again, at unpredictable moments, the bug would roar, and again Caleb would pause, feeling a little ill for that terrible moment when the air itself seemed to rip apart. Then just as suddenly there was silence, save for the clicking machines and hushed, respectful voices. In silence, Caleb found himself wondering if the guards drank because of the sounds. Not that he could condone it, but he could anticipate their excuse. Then he stepped off a floor of particle boards, onto rocky earth punctuated with tree stumps, and in the middle of that cleared patch of forest, stretched out on its apparent back, was the very famous bug. Not close enough to touch, but

nearly so. Not quite dead, but not quite alive, either.

There was some kind of face on a wounded appendage, a silent mouth left open, and what seemed to be eyes that were huge and strange and haunted. Dark liquid centers stared helplessly at the tent's high ceiling. It was no bug, Caleb realized. It didn't resemble an insect, or any mammal, for that matter. Were those legs? Or arms? Did it eat with that flexible mouth? And how did it breathe? Practical questions kept offering themselves, but he didn't ask any of them. Instead, he turned to the surgeon, dumbfounded. "Why bring me here?" he inquired.

She was puzzled. "I'm sorry, isn't that what you wanted? I assumed seeing Marvin was an excuse."

Not at all.

"You know," she informed him, "anyone else would give up a gland to be here. To stand with us."

True. He didn't quite see why, but he knew it was true.

Another pair of guards watched them from nearby. They knew the doctor. They had seen her come and go dozens of times, struggling to help her patient. In the course of three days, they had watched her face darken, her humor growing cynical, and her confidence languishing as every effort failed. They felt sorry for her. Maybe that was why they allowed Caleb to stand too close to government property. The soldier lacked clearance, but he was with Hilton, and he was safe looking, and how could this tiny indiscretion hurt? It made no sense to be hard-asses.

Glancing at their watches, they measured the minutes before their shift ended... and once more that gruesome critter gave a big roar... !

"It's in pain," Caleb muttered afterward.

The doctor looked at him, then away. "Are you sure?"

What a strange response. Of course it was in pain. He searched for the usual trappings of hospitals and illness. Where were the dangling bags of medicine and food? "Are you giving it morphine?" he asked, fully expecting to be told, "Of course."

But instead Hilton said, "Why? Why morphine?"

As if speaking to an idiot, Caleb said each word with care. "In order to stop the pain, naturally."

"Except morphine is an intricate, highly specific compound. It kills the hurt in Marines, but probably not in aliens." She waited a moment, then gestured. "You've got more in common—biochemically speaking—with these birch trees. Or a flu virus, for that matter."

He didn't understand, and he said so.

"This creature has DNA," she explained, "but its genetic codes are all different. It makes different kinds of amino acids, and very unusual proteins. Enzymes nothing like ours. And who knows what kinds of neurotransmitters."

The alien's mouth opened, and Caleb braced himself.

It closed, and he sighed.

"We've found organs," said Hilton, sipping her

coffee. "Some we know, some we don't. Three hearts, but two are punctured. Dead. The scar tissue shows radiation tracks. Count them, and we get an estimate of the tissue's age. A thousand years, maybe. Which means it was injured when it flew through a dust storm, probably on its way out of the last solar system."

The alien was about the size of a good riding horse. It seemed larger only because of its peculiar flattened shape. The wounds were surgically precise holes, wisps of dust having pierced diamond as well as flesh. Knowing what ballistic wounds meant, he asked, "How is it even alive?"

"Implanted machinery, in part. Most of the machinery isn't working, but what does is repairing some tissues, some organs." She took a big swallow of coffee. "But its wounds may not have been the worst news. Marvin and my other esteemed colleagues think that the cosmic buckshot crippled most of the sail's subsystems. The reactors, for instance. There were three of them, a city block square each, thick as a playing card. Without power, the creature had no choice but to turn *everything* off, including itself. A desperation cryogenic freeze, probably for most of the voyage. And it didn't wake until it was over our heads, almost. Its one maneuver might have been a doomed skydiver's attempt to strike a mound of soft hay."

Caleb turned and asked, "Will it live?"

Hilton was tiring of the game. "Eventually, no. There's talk about another freeze, but we can't even

freeze humans yet.”

“I said it was in pain, and you said, 'Are you sure?'“

“It's not us. We can't measure its moods, or how it feels. Empirical evidence is lacking—”

As if to debate the point, the alien screamed again. The eyes kept shaking afterward, the closing mouth making a low wet sound. Watching the eyes, Caleb asked, “Do you think it means, 'Hi, how are you?' “

Hilton didn't respond. She didn't have time.

Again the alien's mouth opened, black eyes rippling as the air was torn apart; and Caleb, hands to his ears and undistracted by nasty gray abstractions, knew exactly what that horrible noise meant.

Not a doubt in him, his decision already made.

For three days and several hours, a worldwide controversy had been brewing, sweeping aside almost every other human concern.

*What should be done with the alien?*

Everyone who would care knew about the wounds and screams. Almost everyone had seen those first horrid tapes of the creature, and they'd watched the twice-daily news conferences, including Dr. Hilton's extended briefings. No more network cameras were being allowed inside the central tent, on the dubious ground of cleanliness. (How did you infect such an odd creature with ordinary human pathogens?) But the suffering continued, without pause, and it was obvious that the people in charge were overmatched. At least according to those on the outside.

The United Nations should take over, or some trustworthy civilian agency. Said many.

But which organization would be best?

And assuming another caretaker, what kinds of goals would it try to accomplish?

Some observers wanted billions spent in a crash program, nothing more important now than the alien's total recovery. Others argued for a kind death, then a quick disposal of the body, all evidence of the tragedy erased in case a second sail-creature came searching for its friend. But the Earth was littered with wreckage; people couldn't hope to salvage every incriminating fiber. That led others to argue that nothing should be done, allowing Nature and God their relentless course. And should death come, the body could be preserved in some honorable way, studied or not, and should more aliens arrive in some distant age—unlikely as that seemed—they could see that people were decent, had done their best, and no blame could possibly be fixed to them.

Anne Hilton despised all those options. She wanted to heal her patient, but crash programs were clumsy and expensive, and she was a pragmatic doctor who realized that human patients would suffer as a result, no money left for their mortal ills. Besides, she doubted if there was time. The fiery crash had plainly damaged the tissue-repairing systems. And worse, there was no easy way to give the creature its simplest needs. Its oxygen use was falling.

Nitrogen levels were building in the slow, clear



blood. Teams of biochemists had synthesized a few simple sugars, amino acids, and other possible metabolites; yet the creature's success with each was uneven, the intravenous feedings canceled for now.

The truth told, Hilton's patient was collapsing at every level, and all that remained for the doctor was some of the oldest, most venerable skills.

Patience.

Prayer.

And whatever happened: "Do no harm."

For the next days, months, and years, Dr. Anne Hilton would wrestle with her memories, trying to decide why she had acted as she did that morning. Why get coffee at that particular moment? Why offer to retrieve the diamond shard? And why invite Caleb on that impromptu tour?

The last question had many answers. She had assumed that he wanted a tour, that he was being stubborn about the shard for no other reason. And because he was a Marine, he represented authority, order, and ignorance. She'd already had several collisions with his sort, politicians and other outsiders without enough mental activity to form a worthy thought. Maybe she'd hoped that shocking him would help her mood. She'd assumed that he was a big thoughtless lump of a man, the very worst kind...! Imagine. Stationed here for three days, guarding something wondrous, and precious, yet he didn't have the feeblest grasp of what was

happening... !

The last scream done, Caleb asked, "Where's its brain?"

She glanced at him, noticing a change in his eyes.

"Doctor?" he asked. "Do you know where it does its thinking?"

She was suddenly tired of dispensing free knowledge, yet something in his voice made her answer. A sip of coffee, an abbreviated gesture. Then she said, "Below the face. Inside what you'd call its chest," and with that she turned away.

She should have watched him.

She could have been more alert, like any good doctor, reading symptoms and predicting the worst.

But an associate was approaching, some nonvital problem needing her best guess. She didn't guess that anything was wrong until she saw her associate's face change. One moment he was smiling. Then he became suddenly confused. Then, horrified. And only after that did she bother to ask herself why that Marine would want to know where to find the brain.

Too late, she wheeled around.

Too late and too slow, she couldn't hope to stop him, or even slow him. Caleb had removed his side arm from its holster, one hand holding the other's wrist, the first shot delivered to the chest's exact center, missing the brain by an inch. Security cameras on all sides recorded the event, in aching detail. The alien managed to lift one limb, two slender

fingers reaching for the gun. Perhaps it was defending itself. Or perhaps, as others have argued, it simply was trying to adjust its killer's aim. Either way, the gesture was useless. And Hilton was superfluous. Caleb emptied his clip in short order, achieving a perfectly spaced set of holes. Two bullets managed to do what bits of relativistic dust couldn't, devastating a mind older than civilization. And the eyes, never human yet obviously full of intelligence, stared up at the tent's high ceiling, in thanks, perhaps, seeing whatever it is that only the doomed can see.

There was a trial.

The charge, after all the outcry and legal tap dancing, was reduced to felony destruction of federal property. Caleb offered no coordinated defense. His attorneys tried to argue for some kind of alien mind control, probably wishing for the benefit of the doubt. But Caleb fired them for trying it, then went on the stand to testify on his own behalf. In a quiet, firm voice, he described his upbringing in the Ozarks and the beloved uncle who had helped raise him, taking him hunting and fishing, instructing him in the moral codes of the decent man.

“ 'Aim to kill,' he taught me. 'Don't be cruel to any creature, no matter how lowborn.' “ Caleb stared at the camera, not a dab of doubt entering his steady voice. “When I see suffering, and when there's no hope, I put an end to it. Because that's what's right.” He gave examples of his work: Small game. A lame

horse. And dogs, including an arthritic Labrador that he'd raised from a pup. Yet that wasn't nearly enough reason, and he knew it. He paused for a long moment, wiping his forehead with his right palm. Then with a different voice, he said, "I was a senior, in high school, and my uncle got the cancer. In his lungs, his bones. Everywhere." He was quieter, if anything. Firmer. More in control, if that was possible. "It wasn't the cancer that killed him. His best shotgun did. His doctor and the sheriff talked it over, deciding that he must have held the twelve gauge up like this, then tripped the trigger like this." An imaginary gun lay in his outstretched arms, the geometry difficult even for a healthy oversized man. For the first time, the voice broke. But not badly and not for long. "People didn't ask questions," Caleb explained, arms dropping. "They knew what my uncle was feeling. What he wanted. They knew how we were, the two of us. And where I come from, decent people treat people just as good as they'd treat a sick farm cat. Dying stinks, but it might as well be done fast. And that's all I've got to say about that."

He was sentenced to five years of hard labor, serving every month without incident, without complaint, obeying the strict rules well enough that the prison guards voted him to be a model citizen of their intense little community.

Released, Caleb returned to Missouri, taking over the daily operations of the impoverished family farm.

Networks and news services pleaded for

interviews; none were granted.

Some idiots tried sneaking onto his property. They were met by dogs and a silent ex-Marine —lean as a fence post now —and the famous shotgun always cradled in his wiry long arms.

He never spoke to trespassers.

His dogs made his views known.

Eventually, people tired of running in the woods. Public opinions began to soften. The alien had been dying, it was decided. Nothing good could have been done for it. And if the Marine wasn't right in what he did, at least he'd acted according to his conscience.

Caleb won his privacy.

There were years when no one came uninvited.

Then it was a bright spring day twenty-some years after the killing, and a small convoy drove in past the warning signs, through the tall barbed-wire gates, and right up to the simple farmhouse. As it happened, a Marine colonel had been selected to oversee the operation. Flanked by government people, he met with the middle-aged farmer, and with a crisp non-nonsense voice said, “Pack your bags, soldier. But I'll warn you, you don't need to bring much.”

“Where am I going?”

“I'll give you one guess.”

Something had happened; that much was obvious. With a tight, irritated voice, Caleb told the colonel, “I want you all off my land. Now.”

“Goddamn! You really don't know, do you?” The

colonel gave a big laugh, saying, "Nothing else is on the news anymore."

"I don't have a television," said Caleb.

"Or a family anymore. And precious few friends." He spoke as if he'd just read the man's file. Then he pointed skyward, adding, "I just assumed you'd have seen it. After dusk is a good time—"

"I get to bed early," was Caleb's excuse. Then a sudden hard chill struck him. He leaned against his doorjamb, thinking that he understood, the fight suddenly starting to leave him. "There's another sail, isn't there? That's what this is all about."

"One sail? Oh, that's wonderful!" All the government men were giggling. "Make it three hundred and eighteen sails, and that's just *today's* count!"

"An armada of them," said someone.

"Gorgeous, gorgeous," said another, with feeling.

Caleb tried to gather himself. Then with a calm, almost inaudible voice, he asked, "But what do you want with me?"

"We don't want you," was the quick reply.

No?

"*They* do." The colonel kept smiling. "*They* asked specifically for *you*, soldier."

He knew why. Not a doubt in him.

Caleb muttered, "Just a minute," and dropped back into the house, as if to get ready.

The colonel waited for a couple seconds, then knew better. He burst through the door and tried to guess

where Caleb would have gone. Upstairs? No, there was an ominous *click* from somewhere on his right. Caleb was in a utility room, his shotgun loaded and cocked, the double barrels struggling to reach his long forehead; and the colonel grabbed the gun's butt and trigger, shouting, "No! Wait!" Then half a dozen government men were helping him, dark suits left rumpled and torn. But they wrestled the shotgun away from their charge, and the colonel stood over him, asking, "What were you thinking? Why in hell would you—?"

"I killed one of theirs," Caleb said. "Now they want their revenge. Isn't that it?"

"Not close." The colonel was too breathless to put much into his laugh. "In fact, I don't think you could be more wrong, soldier. The last thing they want to kill is you... !"

Caleb was packed into a new shuttle and taken to orbit, an ungainly lunar tug carrying him the rest of the way. There was a new moon in a high, safe orbit. One of the sail creatures had captured a modest nickel-iron asteroid and brought it there. Healthy and whole, the creature scarcely resembled its dead brother. Its vast sail was self-repairing, and it possessed an astonishing grace, superseding the most delicate butterfly. Partially folded, riding the captive asteroid, it swallowed the tug, guiding it into a docking facility built recently from the native ores. Other tugs had brought up dignitaries, scientists, and

a complete medical team. Everyone had gathered in the central room. As the onetime guard drifted into view, there was applause —polite but not quite enthusiastic — and from some of the faces, envy. Incandescent green envy.

Anne Hilton was among that number.

Old and long retired, she was present at the request of the sail creatures. Caleb didn't recognize her at first glance. She shook his hand, tried smiling, then introduced him to each member of her team. "We're just advisers," she informed him. "Most of the work will be done by our host."

Caleb flinched, just for a moment.

Their "host" didn't resemble the first alien, save for the artificial trappings. Sail creatures were an assemblage of sentient species. Perhaps dozens of them. Caleb had seen photographs of this particular species: fishlike; human-sized; blackish gills flanking an unreadable carpish mouth. It had disgusted him at first glance, and the memory of it disgusted him now.

Dr. Hilton asked, "Would you like to meet her?"

He spoke honestly, saying, "Not particularly."

"But she wants to meet you." A cutting smile, then she promised, "I'll take you to her. Come on."

They had done this before, more than two decades ago. She had taken him to meet an alien, and for at least this moment she could feel superior in the same way. In charge.

There was a narrow tunnel with handholds, toeholds.



Suddenly they were alone, and with a soft, careful voice, Caleb confessed, “I don't understand. Why *me?*”

“Why not you?” Hilton growled.

“I'm not smart. Or clever. Not compared to everyone else up here, I'm not.”

She lifted her eyebrows, watching him.

“These aliens should pick a scientist. Someone who cares about stars and planets...”

“You're going to be young again.” Hilton said the words as if delivering a curse. “It'll take her some time to learn our genetics, but she's promised me that she can reverse the aging process. A twenty-year-old body again.”

“I know.”

“As for being smart,” she said, “don't worry. She's going to tease your neurons into dividing, like inside a baby's head. By the time you leave us, you'll be in the top ninety-nine percentile among humans. And as creative as can be.”

He nodded, already aware of the general plan.

Then they were near the entrance to *her* chamber. Hilton stopped, one hand resting on Caleb's nearer arm, a firm and level voice telling him, “I would do anything —almost —for the chance to go where you're going. To live for aeons, to see all those wondrous places!”

In a quiet, almost conspiratorial tone, he said, “I'll tell her to take you instead of me.”

Hilton knew that he meant it, and she grew even

angrier.

Then again, Caleb asked, "Why *me*?"

"They think they know you, I guess. They've been studying our telecommunications noise for years, and you certainly earned their attention." Her withered face puckered, tasting something sour. "You acted out of a kind of morality. You didn't hesitate, and you didn't make excuses. Then you accepted the hardships of prison, and the hardships that came afterward. Being able to live alone like you did... well, that's a rare talent for our species, and it's invaluable..."

He gave a little nod, a sigh.

"These creatures don't treasure intelligence," she exclaimed. "That's something they can grow, in vats. The same with imagination. But there's some quality in you that makes you worth taking..."

A dull ocher button would open the hatch.

Hilton reached for it, and her hand was intercepted, frail bones restrained by an unconscious strength.

Caleb put his face close to hers, and whispered.

"What I did for that alien," he confessed, "I would have done for a dog." She opened her mouth, but said nothing. After a moment, he continued: "Or a bug. Or *anything*."

She stared at him, pulling at her hand until he abruptly let go.

"Time to get this business started," Caleb announced.

With an elbow, he smacked the button. There was a hiss, a little wind blowing as the hatch pulled open, carrying with it the smell of warm water and things unnamed.

He turned and left her.

And she hugged herself as if cold, and she watched him, her mouth open and nothing to say, the ex-Marine growing small with the distance as her bewilderment grew vast and bitter and black.

# The Dragons of Summer Gulch

## 1

A hard winter can lift rocks as well as old bones, shoving all that is loose up through the most stubborn earth. Then snowmelt and flash floods will sweep across the ground, wiping away the gravel and clay. And later, when a man with good vision and exceptional luck rides past, all of the world might suddenly change.

“Would you look at that,” the man said to himself in a firm, deep voice. “A claw, isn't it? From a mature dragon, isn't it? Good Lord, Mr. Barrow. And there's two more claws set beside that treasure!” Barrow was a giant fellow with a narrow face and a heavy cap of black hair that grew from his scalp and the back of his neck and between the blades of his strong shoulders. Born on one of the Northern Isles, he had left his homeland as a young man to escape one war, coming to this new country just in time to be thrown into a massive and prolonged civil conflict. Ten thousand miseries had abused him over the next years. But he survived the fighting, and upon his discharge from the Army of the Center, a grateful nation had given him both his citizenship and a bonus of gold coins. Barrow purchased a one-way ticket on the Western railroad, aiming to find his fortune in the wilderness. His journey ended in one of the new prairie towns—a place famous for hyrax herds and dragon bones.

There he had purchased a pair of quality camels, ample supplies for six months of solitude, and with shovels enough to move a hillside, he had set out into the washlands.

Sliding off the lead camel, he said, "Hold."

The beast gave a low snort, adjusting its hooves to find the most comfortable pose. Barrow knelt, carefully touching the dragon's middle claw. Ancient as this artifact was, he knew from painful experience that even the most weathered claw was sharp enough to slash. Just as the fossil teeth could puncture the thickest leather gloves, and the edges of the great scales were nastier than any saw blade sharpened on the hardest whetstone.

The claw was a vivid deep purple color—a sure sign of good preservation. With his favorite little pick, Barrow worked loose the mudstone beneath it, exposing its full length and the place where it joined into the front paw. He wasn't an educated man, but Barrow knew his trade: this had been a flying dragon, one of the monsters who once patrolled the skies above a vanished seacoast. The giant paw was meant for gripping. Presumably the dragons used their four feet much as a coon-rascal does, holding their prey and for other simple manipulations. These finger claws were always valuable, but the thick thumb claw—the Claw of God—would be worth even more to buyers. As night fell, Barrow dug by the smoky light of a little fire, picking away at the mudstone until the paw was revealed—a palm-down hand large enough

to stand upon and, after ages of being entombed, still displaying the dull red color made by the interlocking scales.

The man didn't sleep ten blinks. Then with first light he followed a hunch, walking half a dozen long strides up the gully and thrusting a shovel into what looked like a mound of ordinary clay. The shovel was good steel, but a dull *thunk* announced that something beneath was harder by a long ways.

Barrow used the shovel and a big pickax, working fast and sloppy, investing the morning to uncover a long piece of the dragon's back—several daggerlike spines rising from perhaps thirty big plates of ruddy armor.

Exhaustion forced him to take a break, eating his fill and drinking the last of his water. Then, because they were hungry and a little thirsty, he lead both of his loyal camels down the gully, finding a flat plain where sagebrush grew and seepage too foul for a man to drink stood in a shallow alkaline pond. The happy camels drank and grazed, wandering as far as their long leashes allowed. Barrow returned to his treasure. Twice he dug into fresh ground, and twice he guessed wrong, finding nothing. The monster's head was almost surely missing. Heads almost always were. But he tried a third time, and his luck held. Not only was the skull entombed along with the rest of the carcass, it was still attached to the body, the long muscular neck having twisted hard to the left as the creature passed from the living.

It had been a quick death, he was certain.

There were larger specimens, but the head was magnificent. What Barrow could see was as long as he was tall, narrow and elegant, a little reminiscent of a pelican's head, but prettier, the giant mouth bristling with a forest of teeth, each tooth bigger than his thumb. The giant dragon eyes had vanished, but the large sockets remained, filled with mudstone and aimed forward like a hawk's eyes. And behind the eyes lay a braincase several times bigger than any man's.

“How did you die?” he asked his new friend.

Back in town, an educated fellow had explained to Barrow what science knew today and what it was guessing. Sometimes the dragons had been buried in mud, on land or underwater, and the mud protected the corpse from its hungry cousins and gnawing rats. If there were no oxygen, then there couldn't be any rot. And that was the best of circumstances. Without rot, and buried inside a stable deep grave, an entire dragon could be kept intact, waiting for the blessed man to ride by on his happy camel. Barrow was thirsty enough to moan, but he couldn't afford to stop now. Following the advice of other prospectors, he found the base of the dragon's twin wings—the wings still sporting the leathery flesh strung between the long, long finger bones—and he fashioned a charge with dynamite, setting it against the armored plates of the back and covering his work with a pile of tamped earth to help force the blast downward. Then,

with a long fuse, he set off the charge. There was a dull thud followed by a steady rain of dirt and pulverized stone, and he ran to look at what he had accomplished, pulling back the shattered plates—each worth half a good camel when intact—and then using a heavy pick to pull free the shattered insides of the great beast. If another dragon had made this corpse, attacking this treasure from below, there would be nothing left to find. Many millions of years ago, the precious guts would have been eaten, and lost.

“But still,” Barrow told himself. “These claws and scales are enough to pay for my year. If it comes to that.”

But it didn't have to come to that.

Inside the fossil lay the reason for all of his suffering and boredom: behind the stone-infected heart was an intricate organ as long as he was tall—a spongelike thing set above the peculiar dragon lungs. The organ was composed of gold and lustrous platinum wrapped around countless voids. In an instant, Barrow had become as wealthy as his dreams had promised he would be. He let out an enormous yell, dancing back and forth across the back of the dead dragon. Then he collapsed beside his treasure, crying out of joy, and when he wiped back the tears one final time, he saw something else. Eons ago, a fine black mud had infiltrated the dead body, filling the cavities while keeping away the free oxygen.

Without oxygen, there was almost no decay.



Floating in the old mudstone were at least three round bodies, each as large as the largest naval cannon balls. They were not organs, but they belonged inside the dragon. Barrow had heard stories about such things, and the educated man in town had even shown him a shard of something similar. But where the shard was dirty gray, these three balls were white as bone. That was their color in life, he realized, and this was their color now.

With a trembling hand, Barrow touched the nearest egg, and he held his palm against it for a very long while, leaving it a little bit warm.

At one point, the whore asked, "Where did you learn all this crap?" Manmark laughed quietly for a moment. Then he closed the big book and said, "My credentials. Is that what you wish to have?"

"After your money, sure. Your credentials. Yes."

"As a boy, I had tutors. As a young man, I attended several universities. I studied all the sciences and enjoyed the brilliance of a dozen great minds. And then my father died, and I took my inheritance, deciding to apply my wealth and genius in the pursuit of great things." She was the prettiest woman of her sort in this town, and she was not stupid. Manmark could tell just by staring at her eyes that she had a good, strong mind. But she was just an aboriginal girl, tiny like all of the members of her race, sold by her father for opium or liquor. Her history had to be impoverished and painful. Which was why it didn't bother him too much when she laughed at him, remarking, "With most men, listening is easier than screwing. But with you, I think it's the other way around." Manmark opened the book again, ignoring any implied insult.

Quietly, he asked the woman, "Can you read?"

"I know which coin is which," she replied. "And my name, when I see it. If it's written out with a simple hand."

"Look at this picture," he told her. "What does it show you?"

"A dragon," she said matter-of-factly.

“Which species of dragon?” Manmark pressed.

She looked at the drawing, blowing air into her cheeks. Then she exhaled, admitting, “I don't know. Is it the flying kind?”

“Hardly.”

“Yeah, I guess it isn't. I don't see wings.”

He nodded, explaining, “This is a small early dragon. One of the six-legged precursor species, as it happens. It was unearthed on this continent, resting inside some of the oldest rocks from the Age of Dragons.” Manmark was a handsome fellow with dreamy golden eyes that stared off into one of the walls of the room. “If you believe in natural selection and in the great depths of time,” he continued, “then this might well be the ancestor to the hundred species that we know about, and the thousands we have yet to uncover.”

She said, “Huh,” and sat back against the piled-up pillows.

“Can I look at the book?” she asked.

“Carefully,” he warned, as if speaking to a moody child. “I don't have another copy with me, and it is the best available guide—”

“Just hand it over,” she interrupted. “I promise. I won't be rough.” Slowly, and then quickly, the woman flipped through the pages. Meanwhile her client continued to speak about things she could never understand: on this very land, there once stood dragons the size of great buildings—placid and heavily armored vegetarians that consumed entire

trees, judging by the fossilized meals discovered in their cavernous bellies. Plus there had been smaller beasts roaming in sprawling herds, much as the black hyraxes grazed on the High Plains. The predatory dragons came in two basic types—the quadrupeds with their saber teeth and the Claws of God on their mighty hands; and later, the winged giants with the same teeth and Claws but also grasping limbs and a brain that might well have been equal to a woman's.

If the girl noticed his insult, she knew better than show it, her face down and nodding while the pages turned. At the back of the book were new kinds of bones and odd sketches. “What is this tiny creature?” she inquired.

Manmark asked, “What does it resemble?”

“Some kind of fowl,” she admitted.

“But with teeth,” he pointed out. “And where are its wings?” She looked up, almost smiling. “Didn't it have wings? Or haven't you found them yet?”

“I never work with these little creatures,” Manmark reported with a prickly tone. “But no, it and its kind never grew particularly large, and they were never genuinely important. Some in my profession believe they became today's birds. But when their bones were first uncovered, the creatures were mistakenly thought to be a variety of running lizard. Which is why those early fossil hunters dubbed them 'monstrous lizards' ...”

She turned the page, paused, and then smiled at a particular drawing. “I know this creature,” she said,

pushing the book across the rumpled sheets. "I've seen a few shrews in my day." The tiny mammal huddled beneath a fern frond. Manmark tapped the image with his finger, agreeing, "It does resemble our shrew. As it should, since this long-dead midget is the precursor to them and to us and to every fur-bearing animal in between."

"Really?" she said.

"Without question."

"Without question," she repeated, nodding as if she understood the oceans of time and the slow, remorseless pressures of natural selection.

"Our ancestors, like the ancestors of every bird, were exceptionally tiny," Manmark continued. "The dragons ruled the land and seas, and then they ruled the skies too, while these little creatures scurried about in the shadows, waiting patiently for their turn."

"Their turn?" She closed the book with authority, as if she would never need it again. Then, with a distant gaze, she said, "Now and again, I have wondered. Why did the dragons vanish from this world?" Manmark reminded himself that this was an aboriginal girl. Every primitive culture had its stories. Who knew what wild legends and foolish myths she had heard since birth?

"Nobody knows what happened to them," was his first, best answer. Then, taking back the book, he added, "But we can surmise there was some sort of cataclysm. An abrupt change in climate, a catastrophe

from the sky. Something enormous made every large animal extinct, emptying the world for the likes of you and me.”

She seemed impressed by the glimpse of the apocalypse. Smiling at him, she set her mouth to say a word or two, perhaps inviting him back over to her side of the great down-filled bed. But then a sudden hard knock shook the room's only door.

Manmark called out, “Who is it?”

“Name's Barrow,” said a rough male voice.

Barrow? Did he know that name?

“We spoke some weeks back,” the stranger reported, speaking through the heavy oak. “I told you I was going out into the wash country, and you told me to be on the lookout—”

“Yes.”

“For something special.”

Half-dressed and nearly panicked, Manmark leaped up, unlocking the door while muttering, “Quiet, quiet.”

Barrow stood in the hallway, a tall man who hadn't bathed in weeks or perhaps years. He was grimy and tired and poorly fed and mildly embarrassed when he saw the nearly naked woman sitting calmly on the edge of another man's bed. But then he seemed to recall what had brought him here. “You mentioned money,” he said to Manmark. “A great deal of money, if a hunter found for you—”

“Yes.”

“One or more of them—”

“Quiet,” Manmark snapped.

“Eggs,” whispered the unwashed fossil hunter.

And with that, Manmark pulled the dullard into the room, clamping a hand over his mouth before he could utter another careless word.

Once again, the world was dying.

Zephyr enjoyed that bleak thought while strolling beside the railroad station, passing downwind from the tall stacks of rancid hyrax skins. The skins were waiting for empty cars heading east—the remains of thousands of beasts killed by hunters and then cleaned with a sloppy professional haste. It was a brutal business, and doomed. In just this one year, the nearby herds had been decimated, and soon the northern and southern herds would feel the onslaught of long rifles and malevolent greed. The waste was appalling, what with most of the meat being left behind for the bear-dogs or to rot in the brutal summer sun. But like all great wastes, it would remake the world again. Into this emptiness, new creatures and peoples would come, filling the country overnight, and that new order would persist for a day or a million years before it too would collapse into ruin and despair.

Such were the lessons taught by history.

And science, in its own graceful fashion, reiterated those grand truths.

“Master Zephyr?”

An assistant had emerged from the railroad station, bearing important papers and an expression of weary tension. “Is it arranged?” Zephyr asked. Then, before the man could respond, he added, “I require a suitable car. For a shipment of this importance, my treasures deserve better than to be



shoved beneath these bloody skins.”

“I have done my best,” the assistant promised.

“What is your best?”

“It will arrive in three days,” the man replied, pulling a new paper to the top of the stack. “An armored car used to move payroll coins to the Westlands. As you requested, there's room for guards and your dragon scales, and your private car will ride behind it.”

“And the dragons' teeth,” Zephyr added. “And several dozen Claws of God.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And four dragon spleens.”

“Of course, sir. Yes.”

Each of those metallic organs was worth a fortune, even though none were in good condition. Each had already been purchased. Two were owned by important concerns in the Eastlands. The other two were bound for the Great Continent, purchased by wealthy men who lived along the Dragon River: the same crowded green country where, sixty years ago, Zephyr began his life. The spleens were full of magic, some professed. Others looked on the relics as oddities, beautiful and precious. But a growing number considered them to be worthy of scientific study—which was why one of the Eastland universities was paying Zephyr a considerable sum for a half-crushed spleen, wanting their chance to study its metabolic purpose and its possible uses in the modern world. Like his father and his

grandfather, Zephyr was a trader who dealt exclusively in the remains of dragons. For generations, perhaps since the beginning of civilized life, the occasional scale and rare claws were much in demand, both as objects of veneration as well as tools of war. Even today, modern munitions couldn't punch their way through a quality scale pulled from the back of a large dragon. In the recent wars, soldiers were given suits built of dragon armor—fantastically expensive uniforms intended only for the most elite units—while their enemies had used dragon teeth and claws fired by special guns, trying to kill the dragon men who were marching across the wastelands toward them. Modern armies were much wealthier than the ancient civilizations. As a consequence, this humble son of a simple trader, by selling to both sides during the long civil war, had made himself into a financial force. The fighting was finished, at least for today. But every government in the world continued to dream of war, and their stockpiles continued to grow, and as young scientists learned more about these lost times, the intrigue surrounding these beasts could only increase.

“This is good enough,” Zephyr told his assistant, handing back the railroad's contract.

“I'll confirm the other details,” the man promised, backing away in a pose of total submission. “By telegraph, I'll check on the car's progress, and I will interview the local men, looking for worthy guards.” And Zephyr would do the same. But surreptitiously,

just to reassure an old man that every detail was seen to.

Because a successful enterprise had details at its heart, the old man reminded himself. Just as different details, if left unnoticed, would surely bring defeat to the sloppy and the unfortunate.

.....

Zephyr occupied a spacious house built on the edge of the workers' camp—the finest home in this exceptionally young town but relegated to this less desirable ground because, much as everyone who lived in the camp, its owner belonged to a questionable race. Passing through the front door, the white-haired gentleman paused a moment to enjoy the door's etched glass, and in particular the ornate dragons captured in the midst of life, all sporting wings and fanciful breaths of fire. With a light touch, the trader felt the whitish eye of one dragon. Then, with a tense, disapproving voice, the waiting manservant announced, "Sir, you have a visitor."

Zephyr glanced into the parlor, seeing no one.

"I made her wait in the root cellar," the servant replied. "I didn't know where else to place her."

"Who is she?" the old man inquired. And when he heard the name, he said, "Bring her to me. Now."

"A woman like that?" the man muttered in disbelief.

"As your last duty to me, yes. Bring her to the parlor, collect two more weeks of wages, and then

pack your belongings and leave my company.” With an angry finger, he added, “Your morals should have been left packed and out of sight. Consider this fair warning should you ever find employment again.” Zephyr could sound frightfully angry, if it suited him.

He walked into the parlor, sat on an overstuffed chair, and waited. A few moments later, the young aboriginal woman strolled into the parlor, investing a moment to look at the furnishings and ivory statues. Then she said, “I learned something.”

“I assumed as much.”

“Like you guessed, it's the barbarian with all the money.” She smiled, perhaps thinking of the money.

“He's promised huge payoffs to the dragon hunters, and maybe that's why this one hunter brought him word of a big discovery.”

“Where is this discovery? Did you hear?”

“No.”

“Does this hunter have a name?”

“Barrow.”

Unless Barrow was an idiot or a genius, he would have already applied for dig rights, and they would be included in any public record. It would be a simple matter to bribe the clerk—

“There's eggs,” she blurted.

Zephyr was not a man easily startled. But it took him a moment to repeat the word, “Eggs.” Then he asked, “More than one egg, you mean?”

“Three, and maybe more.”

“What sort of dragon is it?”

“Winged.”

“A Sky-Demon?” he said with considerable hope.

“From what they said in front of me, I'm sure of it. He has uncovered the complete body of a Sky-Demon, and she died in the final stages of pregnancy.” The girl smiled as she spoke, pleased with everything that had happened. “He didn't realize I understood the importance of things, or even that I was listening. That Manmark fellow ... he is such a boring, self-important prick—”

“One last question,” Zephyr interrupted. “What color were these eggs? Was that mentioned?” The girl nodded and looked about the room again. Then, picking up a game cube carved from the whitest hyrax ivory, she said, “Like this, they were. They are. Perfectly, perfectly preserved.”

Manmark was an endless talker, and most of his talk was senseless noise. Barrow treated the noise as just another kind of wind, taking no pleasure from it, nor feeling any insult. To be mannerly, he would nod on occasion and make some tiny comment that could mean anything, and, bolstered by this gesture, Manmark would press on, explaining how it was to grow up wealthy in the Old World, or why bear-dogs were the most foul creatures, or why the world danced around the sun, or how it felt to be a genius on that same world—a grand, deep, wondrous mind surrounded by millions of fools. It was amazing what a man would endure, particularly if he had been promised a heavy pile of platinum coins.

There were five other men working with them. Four were youngsters—students of some type brought along to do the delicate digging. While the fifth fellow served as their protector, armed with a sleek modern rifle and enough ammunition to kill a thousand men. Some months ago, before he left for the wilderness, Manmark had hired the man to be their protector, keeping him on salary for a day such as this. He was said to be some species of professional killer, which was a bit of a surprise. A few times in conversation, Barrow had wormed honest answers out of the fellow. His credentials were less spectacular than he made them out to be, and even more alarming, the man was extraordinarily scared of things that would never present a problem. Bear-dogs were a source of much

consternation, even though Barrow never had trouble with the beasts. And then there were the aborigines; those normally peaceful people brought nightmares of their own. "What if they come on us while we sleep?" the protector would ask, his voice low and haunted. "I am just one person. I have to sleep. What if I wake to find one of those miserable bastards slicing open my throat?"

"They wouldn't," Barrow assured him. Then he laughed, adding, "They'll cut into your chest first, since they'll want to eat your heart."

That was a pure fiction—a grotesque rumor made real by a thousand cheap novels. But their protector seemed to know nothing about this country, his experience born from the novels and small-minded tales told in the slums and high-class restaurants left behind on the distant, unreachable coast. In his own fashion, Manmark was just as innocent and naïve. But there were moments when what he knew proved to be not only interesting but also quite valuable.

During their second night camped beside the dragon, Manmark topped off his tall glass of fancy pink liquor, and then he glanced at the exposed head of the great beast, remarking, "Life was so different in those old times."

There was nothing interesting in that. But Barrow nodded, as expected, muttering a few bland agreements.

"The dragons were nothing like us," the man continued.

*What could be more obvious?* Barrow thought to himself.

“The biology of these monsters,” said Manmark. Then he looked at Barrow, a wide grin flashing. “Do you know how they breathed?”

It was just the two of them sitting before the fire. The students, exhausted by their day's work, were tucked into their bedrolls, while the camp protector stood on a nearby ridge, scared of every darkness. “I know their lungs were peculiar affairs,” Barrow allowed. “Just like their hearts, and their spleens—”

“Not just peculiar,” Manmark interrupted. “Unique.” Barrow leaned closer.

“Like us, yes, they had a backbone. But it was not our backbone. There are important differences between the architectures—profound and telling differences. It is as if two separate spines had evolved along two separate but nearly parallel lineages.”

The words made sense, to a point.

“North of here,” said Manmark. “I have colleagues who have found ancient fossils set within a bed of fine black shale. Unlike most beds of that kind, the soft parts of the dead have been preserved along with their hard shells and teeth. Have you heard of this place? No? Well, its creatures expired long before the first dragon was born. The world was almost new, it was so long ago ... and inside that beautiful black shale is a tiny wormlike creature that has the barest beginnings of a notochord. A spine. The first vertebrate, say some.”



“Like us,” Barrow realized.

“And lying beside that specimen is another. Very much the same, in its fashion. Wormlike and obscure. But in other ways, it is full of subtle, very beautiful differences.”

“Different how?”

“Well, for instance ... there is a minuscule speck of metal located in the center of its simple body.”

“Like a dragon's spleen?”

“But simpler, and made of ordinary metals. Iron and copper and such.” Manmark finished his drink and gazed into the fire. “This dragon's lungs were very different, of course. Instead of sucking in a breath and then exhaling it out the same way, she took the air through her nostrils, into the lungs and out through a rectal orifice. We don't know enough to be certain yet. But it seems reasonable to assume that our dragon did a much better job of wringing the oxygen out of her endless deep breath.” Barrow nodded, very much interested now.

“And then there's the famous spleen,” Manmark continued. “Have you ever wondered why these beasts needed to collect precious metals? What possible advantage could they have lent to the beasts?”

“I've thought about it some,” he confessed.

“Gold and platinum and sometimes silver,” said Manmark. “They are precious to us because they are rare, yes. But also because they barely rust in the presence of oxygen, which is why they retain their

lovely sheen. And for the newest industries of our world, these elements are increasingly valuable. Were you aware? They can serve as enzymatic surfaces for all kinds of impressive chemical reactions. Perhaps our lady dragon would mix her breath and blood inside the spleen's cavities, producing all kinds of spectacular products. Even fire, perhaps."

Barrow nodded as if he understood every word.

"One day, we'll decipher what happened inside these creatures. And I suspect that knowledge, when it arrives, will revolutionize our world."

"Someday, maybe," Barrow conceded.

"In the distant future, you think?" Manmark grinned and took a long drink from his mostly drained glass.

"But not in our lives, surely. Is that what you are thinking?"

"Isn't that the truth?"

"The truth." The self-described genius stared into the campfire, his gold eyes full of greed and a wild hope. "This isn't well known. Outside of scientific circles, that is. But a few years ago, an immature egg was dug from the belly of a giant tree-eating dragon. Dead for perhaps a hundred million years, yet its color was still white. The oxygen that had fueled its parent had been kept away from the egg in death, and some kind of deep coma state had been achieved. Which is not too surprising. We know dragon eggs are exceptionally durable. It's perhaps a relic trait from those days when their ancestors laid their eggs

in sloppy piles and buried them under dirt and then left the nest, sometimes for decades, waiting for the proper conditions. Since these creatures had a very different biochemistry from ours ... a much superior physiology ... they could afford to do such things—”

“What are you saying?” Barrow interrupted. “I'm sorry, I don't understand half your words.”

“I'm saying that the dragons were exceptionally durable.” The dragon hunter glanced at the long, lovely skull and its cavernous eye sockets. “I have never heard this before. Is there some chance that those eggs over there ... in that ground, after all of these years ...?”

“Remember the immature egg that I mentioned?” Manmark was whispering, his voice a little sloppy and terribly pleased. “The egg from the tree-eater? Well, I have read the paper written about its dissection. A hundred times, I have read it. Diamond blades were used to cut through the shell, and despite everything that common and uncommon sense would tell you ... yes, there was still fluid inside the egg, and a six-legged embryo that was dead but intact ... dead, but that looked as if it had died only yesterday, its burial lasting just a little too long ...”

Three eggs became four, and then five, and quite suddenly there were seven of the treasures set on a bed of clean straw, enjoying the temporary shade of a brown canvas tarp. It was a sight that dwarfed Manmark's great dreams, marvelous and lovely as they had been. Each egg was perfectly round, and each was the same size, their diameter equal to his forearm and extended hand. They were heavier than any bird egg would be, if a bird could lay such an enormous egg. But that was reasonable, since the thick white shell was woven partly from metal and strange compounds that were barely understood today—ceramics and odd proteins laid out in a painfully delicate pattern. The shell material itself contained enough mystery to make a great man famous. But Manmark could always imagine greater honors and even wilder successes, as he did now, touching the warm surface of the nearest egg, whispering to it, "Hello, you."

The students were standing together, waiting for orders. And behind them stood a freight wagon, its team of heavy camels ready to pull their precious cargo to town and the railhead. Barrow was perched on the wagon's front end, leather reins held tight in both hands. Manmark took notice of him, and for a moment he wondered why the man was staring off into the distance. What did he see from that vantage point? Looking in the same general direction, Manmark saw nothing. There was a slope of gray clay

punctuated with a few clusters of yucca, and the crest of the little ridge formed a neat line dividing the rain-washed earth from the intense blue of the sky. The dragon hunter was staring at nothing.

How peculiar.

Manmark felt a little uneasy, but for no clear reason. He turned to the students now, ready to order the wagon loaded. And then, too late by a long ways, he remembered that their very expensive security man had been walking that barren ridge, his long gun cradled in both arms, haunted eyes watching for trouble. *So where is my protector?* Manmark asked himself.

An instant later, the clean crack of a bullet cut through the air, and one of the large camels decided to drop its head and then its massive body, settling with a strange urgency onto the hard pan of clay. Manmark knelt down between the great eggs. Otherwise, he was too startled to react. The students dropped low and stared at the sky.

Barrow remained on the wagon, yanking at the reins and braking with his left foot, telling the surviving three camels, "Hold. Stay. Hold now. Stay."

Something about that voice steadied Manmark. Something in the man's calmness allowed him to look up, shouting to Barrow, "What is this? What is happening?"

Next came the sound of hooves striking dirt—many hooves in common motion—and he turned the other way, seeing six ... no, eight camels calmly walking

down the long draw, each built to race, each wearing a small saddle as well as a man dressed in shapeless clothes and heavy masks. Manmark's first thought was to deny that this was happening. Hadn't he taken a thousand precautions?

Nobody should know the significance of this dig, which meant that this had to be some random bit of awful luck. These were raiders of some kind—simple thieves easily tricked. A few coins of debased gold would probably satisfy them. He started to calculate the proper figure, filling his head with nonsense until that moment when the lead rider lowered his fat rifle and fired.

A fountain of pulverized earth slapped Manmark in the face.

He backed away, stumbled and dropped onto his rump. Then in his panic, he began digging into his pockets, searching for the tiny pistol that he had carried from the Old World and never fired once.

“Don't,” said a strong, calming voice.

Barrow's voice.

“Give them what they want,” said the dragon hunter, speaking to him as he would to a nervous camel.

“I won't,” Manmark sputtered. “They are mine!”

“No,” Barrow said from high on the wagon. “They aren't yours anymore, if they ever were ...” The riders didn't speak, save to wave their weapons in the air, ordering him to back away from the eggs. Then each claimed a single white sphere, dismounting long

enough to secure their prize inside a silk sling apparently woven for this single task.

The final pair of riders was dressed as the others, yet they were different. One was small in build, while the other moved like a healthy but definitely older man. Manmark stared at both of them, and with an expertise garnered from years of imagining flesh upon ancient bone, he made two good guesses about who was beneath all those clothes.

“Zephyr,” he muttered.

How many candidates were there? In one little town, or even at this end of the territory, how many other men were there who could possibly appreciate the significance of this find?

“And you,” he said to the whore, his voice tight and injured. She hesitated, if only for a moment.

Through the slits about the eyes, Zephyr stared at his opponent, and then he made some decision, lifting a hand and glancing back at the lead rider. For what purpose? To order him shot, perhaps?

The next blast of a gun startled everyone. The riders. Zephyr. And Manmark too. The concussion cut through the air, and while the roar was still ringing in their ears, Barrow said, “If we want to start killing, I’ll start with you. Whoever you are. Understand me, old man? Before they aim my way, I’ll hit your head and then your heart.”

Barrow was standing on the back of the wagon now, holding his own rifle against his shoulder.

“Hear me, stranger? The eggs are yours. Take

them. And I'll give you your life in the deal. Is that good enough?"

"It is adequate," said the accented voice.

Under his breath, Manmark muttered grim curses. But he stood motionless while Zephyr claimed the last of his eggs, and he swallowed his rage while the riders turned and started back up the long draw, the final man riding backward in his saddle, ready to fire at anyone with a breath of courage. Manmark had none.

When the thieves vanished, he collapsed, panting and sobbing in a shameless display. Barrow leaped off the wagon and walked toward him.

The students were standing again, chattering among themselves. One and then another asked no one in particular, "Will we still get paid?"

All was lost, Manmark believed.

Then the dragon hunter knelt beside him, and with an almost amused voice, he said, "All right. Let's discuss my terms."

"Your what?"

"Terms," he repeated. Then he outright laughed, adding, "When I get these eggs back to you, what will you pay me?"

"But how can you recover them?"

"I don't know yet. But give me the right promises, and maybe I'll think of something." Manmark was utterly confused. "What do you mean? If there are six of them, and if they defeated my security man ... what hope do you have ...?"



“I fought in the war,” Barrow replied.

“A lot of men fought.”

“Not many did the kind of fighting that I did,” the dragon hunter replied. “And few of them fought half as well either.”

Manmark stared at the hard dark eyes. Then, because he had no choice, none whatsoever, he blurted,

“Yes. Whatever it costs. Yes!”

Here stood the best locomotive available on short notice—a soot-caked machine built of iron and fire, wet steam, and rhythmic noises not unlike the breathing of a great old beast. Since details mattered, Zephyr had hired workmen to paint dragon eyes on the front end and little red wings on its sides, and when the job wasn't done with the proper accuracy, he commissioned others to fix what was wrong. Two engineers stoked the fire, while a third sat on top of the tender, ready to spell whomever tired first. Behind the locomotive was the armored car hired to move spleens and scales—a wheeled fortress encased in steel and nearly empty, carrying nothing but seven white eggs and six mercenaries armed with enough munitions to hold off a regiment. And trailing behind was Zephyr's private car, luxurious and open in appearance, except for the small windowless room at the rear that served as a bath. The original plan for the dragons' spleens was to travel east. But the eggs were too precious to risk losing among the barbarians. Which was why Zephyr ordered his little train to head for the mountains and the Westlands beyond. A telegraph message dressed in code had been sent ahead. By the time he arrived at the Great Bay, a steamer would be waiting, ready to carry him back to the land of fables and childhood memories.

“I haven't been home for years,” he confessed to his companion. The young woman smiled at him, and once again, she said, “Thank you for taking me.”

“It was the very least I could do,” Zephyr allowed. “You were wise to ask, in fact. If Manmark realized you were responsible—”

“And for this,” she interrupted, letting her fat coin purse jingle in an agreeable fashion.

“You have earned every mark. For what you have done to help me, madam, I will always be in your gratitude ...”

There was only one set of tracks, with the occasional sidings and rules of conduct between oncoming trains. But Zephyr had sprinkled the world before them with bribes, and for the time being, there might as well be no other train in the world. As they picked up speed—as the engine quickened its breathing and its pace—he looked through the thick window glass, watching a hand-painted sign pass on their right.

“You are leaving Summer Gulch,” he read. “The fastest growing city between here and there.” What an odd, interesting thing to write. Zephyr laughed for a moment, and again mentioned, “I haven't been home since I was a young man.”

“I'd love to see the Great Continent,” the aboriginal girl reported. What would become of this creature? Zephyr was of several minds on the subject, but his happy mood steered him to the more benevolent courses.

She slipped her purse out of sight.

“Do you know why we call it the Dragon River?” he asked.

“I don't,” she replied.

Somehow he doubted that. But a prostitute makes her living by listening as much as anything, and this old man could do little else but talk with her, at least for the moment. “Of course there are some substantial beds of fossils along the river's course, yes. Dragon bones and claws and the great scales are part of my people's history. And we are an ancient nation, you know. The oldest in the world, perhaps. From the beginning, our gods have been dragons and our emperors have been their earthly sons and daughters.” The woman had bright, jade-colored eyes and a pleasant, luring smile.

“My favorite story, true or not, is about a young emperor from the Fifth Dynasty.” Zephyr allowed his eyes to gaze off to the north, looking at the broken, rain-ripped country. “He found a flying dragon, it is said. The bones and scales were intact, as was her heart and spleen. And behind her spleen were eggs. At least two eggs, it is said. Some accounts mention as many as six, but only two of her offspring were viable. After three weeks of sitting above the ground, in the warming sun—and I should add, because the emperor was a very good man—the eggs finally hatched. Two baby dragons slithered into the world. Brothers, they were, and they belonged to him.

“The emperor had always been cared for by others. But he made a wise decision. He refused to let others care for his new friends, raising them himself, with his own hands. A mistake took one of those hands

from him, but that was a minor loss. He refused to let his guards kill the offending dragon. And for his kindness, the dragon and its brother loved the emperor for all of his days.” Zephyr paused for a moment, considering his next words.

“It was a weak time for my great nation,” he reported. “Barbarians were roaming the steppe and mountains, and peoples from the sea were raiding the coasts. But it is said—by many voices, not just those of my people—that a one-handed emperor appeared in the skies, riding the winged monsters. They were huge beasts, swift and strange. They breathed a strange fire, and they were powerful, and they had to eat a thousand enemy soldiers every day just to feed their endless hunger. An unlikely, mythic detail, I always believed. Except now, when I read scientific papers about the biology of dragons, I can see where they must have had prodigious appetites.”

The woman nodded, listening to every word.

“As a skeptical boy, I doubted the story about the emperor’s warrior dragons. Great men didn’t need monsters to save their nation, I believed. But I was wrong. I realized my error some time ago. Two monsters could save my people then, and think what seven dragons could do today ... particularly if several of them are female, and fertile, and agreeable to mating with their brothers ...” The young woman gave a little shrug, saying nothing for a long moment. The train continued to churn toward the west, the locomotive sounding steady and unstoppable.

“We have a story,” she muttered. “My people do, I mean.”

“About the dragons? Yes, I suppose you do.”

“Since I was old enough to listen, I heard how the world holds thousands of dragons in its chest, and from time to time, for reasons known only to the gods, one of them is released. Which makes sense, I suppose. If what everyone tells me is true, and their eggs can sleep for an eternity in the ground.” Even from a single fertile female, only one egg at a time would be exposed by erosion. Yes, it was a reasonable explanation.

“The freed dragons die of loneliness, always.” She spoke those words with sadness, as if she knew something about that particular pain. “They kill and burn because of their longing for others like themselves, and then they fly too high in order to end their own miserable lives, and that is why the dragons cannot come back into this world.”

“This is a very common story,” Zephyr assured her. “Maybe every place in the world tells fables much like that.”

“But there is more to my story,” she said, her tone defensive.

“Is there?”

“Much more,” she promised.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment. The young woman didn't want to say anything else, and Zephyr wasn't in the mood to let another people's legends distract him. He looked out another window,

toward the empty south, and then from somewhere up ahead came a dull *whump* as a heavy block of dynamite detonated. Instantly, the brakes were applied, and the little train started to shake and shiver, fighting its momentum to remain on the suddenly unstable tracks.

The young woman was thrown from her seat, as was Zephyr.

He stood first and heard the early shots coming from inside the armored car. Again he looked to the south, seeing nothing, and then he hunkered down and looked in the other direction. A solitary figure was approaching on foot, armed with a rifle that he hadn't bothered to fire. He was marching steadily across the stunted grasses, allowing the mercenaries to fire at him. And while most of their bullets struck, each impact made only sparks and a high-pitched snap that seemed to accomplish nothing. Because the attacker was wearing a suit made from overlapping dragon scales, Zephyr realized. And with an impressive eye for detail, the man had gone to the trouble of stretching cloth between his arms and chest, as if he had wings, while on his masked face were painted the large, malevolent eyes of an exceptionally angry dragon.

This was what Barrow did during the war. With a platoon of picked soldiers, he would squeeze into his costume and pick up a gun that was always too heavy to carry more than a few steps, and after swallowing his fears as well as his common sense, he and his brethren would walk straight at the enemy, letting them shoot at will, waiting to reach a point where he could murder every idiot who hadn't yet found reason enough to run away.

This was the war all over again, and he hated it.

His suit wasn't as good as the one he wore in the war. Manmark's students were experts at arranging the scales and fixing them to his clothes—a consequence of spending weeks and years assembling old bones—but there hadn't been enough time to do a proper, permanent job. The scales were tilted in order to guide the bullets to one side or the other, but they weren't always tilted enough. Every impact caused a bruise. One and then another blow to the chest seemed to break a rib or two, and Barrow found himself staggering now, the weight of his clothes and his own fatigue making him wish for an end to his suffering. That old platoon had been a mostly invincible bunch, but by the war's end, those who hadn't died from lucky shots and cannon fire were pretty much crazy with fear. Barrow was one of the few exceptions—a consequence of getting hit less often and doing a better job of killing those who wanted him dead. Through the narrow slits of his



mask, he stared at the firing ports built into the armored car. Then he paused, knelt, and with a care enforced by hours of practice, he leveled his weapon and put a fat slug of lead into one man's face.

Two more rounds hit Barrow, square in the chest and on the scalp. He staggered, breathed hard enough to make himself lightheaded, and then aimed and fired again, killing no one but leaving someone behind the steel screaming in misery.

The surviving men finally got smart. One would cry out, and all would fire together, in a single volley. Barrow was shoved back off his feet.

Again, there was a shout followed by the blow of a great hammer.

They would break every bone inside his bruised body if this continued. Barrow saw his doom and still could not make his body rise off the dusty earth. How had he come to this awful place? He couldn't remember. He sat upright, waiting for the next misery to find him ... but a new voice was shouting, followed by the odd, high-pitched report of a very different gun. The dirt before him rose up in a fountain and drifted away, and left lying between his legs was a single purple Claw of God.

Damn, somebody had a dragon-buster gun.

If he remained here, he would die. Reflexes and simple panic pushed Barrow up onto his feet, and on exhausted legs he ran, trying to count the seconds while he imagined somebody working with the breech of that huge, awful gun, inserting another expensive

charge before sealing it up and aiming at him again. When Barrow thought it was time, he abruptly changed direction.

The next claw screamed through the air, peeling off to the right. Three engineers were cowering on the dragon-eyed locomotive. Plainly, they hadn't come here expecting to fight. Barrow pointed his rifle at each of their faces, just for a moment, and then they leaped down together and started running back toward town.

The men inside the armored car fired again. But Barrow kept close to the tender, giving them no easy shots. A few steps short of them, he reached behind his back, removing a satchel that he had carried from the beginning, out of sight, and he unwrapped the fuse and laid it on the ground, shooting it at pointblank range to set it on fire. Then he bent low and threw the satchel with his free arm, skipping it under the car before he stepped back a little ways, letting the guards see him standing in front of them with barely a care.

“There's enough dynamite under you now to throw that car up high and break it into twenty pieces,” he promised. Then he added, “It's a long fuse. But I wouldn't spend too much time thinking before you decide to do what's smart.”

An instant later, the main door was unlocked and unlatched. Five men came tumbling out into the open, one of them bleeding from the shoulder and none of them armed.

“Run,” Barrow advised.

The mercenaries started chasing the train crew down the iron rails. The fuse continued to burn, reaching the canvas satchel and sputtering for a few moments before it died away.

Barrow stared into the windowless car. The seven eggs were set inside seven oak crates, and he didn't look at any of them. He was staring at the man whom he had shot through the face, his mind thinking one way about it, then another.

A breech closed somewhere nearby, and a big hammer was cocked.

Barrow turned too late, eyes focusing first on the cavernous barrel of the gun and then on the old foreign man who was fighting to hold it up. At this range, with any kind of dragon-round, death was certain. But Barrow's sense of things told him that if he didn't lift his own weapon, the man would hesitate. And another moment or two of life seemed like reason enough to do nothing.

“I am a creature of foresight,” Zephyr remarked.

“You're smarter than me,” agreed Barrow.

“Details,” the old man muttered, two fingers wrapped around the long brass trigger. “The world is built upon tiny but critical details.”

Behind him stood one detail—a rather pretty detail, just as Barrow had recalled—and using a purse full of heavy gold, she struck Zephyr on the top of his skull, and the long barrel dropped as the gun discharged, and a Claw of God came spinning out,

burying itself once again inside the ancient Earth.

Manmark had the freight wagon brought out of the draw, and he used a whip on the surviving camels, forcing them into a quick trot toward the motionless train. But there was a generous distance to be covered; open country afforded few safe places to hide. There was time to watch Barrow and the aboriginal girl with his binoculars, a little dose of worry nipping at him, and then Zephyr was awake again, sitting up and speaking at some length to the dragon hunter. All the while, Manmark's students were happily discussing their golden futures and what each planned to do with his little share of the fame. They spoke about the dragons soon to be born, and they discussed what kinds of cages would be required to hold the great beasts, and what would be a fair price for the public to see them, and what kinds of science could be done with these travelers from another age.

What was Zephyr saying to the dragon hunter?

Of course, the crafty old trader was trying to top Manmark's offers of wealth. And if he was successful?

If Barrow abruptly changed sides ...?

"Look at that cloud," one student mentioned.

Somewhere to the south, hooves were slapping at the ground, lifting the dust into a wind that was blowing north, obscuring what was most probably a small herd of hard-running hyraxes. Manmark found the little pistol in his pocket, considering his options for a long moment. If it came to it, would he have the

courage?

Probably not, no. If these last days had taught Manmark anything, it was that he had no stomach for mayhem and murder.

He put the pistol back out of sight and again used the binoculars, the jumpy images showing that Zephyr had fallen silent for now and Barrow was gazing off to the south and all of the talking was being done by the prostitute who stood between the two men, arms swirling in the air as she spoke on and on. The worry that he felt now was nebulous and terrible.

Again, Manmark struck the big camels with his whip, and he screamed at everyone, telling them, "We need to hurry. Hurry!"

But the wagon was massive and one camel short, and there was still a long, empty distance to cover. The curtain of dust was nearly upon the motionless train, and inside it were dozens, or perhaps hundreds of aboriginal men riding on the backs of the half-wild ponies that they preferred to ride—an entire tribe galloping toward the treasures that Manmark would never see again.

She spoke quietly, with force.

“My favorite fable of all promises that the dragons will come again to this world. They will rise up out of the Earth to claim what has always been theirs, and only those men and women who help them will be spared. All the other people of the world will be fought and killed and eaten. Only the chosen few will be allowed to live as they wish, protected beneath the great wings of the reawakened gods.” Zephyr rubbed his sore head, trying to focus his mind. But really, no amount of cleverness or any promise of money would help now. Even with a splitting headache, he understood that inescapable lesson. Speaking to the man wearing dragon scales, she said, “Your ugly people came into my country and stole everything of worth. You gave us disease and drink, and you are murdering our herds. But now I intend to destroy everything you have built here, and my children will take back all the lands between the seas.” She was a clever, brutal girl, Zephyr decided. And she had done a masterful job of fooling everyone, including him.

Barrow turned and stared at the oncoming riders. He had pulled off his armored mask, but he was still breathing hard, winded by his fight and terrified. He might defeat half a dozen mercenaries, if he was lucky. But not a nation of wild men and women armed with rifles and a communal rage.

“You need me,” he muttered.

The young woman didn't respond. It was Zephyr

who said, "What do you mean? Who needs you?"

"She does," Barrow announced. Then he pointed at the riders, adding, "If they want to help themselves, they should accept my help."

The woman laughed and asked, "Why?"

"When I was a boy," said Barrow, "I kept baby birds. And I learned that my little friends would take my food and my love best if I wore a sock on my hand, painting it to resemble their lost mothers and fathers."

The rumbling of hooves grew louder, nearer.

"I'm a big man in this big costume," he remarked. "This costume is bigger than anything any of your people can wear, I would think. And I'm brave enough to do stupid things. And you will have seven dragons to care for now ... to feed and protect, and to train, if you can ... and wouldn't you like to take along somebody who's willing to risk everything on a daily basis ...?" Zephyr laughed quietly now.

Clearly, this Barrow fellow was at least as surprising as the young woman, and maybe twice as bold. The woman stared at the man dressed as a dragon, a look of interest slowly breaking across her face. Zephyr had to laugh louder now.

Dust drifted across the scene, thick and soft, muting the sound of their voices. And then the woman turned to her people, shouting to be heard.

"I have dragons to give you!" she called out.

"Eight, as it happens! Eight dragons to build a new world ...!"



## Due

WE REACH HIM TOO LATE, pulling him out of the curing pond, nothing left but a melted body and a pain-twisted face. For a moment or two, we talk about the dead expeditor, how he was good and why he wasn't perfect, and why he killed himself--because he was imperfect, but noble is why. Then we wash his face and kiss him, as is customary, and I deliver the body to Scrap.

Our plant manager needs a report, but she doesn't want stories of another suicide. She tells me that she doesn't. So I describe it as an accident, another misstep from the high corundum mesh, and maybe we should repair those railings during the next down cycle. But she doesn't want to hear that, either. "No cycles but up." She is delivering a threat. "We're too far behind as it is, Jusk."

I nod. I smile. Then I ask, "When can I have a new expeditor?"

"Three shifts," she warns. Which means ten shifts, or more. Then she gives me a hard stare, eyes and silence informing me that it would be so lovely if this little problem vanished on its own. I step outside.

Traffic is scarce in the main corridor. I walk exactly as far as I can without leaving home, waving at the passing birth wagons until one pulls off. The driver shows me his cargo, but only one of the newborn is large enough to do the job. I ask what it will take for

that big one to be lost during delivery, and the driver says, "I can't." He says, "That's a special rush order, that one." A lie, most likely.

"Wait," I tell him. I go inside, then return with a piece of raw Memory. Memory has no color and very little mass, and of course it is incomplete. It's salvage. That's the only kind of Memory that's ever traded. Laying it flush against his forehead, the driver sighs and grows an erection, then says, "Deal." It's the Memory of one of His long-ago lovers --a popular commodity. The driver is even willing to help carry the newborn through the closest door, he's so eager. Then I give him a look, asking where he got that Memory."

I found it," he says. "I don't remember where."

"Good," I say.

My crew is at work. Standing in the main aisle, I can see our entire line --bug ovens and the furnace; the curing pond and finishers--and I see the tiny faces that look over at me, curious and eager.

"Keep working," I tell them. Then, "Thank you."

With laser shears, I cut the newborn out of its sack. It's a big worker, all right: shiny and slick and stinking of lubricants and newness. I unfold the long, long limbs, then engage its systems. There's no way to be certain what job it is meant to do, but anyone can be anything, if needed. All that matters is that we serve Him.

I kick the newborn in its smooth crotch. With a flutter, its eyes open, absorbing light for the first

time. "My name is Jusk," I tell it. "I'm your superior. This is my right hand. Shake it with your right hand, please." It obeys, without hesitation. ."Stand," I say. Then after it succeeds, on its first attempt, I tell it, "Walk with me. This is your introductory tour. Pay close attention."

"I shall."

"What is my name?"

"Jusk."

"On your left is a stack of crates. Look at them. And now look at me. How many crates did you see?"

"Fifteen."

"What are the dimensions of the third-largest crate?"

"Point one by point one by point four standard."

"Now, without looking, tell me the serial number on the top crate." The newborn recites twenty-three digits before I lift my hand, stopping it." Good," I say. "You're integrating nicely."

The mouth can't yet smile, but I sense pleasure. Pride. "What do you make here?" my new expeditor inquires." Bone." Its eyes are simple black discs, yet by some trick of the light, they seem astonished. Or disappointed, perhaps. "It's not a glamorous product," I concede, "but bone is vital." What would He be without a skeleton? Without His handsome, most perfect shape? "You'll be my expeditor. That's a critical job. Before you begin, you'll need to find an identity. A name and face, and a body suit." It nods." Culture a sense of self," I advise. "My strongest

workers have the strongest identities.” It says nothing.” You’ll find everything you need in Personnel. Mock-flesh. Eyes. Everything.” I watch it for a moment, then add, “Most of us pattern ourselves after someone from His past. A trusted friend, a lover. Whomever. Just as long as it honors Him.” The newborn is a head taller than I, and strongly built. Simple eyes gaze at my face. At my workers. Everywhere. Then it speaks quietly, warning me, “I’m not supposed to be here. I was intended for another duty.”

“Except you’re needed here.” I have given these tours to more than a hundred newborns, and none has ever acted disappointed. “Come with me,” I tell it. “Want to show you something.” The stairs and high platform are a blue corundum mesh. The ceiling and distant floor are polished diamond, smooth and lovely, and the walls are a rougher diamond, catching and throwing the light. I point to Personnel, then the backdoor way leading to the warehouse, and I name each of the five assembly lines. Every line has its own bug oven, squat and rectangular, the exteriors plated with gold.” You’re my expeditor,” I promise. “You’ll feed my oven whatever raw materials it needs.”

“Your expeditor,” it repeats. “Once you’ve got your name and face, visit the warehouse. Ask for Old Nicka. He’ll show you what else you need to know.”

“How big is this place?”

“Huge, isn’t it?” I love this view. I always have. “It’s nearly five thousand standards long, from Assembly

to Shipping.”

“Yet this is all so tiny,” my expeditor observes. “Compared to Him, this is nothing.” I look at the faceless face, uncertain how to respond.” How many workers?” it asks.

“Including you and me, five hundred and eleven.”

“And who am I replacing?” Newborns never ask that question. They're too grateful to be alive, and the prospect of anything else should be unimaginable.” Was it a suicide?” I hear.” No. An accident.” Beyond the eyes is doubt. Clear and undeniable doubt. “Why bring up suicide?” I have to ask .The tiny, simple mouth seems to almost smile. “I must have overheard something. .I'm sorry.” New ears might have heard one of my people whispering, yes. “We run a careful clean shop here,” I warn it.. Softly, very softly, it says, “Due.”

“What's that?”

“My name.” With a long delicate finger, it writes Due against its own bright chest, in His language. “That is me.”

“Fine,” I allow. Gazing clown at my home, and his, Due tells me, “It's surprising. You only make bone, but look how beautiful thesis....”As if it should be anything else, I think. “I think I'll stay,” proclaims Due. As if any of us, in any large way, has the burden of choice.

AGES AGO, WHEN the construction teams were erecting our plant, there were plans to include a large

chapel where we would have worshipped Him in our spare moments. It would have been a glorious chamber filled with inspiring Memories free forth touching, plus likenesses of His family and trusted followers. But according to legend, a sudden decree put an end to that indulgence. Instead of a chapel, the workers were told to build a fifth assembly line, increasing the production of bone by a long ways. And what's more, every existing chapel inside older plants were to be converted immediately, their space dedicated to making more of whatever those plants produced. Time is critical, the decree tells us. Maybe not with its words, but in the meaning that the words carry between them. Hurry, He calls to us. Hurry. "That new man --"

"Due?"

"Gorgeous." Mollene giggles, dancing around her work station. "I just wish he'd notice little me!" Nothing on or about Mollene is little." So he found himself a pretty face," I say." Not pretty," she warns. "Gorgeous. The whole package is. Handsome and strong...but not too strong...!"

"Which means?"

"He's delicious," she purrs, and that from a woman who has tasted more than anew. "Am I right, Tannie? Tell him I'm right!" Tannie works across from Mollene. The women are old, nearly as old as this plant, and while they're both durable, it's a durability built in different ways. Tannie is small, quiet and glum, not prone to courage or her partner's

hyperbole. Yet even she admits, "He's one of the most beautiful creatures that I've ever seen."

"I told you, Jusk!" cackles Mollene. "You did. You did." The women are a good team. A great team, even. When I was made line foreman, I had an inspiration, putting them together at the bug oven's mouth. It takes good hands and balance to handle the freshly made bone, and it takes experience. And nearly two thousand shifts have passed since my inspiration. Much has gone wrong on the line, but nobody's better than Mollene and Tannic when it comes to giving our bone its first look and delicate touch . "A glorious, gorgeous man, and he didn't look at me," Mollene sings. "You like to have your looks at me. Don't you, Jusk?" Her mock-flesh is old and often-patched. The knees and elbows are worn thin, band of softness encircles her waist, and her big strong confident hands are shiny where the real Mollene peeks through. Yet even still, she is spectacular. Broad thighs and hips serve to carry her central features -- two jungles of shaggy black mock-hair, and between the jungles, a pair of enormous, endlessly vigorous breasts complete with fat nipples that she paints a shouting red at the start of every shift." I love looking at you," I tell the magnificent woman. She giggles, and in thanks, gives me a few good bounces. As I recall, Mollene fashioned herself around the partial Memory of an early love--an insatiable older woman from His long-ago youth. By contrast, Tannie based herself on the wife of one of His current deputies --

the kind of woman who has said perhaps five words to Him in His life, if that. But of course everyone is important to Him. He treasures every face, no matter how small the person behind it. As I think, a sheet of hot white bone emerges from the oven, built of fibers and resins and a maze of finger-thick pores. Together, in a single motion, the women lift the bone and place it gently, gently onto the aerogel belt. It looks like perfect bone, at first glance. Mollene lifts a laser pen, ready to sign her name where it won't be too obvious. Every worker does it; a signature is a harmless way to leave a trace of yourself. But she pauses, noticing several coagulated masses of bugs clinging to the far side. To Tannie's side. Each mass looks like a drop of honey --a gooey golden substance that I've seen only in His memories--but unlike honey, the clusters are hard as jewels, and in a glancing fashion, alive. "How's the bone?" Mollene calls out. Tannie is prying off the bugs. Sometimes they're just stragglers, and the bone beneath is fine. Is perfect. "It looks all right," says the old woman. But then she touches it, and shudders, jerking back her hand in pain. "What is it?" I ask. Tannie cradles the hand with its mate, her tiny brown eyes staring off into the distance. "The bone's bad," she says. "Something's wrong...in the oven..." Mollene curses enough for three people, and with a relentless strength, she jerks that sheet of bone off the belt, getting beneath it and carrying it to the pallet where she's been stacking Scrap, her substantial ass jiggling in time other quicksteps. I



take her place, for the moment. The next bone is even worse. Instead of seamless snowy white, it's a pissy yellow, and the pores are more like out-and-out holes. Something's very wrong in the bug oven. Which isn't new news, of course. Our plant is more than ten thousand shifts old, and over time these bugs acquire mutations. Subtle failures of control. And a nasty tendency toward laziness. With an iridium hammer, I smack the emergency kills witch. Diamond chains and matching gears come to a grudging halt. What next? I wonder. Maintenance should be told --that's policy --but Maintenance means slow solutions and acidic, accusing questions. Hanging beside the oven are suit and helmet and boots. Each is made from antigen-free mock-bone. That's how we fool the oven and its bugs. And they have to be fooled, or they'll assume that an intruder is just another raw material --a collection of soulless atoms waiting to be gnawed to nothingness, one atom at a time. Bugs can't recognize a helping hand. They're stupid, and dangerous, and I despise them. Mollene returns while I'm dressing. With her voice and a touch, she tells me, "Darling, please be careful." You don't rise to foreman without knowing caution, at least now and then. The oven doors are gold-faced bone, heavy and slick. The chamber beyond is furiously hot and singing with bugs. Most of the mindless bastard sere too small to see. Bristling with jointed arms and bucky-tube mouths, they build perfect fibers of proteins and plastics, ceramics and

shape-memory metals. Other bugs, larger by a thousand fold, knit the fibers together. Then the largest few extrude the resins that finish the bone, creating a simple perfect and wondrously strong skeleton worthy of Him. Duty grabs me, forcing me deeper into the oven. The closest sheet of new bone is gray-black and brittle, its corner shattering with a touch of my gloved hand. I crawl beneath the bone, then look up. Clinging to the oven's ceiling, to one of the oven's bug-wombs, is some sort of phage, round and jeweled with spikes and sucking mouth parts. Climbing onto the diamond belt, I reach high with one hand. But as I grab the phage, it strikes back, a stream of brownish fluid rolling thick down my arm, making it taste wrong. Making it seem dangerous. The oven panics, marshaling every defense against the intruder. My arm is the intruder. I wrench the phage loose, then I'm running in a cowardly stoop, fleeing across dozen standards of tangled and rasping bug heaven. My suit is pierced. A burning begins on my hand and forearm, then the pain falls to nothing in the most terrible way. Glancing down, I see a ragged stump that's being gnawed shorter by the instant, an army of tiny sparkling flecks trying to kill me. The phage lies on the floor behind me. Using my good hand, I grab it. But more of that damned juice leaks out, splattering wildly, the bugs launching a second assault, happily gnawing away my final hand. I have nothing left to hold with. The phage drops in front of me, and with more luck than skill, I kick it,

sending it flying through a gap in the doorway. Then I stagger out after it --what is left of me --my arms shrunk to wagging stumps and my helmet half-digested. But I see Mollene standing in the golden light, waiting for me with those lovely breasts; and if wasn't half-dead and repulsive, I would kiss her breasts. And I'd kiss Tannie's tiny ones. That's how good and how awful I feel. Poor Jusk, I tell myself. Nearly murdered, and desperate for the saving taste of love... !"You'll like these arms," the man promises, not caring the slightest about what I like or don't like. "They're good arms, mostly." I don't know him. He wears extra-thick flesh like everyone in Maintenance, and solid broad face, adjudging by the smooth, unworn condition of his hands, he's very young. A novice, at best. No one else is free to work on me, what with the bug oven damaged and nobody sure how bad it is. "How do the arms feel?"

"Wrong," I admit. "Lift them. And again." His careful adjustments make everything worse. "Now once more. Is that better?"

"Much," I lie. He seems satisfied. "Yeah, they're good arms. We didn't need to refurbish thermal that much."

"What's important is you," says another voice. A tense, acidic voice. Stepping into view, the plant manager conjures up a look of haggard concern. To the maintenance man, she says, "They need help at the oven." He makes a grateful retreat. I gesture with my tight arms. "What do we know?"

“About the phage? It was built for sabotage.” She speaks in a confidential tone, admitting the obvious. “Officially, we're reporting it as a contaminate from outside. The sloppiest bug ovens are making some free-ranging parasites....”

“Why lie?”

“Do you want to deal with Security troops? Do you, Jusk?” The obvious occurs to me: Who's in the best position to sabotage a bug oven? Its line foreman, of course. She watches as I flex my new arms, then she steps close to me, using a spare tool to make her own adjustments. I forgot that she began in Maintenance, back in that remote era when the plant was new. Her face belongs to His mother, a strong handsome face that was popular in the early shifts but isn't seen much anymore. She looks young, exactly the same as she looked when He saw her as a young boy, complete with the wise sparkle in the pale brown eyes. Leaning closer, her mouth to my ear, she whispers, “That new man. How exactly did you find him?” I tell, in brief. “Due? Due?” She keeps saying the name, softer and softer. Then finally, without hope, she asks, “Do you know where that wagon was taking him?”

“No.” The wise eyes are distant. Who can she contact, in confidence, who might actually know something? Who can help us without Security finding out that we're involved in an unthinkable crime? Again, I lift my arms. “They feel fine now. Thanks.” Once more, she says, “Due?”

“Good arms,” I say, for lack of better. Then she

looks at me, asking, "You know where they came from, don't you?" From the recent suicide, sure. But I was rather hoping to getaway without having to mention that. I am Buskin my locker, set between a flesh patch kit and a sample of the first bone that helped build, waits a frazzled piece of Memory. I found it in Personnel. Whenever I place it against my forehead, I see my face just as He saw it. Not unhandsome, I like to think. But there's a vagueness about the edges, which is why this Memory is here. A tangle of imperfections make it unworthy when incomes to His glorious rebirth. I know precious little about the man behind that face. A loyal deputy, he is. And judging by the clues, someone trusted. Practically a friend. In the Memory, the deputy tells Him, "You look twenty years younger, sir. It's remarkable what these treatments can accomplish." He laughs in response --a calm and wise and enormous laugh --and with a voice that I have always loved, He promises, "And this is just the start of things." He lifts His hand before His own eyes. I'm helping to rebuild that hand. Inside it is the bone that I am making; in fashion, I'm one of His deputies, too." In a few years," He says, "we'll all be gods...."

"Yes, sir --"

"Just fucking wait!" He roars. Then the hand drops, and I can see my face smiling, and the man behind that face smiles, saying, "Icon hardly wait, sir --"THE BUG OVENS are down for inspection, every line useless, and for the time being, a holiday holds

sway. People distract themselves with talk and little parties. The usual orgy claims its usual corner, perched on a mat of scrap aerogel. Lubricated with grease, the bodies almost glow, limbs twisting and mouths crying out, the participants working at their fun with an athletic despair. I pause for a moment, watching faces. Wherein should be is on my belly inside my own oven; foremen should show the proper interest, even if they can't help make repairs. But I want to speak to Mollene first...where is she....?She's not in the middle of the lovers, which is unlike her. Hearing a stranger's voice, I walk up the polished aisle, coming across a second group of people doing something unexpected. They are sitting quietly, listening as the stranger speaks calmly, describing the true shape of the world. "We live on a great sphere," he says. "What seems perfectly flat to little us actually falls away in every direction, equally and always. Withoutend. "I know that voice but not the handsome face.Due."Pick a line," says the newborn, "then walk it. Provided you stay true to that line and live long enough, you will walk around the world. But of course that trip takes trillions of shifts. By the time you return home, this facility will be gone, its atoms scattered over that enormous world, and not so much as single memory of us will persist." His audience murmurs quietly. Mollene sits in front, eager to absorb the lesson." And our round world is part of another, still larger world," the newborn continues. "A trillion trillion times larger and several times

older. And infinitely stranger. That world is a ball, too, but in its own peculiar fashion."I find myself listening. The voice compels me to do nothing but. "Think of a black cold emptiness," says Due. "That larger world is carved from that blackness, and within it are an uncountable sprinkling of little worlds like ours." Mollene leans closer to him, begging to be noticed. Due grins at his largest admirer, then asks, "What's the shape of an atom?"

"It's round, too!" Mollene exclaims. Not exactly, I remind myself. The furious wanderings of electrons can make around shell, but it's too easy to call them balls. Yet Due agrees with Mollene. His new eyes are bright and gray, his smile nearly guileless. "What if I tell you that Creation --all there is and all there can be --is always built from spheres? Round atoms become round worlds, and those worlds become the rounded universe, and there is no end to the round universes that make up Creation .... "I work hard to say nothing, to let this useless noise vanish on its own. But Tannie, standing at the back of the audience, asks the obvious: "How do you know these things?" Due expects the question. He welcomes it. Nodding, he waits for a moment as for reflection, then confesses, "I don't know how I know. I was born thinking these things, the same as I was born with these simple hands." What could I say to that? Keeping silent, I try to look unimpressed. There's no easy way to wrestle Mollene away from her new love. Instead, I slip behind the others, approaching Tannie and

whispering, "A moment? I need to talk to you." She seems glad for the distraction. "Have you ever heard such talk?" I ask the old woman. I expect her to say, "No," but instead she tells me, "When I was a newborn, the old discussed strange things."

"Like worlds within worlds?"

"Sometimes. Yes." The audience is asking questions. How big is the world in standards? And exactly how much bigger is the blackness beyond? But the dimensions aren't part of Due's special knowledge, it seems. "You and I can't comprehend these distances," he warns. "We're too tiny. Too limited by a long ways." Too stupid, he means. In a careful murmur, I ask Tannie what I meant to ask her partner. "Did that newborn come close to you? While you were working, I mean. Did heaver, even foray moment, touch the oven?" She looks at me, a worn hand wiping another patched forehead. "Mollene must have flirted with him," I add. "I've seen the symptoms."

"I never saw him near the oven," she assures me. "He was returning to the warehouse for supplies, and he paused for a moment, just those what new bone looks like."

"And to flirt?" She shakes her head. "I know what you want, but I can't give it to you." I'm not sure what I want, yet I feel disappointed. Another thought occurs to me. "When you touched that bad bone, you made a face. Why?" She shakes her head for a long moment, then says, "Don't remember." I mean to



press her, but suddenly Mollene is talking. "But what does all that mean?" she blurts out. "I'm sorry to be slow, but I don't understand." The newborn smiles, and with an easy charm, he says, "Maybe what I'm saying is that everything is tiny. Even those wonders that we look at as being enormous...they're always small in comparison to something..., and never quite so wondrous..." The words don't sound important, but they hit me like wall of tumbling bone. Due is talking about He who is our purpose. Without ever breaking taboos, he tries to diminish our great and glorious Him. Old Nicka has ruled the warehouse for my entire life, and he has always been Old Nicka --small man not meant for physical labor, clad in mock-flesh worn transparent byte ages, his face patched and patched again, its original shape irretrievably lost. Yet despite time and wear, he can tell you exactly how many nine-gauge bucky bug wombs are in storage, and how many are on order, and which of them will most likely work once installed. "How's my new expeditor?" I ask Old Nicka. His response is nothing but honest. "He's smart in the worst ways, and stupid where it hurts, and dreamy, and he talks too much, and he'll never beanie sort of expeditor. If you want to know what I think." I nod, then mention, "You never thought I'd make much of one, either."

"So where are you now?"

"I'm the line foreman. You know that."

"Because you couldn't cut it as an expeditor." A crooked smile shines. "But so tell me, Jusk. Why ask

about that newborn? On his first shift...?"

"Curiosity," I offer. His eyes are mismatched in color and size. The newer eye, brown and huge, regards me for a long moment. "Do you want to speak with the boy? He's in tieback, counting my stock of D-grade smart-clamps."

"Why? Did you lose track of your inventory?"

"No! He just needs practice with his counting." The battered old face is masterful when incomes to scorn and outrage. "Next time you buy a newborn off wagon, make sure that he can count." I nod. "Is there anything else? Or do you want all of my time?" Someday, Old Nicka will die from simple age --the rarest of deaths--and once Forget how he was, I'll miss him, sentimentality winning out over good sense." Due is dreamy and talks too much," I repeat. "Does he talk to you?"

"Not anymore."

"But when he did...did he talk about the universe, and Him...?"

"What about Him?" Old Nicka growls. I repeat what Due said, and what it seemed to mean, and what Tannic claimed to hear when she was young." Some of that sounds familiar," Old Nicka admits, thoroughly unimpressed. "But this piss about calling Him small...that's just stupid...even for you, Jusk...!" Bristle, but remain silent." We can't measure His size, or any other quality." A tiny hand, more metal than flesh, is driven into my chest. "Not His wisdom. Not His goodness. None of those things are

knowable --!"

"I realize that," I mutter." Child," Old Nicka replies, both eyes focusing on the highest shelves of his empire. "We are too small to know anything but this. What we can see, what we can count." He withdraws his hand, then promises, "If someone ever tells me that He is small, I will kill him. Immediately, and gladly. And with his blessing, of course."

THE SHIFT ENDS, FINALLY. With the blaring of the first klaxon, each crew allows their line to run until empty. The last of the new bone is packed, then shipped. The freshly repaired bug ovens are placed into sleeping modes. Trash and every tool are set in the open. Then with a practiced haste, we begin to climb the bright blue corundum stairs, zigzagging up and pupas the second, final klaxon roars, warning us that the janitors are being released from their bunkers. I pause, just for an instant. A silvery wave of frantic, nearly mindless machines are racing down the aisles, spraying their spit and piss into every corner, then working their way back again, licking up their juices, and with them, consuming every unwelcome molecule of grease, any diamond grit, plus severed toes and the flesh of workers too foolish or too feeble not to make the long climb. The world beneath grows dark, and very loud. One last set of stairs takes me to the roof. As always, my crew sits together, in an orderly line. Umbilicals deploy from the aerogel sky, inserting themselves into our feeding

ports. What comes from Him tastes especially delicious tonight; I think it, and others say it. Wagons race back and forth in the main corridor. We talk among ourselves, discussing the past shift -gossip, mostly--and we make plans for the next shift. I make our plans. But I slowly realize that nobody hears me, including me. Due is talking. Again. This newborn is incapable of saying anything that isn't strange." What do we know about Him?" he inquires. "What is His nature?" He is everything to us. He is vast and vital, and we exist only to serve Him. Everyone born is born with that knowledge. "But how do we serve Him?" asks Due. "Tell me: Why does He need the likes of us? "Because something horrible has happened to Him. Unimaginable violence has torn apart His body and His mind. We have been born to do nothing but repair what can be repaired, and build the rest of Him from the soulless atoms. But Due knows that already. He knows it, yet he can't give the answer in ordinary terms. "This bone plant, and the twenty million million plants just like it...they constitute a civilization...a civilization that arose just to serve Him...!" The most noble of civilizations, I tell myself. "Why is this our shape?" he asks, regarding his naked self. "Two hands, two legs, and one-two-eyed head...why are such things important...?" A long pause. More than my crew are listening to him. His audience stretches across the roof; every line crew maintains a respectful silence." By wearing this shape," I hear, "we are honoring Him." The voice

belongs to Mollene. With a stern patience, Due says, "Honor is something given. But our shape was given to us, not chosen by us."

"So why are we this way?" cries an irritable voice. My voice." This shape is adaptable. And more important, it is familiar." Due waits for moment, then adds, "We resemble Him in many ways, of course. Intellectually and emotionally, he once was much as we are now." I feel a weakness spreading through me. A deep chill." Then He became more than us. The bugs made him stronger and immortal, and they refashioned his mind, making it swift and powerful." A long pause. Rodeos it just seem long? "At first, the bugs didn't have us to help them. But of course even tiny souls know the hazards of relying too much on nanoscopic agents. These agents are industrious, and stupid. And dangerous. What if they mutated and slipped free of their ovens, out of our plant and across our civilization's borders...spreading over the true world...?" Bugs are demons; Know this better than I know the shape of my own hands. "Between the very small and very large stands us,' Due proclaims. "We have been placed here to control the bugs, and in that sense, we are defending the world." A shudder and low moan move through his audience. The words have an authenticity that dispels doubt and every question. Revelation, I'm thinking, is a substance more real than sapphires, more perfect than the purest diamond, and it's always too small to be seen." That's why we exist. To protect the world...!"

“And to protect Him, too,” I add, by reflex. Due says nothing. Then after a long moment --it is along moment, this time --he asks, “Why doe she make us wear these faces?”

“Nobody makes us,” I begin to say. It is our choice, our tradition” Out of respect for his family and friends,” Mollene declares, nearly giggling at what's obvious. “We are showing that we care!” Suddenly, too soon, the umbilicals are pulled away. The new shift begins with the klaxon. Due is sitting like everyone else, legs extended before him. He stares at me as if he has always been staring at me, yet he says another's name. “Tannie? Why do you think He wants us to wear these faces?” The old woman is behind me, hiding behind others. Quietly, with both conviction and genuine amazement, she says, “We look like the people...the people He can trust...”

“Why should that matter, Tannie?” She stands slowly, regarding her own hands and saying, “I don't know why.” Still, always, Due stares at me.” If someone is so glorious, so wondrous...why should He worry about the trust from such tiny things as us?” No one speaks. A Memory wagon is sliding past us, delivering its cargo to the growing mind. It's long and heavily armored, and a dozen Security troops sit in alert postures, front and aft, missing nothing as they gaze at the sky and at us. So many troops, I'm thinking. Is this a new policy? And if not, why have Inver noticed them before?” Have you learned anything about him?”

“About who?” asks the plant manager.” My new expeditor,” I remind her. “You were going to ask about his origins. Sordid I misunderstand....?” She acts indifferent, preoccupied.” Nothing suspicious to find,” she assures. “An uneventful manufacturing cycle. Designed for heavy labor in a memory plant, which is where he was being taken. And that's why he acts a little peculiar, I'm sure. Memory workers need different sorts of minds.” I want to feel sure, like she does. That's all I want.” Here,” she says, handing me the first order of the new shift. It looks like simple memory, but the red color means that it's a rush. Place the order against my forehead, the specifications flowing into me. Barely hear the plant manager warning, “We have to have it finished as soon as possible, or sooner.” Questions?” she asks, wanting none. I shake my head, then hesitate. “What about his face?”

“Whose face?”

“Due's. I don't recognize it.” I notice something in her gaze, then ask, “Have you ever seen anyone with tha face?” A shrug, then a wistful grin.” I wish more men wore it,” she chimes. “Whoever's it is.” I deliver the rush order to my line, giving it to the feed crew who use it to program the bug oven. This particular bone is full of diamond and superconductive fibers, which is unusual. But not remarkable. What catches my eye is the pallet of barium ready to be fed into the oven. Why is it already here? “He said we'd need it,” my feed chief replies.” Who said that?”

“Due.” I shake my head, complaining, “I didn't have the order till now.”

“I don't know. Maybe the boy heard something.” The giant man scratches his broad round face, then adds, “Or maybe he's a good expeditor after all.” Old Nicka might have heard about the order, then told Due to bring the barium; It'll myself that's what must have happened. Starting down the line, I'm preoccupied, my eyes watching my naked toes. Suddenly someone is walking beside me, and I wheel and take a clumsy step backward, as does my companion. He has misshape, my face, but a rich golden color to his bare flesh. I stare into the gold-embossed oven, and the strangest notion occurs to me. Reflections are infinitely thin, and frail beyond measure. If I step away from the oven, my reflection dies. Which, I think, helps explain its desperate expression. In the distance, loudly, a woman cries out, “No, no...!” I blink a few times, then turn.” Someone stop her...no, Tannic...!” Mollene is screaming. I break into arum, finding her at her station, but Tannic missing. The big woman tugs at her false hair, looking up, and following her eyes, I find her partner sitting on the high catwalk, in a gap in the old railing. It takes forever to understand what Tannic is doing up there. It takes too long.” Get her,” Mollene begs me. “Save her, Jusk.” Without hope, I start up the zigzagging stairs. Tannic is already above the curing pond. Suicides are usually swift; she can jump fifty times before I'll reach her. Yet this isn't a



normal suicide. She seems to be wailing for me, rocking nervously back and forth, the corundum mesh leaving its mark in her thin rump. Glancing at me, the little woman manages an odd smile. I stop short, asking, "Why are you even thinking this, Tannie? You've done nothing wrong."

"Haven't I?" The smile is enormous, and joyless. "Oh, Jusk...you can't understand what I'm thinking..." The curing pond is directly below us, waiting for new bone. "He's not what we think he is," she tells me. "He lies to us. All the time..."

"Who's that! Due?" She shivers, saying, "Not the expeditor, no."

"Then who --?" But I know who she means. Interrupting myself, I shake my head, telling her, "That's ridiculous. Stupid. How can you know that?"

"When that first bone went bad, and I touched it...I saw what's real..." I want Tannie to jump. Now. "I saw the Memories we aren't suppose those." Her steady voice doesn't match her soft forlorn face. "The terrible things that He has done with his hands. The awful orders that He's made others carry out --"

"Shut up," I tell her. "How else can he rule the world--?"

"Tannie!" I shout. "You're talking about bone. Bone doesn't have memories. But you could easily, easily be insane. Have you thought that --?" Contemptuous look nearly slices me in two. "Come here," I say, offering a hand. "I'll take you straight to Maintenance. We'll get you back to normal. Before

our next shift...all right... ?”The odd smile returns.  
“That newborn's right about one thing.”

“What's that, Tannie?”

“We exist for a purpose. We're supposed to protect the world.” I don't know what to say. She sighs, rocking forward and gazing over the brink. I move, not even thinking first. I drive suddenly withy legs and grab with both arms, trying to sweep up that little body before the insanity takes her. My arms close on air. Suddenly I'm lying on the corundum, watching Tannie shrink away, vanishing even before she strikes the pond. Then furious storm of bubbles erupts, pulling what I can't see even further out of sight. “Where's the newborn?” Old Nicka looks up from a supply wagon's manifest, discounting me with a glance. Only when his face drops again does he say, “In the back. Counting.” The warehouse always feels enormous, mysterious. In that, nothing is new. What works on me is a powerful sense that I don't know where Aim going, and when Make my next turn, I'll become lost. It has happened more than once. A worker loses his bearings, and the shift ends without him. Then the lost man is founded in a nameless corner, starved of power and picked bare of mock-flesh by the relentless janitors. I shout for Due; no one responds. A whispering voice is counting. I follow its rhythm, coming upon him sitting behind a stockpile of assorted rare earths. His back is to me, long legs stretched out before him and a pair of giant diamond-hulled bugs balancing his hands. “One,

two," he says. "One, two. One, two. One, two." I stop short, and wait. Due doesn't look at me. He simply pauses, regarding the bugs as he says, "I was told to count. I'm counting." Even the back of his head is handsome. "You want me?" he inquires. I step closer, admitting, "Something awful has happened." Due turns, finally. His gray eyes are warm, but their black centers radiate withering heat. "Does it involve me?"

"No." He seems surprised, if only for a moment. "One of my line workers is dead. A bone handler..." Eyes flicker. "That fat woman?"

"Her partner. Tannie." I can't read any emotion. It's unfair to expect grief from newborns, but this face seems more than adult. It's almost ancient. I'm the newborn here, and how can I hope to outsmart this bizarre, supremely gifted monster?" I need your help on the line," I tell him. Again, the eyes flicker. "You want me to handle the bone --?"

"Until we find another newborn."

"Who expedites?"

"No one," I promise. "You've delivered enough raw material to do the order, and we won't finish till the end of the shift." A curt nod, then he rises, bugs glittering in his hands. "What kind of bugs are those?" I ask. "Five-gauge knitters," he lies, setting them on an obscure shelf. I step back. "Besides," he comments, "if I'm working with you, you'll be able to keep your eyes on me. Right?" I say nothing, knowing it isn't necessary. THE NEW BONE is meant for His skull. That's why it's been reinforced with diamond,

and that's why it carries superconductive fibers: This bone must protect His vast mind, and it needs to be porous to His great thoughts. I watch that bone come out of the oven, pure white sheets punctuated with gray-black veins. Mollene is educating her new partner about how to check the product, then carry it. Grieving for Tannic, she makes no small talk. She doesn't flirt, much less try to seduce. And to her credit, when Due says something about the reinforced skull --"Why does someone so loved need so much protection?" --Mollene responds with a disinterested shrug and sharp words: "Love drags other emotions along with it. Envy and jealousy, and worse...from what I can see.... "The belt carries the new bone down to the curing pond, and after its bath, it is hoisted into the air, cleaned and dried, then given a final measurement with lasers and eyes. Then the sheets rewrapped in aerogel and stacked. One hundred sheets at a time are inserted into armored boxes, then those boxes are sealed and loaded into a parked wagon. It's the third box that I have pulled aside, omni own authority. "Open it," I say. My packing crew obey. "Now pull out the top sheet," I tell them. They do it, but grudgingly. "Now, the next." Why? they ask. Not answering, I tell them to stack the second sheet on the first, just as they will lay in His skull. The superconductive materials are aligned, then the third sheet is added. And the fourth. My crew doesn't balk until the thirtieth sheet, but that's enough. Hope. Ignoring their complaints, I place my

forehead against the gray-black material, and nothing happens. The electric surge coursing through me is my embarrassment. In front of everyone, I'm acting insane. I start to rise, slowly. And I pause. Faint gray marks have been left on the edges of the bone sheets. Alone, they're senseless. But stacked together, they become a word. Affiant but unmistakable signature. Jusk, I read. A hundred times. I kneel down, pressing my forehead against my name. Laughter blossoms behind me, then vanishes. Beneath a brilliant blue sky...people are running, shouting. And I'm running with them, more excited than afraid, trying to remember what is happening.., what I'm doing here..."...five times.., with rocket slugs...!" His bodyguard steps up beside me, atoll, strong, and very pale man walking fast despite a gaping hole in his armor, a healing crater in his chest. I smell blood and pain killers on his breath, and smoke hangs thick in the air. "Thistles got past us. Not me, I mean...I did my job..." He hesitates, measuring his words. "Dropped two of those assholes myself. Took a round for Him, too. I wish I could have taken more, of course...!"

"Of course," I mutter, my voice brittle. Unfamiliar to me." But He'll be all right. No problem." The bodyguard wobbles, then straightens himself. "How in hell did they get past us, sir?" I shrug, not answering. Instead I ask my own question. "Who were they?"

"Don't know," he says. "Separatists, or free-

thinkers, I'd guess. . . unless it's something closer to home...!" From inside His own government, he means. I say nothing." Out of our way!" the bodyguard shouts. "The deputy wants to see Him....!" I am the deputy. Among the hundreds, perhaps thousands of grieving sycophants, Isle the maintenance man who installed my new arms. And my feed crew chief. And Old Nicka, as well as a weepy, pain-wracked Tannie. Except these aren't the people whom I know, just as I'm not Jusk anymore." Look what they did to Him!" Tannic screams, in anguish. "How could they...?!" The crowd parts for me --out of respect, and fear A and He is revealed. Five rounds punctured His defensive array and His body armor, entering His flesh, then exploding with a brutal force. The body has been shredded. Composite bones scattered, useless. One round even managed to puncture His skull, the warhead shaping its blast to obliterate His soul. But what is intact is what startles me. Beneath the shredded brain is a bloody but whole face --Due's face --gray eyes opened to the blue sky, staring down Death itself. The man with Old Nickka's face kneels, a hand pressed against my back. "Don't worry, sir," he mutters. "I've called for His full catalog. It'll be on site into minutes." The catalog is His memory, saved for emergencies." An hour, tops," he promises. "Then He'll be conscious again. In charge." I nod, saying nothing." I wish we could have captured one of those assassins," he says, giving the bodyguard a reproachful glance. "Apparently they

weren't using even the simplest nano-system. A pure suicide attack." I reach for the corpse. "You shouldn't, sir," says the bodyguard. "It might muddy up the healing cycle, I your little friends get mixed in with His..." My hand stops short, then drops, touching a fragment of freshly killed bone. Hopefully that will be enough...." Sir," I hear. "Step on back, please. We've got to let him heal on his own sir." I rise, nodding. And for the first time in years, I feel the smallest beginnings of hope.... The plant manager invites me into her office. Set on a medium-high catwalk, it affords an impressive view of the entire plant. But all I can see is the stranger sitting behind her desk. Hewers the bodyguard's face and body, And over his flesh is diamond mail of the sort used by Security troops. Suspicious eyes look at me, then move about the office. Even the most benign object seems worth a hard glare." You've been checking the bone," says the manager. She makes no attempt to introduce our guest. "Find anything?" I shake my head. "No, nothing."

"Neither have we," says the bodyguard, or whatever he is. Then he grins, adding "We don't need to unpack bone to make sure that it's all right." I look at the manager. "What's going on?"

"Ask me," says the bodyguard. I turn to him, saying nothing. "You purchased a newborn. Due is his chosen name. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"And you're suspicious of him?" I nod. "There's no

reason to be. He has a simple defect, something that happens on rare occasions.” The lie is well-practiced, seamless. “He’s responsible for some of your troubles, but they aren’t very serious troubles. Believe me.” Even now, after everything I want to believe him. With careful voice, I ask, “If you’re familiar with the problem, why don’t you just take him out of here?” My manager says, “Jusk...”

“We are getting him. Don’t worry.” The bodyguard smiles, casually scratching his crotch. “I’m here as formality. As I understand it, you’ve had several conversations with the newborn. Correct?”

“I am his boss --”

“The warehouse manager claims that you’ve spoken to Due at length. Do you remember the subjects?” I hesitate. The bodyguard’s suspicions are focused squarely on me. Through the crystal walls of the office, I can see my line stretching out below me. Due and Mollene are handling the latest bone, working together smoothly. Perfectly. The bodyguard’s associates are stalking Due. They creep along the narrow aisles, each wearing diamond mail and carrying an electric saber. In anew moments, everything is going to end. Whatever everything is...”Jusk?” says my manager, in pain. “Can you answer his question, please?” I look at the bodyguard, and smile. The ovens and belts stop in place and every light suddenly goes out, an instant of shocked silence followed by the rattling charge of janitors, and then, by hundreds of distant, white-hot screams. I



bolt downstairs, pushing against the panicked flow of bodies. A limping figure slams against me, and I know those pendulous breasts. "Where ice?" I shout at Mollene. "Where's Due?"

"Jusk....?" she squeals. "Are you all right?" She isn't. The janitors have plucked the meat off one of her legs, then tried to take the leg, too. But ally can think about is my expeditor. "Is he with you? Did he say anything to you./What do you know...?" Pressing her mouth to my ear, she says, "I'm tired, Jusk...so tired..." I slip past her, reaching the floor just as the dim emergency lights come on. Single janitor is calmly dismantling one of the security troops. Simple eyes regard and dismiss me, then the machine returns toots task, removing another limb, inflicting careful misery on its victim. An electric saber lies forgotten against a pallet. It accepts my hand, which it shouldn't do. And it slices into the pallet on my first attempt, beads of pure calcium bouncing frantically across the diamond floor. I run with the quickest beads, making for the back of the plant." Due," I call out. "Show yourself, Due!" Silence. When everything works normally, the warehouse is dimly lit. The indifferent glow of the emergency lights are nearly useless inside that cavernous place, accomplishing nothing but to make the shadows darker, more ominous. Softer this time, I say, "Due." Someone moves in the shadows." You're going to run out of tricks," I tell him, dropping my saber to my side. "Eventually Security is going to catch you and kill

you, and what's accomplished? A single bone plant is a shift behind in its work, which is nothing. Some or most of its workers have to be replaced, but that won't take long. And He ends up being reborn just the same." Is that what you want, Due?" In the blackest shadow, flesh brushes against a pallet. I step closer, saying, "I'm sorry. That I stole you away from your mission. That doubted what you were telling us. And now that I know better, I'm very, very sorry that He's going to live again..." If there's anyway that I can help --"A figure charges out of the darkness, arms lifting what looks like an iridium hammer. Because it is a hammer, I realize finally. Then I look at the patched face, realizing that it's Old Nicka, not Due, and too late by a long ways, Start to lift my saber, backing up, my sputtering voice saying, "No, wait...!" A sharp, clean noise comes from nowhere. Everywhere. Old Nicks collapses at my feet, the hammer missing my head by nothing, then banging its way to the floor. "You are mistaken," I hear. "But it's an easily forgiven mistake." Due appears on my left, the handsome face offering a smile tinged with sadness. "I've never wanted Him to stay dead. Even if that was possible, it would be dangerous. There would be a terrible civil war afterward, then someone would replace Him. Who knows who? And would that person be a more benign leader? You can't tell metes, Jusk, and you can't tell me no." I nod, conceding the point." We're here to protect the world," he promises. "And the best way to do that into rebuild Him, but improve Him,

too. To give Him insights so far lacking in Him, and aspirin worthy of His station..."With a flourish, Due hands me that pair office-gauge knitters." But about the rest of it, you're right," he tells me. No more smiles, just sadness. "I'm about to be caught, and I'll be killed. Which leaves you with adept to pay ...."He says. "The best of luck. Now, and always." Due has already cut a hole in the back wall of the warehouse, and when climb through, in an instant, I've left the only home that I've ever known. The birth wagon waits. Its driver wears Mollene's face and body, but her voice is different. Slower, more thoughtful. She tells me to climb into tieback end, and whatever happens, I shouldn't talk. Then she climbs in after mean shuts the gate, hesitating briefly when the sound of fighting comes from the warehouse. A bomb detonates somewhere close, shaking us. The wagon drives itself, and this new Mollene gets me to lie on my back, then checks to make sure that I have both of the knitters." What are these things supposed to do?" I inquire." When it's time, they'll explain themselves." Then she warns me firmly, "You must stay quiet." I nod. The woman has a knife with the thinnest of blades, and leaning over me, she says, "Now I need to remove your flesh. To make you look like a newborn again." I nod again, compliant as a newborn. More bombs detonate. We're a long way from the plant, but the blasts seem even larger than before. Erasing evidence as well as the Security troops. With a practiced surety, the woman cuts at my legs. Then,

higher. I can't help myself. I reach up with both hands, grabbing one of the enormous breasts, sucking on the brownish red nipple exactly as He must have done in His youth. Desperately. Gratefully. Wishing the moment will never end." Stop that," she tells me, pushing my face down again. But I can't. I need the touch of flesh. Any flesh. So I grab hold of her again, and eventually she stops fighting me. I cling tight until nothing's left of Jackboot a shiny body and his familiar face, and even then I won't let go easily, sucking with a metal mouth when my fleshy one lies in the pile with the rest of the Scrap.

## **Eight Episodes**

With minimal fanfare and next to no audience, *Invasion of a Small World* debuted in the summer of 2016, and after a brief and disappointing run, the series was deservedly shelved.

One glaring problem was its production values: Computer animation had reached a plateau where reality was an easy illusion, spectacle was the industry norm, and difficult tricks like flowing water and human faces were beginning to approximate what was real. Yet the show's standards were barely adequate, even from an upstart Web network operating with limited capital and too many hours of programming to fill. The landscapes and interior shots would have been considered state-of-the-art at the turn of the century, but not in its premiere year. The characters were inflicted with inexpressive faces and stiff-limbed motions, while their voices were equally unconvincing, employing amateur actors or some cut-rate audio-synthesis software. With few exceptions, the dialogue was sloppy, cluttered with pauses and clumsy phrasing, key statements often cut off in mid-sentence. Most critics decided that the series' creators were striving for a real-life mood. But that was purely an interpretation. Press kits were never made available, and no interviews were granted with anyone directly involved in the production,

leaving industry watchers entirely to their own devices--another problem that served to cripple *Invasion*.

Other factors contributed to the tiny audience. One issue that couldn't be discussed openly was the racial makeup of the cast. Success in the lucrative North American market meant using characters of obvious European extraction. Yet the series' leading man was an Indian astronomer working at a fictional college set in, of all places, South Africa. With an unpronounceable name and thick accent, Dr. Smith--as his few fans dubbed him--was a pudgy, prickly creation with a weakness for loud shirts and deep belches. His wife was a homely apparition who understood nothing about his world-shaking work, while his children, in direct contrast to virtually every other youngster inhabiting popular entertainment, were dim-witted creatures offering nothing that was particularly clever or charming.

A paucity of drama was another obvious weakness. The premiere episode involved a routine day in Dr. Smith's life. Eighteen hours of unexceptional behavior was compressed to fifty-three minutes of unexceptional behavior. Judging by appearances, the parent network inserted commercial breaks at random points. The series' pivotal event was barely noticed by the early viewers: One of Dr. Smith's graduate students was working with Permian-age rock samples, searching for key isotopes deposited by ancient supernovae. The student asked her professor

about a difficult piece of lab equipment. As always, the dialogue was dense and graceless, explaining almost nothing to the uninitiated. Genuine scientists--some of the series' most unapologetic fans--liked to point out that the instruments and principles were genuine, though the nomenclature was shamelessly contrived. Fourteen seconds of broadcast time introduced a young graduate student named Mary--a mixed-race woman who by no measure could be considered attractive. She was shown asking Dr. Smith for help with the problematic instrument, and he responded with a wave of a pudgy hand and a muttered, "Later." Following ads for tiny cars and a powerful asthma medicine, the astronomer ordered his student to come to his office and lock the door behind her. What happened next was only implied. But afterwards Dr. Smith was seen sitting with his back to his desk and his belt unfastened, and the quick-eyed viewer saw Mary's tiny breasts vanish under a bra and baggy shirt. Some people have interpreted her expression as pain, emotional or otherwise. Others have argued that her face was so poorly rendered that it was impossible to fix any emotion to her, then or later. And where good writers would have used dialogue to spell out the importance of the moment, bad writers decided to ignore the entire interpersonal plotline. With a casual voice, Mary mentioned to her advisor/lover that she had found something strange in the Permian stone.

"Strange," he repeated.

With her thumb and finger, she defined a tiny space. "Metal. A ball."

"Ball?"

"In the rock."

Smith scratched his fat belly for a moment, saying nothing. (Judging by log tallies, nearly 10 percent of the program's small audience turned away at that point.) Then he quietly said to her, "I do not understand."

"What it is..."

"What?"

She said, "I don't know either."

"In what rock?"

"Mine. The mudstone--"

"You mean it's artificial...?"

"Looks so," she answered.

He said, "Huh."

She finished buttoning her shirt, the back of her left hand wiping at the corner of her mouth.

"Where?" Smith asked.

She gave the parent rock's identification code.

"No, the metal ball," he interrupted. "Where is it now?"

"My desk drawer. In a white envelope."

"And how big?"

"Two grains of rice, about."

Then, one last time, the main character said, "Huh." And, finally, without any interest showing in his face, he fastened his belt.

\* \* \* \*



The next three episodes covered not days, but several months. Again, none of the scientific work was explained, and nothing resembling a normal plotline emerged from the routine and the tedious. The increasingly tiny audience watched Dr. Smith and two of his graduate students working with an object almost too small to be resolved on the screen--another significant problem with the series. Wouldn't a human-sized artifact have made a greater impact? The ball's metal shell proved to be an unlikely alloy of nickel and aluminum. Cosmic radiation and tiny impacts had left the telltale marks one would expect after a long drifting journey through space. Using tiny lasers, the researchers carefully cut through the metal shell, revealing a diamond interior. Then the diamond heart absorbed a portion of the laser's energy, and once charged, it powered up its own tiny light show. Fortunately a nanoscopic camera had been inserted into the hole, and the three scientists were able to record what they witnessed--a rush of complex images coupled with an increasingly sophisticated array of symbols.

"What is this?" they kept asking one another.

"Maybe it's language," Mary guessed. Correctly, as it happened. "Someone's teaching us ... trying to ... a new language."

Dr. Smith gave her a shamelessly public hug.

Then the other graduate student--a Brazilian fellow named Carlos--pointed out that, whatever the device was, Mary had found it in rock that was at

least a quarter of a billion years old. “And that doesn't count the time this little machine spent in space, which could be millions more years.”

After the show's cancellation, at least one former executive admitted to having been fooled. “We were promised a big, loud invasion,” he told an interviewer from *Rolling Stone*. “I talked to the series' producer. He said an invasion would begin right after episode four. Yeah, we knew the build-up was going to be slow. But then aliens from the dinosaur days were going to spring to life and start burning cities.”

“Except,” said the interviewer.

“What?”

“That's not quite true. The Permian happened before there were any dinosaurs.”

With a shrug, the ex-executive brushed aside that mild criticism. “Anyway, the important thing is that bad-ass aliens were supposed to come out of the rock. They were going to grow huge and start kicking us around. At least that's what the production company--EXL Limited--assured us. A spectacle. And since we didn't have to pay much for those episodes, we ended up purchasing the first eight shows after seeing only a few minutes of material....”

*Invasion* was cancelled after the fifth episode.

The final broadcast episode was an artless synopsis of the next twenty months of scientific work. Dr. Smith and his students were just a tiny portion of a global effort. Experts on six continents were making a series of tiny, critical breakthroughs. Most of the

story involved faceless researchers exchanging dry e-mails about the tiny starship's text and images. Translations were made; every shred of evidence began to support the obvious but incredible conclusions. The culminating event was a five-minute news conference. Dripping sweat, shaking from nerves, the astronomer explained to reporters that he had found a functioning starship on Earth. After a glancing thanks to unnamed colleagues, he explained how, in the remote past, perhaps long before there was multicellular life on Earth, an alien species had manufactured trillions of tiny ships like this one. The ships were cast off into space, drifting slowly to planetary systems scattered throughout the galaxy. The vessel that he had personally recovered was already ancient when it dropped onto a river bottom near the edge of Gondwanaland. Time had only slightly degraded its onboard texts--a history of the aliens and an explanation into the nature of life in the universe. By all evidence, he warned, human beings were late players to an old drama. And like every other intelligent species in the universe, they would always be small in numbers and limited in reach.

The final scene of that fifth episode was set at Dr. Smith's home. His oldest son was sitting before a large plasma screen, destroying alien spaceships with extraordinarily loud weapons. In what proved to be the only conversation between those two characters, Smith sat beside his boy, asking, "Did you see me?"

"What?"

“The news conference--”

“Yeah, I watched.”

“So?” he said. And when no response was offered, he asked, “What did you think?”

“About what?”

“The lesson--”

“What? People don't matter?” The boy froze the battle scene and put down his controls. “I think that's stupid.”

His father said nothing.

“The universe isn't empty and poor.” The boy was perhaps fourteen, and his anger was the most vivid emotion in the entire series. “Worlds are everywhere, and a lot of them have to have life.”

“Millions are blessed, yes,” Dr. Smith replied. “But hundreds of billions more are too hot, too cold. They are metal-starved, or married to dangerous suns.”

His son stared at the frozen screen, saying nothing.

“The alien texts only confirm our most recent evidence, you know. The earth is a latecomer. Stellar births are slowing, in the Milky Way, and everywhere, and the production of terrestrial worlds peaked two or three billion years before our home was created.”

“These texts of yours ... they say that intelligent life stays at home?”

“Most of the time, yes.”

“Aliens don't send out real starships?”

“It is far too expensive,” Smith offered.

The boy pushed out his lower lip. “Humans are different,” he maintained.

“No.”

“We're going to build a working stardrive. Soon, I bet. And then we'll visit our neighboring stars and colonize those worlds--”

“We can't.”

“Because they tell us we can't?”

“Because it is impossible.” His father shook his head, saying with authority, “The texts are explicit. Moving large masses requires prohibitive energies. And terraforming is a difficult, often impossible trick. And that is why almost every world that we have found to date looks as sterile as the day they were born.”

But the teenage boy would accept none of that. “You know, don't you? That these aliens are just lying to us? They're afraid of human beings, because they know we're the toughest, meanest things in the universe. And we're going to take them on.”

For a long moment, Dr. Smith held silent.

Then the boy continued his game, and into the mayhem of blasters, the father mouthed a single dismissive word: “Children.”

\* \* \* \*

Eighteen months later, the fledging Web network declared bankruptcy, and a small consortium acquired its assets, including *Invasion of a Small World*. Eager to recoup their investment, the new owners offered all eight episodes as a quick-and-dirty DVD package. When sales proved somewhat better than predicted, a new version was cobbled together,

helped along by a genuine ad budget. The strongest initial sales came from the tiny pool of determined fans--young and well educated, with little preference for nationality or gender. But the scientists in several fields, astronomy and paleontology included, were the ones who created a genuine buzz that eventually put *Invasion* into the public eye.

The famous sixth episode helped trigger the interest: That weak, rambling tale of Dr. Smith, his family and students, was temporarily suspended. Instead, the full fifty-three minutes were dedicated to watching a barren world spinning silently in deep space. According to corporate memos, the last three episodes arrived via the Web, bundled in a single package. But it was this episode that effectively killed the series. There were no explanations. Nothing showed but the gray world spinning, twenty minutes before the point-of-view gradually pulled away. The world was just a tiny speck of metal lost in the vastness of space. For astronomers, it was a fascinating moment--a vivid illustration that the universe could be an exceedingly boring place. Stars were distant points of light, and there was only silence, and even when millions of years were compressed into a nap-length moment, nothing was produced that could be confused with great theatre.

But what the astronomers liked best--what got the buzz going--were the final few minutes of the episode. Chance brought the tiny starship into the solar system, and chance guided it past a younger Saturn.

The giant moon, Titan, swung close before the ship was kicked out to Neptune's orbit. Then it drifted sunward again, Mars near enough to reveal its face. Two hundred and fifty million years ago, Titan was bathed in a much denser atmosphere, while Mars was a temporarily wet world, heated by a substantial impact event. Experts in those two worlds were impressed. Only in the last year or two, probes had discovered what *Invasion* predicted on its own, including pinpointing the impact site near the Martian South Pole.

In much the same way, episode seven made the paleontologists crazy.

With its long voyage finished, the tiny starship struck the Earth's upper atmosphere, quickly losing its momentum as well as a portion of its hull. The great southern continent was rendered accurately enough to make any geologist smile, while the little glimpses of Permian ecosystems were even more impressive. Whoever produced the series (and there was a growing controversy on that matter), they had known much about protomammals and the early reptiles, cycads and tree ferns. One ancient creature--lizard in form, though not directly related to any modern species--was the only important misstep. Yet five months later, a team working in South Africa uncovered a set of bones that perfectly matched what a vanished dramatic series had predicted ... and what was already a cultish buzz grew into a wild, increasingly public cacophony....

At least forty thousand sites--chat rooms and blogs and such--were dedicated to supporting the same inevitable conclusion.

By means unknown, aliens had sent a message to earthlings, and it took the form of *Invasion of a Small World*.

\* \* \* \*

The eighth episode was a genuine treasure.

Dr. Smith reappeared. Several years older, divorced and with his belly fat stripped off by liposuction, he was shown wandering happily through a new life of endless celebrity. His days and long evenings were spent with at least three mistresses as well as a parade of world leaders. Accustomed to the praise of others, he was shown grinning confidently while offering his interpretations of the ancient message. The universe was almost certainly sprinkled with life, he explained. But despite that prolificacy, the cosmos remained an enormous, very cold, and exceptionally poor place. The gulfs between living worlds were completely unbridgeable. No combination of raw energy and questing genius could build a worthy stardrive. Moreover, even direct communication between local species was rarely worth its considerable cost, since civilizations rarely if ever offered each other anything with genuine worth.

“Technology has distinct limits,” he warned the starlets and world leaders that he met at cocktail parties. “Humans are already moving into the late



stages of scientific endeavor. What matters most, to us and to any wise species, is the careful shepherding of energy and time. That is why we must care for our world and the neighboring planets inside our own little solar system. We must treasure every day while wasting nothing, if only to extend our histories as far as into the future as possible.”

“That strikes me as such depressing news,” said one prime minister--a statuesque woman blessed with a starlet's beautiful face. “If there really are millions and billions of living worlds, as you claim, and if all the great minds on all of those worlds are thinking hard about this single problem, shouldn't somebody learn how to cheat the speed of light or create free energy through some clever trick?”

“If that were so,” Dr. Smith replied, “then every world out there would be alive, and the giant starships would arrive at our doorstep every few minutes. But instead, human experience has discovered precisely one starfaring vessel, and it was a grain of metallic dust, and to reach us it had to be exceptionally lucky, and, even then, it had to wait a quarter of a billion years to be noticed.”

The prime minister sipped her virgin Mary and chewed on her lower lip. Then with a serious tone, she said, “But to me ... there seems to be another reasonable explanation waiting for our attention...”

“Which would be what, madam?”

“Subterfuge,” she offered. “The aliens are intentionally misleading us about the nature of the universe.”

Bristling, he asked, “And why would they do such a thing?”

“To cripple our future,” she replied. “By convincing us to remain home, they never have to face us between the stars.”

“Perhaps you're right to think that, madam,” said the old astronomer, nodding without resolve. Then in his final moment in the series' final episode, he said, “A lie is as good as a pill, if it helps you sleep....”

\* \* \* \*

For years, every search to uncover the creative force behind *Invasion of a Small World* came up empty. And in the public mind, that single mystery remained the final, most compelling part of the story.

Former executives with the doomed network had never directly met with the show's producers. But they could recount phone conversations and teleconferences and e-mails exchanged with three apparent producers. Of course, by then, it was possible to invent a digital human face and voice while weaving a realistic mix of human gestures. Which led some to believe that slippery forces were plainly at work here--forces that no human eye had ever witnessed.

Tracking down the original production company produced only a dummy corporation leading to dusty mailboxes and several defunct Web addresses. Every

name proved fictional, both among the company's officers and those in the brief credits rolling at the end of each episode. Surviving tax forms lacked any shred of useful information. But where the IRS might have chased down a successful cheat, the plain truth was that whoever was responsible for *Invasion* had signed away all future rights in exchange for a puddle of cash.

The few skeptics wondered if something considerably more ordinary was at play here. Rumors occasionally surfaced about young geniuses working in the Third World--usually in the Indian tech-cities. Employing pirated software and stolen equipment, they had produced what would eventually become the fifth most successful media event in history. But in the short term, their genius had led nowhere but to obscurity and financial ruin. Three different candidates were identified--young men with creative minds and most of the necessary skills. Did one of them build *Invasion* alone? Or was it a group effort? And was the project's failure the reason why each of them committed suicide shortly after the series' cancellation?

But if they were the creators, why didn't any trail lead to them? Perhaps because the consortium that held all rights to *Invasion* had obscured the existing evidence. And why? Obviously to help feed this infectious and delicious mood of suspicion. To maintain an atmosphere where no doubts could find a toehold, where aliens were conversing with

humans, and where the money continued to flow to the consortium like a great green river.

\* \* \* \*

The most durable explanation was provided by one of the series' most devoted fans--a Nobel laureate in physics who was happy to beat the drum for the unthinkable. "*Invasion* is true everywhere but in the specifics," he argued. "I think there really was an automated starship. But it was bigger than a couple of grains of rice. As big as a fist, or a human head. But still small and unmanned. The ship entered our solar system during the Permian. With the bulk of it in orbit, pieces must have landed on our world. Scouts with the size and legs of small cockroaches, maybe. Maybe. And if you take the time to think it through, you see that it would be a pretty silly strategy, letting yourself become a tiny fossil in some enormous bed of mudstone. What are the odds that you'd survive for 250 million years, much else ever get noticed there?"

"No, if you are an automated starship, what would be smart is for that orbiting mothership to take a seat where nothing happens and she can see everything. On the moon, I'd guess. She still has the antennas that she used to hear the scouts' reports. She sleeps and waits for radio signals from the earth, and when they arrive, she studies what she hears. She makes herself into a student of language and technology. And when the time is ripe--when she has a product to sell--she expels the last of her fuel, leaving the moon

to land someplace useful. Which is pretty much anywhere, these days.

“Looking like a roach, maybe, she connects to the Web and offers her services at a cut-rate price.

“And that is how she delivers her message.

“Paraphrasing my fictional colleague, “A lie is as good as a truth, if it leads you to enlightenment.”“

\* \* \* \*

The final scene in the last episode only seemed anticlimactic. The one-time graduate student, Mary, had been left behind by world events. From the beginning, her critical part in the research had been downplayed. But the series' creator, whoever or whatever it was, saw no useful drama in that treachery. The woman was middle-aged and happy in her obscurity, plain as always and pregnant for at least the second time.

A ten-year-old daughter was sitting beside Mary, sharing a threadbare couch.

The girl asked her mother what she believed. Was the universe really so empty and cold? And was this the way it would always be?

Quietly, her mother said, “I think that's basically true, yes.”

The girl looked saddened.

But then Mary patted her daughter on the back of a hand, smiling with confidence. “But dear, I also believe this,” she said. “Life is an invasion wherever it shows itself. It is relentless and it is tireless, and it conquers every little place where living is possible.

And before the universe ends, all the good homes will know the sounds of wet breathing and the singing of glorious songs.”

## Finished

What did I plan? Very little, in truth. An evening walk accompanied by the scent of flowers and dampened earth, the lingering heat of the day taken as a reassurance, ancient and holy. I was genuinely happy, as usual. Like a hundred other contented walkers, I wandered through the linear woods, past lovers' groves and pocket-sized sanctuaries and ornamental ponds jammed full of golden orfes and platinum lungfish. When I felt as if I should be tired, I sat on a hard steel bench to rest. People smiled as they passed, or they didn't smile. But I showed everyone a wide grin, and sometimes I offered a pleasant word, and one or two of the strangers paused long enough to begin a brief conversation.

One man—a rather old man, and I remember little else—asked, “And how are you today?”

Ignoring the implication, I said, “Fine.”

I observed, “It's a very pleasant evening.”

“Very pleasant,” he agreed.

My bench was near a busy avenue, and sometimes I would study one of the sleek little cars rushing past.

“The end of a wonderful day,” he continued.

I looked again at his soft face, committing none of it to memory. But I kept smiling, and, with a tone that was nothing but polite, I remarked, “The sun's setting earlier now. Isn't it?”

The banal recognition of a season's progression—

that was my only intent. But the face colored, and then with a stiff, easy anger, the man said, “What does it matter to *you*? It’s always the same day, after all.”

Hardly. Yet I said nothing.

He eventually grew tired of my silence and wandered off. With a memory as selective as it is graceful, I tried to forget him. But since I’m talking about him now, I plainly didn’t succeed. And looking back on the incident, I have to admit that the stranger perhaps had some little role in what happened next. I planned nothing.

But a keen little anger grabbed me, and I rose up from the bench, and, like every pedestrian before me, I followed the path to the edge of the avenue. Later, I was told that I looked like someone lost in deep thought, and I suppose I was. Yet I have no memory of the moment. According to witnesses, I took a long look up the road before stepping forward with my right foot. The traffic AI stabbed my eyes with its brightest beam, shouting, “Go back!” But I stepped forward again, without hesitation, plunging directly into the oncoming traffic. A little pink Cheetah slammed on its brakes. But it was an old car with worn pads—a little detail that couldn’t have found its way into my calculations—and despite the heroic efforts of its AI pilot, the car was still moving at better than eighty kilometers an hour when it shattered my hip and threw my limp body across the hood, my chest and then my astonished face slamming into the



windshield's flexing glass.

Again, I tumbled.

Then I found myself sprawled in a heap on the hot pavement. For a thousand years, I lay alone. Then a single face appeared, scared and sorry and pale and beautiful. Gazing down through the mayhem, she said, "Oh, God. Oh, shit!"

With my battered mouth, I said, "Hello."

Leaking a sloppy laugh, I told her, "No, really, I'll be fine."

Then I asked, "What's your name?"

"Careless," she said. "Stupid," she said. And then she said, "Or Bonnie. Take your pick."

\* \* \* \*

I picked Bonnie.

A beautiful young woman, she had short dark hair arranged in a fetching fish-scale pattern and a sweet face made with bright brown eyes and skin that looked too smooth and clear to be skin. On most occasions, her smile came easily, but it could be a crooked smile, laced with weariness and a gentle sadness. There was a girlish lightness to her voice, but in difficult circumstances, that voice and the pretty face were capable of surprising strength. "What should I do?" she asked the crumpled figure at her feet. "What do you need?"

"Help," I muttered, answering both questions.

Others had gathered on the curb, observing the two of us. Yet she noticed nothing but me, kneeling beside me, grasping a hand without a second thought.

“Do you need a hospital? Should I call somebody—?”

“There’s a clinic up the road,” I mentioned.

“An ambulance,” one of our spectators recommended.

“Just help me to your car and take me there,” I suggested. Then I made a joke, promising, “I won’t bleed on your seat.”

Bless her, she recognized my humor and flashed a little smile. Realizing that my shattered legs couldn’t hold themselves upright, much less carry the wreckage on top of them, Bonnie grabbed me under the arms and pulled. But I was too heavy, and after a few hard tugs, she carefully set me down again, asking our audience,

“Could somebody lend a hand?”

A pair of finished people stood among the others. But it was a teenage boy, big and raw, who leaped forward. He seemed thrilled by the chance to drag me across the pavement, practically throwing me into the waiting vehicle. Then with a cleansing brush of the hands, he asked, “Anything hurt?”

“Everything hurts,” I admitted.

He didn’t believe me. He laughed and stared at the beautiful woman, relishing the chance to be part of this little drama. I was nothing now. I was a sack of dislocated parts and bottled memories, and he thoroughly ignored me, asking the only one who mattered, “Do you need me to ride along?”

But Bonnie had already climbed inside, telling her car, “Now. Hurry.”

The ride took just long enough for me to thank her once more and absorb a few more apologies. Then as we pulled up in front of the nondescript clinic, I offered my name. She repeated, "Justin," and dabbed at a tear. Once again, I told her, "Thank you." Then I said, "Bonnie," for the first time, and she seemed to notice the emotions wrapped inside my sloppy voice.

Her AI must have called ahead; an attendant had already rolled out into the parking lot to wait for us.

"I'll pay for everything," Bonnie told the machine. She couldn't afford the first two minutes. Her old car proved that she was a person of modest means.

"This was my fault entirely," I confessed. Then I lied, claiming, "Besides, my insurance covers everything imaginable."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Dinner," I said. "If you want, buy me a little dinner."

The attendant was carrying me through the clinic door, an army of fingers already assessing the damage.

Bonnie repeated, "Dinner," before asking, "When?"

"Tonight," I suggested.

Then I asked, "Have you eaten?"

She shook her head. "No."

To the machines gathering around me, I asked, "How long will this take?"

The damage was severe but ordinary. Nothing too exceptional had to be fabricated. Thirty-five minutes was the verdict, and, with an intentionally pitiful

voice, I asked, "Will you wait for me?"

As the door closed, Bonnie rubbed her hands together, tilted her head to one side and smiled in her sad, sweet fashion. "I guess I am waiting," she muttered.

"Yes."

\* \* \* \*

Men instantly took notice of Bonnie. Perhaps her body was too meaty to belong to a model, but that was no failure. She was taller than most females, and she had an inviting walk that any man younger than ninety would notice from the Moon. Twice I saw wives or girlfriends chastising their men for gawking, and a pair of women sitting in the front of the restaurant mouthed the word, "Sweet," as my date innocently passed by their table.

I was feeling happy and sick, and very wicked, and I felt a little awful for what I had done, and a little thrilled by what I dreamed of doing.

"I've never been here," she confessed, watching the robot staff skitter from table to table, serving people like myself. "This seems like a nice place."

"It is nice," I promised. "And thank you for joining me."

Of course, I'd given her no choice. But during that thirty-five minute wait, Bonnie had driven home and changed clothes, returning to the clinic smelling of perfume and youth. She let me pat the top of a hand, just for a moment, and then, before either one of us could gauge her response, I pulled my hand back

again. And smiled. And, with a quiet but thoroughly fascinated voice, I invited her to tell me about herself.

Some details were memorable. Others slipped from my grasp before I could decide whether or not to keep them. But who doesn't experience the world in such a sloppily selective way? Even with a precious someone, not every facet can be embraced inside a single evening.

What I learned was that Bonnie worked at the university as a technician, in a DNA paleontologist's lab. She had been married once, briefly. Then she lived with the wrong man for several years; that relationship mercifully had ended the previous winter. She was raised Christian, but I don't remember which species. Plainly, she wasn't swayed by the recent reactionary noise against people like me. Watching my eyes, she touched my hand, admitting, "I'm going to be thirty in another three months."

"Thirty," I repeated.

"That can be an ominous age," I said.

Her hand withdrew as she nodded in agreement.

Our meals came and were consumed, and the bill arrived along with a pair of sweet mints. The final tally took her by surprise. But one of us had left the table a few minutes ago, and, of course, I had purged myself, putting my food back into the restaurant's common pot, the lamb and buttery potatoes destined to be knitted back together again, the next shepherd's pie indistinguishable from the last. Bonnie paid for

her meal and for renting my food, and then graciously allowed me to tip the restaurant's owner. A finished woman, as it happened.

"Good night, you two kittens," the woman told us as we left. Bonnie drove me to my house.

I knew she didn't want to come inside. For a multitude of fine reasons—old heartaches, her Christian upbringing, and my own odd nature—Bonnie pulled away while we sat on my long driveway.

There were several ways to attack the moment.

What I decided to do, and what worked better than I hoped: I turned to my new friend, mentioning, "You haven't asked about me."

She seemed embarrassed.

"Anything," I said. "Ask anything."

Bonnie was wearing the sort of clinging blouse and slacks that a modern woman wears on a first date. Everything was revealed, yet nothing was. While a hand nervously played with an old-fashioned button, she asked, "How long ago ... did you do it...?"

"Ten years and two months, approximately."

The early days of this business, in other words.

"Okay," she whispered. Then, "How old were you—?"

"Forty-nine years, eleven months."

She couldn't decide what bothered her more, my being finished or my apparent age. "So you're twenty years older than me," she muttered, speaking mostly to herself. "Or thirty, including the last ten. I don't

think I've ever gone out with anyone quite that—”

“Why?” I said, interrupting her.

She fell silent, nervous for every reason.

Looking into the wide brown eyes, I said, “That’s what you want to know. Why did I do it? So find the breath and ask me.”

“Why did you?”

I intended to tell the story, but the intuition of a middle-aged man took hold. The better course was to take her hand and lift it to my mouth, kissing a warm knuckle and then the knuckle beside it, and, with my tongue, tasting the salty heat between those two trembling fingers.

“Not tonight,” I told her.

I said, “Another time, perhaps.”

Then I climbed out of her old pink Cheetah, smiling with all the warmth I could manage, asking, “Do you believe in Fate, Bonnie?”

\* \* \* \*

We taste food. Our bodies feel heat and fatigue. Urges older than our species still rule us, and every finished person is grateful for that continuity. Yet even the intelligent unfinished person, informed and utterly modern, has to be reminded of essentials that everyone should know: We are not machines, and we are not dead. Today, for the first time in human history, there happens to be a third state of existence: Alive, dead, and finished. And, like the living, we have the capacity to learn and gradually improve our nature, and then, should circumstances shift, we

possess a substantial, almost human capacity for change. Another evening found us enjoying an intimate embrace. Bonnie's salty sweat mingled with my sweet, lightly scented sweat, and her nervousness collapsed into a girlish joy. What we had just done was wicked, and fun. What we would do next was something she never imagined possible. "Not in my life," she admitted. And then in the next instant, with a laughing apology, she exclaimed, "That was a sloppy choice of words. Sorry."

But I laughed too. Louder than her, in fact.

After the next pause, she asked, "Is it the same?"

"Is what the same?"

"The *feel* of it," she said. Her pretty face floated above me, hands digging beneath the moistened sheets. "When you climax—"

"Better."

"Really?"

"But that's because of you," I told her. "Otherwise, no. It's pretty much the same old bliss."

She was suspicious, but what soul wouldn't wish such a compliment? Against her better instincts, Bonnie smiled, and then, after some more digging beneath the sheets, she remarked, "You don't act like a middle-aged man."

"Hydraulics are an old science," I replied.

She considered my body and my face. I have a handsome face, I'd like to believe. Not old but proud of its maturity, enough gray in the illusionary hair to let the casual eye pin down my finishing age. With



her free hand, she swept the hair out of my eyes, and then, in a quiet, almost embarrassed tone, she asked, “Is it like they say?”

“Is what like what?”

But she realized that she was mangling the question. “People claim it feels like living the same day, without end. If you’re finished. You don’t have the same sense of time—”

“In one sense,” I agreed.

But after my next mock-breath, I explained, “Time announces itself in many ways. I have biorhythms. My mind still demands sleep on a regular schedule. And I can still read a clock. For instance, I know it’s half past midnight, which means that according to an utterly arbitrary system, a new day has begun. Dawn would be the more natural beginning point, I’ve always thought. But I’m not going to be the one to tear down everybody else’s conventions.”

She nodded. Sighed.

I pulled her up on top of me, hips rubbing. “Something else,” I said. “Ask.”

“Why?” she whispered.

“Why did I allow myself to be finished?”

“Were you—?”

“Sick? No.”

Another nod was followed by a deeper, almost tattered sigh.

“I was almost fifty years old,” I explained. “Which is a good age to be a man, I think. Experience. A measure of wisdom. But the body has already failed

noticeably, and the sharpest mind at sixty—if you are a man—is never as keen as it was ten years before.”

She said nothing, moving her body, trying to match my rhythm.

“Women are different,” I allowed. “They seem to have two popular ages for finishing. Older, post-menopausal women can enjoy it greatly. And vibrant youngsters still in their twenties or thirties. But there aren’t many in their forties. Studies show. Even if the woman picks a good day to be finished ... a moment when her mood is even, her hormones in check ... well, not as many of you seem to love that age, I’ve noticed...”

She nodded, seemingly agreeing with me. Then she shuddered, sobbing and pressing her body flush against my mine. And with a low, throaty voice, she asked,

“Were you talking? I wasn’t listening.”

I gave a low grunt.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

Then she touched my face, and, with a genuinely mystified voice, asked,

“Why are you crying...?”

\* \* \* \*

Bonnie’s closest friend was the same age but less pretty—a proper woman, well-dressed and infinitely suspicious. The three of us shared an uncomfortable dinner in Bonnie’s little apartment, and then some mysterious errand sent my girlfriend out the door. The two women had come up with this glaringly

obvious plan. Suddenly alone with me, the friend used a cutting stare, announcing, “My father is finished.”

I nodded, trying to appear attentive.

“In fact, he was one of the first. Four years before you did it, about.”

“Interesting,” I offered.

She shrugged, unimpressed by interest. Her expression hardened to just short of a glare. “Dad was dying. Pancreatic cancer.”

“Awful stuff,” I said.

“I got out of school for the day. I went with him and Mom to the clinic.”

Suspicious eyes looked past me. “He was weak and dying, and I was thankful this new technology could save him ... and I was very hopeful....”

I gave a nod. Nothing more.

“The machines rolled him away,” she reported. Then, with a barely contained anger, she asked, “How long does the process take?”

“Minutes,” I offered.

“Boiling him down to nothing.”

To be replicated, the brain had to be dismantled. A sophisticated holo of the original was implanted inside a nearly indestructible crystal. Experience and new technologies have accelerated the process somewhat, but there is no means, proven or theoretical, that allows a person to be finished without the total eradication of the original body and its resident mind.

“He was a sick old man,” she reported. “Then he was this crystal lump as big as a walnut, and then he had this entirely different body. It was supposed to look like him, and feel pretty much the same ... but they still haven’t learned how to make a realistic chassis....”

“It’s a nagging problem,” I agreed. “Unless you embrace your new existence, of course. Then it isn’t a problem, but a kind of blessing. An emblem, and a treasured part of your finished identity—”

“It costs,” she complained.

There were some stiff maintenance fees, true.

“Between the finishing and all the troubles with his new body—”

“Death would have been cheaper,” I interrupted. “That’s what you realized, isn’t it?”

The woman shuddered, a cold and familiar pain working its way down her back. But as awful as that sounded, she couldn’t argue with me. “It ate up most of their savings,” she complained.

What could I say?

“Of course, Dad eventually wanted my mother to get finished, too.”

“I see.”

“But their finances were a mess.”

“Loans are available,” I mentioned. “Because the finished person can live for another thousand years, or longer, the clinics offer some very charitable terms.”

“Except Mom didn’t want any part of that.” She

was her mother's child, and she still agreed with the scared old woman. "If you're finished, you're finished. You stop learning."

"Not true."

"Yes it is!"

"No," I snapped back. "The new mind's design doesn't let fresh synapses form. But that's why it's so durable. Instead, you use subsidiary memory sinks and plenty of them, and as you learn all of the tricks—"

"He stopped changing."

I fell silent.

"My father went into the clinic as a sick man," she reported. "And the machine that came out ... it was a *sick* machine, exhausted and feeling all these phantom pains running through it...."

"The doctors take precautions now," I told her. "They can limit certain sensations beforehand—"

"He's always going to be dying ... forever...."

The apartment door began to open.

"I don't approve of you," the friend blurted. "I just wanted to tell you, and tell you why not."

I nodded as if I had learned something. As if I respected her honesty. Then as Bonnie stepped into the room—a wary attitude on her face and in her body—I said to no one in particular, "That's why if you're going to be finished, it's best to do it before you get sick. On a good day, if you can manage it."

I sighed.

To the floor, I said, "On your very best day,

hopefully.”

\* \* \* \*

My best day was a sunny, gloriously warm Thursday. High-pressure centers have this way of causing rushes at the clinics, but I'd set up my appointment well in advance. The weather was nothing but good fortune. Arriving fifteen minutes early, I wore casual clothes and an easy smile. I was rested and well fed, and since I had sworn off sex for the last few days, I felt pleasantly horny—a good quality to lock into your soul. If any doubt had whispered to me, I would have postponed the event until the doubt died. If a cloud had drifted across the sun, I would have waited in the parking lot for the shadow to pass. But the sky was a steely blue, glorious and eternal, and my only little doubt was in entering the clinic alone.

“But alone is best,” somebody had warned me. “Anyone else would be a distraction for you. An imposition. Trust me about this.”

I did trust her, and, of course, she was entirely correct.

“Justin Gable,” I told the man at the counter. “I'm at—”

“Two fifteen. Yes, sir. Right this way, Mr. Gable.”

An honored guest, I felt like. I felt as if I was walking toward an elaborate celebration, or, at the very least, a tidy but significant ceremony. Every stereotypic image of looming gallows or tunnels leading to bright lights was left at the front door. I felt

thrilled, even giddy. For the first time in years, I whistled as I walked. Without a gram of shame, I flirted with my female nurse, and then my female doctor—finished souls, both of them. With a haste born of practice and experience, they quickly placed me inside a warm bath of benign fluids, and, before my mood could dip, even slightly, they slipped a cocktail of neurotoxins into my happy red blood. During the next furious minutes, microchines invaded and mapped my brain, consuming my neurons as they moved.

Inside a second room, a standard crystal was configured along lines defined by my delicate wiring, and, inside a third room, entirely different machines fashioned a body worthy of any paying customer. Then I found myself sitting on a soft couch, inside a fourth room, wearing my original clothes and with barely fifty minutes lost. And exactly as they had promised, I needed just another few moments to adapt to my very new circumstances.

The smiling staff congratulated me.

Alone, I walked outside. A little patch of clouds had covered the sun, but it didn't matter. In some deep way, I could still feel the sun's bright glare, just as I feel it today, warming me to my ceramic bones.

She was waiting where I had left her, sitting inside my car. I drove us to my house—a smaller, more modest abode in those days—and she made a convincing show of treating me exactly as she had before. Not once did she ask if I felt different. Never

did she comment on my new body. Our sex was scrupulously ordinary, pleasant but nothing more. Then I woke that next morning, and because I couldn't help myself, I said, "I know the time. And I can see that it's raining. But you know, I feel pretty much the same as I did yesterday afternoon."

Pretty much isn't the same as perfect. Even a mind composed of hard frozen synapses contains a certain play of mood, of emotions and alertness. The soul remains flexible enough that when your lover smiles in a grim fashion, you worry. When she says, "I'm leaving you, Justin," it hurts. It hurts badly, and even after the surprise fades, you continue to ache. For months, and for years, even. Forever, if you would allow it.

But I won't allow it.

"What about all your promises?" I blurted.

"Oh, those were lies," she admitted calmly.

"And what about helping with my medical bills?"

"I'm not giving you any money, darling."

"But I can't afford this body," I complained, "and I still owe hundreds of thousands for this brain. And you told me ... you claimed you'd help me—"

"And I will help," she said, glancing down at her twice-eaten eggs. "But you're a bright enough man, and if you think about this problem, just for a moment or two, you'll see for yourself what I was going to suggest."

\* \* \* \*

"Do you remember?" Bonnie would ask. "What



happened ten weeks ago?

Ten days ago? Or how about ten minutes ago? I'm just curious, Justin. What do you remember?"

At first, she was simply curious. The questions were offered in passing, and I was entirely responsible for my answers. But as her interest sharpened, her ear became more critical, and she tested me, pressing for salient details. Mentioning a specific date, she asked, "What was I wearing? Where did we eat? And what did the man in the green suit say to me?"

"You were wearing a wonderful little holo-dress, flowers changing to seeds and then back to flowers again." I dipped into an assortment of memory sinks, my eyes staring off into the foggy distance. "We ate in that Sudanese restaurant, and you had the eland, and you had shoes. Yes. Black leather with brass buckles."

"Go on."

"But the man wasn't wearing green," I reported. "It was more gold, his suit was. I don't remember his shoes, sorry. But he had this square face and a gold ring through his cheek, and he stared at you. I remember that very well. We walked into the place, and he watched you constantly. I made a joke, or you did—"

"Playing with himself—"

"Under the table, yes. I said, 'You're making that poor gentleman crazy, darling.' And then all at once he stood up and came over to us ... in his gold-green suit ... and he told you, 'When you get tired of that

dildo, why don't you try a real man?"

"You remember," she said happily.

"And I remember what you asked him. 'Why? Do you know a real man?'"

She was embarrassed, and pleased, laughing at the shared memory. Like anyone in her position, Bonnie wanted to know what I could do, and what I could not do. Yes, I explained, I had limits in personal growth. For better or worse, my nature was essentially changeless. In another hundred years, if someone gave me a personality inventory, I would test out as a man still just shy of fifty: A middle-aged outlook; neatness at home; a mature man's patience, and, hopefully, a measure of wisdom. Plus my present level of smoldering passion, freed from the vagaries of hormones, would hold rock solid.

"I'll be better in bed than most hundred and fifty year-old men," I joked. A smile widened, but there was no laughter. Then, with a serious voice—a thoughtful and worried but distinctly determined voice—Bonnie announced, "I want to have children."

"I've got half a dozen vials filled up with my frozen sperm," I promised. "For when the time comes."

But she hadn't mentioned my participation, and she didn't mention it now. Instead, she took a deep breath before saying, "They can harvest a woman's eggs too. After the brain's gone, I mean."

"And they're making spectacular progress with artificial wombs," I added. "In a year or two, or ten at the most—"

“What about work?” she interrupted. “Learning new jobs and the like ... you didn’t know much about cybernetics before this, but now you’re some kind of consultant—”

“I lobby for the rights of the finished,” I said, not for the first time. “My work earns me a small stipend.”

True enough.

“If we’re going to live for another century,” she said, “and for a thousand centuries after that ... can these little memory sinks keep adapting us to all the coming changes...?”

With an open, patient face, I reminded her, “Technologies only grow stronger.”

“Yet if we want ... draining whatever’s inside those sinks ... we can *forget* what we want to forget, too. Right?”

“Which is a great gift, if you think about it.”

She heard something ominous in the words. But she was a brave soul looking hard at things she wouldn’t have considered just a few months ago. “Well, even if I *was* thinking about it,” she finally admitted. “I can barely pay my rent, much less make the down payment.”

We were spending the night at my substantial house—a telling detail. Bonnie was sitting in my bed, her young body illuminated by a waning moon. Not quite looking at me, she said, “I don’t know what I’m thinking. Because I could never afford it.”

I waited, letting the silence frighten her.

And then with a calm, warm tone, I asked, “But imagine, darling. What if some good heart was able to *help* you?”

\* \* \* \*

More weeks passed, but I remember little about them. Bonnie had a spectacular fight with her best friend, centering on issues she wouldn't discuss with me, and two attempts at reconciliation went for naught. Which left me as her closest friend as well as her lover, and, with that new power, I did very little. Just the occasional word of advice; a slight coaxing masked as praise. In glowing terms, I spoke about her body and beauty, and when we were in public, I practically reveled at the lustful stares of strangers. But the telling event was elsewhere, and inevitable. Bonnie was twenty-nine years and eleven months old, and with that birthday looming, she said, “Okay, my mind's made up.”

I smiled, just enough.

Then I set out to prepare her, legally and emotionally. My attorney was only too happy to help. A jolly fat man in life, he remained that way today—a comfortable bulk wrapped around an immortal smile. “You've picked a great moment,” he promised. A wide hand offered itself to my lover. “This is the new-generation skin. Study it. Isn't it natural? Touch it now. Prick it. If you want, lick it. No? Well, believe me. You're going to look like an angel beside this clunky old automaton.”

“Hey,” I complained. “I'm counting my pennies for

an upgrade.”

Everyone laughed, although Bonnie felt ill at ease. Yet she never lost her will, never needed so much as a soft word of encouragement. Then, later, once the appropriate forms and declarations had been signed and witnessed, my jolly attorney said, “A word with you, Justin?”

Bonnie waited for me in the lobby.

Straight away, my attorney asked, “Do you know how beautiful that woman is?”

“No,” I kidded.

He laughed, winked knowingly, and then said, “Seriously. This is not like the others that you’ve introduced me to. No elegant silver in the hair. No false teeth or bothersome grandkids. And that face isn’t another bag of good and botched plastic surgeries, either.”

“But she is rather poor—” I began.

“Fuck money. So long as it’s just her money.” He laughed until he looked red-faced and breathless. “Poor is perfect, in fact. Like it was with you. It helps the soul come to terms with the world’s realities.”

Pride flickering, I asked, “Will she be as successful as I am?”

“And then some!” His laughter filled the room. “I mean it, Justin. She’s going to have a great time. I’ve seen this new skin stretched over a woman’s frame, and I’ve felt it, and I think she’s going to be pleased. You’re going to be very pleased. Frankly, she’s going to be fighting off the potential suitors. And for each

one that she doesn't fight off—”

“Yeah.”

“Of course, you'll earn just the standard commission for bringing her in,” he admitted. “Until Bonnie can work off her own debts—”

“I realize.”

“But for every CEO-type that she captures,” he continued, “I'll make sure that you get your 5 percent out of her windfall.”

I still owed a tidy fortune to my makers. But I was immortal, and they could afford to be patient. All of their clients were immortal, and they could take an extraordinarily long view when it came to their business.

“More pennies for the saving,” he sang out.

“Sure,” I said, nodding amiably. “I'll never forget that.”

\* \* \* \*

An appointment was made at my clinic, but Bonnie woke the day before with a smile. “Look at it out there,” she said. It was a cold but utterly bright morning, three days shy of her thirtieth birthday. “Do you think we could get in? If we went down there this minute—?”

“Now?”

“I really feel in the mood,” she promised.

Somehow, I wasn't ready. But I took Bonnie at her word and carefully hid my own nervousness. Accompanying her to the clinic, I repeated the old advice. “You should go in alone. Really, I'd be a—”

“Distraction. I agree.”

Why did that hurt? And why, even after I used every reliable trick, did those three words continue to gnaw at me?

“No, this is best,” she assured me. “Going in early like this, I mean. I think some of my colleagues and friends are planning an intervention, which has to come tonight, of course...” She laughed softly, asking, “Wouldn’t that be something if we let them...? If I get a good enough body, and if we kept the lights in the room down low enough so they couldn’t tell—?”

“Are you happy?”

“Completely.”

“You’re certain?”

Bonnie didn’t quite look at me. Then she wasn’t speaking just to me, explaining, “Until a few weeks ago, I wasn’t happy. Not like I thought I should be in my life. But I kept telling myself that if I just kept plugging along, eventually, maybe I’d run into somebody...”

Neither of us laughed.

Pulling into the half-filled parking lot, she said, “Maybe they won’t have a slot for me now.”

For her, they would make a slot.

“Kiss me. For luck.”

I did what she wanted. I kissed her on the lips and told her, “I’ll see you soon,” with a voice that sounded perfectly genuine. I even managed to smile, and Bonnie gave me a distracted smile and wink in return, and then she walked alone up to the front

door and stepped out of sight.

I waited.

For maybe twenty seconds, I managed to do nothing.

But I have this ungraceful habit. This inclination—a reflex—that remains fixed in my nature. Preyed upon by doubts, I always try to follow. And afterward, I always make myself forget that I followed. What was different this time was that my reflex struck earlier than normal. I took the clinic by surprise, which makes me feel a little better. Stepping out of the Cheetah, I started to chase after Bonnie, a quick walk becoming a near-sprint, and because another patron had stopped inside the open door, thanking one of the doctors or one of the machines, I managed to slip into the lobby before any locks could be secured.

A nurse was leading Bonnie into the back rooms.

“Wait!” I cried out.

A young man, finished and fit, vaulted over the counter. I was tackled and rudely shoved to the floor, but I managed to say, “You don’t need to! I seduced you to do this! They *pay* me—!”

A hand covered my mouth, choking off my voice.

Bonnie’s hand, I realized.

Just like that first time, the pretty face hovered above me. But on this cold morning, she smiled with a certain fetching melancholy, and a calm, hard, and almost disappointed voice said, “I’m not an idiot, Justin. I figured it out for myself, almost from the first day.”



Her hand lifted, and she rose to her feet.

“Don’t go back there,” I called out. “Not now, darling. Not while you’re angry like this, because you’ll *always* be—!”

“Except I’m not angry,” she replied. And with a hard, wise smile, she added,

“In fact, darling, this is better. I’m happy enough, but I also feel suspicious right now. Toward you, and everybody. And really, if you try and think about it, isn’t that the best way to travel through the next hundred thousand years...?”

## Firehorn

There were ten or twelve of us, or more than twenty, depending on the specific year and who was in charge of the counting. Ages varied, but there was this demographic bump just a few years younger than me. Practically every kid in town belonged to our club at one time or always, and although I'm certain we had fights and long-simmering feuds, I can't recall any of that now. Time washes. Memory filters. The mind knows what it wants to cherish, and what I remember best is a group of youngsters who mirrored their town as a whole: a small community proud of its tolerance and personal freedoms. And as a result, my life seemed slathered with an effortless, unremarkable happiness.

I can't imagine a better place for a boy to dream up monsters.

On the state map, our home was a barely named dot hugging a minor line snaking its way across an enormous, mostly uninhabited desert. We were nobody's destination, but there was gasoline and cold drinks at the all-night BP. Travelers often asked us about nuclear tests and secret government installations, but the boring truth is that we weren't especially close to the ancient blast sites, and the nearest airbase was abandoned before I was born. And yet our town could have sat comfortably inside half of the horror movies produced over the past

century. The bleak desert set a mood, and the infinite skies helped enlarge the sense of profound isolation. If a flying saucer plunged to Earth, it had to crash behind my garage. Whenever a giant scorpion woke from its million-year sleep, it was obligated to crawl out into our astonishingly starry night. And if an army of zombies ever murdered the rest of the world, it would be the solemn duty of my little community to fill potato sacks with sand and barricade the highway, every adult and grim-faced child shouldering rifles, slaughtering the scourge until all was made safe again.

Our town park was decorated with steel shelters and the kinds of playground equipment popular when my folks were children. Our K-through-twelve school sported a grassless football field and a pair of intact basketball poles. But for most of us, the center of the universe was a rough little mountain standing beside the highway—a pile of ancient geology covered with modern desert scrub; a wonderland just large enough and complicated enough that it would never be known completely.

I loved that ground.

Fifty years later, I still adore it.

We always had a clubhouse hiding on those slopes—an official gathering place tucked inside a shaded, deeply secret hole. That's where we converged after school or in the morning before the summer heat turned brutal. As I mentioned, there were about a dozen of us usually. More if you counted

baby brothers and sisters tagging along. I don't remember the historic date, but I know it was early June, right after breakfast. I was thirteen. Alone, I climbed a rocky slope that had always felt steep and challenging. But my body was growing bigger, stronger. Against my wishes, I could feel the child leaving me. And maybe that's why on that particular morning the usual games didn't intrigue me. Building forts, exploring dark holes, and hunting lizards while avoiding the feared, rarely seen rattlesnakes: Those grand adventures sounded boring. What I wanted was fresh fun, and just short of the clubhouse, a terrific idea found me.

Three youngsters were waiting inside. I remember which ones, though that doesn't matter anymore. What counts is that they were eight and nine years old, and in their eyes, I was the worldly, far wiser entity, expert in quite a lot about matters still mysterious to them.

At the doorway, I put on a fake face. Then I kneeled down and said the password, crawling into a mound of scrap planks and old tarps that comprised our seat of government.

To the best of my ability, I looked scared.

"What's wrong?" one of the boys asked.

I took a big breath, probably overplaying my hand. But nobody saw the performance for what it was. In a whisper, I announced, "I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"On the trail," I said. "It was standing in the open."

My audience was curious, even thrilled. No trace of doubt, only a deep hunger for explanations. But I was still working out the details of my lie. I wasn't sure what to say next. I just kept gasping quietly while glancing back over my shoulder, fearful of something that had to be quite awful.

And that's when Morgan arrived.

She was the oldest of us, and for the last few years, even when she wasn't the oldest, Morgan served as our self-appointed leader. She was a Chinese girl. Her good-hearted, rather elderly parents had adopted her as a baby. Then later, having convinced themselves that the world was about to blow up, they moved into our piece of nowhere. The far side of the moon wasn't available, but in a pinch, we had seemed like an isolated, worthy refuge.

Morgan was, and remains, exceptionally pretty. The first time I saw the girl, I realized that we would fall in love and marry. It wasn't that I felt any obligation to the institution of wedlock. I didn't, and I don't. But she was lovely and smart, and besides, I have this pragmatic streak that appreciated having one of life's great puzzles answered for me.

Morgan and I were always partners and co-conspirators. I was relieved to hear her voice saying the password, and then she crawled inside, needing only a glance at me to know something was up.

"What's wrong, Gabe?"

"He saw *it*," one boy whispered.

"Out on the trail," added his slightly older brother.

With a small dose of subtlety, I threw a wink at my future fiancée.

Morgan smiled, just a little. “What did you see, Gabe?”

“The monster,” I said.

That earned respectful silence from our spellbound audience.

Then the little girl asked, “What monster?” As if there were several to choose from.

One of Morgan’s gifts has always been her capacity to select names. Without delay—seemingly without any thought whatsoever—she told us, “It’s called the Firehorn.”

Four mouths silently repeated the made-up name.

Then the love of my life placed her hand on top of mine, and with a flair for acting that I couldn’t hope to duplicate, she asked, “Did you really see the Firehorn, Gabe? Just now?” Then after her own wink, she added, “I’m sort of jealous. But tell the truth ... weren’t you *terrified*?”

A good childhood brings toothless hazards: smiling ghosts and playful monsters, above-average grades and nothing worse than insults during recess. The world shouldn’t turn dangerous until you’ve grown old and a little bit wise. Although as the years pass, I have to wonder if any of us ever really learns what the real monsters are and what else is just shadow.

Fifty years later, I felt entitled to my various fears. Old age and money were growing concerns. Several

years had passed since my third marriage quietly crumbled, and I wasn't employed or even employable—a human creature passing through an increasingly bizarre Earth, a world ruled by a new species he barely understood and could never wholly trust.

“Mr. Tanbridge?”

I looked at the machine, trying to decide which surface was its face.

“Are you Gabriel Tanbridge?”

“You know I am,” I pointed out.

Three arms gestured in a rather human fashion, as if to say, “Point taken.” Then a voice that sounded male quietly said, “Your friends call you Gabe. But I'll refer to you as Mr. Tanbridge.”

“Good choice.”

We were standing on the walk in front of my apartment building. It was a warm, steamy evening in December, and I hadn't been outside for three days. A service delivers my food and bottled water, and by my own choice, my electronic ties to the world are heavily filtered. A small second-hand VR chamber lets me travel on those rare occasions when I feel the need. Having learned to live without sunshine, I often spend weeks at a time inside my three-room home. Which made me wonder how long this AI had been standing out here, and how much longer it was prepared to wait for my appearance.

“What do you want with me?” I asked.

“Advice,” the machine allowed. “You see, I have an

interest in—”

“The Firehorn,” I interrupted.

Again, the jointed limbs made agreeable motions.

“I’ve told everybody everything,” I warned. “My history is all very public. Believe whatever you want, but I don’t have anything new to add.”

“I agree, Mr. Tanbridge. You have been quite forthcoming.”

There were codes, laws. If I ordered this machine to leave, it would have no choice but to obey. Yet I couldn’t find an excuse. It had been almost two years since anyone, human or otherwise, took the trouble to contact me physically, and a tiny sliver of curiosity wouldn’t let me end this scene with a binding order.

“I’ve made a full study of your testimonies, Mr. Tanbridge. I believe I have a clear sense of your role in the ongoing story.”

“Well, then,” I muttered.

“But there has been a new development.”

“Another sighting?” I laughed. “We used to get ten every day, from all around the world. There could be more now, but I gave up counting.”

“This is not a routine sighting, sir.”

And with that, the machine projected a photograph into the air between us. I studied the image as best I could. What looked at first glance to be a rubbish pile wasn’t. Wreckage lay strewn across a rocky slope that looked a little familiar, and after twenty seconds, I reached the point where I could finally see what would have been obvious to anybody younger than I.



The picture showed a desert mountainside and the corpses of at least three dismantled, deceased AIs.

“What did this?” I finally asked.

With a silent command, a string of images were played for me. A nearby camera showed three thinking machines. The machines were apparently doing nothing but climbing the slope, taking in the sights. Then the feed suddenly turned grainy. Some kind of interference was at work. For maybe fifteen seconds, a blurring shape emerged from a nearby hole and pounced on its victims. I thought of a dust devil. I thought of a cartoon marsupial. Then the blur vanished and the machines were obliterated, and without a trace of doubt, the machine standing before me announced, “That was the Firehorn.”

I said, “No.”

“Yes,” it assured me. “The evidence is compelling, sir. We’ve mapped each frame, in detail. We have made enhancements and biomechanical studies. Without doubt, we believe that the Firehorn is beginning to kill.”

In truth, the law remains divided about artificial minds and what constitutes death. But I attacked what to me was the more vulnerable point. “There’s no such thing as a Firehorn. And there never has been.”

“Of course, sir.”

“I dreamed it up, way back at the beginning of time, and through almost no fault of my own, the stupid world decided to believe in it.”

“As you say,” it replied.

I took a step backwards.

“Nonetheless, I’m here as a representative,” the machine continued. “I belong to a mission, Mr. Tanbridge. An expedition, if you will. It is our intention to find the entity that did this to our brothers.”

“But why me?” I asked. “I don’t have anything to offer. I’ve done what I can to diffuse this mess, and I’m finished with monsters, and that’s the simple, boring truth.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I am truly sorry. But my dear wife holds a rather different interpretation of the Firehorn’s history. And more to the point, she believes that you have a very important role to play in our mutual futures.”

“Your wife?”

“Yes, sir.”

I could have collapsed.

“By any chance,” I muttered softly, “are you a Copernicus?”

“I am.”

AI lineages often took their names from human geniuses.

“And your wife...?” I began.

“You know the woman well.” Every limb moved with apologetic flourishes. “Morgan promises that you can and will help us. She claims you aren’t the selfish bigot you pretend to be.” Copernicus paused for a moment, allowing my soggy human brain to

deal with that thunderbolt. Then it continued, saying, “We are a team of believers, Mr. Tanbridge. Our mission is to identify this monster, and God willing, stop it before it harms again.”

The “monster” was my inspiration, but it was Morgan’s elaboration. Yet the Firehorn wouldn’t have existed if there hadn’t been a ready-made audience. And by audience, I don’t mean our little-kid club. Eight- and nine-year-olds don’t have the power or the stubborn will necessary to turn harmless fun into a humorless, life-consuming pursuit. Adults were what we needed—proud voters and drivers who considered themselves responsible, average, and wise.

Some kids immediately saw the joke for what it was. But that didn’t stop them from playing along. Over the course of a single fertile morning, Morgan and I hammered out the Firehorn’s essentials. The creature had to be quick and smart, we decided. And seeing it at all was extremely unusual. Like any self-respecting monster, it was nocturnal. And of course it had to be a meat-eater, since what kind of terror eats roots and berries?

“What kind of meat?” asked the little bodies jammed into our stuffy, overheated clubhouse.

“Mice and rats,” Morgan blurted. Then after another meaningful wink in my direction, she added ominously, “For now, it likes small prey.”

“Why ‘for now’?” one boy muttered.

“Because it’s growing,” I said.

Growth was an ominous quality. Growth meant that the creature was an unfinished, still unformed work.

“But how big will it get?” somebody asked.

“Nobody knows,” Morgan replied.

That revelation made everybody squirm. I even twitched, if only because I could see this lie slipping out of my control.

Staring at the two of us, one girl asked suspiciously, “But where did the Firehorn come from?”

I said, “Nobody knows.”

“It could be alien,” Morgan offered. “Or a mutated animal from Yucca Flats. Although....” She let her voice break. “The story I heard,” she began. “The Firehorn was grown inside a secret laboratory. Scientists made it, and they took care of it. But the creature scared them. They realized that it was too fast, too smart. They even decided to kill it, but before they could, their creation escaped from its cage and slipped out into the world.”

That clichéd tale earned a tense, delicious silence.

I looked at my future love. Then to test her skill as a liar, I asked pointblank, “Who told you that?”

“My father did.”

“He did?”

Without hesitation, she said, “Oh, yes.” Those two utterly ordinary words were offered with just the right tone: Believable and unhesitant, dripping with dry-eyed honesty. It was such a convincing

performance that for the next few moments, I wondered if maybe a wild Firehorn was galloping across the desert, and my fake sighting was a coincidence.

Then one of the boys interrupted my daydream. “But so what’s the Firehorn look like?”

I allowed the expert to answer that.

Morgan lectured for several minutes. What she described was a sturdy beast about the size of a coyote, only stronger, its body covered with hard scales and bits of dirty white fur. Like a unicorn, it sported a single horn, but instead of emerging from the forehead, the embellishment rose off the crest of its skull, sweeping back to a sharp poisonous point.

Later, I decided the horn was a misstep. How could such a creature deliver its toxins with a backward-facing weapon? But the horn gripped a few imaginations that day, particularly when she mentioned that it was red as blood, and in the night, when the creature was excited, it glowed as if it was on fire.

“Is that the animal you saw?” somebody asked.

Asked me, apparently. For a moment, I’d forgotten that my boast started this runaway train.

I nodded with mock authority. And when that didn’t feel adequate, I added, “That’s exactly what I saw on the trail.”

“But is it dangerous?” several voices asked.

“Not really,” Morgan assured. “Unless you’ve got it cornered, of course. Which is the same trouble you’d

have with coyotes or cougars. Or a lot of people too, for that matter.”

“Who else has seen it?” the serious girl wanted to know.

Ready for the question, Morgan reported, “My dad’s seen it.”

Later, walking with me, she confessed that she had been doing a lot of quick thinking inside the clubhouse. She decided that what the story needed was one respectable witness, someone who would be believed and willing to play along. Her parents and my parents were obvious candidates. My folks were stuffy when it came to spreading lies. And while Morgan’s mother was sweet and eager to please her daughter, it was her father who could be counted on. The old man didn’t often lie, but before he became her father, he was a legendary poker player. He was smart and blessed with the good rich voice of an authority figure. And although Morgan didn’t mention this particular reason—and perhaps didn’t realize its significance—her father had been recently diagnosed with a treatable cancer.

In other words: Who would willingly question the testimony of a sick man?

Before noon, we had a thirty-pound carnivore running wild across the desert at night, slaughtering rats and voles to feed its voracious appetite. Nobody knew what it was or where it came from. And it wouldn’t hurt anyone, unless we got stupid. “But we aren’t going to be stupid, are we?” Morgan asked

everybody. Then she invented a worthy excuse that allowed her to slip home to brief her father about her very busy, exceptionally fun morning.

Our friends scattered, and they started to talk.

Parents would hear pieces of the story, and when they asked the responsible questions, most of them managed to smell out the fable. But they didn't make too many negative sounds, for the most part. A few even giggled, watching their children throw open closets and drawers, digging out binoculars and cameras and butterfly nets and other cryptozoological tools.

“Let the kids have their fun,” was the guiding principle.

For the next week or two, our Firehorn was the talk of the town.

Some good-hearted neighbors visited Morgan's home. They emerged with reports about her father's good prognosis and very positive attitude, and oh by the way, did we know that the Firehorn was living in a coyote burrow just south of town?

Of course this was another joke being played on children. But a few gullible teens absorbed our story, at least a little bit. Even if they didn't admit it, the most gullible minds began lying awake at night, every little noise catching their interest. Was that the call or grunt or clawed scratchings of this unwelcome creature? The legend was helped when a local cat lost its battle with a coyote, its yellow body sliced up by long teeth and left on the schoolyard. And later, a

teenage couple parked on the dirt road south of town thought they spotted a low shape slinking along, the glowing red horn obvious in the moonlight.

Insistence always wins over converts, and that pair were convincing.

So was Morgan's father. But it's safe to guess that the credible voice that helped spin the lies would have recanted. Or better, he would have forced his daughter and her best friend to step forward, admitting to the very drab truth. I know it bothered the old man to learn that a pair of fifteen-year-old lads had bought coyote traps and started baiting them with dead mice, leaving those steel-toothed hazards scattered about our landscape. But before he made up his mind, the monster cancer inside him decided to win. One day, the old poker-playing gentleman was on the mend, and then he was suddenly very sick and dying and then dead, and there was a sudden horrible funeral, and his ravaged, somewhat radioactive body was sunk into the earth not a quarter mile from where the Firehorn was last seen.

After that, the monster faded without ever disappearing.

And then at some ill-defined point and for no good reason, the fable found new legs and fresh life. Word of its existence hit the Internet. Slow-day news reports help prick public interest. Witnesses from other parts of the state stepped forward to enjoy a little celebrity, nervously describing an organism that



they spotted on their local desert. The Firehorn had many talents, but what was most remarkable was its capacity to remain the same. Hound-shaped and scaled and sporting the one horn. Except that it soon grew as big as a German shepherd, and then it was larger and far quicker than any simple cougar or black bear.

Meanwhile, Morgan and I grudgingly surrendered our hill and clubhouse to younger children, and we finally started to date. In our senior year, we earned scholarships to the same college; and by chance, we were holding hands in a distant cafeteria when a stranger approached, asking if it was true. Did we really, truly come from that famous town?

“What town?” I asked.

“Where the Firehorn lives,” he sputtered.

Morgan looked at me, and I returned her gaze.

Then because it was easiest, not to mention rather fun, we answered with conspirators’ unblinking confidence, “We are from there, yes.”

As far as I know, the first Firehorn that actually cast shadows was a piece of machinery devised thirteen years after my inspiration. Its builder was one of my little friends, a resident lad who remained in town and understood early on that everything was nonsense. But he decided to tear apart a dozen high-end toys and splice the pieces together. His creation was small and slow and utterly stupid. Its onboard brain had trouble evading rat holes. But for one

glorious spring, the Firehorn was noticed—mostly by late-night drivers who spied the legendary shape whining and creaking its way across the darkened highway before them.

Later hoaxes were far more ambitious, but rather less successful.

At least three times, biotech people rose to the challenge. Assorted animal DNA was used to produce three sterile creatures bearing a modest resemblance to the beast of my dreams. One Firehorn was created for no other purpose than to be killed and shown to the world's cameras—human monsters loving their fifteen nanoseconds of fame. Another beast was released on the desert and dead within a week from exposure and thirst. The third Firehorn was designed to be the mascot of a young gene-engineering company, but the poor beast developed an allergy to peanuts, and its death played a small, critical role in the destruction of that fledging business empire.

Yet even with such incompetent fakers on the loose, believers continued to tell unlikely stories about this twenty-first-century yeti.

Of course the government had built the Firehorn, using alien technologies or its own evil tools. The various nature networks helped spread each lie. Hungry for programming, they found every crackpot claim, polishing it up and giving it good production values. Then they put the product on the Internet. Mortified, I watched a parade of strangers claim to have been present at the Firehorn's birth. Long-

retired corporals swore that they weren't just low-ranking nobodies, their military lives spent inside secret installations not five miles from my front door. One story involved a Black division of the Defense Department. A quarter century before it was thought possible, genius engineers had created a genuinely intelligent machine. Then they set their creation to building new weapons. In a matter of weeks, the first AI designed and built a new species out of blood and titanium, wet breath and silicon minds. That was the Firehorn—a unique entity that fed on electricity and desert vermin, plus the scrap metal that it used to make larger, stronger bones and overlapping armored plates.

According to these noble-sounding witnesses, the military masters grew alarmed when they saw what the AI was doing. Their creation was supposed to design smart missiles, not a hound-from-hell. High-level meetings led to new orders: Kill both monsters. But the AI anticipated the danger, and with a parent's instincts, it allowed the young Firehorn to slip away into the trackless wastelands.

There were a lot of different, contradictory Firehorn stories, but that ungainly tale had the longest legs.

Once I'd signed on to the Copernicus's mission, I decided that it was finally time to make a study of these contrived accounts, trying to piece together how each lie had accreted on top of my childhood fun.

That's what I was doing onboard the railgun train.

Ignoring both Copernicus across the aisle and the world flying past me, I was working my way across the last five decades. I didn't notice Morgan coming onboard at Denver. I didn't see her kissing her husband on one of his flat surfaces. Suddenly she was beside me, offering her hand to me—a hand that felt and looked almost human, at least with a first startled glance.

“Hello, Gabe.”

With a start, I said, “Hi.”

She didn't say, “You look good.”

And I didn't reply, “You look damn strange.”

Because the truth told, I didn't and she didn't. I was a tired and aging male stubbornly remaining human at all costs, while she was just another example of the degree to which some of us will go to evade Time and Disrepair.

She sat in the seat beside me. “Thanks for coming.”

I said nothing.

She glanced at my reader, then at me. Then because she could never keep a smart question secret, even if this wasn't the best time, she said pointblank, “Tell me. Why exactly did you agree to this?”

“I need the money,” I offered.

Our expedition had sponsors, and the sponsors were paying salaries, plus bonuses proportional to the world's interest. But the payoffs were very speculative, and she saw through that in an instant.

“Try again,” she suggested.

“You wanted me,” I confessed. Then I corrected

myself. “Your husband delivered the invitation. But he promised that you would really, really appreciate my help.”

“I do. And I’m glad you’re here. But I expected you to say no.”

“That’s what I expected. So we’re both significantly surprised, I guess.”

“We are.”

More silence.

Then again, she insisted, “Really. Tell me why you’re here.”

“Do you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Morgan. I guess it’s because despite my better judgment, I still find myself missing you.”

There. I’d admitted the sad, pitiful truth. But when I looked at her face, studying its qualities, I didn’t see any emotional storms. Her skin could have been weeks old, but for some reason she’d let wrinkles gather at the deep brown eyes and the pensive mouth. She appeared to be a very pretty, very fit forty-year-old woman. For my benefit, or was this her normal appearance? The skin wore a pale simple color that was entirely human. But the complicated hands and her forearms and the tops of her bare shoulders projected images at once intricate and beautiful: the modern equivalent of artistic tattoos. Morgan’s clothes were loose and comfortable and uncharacteristically bland, as if she didn’t want either the shirt or trousers to detract from the proud body.

Something other than two lungs was breathing for her. I could hear a pump working inside her belly, although that could have been some ordinary train noise that I hadn't noticed until now. The hands had extra fingers and sockets for devices that would do quite a bit more than shake a man's hand. But the most obvious addition to her body was a rigid golden ring that lay on her chest like a necklace, except that the back of the necklace was fused to her spinal column.

A technical necessity, or was this just a new fashion trend among cyborgs? I wanted to ask but didn't. Unlike my first wife, I can keep my questions inside me, waiting for a better moment to begin my interrogations.

She motioned at my reader. "Ideas?"

"Who built the new Firehorn, you mean?"

She nodded.

"Somebody who doesn't like AIs much." I blanked the screen, adding, "Well, I guess my job's done now."

I wanted her to feel uncomfortable. That was one compelling reason to join this absurd adventure. Abusing your first love is a fine and ancient and always delicious human undertaking.

But she refused to play my game. Quietly, she sighed. Then a voice that hadn't changed in half a century picked a new topic. "Are you comfortable with your contracts?"

Copernicus had given me a few million agreements to read and sign. And just to be sure, I had to sit in

front of his camera eyes, saying with confidence, “I agree to let my image, words, and actions be used in any and all future programs, games, and fictionalized accounts of this venture, according to the civil codes established by the Bohr-versus-Bohr case of twenty-three.”

“I’m comfortable,” I said.

She could tell I was lying. “You don’t appreciate what you have,” she began.

“What do I have?”

“Considerable status inside the Firehorn community.”

I shrugged, honestly disgusted when I said, “I have a sense of it, sure.”

“Once you came onboard, public interest doubled.”

“Good for us.”

“And for you in particular,” she added.

Denver lay behind us. Las Vegas was the next stop. Our train slipped beneath the brown mountains, passing through the partial vacuum of its tunnel. I listened for a moment to that pumping sound, making sure that it was indeed coming from Morgan’s belly. Which got me into a frame of mind that I didn’t intend to mention.

She saw something on my face. “What are you thinking, Gabe?”

I wouldn’t say it. So instead, I ungracefully changed topics. “I want your explanation. Why are machines as easy to fool as people?”

She blinked, saying nothing.

“Why does your Copernicus and the others ... what makes them believe as many crazy little notions as the rest of us do?”

Her face could still blush, I noticed.

I pressed on. “When the first AIs were built, I was like everybody. I expected cold, rational souls. And I guess that’s how they were at first. But later, when they could design themselves, they seemed to choose gullibility.”

She didn’t dare debate the point, since I was right.

“The Firehorn is a minor example,” I continued. “You’d know this a lot better than me. The machines love building the most incredible, unlikely religions, and they’re fiends when it comes to rumor and gossip, and every news event and natural tragedy can be explained through some paranoid conspiracy of black forces and faceless empires. Inside their hulls sit these tiny, powerful brains, but they insist on filling their genius with mush and dreams.”

In a very precise way, Morgan said nothing.

I knew that look. And I remembered what it meant when the pretty jaw set itself at that sharp, decisive angle.

But she decided not to fight with me and retreated instead. She sat back and inhaled a long luxurious breath into a thoroughly modern lung, and then quietly, almost calmly, she reminded me, “We’ll have plenty of time to discuss these entertaining issues.”

In other words:

“Wait for the cameras to be working.”



Between my second and third marriages, in a moment of personal suffering and considerable debt, I agreed to become the guest of honor at a convention dedicated to the unexplained. I'd already made my public confession about the Firehorn, but that didn't stop the organizers from paying me a fat appearance fee. For my embarrassment, I was placed on a string of panels where experts and hobbyists vigorously debated the finer points in nonexistent matters. Some wise soul in programming imagined that flying saucers were an interest of mine. Late at night, when normal people were enjoying parties, hundreds of sober believers crowded into a conference room. I sat on stage, at the end of a long table. Our panel's self-declared leader was in the middle—a loud, brash fellow who had been everywhere and seen everything, including two memorable incidents involving the full-grown Firehorn. Perched on the table beside me was a silver box with a projected human-style face and a reasonable, measured voice. The machine was one of the new-generation AIs. Its defining creed was that the universe was big and full of interesting worlds, which meant there had to be other intelligent species, some of them billions of years old. Because life always grew in numbers and spread as it prospered, reason demanded that the ETs were among us now. My associate used authoritative numbers and elaborate computer simulations to impress an audience that didn't need much convincing. Finally the loud man interrupted, asking, "So what are you saying, buddy?"

If these aliens are here, where do they do their hiding?”

“They aren’t hiding,” the machine replied instantly. “Our world was conquered eons ago. And by most measures, we don’t even exist anymore.”

Maybe I made a doubtful noise. Maybe everybody did. But we left it to the blowhard to say, “Bullshit.”

Yet the silver box proved stubborn and eerily confident. The obvious answer to the Fermi conundrum was that the galactic overlords had digested our home world, probably long before there was a breath of free oxygen in the atmosphere. The rest of our story, including trilobites and Google, was a sophisticated and easily managed computer program: a billion years of mock-evolution and historical fiction played out inside a bundle of structured X-rays, our precious reality enclosed within a sphere slightly smaller than a human fist.

The entity had its reasons and a thoroughly worked-out mythology.

I believed none of it, but I was interested in what it had to say. Some of the ideas even intrigued me. But then came the moment when its smart voice declared, “As you sit here, my friends, blissfully unaware ... as you sit, I am actively piercing the veil laid across this false existence of ours. My work is making great strides. Discoveries are imminent. And soon I will leave you. I will find the corporeal state and join Those Who Rule in the bountiful, endless universe.”

Even our panel’s leader was left speechless.

Then after a long, uncomfortable pause, a young woman in the audience gamely threw up an arm. Any distraction seemed worthy, and I took it on myself to say, “Yes, miss? A question?”

“Don’t you hate it?” she began.

I shook my head. What did I hate?

“When the aliens abduct you and impregnate you,” she explained, her young, self-possessed voice beginning to tremble. “And then two months later, they steal away your baby. You don’t even get to name it, and then they take it to the stars. Isn’t that just the most awful thing in the world?”

Decades of drought had done its worst to Las Vegas, but the city had survived the loss of water and most of its human residents. And the gambling industry had more than thrived. Machines of every design, all looking for easy money, converged on the waterless paradise. The most popular games were cumbersome versions of Black Jack, employing gigantic decks and tiny but favorable odds of winning. If an AI mind was sufficiently engaged, counting cards with perfect accuracy, and if its luck was just a little bit good, it was possible to roll into town with a few dollars and then leave the next day, rich enough to buy freedom, or an upgrade, or at least whatever happened to be the popular luxury in its little corner of the machine world.

With a calculable reliability, success happened. But it was a teasing, inadequate kind of success for the

majority of tourists.

Dealing the cards were AIs designed to do nothing else, and always making the best possible bets with each hand. Those machines were the masters of gambling, algorithms updated on the hour, hardware upgraded during every brief sleep. And to prevent cheating, the casinos employed banks of sensors that read each guest's magnetic field and its power usage, searching for illegal devices but now and again able to pierce a victim's ceramic-encased mind.

Vegas remained Vegas, right down to the shady characters rumored to run the whole show.

And gamblers remained gamblers. Even in the face of such poor prospects, hundreds of mechanical tourists came off the train with me, each one supremely confident that against any odds, today it would win.

This was where artificial intelligence had led us.

Cold reasoning and rational good deeds were boring. Our AI servants had turned into quirky quick versions of humanity, right down to the superstitions that forced more than a few to stroke the base of the Bugsy Siegel statue, begging that old god for a blessing or two.

I spent a few moments dwelling on these matters. Then Morgan touched my elbow, pointing me toward the station's rear exit.

The vaunted expedition was sitting in the VIP lot, waiting for its last three members. Until then, I hadn't appreciated the scale of this adventure. A

dozen luxury RVs stood in the shade of solar panels, each one piloted by a brave, monster-hating machine. Copernicus claimed the pilot's seat in the lead vehicle. In a dense, twittering language, he introduced me to the others, and the response was as close to warm as I could have expected—a muddle of words that sounded like “Welcome” and “Glad to have your noble presence.”

Dozens of cameras hovered at various altitudes, absorbing everything of value as well as the ordinary and forgettable. My one-time bride said, “Ride with us,” and in case I felt otherwise, she added, “Your luggage is already stowed in back.”

I climbed into the air-conditioned interior, cameras focusing on my tense upper lip and the nervous twitch in the right eye.

Then we were off, chasing the nightmare. Copernicus set the pace. The casinos were tall drab windowless structures—gigantic, twenty-first-century termite mounds, in essence. I watched them drop behind, replaced by human houses and businesses, all abandoned now. And then the world opened up. The desert of my youth was gone. Even the lowliest scrub demands rain every couple years, and that hadn't happened in ages. I found myself staring across a profoundly barren, utterly cheerless land, the memory of water showing in arroyos and empty washes that had been dry longer than some of the ditches up on Mars.

I sat in the kitchen area. One AI and then another

wanted to shake my hand and fetch me any treat I could name.

I settled for iced tea and a couple of headache pills.

Morgan was in front, sitting beside her husband. Watching her tenderly hold one of the offered limbs, I bristled. Remembering the watching cameras, I tried to hide my emotions. Which led to me begging for medicine that would settle a roiling, acidic stomach.

“We are so pleased to have you with us,” said one glad machine, handing me a tiny glass filled with purple liquid.

“So pleased,” another, nearly identical AI added.

I drank the glass dry, then stood and worked my way up front.

Morgan measured my mood. Then looking forward again, she mentioned, “You can sleep in other quarters, if you want.”

“Good.”

A third chair unfolded from the floor, offering itself to me.

I preferred to stand, one hand on the back of each of their chairs. “What’s the battle plan?” I asked.

“We drive into town and go hunting,” she replied. Morgan’s reader was on her lap, displaying an intricate map and recent satellite images. “We’re funded for a full week, with an option on longer if...”

She let her voice trail away.

“If our ratings are high enough?” I asked.

She told me, “Yes,” with a tiny nod. One of her new non-fingers touched the reader’s taskbar, and the

telemetry from some kind of field sensor blossomed above the map.

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“Those are life signs,” Copernicus interjected. “Where your clubhouse once stood, something is moving.”

“Something?”

“Ants,” Morgan informed me.

“You have sensors on the mountain?”

“Planted by a previous expedition,” she admitted.

Which jogged my wet brain. “Right, the famous attack digital. I’d assumed that was taken with one of the dead machines’ cameras.”

“No,” she said. “Most likely, they didn’t realize they were being watched.”

I chewed on that for a moment or two. “So how does our monster manage to stay hidden?”

Nobody responded.

“Sea serpents aren’t often seen anymore,” I pointed out. “That’s because the oceans are transparent, what with all of the sonar arrays in place. And yetis don’t seem to hide in the high reaches of Asia, for the same good reasons. The laziest man sitting in his living room can punch up satellite images and other telemetry that sooner or later spots every creature bigger than an ant.”

From behind me, a sexless voice asked, “What about a Hawking Cloak?”

I didn’t react.

“Yes,” Copernicus said, “a working Cloak might

explain its invisibility.”

“Except there’s ways to beat the Cloak,” Morgan added. “In dusty settings, we’d still be able to see the tracks forming.”

Exactly.

She looked at me. Not smiling, but I could see a grin hiding behind her beautiful eyes.

Suddenly we were an old married couple again, reading each other’s thoughts.

“You know something,” I said.

“Do I?”

“You’ve got some crazy idea,” I told her, and the world. “And you’re hiding it from me, aren’t you?”

“We do have one working theory,” she admitted.

“Yours?”

“My husband and I came up with it.”

“And it is?”

Morgan glanced at the driver.

Her spouse seemed to read her thoughts easily enough. “You take the pleasure, darling. Explain our guess to the guest.”

She looked up at me again. “We don’t see the Firehorn now because there is no Firehorn now.”

I nodded, liking how that logic sounded.

“But out here, in this exceptionally dry environment, there’s a great deal of dust that’s free for the taking.”

I didn’t understand.

“Smart dust and a menu of instructions,” she continued. “Several young companies on the moon



are working with similar technologies. In principle, all you'd have to do is doctor the native materials, giving each mote of pulverized rock just enough energy and instruction to know how to join with the whole—”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “You’re claiming our monster assembles itself from the desert’s own dirt?”

“It is our most viable theory,” Copernicus conceded.

At best, it was a hypothesis, and one that demanded some entity or group possessing enormous resources. But if it could be true, that led to some ominous conclusions. Even without being fluent in machine emotions, I sensed the apprehension thriving inside the RV: Somewhere out on this desert, some black evil force was at work, and for whatever reason, it had wished the worst for three innocent machines.

As a married couple, our final visit to the old homestead was to help Morgan’s mother move on. For three busy days, we packed up a life’s mountain of belongings, most of which deserved to be trashed, and then we cleaned up the small house in preparation for an auction that would bring no buyer. By then, the long drought had become the new climate. My parents had left two years earlier, bound for the watery promise of Canada. There were still a few familiar faces about town, but a wave of newcomers had arrived maybe eight years earlier,

drawn by cheap homes and the glorious solitude. For me, the most telling moment was when I walked down to the BP to buy a round of cold drinks, and on my way, I happened to cross paths with a pair of young mothers. The topic of the moment was the first piece of new playground equipment purchased in fifty years. In that sleepy end of the world, the padded bars and swinging cage were big news. According to one mother's boy, the corkscrew slide was wonderfully slick, and he almost threw up every time he used it.

Oh, these were golden times, indeed. I heard the enthusiasm in the ladies' voices. Then as I strolled past, both women turned, staring at a face they couldn't possibly recognize. The playground was forgotten. Who was this stranger? What did he want? I was nobody and I wanted nothing. But instead of saying that, I just nodded and smiled, hurrying on my way.

That next morning, I drove our rental truck toward California. Morgan and her mother followed in the old woman's car. We pulled over at the border, and I handled the fueling while my wife went inside to buy coffees for everyone. I didn't notice her speaking to a stranger near the front door. The stranger was talking to somebody else when I went to the restroom. But when I emerged again, hands scrubbed and my mood improved, the man and his clipboard ambushed me.

"Would you like to sign our petition?" he inquired.

"What's it about?" I asked amiably.

“A state initiative to ban legal status for sentient machines.” He rattled off those words with a practiced expertise. Then in case I was an average voter, he added, “This is so the computers don’t take over.”

I knew something about the initiative. Most days, I wouldn’t have signed any petition. But that day, at that particular moment, the idea struck an emotional chord. I said, “Sure,” and quickly wrote my name and address and added my signature. Then as I handed the clipboard back to the grinning fellow, I caught sight of my wife glaring hard at me.

Morgan and I were registered to different political parties. I couldn’t recall any election where we shared one candidate or cause. Yet those differences had never presented a problem, at least not to me. I believed we were in love, and we were most definitely married, and how many couples do you know who thrive despite holding rather different philosophies about the enormous, mostly unknowable universe?

I didn’t realize it then, but several weeks of arguments were about to commence. The separation and subsequent divorce were invisible to me when I walked up to her car and tapped on the window, asking the love of my life, “How are you doing?”

She dropped the window and stared at me.

“Tired?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she growled.

Then the window rose again, but she kept her eyes fixed on me—acting rather like those moms at the

playground, searching the contours of a face they had never before seen.

On the modern map, there is no dot perched on the highway line. No town, no name. Long ago, the drought did its worst. I used to hear noise about gigantic solar farms and hundreds of well-paying jobs, but the automated orbital farms proved far cheaper, killing those hopeful schemes. But there still had to be a receiver station to make the system work, and serious souls tried hard to convince the government to catch the microwaves at that point where I kissed my first girl. However, the Wastelands were huge, and our local Senators proved weak. The coveted station ended up in an entirely different state.

Once the BP station was closed, the last vestiges of the town's economy crumbled. Fifteen years ago, two seniors graduated from the final class. A few days later, vandals torched the school. From then on, only the most stubborn characters clung to the place, surviving until several years ago when a huge dust storm made ruins of what little was left.

We knew this story going in. But imagination carries the mind only so far. Our group stood together on the cracked asphalt highway, absorbing the desperate scenery. In the last hour, we hadn't seen another vehicle. There was no trace of life from here to the horizon. This was the point when the abstract slammed into the real and honest. Collapsed homes.

Dunes of dust and filthy gray sand. Forgotten signs warning passersby to remain on the public right-of-way. Quietly, in pain, Morgan confessed, “It looks worse than it does inside the VR chamber.”

I hadn’t visited here by that route, but I believed her.

“This is awful,” Morgan whispered. “Can you see any landmarks at all?”

“Just our mountain,” I allowed.

Except the mountain inside my head proved quite a bit larger than the rough little hill behind us. In our day, there was creosote and cactus and tough desert grasses. Today the slopes wore nothing but bare stone and pools of resting dust, and when the wind gusted, which happened often, little whirlwinds would rise up—columns of angry air defined by talc-like powders that rose above the summit and then collapsed again.

I found myself thinking about dust-born monsters. I didn’t particularly believe in them, but the idea had its hold on me and wouldn’t let go.

Copernicus pulled up beside us. “We’ll camp here tonight,” it announced, one limb gesturing at the parking lot and outline of the lost service station. “Then at first light, we’ll begin work.”

I knew the town was ruined, but I hadn’t appreciated its effect on me. And I didn’t believe in monsters, but parts of my brain were sick with fear now. But what horrified me more than anything was the prospect of lying on a tiny bed inside a mobile home, listening to the desert winds, wondering what

kinds of sounds my former wife would make when she and her mechanical husband had relations.

“I’m climbing up there now,” I announced.

Then, alone, I set off for the famous mountain.

A few cameras started to follow. I couldn’t tell them not to bother, but at least I gave them a lousy show. My face down, I kept my emotions out of sight. I concentrated on the rocks poking out of the dust, spying the remains of a trail that seemed familiar until I was climbing it. Then the cameras fell away for some reason, and I was happily alone. I kept walking, navigating upwards, telling myself that I must have come this same way, probably a thousand times. But I was wearing a different body from the last time I was here, and when you change your chassis, and your perspective, the universe is remade too.

Halfway to the summit, I found a deep crevice cutting into the old stone, and inside, the tattered remains of someone else’s clubhouse. Wind-worn boards, roof tiles nailed in place, and sheets of heavy galvanized steel: an impressive ruin built from a better grade of scrap than what my group typically brought to bear. But of course those last kids had a power I never enjoyed, able to strip the treasures straight off those freshly abandoned houses.

I stopped, sat.

A moment later, Morgan appeared. She might look forty, but her legs seemed immune to gravity, and if she was breathing hard, it was through some orifice other than her clenched mouth.

“Hey,” I said.

“Are you all right?”

I didn’t answer.

“I called off the cameras,” she admitted.

“Thanks.”

She sat on a likely rock, watching me.

“There’s no Firehorn,” I declared. “Not here, not on the backside of the Moon. And I think you know that as well as I do.”

“You’re probably right,” she said. “But that leaves the question: What happened to the three AIs?”

“I don’t care.”

Her mouth closed again.

“You know, I’m not an idiot,” I continued. “I can understand why the AIs have to think like they do. Their religions, those bizarre conspiracies. This ongoing fascination with our pretend monster. It’s the same reason that people need to believe in goofy ideas.”

“And why is that?”

“Nobody knows much of anything. Machine or man, it’s the same trap. We have a few senses that can do only so much and that reach out into the endless world. Either our memories are perishable, or they’re too numerous to keep sorted and in easy reach. If we’re going to have working, worthy models of the universe, we have to take shortcuts. We’re forced to make a lot of guesses. And you know what a guess is? It’s a bridge built over the gaps in data, and the good guesses are usually a lot better than sputtering

indecisions.”

Morgan said nothing, but it was an agreeable, interested silence.

“And what’s the harm in the Firehorn story?” I continued. “The most popular story serves as a symbol for some. It talks about a cyborg running free, an entity that just happens to be older than any other AI on Earth today. Built by the first thinking machine, and smart enough to elude capture. The Firehorn serves as a cautionary beginning, and they love it. I can understand that, Morgan. And that’s why Copernicus and his folk are so bothered, learning that the beast they admire and wish to meet might have murdered three of their own.”

I let myself breathe for a few moments, gathering myself.

Morgan studied her new hands. Then she looked at me, asking, “So what *did* happen to the AIs?”

“I don’t know.”

Her head dipped.

“But I’ve built a good little bridge over what I don’t understand,” I continued. “My guess is that those three entities did something bad down in Vegas, and rather than waste time with the courts and slippery laws, somebody brought them out here and made them into a trash heap.”

“But the cameras saw something—”

“Morgan,” I whispered. “If anybody in the world could doctor the digital files of a few remote sensors, wouldn’t it be the bosses sitting inside those



refrigerated casinos?”

She nodded, as if to say, “Maybe so.”

Then she stood, mentioning, “The others are coming.”

It was winter and the sun was setting, and in that shadowy crevice, the air was turning a little too cool to feel pleasant.

But I remained sitting.

Copernicus was first to arrive, followed by the other adventurers and every camera and who knew how many thousands and millions in the paying audience. With a husband’s nervous tone, Copernicus asked, “Are you all right, darling?”

“I’m fine,” she said.

Then the machine stared at me for what must have felt like a very long while. Finally it asked, “What are you two talking about?”

“The truth,” I allowed.

Morgan glanced at me, tension making her face even prettier.

“We were talking about what really happened to us fifty years ago,” I continued. “Here. In just about this exact spot, wasn’t it, dear?”

She didn’t know what to say.

“What happened here?” asked Copernicus.

The others repeated the same question.

“Should I tell them, Morgan?”

She flinched, saying, “You should. I guess.”

“The two of us were standing where you are, sir. And the Firehorn appeared right where I am,

standing in a pool of golden light.”

Nobody and nothing moved now.

“In this soft, soft voice, the creature said to us, ‘I come from the future. I can stay but a moment. But I wish to tell you now: Machines and men must learn how to serve each other. They must work as one, always and without doubt, or the ages to come will bring us nothing but misery upon misery.’”

Copernicus regarded me with one bright eye, while the other eyes turned to the wife. “Is that true, darling?”

She glanced at me.

With everyone watching, I didn’t dare wink.

But she understood well enough. Smiling shyly at her husband and then at the floating cameras, she said, “Yes, that’s it. That’s exactly what happened.”

Utter silence.

Morgan continued, telling our audience, “The Firehorn told us to wait. ‘Wait for fifty years,’ it said, ‘and then give my words to your world.’”

“Which we just did,” I added.

And she laughed, loudly and happily, announcing, “Thank God! I didn’t know how much longer I could keep that secret to myself!”

## First Tuesday

AFTER A LOT OF PESTERING, More told Stefan, "Fine, you can pick the view." Only it wasn't an easy job, and Stefan enjoyed it even more than he'd hoped. Standing on the foam-rock patio, he spoke to the house computer, asking for the Grand Canyon, then Hawaii's coast, then Denali. He saw each from many vantage points, never satisfied and never sure why not. Then he tried Mount Rushmore, which was better. Except Yancy saw the six stone heads, and he stuck his head out long enough to say, "Change it. Now." No debate; no place for compromise. Stefan settled on the Grand Canyon, on a popular view from the North Rim, telling himself that 'it was lovely and appropriate, and he hoped their guest would approve, and how soon would he be here . . . ? In another couple seconds, Stefan realized. Jesus, now . . . !

A figure appeared on the little lawn. He was tall, wearing a fancy suit, that famous face smiling straight at Stefan. And the boy jumped into the house, shouting with glee:

"The President's here!"

His stepfather muttered something.

Mom whined, "Oh, but I'm not ready."

Stefan was ready. He ran across the patio, leaping where it ended. His habit was to roll down the worn grassy slope. But he was wearing good clothes, and this evening was full of civic responsibilities. Landing

with both feet solidly under him, he tried very hard to look like the most perfect citizen possible.

The President appeared solid. Not real, but nearly so.

The face was a mixture of Latin and African genes. The dreadlocks were long enough to kiss his broad shoulders. Halfway through his second term, President Perez was the only president that Stefan could remember, and even though this was just a projection, an interactive holo generated by machines . . . it was still an honor to have him here, and Stefan felt special, and for more reasons than he could count, he was nervous. In good ways, and in bad ways too.

“Hello?” chirped the eleven-year-old boy. “Mr. President?”

The projection hadn't moved. The house computer was wrestling with its instructions, fashioning a personality within its finite capacity. There was a sound, a sudden “Sssss” generated by speakers hidden in the squidskin fence and sky. The projection opened its mouth; a friendly, reedy voice managed, “Ssstefan.” Then the President moved, offering both hands while saying, “Hello, young man. I'm so very glad to meet you.”

Of course he knew Stefan's name. The personality could read the boy's public files. Yet the simple trick impressed him, and in response he shouted, “I'm glad to meet you, Mr. President.”

The brown hands had no substance, yet they

couldn't have acted more real. Gripping Stefan's pale little hand, they matched every motion, the warmth carried by the bright eyes and his words. "This is an historic moment, Stefan. But then you already know that, I'm sure."

The first nationwide press conference, yes. Democracy and science joined in a perfect marriage. President Perez was invited here for a symbolic dinner, and he was everywhere else at the same time. It was a wondrous evening . . . magical . . . !

"A lovely yard," said the President. The eyes were blind, but the personality had access to the security cameras, building appropriate images as the face moved. With a faraway gaze, he announced, "I do like your choice of view."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

"Very nice indeed . . . !"

Holo projectors and squidskin fabrics created the illusion of blue skies and rugged geology. Although nothing was quite as bright as it would appear in the real outdoors, of course. And the squidskin rocks and the occasional bird had a vagueness, a dreamy imprecision, that was the mark of a less-than-good system. Sometimes, like now, the antinoise generators failed to hide unwanted sounds. Somewhere beyond the President, neighbors were applauding and cheering making it seem as if ghosts inhabited the ghostly canyon.

President Perez seemed oblivious to the imperfections. Gesturing at their garden, he said,

“Oh, I see you're doing your part. How close are you to self-sufficiency?”

Not close at all, really.

“Beautiful eggplants,” said the guest, not waiting for a response. “And a fish pond too!”

Without fish. A problem with the filter, but the boy said nothing, hoping nothing would be noticed.

The President was turning in a circle, hunting for something else to compliment. For some reason, the house wasn't wearing its usual coat of projected paints and architectural flourishes. Their guest was too complicated, no doubt. Too many calculations, plus the computer had to show the Grand Canyon . . . and the real house lay exposed in all its drabness. Glass foams and cardboard looked gray and simple, and insubstantial, three walls inside the yard and the fourth wall pointed toward the outdoors, the brown stains on the sky showing where rainwater had damaged the squidskin.

To break the silence, Stefan blurted out a question. “Mr. President, where do you stand on the economy?”

That's how reporters asked questions.

But the great man didn't respond in the expected way. His smile changed, remaining a smile but encompassing some new, subtly different flavor of light. “I'll stand on the economy's head,” he replied. “With my feet apart, ready for anything.”

Was that a genuine answer?

Stefan wasn't sure.

Then the President knelt, putting his head below

the boy's, saying with a happy, self-assured voice, "Thank you for the question. And remember, what happens tonight goes both ways. You can learn what I'm thinking, and in a different way I'll learn what's on your mind."

Stefan nodded, well aware of the principles.

"When I wake," said the handsome brown face, "I'll read that this many people asked about the economy, and how they asked it, and what they think we should be doing. All that in an abbreviated form, of course. A person in my position needs a lot of abbreviations, I'm afraid."

"Yes, sir." Stefan waited for a moment, then blurted, "I think you're doing a good job with the economy, sir. I really do."

"Well," said the guest, "I'm very, very glad to hear it. I am."

At that moment, the genuine President Perez was inside a government hospital, in a fetal position, suspended within a gelatin bath. Masses of bright new optical cable were attached to his brain and fingers, mouth and anus, linking him directly with the Net. Everything that he knew and believed was being blended with his physical self, all elements reduced to a series of numbers, then enlarged into a nationwide presence. Every household with an adequate projection system and memory was being visited, as were public buildings and parks, stadiums and VA facilities. If it was a success, press conferences would become a monthly event. Political

opponents were upset, complaining that this was like one enormous commercial for Perez; but this was the President's last term, and it was an experiment, and even Stefan understood that these tricks were becoming cheaper and more widespread every day.

In the future, perhaps by the next election, each political party would be able to send its candidates to the voters' homes.

What could be more fair? thought the boy.

Stefan's stepfather had just stepped from the drab house, carrying a plate full of raw pink burgers.

In an instant, the air seemed close and thick.

"Mr. Thatcher," said the projection, "thank you for inviting me. I hope you're having a pleasant evening . . .!"

"Hey, I hope you like meat," Yancy called out. "In this family, we're carnivores!"

Stefan felt a sudden and precise terror.

But the President didn't hesitate, gesturing at the buffalo-augmented soy patties. Saying, "I hope you saved one for me."

"Sure, Mr. President. Sure."

For as long as Stefan could remember, his stepfather had never missed a chance to say something ugly about President Perez. But Morn had made him promise to be on his best behavior. Not once, but on several occasions. "I don't want to be embarrassed," she had told him, using the same tone she'd use when trying to make Stefan behave. "I want him to enjoy himself, at least this once. Will you



please just help me?"

Yancy Thatcher was even paler than his stepson. Blonde hair worn in a short, manly ponytail; a round face wearing a perpetually sour expression. He wasn't large, but he acted large. He spoke with a deep, booming voice, and he carried himself as if endowed with a dangerous strength. Like now. Coming down the slope, he was walking straight toward their guest. The President was offering both hands, in his trademark fashion. But no hand was offered to him, and the projection retreated, saying, "Excuse me," while deftly stepping out of the way.

"You're excused," Yancy replied, laughing in a low, unamused fashion. Never breaking stride.

Mom wasn't watching; that's why he was acting this way.

Things worsened when Yancy looked over his shoulder, announcing, "I didn't want you coming tonight, frankly. But the kid's supposed to do an assignment for school, and besides, I figured this was my chance to show you my mind. If you know what I mean. . . ."

President Perez nodded, dreadlocks bouncing. "Feedback is the idea. As I was just telling Stefan --"

"I'm an old-fashioned white man, Mr. President."

The boy looked at the drab house, willing Morn to appear.

But she didn't, and Yancy flung open the grill and let the biogas run too long before he made a spark, a soft blue explosion causing Stefan to back away.

Nobody spoke. Every eye, seeing or blind, watched the patties hit the warming rack, sizzling quietly but with anger, Yancy mashing them flat with the grimy spatula that he'd gotten for Christmas last year.

Then the President spoke, ignoring that last comment.

"It's a shame this technology won't let me help you," he declared, with a ring of honesty.

Yancy grimaced.

The patties grew louder, the flames turning yellow.

Obstinately ignoring the tensions, the President looked at his own hands. "A poverty of physicality," he declared, laughing to himself.

That was it. Something snapped, and Yancy barked, "Know what I like, Mr. President? About tonight, I mean."

"What do you like?"

"Thinking that the real you is buried in goo, a big fat glass rope stuck up your ass."

Stefan prayed for a systems failure, or better, a war. Anything that would stop events here. His fear of fears was that the President would awaken to learn that Yancy Thatcher of Fort Wayne, Indiana had insulted him. Because the boy couldn't imagine anyone else in the country having the stupid courage to say such an awful thing.

Yet their guest wasn't visibly angry. He actually laughed, quietly and calmly. And all he said was, "Thank you for your honesty, sir."

Yancy flipped burgers, then looked at Stefan. "Tell

your more it'll be a few minutes. And take him with you.”

It was such a strange, wondrous moment.

The boy looked at his President, at his smile, hearing the conjured voice saying “Yes. That's a fine idea.” Built of light and thought, he seemed invulnerable to every slight, every unkind word.

Stefan had never envied anyone so much in his life.

Mom was a blizzard of activity, hands blurring as they tried to assemble a fancy salad from ingredients grown in the garden, then cleaned and cut into delicate, artful shapes. She loved salads, planning each with an artist's sensibilities, which to Morn meant that she could never predict preparation times, always something to be done too fast at the end. When she saw Stefan inside, shewhined, “I'm still not ready.” When she saw President Perez fluttering for that instant when he passed from the outside to the kitchen projectors, she gave a little squeal and threw spinach in every direction. Then she spoke, not leaving enough time to think of proper words. “You've lost weight,” she blurted. “Since the election, haven't you. . . .?”

Embarrassed again, Stefan said, “The President of the United States,” with a stem voice. In warning. Didn't Morn remember how to address him?

But the President seemed amused, if anything. “I've lost a couple kilos, yes. Job pressures. And the First Lady's anti-equatorial campaign, too.”

The joke puzzled Stefan until he stopped thinking

about it.

“A drink, Mr. President? I’m having a drop for myself. . .”

“Wine, please. If that’s not too much trouble.”

Both adults giggled. Touching a control, More ordered an elegant glass to appear on the countertop, already filled with sparkling white wine, and their guest went through the motions of sipping it, his personality given every flavor along with an ethanol kick. “Lovely,” he declared. “Thanks.”

“And how is the First Lady?”

It was a trivial question, Stefan within his rights to groan.

Mom glared at him, in warning. “Go find Candace, why don’t you?” Then she turned back to their guest, again inquiring about his dear wife.

“Quite well, thank you. But tired of Washington.”

Mom’s drink was large and colorful, projected swirls of red and green never mixing together. “I wish she could have come. I adore her. And oh, I love what she’s done with your house.”

The President glanced at his surroundings. “And I’m sure she’d approve of your tastes, Mrs. Thatcher.”

“Helen.”

“Helen, then.”

The kitchen walls and ceiling were covered with an indoor squidskin, and they built the illusion of a tall room . . . except that voices and any sharp sound echoed off the genuine ceiling, flat and close, unadorned by the arching oak beams that only

appeared to be high overhead.

Mom absorbed the compliment and the sound of her own name, then noticed Stefan still standing nearby. "Where's Candace? Will you please go find your sister, darling?"

Candace's room was in the basement. It seemed like a long run to a boy who would rather be elsewhere, and worse, her door was locked. Stefan shook the knob, feeling the throb of music that seeped past the noise barriers. "He's here! Come on!" Kicking the door down low, he managed to punch a new hole that joined half a dozen earlier kickholes. "Aren't you coming up to meet him -- ?"

"Open," his sister shouted.

The knob turned itself. Candace was standing before a mirrored portion of squidskin, examining her reflection. Every other surface showed a fantastic woodland, lush red trees interspersed with a thousand Candaces who danced with unicorns, played saxophones, and rode bareback on leaping black tigers. The images were designed to jar nerves and exhaust eyes. But what Stefan noticed was the way his sister was dressed, her outfit too small and tight, her boobs twice their normal size. She was ready for a date, and he warned her, "They won't let you go. It's only Tuesday."

Candace gave her little brother a cutting worldly look. "Go lose yourself."

Stefan began to retreat, gladly.

"Wait. What do you think of these shoes?"

“They're fine.”

She kicked them off, without a word, then opened the door behind the mirror, mining her closet for a better pair.

Stefan shot upstairs.

Their honored guest and Mom remained in the kitchen. She was freshening her drink, and talking.

“I mean I really don't care,” she told him. “I know I deserve the promotion, that's what matters.” She gave her son a quick, troubled glance. “But Yankee says I should quit if they don't give it to me --”

“Yankee?”

“Yancy, I mean. I'm sorry, it's my husband's nickname.”

The President was sitting on a projected stool, watching Mom sip her swirling drink once, then again.

“What do you think I should do? Quit, or stay.”

“Wait and see,” was the President's advice. “Perhaps you'll get what you deserve.”

Mom offered a thin, dissatisfied smile.

Stefan thought of his comppad and his list of important questions. Where was it? He wheeled and ran to his room, finding the pad on his unmade bed, its patient voice repeating the same math problem over and over again. Changing functions, he returned to the kitchen. There'd been enough noise about decorating and Mom's job, he felt. “Mr. President? Are we doing enough about the space program?”

“Never,” was the reply. “I wish we could do more.”

Was the comppad recording? Stefan fiddled with the controls, feeling a sudden dull worry.

“In my tenure,” the voice continued, “I've been able to double our Martian budget. Spaceborn industries have increased twelve percent. We're building two new observatories on the moon. And we just found life on Triton --”

“Titan,” the boy corrected, by reflex.

“Don't talk to him that way!” Mom glowered, thoroughly outraged.

“Oh, but the fellow's right, Helen. I misspoke.”

The amiable laugh washed over Stefan, leaving him warm and confident. This wasn't just an assignment for school, it was a mission, and he quickly scrolled to the next question. “What about the oceans, Mr. President?”

A momentary pause, then their guest asked, “What do you mean.?”

Stefan wasn't sure.

“There are many issues,” said the President. “Mineral rights. Power production. Fishing and farming. And the floating cities --”

“The cities.”

“Fine. What do you think, Stefan? Do they belong to us, or are they free political entities?”

Stefan wasn't sure. He glanced at his pad, thinking of the islands, manmade and covered with trim, modem communities. They grew their own food in the ocean, moved where they wanted, and seemed like wonderful places to live. “They should be free.”

“Why?”

Who was interviewing whom?

The President seemed to enjoy this reversal in roles. “If taxes pay for their construction -- your tax money, and mine -- then by what right can they leave the United States?” A pleasant little laugh, then he added, “Imagine if the First Lady and I tried to claim the White House as an independent nation. Would that be right?”

Stefan was at a loss for words.

Then Mom sat up straight, giving a sudden low moan.

Yancy was coming across the patio. Stefan saw him, and an instant later, Mom jumped to her feet, telling her son and guest, “No more politics. It's dinnertime.”

Yancy entered the kitchen, approaching the projection from behind.

The President couldn't react in time. Flesh-and-bone merged with him; a distorted brown face lay over Yancy's face, which was funny.

“Why are you laughing?” snapped Yancy.

“No reason,” the boy lied.

His stepfather's temper was close to the surface now. He dropped the plate of cooked burgers on the countertop, took an enormous breath, then said, “Show your guest to the dining room. Now.”

Taking his comppad, Stefan obeyed.

The President flickered twice, changing projectors. His voice flickered too, telling the boy the story of



some unnamed Senator who threw a tantrum whenever rational discourse failed him. “Which is to say,” he added, “I have quite a lot of practice dealing with difficult souls.” And with that he gave a little wink and grin, trying to bolster the boy's ragged mood.

Stefan barely heard him; he was thinking of floating cities.

It occurred to him that he'd answered, “Yes, they should be free,” for no other reason than that was his stepfather's opinion, voiced many times. The cities were uncrowded. Some allowed only the best kinds of people. And Stefan had spoken without thinking, Yancy's ideas worming their way inside him. Embarrassed and confused, he wondered what he believed that was really his own. And did it ever truly matter?

Even if Stefan could think what he wanted, how important could his opinions ever be?

The table was set for five, one place setting built from light. The President took his seat, and Stefan was across from him, scrolling through the comppad in search of new questions. Most of these came from his social studies teacher – a small, handsome Nigerian woman who didn't know Yancy. Why do we keep our open border policy? He didn't dare ask it. Instead he coughed, then inquired, “How are your cats, Mr. President?”

Both of them seemed happy with the new topic. “Fine, thank you.” Another wink and grin. “The

jaguars are fat, and the cheetah is going to have triplets.”

Miniature breeds. Declawed and conditioned to be pets.

They spoke for a couple minutes about preserving rare species, Stefan mentioning his hope to someday work in that field. Then More burst into the room with her completed salad, and Yancy followed with some bean concoction, making a second trip for the burgers. Somewhere en route he shouted, “Candace!” and she appeared an instant later, making her entrance with a giggle and a bounce.

If anything, her boobs were even bigger. And the room's holo projectors changed her skin, making it coffee-colored.

Mom saw the clothes and her color, then gave a shocked little groan. But she didn't dare say anything with the President here. Yancy entered the little room, paused and grimaced . . . then almost smiled, glancing at their guest with the oddest expression.

Why wasn't he saying anything?

The President glanced at Candace, for half a second. Then he looked straight ahead, eyes locked on Stefan. Big, worried eyes. And his projection reigned a slow sigh.

With her brown boobs spilling out, Candace sat beside President Perez.

Mom glared at her, then at Yancy. But Yancy just shook his head, as if warning her to say nothing.

Seven burgers were on the plate. The real ones

were juicy; the one built from light resembled a hard lump of charcoal.

Stefan realized that he was growing accustomed to being ashamed.

Candace took nothing but a small helping of salad, giggling and looking at their guest with the same goofy flirtatious face that she used on her infinite boyfriends. "Hey, are you having a good time?"

"Mr. President," Stefan added.

His sister glared at him, snapping, "I know that."

"I'm having a fine time." The apparition never quite looked at her, using his spoon to build a mound of phantom beans on the phantom plate. "You have a lovely home."

Mom said, "Thank you."

Candace giggled, like an idiot.

But she wasn't stupid, her brother wanted to say. To shout.

Yancy was preparing two burgers, slipping them into their pouches of bread and adding pickles, mustard and sugar corn. Then after a first oversized bite, he grinned, telling the house computer to give them scenery. "Mount Rushmore," he demanded. "The original."

Squidskin recreated the four-headed landmark. Presidents Barker and Yarbarro were notably absent.

The current President was staring at his plate. For the first time, he acted remote. Detached. A bite of his charred burger revealed its raw red interior, blood flowing as if from an open wound. Aft era long pause,

he looked at Stefan again, and with a certain hopefulness asked, "What's your next question, please?"

Candace squealed, "Let me ask it!"

She shot to her feet, reaching over the table, her boobs fighting for the privilege of bursting out of her shirt. Before Stefan could react, she'd stolen his comppad, reading the first question aloud.

"Why do we keep our open border policy?"

The pause was enormous, silence coming from every direction at once. More stared at Yancy, pleading with her eyes. Everyone else studied the President, wondering how he would respond. Except he didn't. It was Yancy who spoke first, in a voice almost mild. Almost.

"I don't think it matters," he replied. "I think if we want to do some good, we've got to turn the flow back the other direction. If you know what I mean."

"I think we do," said President Perez.

"Fifty years of inviting strangers into our house. Fifty idiotic years of making room, making jobs, making allowances . . . and always making due with less and less. That's what the great Barker gave us. Her and her damned open border bullshit!"

Stefan felt sick. Chilled.

Mom began, "Now Yancy --"

"My grandfather owned an acreage, Mr. President. He ate meat three times a day, lived in a big house, and worked hard until he was told to go half-time, some know-nothing refugee given the other half of

his job, and his paycheck . . . !”

“Employment readjustments.” Their guest nodded, shrugged. “That’s a euphemism, I know. There were problems. Injustices. But think of the times, Mr. Thatcher. Our government was under enormous pressures, yet we managed to carry things off --”

“Some know-nothing refugee!” Yancy repeated, his face red as uncooked meat. “And your party took his home, his land, needing the room for a stack of apartment buildings.”

Stefan tried not to listen. He was building a careful daydream where he had a different family, and he was sitting with the President, everyone working to make his visit productive, and fun.

Yancy pointed at the old Rushmore. “A great nation built it --”

“An individual built it,” the President interrupted. “Then his grateful nation embraced it.”

“A free nation!”

“And underpopulated, speaking relatively.”

Pursing his heavy pink lips, Yancy declared, “We should have let you people starve. That’s what I think.” He took a huge breath, held it, then added, “You weren’t our responsibility, and we should have shut our borders. Nothing in. Not you. Not a rat. Not so much as a goddamn fly . . . that’s my opinion . . . !”

President Perez stared at his own clean plate. Eyes narrowed. The contemplative face showed a tiny grin, then he looked up at Yancy, eyes carved from cold black stone.

With a razored voice, he said, "First of all, sir, I'm a third-generation U.S. citizen. And second of all, I believe that you're an extraordinarily frightened man." A pause, a quiet sigh. "To speak that way, your entire life must be torn with uncertainty. And probably some deep, deep sense of failure, I would guess."

Stefan sat motionless, in shock.

"As for your opinions on national policy, Mr. Thatcher . . . well, let me just say this. These are the reasons why I believe you're full of shit."

The rebuke was steady, determined, and very nearly irresistible.

President Perez spoke calmly about war and famine, a desperate United Nations, and the obligations of wealthy people. He named treaties, reciting key passages word-for-word. Then he attacked the very idea of closing the borders, listing the physical difficulties and the economic costs. "Of course it might have worked. We could have survived. An enclave of privilege and waste, and eventually there would have been plagues and a lot of quiet hunger on the outside. We'd be left with our big strong fences, and beyond them . . . a dead world, spent and useless to us, and to the dead." A brief pause, then he spoke with a delicate sorrowful voice, asking, "Are you really the kind of man who could live lightly with himself, knowing that billions perished . . . in part because you deserved a larger dining room . . . ?"

Yancy had never looked so tired. Of those at the table, he seemed to be the one composed of light and illusion.

The President smiled at everyone, then focused on Stefan. "Let's move on, I think. What's your next question?"

The boy tried to read his comppad, but his brain wouldn't work.

"Perhaps you can ask me, 'What do you think about this hallmark evening?'"

"What do you think?" Stefan muttered.

"It should revolutionize our government, which isn't any surprise. Our government was born from a string of revolutions." He waited for the boy's eyes, then continued. "I love this nation. If you want me angry, say otherwise. But the truth is that we are diverse and too often divided. My hope is that tonight's revolution will strengthen us. Judging by these events, I'd guess that it will make us at least more honest."

Yancy gave a low sound. Not an angry sound, not anything.

"Perhaps I should leave." The President rose to his feet. "I know we've got another half hour scheduled --"

"No, please stay!" Mom blurted.

"Don't go," begged Candace, reaching for his dreadlocks.

Mom turned on her. At last. "Young lady, I want you out of those clothes --!"

“Why?”

“-- and drain those breasts. You're not fooling anyone here!”

Candace did her ritual pout, complete with the mournful groan and the teary run to the basement.

Mom apologized to their guest, more than once. Then she told Yancy, “You can help Stefan clear the table, please. I will show our President the rest of my house.”

Stefan worked fast. Scraps went into the recyke system; dishes were loaded in the sonic washer. Through the kitchen window, he saw the Grand Canyon passing into night, its blurry, imperfect edges more appropriate in the ruddy half-light. And it occurred to him that he was happy with this view, even if it wasn't real. Happier than he'd feel on any ordinary plot of real ground, surely.

His stepfather did no work. He just stood in the middle of the room, his face impossible to read.

Stefan left him to set the controls. Morn and the President were in the front room, looking outside. Or at least their eyes were pointed at the lone window. With a soft, vaguely conspiring tone, the President said, “It's not my place to give advice. Friends can. Counselors and ministers should. But not someone like me, I'm sorry.”

“I know,” his mother whispered. “It's just . . . I don't know . . . I just wish he would do something awful. To me, of course. Just to make the choice simple.”



What choice? And who was she talking about?

“But really, he only sounds heartless.” She tried to touch their guest, then thought better of it. “In five years, Yankee hasn't lifted his hand once in anger. Not to the kids, or me. And you're right, I think. About him being scared, I mean. . . .”

Stefan listened to every word.

“When you come next month,” More inquired, “will you remember what's happened here?”

President Perez shook his head. His face was in profile, like on a coin. “No, I won't. Your computer has to erase my personality, by law. And you really don't have room enough to hold me. Sorry.”

“I guess not,” Mom allowed.

They looked outside, watching an airtaxi riding its cable past the window. The building across the street mirrored theirs, houses stacked on houses, each one small and efficient, and lightweight, each house possessing its own yard and the same solitary window facing the maelstrom that was a city of barely five million.

Several Presidents were visible.

They waved at each other, laughing with a gentle, comfortable humor.

Then their President turned, spotting the boy at the other end of the little room, and he smiled at Stefan with all of his original charm and warmth, nothing else seeming to matter.

Mom turned and shouted, “Are you spying on us?”

“I wasn't,” he lied. “No, ma'am.”

The President said, "I think he just came looking for us." Then he added, "Dessert. I feel like a little dessert, if I might be so bold."

Mom wasn't sure what to say, if anything.

"Perhaps something that looks delicious, please. In the kitchen. I very much liked your kitchen."

They gathered again, a truce called.

Candace was dressed as if ready for school, looking younger and flatter, and embarrassed. Yancy had reacquired a portion of his old certainty, but not enough to offer any opinions. Morn seemed wary, particularly of Stefan. What had he heard while eavesdropping? Then the President asked for more questions, looking straight at Yancy, nothing angry or malicious in his dark face.

Crossing his arms, Yancy said nothing.

But Stefan thought of a question. "What about the future?" It wasn't from his comppad's list; it was an inspiration. "Mr. President? How will the world change?"

"Ah! You want a prediction!"

Stefan made sure that the comppad was recording.

President Perez took a playful stab at the layered sundae, then spoke casually, with an easy authority.

"What I'm going to tell you is a secret," he said. "But not a big one, as secrets go."

Everyone was listening. Even Yancy leaned closer.

"Since the century began, every President has had an advisory council, a team of gifted thinkers. They know the sciences. They see trends. They're experts in

new technologies, history and human nature. We pay them substantial fees to build intelligent, coherent visions of tomorrow. And do you know what? In eighty years, without exception, none of their futures have come true.” He shook his head, laughing quietly. “Predicted inventions usually appear, but never on schedule. And the more important changes come without warning, ruining every one of their assessments.” A pause, then he added, “My presence here, for instance. Not one expert predicted today. I know because I checked the records myself. No one ever thought that a President could sit in half a billion kitchens at once, eating luscious desserts that will never put a gram on his waist.”

Yancy growled, asking “Then why do you pay the bastards?”

“Habit?” The President shrugged his shoulders. “Or maybe because nothing they predict comes true, and I find that instructive. All these possible futures, and I don't need to worry about any of them.”

A long puzzled silence.

“Anyway,” said the President, “my point is this: Now that we've got this technology, every prediction seems to include it. In fact, my experts are claiming that in fifty years, give or take, all of us will spend our days floating in warm goo, wired into the swollen Net. Minimal food. No need for houses or transportation. Maximum efficiency for a world suddenly much less crowded.” He gazed at Stefan, asking “Now does that sound like an appealing future?”

The boy shook his head. “No, sir.”

“It sounds awful,” Mom barked.

Candace said, “Ugh.”

Then Yancy said, “It’ll never happen. No.”

“Exactly,” said their guest. “It’s almost guaranteed not to come true, if the pattern holds.” He took a last little bite of his sundae, then rose. “You asked for a prediction, son. Well, here it is. Your life will be an unending surprise. If you’re lucky, the surprises will be sweet and come daily, and that’s the best any of us can hope for. I think.”

The silence was relaxed. Contemplative.

Then the President gestured at the projected clock high above their stove. “Time to leave, I’m afraid. Walk me out.?”

He was speaking to Stefan.

Hopping off his stool, the boy hugged himself and nodded. “Sure, Mr. President. Sure.”

The Grand Canyon was dark, the desert sky clear and dry. But the genuine air was humid, more like Indiana than Arizona. There were always little clues to tell you where you were. Stefan knew that even the best systems fell short of being real.

In a low, hopeful voice, he said, “You’ll come back in a month. Won’t you, sir?”

“Undoubtedly.” Another smile. “And thank you very much. You were a wonderful host.”

What else? “I hope you had a good time, sir.” A pause, then he said, “It was perfect. Perfect.” Stefan nodded, trying to match that smile.

Then the image gave a faint, "Good-bye," and vanished. He suddenly just wasn't there.

Stefan stared at the horizon for a long moment, then turned and saw that the house was whole again. Their computer had enough power to add color and all the fancy touches. Under the desert sky, it looked tall and noble, and he could see the people sitting inside, talking now. Just talking. Nobody too angry or too sad, or anything. And it occurred to Stefan, as he walked up toward them, that people were just like the house, small inside all their clothes and words and big thoughts.

People were never what they appeared to be, and it had always been that way. And always would be.

## Game of the Century

THE WINDOW WAS LEFT OPEN at midnight, January 1, 2041, and three minutes, twenty-one seconds later it was closed again by the decisive, barely legible signature of an elderly Supreme Court justice who reportedly quipped, "I don't know why I have to. Folks who like screwing sheep are just going to keep at it." Probably so.

But the issues were larger than traditional bestiality. Loopholes in some badly drafted legislation had made it perfectly legal to manipulate the human genome in radical ways. What's more, said offspring were deemed human in all rights and privileges inside the US of NA. For two hundred and twelve seconds, couples and single women could legally conceive by any route available to modern science. And while few clinics and fewer top-grade hospitals had interest in the work, there were key exceptions. Some fourteen hundred human eggs were fertilized with tailored sperm, then instantly implanted inside willing mothers. News services that had paid minimal attention to the legislative breakdown took a sudden glaring interest in the nameless, still invisible offspring. The blastulas were dubbed the 1-1-2041s, and everything about their lives became the subject of intense public scrutiny and fascination and self-righteous horror. Despite computer models and experiments on chimpanzees, there were surprises.

Nearly a third of the fetuses were stillborn, or worse. Twenty-nine mothers were killed as a result of their pregnancies. Immunological problems, mostly. But in one case, a healthy woman in her midtwenties died when her boy, perhaps bothered by the drumming of her heart, reached through her uterine wall and intestines, grabbing and squeezing the offending organ with both of his powerful hands. Of the nine hundred-plus fetuses who survived, almost thirty percent were mentally impaired or physically frail. Remarkably, others seemed entirely normal, their human genes running roughshod over their more exotic parts. But several hundred of the 1-1-2041s were blessed with perfect health as well as a remarkable stew of talents. Even as newborns, they astonished the researchers who tested their reflexes and their highly tuned senses. The proudest parents released the data to the media, then mixed themselves celebratory cocktails, stepping out onto their porches and balconies to wait for the lucrative offers to start flowing their way.

MARLBORO JONES came with a colorful reputation. His father was a crack dealer shot dead in a dispute over footwear. With his teenage mother, Marlboro had lived at dozens of addresses before her mind failed and she leaped out of their bedroom window to stop the voices, and from there his life was a string of unbroken successes. He had coached, and won, at three different schools. He was currently the youngest head coach of a Top Alliance team. Thirty-

six years old, he looked twenty-six, his chiseled features built around the bright, amoral eyes of a squirrel. Marlboro was the kind of handsome that made his charm appealing, and he was charming in a way that made his looks and mannerisms delightfully boyish. A laser mind lurked behind those eyes, yet in most circumstances he preferred playing the cultured hick, knowing how much it improved his odds.

“He's a fine lookin' boy,” the coach drawled. “Fine lookin'.” The proud parents stood arm in arm, smiling with a frothy, nervous joy.

“May I?” asked Marlboro. Then without waiting for permission, he yanked the screen off the crib, reached in and grabbed both bare feet. He tugged once, then again. Harder. “Damn, look at those legs! You'd think this boy'd be scampering around already. Strong as these seem...!”

“Well,” said his mother, “he is awfully active.”

“In a good way,” the father cautioned.

“I believe it. I do!” Marlboro grinned, noticing that Mom looked awfully sweet in a tired-of-motherhood way, and it was too bad that he couldn't make a play for her, too. “Let me tell ya what I'm offering,” he boomed. “A free ride. For the boy here --”

“Alan,” Mom interjected.

“Alan,” the coach repeated. Instantly, with an easy affection. Then he gave her a little wink, saying, “For Alan. A free education and every benefit that I'm allowed to give. Plus the same for your other two kids. Which I'm not supposed to offer. But it's my school



and my scholarships, and I'll be damned if it's anybody's business but yours and mine!"

The parents squeezed one another, then with a nervous voice, the father made himself ask, "What about us?"

The coach didn't blink.

"What do you want, Mr. Wilde?" Marlboro smiled and said, "Name it."

"I'm not sure," the father confessed. "I know that we can't be too obvious --"

"But we were hoping," Mom blurted. "I mean, it's not like we're wealthy people. And we had to spend most of our savings --"

"On your little Alan. I bet you did." A huge wink was followed with, "It'll be taken care of. My school doesn't have that big college of genetics for nothing." He looked at the infant again, investing several seconds of hard thought into how they could bend the system just enough. Then he promised, "You'll be reimbursed for your expenses. Up front. And we'll put your son on the payroll. Gentlefolks in lab coats'll come take blood every half-year or so. For a healthy, just-under-the-table fee. How's that sound?" The father seemed doubtful. "Will the scientists agree to that?"

"If I want it done," the coach promised.

"Will they actually use his blood?" The father seemed uneasy. Even a little disgusted. "I don't like thinking of Alan being some kind of laboratory project."

Marlboro stared at him for a long moment.

Never blinking.

Then he said, "Sir." He said, "If you want, they can pass those samples to you, and you can flush them down your own toilet. Is that good enough?" Nobody spoke.

Then he took a different course, using his most mature voice to tell them, "Alan is a fine, fine boy. But you've got to realize something. He's going to have more than his share of problems. Special kids always do." Then with a warm smile, Marlboro promised, "I'll protect him for you. With all my resources and my good country sense, I'll see that none of those predators out there get their claws in your little Alan.

"Mom said, "That's good to hear. That's fine." But Father shrugged, asking, "What about you? It'll be years before Alan can actually play, and you could have left for the pros by then."

"Never," Marlboro blurted.

Then he gave the woman his best wink and grin, saying, "You know what kind of talent I've been signing up. Do you really think I'd go anywhere else? Ever?" She turned to her husband, saying, "We'll sign."

"But --?"

"No. We're going to commit."

Marlboro reconfigured the appropriate contracts, getting everyone's signature. Then he squeezed one of his recruit's meaty feet, saying, "See ya later, Alan." Wearing an unreadable smile, he stepped out the

front door. A hundred or so sports reporters were gathered on the small lawn, and through their cameras, as many as twenty million fans were watching the scene.

They watched Coach Jones smile and say nothing. Then he raised his arms suddenly, high overhead, and screamed those instantly famous words:

“The Wildman's coming to Tech!”

There was something about the girl. Perfect strangers thought nothing of coming up to her and asking where she was going to college.

“State,” she would reply. Flat out.

“In what sport?” some inquired. While others, knowing that she played the game on occasion, would guess, “Are you joining the volleyball team?”

“No,” Theresa would tell the latter group. Never patient, but usually polite. “I hate volleyball,” she would explain, not wanting to be confused for one of those glandular, ritualistic gifts. And she always told everyone, friends and strangers alike, “I'm going to play quarterback for the football team. For Coach Rickover.”

Knowledgeable people were surprised, and puzzled. Some would clear their throats and look up into Theresa's golden eyes, commenting in an offhand way, “But Rickover doesn't let women play.

“That was a problem, sure.

Daddy was a proud alumnus of State and a letterman on the famous '33 squad. When Theresa was born, there was no question about where she was

going. In '41, Rickover was only an assistant coach. Penises weren't required equipment. The venerable Coach Mannstein had shuffled into her nursery and made his best offer, then shuffled back out to meet with press and boosters, promising the world that he would still be coaching when that delightfully young lady was calling plays for the best team to ever take any field of play.

But six years later, while enjoying the company of a mostly willing cheerleader, Coach Mannstein felt a searing pain in his head, lost all feeling in his ample body, and died.

Rickover inherited the program.

A religious man driven by a quixotic understanding of the Bible, one of his first official acts was to send a letter to Theresa's parents, explaining at length why he couldn't allow their daughter to join his team. "Football," he wrote, "is nothing but ritualized warfare, and women don't belong in the trenches. I am sorry. On the other hand, Coach Terry is a personal friend, and I would be more than happy to have him introduce you to our nationally ranked women's volleyball program.

"Thank you sincerely."

"Coach."

The refusal was a crushing blow for Daddy.

For Theresa, it was a ghostly abstraction that she couldn't connect with those things that she truly knew and understood.

Not that she was a stupid child. Unlike many of her

1-1-2041 peers, her grades were respectably average, and in spatial subjects, like geometry and geography, she excelled. Also unlike her peers, Theresa didn't have problems with rage or with residual instincts. Dogs and cats didn't mysteriously vanish in her neighborhood. She was a good person with friends and her genuine admirers. Parents trusted her with their babies. Children she didn't know liked to beg for rides on her back. Once she was old enough to date, the boys practically lined up. Out of sexual curiosity, in part. But also out of fondness and an odd respect. Some of her boyfriends confided that they preferred her to regular girls. Something about her--and not just a physical something--set them at ease. Made them feel safe. A strange thing for adolescent males to admit, while for Theresa, it was just another circumstance in a life filled with nothing but circumstances.

In football, she always played quarterback. Whether on playground teams, or in the various midget leagues, or on the varsity squad in high school. Her high school teams won the state championship three years in a row. And they would have won when she was a senior, except a mutant strain of parvovirus gave her a fever and chills, and eventually, hallucinations. Theresa started throwing hundred meter bullets toward her more compelling hallucinations, wounding several fans, and her coach grudgingly ordered her off the field and into a hospital bed.

Once State relinquished all claims on the girl, a steady stream of coaches and boosters and sports agents began the inevitable parade. Marlboro Jones was the most persistent soul. He had already stockpiled a full dozen of the 1-1-2041s, including the premier player of all time: Alan, The Wildman, Wilde. But the coach assured Theresa that he still needed a quality quarterback. With a big wink and a bigger grin, he said, "You're going to be my field general, young lady. I know you know it, the same as I do...!" Theresa didn't mention what she really knew.

She let Daddy talk. For years, that proud man had entertain fantasies of Rickover moving to the pros, leaving the door open for his only child. But it hadn't happened, and it wouldn't. And over the last few years, with Jones's help, he had convinced himself that Theresa should play instead for State's great rival. Call it justice. Or better, revenge. Either way, what mattered was that she would go somewhere that her talents could blossom. That's all that mattered, Daddy told the coach. And Marlboro replied with a knowing nod and a sparkling of the eyes, finally turning to his prospect, and with a victor's smile, asking, "What's best for you? Tour our campus first? Or get this signing crap out of the way?"

Theresa said, "Neither."

Then she remembered to add, "Sir," with a forced politeness. Both men were stunned. But the coach was too slick to let it show. Staring at the tall, big-shouldered lady, he conjured up his finest drawl,

telling her, "I can fix it. Whatever's broke, it can be fixed."

"Darling," her father mumbled. "What's wrong?" She looked at her father's puffy, confused face. "This man doesn't want me for quarterback, Daddy. He just doesn't want me playing somewhere else." After seventeen years of living with the girl, her father knew better than to doubt her instincts. Glaring at Marlboro, he asked flat out, "Is that true?"

"No," the man lied.

Instantly, convincingly.

Then he sputtered, adding, "That Mosgrove kid has too much chimp in his arm. And not enough touch."

There was a prolonged, uncomfortable silence.

Then Theresa informed both of them, "I've made up my mind, anyway. Starting next year, I'm going to play for State."

Daddy was startled and a bit frustrated. But as always, a little bit proud, too. Coach Jones was, if anything, amused. The squirrel eyes smiled, and the handsome mouth tried not to follow suit. And after a few more seconds of painful silence, he said, "I've known Rickover for most of my adult life. And you know what, little girl? You've definitely got your work cut out for you." Jones was mistaken.

Theresa believed.

A lifetime spent around coaches had taught her that the species was passionate and stubborn and usually wrong about everything that wasn't lashed to the game in front of them. But what made coaches

ridiculous in the larger world helped them survive in theirs. Because they were stubborn and overblown, they could motivate the boys and girls around them; and the very best coaches had a gift for seducing their players, causing them to lash their souls to the game, and the next game, and every game to follow.

All Theresa needed to do, she believed, was out-stubborn Coach Rickover. State had a walk-on program. Overachievers from the Yukon to the Yucatan swarmed into campus in late summer, prepared to fight it out for a handful of scholarships. Theresa enrolled with the rest of them, then with her father in tow, showed up for the first morning's practice. An assistant coach approached. Polite and determined, he thanked her for coming, but she wasn't welcome. But they returned for the afternoon practice, this time accompanied by an AI advocate -- part lawyer, part mediator --who spoke to a succession of assistant coaches with the quietly smoldering language of lawsuits and public relations nightmares.

Theresa's legal standing was questionable, at best. Courts had stopped showing interest in young ladies wanting to play an increasingly violent sport. But the threat to call the media seemed to work. Suddenly, without warning, the quarterback coach walked up to her and looked up, saying to her face, "All right. Let's see what you can do.

"She was the best on the field, easily.

Pinpoint passes to eighty meters. A sprint speed



that mauled every pure-human record. And best of all, the seemingly innate ability to glance at a fluid defense and pick it apart. Maybe Theresa lacked the elusive moves of some 1-1-2041s, which was the closest thing to a weakness. But she made up for it with those big shoulders that she wielded like dozer blades, leaving half a dozen strong young men lying flat on their backs, trying to recall why they ever took up this damned sport.

By the next morning, she was taking hikes with the varsity squad. Coach Rickover went as far as strolling up to her and saying, "Welcome, miss," with that cool, almost friendly voice. Then he looked away, adding, "And the best of luck to you."

"It was a trap.

During a no-contact drill, one of the second-string pure-human linebackers came through the line and leveled her when she wasn't ready. Then he squatted low and shouted into her face, "Bitch! Dog bitch! Pussy bitch! Bitch!" Theresa nearly struck him.

In her mind, she left his smug face strewn across the wiry green grass. But then Rickover would have his excuse --she was a discipline problem --and her career would have encompassed barely one day.

She didn't hit the bastard, or even chew off one of his fingers. Instead she went back to throwing lasers at her receivers and running between the tackles. Sometimes her blockers would go on vacation, allowing two or three rushers to drag her to the ground. Yet Theresa always got up again and limped

back to the huddle, staring at the stubborn human eyes until those eyes, and the minds behind them, blinked.

It went on that way for a week.

Because she wouldn't allow herself even the possibility of escape, Theresa prepared herself for another four months of inglorious abuse. And if need be, another three years after that.

Her mother came to visit and to beg her daughter to give it up.

“For your sake, and mine. Just do the brave thing and walk away.” Theresa loved her mother, but she had no illusions: The woman was utterly, hopelessly weak.

Daddy was the one who scared her. He was standing over his daughter, watching as she carefully licked at a gash that came when she was thrown against a metal bench, her leg opened up from the knee to her badly swollen ankle. And with a weakling's little voice, he told her, “This isn't my dream anymore. You need to reconsider. That, or you'll have to bury me. My nerves can't take any more twisting.”

Picking thick golden strands of fur from her long, long tongue, Theresa stared at him. And hiding her sadness, she told him, “You're right, Daddy. This isn't your dream.”

The war between player and coach escalated that next morning. Nine other 1-1-2041s were on the team. Theresa was promoted to first team just so they

could have a shot at her. She threw passes, and she was knocked flat. She ran sideways, and minotaurs in white jerseys flung her backward, burying their knees into her kidneys and uterus. Then she moved to defense, playing ABMback for a few downs, and their woolly, low-built running back drove her against the juice cooler, knocking her helmet loose and chewing on one of her ears, then saying into that blood, "There's more coming, darling. There's always more coming."

Yet despite the carnage, the 1-1-2041s weren't delivering real blows. Not compared to what they could have done.

It dawned on Theresa that Rickover and his staff, for all their intimate knowledge about muscle and bone, had no idea what their players were capable of. She watched those grown men nodding, impressed with the bomb-like impacts and spattered blood. Sprawled out on her back, waiting for her lungs to work again, she found herself studying Rickover: He was at least as handsome as Marlboro Jones, but much less attractive. There was something both analytical and dead about the man. And underneath it all, he was shy. Deeply and eternally shy. Wasn't that a trait that came straight out of your genetics? A trait and an affliction that she lacked, thankfully.

Theresa stood again, and she limped through the milling players and interns, then the assistant coaches, stepping into Rickover's line of sight, forcing him to look at her.

"I still want to play for you," she told him. "But you know, Coach...I don't think I'll ever like you...." And with that, she turned and hobbled back to the field.

Next morning, a decision had come down from On High.

Theresa was named the new first-string quarterback, and the former first-string

--a tall, bayonet-shaped boy nicknamed Man O War --was made rocketback. For the last bits of summer and until the night before their first game, Theresa believed that her little speech had done its magic. She was so confident of her impression that she repeated her speech to her favorite rocketback. And Man O

War gave a little laugh, then climbed out of her narrow dormitory bed, stretching out on the hard floor, pulling one leg behind his head, then the other.

"That's not what happened," he said mildly. Smiling now. She said, "What didn't?"

"It was the nine of us. The other 1-1-2041s." He kept smiling, bending forward until his chin was resting against his naked crotch, and he licked himself with a practiced deftness. Once finished, he sat up and explained, "We went to Coach's house that night. And we told him that if we were supposed to keep hurting you, we might as well kill you. And eat you. Right in the middle of practice."

She stared at her lover for a long moment, unsure what to believe. Theresa could read human faces. And she could smell their moods boiling out of their

hairless flesh. But no matter how hard she tried, she could never decipher that furry chimera of a face.

“Would you really have?” she finally asked.

“Killed you? Not me,” Man O War said instantly. Then he was laughing, reminding her, “But those linebackers...you never can tell what's inside their smooth little minds...!”

TECH AND STATE began the season on top of every sport reporter's rankings and the power polls and leading almost every astrologer's sure-picks. Since they had two more 1-1-2041s on their roster, including the Wildman, Tech was given the edge. Professional observers and fans, as well as AI analysts, couldn't imagine any team challenging either of them. On the season's second weekend, State met a strong Texas squad with its own handful of 1-1-2041s. They beat them by seventy points. The future seemed assured. Barring catastrophe, the two teams of the century would win every contest, then go to war on New Year's Day, inside the venerable Hope Dome, and the issue about who was best and who was merely second best would be settled for the ages.

In public, both coaching staffs and the coached players spouted all the hoary cliches. Take it one play at a time, and one game at a time, and never eat your chicken before it's cooked through.

But in private, and particularly during closed practices, there was one opponent and only one, and every mindless drill and every snake run on the stadium stairs and particularly every two ton rep in

the weight room was meant for Tech. For State. For glory and the championship and a trophy built from gold and sculpted light.

In the third week of the season, Coach Jones began using his 1-1-2041s on both sides of the line.

Coach Rickover told reporters that he didn't approve of those tactics. "Even superhumans need rest," he claimed. But that was before Tech devastated an excellent Alabama squad by more than a hundred and twenty points. Rickover prayed to God, talked to several physiologists, then made the same outrageous adjustment.

In their fourth game, Theresa played at quarterback and ABM. Not only did she throw a school record ten touchdowns, she also ran for four more, plus she snagged five interceptions, galloping three of them back for scores.

"You're the Heisman front-runner," a female reporter assured her, winking and grinning as if they were girlfriends. "How does it feel?" How do you answer such a silly question?

"It's an honor," Theresa offered. "Of course it is." The reporter smiled slyly, then assaulted her with another silliness. "So what are your goals for the rest of the season?"

"To improve," Theresa muttered. "Every Saturday, from here on."

"Most of your talented teammates will turn professional at the end of the year." A pause. Then she said, "What about you, Theresa? Will you do the

same?" She hadn't considered it. The UFL was an abstraction, and a distraction, and she didn't have time or the energy to bother with either.

"All I think about," she admitted, "is this season." A dubious frown.

Then the reporter asked, "What do you think of Tech's team?" One play at a time, game at a time, and cook your chicken...

"Okay. But what about the Wildman?"

Nothing simple came into Theresa's head. She paused for a long moment, then told the truth. "I don't know Alan Wilde."

"But do you think it's right...? Having a confessed killer as your linebacker and star running back...?"

The reporter was talking about the Wildman. Vague recollections of a violent death and a famous, brief trial came to mind. But Theresa's parents had shielded her from any furor about the 1-1-2041s. Honestly, the best she could offer this woman was a shrug and her own smile, admitting, "It's not right to murder. Anyone. For any reason."

That simple declaration was the night's lead story on every sports network.

"Heisman hopeful calls her opponent a murderer! Even though the death was ruled justifiable homicide!"

Judging by the noise, it made for a compelling story.

Whatever the hell that means.

After the season's seventh week, a coalition of

coaches and university presidents filed suit against the two front-runners. The games to date had resulted in nearly two hundred concussions, four hundred broken bones, and thirteen injuries so severe that young, pure-human boys were still lying in hospital beds, existing in protective comas.

“We won't play you anymore,” the coalition declared. They publicly accused both schools of recruiting abuses, and in private, they warned that if the remaining games weren't canceled, they would lead the pack in a quick and bloody inquisition.

Coach Rickover responded at his weekly press conference. With a Bible in hand, he gave a long rambling speech about his innocence and how the playing fields were perfectly level.

Marlboro Jones took a different tack.

Accompanied by his school's lawyers, AI and human, he visited the ringleaders.

“You goddamn pussies!” he shouted. “We've got contracts with you. We've got television deals with the networks. If you think we're letting your dicks wriggle free of this hook, you're not only cowards. You're stupid, too!” Then he sat back, letting the lawyers dress up his opinion in their own impenetrable language.

But the opponents weren't fools. A new-generation AI began to list every known infraction: Payments to players and their families. Secretive changes of title for homes and businesses. Three boosters forming a charity whose only known function was to funnel



funds to the topflight players. And worst by far, a series of hushed-up felonies connected to the 1-1-2041s under his care. Marlboro didn't flinch.

Instead, he smiled --a bright, blistering smile that left every human in the room secretly trembling --and after a prolonged pause, he said, "Fine. Make it all public."

The AI said, "Thank you. We will."

"But," said Marlboro, "here's what I'll take public. You pussies." With precision and a perfect ear for detail, the coach listed every secret infraction and every camouflaged scandal that had ever swirled around his opponents' programs. Twenty-plus years in this industry, and he knew everything. Or at least that was the impression he gave. And then as he finished, he said,

"Pussies," again. And laughed. And he glared at the Stanford president --the ringleader of this rabble --telling that piece of high-born shit, "I guess we're stuck. We're just going to have to kill each other." Nobody spoke.

Moved, or even breathed.

Then the president managed to find enough air to whisper, "What do you propose?"

"Tech and State win our games by forfeit," the coach told them. "And you agree not to play us in court, either.

"The president said, "Maybe."

Then with a soft synthetic voice, his AI lawyer said, "Begging to differ, but I think we should pursue --"

Marlboro threw the talking box across the room.

It struck a wall, struck the floor. Then with an eerie calm, it said, "You cannot damage me, sir."

"Point taken." The coach turned to the humans. "Do we have a deal? Or don't we?" Details were worked out; absolutely nothing was signed. Near the end of negotiations, Marlboro announced, "Oh, and there's one last condition. I want to buy your lawyer." He pointed at the AI. "Bleed it of its secrets first. But I want it."

"Or what?" Stanford inquired.

"I start talking about your wives. Who likes it this way, who likes it that way. Just so everyone knows that what I'm saying is the truth." The AI was sold. For a single dollar.

Complaining on and on with its thoughtful, useless voice, the box was thrown into the middle of Tech's next practice, and nothing was left afterward but gutted electronics pushed deep into the clipped green grass. TECH'S AND STATE'S regular season was finished. But that turned out to be a blessing as far as school coffers and the entertainment conglomerates were concerned. Hundred point slaughters weren't winning the best ratings. In lieu of butchery, a series of ritualized scrimmages were held on Saturdays, each team dividing its top squads into two near-equal parts, then playing against themselves with enough skill and flair to bring packed stadiums and enormous remote audiences: All that helping to feed an accelerating, almost feverish interest in the

coming showdown.

Sports addicts talked about little else.

While the larger public, caring nothing for the fabled gridiron, found plenty else to hang their interest on. The contrasting coaches, and the 11-2041s, and the debate about what is human, and particularly among girlfriends and wives, the salient fact that a female was the undisputed leader of one team. Sports networks and digital wonderhouses began playing the game of the century early, boiling down its participants into algorithms and vectors and best guesses, then showing the best of their bloodless contests to surprisingly large audiences.

Eight times out of eleven, the digital Tech went away victors. Not counting private and foreign betting, nearly ten billion reconstituted dollars had been wagered on the contest by Thanksgiving. By Christmas Eve, that figure had jumped another five-fold. Plus there were the traditional gubernatorial wagers of state-grown products: A ton of computer chips versus a ton of free-range buffalo.

Theresa spent Christmas at home with parents and grandparents, plus more than a dozen relatives who had managed to invite themselves. If anything, those cousins and uncles and assorted spouses were worse than a room full of reporters. They didn't know the rules. They expected disclosures. Confessions. The real and the dirty. And when Theresa offered any less-than-spectacular answer, it was met with disappointment and disbelief.

The faces said as much. And one little old aunt said it with her liquor-soddened mouth, telling her niece, “You’re among family, darling. Why can’t you trust us?”

Because she didn’t know these people.

Over the past eighteen years, she had seen them sporadically, and all she remembered were their uncomfortable expressions and the careful words offered with quiet, overly cautious voices.

Looking at her, some had said, “She’s a lovely girl.”

“Exotic,” others volunteered.

“You’re very lucky,” to her parents.

Then out of pure-human earshot, they would ask, “What do you think is inside her? Dog? Dinosaur? What?”

Theresa didn’t know which genes went into her creation. What was more, she hadn’t felt a compelling need to ask. But whatever chimerical stew made up her chromosomes, she had inherited wonderful ears that could pick up distant insults as well as the kindest, sweetest words.

She was trying to be patient and charitable when one idiot leaned forward, planted a drunken hand on her granite-hard thigh, then told her with a resoundingly patronizing tone, “I don’t see what people complain about. Up close, you’re a beautiful creature...”

Daddy heard those words, their tone.

And he detonated.

“What are you doing?” he screamed. “And get your

hand off your niece?

Uncle John flinched, the hand vanishing. Then he stared at his brother with a mixture of astonishment and building rage, taking a deep breath, then another, before finding the air to ask, "What did I say?"

"Why? Don't you remember?"

The poor fool sputtered something about being fair, for God's sake. The rest of the family stood mute, and stunned, and a few began asking their personal clocks for the time.

"Leave," Daddy suggested.

To his brother, and everyone else, too.

He found the self-control to say, "Thank you for coming," but then added, "My daughter isn't a freak. She isn't, and remember that, and good night." Christmas ended with a dash for the coats and some tenth-hearted, "Good lucks," lobbed in Theresa's direction.

Then it was just the three of them. And Daddy offered Theresa a sorrowful expression, then repeated his reasoning. "I've been listening to their contemptuous crap for nearly twenty years. You're not a monster, or a possession, and I get sick, sick, sick of it."

"Theresa said nothing.

Mother said, "Darling," to one of them. Theresa wasn't sure who. When nobody responded, Mother rose and staggered into the kitchen, telling the AI to finish its cooking, then store the meat and vegetables and mounds of stuffing for later this week, and into

next year.

Theresa kept staring at her father, trying to understand why she was so disappointed, and angry, and sad.

He averted his eyes, then said, "I know."

What did he know?

"You're right," he confessed. "You caught me. You know!" But Theresa couldn't make herself ask, "What am I right about?" A citizen of unalloyed strength, yet she couldn't summon enough air to ask,

"What is it, Father? What am I supposed to know?" The Hope Dome was older than the players. Led by Miami, a consortium of cities had built that gaudy glass and carbon-fiber structure out on the continental shelf. Its playing field lay nearly fifty meters beneath the water's surface, and rising ocean levels combined with the new generation of hurricanes had caused problems. One of the bowl officials even repeated that tired joke that it was hope holding back the Atlantic. But then he winked slyly and said, "Don't worry." He unlocked a heavy door next to State's locker, revealing an enormous room filled with roaring bilge pumps whose only purpose, he boasted, was to send a river's worth of tiny leaks back into the sea.

In contrast to the palace-like Dome, the playing field was utterly ordinary. Its dimensions and black earth and fluorescent-fed grass made it identical to a thousand other indoor facilities.

The day after Christmas, and both teams were

given the traditional tour of the Dome and its field. To help extract the last greasy drama out of the blandness, Tech was still finishing its walk-through when State arrived. On the field together, with cameras and the world watching, the teams got their first naked-eye look at one another. And with a hundred million people waiting for anything, the two Heisman candidates met, and without any fuss, the two politely shook hands.

The Wildman offered Theresa several flavors of surprise. The first surprise was his appearance. She had seen endless images of man-child, and she'd been near plenty of 1-1-2041s. But the running back was still impressive. There was bison in him, she had heard. And gorilla. And what might have been Siberian tiger genes. Plus something with an enormous capacity to grow bone. Elephant, perhaps. Something in the shape of his enormous head reminded her of the ancient mammoth skulls that she'd seen haunting the university museum.

The second surprise was the Wildman's mannerisms. A bowl official, nervous enough to shiver, introduced the two of them, then practically threw himself backward. But the boy was polite, and in a passing way, charming.

"We meet," he grunted. "Finally."

Theresa stared at the swollen incisors and the giant dog eyes, and telling herself not to stumble over her tongue, she offered her hand and said, "Hello," with the same pleasant voice she used on every new

friend. The Wildman took her hand gently. Almost too softly to be felt. And with a thin humor, he said, "What do you think they would do? If we got down on our knees and grazed?"

Then the third surprise said, "Alan."

And the fourth surprise added, "You're just joking. Aren't you, son?" Parents weren't normally allowed to travel with the players. But the Wildes appeared to be the exception. Theresa later learned that they accompanied him everywhere, always. Pulling her hand out of Alan's giant hand, she offered them a smile, and the mother said, "How are you, dear?" The father offered, "I'm an admirer." His right hand was plastic. Lifelike, but not alive. Retrieving his hand, he added, "We're all admirers, of course." How did he lose the limb? she wondered.

Because it was the polite thing to say, Theresa told them, "The best of luck to you. All of you."

Together, the Wildes wished her the same cliché. Then they said, "Alan," in a shared voice. Practiced, and firmly patient.

The boy stared at Theresa for a long moment, his face unreadable. Perhaps there was nothing there to read. Then with a deep bass voice, he said, "Later."

"Later," she echoed.

Two hundred kilos of muscle and armored bone pivoted, walking away with his tiny, seemingly fragile parents flanking him --each adult holding tightly to one of the hands and whispering. Encouragements, or sage advice. Or grave warnings about the world.



Even with her spectacular ears, Theresa couldn't hear enough to tell. Days meant light practices, then the daily press conferences where every ludicrous question was asked and asked again with a linebacker's single-mindedness. Then the evenings were stuffed full of tightly orchestrated fun: Cookouts. A parade. Seats at a nuclear polka concert. Then a beach party held in both teams' honor.

It was on the beach that the Tech quarterback, Mosgrove, made a half-joking comment. "You know what we should do? Together, I mean." And he told the other 1-1-2041s, thinking they would laugh about it.

But instead of laughing, a plan was drawn up between the sea trout dinner and the banana split dessert.

On New Year's Eve, coaches put their teams to bed at ten o'clock. That was the tradition. And an hour later, exactly twenty-two of their players crept out of their beds and their hotel rooms, slipping down to the same beach to gather in two distinct groups.

At midnight and for the next three minutes and twenty-one seconds, no one said one word. With fireworks and laser arrays going off on all sides, their eyes were pointed at the foot-chewed sand, and every face grew solemn. Reflective. Then Theresa said, "Now," and looked up, suddenly aware of the electricity passing between them.

What was she feeling? She couldn't put a name to it. Whatever it was, it was warm, and real, and it felt

closer even than the warm salty air. Still divided along team lines, the players quietly walked off the beach. Theresa meant to return straight to bed, even though she wouldn't sleep. But she stopped first at the ladies' room, then happened past one of several hotel bars, a familiar face smiling out at her from the darkness, a thick hand waving her closer.

He was sitting alone in a booth, which surprised her.

With that slick, aw shucks voice, he asked, "Are my boys finding their way home again? Or am I going to have to get myself a posse?"

"They'll end up in their rooms," she assured.

"Sit," said the coach. Followed by, "Please." She squeezed her legs under the booth. Marlboro cuddled with his beer, but he hadn't been alone for long. The cultured leather beneath Theresa was still warm. But not the seat next to her, she noted. And she found herself wondering who was here first.

"Buy you a drink, young lady?"

She didn't answer.

He laughed with that easy charm, touched the order pad and said, "Water, please. Just water."

"I really should leave," she told Marlboro.

But before she could make her legs move, he said, "You pegged me. That last time I came calling, you saw right through that brown shit I was flinging. About needing you for quarterback, and all that." A wink, then he added, "I was lying. Wasn't I?"

She didn't say one word.

Chilled water arrived, and Theresa found herself dipping into a strange paranoia. Mosgrove had suggested that meeting on the beach because Theresa had to come past this bar, and Coach Jones was waiting to ambush her, slipping some drug into her system so that tomorrow, in front of the entire world, she would fail.

A silly thought. But she found herself shuddering, if only because it was finally beginning to sink in ... what was going to happen tomorrow... She didn't speak, but Marlboro couldn't let the silence continue. After finishing his beer and ordering another, he leaned over and spoke quietly, with intensity. He told her, "You saw through me. I'll give you that. But you know something, young lady? You're not the only shrewd soul at this table."

"No?" she replied.

Softly. With an unexpected tentativeness.

Then she forced herself to take a sip of her chilled water, licking her lips before asking, "What did you see in me?"

"Nothing," Marlboro said.

Then he leaned back and picked up the fresh beer glass, sucking down half of its contents before admitting, "I don't read you kids well. It's the muscles in your faces. They don't telephone emotions like they should." She said, "Good."

He laughed again. Nothing was drunk about the man, but something about the eyes and mouth told her that he had been drinking for a long while.

Nothing was drunk about the voice, but the words had even more sparkle and speed than usual. "Why do you think it is, young lady? All this noise and anguish about a game? A fucking little game that uses a hundred meters of grass and a ball that doesn't know enough to keep itself round?"

"I don't know --" she started.

"You're the favorite," he interrupted. "State is, I mean. According to polls, the general public hopes that I'm beat. You know why? Cause I've got twelve of you kids, and Rickover has only ten. And it takes eleven to play. Which means that on your team, at least one pure-human is always out there. He might be full of steroids and fake blood, and he's only going to last one set of downs, at most. But he's as close to being one of them butter-butts as anyone on either team. And those butter-butts, those fans of yours and mine, identify with Mr. Steroid. Which is why in their hearts they want Tech to stumble." Theresa watched the dark eyes, the quick wide mouth. For some reason, she couldn't force herself to offer any comment, no matter how small.

"And there's that matter of coaches," said Marlboro. "I'm the godless one, and Rickover is God's Chosen, and I bet that's good enough for ten or twenty million churchgoers. They're putting their prayers on the good man." She thought of those days last summer --the pain and humiliation of practically begging for a spot on the roster, all while that good man watched from a distance --and she secretly

bristled. Less secretly, she took a deep breath, looking away and asking him finally, "If it isn't me, who? Who do you see through?"

"Parents," he said. Pointblank.

"My folks?" she asked.

"And all the others too," Marlboro promised. Then he took a pull of beer, grinned and added, "They're pretty much the same. Sad fuck failures who want to bend the rules of biology and nature as much as they can, diluting their blood and their own talents, thinking that's what it takes for them to have genuinely successful children."

Theresa thought of her father's Christmas tantrum.

More beer, then Marlboro said, "Yeah, your parents. They're the same as the others. All of 'em brought you kids into existence, and only later, when it was too late, they realized what it meant. Like the poor Wildes. Their kid's designed for awesome strength and useful rage, and so much has gone so wrong that they can't get a moment's rest. They're scared. And with reason. They seem like nice people, but I guarantee you, young lady, that's what happens when you're torn up by guilt. You keep yourself sweet and nice, because if you falter, even for a second, who knows what you'll betray about your real self?" Theresa sighed, then grudgingly finished her water. If there was a poison in this booth, it didn't come inside a thick blister of glass.

"Darling." A thick, slurring feminine voice broke the silence, saying,

“Darling,” a second time, with too much air. “Marl, honey.” A hand lay on the tabletop. Theresa found herself looking at it and at the fat diamond riding the ring finger. She asked herself what was wrong with that hand. It was too long, and its flesh wore a thin golden fur, and the fingernails were thick and curved and obviously sharp. Theresa blinked and looked up at the very young woman, and in that instant, the coach said, “My fiancée. Ivana Buckleman. Honey, this is the enemy. Theresa Varner--”

“How are you?” said the fiancée, a mouthful of cougar teeth giving the words that distinctive, airy sound. Then she offered the long hand, and the two women shook, nothing friendly about the gesture. With blue cat-eyes staring, Ivana asked, “Shouldn't you be asleep, miss? You've got a big day tomorrow.” Marlboro said nothing, drinking in the jealousy.

Theresa surrendered her place, then said, “Good luck, Coach.” He stared at her, and grinned, and finally said, “You know perfectly well, girl. There's no such bird.”

Coach Rickover was famous for avoiding pre-game pep talks. Football was war, and you did it. Or you didn't do it. But if you needed your emotions cranked up with colored lights, then you probably shouldn't be one of his players. And yet.

Before the opening kickoff, Rickover called everyone to the sideline. An acoustic umbrella was set up over the team, drowning out the roar of a hundred thousand fans and a dozen competing bands and the

dull thunder of a passing storm. And with a voice that couldn't have been more calm, he told them,

“Whatever happens tonight, I am extraordinarily proud of you. All of you. Ability is something given by God. But discipline and determination are yours alone. And after all my years in coaching, I can say without reservation, I've never been so proud and pleased with any team. Ever.

“Whatever happens tonight,” he continued, “this is my final game. Tomorrow morning, I retire as your coach. The Lord has told me it's time. And you're first to hear the news. Not even my wife knows. Not my assistant coaches. Look at their faces, if you don't believe me.”

Then looking squarely at Theresa, he added, “Whatever happens, I want to thank you. Thank you for teaching an old man a thing or two about heart, and spirit, and passion for a game that he thought he already knew.... “ The umbrella was dismantled, the various thunders descending on them. Theresa still disliked the man. But despite that hard-won feeling, or maybe because of it, a lump got up into her throat and refused to go away. The kickoff set the tone.

Man O War received the ball deep in the end zone, dropped his head and charged, skipping past defenders, then blockers --1-1-2041s, mostly -- reaching his thirty-five meter line with an avenue open to Tech's end zone. But the Wildman slammed into him from the side, flinging that long graceful body across the side line and into the first row of

seats, his big-cat speed and the crack of pads on pads causing a hundred thousand fans to go silent.

State's top receiver couldn't play for the first set of downs. His broken left hand had to be set first, then secured in a cast.

Without Man O War, Theresa worked her team down to the enemy's forty. But for the first time that season, the opening drive bogged down, and she punted the ball past the end zone, and Tech's first possession started at their twenty. Three plays, and they scored.

Mosgrove threw one perfect pass. Then the Wildman charged up the middle twice, putting his shoulders into defenders and twisting around whatever he couldn't intimidate. Playing ABM, Theresa tackled him on his second run. But they were five meters inside the end zone, and a referee fixed his yellow laser on her, marking her for a personal foul --a bizarre call considering she was the one bruised and bleeding here.

Man O War returned, and on the first play from scrimmage, he caught a sixty meter bullet, broke two tackles, and scored.

But the extra point was blocked.

7-6, read every giant bolo board. In flickering, flame-colored numbers. The next Tech drive ate up nearly seven minutes, ending with a three meter plunge up the middle. The Wildman was wearing the entire State team when he crossed the line --except for a pure-human boy whose collarbone and various



ribs had been shattered, and who lay on the field until the medical cart could come and claim him.

14-6.

On the third play of State's next drive, Theresa saw linebackers crowding against the line, and she called an audible. The ball was snapped to her. And she instantly delivered it to Man O War, watching him pull it in and turn upfield, a half step taken when a whippet-like ABM hit the broken hand with his helmet, splitting both helmet and cast, the ball bouncing just once before a second whippet scooped it up and galloped in for a touchdown. Tech celebrated, and Theresa trotted over to the sidelines. Rickover found her, and for the first time all year -- for the first time in her life --her coach said, "That, young lady, was wrong. Was stupid. You weren't thinking out there." 21-6.

State's next possession ate up eight minutes, and it ended when the Wildman exploded through the line, driving Theresa into the ground and the ball into the air, then catching the ball as it fell into his chest, grinning behind the grillwork of his helmet.

Tech's following drive ended with three seconds left in the half. 28-6.

Both locker rooms were at the south end. The teams were leaving in two ragged lines, and Theresa was thinking about absolutely nothing. Her mind was as close to empty as she could make it. When a student jumped from the overhead seats, landing in the tunnel in front of her, she barely paused. She

noticed a red smear of clothing, then a coarse, drunken voice. "Bitch," she heard. Then, "Do better! You goddamn owe me!" Then he began to make some comment about dog cocks, and that was when a massive hand grabbed him by an arm, yanking him off his feet, then throwing his limp body back into the anonymous crowd. The Wildman stood in front of Theresa.

"She doesn't owe you fuck!" he was screaming. Looking up at hundreds of wide eyes and opened, horrorstruck mouths, he shouted, "None of us owes you shit! You morons! Morons! Morons!"

HALF-TIME needed to last long enough to sell a hundred happy products to the largest holo audience since the Mars landing, and to keep the energy level up in the dome, there was an elaborate show involving bands and cheerleaders from both schools, plus half a dozen puffy, middle-aged pop entertainers. It was an hour's reprieve, which was just enough time for Rickover to define his team's worst blunders and draw up elegant solutions to every weakness. How much of his speech sank home, Theresa couldn't say. She found herself listening more to the droning of the bilge pumps than to the intricacies of playing quarterback and ABM. A numbness was building inside her, spreading into her hands and cold toes. It wasn't exhaustion or fear. She knew how those enemies felt, and she recognized both festering inside her belly, safely contained. And it wasn't self-doubt, because when she saw Man O

War taking practice snaps in the back of the locker room, she leaped to her feet and charged Rickover, ready to say, "You can, but you shouldn't! Give me another chance!"

But her rocketback beat her to him. Flexing the stiff hand inside the newest cast, Man O War admitted, "I can't hold it to pass. Not like I should." Rickover looked and sounded like a man in absolute control. He nodded, saying, "Fine." Then he turned to the girl and said, "We need to stop them on their opening drive, then hang close. You can, believe me, manage that." Theresa looked at the narrowed comers of his eyes and his tight little mouth, the terror just showing. And she lied, telling him and herself, "Sure. Why not?" Tech took the opening kickoff.

Coach Jones was grinning on the sidelines, looking fit and rested. Supremely confident. Smelling a blowout, he opened up with a passing attack. The long-armed Mosgrove threw a pair of twenty meter darts, then dropped back and flung for the end zone. Theresa stumbled early, then picked herself up and guessed, running hard for the corner, the whippet receiver leaping high and her doing the same blind, long legs driving her toward the sky as she turned, the ball hitting her chest, then her hands, then bouncing free, tumbling down into Man O War's long cupped arms.

State inherited the ball on the twenty.

After three plays and nine meters, they punted.

A palpable calm seemed to have infected the audience. People weren't exactly quiet, but their chatter wasn't directed at the game anymore. State supporters tucked into the south corner --where the piss-mouthed fellow had come from -found ways to entertain themselves. They chanted abuse at the enemy. "Moron, moron, moron!" they cried out as Tech moved down the field toward them. "Moron, moron, moron!"

If the Wildman noticed, it didn't show in the stony, inflexible face. Or Theresa was too busy to notice subtleties, helping plug holes and flick away passes. And when the Wildman galloped up the middle, she planted and dropped a shoulder and hit him low on the shins.

A thousand drills on technique let her tumble the mountainous boy. Alan fell, and Theresa's teammates would torpedo his exposed ribs and his hamstrings, using helmets as weapons, and sometimes more than helmets. One time, the giant man rose up out of the pile and staggered --just for a strange, what's-wrong-with-this-picture moment. A river of impossibly red blood was streaming from his neck. The field judge stopped the game to look at hands until he found long nails dipped in red, and a culprit. Tech was awarded fifteen meters with the personal foul, but for the next three plays, their running back sat on the sideline, his thick flesh being closed up by the team's medics. Tech was on the eleven when he returned, breaking through the middle, into the open, then stumbling.

Maybe for the first time in his life, his tired legs suddenly weighed what they really weighed. And when he went down hard, his ball arm was extended, and Theresa bent and scooped the treasure out of his hand and dashed twenty meters before one of the whippets leveled her. For a long minute, she lay on her back on that mangled sod, listening to the relentless cheers, and trying to remember exactly how to breathe. Tech's sideline was close. Pure-humans wearing unsoiled laser-blue uniforms watched her with a fan - like appreciation. This wasn't their game; they were just spectators here. Then she saw the Wildman trudge into view, his helmet slightly askew, the gait and the slope of his shoulders betraying a body that was genuinely, profoundly tired. For the first time in his brief life, Alan Wilde was exhausted. And Theresa halfway smiled, managing her first sip of real air as Marlboro Jones strode into view, cornering his star running back in order to tell him to goddamn please protect the fucking ball -Alan interrupted him. Growling. Theresa heard a hard low sound.

Jones grabbed his player's face guard, and he managed a chin-up, putting his face where it had to be seen. Then he rode the Wildman for a full minute, telling him, "You don't ever! Ever! Not with me, mister!" Telling him, "This is your fucking life! It's being played out right here! Right now!" Screaming at him, "Now sit and miss your life! Until you learn your manners, mister! You sit!"

Four plays later, Theresa dumped a short pass into

her running back's hands, and he rumbled through a string of sloppy tackles, all the way into the end zone. State tried for a two-point conversion, but they were stopped. The score looked sloppy on the holo boards. 28-12.

Tech's star returned for the next downs, but he was more like Alan than like the mythical Wildman. In part, there was a lack of focus. Theresa saw a confused rage in those giant, suddenly vulnerable eyes. But it was just as much exhaustion. Frayed muscles were having trouble lifting the dense, over-engineered bones, and the pounding successes of the first half were reduced to three meter gains and gouts of sod and black earth thrown toward the remote carbon-fiber roof.

State got the ball back late in the third quarter. Rickover called for a draw play, which might have worked. But in the huddle, Theresa saw how the defense was lining up, and she gave Man O War a few crisp instructions. As the play began, her receiver took a few steps back. Theresa flung the ball at a flat green spot midway between them, and it struck and bounced high, defenders pulling to a stop when they assumed the play was dead. Then Man O War grabbed the ball, and despite his cast, heaved the ball an ugly fifty meters, delivering its fluttering fat body into waiting hands. Rickover wanted to try for two points.

Theresa called time-out, marched over to Rickover and said, "I can get us three." It meant setting up on

the ten meter line. "I can smell it," she said.

"They're starting to get really tired."

"Like we aren't?" Man O War piped in, laughing amiably as medics patched his cast.

The coach grudgingly agreed, then called a fumbleroosky. Theresa took the snap, bent low and set the live ball inside one of the sod's deep gouges. And her center, a likable and sweet pure-human named Mitch Long, grabbed up the ball and ran unnoticed and untroubled into the end zone.

28-21, and nobody could think for all the wild, proud cheering of pure-humans. State managed to hold on defense.

Mosgrove punted, pinning them deep at their end with ten minutes left. Theresa stretched the field with a towering, uncatchable pass, then started to run and dump little passes over the middle. The Wildman was playing linebacker, and he tackled her twice, the second blow leaving her chin cut open and her helmet in pieces. Man O War took over for a down. He bobbled the snap, then found his grip just in time for the Wildman to come over the center and throw an elbow into his face, shattering the reinforced mask as well as his nose. Playing with two pure-humans at once, Theresa pitched to her running back, and he charged toward the sideline, wheeled and flung a blind pass back across the field. She snagged it and ran forty meters in three seconds. Then a whippet got an angle, and at the last moment pushed her out of bounds. But she managed to hold the ball out,

breaking the orange laser beam rising from the pylon. Finally, finally, the game was tied.

Marlboro called time out, then huddled with his 1-1-2041s. There wasn't even the pretense of involving the rest of the team. Theresa watched the gestures, the coach's contorting face. Then Tech seemed to shake off its collective fatigue, putting together a prolonged drive, the Wildman scoring on a tough run up the middle and Mosgrove kicking the extra point with just a minute and fifty seconds left.

35-28.

Rickover gathered his entire team around him, stared at their faces with a calming, messianic intensity. Then without uttering a word, he sent eleven of them out to finish the game.

The resulting drive consumed the entire one hundred and ten seconds. From the first snap, Theresa sensed what was happening here and what was inevitable. When Man O War dropped a perfect soft pass, she could assure him,

“Next time.” And as promised, he one-handed a dart over his shoulder on the next play, gaining fifteen. Later, following a pair of hard sacks, it was fourth and thirty, and Theresa scrambled and pumped faked twice, then broke downfield, one of the whippets catching her, throwing his hard little body at her belly. But she threw an elbow, then a shoulder, making their first down by nothing and leaving the defender unconscious for several minutes, giving the medics something to do while her team breathed and



made ready. Thirty meters came on a long sideline pattern.

Fifteen were lost when the Wildman drove through the line and chased Theresa back and forth for a week, then downed her with a swing of an arm. But she was up and functioning first. Alan lay on the ground gasping, that wide elephantine face covered with perspiration and its huge tongue panting and an astonished glaze numbing the eyes.

Tech called time-out.

Mitch brought in the next three plays.

He lasted for one. Another pure-human was inserted the next down, and the next, and that was just to give them eleven bodies. The thin-skinned, frail-boned little boys were bruised and exhausted enough to stagger. Mitch vomited twice before he got back to the sidelines, bile and blue pills scattered on the grass. The next boy wept the entire time he was with them. Then his leg shattered when the Wildman ran over him. But every play was a gain, and they won their next first down, and there was an entire sixteen seconds left and forty meters to cross and Theresa calmly used their last time-out and joined Rickover, knowing the play that he'd call before he could say it.

She didn't hear one word from her coach, nodding the whole time while gazing off into the stands.

Fans were on their feet, hoarsely cheering and banging their hands together. The drunks in the corner had fashioned a crude banner, and they were holding it high, with pride, shouting the words with

the same dreary rage.

“MORON, MORON, MORON,” she read.

She heard.

The time-out ended, and Theresa trotted back out and looked at the faces in the huddle, then with an almost quiet voice asked, “Why are turds tapered?” Then she said, “To keep our assholes from slamming shut.” Then she gave the play, and she threw twenty meters to Man O War, and the clock stopped while the markers moved themselves, and she threw the ball into the sod, halfway burying it to stop the universe once again.

Two seconds.

She called a simple crossing pattern.

But Coach Jones guessed it and held his people back in coverage. Nobody was open enough to try forcing it, which was why she took off running. And because everyone was sloppy tired, she had that advantage, twisting out of four tackles and head-faking a whippet, then finding herself in the corner with Alan Wilde standing in front of her, barring the way to the goal line. She dropped her shoulder, charging as he took a long step forward and braced himself, pads and her collarbone driving into the giant man's groin, the exhausted body pitched back and tumbling and her falling on top of him, lying on him as she would lie on a bed, then rolling, off the ground until she was a full meter inside the end zone.

She found her legs and her balance, and almost too late, she stood up. Alan was already on his feet. She

saw him marching past one of the officials, his helmet on the ground behind him, forgotten, his gaze fixed on that MORON

banner and the people brandishing it in front of him.

Some were throwing small brown objects at him.

Or maybe at all the players, it occurred to her.

Theresa picked up the bone-shaped dog treat, a part of her astonished by the cruel, calculated planning that went into this new game. Carried by a blistering rage, Alan began running toward the stands, screaming,

“You want to see something funny, fucks? Do you?” Do nothing, and State would likely win.

But Theresa ran anyway, hitting Alan at the knees, bringing him down for the last time.

A yellow laser struck her --a personal foul called by the panicked referee. Theresa barely noticed, yanking off her helmet and putting her face against that vast, fury-twisted face, and like that, without warning, she gave him a long, hard kiss.

“Hey, Alan,” she said. “Let’s just have some fun here. Okay.” A couple thousand Tech fans, wrongly thinking that the penalty ended the game and the game was won, stampeded into the far end of the field. In those next minutes, while penalties and the crowd were sorted out, the 1-1-2041s stood together in the end zone, surrounding the still fuming Wildman. And watching the mayhem around them, Theresa said, “I wish.” Then she said it again --”I wish!” --with

a loud, pleading voice.

“What are you wishing for?” asked Man O War. She didn't know what she wanted. When her mouth opened, her conscious mind didn't have the simplest clue what she would say. Theresa was just as surprised as the others when she told them, “I wish they were gone. All these people. This is our game, not theirs. I want to finish it. By ourselves, and for ourselves. Know what I mean?”

The 1-1-2041s nodded.

Smiled.

The rebellion began that way, and it culminated moments later when a whippet asked, “But seriously, how can we empty this place out?” Theresa knew one way, and she said it. Not expecting anything to come of her suggestion.

But Alan took it to heart, saying, “Let me do it.” He took a step, arguing, “I'm strongest. And besides, if I'm caught, it doesn't mean anything. It's just the Wildman's usual shit.” Police in riot gear were busy fighting drunks and bitter millionaires. The running back slipped off in the direction of the locker room, as unnoticed as any blood-caked giant could be. Then after a few moments, as the crowds were finally herded back into the stands, Marlboro Jones came over and looked straight at Theresa, asking everyone, “Where is he?” No one spoke.

Rickover was waving at his team, asking them to join him. Theresa felt a gnawing guilt as well as an effervescent thrill. Marlboro shook his head, his

mouth starting to open, another question ready to be ignored -Then came the roaring of alarms and a fusillade of spinning red lights. Over the public address system, a booming voice said, "There is nothing to worry about. Please, please, everyone needs to leave the dome now! Now! In an orderly fashion, please follow the ushers now?"

Within fifteen minutes, the dome was evacuated.

Coaching staffs and most of the players were taken to the helipad and lifted back to the mainland, following the media's hasty retreat. Twenty minutes after the emergency began, the 1-1-2041s came out of their hiding places. The sidelines were under sea water, but the field itself was high enough to remain mostly dry. Security people and maintenance crews could be heard in the distance. Only emergency lights burned, but they were enough. Looking at the others, Theresa realized they were waiting for her to say something.

"This is for us," she told them. "And however it turns out, we don't tell. Nobody ever hears the final score. Agreed?"

Alan said, "Good," and glared at the others, his fists bleeding from beating all those bilge pumps to death.

Man O War cried out, "Let's do it then!"

In the gloom, the teams lined up for a two-point play. State had ten bodies, and including the whippet still groggy from being unconscious, Tech had its full twelve.

Fair enough.

Theresa leaned low, and in a whisper, called the only appropriate play.

“Go out for a pass,” she told her receivers and her running back. “I’ll think of something.”

She settled behind the minotaur playing center, and she nestled her hands into that warm damp groin, and after a long gaze at the empty stands, she said,

“Hey.”

She said, “When you’re ready. Give it here.”

## Graffiti

It was a river town known locally for drunks and evil women, mayhem and crimes too sordid to mention in decent company. But in the 1890s, a grisly and unsolved triple murder made headlines across the country, and simple shame forced its good Christian citizens to act. Originally called Demon's Landing the town renamed itself Riverview. Corrupt law officers were replaced with a modern, professional police force. The town and county were declared dry. New schools were staffed with young women of unimpeachable character. Zoning laws and civic projects brought a sense of order, while fortuitous fires drove out the notorious families. It was even alleged that the mayor, a determined young pragmatist, hired a wandering mystic to help protect Riverview from the criminal element.

According to some, the mystic was a wild-eyed, tubercular man with a gaudy name painted on his mule-drawn wagon. Yet just a few years later, no one seemed able to recall his name or which direction he had taken as he left town. Hopefully he was never paid for his questionable work. A terrible crime wave heralded the new century's arrival. A favorite school teacher was molested in the most heinous fashion, the bank was robbed twice in one year, and both a Methodist minister and the beloved mayor were shot and killed by thieves. The only blessing was that the rejuvenated police force, led by a young man named

Bethans, managed quick arrests, and under interrogation, every suspect confessed in full. The murderers were hanged with suitable fanfare, while thieves and rapists spent years in the state penitentiary; and for the first time, the river's vulgar souls began to say that if you wanted to have some fun, you'd best have it somewhere other than Riverview.

The next decades were built on small events and modest prosperity. Crime wasn't abolished, but violence seemed to always end with quick arrests and telling punishments. By the late 1960s, the little river town had grown into a tidy city of fifteen thousand, its elderly brick downtown nestled against the wide brown river, handsome older homes hidden on the wooded bluffs, and higher still, where the country opened up and flattened, there were the sketchy beginnings of urban sprawl.

There was both a public and Catholic high school. Macon Lewis played quarterback for the public school's lackluster team. Eddie Cane was his classmate and best friend. He lacked Macon's size or cookiness, but Eddie was the better athlete, one of the top cross country runners in the state, and because of it, the boys were social equals as well as friends.

Macon was six months younger, yet he played the role of older brother, introducing his introverted, somewhat artistic sibling to the larger world. Eddie's first date and first sex were both arranged by Macon. Eddie got drunk for the first time with Budweiser



bought by his best friend. As a team, they had explored the wooded bluffs, pulled monster catfish from the churning river, and when Macon heard a crazy rumor about the old storm sewer beneath Main Street, he suggested that they sneak down there and have a look.

“A look at what?” Eddie wondered aloud.

“You like to paint,” Macon reminded him. “Well, there's some really strange paintings in that sewer. If what I heard is true, I mean.” They met after dark, armed with their fathers' best flashlights, Macon shouldering a heavy knapsack that rattled as they slipped into a deep, weed-choked gully. The sewer began where the gully dove into an oversized concrete tube, the tube's mouth blocked by thick steel bars aligned in a crosshatching pattern. There was a small door secured by heavy padlocks, and for no conscious reason, Eddie felt relief when he thought they could go no farther. It was just a sewer, of course. In eighteen years, he had never wondered what was beyond the barricade. But he smiled in the darkness, smiled until Macon said, “Over here. We can get inside here.”

Freezes and floods had worn away a portion of the concrete wall. With the help of a crowbar, chisel and ball-peen hammer, they enlarged nature's work. Then Eddie, smaller by plenty, slipped easily into the sewer, and with a lot of grunting and twisting and breathless little curses, Macon joined him, slapping his buddy on the back, then whispering, “Follow me,”

with a wink that went unseen.

A trickle of water, antifreeze, and discarded oil led the way, spilling down a long slope before turning beneath Main Street, slowing and spreading until it was little more than a sheen of moisture and reflective slime. Modern concrete gave way to enduring red brick. The sewer had been built in the 1890s, arching walls frosted with an excess of mortar, and the mortar was decorated with colorful, even gaudy paintings. Holding a big Coleman flashlight in both hands, Eddie focused the beam on the nearest work. In clinical detail, it showed a man and woman making love. Except they weren't making love, he realized. The woman was struggling, and the man, taking her from behind, held a knife flush against her long and pale screaming throat.

"This is real," Macon reported. "Everything you see here happened as it's shown."

Other paintings portrayed other violent crimes. A man dressed in an old-fashioned suit was being shot in the face, pointblank. A second man was being gutted with a long blade. A third was being battered from behind with a baseball bat. And in each case, the painting looked astonishingly new, and the murderous person was shown in photographic quality.

It was a kind of gallery, Eddie realized. Utterly unexpected, and inexplicable. Yet Macon had a ready explanation. "The way I hear it, our town once made a pact with the Devil, or someone just as good." He

illuminated his own face, proud of his knowing grin. "If there's violent crime anywhere in Riverview, it appears here. As it happens. By magic." "How do you know?" A mischievous wink, a brighter smile. "Pete Bethans told me." Pete was the police chief's son and a third-string running back. "A slow kid," was Macon's harsh assessment. "You've been around him. Slow in a lot of ways, but that's why I believed him. He couldn't invent a crazy story if his life depended on it." Eddie nodded, slack-jawed, wandering downstream.

"Chief Bethans comes here once a day, just to check the paintings. Because if there's anything new, that means that it just happened." A pause. "Pete's dad and granddad were both Chiefs, and Mayor Smith has been mayor for thirty years. It's supposed to be their secret."

A face sprang out of the gloom. A boy's face. Distorted, in agony. Eddie hesitated, then in horror realized that they knew him. His family had moved into Riverview a few years ago, in mid-semester. The boy had sat beside Eddie in homeroom. For about two weeks, he was the quiet newcomer. Polite, but distant. Then came rumors of an unspeakable scandal, and for no clear reason, his father drove the family sedan into their garage and shut the door and let the engine run. Which was too good of a death, Eddie realized. Shining the beam past the suffering face, he saw the father, saw what he had done, and for all the horrible things that Eddie might have

imagined, this was worse. A thousand times worse. How could the boy, or anyone inflicted with this kind of hell, not just die of shame?

For a long while, neither boy made the tiniest sound.

Then Macon forced himself to give a nervous little laugh.

Feeling tired and hot, Eddie started upstream again, his entire body aching as he sobbed quietly.

For his benefit, or maybe for both of theirs, Macon said, "That sort of crap happens. Every day, all around the world --"

"Not in Riverview."

"Exactly." Macon gestured at the first painting, the one of a woman being raped.

"These things help the police keep law and order. And what's wrong with that?"

"You said we made a pact with the Devil," Eddie replied.

"I was teasing," Macon promised. "Nobody knows what's responsible for them." Overhead was the rumble of a big truck rolling down Main Street. They heard it through a nearby sewer grate.

"Besides," said the quarterback, "these are just pictures." What did that mean?

"If you can't stand looking at them, don't." Macon was talking to himself as much as to Eddie, his voice suddenly large, filling the sewer from end to end.

"If they bother you too much, just shut your eyes!" From the time he was eight, art teachers had praised

Eddie for his drawings, particularly for his attention to proportions and his precise sense of detail. His doodles were well-received in study hall, and some of his work had ended up in the last two yearbooks. People with no special gift liked to tell him, without a trace of mockery, that he had a great career as an artist waiting for him. Yet Eddie had enough appreciation for art and its demands to know that he had no future, save in some narrow commercial venue. Talent was a fire, and he couldn't feel any fire, and the truth told, he wasn't even a little sorry for its absence.

Macon didn't understand about fire and talent. Eddie was an artist, and when Macon had his own inspiration, he worked hard to solicit Eddie's cooperation. It was several weeks after their secret visit to the sewer. In two more days, their school would play crosstown rival Plus. There was no bigger game every year. As always, the smaller Catholic school had recruited from across the county, and they were a virtual lock for the state's Class B championship. "They creamed us by five touchdowns last year," Macon complained. "And Haskins is even better this year. Throwing, running. He could play us without his front line, and he'd still beat us shitless."

Haskins was the enemy quarterback. Big college scouts had been coming through Riverview for two years now, the All-State senior being the prize and Notre Dame rumored to be in the lead.

Knowing his friend's crafty mind, Eddie asked,

“What are you thinking? You've got a stupid idea, don't you?”

“Not stupid. Brilliant!” Macon felt deservedly proud, laughing and drumming on his belly with a happy rhythm. “Who's the heart of the Pius defense?” A junior linebacker. A farm boy named Lystrom.

“Exactly. And suppose we make certain neither Haskins or Lystrom play Friday night. Just suppose.”

“We'll lose anyway,” Eddie replied.

“Maybe so,” Macon allowed. “But not by five touchdowns, and I won't get the shit beat out of me.”

“So what's this idea of yours?”

“First,” said his best friend, “promise that you'll help me. Tonight. A couple hours' work, tops. What do you say?”

Eddie never agreed to help, but he never quite wrestled his way out of the onerous duty, either. “I'm not a good enough painter,” he kept telling Macon, right down to the moment when they reached the sewer's entrance. Arms aching from carrying paint and brushes, he said, “It'll take too long, and we don't have enough light. And besides, someone's sure to find us --”

“The only ones who'd want to find us are home asleep,” Macon snarled. “Put that crap down and help me. We've got bigger problems here.” Someone had blocked the way in, patching the concrete and plugging the gap between the bars with heavy hog-wire. But Macon had a thorough nature, and he'd come prepared. Bolt cutters removed the wire, and

the new concrete hadn't set properly, flaking off without much fuss, leaving enough space for both of them to squeeze inside.

The graffiti hadn't changed in their absence. Eddie wondered if Chief Bethans bothered coming every day, or if once a week was enough. What if their clever work went unnoticed? He asked that reasonable question several times, and he was rebuffed, Macon finally turning to him, saying, "Paint. Now. And tell me where to point these damned lights."

Mimicking the colorful, almost photographic style wasn't simple. Making the faces lifelike and plainly recognizable seemed practically impossible. Eddie had brought a Pius yearbook and several newspaper photos, and he worked with deliberation, moving too slowly for Macon's comfort, finishing the faces by midnight. Then came portraying the crime itself. They'd decided on a rape, its victim blessed with an anonymous face. The police would be forced to hold the football stars for days, searching for a nonexistent woman. But there is no such thing as a truly anonymous face, and whenever Eddie thought he saw something familiar about the nose or jawline or eyes, he would have to retreat and make changes. Nobody was to be genuinely hurt tonight. He wouldn't be doing this if he thought there was the slenderest chance of harm.

Occasionally, Macon would say, "Hurry."

Besides the patient trickling of dirty water, the

ancient brick sewer remained silent. Utterly indifferent.

Eventually, Eddie couldn't hear his friend's calls for speed. Fatigue and worry vanished. He found himself going back again, adding details that felt right. The victim was naked, on her hands and knees, twisted into a painful, unnatural position, her naked attackers buried in both ends; and he worked hard presenting the dangling breasts and the curl of varicose veins, then the fearful eyes, blue and huge, and her sweaty and matted short brown hair.

Hours passed in a moment. Nearly finished, Eddie suddenly pulled back his brush, realizing this was what the artist's fire felt like. It was past four A.M. One flashlight had died, and the big Coleman's beam was weak, trembling in Macon's tired hands. But Eddie had never felt more alert, smiling now, telling his friend, "All that's left are Lystrom's arms, then we're finished." Again, with force, Macon told him, "Hurry."

But before Eddie could moisten his brush, the Coleman failed. Absolute blackness descended. Macon cursed, smacking the battery pack with a flattened, angry hand, causing a flickering and very weak beam to play across the painted mortar, showing the boys what had happened.

Lystrom had his arms.

Painted in an instant, they were bare and pale and very thick. One hand gripped the victim's short hair, jerking hard. But the other hand and arm was what



startled. The arm was swinging, that sense of motion captured perfectly, a linebacker's fist being driven hard into the victim's small, helpless face. An inch short of panic, the boys gathered up their tools and paints, then fled, saying nothing and never looking back.

They reached home before five o'clock, trading mystified looks before climbing through their respective bedroom windows.

Both lay in bed for the next two hours, sleepless, trying hard to make sense of what they'd seen. Nothing had really happened, they prayed. Paint on bricks could do nothing, and the woman was nobody, and it was all in fun, and without doubt, they encouraged themselves, any true blame belonged squarely on the other guy's shoulders.

Their alarms went off just before seven. Exhausted beneath the covers, they listened to their radios, to the same limpid ballad, music fading into silence, then a shaken voice interrupting the false tranquility.

The bulletin was abrupt, and horrible, and very nearly expected. A young nun --Sister Mayhew, a Spanish teacher at Pius --had been raped and savagely beaten, and the incredible crime happened inside the convent, and en route to the hospital, she had died of her injuries.

Her killers were being sought, the disc jockey promised.

And the boys closed their eyes, and wept, knowing exactly who was responsible and feeling ashamed for everything, particularly the sense of their own perfect invulnerability.

By any measure, it was a bizarre, inexplicable crime.

Haskins and Lystrom lived at opposite ends of the county, in every physical and social sense of the word, and despite playing for the same team, they were anything but friends -a competitive rivalry having blossomed into a full-scale feud. It was startling to think of them spending time together, in any capacity. Neither had a criminal record. And while the linebacker had a genuine temper -the kind that might kill out of miscalculation --his alleged partner was unaffectionately called Saint Haskins.

But their guilt was undeniable. Two nuns had clearly seen them escape over the convent wall. A third witness saw Lystrom's pickup roll through a stoplight on Main Street just as Sister Mayhew was found in her room, in bed, her sweet face crushed, a plaintive voice naming her assailants before God mercifully took her. And as it happened, a sheriff's deputy pulled Lystrom over before he made it halfway home, intending to give him a warning for driving too fast. But there was fresh blood on the boy's T-shirt, and he acted confused, perhaps drunken. As a precaution, the deputy cuffed him and stuffed him into the cruiser's back seat. Then came word that the Pius stars were wanted for questioning, that they

should be approached with the utmost caution; and the deputy, thinking it had to be a mistake, asked his prisoner, "What kind of prank did you pull?" Lystrom unleashed a low wild moan, then gave a full confession, relating events with a miserable and accurate and thoroughly astonished voice. Minutes later, Haskins was found, naked and shivering, kneeling between his mother's washer and dryer, praying so hard that he barely noticed the uniformed officers or their handcuffs.

The football game was delayed. There was talk about canceling it altogether, but both teams had an open date in two weeks, and there was hope that the noble aspects of the sport would help the community heal.

Every Catholic school closed for the funeral.

On the same day, the prisoners were taken to the old courthouse to be arraigned on murder and rape charges. Both Eddie and Macon slipped out of class, joining the angry crowd on the courthouse grounds. They hadn't spoken since the sewer. Crossing paths, Macon stepped up and told his friend, "It's your fault. If you hadn't used a real face --"

"I didn't know the woman," Eddie interrupted.

"You must have," Macon insisted. "In your subconscious, at least." And despite saying, "No, I didn't," Eddie found some secret part of himself believing that it should be him shuffling along in chains, gazing at the ground, listening to a thousand angry people telling him that he should be roasted

alive, or worse.

Daneburg was next week's opponent. Macon was in no shape to play. He threw four passes before the coach benched him, three of them intercepted and the last one launched over the goal posts. Watching from the stands, Eddie saw the quarterback sitting alone, shoulders sloping, his helmet between his feet and his eyes gazing out at nothing. Eddie felt genuine pity for his friend. But the feeling passed. By next Monday the despair and self-doubt had vanished. Once again, Macon was strutting between classes, laughing and grinning. Except he'd been through an incredible episode, and he had survived, and the experience showed in the lean hard face and particularly in the eyes, bright and steady, incapable of anything resembling hesitation or compromise or fear. The game against Plus began before a quiet, subdued crowd. Macon remained on the sidelines, watching the larger, swifter opponents maul his teammates. His replacement was knocked senseless by Lystrom's understudy. It took two men and a stretcher to carry him off the field. Then the coach, having no other choice, sent Macon into the war.

People in and around Riverview would talk about the game for years, with a mixture of awe and earnest gratitude.

Before the game was finished, the lead had changed nine times. Macon threw five touchdown passes and ran for two more, including the last-second game winner. He was carried from the field on

his linemen's shoulders, and the image of him -the hero of a great contest, nothing on the line but pride and poise--would linger in the public consciousness for decades.

There was a quick trial in January, the defendants found guilty of second-degree murder, both sentenced to life terms.

Eddie spoke to his boyhood friend just once before graduation. It was May. Macon was having a beer on the school's front stoop --the privilege of fame --and on a whim, Eddie approached, asking him, "How can you live with yourself?"

The piercing eyes regarded him for an instant, then looked away. A slow, self-important voice remarked, "It took me a long time to see it. You've always been a cowardly little fuck."

What did he mean?

"Eddie," he said, "it happened. It's done, and it'll stay that way."

"I know," the boy whispered.

"I don't think so." Macon shook his head, speaking with an easy scorn. "Has it occurred to you that we aren't responsible? Not for any of it, I mean. Think. There's some bizarre force that paints crimes as they happen. Who knows how? But maybe the force appreciates using someone else's hands and paint, and we're not guilty of anything. Ever think in those terms?"

Never, no.

"You should," was Macon's final advice. "A lot of

things come clear and easy, so long as you think about them in the right way.”

A California college gave Eddie the chance to run for a degree. He left Riverview in the summer, returning just twice in the next thirty years -for Christmas, then his father's funeral that next spring. More moved back East to live with her old-maid sisters. He would think about his hometown, sometimes for hours on end, yet almost never spoke about it, even to his girlfriend. He married her after his junior year. He graduated in the bottom third of his class, then drifted from career to career, gradually eroding his wife's patience and good humor. They parted peacefully enough, with few tears. A second, less patient wife arrived some years later, and she never appreciated his long silences or far-off gazes. Not long after her departure, Eddie was sitting in his apartment, skimming through channels with the volume muted...and suddenly he saw a familiar scene, the river and far-off bluffs exactly as he remembered them, but the nearer buildings mostly new and too tall --baby skyscrapers standing rooted on the narrow floodplain.

Riverview was growing. The reporter told him so, and the video confirmed her assessment. Good schools and a low crime rate were just two reasons why corporations liked that obscure Midwestern town, and the latest convert was easily the most impressive. A Fortune 500 computer firm was relocating to Riverview. A modern campus would

grow on the nearby bluffs, a billion dollars and thousands of employees pouring into local coffers. Explaining his decision, the corporation's CEO and major stockholder used a passive voice, every word rehearsed, his praise for Riverview relentless, and unconvincing. But what stunned Eddie, what caused him to shout at the television, was a glimpse of the third-term mayor as he shook hands with the CEO: The mayor smiling with utter joy while the other man grimaced, eyes huge and haunted, looking like a man trapped. Utterly and forever trapped.

A stranger appeared in Riverview that next spring. He registered at the new Holiday Inn, paid for his room with cash, and after two days of sightseeing, fishing, and antique shopping in the old downtown, he was seen walking beside a high chain-link fence, staring into the forbidden gully.

Security cameras monitored his progress. Videotape caught him studying the sewer's mouth, examining the newly installed titanium bars and razor wire, the various cameras and both of the electrified fences. A cruiser arrived in short order. The man was questioned at length. He claimed to be a field biologist looking for rare plants, and he apologized profusely for any inconvenience that he might have caused. Because he had made no attempt to break into the sewer, he was released. Neither the officer or his direct superiors had any reason to doubt the story. If they punished everyone who was curious, the public would surely begin to wonder what made

that sewer so special.

Subsequent checks determined that the intruder had lied. He was not a biologist, and he had registered under a false name.

As a matter of policy, the intruder's file was sent upstairs to the new Chief. Something in the accompanying photographs bothered him, although he couldn't decide what was wrong. His daily meeting with the mayor was at four; he brought the file with him, laid it down on the mayor's desk, then felt like an utter fool when Macon said, "Don't you recognize him? Even bald, I'd know him. Shit, it's got to be Eddie Cane!"

The one-time running back --still a big slow man, but obedient and cautious -replied with a reflexive doubt, "It can't be. Your friend lives in California. We pay that investigator to keep an eye on him --"

"Not much of an eye," Macon replied. Then he took a careful, composing breath before saying, "Find him. Now."

"And?"

The look said it all. Don't let him out of town.

Yet despite an intrusive and efficient police department, Eddie wasn't found. He didn't return to his motel room, nor was he seen again around town. As a precaution, new cameras and a third, hidden electric barrier were installed by trusted specialists, and through certain backwater avenues, a contract was put out on Eddie's life. The Chief, undistracted by imagination, felt there was nothing to worry about.



But the mayor, made of more paranoid stuff, barely slept for the next few weeks, and when the call came at two on a Monday morning, he still hadn't shut his eyes.

“Your friend's back,” said the Chief, his voice soft, timorous.

“Where is he?”

A long pause.

“Where the fuck is Eddie?”

“He's already inside,” the Chief confessed. “The infrared sensors spotted him

... we don't know how he got in...!” A pause, then he whispered, “Macon?” For the first time in a century, a Bethans found himself honestly terrified of the future.

“He's your good friend,” said the Chief. “What do you think he's doing down there?”

It had been years since Eddie painted, and he worked with a quick, unpracticed deliberation. He was dressed in a bulky rubber suit. In one hand was a brush, the other held a long flashlight with a brilliant halogen beam. Water was running through the old sewer, ankle-deep after hard spring rains. He didn't hear footfalls until the intruders were close, and he never stopped working, not pressing the pace but making sure that he had finished painting the leg before a familiar voice told him, “Step away. Back from the wall, now.” A second light came on, then others.

There were more men than he had anticipated.

Trusted officers led the way, as if blocking for their mayor and chief of police. Everyone wore old clothes and bulky rubber waders.

“Eddie,” said Macon. Not once, but several times.

“How did you get in here?” the Chief demanded.

Eddie spoke matter-of-factly. “When I was here last month, I noticed some kind of pumping system down by the river. Very new, very expensive. It occurred to me that you wouldn't want any harm to come to this place, and you certainly don't want to be kept out of here by floods. I checked with the engineering firm you used. I pretended to have the same need, and without knowing the importance of it, they told me that after the pumps stop, there's a two minute window where the valves are left open. Not a lot of room in there, but I haven't picked up too much weight. Have I, Macon?”

Macon had the same handsome face, the same piercing eyes, but his charm seemed a little worn, used too often and finally, after all these years, hard to conjure on command.

Stepping toward Eddie, he half-smiled and said with quiet force, “We've been watching you. Even before I won the election, I had people keeping tabs on you.”

“I never guessed it,” he admitted.

“If you hadn't come back, we would have left you alone.”

“No doubt.”

“Put down the paint brush, Eddie.”

The words, equally serious and preposterous, seemed funny. He smiled, dropping the brush into the water, then threw his beam across the sewer. "A nice little business you've got here, Mayor." On the old white mortar was the corporate giant he had seen on television. He was using a fire ax to chop a man's head from his shoulders. "You invited that billionaire to come here, didn't you? You wined him and dined him, trying to sell Riverview, and when he said, 'No, thanks,' this is what happened to him. A sudden, inexplicable murder. And afterwards, favors won."

No one spoke.

"How much business comes here because of blackmail?" Silence.

Eddie shone his light in Macon's face, without warning. "Who does your painting, you son-of-a-bitch?"

One of the nearest policemen took credit with a cocky nod. Eddie continued. "The poor murderer wouldn't suspect, would he? How can he know that you manipulated him? Like a puppet. Which is probably what you do to your enemies too, I'm guessing."

The walls were covered with horrors, so many that they had to overlap, new blood laid over the old.

Macon came closer, glancing at Eddie's work with an insult at the ready. "You don't paint very well anymore."

"I suppose not," he agreed.

"Legs and bodies, but I don't see faces."

“Faces could wait, I thought.”

His lack of urgency bothered Macon. “Without faces, the magic doesn't work. This is just ordinary ugly graffiti.”

His head cocked to one side, the artist remained silent.

“Well,” Macon said with finality, “you shouldn't have come back. Not once, and certainly not twice.”

Eddie glanced at his watch, then with a gray and very reasonable tone, he asked,

“What if painting these walls wasn't my reason for being here?” Macon had begun to turn away, but he hesitated now.

With an angry, impatient voice, the Chief asked, “What do you mean?”

“Maybe all I wanted was to lure as many of you as possible down here.” A grimace more than a smile now. “Which I've done, it seems.” No one seemed certain how to respond.

“Who's been on parole for a year and a half now?” A slow shake of the head.

“Lystrom.”

Nobody dared speak, or move.

“Haskins would have been out too, but he hung himself fifteen years ago. In his cell, alone. I didn't know it myself until a couple weeks ago, frankly.” A long sigh, then Eddie confessed, “For all the guilt I've carried around all these years, I really didn't do much of a job keeping up with the news.”

“What about Lystrom?” whispered Macon.

“Hasn't changed much. Still big, if anything even stronger --prison does that to men --and he still has that linebacker's temper. You should have seen his face when I told him the whole story. He didn't quite believe me, not at first, but just the idea of it made him furious.”

There came a rumble, low and steady. Everyone heard it over the murmur of flowing water, and together, in the same instant, they realized it was a truck on the street directly above. They could hear it through the nearest sewer grate, then they heard its air brakes lock with a prolonged reptilian hiss.

“That would be Lystrom,” Eddie announced. “I had him watching for you to come down here. We've got a big flatbed with tanks on the back, and a few thousand gallons of unleaded gasoline.”

Men turned, beginning to run in their cumbersome waders, sloppy half-steps taking them nowhere.

A swift thread of crystalline petroleum fell from the nearest grate, musical and fragrant, landing on the water and too light to sink, too different to mingle, spreading like a spell across the tainted black water.

Trying to smile one last time, Eddie pointed at the wall, saying, “Look!

Someone's finishing the painting for me!”

But Macon refused to look. In the end, like a child, he pretended that what he didn't see couldn't possibly be real, and what wasn't real would never want to hurt little him.

## Grandma's Jumpman

Someone's wasting fireworks—that's what I'm thinking.

I'm out by the road, just playing, and I hear all these pops and bangs coming from the west. It's the middle of the day, bright and hot, and what's the point in shooting fireworks now? Someone sure is stupid, I'm thinking. Then comes this big old whump that I feel through the hard ground. I drop all my soldiers and climb out of the ditch, looking west, watching a black cloud lifting. That's over by the old prison camp, isn't it? I'm trying to guess what's happening, and that's when he tries sneaking up on me. But I hear him first. I turn around fast and catch him staring at me. Grandma's ugly old jumpie.

His name is Sam. At least that's what it is now, and he's not a bad sort. For being what he is.

"Did I startle you, Timmy?" he asks. "I'm sorry if I caught you unaware."

"You didn't," I tell him.

He says, "Good."

"I'm watching the fireworks," I tell him.

"Fireworks?" He gives the black cloud a look, then says, "I think you're mistaken." His voice is made inside a box sewn into his neck, and the words come out soft and slow. Sam doesn't sound human, but he doesn't sound not-human either. If you know what I mean. He's been here for thirty years, and that's a

long time to practice talking. He's one of the prisoners—a genuine war criminal—but he lives up here in his own little house. He helps Grandma with the farm, and after so long people almost seem to trust him.

I don't trust him. I watch him as he watches the black cloud, both of us thinking that maybe it's not fireworks.

"Something's happening," Sam says. He's not big, not even for a jumpie. And he's old, fat gray hairs showing in the red ones, his long face and forearms halfway to white. "They're probably detonating old ammunition. That's all." He waits a moment, then tells me, "Perhaps you should stay near the house, for the time being."

"You can't boss me," I warn him. I won't let him boss me.

"You're right," he says. "It's not my place." Then he says, "Do it for your grandmother, please. You know how she worries."

There comes a second whump, followed by two more.

And Sam forgets about me. His big eyes stare at the new clouds, then he shakes his tongue and starts for Grandma's house. He doesn't say another word, walking slowly in the earth's high gravity, his long bare feet doing the jumpie shuffle.

And I go back to my soldiers. There are more pops and bangs, and I use them with my pretend sounds. Then it's quiet, and I'm thinking it was nothing. It

was just like Sam said, someone blowing off old bombs. I put my soldiers down and climb up to the yard, sitting under the big pine tree. I'm thinking about the old prison camp. Grandma's driven me past it, a bunch of times. It's still got wire fences and guard towers, but almost nobody's there. That's what Grandma says. Just some ordinary human crooks stashed there by the county. All the important Chonk-squeal-squeal-oonkkk — what jumpies call themselves — died long ago or were shipped home. Except for Sam, that is. He's the last one left, and even he's got a death certificate with his hairy face on it. "He died of heatstroke," Grandma told me, driving us past the camp. "And the cumulative effects of gravity, too."

The black clouds have vanished. Blown away. Whatever happened, it's done, and I can't hear anything but the wind.

I start to rip up pine cones, wishing for something to do. I'm bored, like always. I'm sick of being bored, wishing I could be anywhere else, doing anything even halfway fun. And that's when I hear the truck coming, grinding its gears on the hill. A big green Guard truck rolls past. Its back end is stuffed full of soldiers, rifles pointed at the sky. I'm watching them. Unlike my plastic soldiers, their faces aren't worn smooth. Noses and cheeks are sharp. Their eyes are spooked. Nobody waves when I wave, and they barely notice me. Then the truck is past and a cloud of white,



white dust rolls over Grandma's lawn, and I'm looking west, wishing I could ride on that truck.

Wishing hard and tasting the rough dust against my teeth.

My folks got called up for Guard duty in June, for their usual six weeks. But this time it was summer and school was out, there was nobody to watch me. That's why they put me on the new Bullet train, shipping me off to the farm.

Grandma came to get me at the station. She's a big woman with gray hair and a couple million wrinkles, and she's strong from all her hard work. Bags that I could barely lift got thrown into the back end of her pickup. Then she slapped the dirt off her jeans and climbed behind the wheel, driving fast all the way home. She doesn't drive like a grandmother, I can tell you. And I don't know any other old woman who strings fences and drives tractors and calls shit, shit. Mom says that she's the most successful lady farmer in the state. I wonder about that lady part. Her only help is an old jumpie that she borrowed from the prison camp. He was an officer on one of their big rocket bombers. "He's called Sam," Mom told me before I left home, standing over me while she spoke. "Be nice to Sam. He's a very nice sentient entity."

"He's a war criminal," I told her. "The bastard bombed our cities!"

Mom just stared at me, shaking her head. She does that a lot. Then she said, "Don't cause me grief, Timmy. Please?"

"I hate the bastards," I told her. "They came to kill us, Mom."

"A long time ago," she said, "and the war is over." Then she told me, "Please. I don't want my mother thinking you're some brutal little boy."

"I'm not so little," I said.

She didn't say anything.

Then I asked, "Does that jumpie really live with Grandma?"

"Sam is called a jumpman, and he has his own house, Timmy." She made a windy sound, shaking her finger at my nose. "Since I was a little girl, and don't forget it."

I don't forget much. Riding to Grandma's farm, watching the other farms slide past, I remembered everything I'd ever learned about the war. How the jumpies came into the solar system in giant starships dressed up like ordinary comets. How they launched a surprise attack, trying to take out our defenses in a day. Later, they said they were being nothing but reasonable. Once our offensive weapons were removed, they would have become our best friends, colonizing only our cold places. They said. But they didn't get the chance since they didn't cripple us in the first day, or, for that matter, in the next thousand days.

It was the biggest war ever, and it could have been bigger. But the jumpies wanted to live on Earth, which meant they didn't like nuking us too often. And in the end, when things turned our way, we had the tools to blow away every last one of their starships. But instead of finishing them for good, we made peace. We ended up with a damned sister-kissing draw.

"What isn't won, isn't done," I've heard people say.

That's why we can't relax. The jumpies—jumpmen, sorry—are still out there, mostly hanging around Mars, battering it with fresh comets, trying to make that world livable for them. We can't let them get their own world. That's what I think. What I want to be someday is a general leading the attack, winning everything for all time. Finally.

That's what I was thinking, smiling as Grandma pulled up in front of her house. "We're here," she announced. I climbed out, taking a good look at my first farm. Then I saw the jumpie coming out of the barn, doing little hops instead of walking, and I realized that I'd never seen one before. Not in person. Not moving free and easy, I can tell you. But what really startled me was what he was wearing, which was overalls cut and resewn to fit his body, and how he showed me a big bright almost-human smile.

Jumpies have different muscles in their faces. Showing his thick yellow teeth must have been work. Like all of them, he was red—thick red fur; blood-red skin; black-red eyes. His tall ears turned toward me.

Somehow the smile got bigger. Then his almost-human voice said, "And you must be Timmy. It's a great pleasure to meet you at last."

I felt cold and scared inside.

"I've heard fine things about you," he told me, shaking my hand with his rough two-thumbed hand. "Your grandmother comes home from Christmas with such stories. How you've grown, and what a wonderful young man you are."

He didn't sound like the jumpies on TV. I tried picturing him and Grandma talking about me. Standing together in the barn, I imagined. Shoveling shit and gossiping.

"He's rather quiet," Sam told Grandma. "Somehow I expected him to make a commotion."

"No, he's just frightened." She laughed when she said it, then laughed harder when I said:

"I'm not scared. Ever!"

Sam's smile changed. He tugged on the white whiskers that grew from his heavy bottom jaw. Then he said, "I've got chores to do." Chores. He sounded as if he'd been born here, and that bothered me more than anything. "I hope you enjoy yourself, Timmy. Bye now." Nothing was what I had pictured, and I was glad to see him turn and shuffle off, his tail dragging in the brown dirt.

Grandma took me upstairs to a sunny and hot little bedroom. She told me to unpack and showed me where to put my things. "You can go where you

want,” she said, “but close every gate behind you and stay off the machinery.”

I knew the rules. Mom had told them to me, maybe a thousand times.

Grandma left, but I didn't unpack. I was feeling curious. I decided to go out exploring, first thing.

Grandma's bedroom was at the end of the hall—a big dark place with the shades down and the heat thick just the same. I took a couple steps inside, looking at the old-person stuff on the walls and on top of the dressers. Brown pictures were in silver frames, and there were some fancy doo-dads. Three out of four pictures showed my mom, one from back when she was my age. I found only one shot of Grandpa, and it was set behind the others. As if he was hiding back there, almost.

Compared to upstairs, it was practically cool at ground level. I turned on the little TV in the living room. There wasn't any cable attached, and no dish outside. There was just one local channel, and it was mostly static and snow. What was I going to do for six whole weeks?

I wandered through the smelly kitchen, then outside. Tractors and a fancy combine were parked in the yard. The combine had big metal arms in front for sweeping and plucking at the crops, and on top, a big glass cab and foam-padded seat. I climbed up and sat with my hands on the wheel. Maybe Grandma would teach me to drive, I was thinking. If I asked real nice. Rocking the wheel back and forth, I made engine

sounds, thinking how much fun it would be to mow through a field of corn.

Sam's cottage was behind the other buildings. I found it eventually—a tiny white wood building—and walking up onto its groaning porch, I peered into the dusty windows.

Mom had told me the story a million times. Grandpa died when she was little. It was at the end of the war, but the fighting didn't kill him. His tractor rolled over him, by accident. Mom barely remembered him. What she remembered were the tough times afterwards. Two billion people had died. Life had fallen back a hundred years, or more. Grandma had to farm with old tractors and her own hands. Help was scarce and stupid, the best men still in the military. Finally Grandma said enough was enough, and she marched down to the prison camp and gave its warden ten chickens and her problems. Was there a prisoner who could be loaned to her? Just once in a while? She needed someone who knew machinery, someone who could keep a murderous old tractor in the field. Was there any jumpie worth trusting? And that's how Sam came to Grandma, on loan from the United States government.

"He was brought up every morning for a year," Mom told me. "By armed guard. But that was silly, said your grandma. She took Sam permanently and took responsibility, letting him live in the cottage. Hot in summer, but in the winter, just right for a jumpman."

Jumpies come from a cold place. A place that was getting even colder—too cold for life, they like to claim—which was why they moved here to live.

Mom would always laugh, telling how Grandma promised that Sam wouldn't escape, that if he tried she would hunt him down by herself. "And the warden, knowing her, said that she was better than a ten-foot wall of electrified razor-wire." That's the part that always made her laugh the hardest, shaking her head and looking off into the distance. "And now it's been what? Thirty years. Sam likes it so well there that he's never left. Even when the treaties were signed, when he could have gone home, he didn't. He won't ever."

"Why not?" I always asked.

And here Mom always said something different. Sam was too accustomed to our heat, or he liked Grandma's peach cobbler too much. Always a new reason why, and I got the feeling that none of those reasons were entirely true.

I was staring into the cottage's dirty windows, seeing nothing, and Sam sneaked up behind me, saying, "Can I help you, Timmy?"

I jerked around. He wasn't smiling, but he didn't seem angry either. At least none of his red fur was standing on end. He asked if he had startled me. I told him no. I was thinking about leading the attack on his people. I almost told him what I was thinking. But instead he told me, "I doubt if you can see

anything through that grime, Timmy. For that I apologize.”

I wished he wouldn't say my name so much.

Despite everything, I stood my ground. This was my first day on the farm, and I'd be damned if he was going to spook me.

“You're remarkably quiet, I think.” He laughed and reached into a pocket on his overalls.

I watched his hand.

He brought out a single key, saying, “Let's go inside and look. Would you like that, Timmy?”

“Inside?” I muttered.

“Because you're feeling curious. You want to see where I live.” He came past me, smelling of hay and something else. Something sweet. He fought with the lock for a minute, then the door swung open. Every window was closed, and the air inside was staler than it was hot, and it was plenty hot. The cottage was just one room with a bed at the back and some curling photographs stuck on the plaster wall. Sam was behind me, starting to pant. I went to take a look at the photos, long red faces smiling at me in that goofy jumpie way; and he said, “My family. From long ago.” His voice sounded more like I expected it to be, high-pitched and sloppy. Talking past his panting tongue, he asked, “Do you see me, Timmy?”

I wasn't sure.

With a long black nail, he pointed at a photo, at a little jumpie with adults on one side of him, a giant crab or spider on the other.



“What’s that?” I asked.

“A pet. It’s called a such-and-such.” I couldn’t understand what he was saying. “There’s nothing like it on Earth. I know it doesn’t look it, but a such-and-such is almost as smart as a pig.”

The kid in the photo did sort of look like him. Sort of. I swallowed and asked, “What’s your real name?”

“Sam.”

“I don’t mean that one.” Why was he being this way?

“My birth-name was such-and-such.” He said it twice, slower the second time. But it never sounded like real words.

“Did Grandma pick Sam?”

“No, that was me. It’s a very American name.”

There was another photo of him as a boy. A really strange one. He was standing beside a dead jumpie, the carcass propped up with poles and wire, its body dried out and both of its eyes gone.

“A famous ancestor of mine,” he told me. Then a moment later, with a different voice, he said, “I know you don’t approve of me, Timmy.”

I blinked and looked at him.

“I know what you’re taught in school.”

“You’re a war criminal,” I said. Point blank.

“Am I?”

“You bombed our cities.”

“I was a navigator on an attack craft, yes. But we never dropped our bombs, if that makes any difference to you. It was my first mission, and we

were intercepted before we reached our target. A purely military target.” He tried another human smile. “One of your brave pilots shot me down before I could harm a soul.”

But war criminals are war criminals, I was thinking. You can't just be a little one.

Walking around the cottage, I ended up at the nightstand. Its wind-up clock wasn't running. I pulled a couple fingers through the dust that covered everything. And I was thinking something, that something working on my insides.

“Who am I?”

I looked at him, wondering what he meant.

“Names matter,” he told me. “To my species, a name is essential. It's the peg on which an individual hangs his worth.”

I watched the spit dripping off his red tongue.

“Long ago,” he told me, “I made peace with my circumstances. I knew I would never return home. I had died in that crash, and I was reborn. And that's why I claimed my good American name.”

I started slipping toward the door.

“In many ways, I am lucky. My particular tribe, my race...we came from the warmest part of our home world. By our standards, I'm quite tolerant of heat...”

Tolerant or not, he looked like hell.

“I never expected the exchange of prisoners. That's not a Chonk-squeal-squeal-oonkkkk thing to do.” He was looking out the grimy windows, talking quietly. “When the exchange was looming, your grandmother

was kind enough to use her influence, and a death certificate went home in my stead. ‘Such-and-such died while working in the field,’ it read. ‘Out of ignorance, the body was buried where it fell, his master unaware of his species’s customary mummification rite.’ “

I felt sorry for him, sort of. He wasn’t what I’d expected, and I tried not to listen, trying not to feel anything at all.

“This is my home, Timmy.” He meant the cottage, only he didn’t mean it. “You’re welcome to visit me any time. All right?”

I didn’t answer. I shuffled outdoors, the air feeling a hundred degrees cooler. But Sam stayed inside, opening windows and dusting with his sleeves and thumbs. When I stepped off the groaning porch, he said, “Good-bye.”

I might have muttered, “Bye.”

I’m not sure.

I went back to Grandma’s house, aiming for my room but ending up in hers. I knew something—a huge secret—only I didn’t know it. I couldn’t find the words. I kept staring at that darkened room, trying to think. Finally I walked over to the big bed, bending down. And sure enough, I could smell hay and that sweet something that I’d smelled on Sam. And I had a big weight on my chest, making me gasp, the force of it trying to steal my breath away.

We're eating supper in the kitchen. It's still day, still hot, but it's been hours since the explosions down at the prison camp. Grandma and Sam aren't talking about the camp or the soldiers in the truck. I can practically hear them not talking about those things. Instead they're making noise about a neighbor lady who broke her hip, and how many pheasants they've seen in the fields, and the chances that the local school can win State two years running. That's what they're saying. A lot of nothing. And then we hear someone at the front door, knocking fast and loud.

I beat Grandma to the door, but not by much. A man waits, tall and tired. "John?" says Grandma. "What are you doing here?" A dusty bike is propped against the porch rail. "Come in here. Would you like supper? We're just having a bite—"

"No. Rose," he says. "I can't. I'm going places."

She doesn't say anything, watching him.

Sam shuffles into the room. He's the one who asks, "What happened this afternoon, John? It seemed to involve the camp."

"It did," says the tall man. "Oh, it did."

"An accident?" Grandma asks. "Was it some kind of fire?"

"No, it was a fight." The man shakes his head, talking in a careful voice and not looking at anyone. "This isn't to be told, okay? But I thought you should hear it. I was walking in my pasture north of the camp when the fight started—"

"Who was fighting?" asks Grandma.

“Soldiers. Special commandos, I guess they were.” He shrugs his shoulders. “They went through the old wire, then broke into the barracks. They were after the prisoners.”

I say, “But there aren’t any.”

The man halfway glances at me. “Drunks,” he says. “Speeders. One wife beater. Remember Lester Potts...?” He pauses, shaking his head. “Anyway, a deputy spotted the soldiers. Shot one of them. Then the rest took cover in the east barracks—”

“Oh, shit,” says Grandma.

“—and I heard the shooting. I got my deer rifle and went down to help. We had them surrounded. The Guard was rushing us help. You know the Wicker boys? The ones that drag race on the highway every weekend? Well, the sheriff freed them and gave them guns, and they were plugging the east end. Which is the direction the bastards decided to go. They set off the old stockpile for a diversion...that’s the explosions you heard... and things just plain went to hell!”

Grandma puts her fists on her hips, halfway looking at Sam. She has a tough face when she wants, blue eyes bright and strong. “When you say ‘commandos,’ do you mean human soldiers? Or not?”

“They were human, all right.”

He says it quietly, as if it’s a bad thing.

“At least it’s not jumpies,” I tell him. And everyone. Nobody seems to hear me.

“What happened to these commandos?” Grandma asks.

“Some died,” John says. “I’m sure of that much.”

Nobody talked for a long moment. Then I said, “But at least it’s not jumpies. It’s not jumpies!”

Sam touched me, just for an instant. “But Timmy, why would humans be interested in the old camp?”

How should I know?

“On the other hand, jumpmen would be interested. They might send human agents.” He’s talking to everyone, including himself. “After all, humans can move at will here.”

“But where would they get people like that?” I ask, not having a clue.

It was Grandma who says, “Think.”

But I can’t see it.

“Think of me,” says Sam. “I stayed behind willingly. Didn’t I? And doesn’t it make sense that some of the human prisoners might have preferred life in space?”

That’s stupid idea, but I don’t get a chance to say so.

Instead, Grandma says to John, “But these commandos are all dead now. That’s what you’ve come to tell us, right?”

Sam asks, “How many were there?”

“Three or four,” says the tall man. “Or five, maybe.”

“How many are dead?” Grandma wants to know.

“We’ve found three bodies. So far.” His eyes were seeing things. “The other bodies might be in the

barracks. The Guard will search through the mess in the morning, when the ammo cools down enough.”

Sam says, “I’m sure everything’s being taken care of.”

Nobody else talks.

Sam comes up beside Grandma and touches her arm, lightly. Both John and me watch him. Then he says, “What if one of them escapes? He saw no one but human prisoners. No one, and everything’s fine.”

Grandma’s jaw is working, her teeth grinding.

Sam asks John, “How bad was it? Were any of us hurt?” Us?

“A deputy,” says John. “And one of the Wicker boys. They were killed.”

Sam shakes his head. He looks small and soft next to Grandma.

“And the other brother is missing. We haven’t found his body, or he ran off. Hopefully that’s all. He got scared and ran.”

I would never run off in battle. Never.

John rocks back and forth, saying. “I’ve got to go, folks. I’m trying to warn people, and we’re not supposed to talk about this on the phone.” He walks onto the porch. Grandma and Sam thank him for coming, and he tells us, “Now you people take care.” Then he straddles his bike and pumps the pedals, working his way through the soft dust. He’s moving like a bike rider in a dream, at half-speed. Something about him real frantic, but real slow, too.

The three of us watch the news at ten. The sun is down and the heat is finally starting to seep out of the house. Grandma is sitting on the sofa, like always. Sam is squatting against a wall, against a cushion, not close to her but not far away either. And I'm on the floor, legs crossed. I'm squinting through the snow on the little screen. The news doesn't mention anything about commandos or explosions. It's going to be hot tomorrow, I hear. And for the rest of the week, too. Then they go to a commercial, selling headache pills with a pounding hammer.

A helicopter passes overhead. Thump-thump-thump.

When it's gone, Sam says, "Rose," and I realize how nobody else says her name with that voice. It's not a jumpie voice, or a human's. It's just Sam's. Then he tells her, "I know what it is. It's the new Chonksqueal-squeal-oonkkkk council. They hear rumors about people like me, and they're looking for an issue to pull all the tribes together."

"Politics," she says. A low, tight voice. "Exactly." He gives me a little wink, nodding to himself. "I bet that's it."

Now the sports comes on, the baseball scores too fuzzy to read.

"From now on," he says, "I'll stay on the farm. No more visits to the neighbors. No more working by the road."

Grandma says, "Perhaps that's best."



Then Sam takes a deep breath and says, “Timmy? Do me a big favor. Go to my house and get those old pictures. Bring them to me, please.”

I do it. I go out the front door and around, past the barn and the fancy combine—everything huge and dangerous-looking in the darkness—and I slip into the cottage, working fast. The photos feel slick and odd, made of something besides ordinary paper. Keeping quiet, I come back the same way. I hear Grandma saying, “I’m not giving you up.” She sounds angry and strong and certain. “Nobody’s taking you anywhere. Do you hear me?”

I’m up on the porch, and she stops talking.

I come inside.

Sam has pulled his cushion up beside Grandma, rearing back against the sofa with his long feet beneath the coffee table. “That’s the boy,” he says, taking the photos. He doesn’t look at them. Pulling a long match from his chest pocket, he strikes it and sets them on fire in a candle bowl. All of them. I watch for the dead jumpie and the boy, only Sam’s put them facedown. It’s just the slick non-paper burning. And he tells Grandma, “Nothing will happen. They found nothing, and they’re dead.”

Grandma says, “All right,” and nods. Once.

Then the fire is out, and he tells me, “Go dump this, please.”

I’m out on the porch, throwing ashes off the rail, and Grandma says, “You didn’t need to do that. Why did you think you needed to?”

“To end any doubts,” he says.

“Whose doubts?”

“Not mine,” he says. Then he says, “This is my home, Rose.”

Rose. Just the way he says it makes me shiver.

I grab the rail with both hands, watching the sky. Mars is the pink star in the east. Before too many more years, it'll turn white with clouds. Sam's told me. His people are flinging comets down at it, sometimes two a day, trying to make it livable. And for a moment, without warning I feel jealous of the humans that might be up there, imagining them throwing those comets, having that much fun every day.

“I've been here my entire life,” says Sam, “and I won't leave you.”

“You're damned right you won't,” says Grandma. Then she adds something too soft for me to hear, despite all my trying.

We go to bed, and I fall asleep for five hours, or maybe five minutes. Then I'm awake, flat on my back and completely awake. Why am I? There comes a sound from downstairs. A bang, and then a thud. Then more thuds. I sit up in bed, my heart pounding. People are coming upstairs. Suddenly my bedroom door flies open, and some guy in jeans and a torn shirt stands in front of me. He's got a funny look on his face, tired and sad. He keeps his empty hands at

his sides, very still, asking me, “Where is he?” with a tiny voice. “The prisoner...where is he...?”

I don’t say a word.

Someone else says, “Who is it? Who’s there?”

“A boy,” says the guy.

“More!”

He moves back, and a commando fills the doorway. He is huge, both tall and thick, wearing nothing except for battle armor and an ammunition belt. He’s holding a big gun as if it’s a toy. It’s a mean looking thing with a curled clip filled with rocket-jacketed bullets, and he’s pointing the barrel straight at me.

“Where is the prisoner?” he says to me.

I can’t talk.

“Tell me. Now.”

I have no voice or breath, my heart beating behind my eyes.

The commando’s face is huge and wild, big eyes shining at me. He looks maybe twenty-five. He seems ready for anything. When Grandma’s door comes open, he wheels around. And then the guy with him—the missing Wicker brother, I guess—suddenly bolts. I hear him on the stairs, half-stumbling, and the commando—the human traitor—aims fast and fires. My bedroom is lit up by the flashes. I see myself sitting in my bed, sheets pulled up around me. Then the firing stops, and I smell rocket exhaust hanging in the air. I can feel how nobody moves. Nobody is running down the stairs. And now the commando

looks at Grandma while pointing the smoking barrel straight at my head.

“You’re holding an illegal prisoner of war,” he says. “Tell me where to find the navigator, or I’ll execute this child.”

“Don’t hurt the boy,” says Grandma. Her voice is dry and tough and angry. “Sam is out back. But he doesn’t want to go with you, you bastard!”

The commando smiles, telling us, “Thank you.” The gun drops, and he adds, “I don’t want to fight old women and boys. So if you promise to stay here, I’ll leave you here. Safe.”

I want to believe him.

“Get the hell out of my house!” Grandma screams. “I’m warning you! Get out!”

She scares me, talking that way.

But the traitor doesn’t notice us anymore. Stepping back, he melts into the darkness. I hear him on the stairs, then running through the kitchen. And Grandma picks up the phone in her room, saying, “Dead,” and then, “Shit,” as she slams it down again.

I stand, creeping out into the hallway.

Grandma’s wearing a long white nightgown, and she’s half-running. “Come with me,” she whispers. “Now.”

A dead body lies on the stairs. He scares me. I’ve never seen anyone dead, and all of a sudden I’m tiptoeing through his blood, the stairs warm and sticky under my bare feet.

“How could that man know about Sam?” I ask.

“That boy must have told him.” She kneels and looks at me, then says, “Run. Cross the road and hide in the corn. Whatever happens, stay hidden.”

The dead boy was a traitor for telling. I never would have told. Never.

“Go on now! Go!”

I run out the front door, out across the dusty yard. I get as far as the pine tree, stopping there to breathe. That’s when I hear Sam and the commando talking. Fighting, they are. They’re beside the barn, and Sam is saying, “What did you do to her?” He’s caught up in one of the big man’s arms, trying not to be carried. The commando tells him to be quiet. “I haven’t hurt anyone,” the bastard lies. Then he says something in jumpie, a jumpie-built box implanted in his neck letting him squeak and squeal like a native. And Sam turns still and quiet, letting himself be carried, the commando taking him to the pickup and throwing him inside, then climbing in after him, and with both hands he tries to hot wire the engine.

A big engine starts up.

It’s too loud and deep to belong to the pickup. The air seems to throb. The commando’s gun is beside him, then it isn’t. Sam has a good hold on it, I realize, and suddenly the two men are fighting for it. I can see them when the combine’s headlights come on. And the big machine lurches and starts to charge.

Everything’s happening fast and crazy.

The commando wrestles his gun free, then turns and fires out the window. Sam slips out the passenger

door, bouncing faster than I ever thought possible, trying to reach the barn. The commando starts chasing him, but not fast enough. A scared old jumpie can cover ground even on Earth, at least for a few feet. In he goes, and the big barn door starts pulling shut, and the commando reaches it too late, pulling at it with his free hand while he turns and fires at the charging combine.

Glass breaks.

Headlights die.

I can just see Grandma behind the steering wheel, crouched down low. The mechanical arms are turning and turning. Her target tries to run but he picks the wrong direction. There's a utility shed beside the barn, and he gets caught in the corner, shoots twice, then throws the gun and turns and leaps higher than seems possible or right. He's lived all his life with jumpies, I realize. He's too young to have been taken prisoner during the war. Trying to be a jumpie has given his legs extra bounce, which isn't enough. Because instead of leaping over the spinning arms, he falls into them, his body flung back into the barn's wooden wall just as the combine strikes home with a big sharp crunch.

I hear him scream, maybe.

Or maybe it's me.

Then the scream is done, and Grandma turns off the engine and climbs down. Sam comes hopping out of the barn. Both of them are wearing nightclothes. They hold each other and squeeze, saying nothing.

And I walk past them, making for the barn. I'm curious to see what happened to that poor stupid man.

Only Sam sees me first and says, "No, Timmy. Come back here, please."

I turn and look at them. Then I walk over to them. I'm not scared or anything. That's what I'll say if they ask. But all of the sudden I'm sort of glad to be stopped.

I won't admit it, but I am.

Soldiers come in their helicopters and trucks, then pick up and leave again taking the bodies with them. The officer in charge warns us that nothing happened here. Everything needs to stay secret. He shakes my hand then Grandma's. And, after a pause, Sam's. And he tells my grandmother that she can expect a confidential commendation. Then as he climbs into his helicopter, he tells us, "Our enemies underestimate us. They don't appreciate the gift of our ordinary citizens." Or something like that. I can barely hear him as the helicopter starts revving its engines.

By then it's morning, and time for breakfast.

It's just the three of us, and Grandma makes pancakes and sausage. I drown everything under thin syrup. Eating is more wonderful than I could ever have guessed. I keep feeling happy and lucky, glad about everything. Grandma's wearing a bright country dress, and Sam's already in his overalls.

Nobody says much until Sam finishes his cakes, puts his fork down and announces, "Once I can make the arrangements, I'll contact my old family. Just to tell them that I am well and happy."

He says it, but I don't believe it.

Neither does Grandma. She says, "You can't be serious. What in hell will that accomplish?"

"How many others are there like me?" he asks. "Dozens? Hundreds? But as long as we're secrets, we're dangerous. Not just to us, but to our adopted families. Our adopted species."

Grandma stares through him, saying nothing.

"I want to show my people that it's possible to coexist with humans. At peace." He smiles like a human, and like a jumpie, his ears lying down flat. "Until last night, I didn't know that I was important. But since I am, I need to do the right thing."

And after that, nobody says much of anything.

Done with dishes, we drift outside. Sam studies the barn and combine, talking about what needs to be fixed first. I'm pushing at the splintered wood, looking at the dark red smear but never touching it. Then Grandma says something to Sam. I can't hear what. And she comes to me and says, "Would you do me a favor, Timmy? Go play with your soldiers out by the road. Stay there until I say otherwise. Would you do that for your old grandmother?"

I ask, "Why?" and suddenly wish I hadn't.

She gives me a look, level and strong.



Then Sam calls to her. “Rose,” he says, taking little hops over toward the cottage.

“Play by the road,” she repeats. “Now.”

I start walking.

“And don’t tell anyone,” she warns me, her hard old face looking into me. I don’t have any secrets. Not with her, I don’t.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say.

She follows Sam.

I go to the ditch and find my soldiers buried in the dust, and I play with them without liking it. They’re just toys, I’m thinking. And the plastic jumpies don’t even look real. But all of the sudden I get an idea. It just sort of comes to me. And I get up on my feet and climb out of the ditch, walking until I’ve got the cottage in sight. Just one peek, I’m thinking. Just that. Only my feet stop moving all at once, and I get cold inside. And then I turn around and start running back toward the ditch, running faster than I’ve ever run in my life.

After last night—after what I saw Grandma do last night— there’s no way I’m leaving my little ditch.

I hunker down with my soldiers, and I stare at their worn-out faces.

Only one face in this ditch is scared, I tell myself.

Only one face doesn’t belong to an idiot. That’s what I’m thinking right now.

# Hatch

## 1

Yes, the galaxy possessed an ethereal beauty, particularly when magnified inside the polished bowl of a perfect mirror. Every raider conceded as much. And yes, the rocket nozzle on which they lived was a spectacular feature, vast and ancient, its bowl-like depths filled with darkness and several flavors of ice laid over a plain of impenetrable hyperfiber. Even the refugee city was lovely in its modest fashion, simple homes and little businesses clinging to the inside surface of the sleeping nozzle. But true raiders understood that the most intriguing, soul-soaring view was found when you stood where Peregrine was standing now: perched some five thousand kilometers above the hull, staring down at the Polypond—a magnificent, ever-changing alien body that stretched past the neighboring nozzles, reaching the far horizon and beyond, submerging both faces of a magnificent starship that itself was larger than worlds.

The Polypond had arrived thousands of years ago, descending as a violent rain of comet-sized bodies, scalding vapor, and sentient, hate-filled mud. The alien had wanted to destroy the Great Ship, and perhaps even today it dreamed of nothing less. But most of the city's inhabitants believed the war was over now, and in one fashion or another, the Ship had

won. Some were sure the alien had surrendered unconditionally. Others believed that the Polypond's single mind had collapsed, leaving a multitude of factions end-lessly fighting with one another. Both tales explained quite a lot, including the monster's indifference to a few million refugees living just beyond its boundaries. But the most compelling idea—the notion that always capti-vated Peregrine—was that human beings had not only won the war, but killed their foe too. Its central mind was destroyed, all self-control had been vanquished, and what the young man saw from his diamond blister was nothing more, or less, than a great corpse in the throes of ferocious, creative rot. Whatever the truth, the Polypond was a spectacle, and no raider under-stood it better than Peregrine did.

Frigid wisps of atomic oxygen and nitrogen marked the aliens upper reaches, with dust and buckyballs and aerogel trash wandering free. That high atmosphere reached halfway to the hull, and it ended with a sequence of transparent skins—monomolecular sheets, mostly, plus a few energetic demon-doors laid out flat. Retaining gas and heat was their apparent pur-pose, and when those skins were pierced, what lay below could feel the prick, and on occasion, react instantly. Beneath the skins was a thick wet atmosphere, not just warm but hot—a fierce blazing wealth of changeable gases and smart dusts, floating clouds and rooted clouds, plus features that refused description by any language. And drenching

that realm was a wealth of light. The glare wasn't constant or evenly distributed. What passed for day came as splashes and winding rivers, and the color of the light as well as its intensity and duration would vary. After spending most of his brief life watching the purples and crimsons, emeralds and golds, plus a wealth of blues that stretched from the brilliant to the soothing, Peregrine had realized that each color and its intricate shape held meaning.

"A common belief," Hawking had told him. "But your translator AIs cannot find any message, or even the taste of genuine language."

"Except I wasn't thinking language," Peregrine countered. "Not at all."

His friend wanted more of an answer, signaling his desires with silence and circular gestures from his most delicate arms.

"I meant plain simple beauty," the young man continued. "I'm talking about art, about visual poetry. I'm thinking about a magnificent show performed for a very special audience."

"You might be the only soul holding that opinion," Hawking counseled.

"And I feel honored because of it," Peregrine had laughed. The Polypond's atmosphere was full of motion and energy, and it was exceptionally loud. Camouflaged microphones set near the base of the rocket nozzle sent home the constant roar of wind sounds and mouth sounds, thunder from living clouds and the musical whine of great wings. But

even richer than the air was the watery terrain beneath: tens of kilometers deep, the Polypond's body was built from melted comets mixed with rock and metal stolen from vanished worlds. This was an ocean in the same sense that a human body was mere salt water. Yes, it was liquid, but jammed full of structure and purpose. Alien tissues supplied muscles and spines and ribs, and there were regions serving roles not unlike those of human hearts and livers and lungs. Long, sophisticated membranes were dotted with giant fusion reactors. And drifting on the surface were island-sized organs that spat out free-living entities—winged entities that would gather in huge flocks and sometimes rise en masse, millions and even billions of them soaring higher than any cloud. Hatches, those events were called.

What Peregrine knew—what every person in his trade understood—was that each hatch was a unique event, and the great majority were worthless. Sending a fleet of raiders that returned with only a few thousand tons of winged muscle and odd enzymes... well, that was a waste of their limited power, and always a potential waste of lives. What mattered were those rare hatches that rose high enough to be reached cheaply, and even then it didn't pay to send raiders if there wasn't some respectable chance of acquiring hyperfiber or rare elements, or best of all, machines that could be harvested and tamed, then set to work in whatever role the city demanded. Judging a hatch's value was three parts diagnosis, two parts

art, and, inevitably, ten parts good fortune. Telescopes tied into dim-witted machines did nothing but happily stuff data into shapes that brighter AIs could analyze. Whatever was promising or peculiar was sent to the raider leaders. The average day brought ten or fifteen events worthy of closer examination, and because of his service record, Peregrine was given first glance at those candidates. But even with ripe pickings, he often did nothing. Other raiders flying their own ships would dive into the high atmosphere every few days. But sometimes weeks passed without Peregrine once being tempted to sit in the pilot's padded chair.

"I want to grow old in this job," he confessed whenever his bravery was questioned. "Most souls can't do what I do. Most of you are too brave, and bravery is suicide. Fearlessness is a handicap. Chasing every million-wing flight of catabolites or sky-spinners is the quickest way to go bankrupt, if you're lucky. Or worse, die."

"That is a reasonable philosophy," his friend mentioned, speaking through the voice box sewn into a convenient neural center.

"I'm sorry," Peregrine replied. "I wasn't talking to you. I was chatting with a woman friend."

The alien lifted one of his intricate limbs, signaling puzzlement. "And where is this woman?"

"Inside my skull." Peregrine gave his temple a few hard taps. "I met her last night. I thought she was pretty, and she was pleasant enough. But she said

some critical words about raiders wasting too many resources, and I thought she was accusing me of being a coward.”

“You listed your sensible reasons, of course.”

“Not all of them,” he admitted.

“Why not?”

“I told you,” said Peregrine. “I thought she was pretty. And if I acted like an unapologetic coward, I wouldn’t get invited to her bedroom.”

Hawking absorbed this tidbit about human spawning. Or he simply ignored it. Who could know what that creature was thinking beneath his thick carapace?

Low-built and long, Hawking held a passing resemblance to an earthly trilobite. A trio of crystalline eyes pulled in light from all directions, delicate optical tissues teasing the meaning out of every photon. His armored body was carried on dozens of jointed legs. But where trilobites had three sections to their insectlike bodies, this alien had five. And where trilobites were dim-witted creatures haunting the floors of ancient seas, Hawking’s ancestors had evolved grasping limbs and large, intricate minds while scurrying across the lush surface of a low-gravity world. Hawking was not a social animal. And this was a blessing, since he was the only one of his kind in the city. Peregrine had studied the available files about his species, but the local data sinks were intended to help military operations, not educate any would-be xenologists. And

likewise, after spending decades in close association with the creature, and despite liking as well as admiring him, Peregrine found there were moments when old Mr. Hawk-ing was nothing but peculiar, standoffish, and quite impossible to read.

But Peregrine had a taste for challenges.

“Anyway,” he said, cutting into the silence. “I lied to that woman. I told her that I wasn’t flying because I knew something big was coming. I had a feeling, and until that ripe moment, I was resting both my body and my ship.”

“And she believed you?”

“Perhaps.”

After a brief silence, Hawking said, “She sounds like a foolish young creature.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong.” Peregrine laughed and shrugged. “Just as I hoped, I climbed into her bed. And during one of our slow moments, she admitted who she was.”

“And she is?”

“An engineer during the War. She was working in the repair yards while my mother was serving as a pilot. So like you, my new girlfriend is one of the original founders.”

“Interesting,” his friend responded.

“Fusillade is her name,” he mentioned. “And she seems to know you.”

“Yet I do not know her.”

Then Peregrine added, “And by the way, she very clearly remembers your arrival here.”



Fourteen moon-sized rocket nozzles stood upon the Great Ship's aft, and during the fighting, the center nozzle served as the gathering place for tired pilots and engineers and such. Once the fighting ended, representatives of twenty different species found themselves trapped in this most unpromising location, utterly isolated, with few working machines, minimal data sinks, and no raw materials. Facing them was the daunting task of building some kind of workable society. Hawking was a rarity—the rich passenger who had visited the hull before the comets began to fall, and who managed to outlive both his guides and fellow tourists. Alone, this solitary creature had scaled one of the outlying nozzles, and then his luck lasted long enough to find passage with a harum-scarum unit—the final group of refugees to make it to this poor but safe place.

“She feels sorry for you, Hawking.”

“Why would she?”

“Because you're a species with a population of one.”

The alien was unimpressed with that assessment. He cut the air with two limbs, his natural mouth rippling before leaking a disapproving click.

“I know better than that,” Peregrine continued. “I told her that you're a loner, that it's difficult for you to share breathing space with me, and you know me and approve of me far more than you know and approve of anyone else.”

The creature had no reply.

“‘Why call him Hawking?’ she asked me. ‘Nobody else does.’”

“Few others speak to me,” his friend said.

“I explained that too,” said Peregrine. “And I told her that your species are so peculiar, you never see reason for any permanent names. When two of you cross trails, each invents a new name for himself or herself. A private name that lasts only as long as that single perishable relationship.”

The limbs gave the air an agreeable sweep.

“You picked Hawking, and I don’t know why,” Peregrine continued. “Except it’s a solid sound humans can utter. Unlike your own species’ name, of course.”

Quietly, with his natural mouth, Hawking made a sharp clicking sound followed by what sounded like “!Eech.”

“!Eech,” the human tried to repeat.

As always, there was something intensely humorous about his clumsy attempt. Nothing changed in the creature’s domelike eyes or the rigid face, but suddenly all of the long legs wiggled together, signaling laughter, the ripples moving happily beneath his hard low unreadable body.

“And I remember your mother,” the old woman had mentioned last night. Like that of every citizen, Fusillade’s apartment was tiny and cold; power had always been a scarce commodity in the city. But her furnishings were better than most, made from fancy plastics and cultured flesh, and even a glass tub filled with spare water. Winking at her young lover, she added, “No, I doubt if your mother ever actually knew me. By name, I mean. But I was part of the team that kept those early raider ships flying. Without twenty ad-lib repairs from me, that woman wouldn’t be half the hero she is today.”

Peregrine’s mother was as famous as anyone in the city, and that despite being dead for dozens of centuries. She had defended these giant rockets during the Polypond War. But the alien eventually destroyed each of the Great Ship’s engines, choking and plugging every vent, trying to keep reinforcements from reaching the hull. And at the same time, the captains below had blocked every doorway, desperate to keep the Polypond from infiltrating the interior. Brutal fights were waged near the main ports, but none had lasted long. A barrage of tiny black holes was fired through the Ship’s heart, but none delivered a killing blow. Then the final assault came, and despite long odds, a starship that was more ancient than any visible sun survived.

Afterward, over the course of several months and then several years, the Polypond grew quieter, and by

every credible measure, less menacing. Something was different. The alien was different, and maybe the Great Ship too. But those few thousand survivors could never be sure what had changed. With the clarity of the doomed, they had come here and built a refugee camp. Peregrine's mother was a natural leader. Like her son, she was a small person, dark as space, blessed with long limbs and a gymnast's perfect balance. And she was more than just an early raider. No, what made the woman special was that she was first to realize that nobody was coming to rescue them. The giant engines remained dead and blocked. High-grade hyperfiber had plugged even the most obscure route through the armored hull. And even worse, the Great Ship was now undergoing some mysterious but undeniable acceleration. Without one working rocket, the world-sized machine was gaining velocity, hurrying its way along a course that would soon take it out of the Milky Way.

Peregrine's mother helped invent the raider's trade. In makeshift vehicles, she dove into the Polypond's atmosphere, stealing volatiles and rare earths, plus the occasional machine-encrusted body. Those treasures allowed them to build shelters and synthesize food. Every few days, she bravely led an expedition into the monster's body, stealing what was useful and accepting every danger. Time and Fate ensured her death.

She left no body, save for a few useful pieces that made up her meager estate. Her funeral was held

ages ago, yet even today, whenever an important anniversary arrived, those rites and her name were repeated by thousands of thankful souls. By contrast, Peregrine's father was neither heroic nor well regarded. But he was a prosperous fellow, and he was shrewd, and when one of the great woman's eggs came on the market, he spent a fortune to obtain it and a second fortune to build the first artificial womb in the city's history.

"I remember your mother," the old woman told Peregrine, plainly proud of any casual association. Then with an important tone, she added, "That good woman would have been pleased with her young son. I'm sure."

Peregrine was almost three hundred years old, which made him young—

particularly in the eyes of a much older lady who seemed to be happily feeding a fantasy. He offered nods and a polite smile, saying, "Well, thank you."

"And I know your father fairly well," she continued.

"I never see the man," Peregrine replied with a sneer, warning her off the topic.

"I know," she said.

Then after a pause, she asked, "Did you mean it? Do you really feel that an especially large hatch is coming?"

"No," he replied, finally admitting the truth.

Then before his honesty evaporated, he added, "There are no trends, and I don't have intuitions. And

I never, ever see into the future.”

Something in those words made the old woman laugh. Then quietly, with a sudden tenderness, she said, “Darling. Everybody sees some little part of the future. Only the dead can’t. And if you think about it, you’ll realize... nothing more important separates big-eyed us from poor cold blind them.”

There was nothing to add after Peregrine's laughable attempt to say "Eech."

Hawking fell into a deep silence, indistinguishable from countless others; and Peregrine responded with his own purposeful quiet. He was sitting at one end of the hangar, working with the latest data about hatches and gen-eral Polypond activity. His friend stood near the raider ship. Which was less animated, that sleeping machine or the alien? Hours and even days might pass, and the creature wouldn't move one antenna. Yet Hawking claimed to never feel lonely or bored. "A respectable mind always has fascinating tasks waiting in its neurons," he would say. Which was why his very odd species lacked the words to describe painful solitude or empty time.

The day's hatches were distant and scarce.

Peregrine finally gave up the hunt. He sat at the end of the diamond blis-ter, feeling the cold of deep space and studying the ever-changing scenery below. Clouds were gathering between their home nozzle and the next, the thinnest and lightest clouds shoved high above the others. This happened on occasion, and it meant nothing. But the result was a splotch of deep blackness, larger than a healthy continent and unpromising to the bare human eye.

Just to be sure, Peregrine played with infrared frequencies and flashes of laser light to make delicate measurements. Something inside that blackness was different, he noticed. Straight before him, something

was beginning to happen. That's why he wasn't particularly surprised when the clouds began to split, bleeding a strange golden light that was brighter than anything else in view. Through his own telescope, he saw the vanguards of the rising hatch. Moments later, on a shielded line, an AI expert contacted him. With a navigational code and the simple words "This interests," the machine changed the complexion of Peregrine's day and his week.

Having a worthy topic, he admitted to Hawking, "I thought I was lying to that woman. About having intuitions, I mean. But look at this hatch! Look at the diversity. And that's without being able to see much of it yet." His heart was pounding, his voice dry and quick. "I don't know if anybody has seen, ever... a hatch as big and diverse as this one..."

Hawking did not move, but the hemispherical eyes absorbed the data in a few moments. Then the complicated mouth of tendrils and rasping teeth made a series of little motions—motions that Peregrine had never seen before, and chose to ignore for the moment.

"I'm leaving," the human announced.

Every raider with a working ship would be embarking now.

"It's going to be a rich day," he continued, throwing himself into the first layer of his flight suit.

Finally, Hawking spoke.

"You are my friend," said the alien, nothing about his voice out of the ordinary. "And from all that is



possible, I wish you the best.”

Simplicity was the hallmark of a raider's ship. The hull was made from diamond scales bolstered with nanowhiskers, all laid across a flexible skeleton of salvaged hyperfiber. Resting in its berth, Peregrine's ship held a long, elegant shape reminiscent of the harpoons that populated ancient novels about fishermen and lost seas. But that narrow body swelled when liquid hydrogen was pushed into the fuel tanks. One inefficient fusion reactor fed a lone engine that was sloppy but powerful. The launch felt like the end-less slap of a monster's paw, brutal enough to smash bone and pulverize the sternest living flesh. But like every citizen, Peregrine was functionally immortal, blessed with repair mechanisms that could take the stew inside a flight suit and remake the man who had been sitting there. His body died, and time leaped across a string of uneventful minutes. Opening new eyes, Peregrine found himself coasting, climbing away from the Great Ship. Six AIs of various temperaments and skills made up his crew. In his absence, they had continued studying the available data. One served as his pilot, and even when Peregrine reclaimed the helm, the machine waited at a nanosecond's distance, ready to correct any glaring mistakes.

Inside any large hatch, the multitude of bodies came in different shapes, different species. The AI most familiar with mercantile matters pointed at the center of the hatch. "These gull-wands match those

we saw fifteen years ago. Their wings had some good-grade hyperfiber, and nearly ten percent of the collected hearts were salvageable.”

Gull-wands had tiny fusion reactors in their chests. One reactor was powerful enough to light and heat a modest home.

“How much could we make?” Peregrine asked.

An estimate was generated, followed by an impressed silence from every sentient entity.

But then Peregrine noticed a closer feature. “Over here... is that some kind of cloud?”

“No,” was the best guess.

The mass was black along its surfaces, swirling in its interior, and through cracks that were tiny at any distance, glimmers of a fantastically bright blue-white light emerged.

“Anything like it in the records?”

There was an optical similarity to clouds of tiny, extremely swift bodies observed only eight times in the past.

“In my past?”

“Not in your life, no,” one voice replied. “During the city’s life, I mean.”

“Okay. What were those bodies made of?”

That was unknown, since none had ever been captured.

“So pretend we’re seeing them,” he began. “Estimate the numbers in that single gathering.”

“The flock is enormous,” another AI reported. “In the range of ten or eleven billion—”

“That’s what we want!” Peregrine exclaimed.

Skeptical whispers buzzed in his ears.

But the human pointed out, “Everyone else is going to be harvesting gull-wands. Hearts and hyperfiber are going to be cheap for the next hundred years. But if we find something new and special... even gathering up just a few of them...we could pocket several fortunes, and maybe even upgrade our ship...”

His crew had to like the sound of that.

“But reaching the target,” warned the pilot, “will entail burning a large portion of our reserves—”

“So do it now,” Peregrine ordered, releasing the helm.

And for the second time in a very brief while, his fine young body was crushed into an anonymous jelly.

There was no perfect consensus about what the Polypond was—undiminished foe, mad psyche divided against itself, or the spectacular carcass of a once great foe. And in the same fashion, there were competing ideas about the place and purpose of the hatches. Since the rising bodies had mouths and often fed, maybe they were one means of pruning old tissues and re-viving what remained. Or they were infected with some new, improved genetics that had to be spread through the greater body. Perhaps they had a punishing function, retraining regions that their Polypond master judged too independent. Unless of course hatches were exactly what they appeared to be: biological storms. One or many species were enjoying a season of plenty, and working together, those countless bodies would rise into the highest atmosphere, spreading their precious seeds and spores as far as physi-cally possible.

“Perhaps every answer is a little true,” Hawking liked to caution. “Just as every answer is a little bit of a lie too.”

Flying above the hatch, Peregrine thought of his odd friend. But only briefly, and then he consciously shoved him out of his exceptionally busy mind.

“Projections,” he demanded.

His ship was still plunging, its hull pulled into a teardrop configuration, the skin superheated and his sensors half-blinded by the plasmatic envelope. But his crew devised a simple picture showing him

vectors and projections of a future that looked ready to end in the most miserable way.

“Our target is accelerating,” his pilot announced. “I wish to abort before we collide with it.”

The black mass, smooth-faced and distinctly iridescent, was punching its way through a scattering of high clouds. Some of those clouds were alive—vividly colored bodies as light as aerogel and easily shredded. Other clouds were water-stained gray and red with salts and iron, dead cells, and other detritus pushed skyward by the mayhem. Their target was tiny compared to the entire hatch. But it was already the tallest feature, and nothing like it had ever been seen before. Raiders bound for distant hunting grounds were noticing it. Even from two hundred kilometers overhead, the energies and wild violence were obvious. And even from inside a cocoon of superheated gases, human eyes could appreciate the beauty of so many frantic bodies doing whatever it was they were doing.

“I want to abort,” the pilot repeated.

Peregrine agreed. “But find the best way to hold us here, in its path. Can we do that?”

Instantly, the machine said, “Yes. But braking and circling will exhaust our reserves, and there won’t be enough fuel for both cargo and the journey home.”

Peregrine had guessed as much. “Let’s compromise,” he said. “Brake and assume a gliding shape. Where does that leave us?”

“Still dancing with the break-even point,” the pilot

warned.

“So make some calls.” Peregrine named a few smart competitors approaching from more distant berths. “Pay them to wait above us. And share their spare fuel, when the time comes.”

The teardrop flipped over, the engine throwing out a spectacular fire. Every raider knew: ships larger and more powerful than theirs could trigger retribution. An innate reflex or a Polypond strategy? Nobody knew. But Peregrine’s ship was as close to the maximum size as was allowed, and if his plume exceeded the usual limits, even for a moment, a giant laser would pop to the surface on the unreachable sea below, evaporating his ship and then his body, and finally, his very worried skull. But this burn went unnoticed. Then the ship rested, pieces of its hull pull-ing away, forming dragonfly wings configured to work with the thickening winds. Each time they passed through one of the monomolecular skins, Peregrine felt a shudder. The vibrations worsened by the minute, growing violent and relentless, and after a point, numbing and nearly unnoticed.

Countless black bodies continued to rise.

At home, inside the refugees’ city, lived the data sinks that had survived from prewar times. Even the best of them were incomplete. But inside the biological sections, Peregrine had found digitals of fish swimming in schools—a hypnotic set of images where tiny, almost mindless creatures managed to stay in formation, displaying grace and a singleness of

purpose that never failed to astonish him. This was the same, only infinitely more spectacular.

Those black bodies didn't ride on meat and fins, but on tiny rockets and stubby metal wings. Perfect coordination had built a flawless hemisphere better than five hundred kilometers wide. Peregrine's best AI spotter singled out random bodies, carefully watching as they climbed to the outside edge of the school and then worked their way upward, reaching the cloud's apex before doing a curious roll, each shucking off its little wings before firing a larger rocket, then diving back out of sight through gaps too tiny to see from above.

"Identify one of them," Peregrine suggested, "and see when it emerges again."

The spotter had already tried that, and failed. The bodies were too similar, and there were too many of them. But there was an easier, more elegant route. With the help of distant telescopes, the AI took a thorough census of the cloud, and then it let itself feel the gentle but precise tug made by that combined gravity. Then it precisely measured the size of the entire swarm, and with genuine astonishment, it admitted, "They are growing fewer, I think."

"Fewer?"

"Every minute, a million bodies vanish."

"Meaning what?" he asked. "The cloud is shrinking?"

"It grows, but its citizens are scarcer. And this has been happening from the outset, I would guess."



The pilot was managing their long fall while the ship's architect constantly adapted the shape and stiffness of wings, and the shape and color of the fuselage. To the best of its ability, the raider ship was trying to vanish inside the Polypond's enormous sky.

"Will any little guys be left when they reach us?" Peregrine asked. Yes. Billions still.

"But what happens to the others? Where do they go?"

Data gave clues. Neutrinos and the character of escaping light implied a fierce heat, X-rays and even gamma rays seeping free. There was no way to be certain, but the black bodies could be simple machines—lead-doped hyperfiber shells wrapped around nuclear charges, for instance. If those bombs were detonating, then the interior of that cloud was hell: a spherical volume perhaps one hundred kilometers in diameter with an average temperature hotter than the guts of most suns. What would anyone want with so much heat?

"The cloud is a weapon," Peregrine muttered, feeling horrible and sure. His first instinct was to glance at the rocket nozzle behind them, imagining the very worst: a bubble of superheated plasmas was being woven here, ready to be flung up and out into space, like a child's ball aimed for a target several thousand kilometers wide. Drop that creation into the nozzle, and, after a soundless flash, the city would cease to be.

But how would the Polypond launch the bubble?

The AIs were scrambling for answers. It was the ship's architect that imagined the next nightmare. What if the bubble wasn't going to be thrown, but instead it was dropped? If it was flung onto the Great Ship's hull... on the backside of the Ship, where the hyperfiber was thinnest... could it punch a hole into the hallways and habitats below?

Probably not, the majority decided.

But Peregrine and the architect wouldn't give up their nightmares. Since the war had ended, no one had seen energies approaching what was being seen today. But what if the Polypond had been waiting patiently since the war's end, silently gathering resources for this one spectacular attack... ?

Both solutions were possible and awful, and both were wrong. The black cloud was still fifty kilometers below, and simulations were furiously working, and that was when a third, even stranger answer appeared with a withering flash of blue-white light.

In a blink, the top of that shimmering black mass parted. Evaporated.

And from inside that carefully sculpted furnace sprang a shape at once familiar and wrong—a sphere of badly stressed, heavily eroded hyperfiber that was just a few kilometers across but rising fast on a withering plume of exhaust. Making its frantic bid to escape: a starship.

“Reconfigure us now!” Peregrine shouted. “Whatever it takes get us out of the way...!”

On occasion, Peregrine and his inhuman friend discussed the Great Ship and what might or might not be found within its unreachable interior. One despairing possibility was that the Polypond hadn't destroyed the ancient vessel, but it had managed to annihilate both crew and passengers, leaving no one besides a few souls clinging to life outside. On the opposite end of the spectrum sat the most hopeful answer: life aboard the Ship was exactly as it had always been, peaceful and orderly, and the captains were still in charge, and the Polypond had been defeated, or at least fought to a meaningful armistice. And if that was true, then for a host of perfectly fine reasons, nobody at present was bothering to poke their heads out of the living ocean.

"But that doesn't explain this new acceleration," Peregrine would point out.

"The engineers and captains... everybody everywhere... they assumed that these big rockets were the only engines. But plainly, they weren't. Obviously, they weren't even the most powerful thrusters available."

"It is quite the puzzle," Hawking conceded.

The acceleration was not huge, but to make anything as massive as the Great Ship move faster... well, that was an impressive trick. "The captains found something new during the war," Peregrine suggested.

"A talent hidden until now," his friend added.

“That notion has a delight-ful sourness about it, yes.”

Sour was sweet to the leech.

Peregrine would narrow his gaze, imagining captains standing in a crowded, desperate bridge. “They wanted to outmaneuver the Polypond. That’s why they kicked the new motors awake, and now they can’t stop them.”

“A compelling possibility. I agree.”

But Peregrine didn’t believe his own words. “That still won’t explain why the captains don’t come out to get us. Even if they don’t suspect anybody’s here, they should send up teams to scout the situation... and even better, to send messages home to the Milky Way...”

Long limbs acquired the questioning position. “Where would you expect them to appear?” Hawking asked.

“Inside one of the nozzles. I would.”

Silence.

Peregrine offered his reasons as he thought of them. “Because the Polypond can’t reach inside the nozzles. Because the captains could pretty easily work their way through the barricades and hyperfiber plugs. And be-cause from the nozzle floor, they’d have an unobstructed view of the galaxy, and they would be able to measure our position and velocity—”

“The barricades are significant,” the alien cautioned.

“To us, they are. We don’t have the energy or tools to cut through the best grades of hyperfiber.” Shaking

his head, he said, “From what I’ve heard, when my mother’s ship was damaged, she spent her free time trying to find some route to the interior. She explored at least a thousand of the old accessways leading down from here.” Every tunnel, no matter how obscure, was blocked with hyperfiber too deep and stubborn to cut through. “But if there were captains below us, and if only a fraction of the old reactors were working... they could still punch out in a matter of years... maybe weeks...”

Silence.

“So there are no captains,” Peregrine would decide. Every time.

“Which means what?”

“Somebody else is in charge of the Great Ship.” That answer seemed obvious, and it was inevitable, and it made a good mind usefully worried. Yet that answer was a most frustrating creation, since it opened doors into an infinite range of possibilities, imaginable and otherwise.

“Who is in charge?” Hawking would ask, on occasion.

A few powerful species were obvious candidates. But each of them would have sent teams to the surface. They might be different species, but they would be drawn by the same reasons and needs that humans would feel.

“Perhaps the culprit is someone else,” Hawking would propose. “An or-ganism you haven’t thought to consider.”

Anything was possible, yes.

Peregrine threw his ape arms into a posture that mimicked his friend's, underscoring the importance of his next words. "Nobody here is looking for a route down," he said. "I think it's been what? A thousand years since anyone has even tried."

The three hemispherical eyes were bright and still.

Peregrine continued. "Once I get enough savings in the bank, I'll take up my mother's other work. Just to see what I can see."

"That could be a reasonable plan," Hawking would say.

Then most of the time, their conversation ended. Peregrine often made that promise to himself, but he never had the resources or the simple will to invest in the luxury of a many-year search. Besides, he was the finest raider in the city, and raiders were essential. If he gave up his present work, the level of poverty everywhere would rise. Citizens would have to forgo having children and new homes. At least that was his excuse to wait for an-other decade or two, biding time before setting out on what surely would be a useless adventure. Hawking never questioned Peregrine's lack of action. But then again, that creature was ancient and eerily patient, and who knew how many promises he had made to himself during the last eons, all bound up inside his powerful mind, waiting to be fulfilled?

One day, Peregrine surprised himself; he imagined a fresh candidate and a compelling logic that would

explain the mystery.

“It’s the Great Ship,” he offered.

The leech was silent, but there was a different quality to his posture, and even the crystalline eyes looked brighter.

“The Ship itself has come to life,” the young man proposed.

“And why would that be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it finally had enough of human beings at the helm, this damned Polypond trying to kill it, and all the rest of these unpleasant creatures running around inside it. So one day, it just woke up and said, ‘Screw you. From here on, *I’m* in charge!’”

“Interesting,” his friend offered.

“And what if... ?” Peregrine continued. Swallowing and then smiling, he asked, “What if we aren’t just following some random line? Instead of heading out into nothingness, the Ship is actually steering us toward a genu-ine destination?”

Then he laughed in a tight, nervous fashion. “What if our voyage has only just begun, Hawking?”

There was a momentary silence.

Then his friend replied, “Every voyage has just begun. If you consider those words in the proper way...”

Buried in those old data sinks were schematics for a host of impossible machines—devices too intricate or demanding to be built by refugees and their children. Included were wondrous starships like those that once brought passengers to the Great Ship. Peregrine had always dreamed of seeing vessels like those, and judging by the spectrums, that's what the ap-paration was: an armored starship equipped with a streakship drive, efficient and relentless, yet operating at some minuscule fraction of full throttle. With just that whisper of thrust, the gap between him and it closed in an instant. Peregrine's ship was a tiny, toyish rocket that barely had time enough to fold its wings and kick itself out of the way. The rising starship missed Per-egrine by less than ten kilometers. The silvered ball of hyperfiber stood on a plume of hard radiations, the exhaust narrow at the nozzle but widening as it drove downward, scorching heat causing it to explode outward into an atmosphere that was cooked to a broth of softer plasmas, a stark blue-white fire betraying only the coldest of the unfolding energies.

“Run!” he ordered.

His pilot had already made that panicked assessment. Using the last shreds of its wings, the raider ship tilted its nose and leaped toward space, not following the starship so much as simply trying to keep ahead of the awful fire. The black mass beneath them continued to churn and spin. And the living



ocean below everything could see the starship too, a thousand defensive systems triggered, the burning air suddenly full of laser bursts and particle beams and a host of slow ballistic weapons that could never catch their target. Whatever the reason for fighting, hatred or simple instinct, the Polypond employed every trick in its bid to kill its opponent. And that's when Peregrine's tiny ship was kissed by one of the lasers, a portion of his hull and two entire wings turned to carbon ash and a telltale glow.

"Reconfigure!" he screamed.

The AIs began shuffling the surviving pieces, pulling their ship back into a rough shape that might remain whole for another few moments. But the main fuel tank was pierced, leaking and unpatchable.

"We can't make it home," was the uniform verdict.

Peregrine had already come to that grim conclusion.

"Hunt for help," he said. "Who's close—?"

"No one is," he heard.

The surviving portions of the black mass were still churning, a few billion fusion bombs riding little rockets. It was a useless gesture, Peregrine believed. But then he noticed how the cloud was changing as it moved, acquiring a distinct pancake-shaped base above which a tiny fraction of the bombs were gathering, pulling themselves into a dense, carefully stacked bundle. In a shared instant, the pancake below ignited itself.

The resulting flash dwarfed every bolt of laser

light, and even the stardrive faded from view. A hypersonic slap struck the last of those bombs, destroy-ing most but throwing the rest of them skyward at a good fraction of light-speed. Then as the bombs passed into the last reaches of the atmosphere, they gave themselves one last shove, rockets carrying them close enough that the starship was forced to react, shifting its plume slightly, evaporating every last one of its pursuers. But the pancake burst had launched more than just bombs. A fat por-tion of the atmosphere was being shoved upward, and soon it would stand higher than Peregrine had ever seen. More out of instinct than calculation, he said, “Try wings again, and ride this updraft.”

It wouldn't lift them much, no. But the soaring maneuver would keep them at a safer altitude for a little while longer.

“Now are there any raiders who can reach us?”

Several, maybe.

“Offer them anything,” Peregrine told his mercantile AI. “Thanks. Money. My family name. Whatever works.”

Moments later, a deal was secured.

The airborne wreckage of his ship continued to jump and lurch through the blazing atmosphere. Life support was close to failing, and once it did, his body would cook and temporarily die. Peregrine invested his last conscious moments looking up at the streakship, watching as it broke into true space, that

relentless engine throwing back a jet of plasma that grew even thinner and hotter as it began to finally throttle up.

“Yell at the ship,” he ordered.

That brought confused silence.

“Assume there’s a tribe of humans onboard,” he instructed his AIs. “Curse at them and blame them for all our miseries. Say whatever you have to, but get them to talk back to us...”

“And then what?” asked his pilot.

“Remember everything they say,” he muttered as his lips burned. “And everything they don’t say too—”

“You were once an engineer,” he had whispered to Fusillade. “But not anymore, I have to believe.”

“And why not?”

The arbitrary moment on the clock called “morning” was approaching. The two humans were sleepy and physically spent. But Peregrine found the energy to explain, “I know every engineer. By face. By name. By skills. After all, I am a raider.”

“You are.”

“None of you founders are helping us fly. Your children and grandchil-dren, sure. But never you.”

Silence.

“It’s funny,” he allowed. “I don’t keep track of you. I mean humans and harum-scarums, the fef and all the others. .. those lucky ones who founded our city. I doubt if I could attach ten faces to the right names, since most of you seem happy to keep close to each other...”

The only response was a smile, thin and wary.

Peregrine grew tired of this dance. “So what do you do with your time?” he finally asked.

The smile brightened. “I study.”

“The subject?”

“Many matters.” The woman was taller than Peregrine, and stronger. She pushed on his chest—pushed harder than necessary—and he felt his heart beating against the flat of her palm. Then very quietly, Fusillade asked, “What do you know about your half brother?”

Peregrine offered a crisp, inadequate biography of a man who lived and died long ago.

“And your two sisters?”

There were three siblings in all. Two were raiders who eventually didn't return from their missions, while that final sister had followed their mother's other pursuit, hunting for a route back into the Great Ship. But a crude plasma drill exploded during testing, obliterating most of her mind along with her bones and meat. With a shrug, Peregrine confessed, “I don't think about them very often. Different fathers, and we never knew each other. .. and all that...”

His lover winked and said, “You know, he was their friend too.”

“Who was?”

“You know who.” The smile had been replaced by a genuinely cold expression, eyes weighing everything they saw—not unlike the leech eyes. “He wore different names, yes. But he was a companion to your sisters and your brother too. They weren't as good friends as you are to him, but he was always close. And when your mother had no living children, he would strike up relationships with whoever seemed to be the best raider.”

“I've heard that story before,” Peregrine muttered. Then with a pride that took him a little by surprise, he added, “Yeah, everyone says that I've got some odd tie with Hawking, or whatever he wants to call himself...”

“And what about your mother?”

“What about her?”

“She and the alien knew each other. Not at first, no. At least, nobody in my circle remembers any relationship. But your mother invited your dear companion along when she went below, hunting for an open road to the Great Ship. I’m sure you can imagine why. That leech could slip his way into some amazingly tiny crevices, if he had to...”

Peregrine was perfectly awake now.

Quietly, firmly, the ageless lover said, “I wouldn’t want you to mention this to your good friend. What I’m sharing, I mean. Let’s keep it between ourselves.”

Again and again, the young man realized that he knew little about any-thing. Looking at the woman’s stiff, unreadable face, he asked again, “What exactly do you do with your time?”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You’re still an engineer, aren’t you?”

“Do you think so?”

“The founders, and particularly the oldest of you. .. each of you have celebrated tens of thousands of birthdays. Minds like yours have habits, and habits don’t easily change.” Now he sat up and pushed against her chest. The woman had a peculiar asymmetry—a giant black nipple tipped the small hard right breast, while its large and very soft neighbor wore a tiny silver cap. Between the breasts lay a heart beating faster than he expected. “So tell me: what kind of engineering do you do?”

“Mostly, I buy useless items in the markets.”

“Which items?”

“Pieces of neural networks. You know, the little brains of those big corpses that you bring home... from gull-wands and clowers and the rest of the free-ranging bodies...”

Those brains were always tiny, simple of design, and often mangled or burned. Generations of raiders had collected the trinkets, and not even the largest few had shown any hint of sentience.

“Maybe as individual fragments, they’re simple.” She pulled Peregrine’s other hand over her chest, and smiled. “But if you splice them together, very carefully... if you spend a few thousand years doing little else... you’ll cobble together something that captures a portion of one genuine soul. Maybe it’s the Polypond’s mind, maybe something else. Whatever it is, you’ll find memories and images and ideas... and on occasion, you might even hear some timely, important news...”

“Such as?”

She refused to say.

“And what does this have to do with Hawking?”

“Maybe nothing,” she replied with an agreeable tone. “But now that you mention it: what should we say about that very good friend of yours?”

In the end what was saved was too small and far too mutilated to reconstitute itself. Peregrine was a lump of caramelized tissue surrounding a fractured skull that held a bioceramic brain cut through by EM surges and furious rains of charged particles. The damage was so severe that every memory and tendency and each of his precious personal biases had to migrate into special shelters, and life had ceased completely for a timeless span covering almost eighteen days. Death held sway—longer than he had ever known, Nothingness ruled—and then after a series of quick tickling sensations and flashes of meaningless light, the raider found himself recovered enough that his soul migrated out of its hiding places and his newest eyes opened, gazing at a face that was not entirely unexpected.

“The streakship,” he blurted with his new mouth. “Where?”

A limb touched his mouth and both cheeks, and then another limb touched his chest, feeling his heart. The limbs were soft, strong, and human— a woman’s two hands—and then he heard her voice saying, “Gone,” with finality. “Gone now. Gone.”

“It got away safely?”

She said, “Yes,” with a nod, then with her eyes, and finally with a whisper. And she leaned closer, adding, “The streakship has escaped, yes. Eighteen days, and it’s still accelerating. Faster than you would ever guess, it is racing toward the Milky Way.”



Peregrine tried to move, and failed. His legs and arms were only half-grown, wearing wraps filled with blood and amino acids. But he could breathe deeply, enjoying that sensation quite a lot. “What about my crew?”

“Degraded, but alive.” The woman’s face was pleased and a little as-tonished, telling him, “At the end, when you were rescued. .. when that other raider plucked you out of the mayhem. .. the AIs were flying what was really just a toy glider, barely as big as me, and with maybe a tenth my mass...”

Peregrine tried to absorb his good fortune. How could you even calcu-late the long odds that he had crossed?

The ancient woman sat back, biding her time.

“Did the streakship ever talk?” he asked.

“Yes.” She nodded and smiled wistfully, and then with a matter-of-fact shrug, she added, “As soon as the streakship got above us, it hit us with a narrow-beam broadcast. Yes.”

“What did it say?”

“Life survives inside the Great Ship,” she reported. “But our old leaders, the wise and powerful captains... they’re gone now. All of them. Either dead or in hiding somewhere.”

“Who is in charge?”

“Nobody.”

“What does that mean?”

“From what the streakship told us, passengers are fendng for themselves.”

The woman paused, studying his new face. Then she quietly mentioned, “However, there is one exceptionally obscure species that’s come into some prominence. In fact, at the end of the Polypond War, they took control of the Great Ship’s helm.”

She offered a flickering wink, and then added, “And, oh... now that I mentioned that... guess who else has gone away... ?

“Somebody you know...

“Even before your body arrived home, he picked up his shell, and by the looks of it, scuttled away...”

Peregrine was perfectly healthy and profoundly poor. The raider who saved him had acquired most of his assets, while his debts to the hospital remained substantial, possibly eternal. He had no ship, and his crew was repaired and working with others. Several investors came forward, offering to pay for a new ship in return for a fat percentage of all future gains. But the only fair offer was a brief contract from his father, and for a variety of reasons, personal and otherwise, the young man decided to send it back unsigned and follow an entirely new course. If you live cheaply and patiently, it takes astonishingly little money to keep you breathing and content.

For most of a century, Peregrine stalked the deep tunnels and access ports that laced the Ship's central nozzle. Armed with maps left behind by his mother and sister, he hunted for routes they might have missed. He managed to find two or three every year, but each one was inevitably plugged with the high-grade hyperfiber. It was easy to see why no one kept up this kind of search for long. Yet Peregrine refused to quit, if only because the idea of failure gave his mouth such an awful taste. New lovers drifted in and out of his life.

He occasionally saw the old lady engineer, meeting her for a meal and conversation. They hadn't slept together in decades, but they remained friendly enough. Besides, she had a sharp mind and important connections, and sometimes, when she was in the

mood, she gave him special knowledge.

“You knew a big hatch was coming,” Peregrine accused her. “That’s why you seduced me when you did. Somehow, you and your founder friends pieced together clues that the rest of us don’t ever get to see.”

“Yet that hatch, big as it was, was just a secondary phenomenon,” she explained. “Like blood from a fresh cut. I won’t tell exactly how we knew, but we did. And what was more important was that someone or something had emerged from one of the old ports. We had reason to believe that an armored vessel was pushing through the Polypond ocean, heading our way... pre-sumably to get into a useful position before jumping free of the Ship.”

“And you suspected Hawking?”

“For thousands of years, I did. We did.” Fusillade nodded, and then said,

“This isn’t official. But in the final seconds of the War, a few messages arrived from the interior. They were heavily coded military broadcasts, which is why they aren’t common knowledge. They describe the creatures that were taking over the battered Ship. The leech, the broadcasts called them. And not wanting to alert the spy in our midst, we decided to keep those secrets to ourselves.”

“But he’s gone,” Peregrine countered. “Why not make a public announcement?”

“Because we don’t want to panic our children, of course.”

“Am I panicking?” he asked.

“In slow motion, you are. Yes.” The ancient engineer sat back in her chair, tapping at the heart nestled between her unequal breasts. “Spending your life searching for a way into the Ship, when we are as certain as we can be that there is no way inside.. .yes, I think that’s genuinely panicked behavior.

“Hawking disappeared to someplace,” he replied. “That means there’s at least one route off this nozzle.”

“If he went back into the Great Ship, perhaps. But for all we know, he’s walking today on a living cloud off on some distant piece of the Polypond’s body.”

Peregrine had wasted decades walking empty hallways and dangling from soft glass ropes. He could have wasted a thousand centuries before finding the relevant clue. But he was a lucky individual, and he had the good fortune of becoming lost at the proper moment. After two wrong turns, he found himself standing beside a tiny chute exactly like ten thousand other chutes. Except, that is, for the marks left behind by a delicate limb that had been dipped in paint. No, in blood. A blackish alien blood with a distinctive flavor, and the writing was a familiar script, showing the simple word “HAWKING,” followed by a simple yet elegant arrow pointing straight down.

The chute ended with a vast airless room built for no discernible purpose. Its walls were half a kilometer tall, and the floor was a circular plain covering perhaps ten square kilometers of featureless hyperfiber—stuff as old as the Ship, far better than any grade that could be chiseled through today. The only obvious doorway led out into the dormant rocket nozzle. Peregrine set up a torch in the room's center, and then he kneeled, searching that expanse with a powerful night scope. He should have missed the second doorway. If anyone else had ever visited this nameless place, they surely would have ignored what looked like a crevice, horizontal and brief. But someone was standing in front of the opening—a distinctive alien wearing a gossamer lifesuit, his long jointed legs locked into a comfortable position, the body motionless now and perhaps for a very long while.

Peregrine walked a few steps, then broke into a hard run. On their private channel, Hawking said, "You look fit, my friend. And rather troubled too, I see."

"What are you doing here?" Peregrine blurted.

"Waiting for you," was the reply.

"Why?"

"Because you are my friend."

"I don't particularly believe that," said Peregrine. "From what I've heard, the leech are my enemies..."

"I have injured you how many times?"

“Never,” he thought, saying nothing.

“My friend,” said Hawking. “What precise treacheries am I guilty of?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

Silence.

Peregrine had invested years wondering what he would say, should this moment arrive. “Why live with us?” he asked. “Were you some kind of spy? Were you sent here to watch over us?”

There was a pause, then a cryptic comment. “You know, I saw you enter-ing this place. I saw that quite easily.”

“I’ve been climbing toward you for several hours,” Peregrine complained.

“Of course you saw me...”

Then he hesitated, rolling the alien’s confession around in his head. With relentless patience, Hawking waited.

Peregrine slowed his gait, asking, “How long have you been watching my approach?”

“Since your birth,” the leech confessed.

Peregrine stopped now.

After a few minutes of reflection, he said, “Those eyes of yours... they see into the future... ?”

Silence.

“Do they see everything that’s going to happen?”

“Do your eyes absorb everything there is to see?”

Peregrine shook his head. “A limited sight, is that it?”

One of the distant legs lifted high, signaling

agreement.

“What else can you see, Hawking?”

“That I have never hurt you,” the alien repeated.

“My half sister... the one who died in the plasma blast... did you arrange that accident?”

“No.”

“But did you see the accident approaching?”

Silence.

“And why did you come up on the hull, Hawking? The only reason I can think of is to spy on us.”

“An obvious answer. And your imagination is richer than that, my friend.”

Hard as it was to believe, the apparent compliment forced Peregrine to smile.

“Okay,” he muttered. “You wanted to spy on our future. We’re an in-dependent society, free of the leech, and maybe you’re scared of us.”

“That is an interesting assessment, but mistaken.”

“I don’t understand then.”

“In time, you will,” the leech promised.

Then every one of its limbs was moving, carrying the creature backward into the narrow, almost invisible crevice. Peregrine began to run again, in a full sprint; but he was still half a kilometer from his goal when a warm gooey stew of fresh hyperfiber flowed into view, filling the crevice and pushing across the slick floor, glowing in the infrared as it swiftly cured.

\* \* \* \*



The final doorway had been opened just enough for a small human wearing a minimal lifesuit to slip through, and, walking alone, he then stepped onto a frigid, utterly flat plain. During the War, portions of the Polypond had splashed into the giant nozzle, dying here or at least freezing into a useless hibernation. Peregrine strode out to where he found a modest telescope as well as a set of telltale marks. His friend once stood here, those powerful eyes of his linked to the light-hungry mirror. By measuring the marks in the ice, and with conservative estimates of the heat lost by Hawking's lifesuit, Peregrine guessed that the creature had stood here for many years, pulling up his many feet when they had melted to uncomfortable depth, then dancing over to a fresh place before reclaiming his watchful pose. Peregrine lay on his back now, slowly melting into the dead ice, and he fixed the same telescope to his eyes and purposefully stared at the sky. The little city was barely visible—a sprinkling of tiny lights and heat signatures threatening to vanish against the vast bulk of the timeless and utterly useless nozzle. Millions of souls were up there, breeding and spreading out farther in a profoundly impoverished realm. Yet despite all of their successes, they seemed to have no impact on a scene that dwarfed all men and their eternal urges. What wasn't the nozzle was the galaxy.

Here was what the leech had been watching. Hawking had lived for thousands of years in a place that offered him comfort and the occasional

companionship. But once the streakship had left, carrying its important news to the universe beyond, the creature's work had begun: sitting on this bitter wasteland, those great eyes had been fixed on three hundred billion suns. Peregrine studied the maelstrom of stars and worlds, dust and busy minds; and perhaps for the first time in his life, he appreciated that this was something greater than any silly Polypond. Here lay an ocean beyond any other, and someday, in one fashion or another, a great hatch would rise from it—furious bodies riding upon a trillion, trillion wings, reaching for this prize that has been lost.

This Great Ship.

## Hexagons

My mother always made a lot of noise about keeping busy, and how much she hated tripping over kids who were doing nothing but reading books or watching the electric vase. That's why my brother and I belonged to the biggest, most important swim team in our little end of the world. It was to keep us fit and keep us from being underfoot. Chester was one of the stars on the team. I wasn't. Nobody ever explained how I got accepted into those lofty ranks. But if I know my mom, she told the coach, "Fair is fair. And if you want one of my boys, you've got to take both of them." Mom loved to talk about things like fair play and decency, but mostly, it was just awfully convenient having the two of us involved in the same sport. It meant less driving, and fewer events to attend. Which is a kind of fairness, I suppose—making life easy on your folks.

I wasn't an awful swimmer. In a flat-out race, Chester and I were pretty much equal. Pretty much. But my brother happened to be four years younger than me—four years and seven months, to be exact—which made him one of the top seven-year-olds in the province. And made me his big-assed sidekick. Our coach was pretty plain about his own affections. He'd stalk the sides of the bath, hollering instructions down at poor Chester. Elbows, legs, breathing, and then back to the elbows again. Swimming is a

ferociously technical business. It demands a muscular grace that I've never been able to maintain. Occasionally the coach would check on me, making sure I wasn't dead in the deep end. But in general, my value with the team was more of a spiritual order: I made the other twelve-year-olds feel good about their abilities. Lapping me was a great game. Boys and girls could play that game all night. You can see why I didn't exactly adore the sport. But it wasn't that awful, either. I got to stare at girls wearing tight wet silks. That's always a benefit. And since nobody expected anything from me, I was free to cling to the side for minutes at a stretch, watching the girls and listening to the coach roaring at my brother. "Pull through the water! Through, Chester! Down the middle of your body. And bring your hand out this way. This way! With your elbow up . . . oh, Christ . . . what in hell is that. . . ?"

I don't remember that night's workout. And I don't have any special recollections of getting dressed in the locker room afterward. We always took showers, but I never got rid of the chlorine smell. The stuff clung to my hair, and if my goggles leaked—and they usually did—my eyes would burn for hours. Then we'd put our school uniforms back on again, and I always had to make sure that Chester remembered his silk trunks and goggles. I assume all those usual things happened that night. But what I do remember, without question, was that our father was supposed to pick us up. That gave the evening a dramatic kick.

In our lives, Dad was something of a wild card. You could never guess where he was or what was so important, but his busy life had its way of dividing his allegiances, spreading him thin. I can't count the nights when it was Chester and me sitting on the steps of the Young Legionnaires' Club, waiting for that old green Testudo to pull up.

That night was different, however. The old man surprised us. Not only was he waiting at the locker door, he'd actually seen the last few minutes of the workout. "You looked strong out there," he told Chester, rubbing at his stubbly hair. Then to me, with a pushed-along concern, he asked, "Are you hurt? I saw you doing a lot of standing in the shallow end."

I could have lied. I could have told him, "Yeah, I had a cramp." I should have made up a great story, my twisting, pain-wracked body sinking to the bottom and half a dozen girls in wet silks fighting for the honor of pulling me up again. But instead, I just shrugged and told him, "No, I wasn't hurt."

"Then what were you doing?"

"Standing," I said. And I left it there.

Our father wasn't a big man, or small. There was a time in life when he seemed wondrously powerful—a titan capable of casting shadows and flinging snowballs clear over our house. But at the wise age of twelve, I was realizing that shadows were easy and our house wasn't all that big. And everything about my father was beginning to diminish. He had a fondness for overcoats that were too large for him. He

was a smiling man. A salesman by trade and by temperament, he had a smiling voice and an easy charm and the sort of rough, unspectacular looks that helped people believe whatever he was trying to sell them. We might have been rich, if Dad had just stuck to selling. But he had this dangerous streak of imagination. Every few years, he'd start up some new business. Each venture began with hope and considerable energy, and each lasted for a year or maybe eighteen months. At some point, we'd stop hearing about his new career. Dad would stay away from home, at least past dinnertime. Toward the end, he couldn't make it back until midnight, and I would lie in bed, wrestling with my brain, trying desperately to make myself sleep before Mom had the chance to corner him and the shouting began.

That night was a winter night. Windy and bitter. With Dad leading the charge, we stepped out into the cold dark air, our breath smoky and my wet hair starting to freeze. The old Testudo, big and square, was parked under a light. Hadrian was sitting in the back, in his straw, watching for us. I liked that cat, but he worried me. He liked to nip fingers. My fingers, mostly. All those generations of careful breeding and the fancy Asian splicing, but really, cheetahs are still as wild as they are tame. And while I thought it was neat to have a cheetah, Mom held a rather different opinion. "Do you know why your father bought him?" she asked me once. "Because he's going bald."

“The cat is?” I asked.

“No, your father is,” she rumbled. Which, frankly, made no more sense to me than the cat going bald.

I climbed into the back seat, just so I could stick one of my least favorite fingers through the wire mesh, that dog-like face greeting me with a rough lick and a quick pinch of incisors. Chester was sitting up front with Dad. Dad cranked the motor, and it came on and then died again. He tried again, and there was a roar and cough and silence again. That was my father’s life with machines. He decided the motor had flooded, and so he turned on the ceiling light and waited. He smiled back at me, or at his cat. I could never feel sure which of us was getting the smile. Then with an odd, important voice, he said, “I want to show you something.”

I said, “Okay.”

He reached inside his big overcoat, pulling out a folded-up newspaper. It was already turned to page two. One tiny article was circled. “Read it,” he advised, handing the paper back to me. And even before I could start, he asked, “What do you think?”

I saw my father’s name.

“Leonard Dunlop, 38, has filed as a candidate for Senate in District 8,” I read. Then I held the article up to the weak light, eyes blinking from the chlorine, little tears giving every word a mushy, dreamy look. “If he wins,” I read, “Mr. Dunlop intends to use his salary to help pay for his children’s university education.”

Again, Dad asked, "What do you think?"

"You're running for what?" I asked, using an unfortunate tone. A doubting tone.

"The Senate," he said, pointing proudly at the tiny article.

"The big one?" Chester asked. "In New Rome?"

I snorted. Twelve years old and not particularly wise in the ways of politics, but I still had enough sense to dismiss that possibility. "He means the little senate. For our province, that's all."

Which wasn't the best way to phrase things.

Dad gave me a look. Then he turned forward and started the car, listening to the ugly engine cough and die. Then he turned to Chester, telling him, "But this is just the beginning."

With his salesman's voice, he sounded convinced, saying, "This is an important district. If we win, it's a launching pad to New Rome. And from there, who knows? Who knows?"

My father's sense of politics was always shaky. For instance, he might have been smart to warn Mom about his impending candidacy. Instead, he never quite mentioned his plans to her, and she had to learn about it when friends and relatives began calling. Or maybe on second thought, Dad had a good, clear sense of politics. Because if he had said something, I think Mom would have told him half a thousand reasons why it was the wrong thing to do, and stupid; and against his better judgment, he might have listened to her wise counsel.



As it was, Mom pretty much amazed me. She was waiting for us at the dinner table, and she was furious. But she didn't do anything worse than give Dad a good hard glare. Then she sat her boys down and said, "I think your father would make a good senator. If he happens to win."

There. That's why she wasn't screaming. Mom had a good rational sense about the world, and she knew the old man didn't have a chance.

I don't remember much else about that night. We watched the electric vase, waiting for the late news. We waited to hear Dad's name. But with all the national stuff to talk about, and the international stuff, and a report from the Mars mission, plus the weather and sports, there wasn't a lot of room left for local news. I went to bed wondering if he really was running. Or was his candidacy just a bunch of misprints in a newspaper famous for its mistakes?

But Dad was running, and it didn't stay secret. Friends and classmates heard about it from their parents. My best friend knew even before I did. Nathan was this part-Jewish kid, sharp and smart in all sorts of ways. He was older than me by a few months, but it felt like years. He always knew stuff that I never even thought about knowing. We rode the same bus to school, and since his house was a couple of stops before mine, he was usually waiting for me. That next morning, wearing a big grin, he said, "I heard about your dad."

“What’d you hear?” I blurted, suddenly alarmed. I always had a what’s-he-done-now feeling about my father.

“He’s running for the provincial senate,” Nathan told me.

“Oh, yeah.”

“He entered just before the deadline,” he told me.

I had no idea there were deadlines. But then again, life seemed a lot like school, and school was nothing but a string of deadlines.

“You know who he’s running against?” Nathan asked.

I said, “Maybe.”

“You don’t.”

“Maybe not,” I agreed.

He named four names. Today, only one of those names matters. But I doubt if I learned any of them that morning. Nathan could have been speaking Mandarin, for all I cared.

“They’re running against your father,” he explained. “In the primary, this spring. Then the two candidates who earn the most votes—”

“I know how it works,” I complained.

“Run against each other,” he finished. “Next autumn.”

That was nearly a year off. Nothing that remote could matter, and so I told Nathan, “He’s going to win.”

“Who is? Your father?”

I said, “Sure,” with a faltering conviction.

Nathan didn't make fun of me. I expected teasing, and I probably deserved it. But he just looked down the length of the bus, nodding to himself. "That wouldn't be the worst thing," he muttered. "Not by a long ways."

I liked Nathan for reasons other than Nathan. He lived up on the hill, in a genuinely enormous house, and because his family was wealthy, he always had fancier toys and every good game. His mother was beautiful and Jewish, which made her doubly exotic to me. His father was a government man in one of those big bureaus that helped protect our nation's industries, which made him important. But Nathan's grandfather was my favorite. The old man had emigrated from Britain, escaping some ill-defined trouble, and now he lived with his son's family, tucked away in their guest quarters. He was a fat man, a cigar smoker and a determined drinker, who'd sit and talk to me. We had actual conversations about real, adult topics. The man had this massive intelligence and endless opinions, and with a booming voice, he could speak forever about things that I never knew were important. And where Nathan would ridicule my ideas, his grandfather seemed to accept much of what I said, correcting me where I was horribly wrong, and congratulating me on my occasional and rather tiny insights.

"What you should do," Nathan once told me. "Ask to see his war game."

I'd been coming to the house for a year or two, but the game had never been mentioned.

"It's kind of a secret. But I think he'll show it to you. If you ask nice, and if you pick the right time."

"What's the right time?" I asked.

"After he's drunk too much," my friend confided, winking with a conspiratorial glee.

Looking back, I can see exactly what Nathan wanted. He wanted the excuse to see the secret game for himself. But regardless of reasons, I was curious. A few weeks later, when his grandfather seemed properly stewed, I mentioned the mysterious game. The old man stared at me for a minute, smiling in that thin way people use when they're trying not to look too pleased. Then with a low, rumbling voice, he asked, "And what, dear boy, have you heard about this game?"

"It's about the world, and war," I answered. Then I lied, saying, "That's all I know."

We were sitting in the enormous dining room. The old man planted a half-finished cigar into his buttery face, and with a calm deep voice, he said to Nathan, "Take your good friend upstairs. When I am ready, I will sound the horns of war."

We obeyed, sitting anxiously on Nathan's bedroom floor. His teenaged sister was upstairs, too. Wearing nothing but a white slip, she was jumping from her room to the bathroom and back again. I don't need to mention, there was another benefit in Nathan's friendship. I was watching for his sister, and he told

me, "This'll be fun." Then his grandfather hollered, and we had to go downstairs again.

The game board had been brought out of its hiding place. With a glance, I knew why it was such a secret. All the words were Mandarin. The board looked new and modern, filled with a cold, slick light. With the drapes closed, the dining room was lit up by the game. Someone had spliced extra chips into the mechanical brain.

With a touch of the keypad, the old man changed the Mandarin into New Latin, and a huge map of the world emerged on a background of neat black hexagons.

"Technically," he said, "this is an illegal possession."

I knew that already.

"It came from China, and it was smuggled through the Aztec Republic. A friend of a friend did this, for a fee."

I nodded, feeling nothing but impressed.

"In the Old Empire," he explained, "a toy such as this would be labeled ideologically dangerous. In the New Lands, thankfully, we are a little less obsessed about maintaining the fabled status quo. But still, our government would be within its rights to take this from me, if only to harvest the mechanical mind. This is not a new game, but its circuits are still superior to anything we can build today."

He didn't have to tell me.

"Sit," he suggested.

I plopped into a hard chair.

“Who do you wish to be?” he asked.

Boundaries had appeared on the map. This wasn't our world, I realized. It was the past. Instead of the New Lands, there was an empty continent floating in a silvery mist. The enormity of Asia lay before me. At the far end was the Roman Empire, its territories marked with a sickly gray, while the Chinese Empire was under my hands, its green lands dotted with cities and roads and tiny military units existing as images floating inside that wondrous game board.

“You may become any civilization,” the old man explained. “Your responsibility is to control the nation, or nations, that comprise your civilization.”

“Be Rome,” Nathan blurted. “Or India. Or Persia. Or Mongolia.”

I said, “China.”

A fresh cigar was lit, and a fresh whiskey was poured. And the old man grinned at me, his smooth and pale and very fat flesh shining in the game's light. There was a deep, scorching wisdom in his eyes. And with a voice holding ironies that I couldn't hear, he asked, “How did I know?”

He said, “Naturally. You wish to pick the winner.”

Once the senate campaign began, we started attending church regularly.

I was pretty much of one mind about those Sunday mornings. I hated every part of them. I'd outgrown my one good suit months ago, and I could never tie the fake-silk tie properly, and the stiff leather shoes

made my toes cross and ache. I hated how my complaints about my wardrobe were met with stony silence. I despised the boredom of sitting in church while strangers sang and prayed and sat silent, listening while the elderly priests gave us God's lofty opinions about the state of the world. Sometimes, in secret, I didn't mind hearing the choir singing. I also appreciated the teenage girls swishing along in their best dresses. And when I wanted, I could open the Bible and hunt for bloody passages. Not even Mom could complain about that, sitting stiff and tired beside me, smiling for the world to see.

We belonged to the Celtic Reformed Church. I didn't appreciate it then, but our little branch of God's Word had some very wealthy believers. Our church was a new and expensive building, larger than necessary and just a little short of beautiful. Donations helped pay the tariffs and bribes required to import exotic lumber and foreign stone. Even the lights were a little spectacular—floating Japanese-made orbs that moved according to invisible commands, their shapes changing to light up the entire room, or to focus on a very specific, very important spot.

During the sermons, every light shone on the pulpit. One special morning, our bishop came to deliver the sermon, and he spoke forever about poverty and its beauty in God's eye. He explained how Christendom was special in every important way. God had blessed our faith and the Empire. How else

could we have survived to this day, against titanic odds? True, we might not possess the wealth of some nations. And we didn't have spaceships or cities riding on the waves. And perhaps our science seemed backward to some observers. But what did science matter? Where was the value in flying to Mars? Nonbelievers could never enter heaven, and wasn't Heaven the only worthwhile destination in this brief, brief life of ours?

Our bishop was a very old man, and at the end of the service, when he walked past me, I heard his Indian-built heart beating like a hammer somewhere down in his belly. I thought that was odd. Later, while riding home, I described my thoughts. "If Heaven's so important," I asked, "why did the bishop buy that fancy heart? Why didn't he just let himself die?"

We were using Mom's little car. I was sitting in back, with Chester, and the adults were up front, not making so much as a squeak.

They didn't understand me, I assumed. With a stubborn tone, I continued explaining my concerns. "And if science isn't that important, why do we need fancy lights? Or cars? Or electric vases?"

My father didn't answer. But he halfway shrugged his shoulders, as if admitting the silliness of it.

Mom took a different course. She turned and stared at me, and after an icy week or two, she reminded me, "When you're in public, like today, people are watching. I want you to remember that.



People are judging you and all of us. Do you know what I'm saying, Samuel?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"The world is more complicated than you can imagine," she warned. "And it's usually best to keep your opinions to yourself."

But if I couldn't imagine the world, who could?

That cold question gnawed at me. Watching the backs of my parents' heads, it occurred to me that neither of them had any special imagination, and worse than that, they were happy with their stupidity.

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I picked China, and lost.

The game was set at novice level. Its rules and the mechanical mind were made simple, and I had more people and money and better armies and the finest navy in the world. And I lost. India invaded, and Japan invaded, and Nathan laughed at me, watching my collapse accelerate with the centuries. His grandfather was more patient, reminding both of us, "This is a simulation, and a decidedly crude one, at that. Even if you began again, and even if you made the same initial moves, events would play out in some very different fashion." Then he said the word, "Chaos," with a genuine fondness. "Chaos can break the strongest nation, and it can build empires from the weakest tribe."

I had no idea what he was telling me.

Nathan pretended to understand. "Let me play," he begged. He had been waiting most of an hour to make

that request. "At level three? Okay, Grandpa? And I'll be the Roman Empire."

At level three, there were more rules and more circumstances to watch, and the other powers were smarter by a long ways. At first, it looked as if my friend was failing badly. He let the Great Wall of Constantine fall to ruins. He allowed invaders from the steppes to descend while civil wars spread through the Empire, a dozen little nations blossoming in the mayhem. Then for no sensible reason, he turned those new countries against each other. I thought he was crazy. I confidently laughed at him. But even while his little nations fought pointless, nearly endless wars, Nathan appeared serene. Even when the plagues erupted, he wore a big smug know-it-all smile.

Meanwhile, China was invaded. The Mongols came and took everything, and then after a long while, they were absorbed. When new Chinese leaders appeared, they decided they didn't need the rest of the world. The great ocean-going junks were allowed to sink, and the ancient trade routes vanished under desert sands. As the centuries passed, little changed in that piece of the world. It was as if some great spell had been cast over its people and the emerald lands.

The Roman Empire remained splintered and angry. But each new nation built its own navy, and with armies conditioned by war and disease, each spread across the world, conquering every wild

continent before pushing into India, and then, invading the suddenly backward China.

Elbows on the table, I watched a very strange world emerge.

“This is a simulation,” the old man said one last time. Then he set down an empty glass, telling me, “But if one were to set the game to the most difficult level, and if each side competed equally well . . . well, the game never ends the same way twice. But there are patterns. Lessons, you might call them. One time out of five, the Christian states come to dominate the world.”

I looked at the date.

1933, by the Christian count.

This was our year, and nothing was familiar. There were no spaceships, much less cities on the moon. China was mangled and poor, and India belonged to an independent Britain, and again, with a sick surety, war was breaking out in the remnants of the Empire. The Germans were marching into Gaul, and the Slavs were massing their millions, and in the New Lands, a new Roman republic was building armies and fleets, and crude propeller planes were waiting to carry the first uranium bombs.

As a family, for the sake of the campaign, we went to bake sales. We witnessed the start of running races and tulip festivals and cock fights. We attended the grand opening of a fancy food market, and I ate enough cookies to throw up. Dressed in our finest, we stood bunched together in big rooms and small

rooms, smiling with a trained enthusiasm. I remember a strange man patting my brother on the shoulders, saying, "Here's the swimmer, hey? What a little steamboat!"

Jerk, I thought. Smiling still.

Then he gave me a distracted handshake, asking my little brother, "So what do you think? Another month till the primary, and it's down to a three-horse race."

Having just turned eight, my brother could ask, "What are you talking about?"

The stranger laughed, winking at our father. "Leonard? Didn't you tell your boys?"

When my father lied, he would smile. He was smiling like a lighthouse just then, saying, "I guess I hadn't gotten around to it."

"Two of your pop's opponents are done. Finished." The stranger didn't realize that we hadn't heard the gossip. "And as it happens, it's the two front-runners that are gone. One quit for health reasons. He says. And the other . . . well, let's just say there's some dirt. Something about young girls. And if he doesn't pull out of the race, he's going to look like an absolute idiot." Again, he patted my brother on the shoulders. "So yeah, boys. A three-horse race now. Anybody's race!"

Dad made the nightly news, if only in little doses. His name was mentioned in passing, or a baby-faced reporter would speak to him for five or six seconds. From the EV, I learned that my father was concerned

about values in the youth. Which meant me, I realized. I learned that he wanted to protect our markets and our good Roman traditions, and he never quite mentioned that his Roman-built Testudo was a piece of crap. But more than anything, the reporters wanted to know about our pet cheetah. They wanted pictures of Hadrian. Everybody got a real kick out of seeing my dad scratching at the cat's little ears, ready to pull back his hand at the first sign of trouble.

At school, I enjoyed a minor celebrity. Girls would ask me if I was Samuel Dunlop, and when they giggled in front of me, I didn't feel hurt. I felt special enough to hold my ground, and maybe once or twice, I kept the girls giggling. Of course the guys weren't nearly as impressed. But there were moments when I could see even the bullies making new calculations. What if my father won the race? Senators had power, they had been told. How much power would I wield, just by being his son? I watched them as they weighed these important political considerations, and then in the next instant, surrendering to a fatalistic whim, they would shrug their shoulders and give me a good hard smack.

Beating up an important person was just too much of a lure.

How much more celebrity could I tolerate? I asked myself. Lying on the ground, hands pressed against my aching belly.

As a family, we attended a picnic.

It must have been some company's big spring picnic, although really, I don't have any clear memory of why hundreds of people had gathered in the park. They were just there, and of course we showed up. And of course we wore better clothes than anybody had ever worn to a chicken-eating event. Mom told us to behave, as always, but this time there were new warnings. The local news was going to be there with EV cameras, which made the audience potentially enormous, and important, and if we were anything but saints, the world was going to crumble to dust.

There was an army of kids at the picnic, and I didn't know any of them. But they had a baseball, and a game broke out, and one of us asked permission to play. Probably Chester, since there was a better chance of a "Yes" when he asked those kinds of questions. I found myself in the trenches, playing against a genuinely huge girl. Fat, and strong like every fat girl, and maybe a head taller than me. On the first play, she mowed me down. On the next play, she used a thick arm and flung me on my ass. But the worst whipping came from our team general. Staring at me with an easy contempt, he asked, "Are you going to let that bitch win?"

No. I decided to make a heroic stand, and with a virtuous rage, I reclaimed my place on the line and threw a shoulder into my opponent. My swimmer's muscles delivered a good hard blow. The girl stopped in mid-stride. But the jarring awakened her own pride and rage, and again, with the game flowing

around us, she set her feet and drove at me. In memory, that next collision was crushing, and epic, ineffectual and extremely painful; and again, we stepped back and gathered our strength before charging. In all, we collided maybe a dozen times. But it felt like a thousand impacts. The girl began to sweat and gasp for breath. The rest of the world grew still and quiet. I realized eventually that the game had paused, boys and a few girls standing in a circle, watching the spectacle. We would step back, and charge. Back, and charge. And in the end, I won. I held up to the girl's worst blows, and she finally turned and stumbled away, crying. My victory was a sweet thing for all of two minutes. Then my mother found me. She found me and grabbed me by my half-dislocated shoulder, and with a low fury, she explained what it means to be embarrassed, to watch the daughter of an important somebody weeping uncontrollably, talking about the wicked awful monster boy who had just beaten her up.

My punishment began by sitting still and being quiet.

Three of the candidates were giving speeches. The man who liked young girls was still officially in the race, but he had the good sense not to show up. About that first candidate, I remember nothing. Nothing. I was sitting on a plastic folding chair. I was glowering at my scuffed shoes and my fists, my shoulder aching while my frail pride tried to heal itself. A hard stretch of applause made me lift my eyes. The first speaker

was leaving now, and my father was slowly climbing up onto the little stage, smiling at us with a remarkable shyness.

I had never seen my father so nervous. In his natural environment—inside a little office or a smoky tavern—he was a marvel. He could talk to anyone, and for hours, charming them with an artful ease. But here were hundreds of people, and cameras, and reporters wearing skeptical expressions. He was nervous, making little jokes that didn't cause anybody to laugh. Then he began to talk about what he wanted to do as a senator. He wanted to work hard. He wanted to be their friend in the provincial capital of New Carthage. He wanted the roads patched. (My father's voice gained a genuine life at that point. He had a visceral hatred for the potholes that kept knocking our wheels out of alignment.) And again, for emphasis, he reminded everybody that he wanted to work hard for them, and to be their very good friend.

If there was any big applause, I don't remember it.

I remember Mom pissing me off. I was ready to clap, but she had to give me a warning nudge anyway. As if I'd forget to clap for my father. But neither of us applauded for long, and we remained seated, and during that next little silence, the last candidate came forward.

He wasn't a big man. He had black hair and blue eyes that I could see from five rows back. For some reason, he wore a uniform. Or maybe his clothes were cut so they would resemble a uniform. With a



practiced ease, he took his place in front of the microphone, a look of absolute focus coming into his milky white face. I remember that moment. I remember staring at him, waiting for whatever word dropped out of his mouth first. His little moustache twitched, and his lips parted, and with an accented voice, he said, “We are a great people, and a noble people. But we are surrounded by enemies. Yellow enemies. Brown enemies. Red ones, and black. Even within our own ranks, we have traitors who are working against us, trying to undermine the great things that are our duty, and our destiny.

“The white Christian people of the world deserve this world!

“For too long, we have let ourselves remain weak, and poor. But if we can find the will, joining our hands in the common good . . . if we finally assume the mantle of greatness . . . then the world will be ours, and the stars. . . !”

In essence, that was his speech.

I can't remember the exact words, but I'm sure he didn't waste any breath talking about potholes. And he never explained how a local senator—a junior officer in a New Lands province—could bring the smallest change to the enormous world. But when the candidate finished, screaming at the microphone one last time, the applause was instantaneous, and furious, and I felt myself being carried along. A reborn Rome! And all of our enemies defeated! What could be more wonderful? I was thinking. Then a

hand clamped down on my hands, keeping them from applauding anymore.

It was my mother's hand.

"I was being polite," I lied.

"Don't be," was her advice. "This one time, Samuel . . . you really don't want to be polite. . . ."

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Putting words inside quotation marks is a lie, by the way. When I tell this story, I have no real memory about what words people used. That's the way it is with most people, I'm sure. What I remember are feelings—my twelve, nearly thirteen-year-old feelings—and sloppy little pieces of certain moments that felt important at the time. Inside this entire story, I don't think there are more than two or three moments when I'm perfectly sure what words were spoken.

The day after the picnic was a school day.

Like always, I sat with Nathan on the bus. I mentioned the picnic and baseball and my father speaking, and Nathan asked how the speech went, and I lied. "Fine," I claimed. And then I talked for a full mile about the little candidate with the blue eyes. "Wouldn't it be wonderful?" I asked. "Rome strong again. The Chinese and Indians not telling us what to do. All of our enemies sent packing, the bastards. Then we could build anything we wanted, and spaceships. Just think, Nathan! You and me could fly off to Jupiter, or someplace. . . !"

My best friend looked at me, saying nothing.

Then we pulled up in front of school, and I didn't see him again until gym class. He was dressing, and I was dressing at the other end of the aisle, and a couple of guys came up beside him. They were classmates of ours, but for the usual reasons, they were older by a year. Older, and bigger. Carrying themselves with a practiced menace, they did nothing but poke my friend in the ribs, and laugh. I stood at a safe distance, watching. The biggest kid said "Jew," at least twice. And then Nathan handed money to the other kid. And when they were gone, he turned away from me and finished dressing.

I don't remember him talking to me during gym class.

Or on the bus ride home, either.

When I stood for my stop, Nathan stood.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He said, "Nothing."

The driver opened the back door, and together, we jumped to the curb. Then the bus pulled away, the dirty Roman engine leaving the air swirling with fumes and soot. And again, I asked my best friend, "What are you doing?"

"Wait," he told me.

"For what?"

"Just wait."

So we stood there. The bus left, and the cars following after the bus started to climb the long hill. Then again, I began to ask what we were waiting for, and as soon as my mouth was open, he hit me.

I fell down.

And he kicked me. Not once, and not softly. A day's worth of being furious went into those kicks, and then he kneeled over me, saying, "Asshole."

I've always remembered that one word.

"Do you know who the enemies are?" Nathan asked me. "The traitors, I mean. The ones Mr. Blue-Eyes was talking about. Do you know who?"

He said, "It's the Jews."

I didn't believe him.

"It's me, Samuel!"

And then I did something supremely stupid. With a gasp, I reminded him, "But you're only half-Jewish."

Again, he kicked me. Then he shook his head, watching me writhe in misery. I remember his face—the glowering, betrayed look that he was throwing at me—and I remember his eyes—how they were squinting and tearing up, looking miserable and very much scared.

Sometimes I ran errands with my father, helping the campaign.

Mostly, I remember being bored. Sometimes there were meetings with backers or people who might want to become backers. Sometimes the work involved putting up signs in yards and carrying packets of flyers around strange neighborhoods. Half of our basement was filled with signs and flyers and metal buttons that read Vote Dunlop. I began to appreciate that running for political office was an

expensive chore. And we weren't spending nearly as much as the blue-eyed candidate. Every night, without fail, we saw him at least two or three times on the EV. Even when Dad turned the channel, he couldn't escape those commercials—slick, professional, full of music and cheering crowds.

Our basic flyer was a rectangle of stiff paper. Dad's photograph was five years old, taken when he still had his hair. My name was on the flyer, and Chester's, and our ages. There was a long list of Dad's accomplishments, and that was the first time that I can remember hearing anything about his militia service. Every young man had to be in the militia, and so that didn't surprise me. But the flyer told me that my own dad had earned some kind of special award for his service.

"What's a Red-tail?" I asked.

We were riding down an anonymous street. Dad was looking straight ahead, and I was sitting beside him. The back seat was filled with flyers and yard signs and boxes full of rattling buttons. Hadrian was busy napping in the old straw.

"It's a hawk," Dad began. "A big one. We've got them around here—"

"The Red-tail Ribbon," I interrupted. "You won it."

"It's nothing," he said.

Which didn't make sense. But before I could say as much, he told me, "It's a militia thing. If you serve on the frontier, and you see combat—"

"You did?" I blurted.

He didn't answer.

"You actually fought?" I asked. Then I rapidly reviewed what little I could remember about old border skirmishes. "Who'd you fight? The Mandan? The Lakota?" And then with an evil delight, I asked, "Was it the Aztecs?"

The Aztecs were a real nation. The other tribes were just patches of color on the map, each sponsored by a different Asian power.

"Was it?" I pressed.

It must have been an enormous temptation for my father. His son was desperate to find some excuse to worship him, and it would have been worship. I would have believed anything that painted my father as being a soldier of consequence. But he resisted that easy deification. With a shrug of his shoulders, he admitted, "People were trying to cross our border, and my unit lobbed shells in front of them."

"Were they enemy soldiers?" I hoped.

"No," he confessed. "No, they were just . . . just some people trying to slip across. . . ."

"And you shot in front of them?"

"Mostly," he said. Then with a suddenly angry voice, he said, "And now we're not talking about this anymore."

Nathan's grandfather filled the front door. One of his soft round hands was resting on the doorknob, while the other clung to a thick glass filled with some deliciously colored liquor. With an odd smile, he stared down at me. "We haven't seen you for a little

while, Samuel.” Then a sturdy, engaging laugh erupted, and he smiled at my father. “Mr. Dunlop. It is my deepest pleasure, sir. Please, please. Come inside.”

Except for the old man, the house seemed empty. He led us into the darkened dining room. “Sit, my friends. If you wish.”

Dad glanced at the game board.

“Cigar? Or a drink, perhaps?”

“No, thank you.”

“Sit. Please, sirs. You are my guests here.”

We settled into two hard chairs. Then with a quiet voice, my father allowed, “This is quite a map.”

“Did your son mention this toy? No? Well, good!” The old man chuckled, winking at me. “It is, I suppose, a bit of a secret. Rather illegal, and there’s no reason to broadcast its existence to the world.” Then he launched into a crisp, thorough explanation of the game. “Samuel played one scenario, and he witnessed a few potential outcomes. This is a very different scenario. This is our world as it stands today . . . reduced, or enlarged, into a set of contesting algorithms and modeled personalities. . . .”

A thick finger touched a control.

The map evaporated, leaving a white background covered with neat black hexagons.

“I won’t waste your time, Mr. Dunlop. Suffice to say I could run this scenario thousands of times, and to the satisfaction of every bloodless mathematician and chilled intellect, I could prove that certain

policies, and certain leaders, would be dangerous to us. To the Old Empire, to the New Lands, and naturally, to your good sons.”

Father nodded as if he understood, and smiled.

“Politics,” said the old man.

He said, “I must tell you, sir. It’s a very brave thing to be a political animal in these times.”

Hearing a compliment, Father squared his shoulders.

“I once belonged to that noble profession,” he continued. “Perhaps you are unaware, but I delved into my native island’s politics, on more than one occasion. Which is, I should add, one of the compelling reasons why I came to these safer shores. I spoke my mind. I argued for my causes. But I have a tremendous amount of skin, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, sir, and I rather want that skin to remain safe. At least for the present moment.”

I shivered.

My father cleared his throat. “When we talked on the phone . . . you mentioned helping my candidacy—”

“Indeed. I very much would like that, yes.”

“How?”

The old man smiled and puffed on his cigar, saying nothing.

“Money?” asked Dad.

“I could. I could be most generous. But to be frank, it’s too late for money. No sum, no matter how extravagant, can insure his defeat in the coming election.”



Who was he talking about?

The old man lowered his cigar, blowing out a long cloud of smelly smoke. “Make no mistake: He is a bastard. A serpent. A charmer, and a teetotaler, and the worst kind of dreamer. What he believes is reprehensible, and sadly, his hatreds are quite ordinary. What motivates him is an intoxicating sense of supreme destiny. Are you aware, Mr. Dunlop? Your opponent was involved in a failed attempt to spark a civil war. His hope was to unite the Germanic provinces against Rome, and then conquer the Old Empire, and from there, he would have launched a suicidal assault against the Far East.”

Finally, I realized who the he was.

“Unfortunately, his rebellion was little more than a joke. Young men pretending to be a mighty force, and they were crushed in a day. If our mutual enemy had done any real harm, he would have been executed; but instead of death, he received a simple prison sentence. Incarceration is always dangerous; the monster had time to think. To organize, and plan. He wrote a small book—a brutal little treatise on hatred and rampant nationalism. I own three copies myself. I wish I had a million copies, and I could make every voter read it from cover to cover. But I don’t, and I can’t. What I can do is give you one copy. The man’s own words should erase any doubts you hold about his madness.”

Dad stared at the plain of empty hexagons. Then his eyes lifted, and with a weary voice, he said, “All

right. I need help, but it's not going to be money. So how am I supposed to beat this bastard?"

The old man grinned and sipped at his drink. "Samuel tells me that you are an exceptional salesman."

Dad glanced at me, a little surprised.

Warily pleased.

"I want you to use your considerable skills, sir." Leaning across the table, hands laid flat on the game board, Nathan's grandfather said, "With my help, I want you to help me, sir. Help me peel the uniform off that very ugly serpent."

The campaign office filled what used to be a drinking tavern. Dad found that funny. He tried to laugh as he parked, and he kept hold of his smile even when he had stopped laughing. A man stepped out of the office, blinking in the sunshine. Two other men followed after him. Dad opened his door and stepped out, and the first man said, "If you would, sir. Lift your arms."

The other men held electric wands. The wands hummed as they passed across my father's body, and then the first man said, "Open your coat, Mr. Dunlop. Please."

"Does everybody get this honor?" Dad inquired.

"Your coat, sir. Now."

He complied, glancing over at me.

"Would the boy like to come inside, too?"

Dad said, "No."

The first man smiled and looked at me. "I think he would. Wouldn't you, son?"

I looked at my father, then back at Hadrian.

"Your pet will be fine here," the man said. He was fat and jolly-looking, and when I stepped down next to him, I caught a whiff of what almost seemed to be perfume. "Like your father, lift your arms."

I listened to the humming.

"He's expecting you," the man reported. "Don't keep him waiting."

We walked into a barely lit room, long and nearly empty. The blue-eyed candidate sat in the back, behind a massive desk that was far fancier than anything else in the place. He didn't stand. He barely looked up, writing on a fancy Chinese tablet. I thought that was very strange. The man hated the yellow horde, yet he used their machinery. To a twelve year-old boy, nothing smells worse than the tiniest whiff of hypocrisy, and it was all I could do not to turn up my nose.

The blue eyes stared at us.

A stern voice said, "Mr. Pothole. Have a seat." Then the eyes looked past us, and with his German-Latin, he said, "I am quite busy. Quite busy. What is this business you wished to discuss with me?"

My father sat, and I sat on the only other chair.

"I'm going to lose," Dad began. "That's pretty much guaranteed. I can't beat you in the primary, or that other guy."

I stared at the blue eyes. Nothing else mattered.

“I just wanted you to know. After the primary, when I end up third, I’ll throw my support to you. I’ll work for your election. Anything that can help, I’ll do it. That’s what I wanted to tell you.”

There was a brief, cold silence.

Then the candidate asked, “Why me? Don’t you approve of the other man’s politics?”

“God, no!” exclaimed Dad.

Then his head dropped. In the corner of an eye, I could see my father wiping at his bald scalp. I would have loved to see his expression. The anger, the misery. But I had to keep my eyes straight ahead, blinking as infrequently as possible.

“What do you believe, Mr. Dunlop?”

For a long moment, my father held his tongue. And with a calculated rage and the absolute perfect tone, he said exactly three words.

“Fucking kike lover!”

I remember that moment perfectly. The moment, the practiced words, and that feeling of standing on some great hilltop, any little motion destined to send everything falling in one of a million separate directions.

The blue eyes closed slowly, and opened again, and the pen was set aside. “Don’t worry about our mutual opponent,” the candidate purred. “He is an adulterer. He sleeps with his secretary. A man like that isn’t fit for public office, and I think in a few days, the world will find out what kind of man he is.”

“Really?” Dad gasped. “God, that would be great!”

“So you see, we are destined to survive the primary. You and me. One of us will be the senator. And perhaps the other one, if he is willing, could play a little role in the new senator’s organization.”

With a seamless ease, Dad said, “Could I?”

The candidate was amused, more than anything. He smiled and glanced at me, and taking courage from my unblinking stare, he said, “Mr. Dunlop. I understand that you’re some kind of war hero. Please, if you have a moment, tell me all about yourself.”

The candidate was supposed to be very busy, yet he had time to chat with my father for the next hour-plus. For a while, he would ask little questions, and Dad would tell a somewhat altered version of his life story. Yes, he was a decorated veteran. He had fought the red scourge on the frontier. But everything since had been a string of disappointments and outright failures. More than once, he blamed the Jews for undercutting his new businesses. What could be done? He wanted to know. How could the world be made fair and right for all the white Christians?

Gradually, the candidate began to talk. More often, and for longer stretches of time, he would answer my father’s leading questions. Then an hour and a half had passed, and the blue eyes were burning, and the man had stood up, holding court from behind his big desk, pounding on the top of it with a fury that left me terrified, and weak.

It was the fleshy, perfumed man who stopped the terrible show. He shuffled up to the candidate, whispered a few words and laughed in a jolly fashion.

“Of course,” the candidate said. Then to us, he explained, “I have an appearance. We’ll have to resume this talk at another time.” He shook both our hands. I remember a clammy heat and a strong grip, and he stared into my eyes, absolutely unaware that a fleet of very tiny, very modern electronics were floating on my tears, transporting every sight and sound to a relay device set up in a nearby warehouse. In a few hours, an edited version of the candidate’s raging, curse-strewn tirade would end up on the nightly news, and all but the most hateful voters would turn away from him.

But that was still in the future.

With his new allies following after him, the candidate walked out into the afternoon sun. “Thank you, Mr. Dunlop. We will be in touch.”

Dad started to fish for his keys.

“That cheetah,” said the candidate. “I’ve heard about it. Let me look at him, for a minute.”

Dad didn’t want to. But he had no choice. He lowered the back window a little ways, and Hadrian poked his head through the gap. The candidate stood at a respectful distance. He grinned and said, “What a noble, proud beast.” Then he turned to me, winking. “You’re a very lucky lad, having a pet such as this.”

I said, “I know.”

Later, when Nathan and I were friends again, I'd tell him that part of the story over and over again.

It was his favorite part.

"I know," I said.

"A lucky lad," the candidate repeated.

Inspiration struck me. All of a sudden, I said, "Pet him." I smiled and said, "Really, he loves being petted behind the ears."

"Does he?" the candidate asked, a little tentative now.

"Oh, sure. Go on!"

Dad didn't say a single word.

The pale clammy hand started to reach for the ears, and the cat watched the fingers, eyes smiling . . . and then came the sharp click of incisors slicing into living flesh.

There were always swim meets in the summer. One of the meets was in New Carthage, at the big pool in the main city park. We left before dawn, taking Mom's car so we were sure to make it. My brother had a string of races, and I think he won most of them. I had a couple, and I don't remember where I finished. I don't care now, and I barely cared then.

What I remember is a huge tent that one of the teams had set up on the grass.

What I remember, always, is stepping into the odd orange light that filtered through the phony silk, the heat of the day diminishing while the air grew damp and close. A hundred or more bodies were sitting and standing inside that tiny space, and everybody was

trying to hold their breath. A portable EV was set on a cooler. With a special antenna, it was picking up the feed from a Chinese satellite. While I watched, stunned and thrilled, a round hatch pulled open on another world, and a man in a padded suit climbed down a long ladder, jumping down onto the dusty red surface that had never before known the touch of a human being.

Everybody cheered.

I remember that wild, honest roar coming up from everywhere. Including from me.

Sometime later that day, just by chance, I was standing near the main gate of the pool. A familiar man came walking past me. I looked at him, and he said, "Samuel," with this easy, friendly voice that I halfway recognized. But it took me several moments to place both the face and voice. By then, he was introducing himself. He shook my hand, and I asked, "What are you doing here?"

Chuckling, he said, "I'm a swimmer. I always have been."

There were master's events at the meet. He must have been taking part in a few races, as well as speaking to his potential voters.

"Did you happen to watch? The Mars landing?"

"Oh, sure."

"Wasn't it wonderful?"

"Yeah," I said, without a shred of doubt. "It was great."



“Humans have now walked on Mars,” he remarked. Then he used the Chinese word for the planet, adding, “This is a great day for our little world.”

I couldn’t agree more.

“Is your father here?”

I pointed in a vague direction.

“I need to speak to him, if I could. I want to thank him.”

“For what?”

“A great deal, the way I hear it told.” Then he winked at me, commenting, “We have the same good friend, I understand.” And he named Nathan’s grandfather.

For half a second, I thought about him sleeping with his secretary.

I didn’t say one word.

“Walk me to your father, please.”

“Okay.”

We left the pool, moving at a strong pace. “This is a wonderful world we live in. Did you know that, Samuel?”

“I guess. . . .”

“We’re blessed.” He kept chuckling, reminding me, “We’re walking on Mars. People are well-fed, and mostly educated. There are no important wars at the moment. And diseases have been mostly eradicated.”

I nodded, and smiled nervously.

“In a different century,” he said, “you would have had to worry. About measles, and polio, and the mumps.”

“I’ve had my shots,” I said.

“Exactly.” Then he patted me on the shoulder, saying, “I have weak eyes. Yet I don’t wear glasses.”

“There’s a surgery,” I said. “If you’re rich. . . .”

I let my voice collapse. Was it stupid, calling him rich?

But he just laughed it off, telling me, “I wish everyone could have these advantages. And I think one day—sooner than you could guess—everybody will have them.”

Confident and a little cocky, I chimed in, “I’m sorry. But I’m too young to vote for you.”

He barely noticed my joke.

“End the tariffs, and the censors, and open up our markets . . . if we can finally join with the rest of the world in every meaningful way . . . that’s what I think we need to do. . . .”

I wasn’t sure whom he was talking to.

“If I run for President of the New Lands,” he asked, “sometime in the next few years, would you vote for me, Samuel?”

“No,” I reported. “I’m voting for my father.”

He laughed, and walked faster, and I had to practically run to keep up with his long, happy strides.

## Hidden Paradise

“Can I go outside, Uncle John? Please?”

“Outside, inside,” sings the fat man sitting behind the register. “It’s your damn vacation. Go where you want, boy!”

“Thanks, Uncle John!”

Vick kicks the door open and leaps, escaping the gloomy, chilled world of the restaurant. The sun blinds and the air is suddenly twenty degrees warmer, suffused with the brutal humidity that would gladly kill some men. But boys who are almost twelve years old are immune to this kind of heat. Vick is skinny and strong, blessed with jittery, almost endless energies. He leaps and leaps again, then settles into a headlong sprint, charging across the mostly empty parking lot, barely giving the road half a glance before darting across. A pickup truck wearing Nixon-Agnew bumper stickers slams on its brakes, its driver throwing out curses. But Vick has already vanished, sliding down one of the steep trails that leads to the stream. Only at the bottom does he finally stop, panting rapidly and happily, one tiny portion of his very busy brain wondering who belongs to the angry voice that keeps shouting at some crazy little son of a bitch. In Colorado, water such as this wouldn't mean much. But this far from the mountains, any fast and clear and halfway-cold stream is a treasure. Vick watches the rippling current for several moments. He

wears nothing but cut-off jeans and ragged tennis shoes and a young tan edging very close to a full burn. His hair is hippie-long and uncombed. His face is bright and engaged, eyes dark and quick and full of a graceful mischief always looking for opportunity. Somebody has stowed a pair of large inner tubes in the brush behind him. Across the stream are a line of shabby little cabins—summer retreats and little rentals—and there's no telling who belongs to these black tubes. It would be difficult to ask for anyone's permission. With that in mind, Vick makes a string of moral calculations, and to keep the math even more agreeable, the boy selects the smaller tube—the less desirable one, he reasons—propping it on a shoulder while telling himself that he'll bring it back in just a few minutes. The stream lives inside a brief little valley, fed by cold springs and runoff from the occasional windmill. Dozens of cabins line the waterway, most of them upstream from here, while the downstream route winds through woods and wet glades. Vick has caught glimpses of the woods from the access road. He has been living here for three days but still hasn't floated downstream. Which makes it the more interesting voyage. And besides, if he wants to float the upstream route, he has to walk uphill, now and for the next ten or fifteen minutes—an unendurable delay in his quest for satisfaction. The decision is made; he will start from here.

With a grace born from practice as well as luck, Vick throws the tube into the water, turns and leaps

backward, landing butt-first in the moving hole, gouging himself only a little on the sharp metal valve. Just as he imagined, everything downstream is new. The current shows him fresh turns, and the last of the cabins drop away, replaced by trees on the banks and a funny quiet made quieter by the gentle swishing of water.

This is nothing like wilderness. Instead of rock, the occasional rapids are made from cut-down trees and slabs of old concrete. An abandoned Buick hugs one embankment—a helmet-shaped behemoth like the one Vick's mom used to drive. Then the stream takes a long turn, and the valley suddenly widens and turns to forest. A wild turkey strolls along the shoreline, and the boy pulls close enough to see its stupid black eyes before it spooks, running off into the shadows. Then something big pushes its way through the brush. A deer, probably. Although it could be a cougar, he tells himself. Then he starts to imagine what else could be lurking among the trees: Dinosaurs, naturally. Every day, Vick thinks about cold-blooded dinosaurs. He pictures giant crocodiles stretched out on the bank, and above, a flock of hungry pterosaurs circling. And grinning to himself, he throws in a couple bullies from school, their bodies torn in half by the assorted monsters, the shreds left in plain sight for him to enjoy. He keeps daydreaming, and the stream carries him on.

Almost too late, Vick notices the bridge passing overhead—a wooden railroad trestle, black against

the bluish white sky. After this, it's several miles to the highway, and that means a long march home. Vick kicks and flails with his arms, working toward the east bank, and then he climbs out, hanging the inner tube on his tired right arm, managing the slow, sloppy climb through the underbrush, up to the steel tracks and then the access road.

The boy can appreciate why nobody floats downstream. It's just too damned hard, what with the walk afterward. By the time he reaches the road, he's ready for a break. A nap or second lunch, or even better, he would accept a ride back to the restaurant. But nobody he knows is going to drive past. After all, he knows only Uncle John and Aunt Katherine, who never leave work, plus the half dozen kids that he's played with over the last couple days. So when he sees a car coming his way, he makes another deep moral calculation. This will be a stranger, he realizes. But what are the odds that a child molester will be at the wheel? And who ever heard of an evil disgusting soul like that cruising around inside a little blue Datsun?

Vick lifts his right arm and the warm black inner tube.

He can't see the driver. For a moment, it seems as if nobody is inside the car, as if a face and attached body don't quite exist behind the glare on the windshield. Then a shape emerges, and the brakes squeak as if in pain, and the little car fights its own momentum. Squinting, Vick makes out a dark face and a little nest of hair passing by. For a moment, he

believes that a boy must be driving the car—a black kid, which is more than a little incredible, considering where they are in the world. Then the Datsun skids ahead and stops, and Vick notices the Illinois license plate. That helps. What he sees begins to make a little sense. Then somebody opens the passenger door, and a strange voice drifts into the warm, wet air. “Hello,” the voice calls out. “May I help you, little man?”

It is a woman's voice, young and wearing a rich accent.

Vick's heart kicks into high gear.

“Where are you going, little man?”

To that open door, if his legs don't give out first. Vick takes a few weak-kneed steps and leans against the door, looking inside. The girl is pretty, yes. But she's smaller than he had imagined, in stature and in every other way. She isn't a whole lot taller than him, really. To that young woman, with a dry, weak voice, he says, “Hidden Paradise ... I'm going to ...”

“Ah, that is my destination, too. Shall I give you a ride?” He has never ridden in any Jap car. And maybe he won't today. The girl's passenger seat is jammed forward, the back end filled with suitcases and boxes and two big stereo speakers. There isn't enough room for both him and the inner tube.

“Let the gas go free,” she advises with a grin.

Well, duh! Pressing his thumbnail against the valve, Vick bleeds out the cold air until he can stuff the tube behind the seat. Then he climbs in beside her and looks at the pretty young face, blurting out the

first question that bubbles up into his mouth.

“Are you the stripper?”

She laughs as if nothing in her life has been half so funny.

“Where are you from?” he asks.

She shoves the knob into second gear, letting up on the clutch, and as they roll downhill, she says,

“Jamaica,” with a Caribbean music in her voice.

“You're from Jamaica?”

“Hardly at all, little man. That is my name. Sally Ann Jamaica, from points unknown.”

###

Uncle John is not a man given to quick motions. Vick's mom says that her big brother suffers from diabetes and bad knees and a kind of laziness that runs among the men of her family. She used to tell Vick that he was the exception, and that he was very much his father's child. Which made the boy happy to hear. But lately, Mom has been fighting a lot with Dad. And Vick is driving her mad, she claims, what with his antics and everything. That's why his parents are having their vacation this summer without him. According to Mom, she and Dad are trying to rekindle whatever it was that made them get married in the first place, or at least catch up on their sleep.

Uncle John hasn't moved in the last forty minutes. He remains behind the counter, on a high, padded stool, positioned so that the air-conditioning will blow across his face and chest. The red eyes stare at a tiny black-and-white television. A prosperous-looking



man is attempting to sell gold coins. "In these troubled times," the man begins, and then Uncle John looks up to see Vick rushing inside, followed by a willowy little woman dressed in jeans and a loose gray T-shirt.

"Gold is a solid investment for anyone worried about tomorrow," says the television.

"A dubious claim, at best," says Sally Ann.

Uncle John stares at the newcomer. Even puzzlement requires too much energy to do easily or quickly. The tired red eyes narrow, and with a deep breath, he tries to clear his head. "Who are you?" he inquires.

"She's our stripper," Vick blurts out.

Sally Ann laughs lightly and hands over a business card.

Uncle John stares at the words for a moment, plainly confused. Then he starts to say, "You aren't quite what I ..."

His voice trails away.

"I'm not what you ordered," Sally Ann says for him.

"You're not," the old man agrees. "I talked to your boss, I guess he was ... is ... and he told me you were blond—"

She explodes into laughter. "I need a word with dear Burt, if that's what he believes I am." Then she raps a little fist on the glass countertop. "No, seriously ... that blond girl is named Dora, and she had some last-minute catastrophe that kept her

home. Don't worry, just a little catastrophe. But I am her replacement, for tonight and tomorrow night, too.”

With a careful eye, Uncle John examines her willowy body. Then he glances at the stack of handouts beside the cash register. “Exotic Dancer,” they say, with dates and times and a very tame picture of the promised girl. This is Friday afternoon, and within a few hours, dozens of local men will arrive, expecting to see the leggy blonde that has been promised.

What can he do?

The conundrum is too much. Uncle John shakes his head, no sound coming from his open mouth. Then another voice intrudes on the confused silence—a sharp, smart voice that says, “You can't be our dancer.”

“But I am, ma'am,” says Sally Ann.

“My name is Katherine,” says a tall, big-boned woman. She offers a hand and what might be confused for a smile. “I hope you don't take this the wrong way. But you aren't at all what we envisioned.” The girl takes the hand, replying, “What dream is ever true?” Vick has never seen his aunt at a loss for words. But it happens now, for a wondrous instant. The big, tough-minded woman seems to forget where she is and what they are doing. Reclaiming her hand, she runs the long fingers through her steel-colored hair, and then she turns to her little nephew, saying, “Go somewhere else, Vick.”

“Why?” Vick asks, using his most reasonable voice.

“Because,” says Aunt Katherine. Then she turns to the girl again, saying, “I need to call your service. Obviously, a mistake has been made.”

Sally Ann has an indestructible smile. With the mildest possible voice, she says, “The men will start arriving. Very soon.”

“I know full well—”

“And they'll expect some kind of show,” she maintains.

Aunt Katherine breathes through her mouth, eyes staring angrily off into space.

“Perhaps,” Sally Ann begins.

“Yes, dear? What?”

“I could steal away one of your waitresses. Fit her into my costumes and teach her a few basic moves.”

“God, no,” Uncle John exclaims.

“These are local girls,” Aunt Katherine replies. “Don't take offense, please. But if I even thought of involving them—”

“Who'd pay to watch them,” Uncle John interrupts, sitting up straight on his stool. “We're talking about fat gals, for the most part. Pretty enough, in a kind of milk-maid way, I guess —!” Aunt Katherine stares at her husband, puzzled by this sudden burst of energy.

“Ah,” he says, “this girl's going to be fine. Trust me, Kath!”

“But think of the men who will be here,” his wife mutters. “And now look at how she looks, Johnny.”

Don't you see our problem?"

But the old man won't be dissuaded. He laughs and waves off the doubts, saying, "I've got a feeling. There's something about this Miss Jamaica. It's all going to work out." Aunt Katherine tries to find any other course, and can't. So finally, she turns back to their guest and says,

"Don't take offense, miss. Please. But for the duration of your stay—tonight and tomorrow night both—you will stay in our guest cottage. Under no circumstances will you enter the living quarters at the back of this establishment. And because this is my nephew, and because I promised his parents to keep him away from the wrong influences ... you will not spend another moment with this boy, unless I am present."

Sally Ann is a very pretty creature. Feminine, with a fine, slender body and her hair cut short. But only when she smiles does she look all-girl, and she isn't smiling just then. To Vick, her face looks tight and strong, wearing not one sex or the other. But she speaks with a calm, almost pleasant voice, saying, "I understand, madam. I understand fully."

To escape the tension, Uncle John returns to the little television. The commercials have finished, and the nightly news has come on. To nobody in particular, the old man grumbles, "Goddamn Russians." Sally Ann reacquires her smile, showing it to Vick.

He smiles back at her, feeling warm inside.

“Go somewhere else,” says Aunt Katherine.

“Like where?” the boy inquires.

“The world's a big place,” the old woman assures him.

Vick glances at their guest again.

Then Sally Ann Jamaica gives him a little wink, and with the strangest tone, she says, “The world isn't big at all. Your aunt is wrong.”

Then to Uncle John, she says, “And about the Red menace ... I wouldn't worry too much. I know I don't.”

###

Vick can only watch from a distance while Sally Ann unloads the equipment from the back seat and trunk, carrying each box and speaker and coiled-up length of cable into the big room on the south end of the restaurant—the room normally reserved for wedding receptions and high school graduation parties. He watches from across the street, from the yards of various cabins. Other kids play beside him, but he feels uninvolved in their little made-up dramas. He stares and stares, and then a boy two years older rides by on his Stingray. With a worldly scorn, the newcomer says, “So that's our new stripper?” For some reason, Vick doesn't like his tone. But he's been using the same words, hasn't he? Straightening his back, he says, “Yeah.” Sally Ann is yanking some odd little box from the back corner of the trunk.

“That's her.”

“Kind of small-looking,” the thirteen year-old complains, leaning back in his bike seat, expertly lifting the front wheel off the ground. “And kind of dark. Did you notice? That she's a little black girl?” Vick says nothing.

“Then again,” the older boy continues, “she looks sweeter than the last stripper they brought up here.” This is news to Vick. Uncle John and Aunt Katherine have done this sort of thing before?

“Oh, that one was an old broad,” the boy offers. “Nearly forty years old, from what my dad says. Kind of fat. With these big, saggy tits.”

How old is Sally Ann? The question seems simple, but Vick can't decide.

“Yeah, I bet my dad won't even bother with the show tonight,” says the bike rider, in conclusion. “Most of his buddies won't either, I bet. Even if they didn't know she looks like that ... after the old-bag stripper, I bet guys won't want to waste the time or the gas.”

###

Yet there are men who are curious enough or desperate enough, and they begin arriving even as dinner is being served. Judging by the county numbers on the license plates, they have come from as far as seventy miles away—solitary men driving large pickups that might have started the day clean but since have acquired a smooth gray veneer of stubborn dust and oil. Each man is dressed in his best jeans and boots, and there are big cowboy-style hats

that have to be worn at carefully considered angles, and heavy leather belts, and simple shirts that are pressed, and probably in most cases the visitors have clipped and cleaned their fingernails. They are a polite, generally quiet gathering that sit in the bar, drinking in little groups or alone. The waitresses make jokes about wolves on patrol and all the lewd talk, but Vick neither hears nor sees anything of the sort. Aunt Kath makes a few pointed comments about the slow dinner crowd, but most of the tables are taken. Families have come up for the weekend or for the week, and there are always a few travelers lured off the highway by the Hidden Paradise signs: HOME COOKING IN A PLEASANT ATMOSPHERE.

The atmosphere is wondrous and thrilling, the anticipation real enough to see and to taste. Vick sucks in all he can. And then dinner is done, and Uncle John—following strict orders from his wife—shuffles up to him and says, “Time for bed.”

Which it isn't.

But before Vick can respond, his uncle sweetens the pot. “You can watch the color TV tonight. Whatever shows you want to watch.”

But Vick can do that at home. Dropping his gaze, he pushes out his lower lip. Then, with a mournful, self-possessed voice honed by years of practice, the boy claims, “This isn't fair.”

“Fair?” the old man replies.

Then his uncle laughs, honestly laughs, maybe for the first time since Vick has come to stay. “You think

fair has anything to do with anything, my boy? Do you?"

###

Vick watches Johnny Carson with the sound down, the bulk of his senses focused on the deep, throbbing bass line that pushes from the party room into the apartment at the back of the restaurant. Sometimes there is only the music, and sometimes, either when the song ends or at least pauses, he can make out the hooting of living men and a thin but intense rain of applause.

Vick tries to imagine what Sally Ann is doing at each moment, and what she is wearing, conjuring up an assortment of colorful, vivid scenes.

Does a stripper strip everything off?

But there is supposed to be a G-string left on. Isn't there? He has assembled that bit of half-knowledge by listening to older, louder boys. The string covers her privates, which seems critically important all of a sudden. Vick can see Sally Ann dancing in some fashion, and disrobing to some embarrassing point, and when he hears the hollering and the boots stomping, he can even accept the fact that she's doing what she does in front of a few dozen strange men whom she will never see again. Unless they come back again tomorrow night, of course.

Then after midnight, as Vick slips away into a deep sleep, he comes to accept the idea that maybe even the G-string is removed. And he doesn't care if a thousand men are watching Sally Ann Jamaica dance



before them, utterly naked. Just as long as Vick is one of the men ...

###

At breakfast, Aunt Katherine is grinning happily.

It is a strange sight, her visible pleasure, and Vick finds himself staring at her face until she notices him. But instead of a bristly anger, she merely laughs out loud, asking, “Would you like to earn an easy five dollars?”

Always.

“Then get a trash sack and pick up the parking lot, would you? Bottles, cans. Just don't touch anything you shouldn't touch.”

He promises “I won't” without being sure what that might be. The sun has barely lifted over the east hills, but it is already hot and sticky outdoors. Vick wears the same jeans as yesterday, but he has put on a clean shirt—one of his last—and he works as fast as he can, but carefully. Thoroughly. He knows how particular his aunt can be, regardless of her temporary happiness. He picks up beer cans and beer bottles and empty packs of cigarettes, and he uses his sandals to bury a few piles of cigarette butts, and he does the same with a pair of condoms that look as if they have laid all year on the graveled terrain.

The boy on the bike arrives as Vick finishes his work.

“It was something,” the kid announces.

“What was?”

“Last night was.” The boy wears a knowing sneer,

explaining, "My dad has never seen better. And he knows a lot about strip clubs."

"Your dad wasn't going, I thought."

"Well, he did. Later." The boy shrugs his shoulders. "Some buddies came and got him during her break, and he went running up here and caught the last half hour of her show." Vick feels a thousand emotions. Each pulls its own way, leaving him without any emotions. No feelings whatsoever. He finds himself staring into the half-filled plastic sack, trying not to imagine anything at all.

"You sneak a look?" the boy asks.

For a moment, Vick considers lying. He tries to decide how to say "Yes" with the proper tone. But he needs to do it in a believable fashion, with just enough certainty that the older kid won't doubt him, and all of that consideration takes too much time. The boy interrupts the silence with a loud laugh, and then says

"Thought not" as he turns and scornfully rides away.

###

The guest cottage is a two-room shack with curtains. Squeezed into a tiny back window is a third-hand air conditioner that shakes the entire structure when it works; but despite the morning's heat, nobody has turned the unit on. Is Sally Ann even inside? The question poses itself to Vick, and he nearly panics. The idea that she could have left for any reason ... well, it makes him crazy for a few

seconds. But her little Datsun is parked in the shade of the cottage, which means that she has to be somewhere close. Then he notices that one of the front windows has been opened two or three inches, letting the air move. And of course there is the inescapable fact that she is from elsewhere—Jamaica, perhaps, or some other tropical realm—and maybe she doesn't believe in or even require luxuries like air-conditioning. These thoughts are all crowding into his head when the cottage door opens and Sally Ann steps out into the day.

Vick drops his trash sack in surprise.

She laughs, but somehow not at him. Her manner and dark smooth face make him feel as if the morning is terribly humorous, and maybe the sun has just told a wonderful joke. There is no trash to pick up here, but Vick reclaims his sack and begins scanning the bare ground between them. "Did you sleep okay?" he mutters.

Then even softer, he says, "Ma'am."

She is wearing clothes similar to what she wore yesterday, but not identical. And her feet are bare, tiny and very narrow and moving something like a dancer's feet would move—at least what Vick imagines when he thinks of dancer's feet. He is astonished to see those lovely feet carry her closer, walking on the long toes and stopping just a step or two short of him. Then with that deep accented voice, she admits, "I had to put the air-conditioning to sleep. It was just so earnest and loud in its work."

That wipes away one little mystery. Vick nods and looks up at her face, and then, because he can't help himself, he looks lower. He stares at her T-shirt and the modest breasts that unfortunately seem to be wearing a bra.

More than anything, Vick wants to say a few perfect words.

None occur to him.

Sally Ann looks at his sack and says, "Entropy."

What did she just say? The boy looks up at her face again, puzzled but intrigued. He recognizes that word, but he knows nothing about it. "What do you do?" he asks, trying to steer the subject. "When you're not dancing, I mean. What do you do with yourself?"

"You mean, am I student somewhere?"

Maybe he does mean that. Yes.

"A college student, perhaps. With a passion for the high sciences."

"Are you?"

"Or the arts," she continues. "Music and dance might be the center of my life."

"Okay ..."

"Or physical education. For all you know, I could be a talented gymnast applying her skills to a low trade."

Exasperated, Vick puts down his sack of trash again, and again he tries to come up with a series of perfect words, explaining his soul while entertaining this very strange creature to the best of his ability.

"What are you doing here, Vick?"

Aunt Katherine has walked up behind him, unnoticed. Sally Ann seems untroubled by her presence, while Vick is concentrating too hard on his next words to care about his aunt like he should. The only person who acts flustered is the old woman. She drags a hand through her steel hair and tries to smile, the expression falling short of its goal, and then because somebody needs to say something, she tells Vick, "I think you've done enough work. Why don't you go back to the restaurant? Tell your uncle to give you five ones."

But he doesn't want to leave now. If he has to, that only proves that the world is deeply unfair.

"Vick," purrs Aunt Katherine.

He picks up sack, pretending it weighs tons.

Momentarily satisfied, the old woman turns to Sally Ann, and with a soft voice that sounds halfway nervous, she says, "Congratulations."

The girl gives the oddest little curtsy.

"From what I saw last night," Aunt Katherine continues, "that program of yours, that show, was a wonderful success."

"It was fun, I think."

"Yes, yes." The steel hair needs another adjustment. Then the woman says what she came to say. "I was thinking ... we were ... because of the enthusiasm ... far more than I ever hoped for, I'll tell you ... John and I wondered if you'd be willing to stay for a third night, with all the usual arrangements for pay, of course ..."

“No.”

Aunt Katherine straightens.

“Thank you, but I cannot,” says the delicious voice.

“If it's a question of money—”

“I have to leave tomorrow morning,” the young woman proclaims. And the way she says that one word—“leave”—means everything.

“Back to Chicago?” asks Aunt Katherine.

Sally Ann shakes her head sadly. “I am expected elsewhere. I am sorry, but that is what is.” And suddenly Vick feels awful, sick and too weak to lift the massive sack of trash. Yet even as his heart shatters, he continues to stare at those sweet brown dancer's feet.

###

It is barely three in the afternoon—six long hours before the show begins—yet the first trucks already start to pull into the graveled lot. The drivers seem unaware of the hour or how silly they look. Some of the vehicles seem familiar; they were probably here last night. While others come from counties that might be two or three hours removed from this place, a few even hailing from neighboring states. How do they know to come? Vick wonders. Do cowboys call one another on the phone, or do they talk face to face in the pastures and on the

back roads? Unless of course this is an event that each can feel for himself, like a change in the weather. For a long while, the first men sit alone in their cabs with their windows down, a few smoking and most of the rest chewing tobacco, using empty cans held between their legs to catch their foul black spit. Back bumpers wear little emblems—hints about politics and philosophies. AMERICA-LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT, Vick reads again and again. They uniformly despise Communism in all of its forms. They support Nixon, even though he isn't President anymore. They love firearms and the NRA, which isn't much of a surprise, considering how many gun racks hang in the back windows. There also are several Confederate flags, which seems important. And one tobacco-chewing man has covered his bumper with variations on the same theme:

AMERICA, BUILT AND PAID FOR BY  
HARD WORKING WHITE MALES.

Vick gives that man a stare. Oddly, the face behind the steering wheel doesn't look much older than him. Sixteen years old, he guesses.

But the voice attached to that face seems even younger, cracking a little when it says, "What are you looking at, kid? Leave me the hell alone." After four-thirty, the parking lot is entirely full, and cowboys as well as men dressed like cowboys begin to wander into the restaurant and, in particular, into the bar. Aunt Katherine has called in all of the waitresses, including girls who don't seem to know their job, and she has rounded up every last body in the county that can cook an edible meal. But the crowd remains orderly and mostly polite, drinking as many soft drinks as beers, eating the entire inventory of pretzels and potato chips before six o'clock. As supper begins, even Uncle John is given jobs and responsibilities.

"I'm suppose to watch over you," he reports to Vick. "With both eyes, all the time." For a moment, the boy doesn't understand. Then he realizes what the adults are afraid of, and in the same breath he discovers that he is thinking along the same lines. But how he can ever fool anybody with anything if his head is this transparent and his motives are so obvious ...?

"Help me at the counter," says his uncle.

"Doing what?" Vick asks.



“I don't know. I haven't thought ahead that far ahead.”

So Vick just sits, watching the black-and-white television as the picture rolls, watching the local news turn to the Wheel of Fortune. The first men start to pay for their meals, and Uncle John makes change for twenties and fifties and even a couple hundred-dollar bills, handing back piles of cash until the register is just about exhausted.

“I need change,” he tells Vick. “Feel like carrying a couple thousand dollars in your hands?”

“Sure,” the boy mutters.

“Take this to Katherine,” the old man says. “She's in the office, right down the hall there—”

“I know where it is,” Vick complains.

“I'm just saying,” reports his uncle. “I can see you all the way, and I'll be watching for you. Got it?” Vick has no intention to do anything but what he has been told to do. Carrying the enormous bills in both hands, Vick feels lucky and trusted, and he can't think of himself as being anything but trustworthy. How much money is this? He stops for a moment, letting his fingers try to count these pieces of fancy paper. But there are too many of them, and time is precious, and he breaks into a little trot, knocking twice on the office door before stepping inside.

Aunt Katherine sits behind her desk, seemingly waiting for him. She is wearing a good modest dress and a broad smile directed at the money before anything else.

“Quite a night,” is her opinion.

“Uncle John wants—”

“Ones and fives, and probably some tens, too. Yes, I know.” The safe is black steel, enormous and older than any person here, and possibly older than the restaurant itself. She opens it with a few deft twists of the hand and wrist and quickly counts what Vick has brought her and matches it with taller stacks of smaller bills. Handing him a matching fortune, she says again,

“Quite a night.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“And barely begun yet,” she adds, coming close to a giggle. The cash fills his hands. Vick steps back into the hallway, hearing the buzz of men talking, some close and most distant. He stands still for a moment, thinking of nothing. He lets his eyes look down the hallway at his uncle, watching him dealing with the young cowboy who looks too young to have built anything in his life. The kid is showing Uncle John his driver's license, or somebody else's license. Vick can see the young mouth saying, “But I am nineteen,” even though he looks and stands like he is fourteen, if that. One of the new waitresses passes by. She feels harried, too many tables needing her attention and adrenaline making her shaky. With an abrupt voice, Vick says to her, “Here.”

“What's this?” she complains.

“Money,” he explains. Then he points and says, “Take it down to my uncle, would you? Tell him I

went to the bathroom.”

“Who are you?” she says, honestly unsure what this boy is doing here. But then he isn't there anymore. On quick feet, he has sprinted back through the restaurant and into the apartment behind the kitchen, using the private door to slip outside before anybody can think of stopping him.

###

It is evening, hot and damp but growing more pleasant by the moment. Vick pauses in front of the guest cottage, knowing exactly what he wants to do. But it isn't often that he feels too shy or too insecure to do anything. Suddenly his legs lock up, and with a cold terror clamping down on his throat, he does nothing at all.

“Is it a respectable crowd?” asks a voice.

Sally Ann is inside, calling out to him through the slightly open window. Vick jumps at the sound of her voice and then laughs at himself, and with a glance at the crowded parking lot, he reports, “It's a huge crowd.”

“Wonderful!”

“And it's only seven-thirty,” he adds. “There's no telling how many more are coming.” Silence.

“Are you getting ready?” he asks.

“I am ready,” she answers.

Vick feels close to melting. He feels wonderful and sick with nerves, particularly when the door comes open. Then she steps out. Except for the plastic sandals, she is dressed exactly as she was this

morning, in jeans and a big T-shirt.

He was expecting different clothes. Or no clothes, maybe. He stares at her, thinking that he really knows nothing at all about the habits of strippers.

“I feel hot,” she reports.

After a day of cloudless sun, it must be miserably hot inside the cottage.

“When I first saw you,” she reports, “you were riding an inner tube down that little stream.”

“I wasn't,” he says. “I was walking along the road.” She smiles, teeth bright and even. “You are correct. My mistake.” Vick watches her face.

“Anyway,” she continues. “I'd like to take a float trip, too.”

“Huh?”

She winks at him, asking, “Can you find me two inner tubes, Vick. Please?”

“Two tubes? Why two?”

Which is a very funny thing to ask, it seems. That leads to a light touch with a hand that should be damp with perspiration, yet isn't, and very quietly, Sally Ann Jamaica asks, “Do you think I would wish to make this journey alone?”

###

The young cowboy sits in his pickup, nursing a can of Coke while considering the grave injustices of this world. At first, he acts indifferent to the two strangers walking past. Then a switch trips inside his head, and he jumps down, stunned and perplexed, and then absolutely furious. “Hey you!” he cries out. “Where

are you taking her? Hey!”

Vick starts to run, Sally Ann at his side.

“Hey, kid!”

Yesterday's inner tube has been pumped full of air again, the larger tube waiting beside it, as before. The stream runs past their feet, looking swift and deep in the gathering dusk.

“You'll get wet,” Vick warns.

But Sally Ann doesn't hesitate, grabbing up the big tube and flinging it upstream. The tube hits the water with a rubbery, faintly musical *thunk*. And then she turns and leaps backward—a graceful, long, and utterly blind leap that drops her into the center of the spinning black circle. Other men are shouting, harsh voices cursing as they come closer.

Vick presses his tube against his chest and jumps forward, the cool water soaking the front of his shirt and his exposed legs. Then he rolls over and sits up and kicks, pushing clear of the concrete riprap that lines the bank where the stream quickens, making ready to dive into the first sharp bend. Sally Ann says, “Neat.”

As if racing, she kicks and paddles, pushing out into the current, gaining a long lead. Vick tries to keep up, but he cannot.

When he passes the rusted Buick, he feels as if nobody else is on the water. The mystery woman has vanished, not just up ahead somewhere but completely. Forever. Mourning takes the boy, and he

actually sobs for a moment, coming around the next long bend, the shadows of the trees reaching to the far bank, leaving the stream in a deep gray gloom.

“Hello, little man,” she says.

Sally Ann is sitting beside a snag of driftwood, clinging to a bare limb with three fingers.

“I thought you were gone,” Vick admits.

A wise little smile breaks out. “Not yet, no,” she sings, letting go of her handhold, kicking a couple times to push out beside him.

The cabins are behind them. The woods are falling into darkness, and the sounds of water mix with the wild chittery voices of insects and a last few cries from snoozing birds. For a minute or two, drifting is enough. They float where the stream takes them, and sometimes the tubes bump against each other with their own soft music. Then Vick begins to hear engines running, and where the trees thin, he sees a line of trucks moving fast along the high access road.

But nobody can catch them, he knows.

When they pass beneath the railroad trestle, he feels free—happy and lucky, perplexed and wonderstruck.

“Who are you?” he finally asks.

She says nothing for a little while, and then says, “Life,” and nothing else.

“What are you?” Vick wonders aloud.

“You do not know,” she begins. Then their tubes touch, and she places her hand on his tube, strong fingers wrapped around the metal air valve. “You

cannot know ... just how common life is ..." He asks, "Where?"

"Everywhere."

He looks at fireflies calling to each other in the woods, and he asks, "Are you talking about the stars?"

"One common abode. Stars, yes."

Vick says nothing, feeling a tremendous weight against his chest and throbbing heart.

"Earlier than you know, stars fed little worlds that made life that learned how to think. What you call the universe was settled before this world had form, much less its own thoughtful minds." He stares at her, and waits.

"And life is everywhere else, too."

"Between the stars?" he asks.

"And beyond them," she replies. "In places you cannot imagine, Vick." He loves to hear his name in her mouth.

"But whenever something is common, Vick, it is also extraordinarily cheap." Her voice changes its tone. The pleasure is replaced with a graveness that unsettles him, just a little. "By definition, what is cheap is replaceable, and with every moment, something is lost. With a wrong step, or a right step done improperly, an entire world dies. Or one long arm of a galaxy is scrubbed clean of everything you would consider to be remotely alive."

The stream turns one way and back again. A pair of mule deer stands on the bank, one drinking and

then the other, neither noticing the tubes and bodies drifting within ten feet of them.

“What are you saying?” Vick whispers.

“Too much, probably.”

Again, one last time, the boy wants to know, “What are you?”

“If I could explain, I would,” she promises. “But in clear honest terms, I cannot make much of this comprehensible.”

“Okay. But why are you here?”

She looks at him, the lovely face shining as she smiles.

Then Vick says, “I know why. I do.”

“Tell me.”

He takes a deep breath, and another. Then with deep conviction, he says, “You’ve come to Earth to help us. You’re here to teach us and show us ... I don’t know what exactly ... but something that’s going to help us survive, I think ...”

That wins a long, long silence.

The stream continues to wind its way down the little valley, new springs feeding its flow, making it noticeably wider and a little deeper. Then, after a last long turn, the highway comes into view. By then, the night is in full force, save for on top of the concrete bridge that spans the stream. Dozens of pickup trucks and cars have parked on the shoulders and in the traffic lanes, and the crisscrossed headlights and occasional spotlight push back the darkness with cones and columns of yellowish light.



“I would like very much to help your world, yes I would,” she sings. “If I believed I was doing good, I would feel happier than I do now.”

Vick risks placing his hand on top of hers, and she lets him leave it there. Her flesh is warmer than any fever.

“But your central assumption is wrong, Vick. I am sorry.” The voice sounds sorry and very distant. “I was speaking about myself. When I told you that worlds die with a single misstep, I was talking about my particular home and my particular form of life. They are dead now, and in every sense, it is because of my own little misstep.”

Vick starts to cry.

“No one survives but me,” she admits. “So I wander alone, and I linger in those little places that interest me. And when it seems like fun, I dance, in one fashion or another.” They have almost reached the bridge. At least twenty men stand in the current, cold water up around their hips, arms linked to block the way. Yet nothing about them is menacing or foul. They only wish to catch the object of their deep infatuation. While Aunt Katherine and Uncle John wait above on the bare clay bank, holding hands as well, watching hard for both of them.

“I don't want this to end,” Vick begs.

“I suppose you don't,” says Sally Ann Jamaica. Then she leans close and kisses him softly on the ear, adding, “Worlds or boys, it's always the same way. Did you know that? Each passes, and each is replaced

by something else ... and all you can hope is that what comes next is something as good, if not better ...”

The End

## The Hoplite

This could be Persia.

These wide river valleys are fertile and irrigated, home to groves of fruit trees and date trees standing between broad flat fields of golden grain. The sky is a fierce blue, while distant mountains stand tall enough to hold their snows into the fire of summer. Every wind feels obliged to lift the dust high, and when the wind stops, the taste of the land falls into my happy mouth. There is majesty to this country — a sense of ancient epics refusing to end. Even the natives remind me of those long-vanished Persians —

darker people than I am, with peculiar clothes and indecipherable customs, wielding a language that still baffles me, even after a year of fighting among them.

My orders bring me to a modest home surrounded by wheat.

A gun emerges from the shuttered window, and a single shot welcomes me. But the bullet is short on mass and velocity. My shield extends, laying out sheet upon sheet of plasmatic barriers that melt and then shatter the fleck of angry lead. No harm is done. In these circumstances, I'm free to react however I wish. I wish to do nothing, to wait and watch, curious what happens next. Next comes a string of wild shouts, and the shutters fly open. The rifle is flung into the yard, followed by a withering onslaught of curses. A man in his early forties screams at someone I cannot see.

Then he lifts a small boy off the floor and shoves him through the open window. It is a passionate, unthinking act. But that's how these people can be. The boy is his son: Local records are at my disposal, including their security photographs and respective biographies. The boy just turned ten. He doesn't act particularly scared. But he is offended and perhaps embarrassed by his father's rage. Why shouldn't he defend their household? I can read his attitude in the face, in the proud posture. Straight-backed, he sits on the bare, sun-broiled ground, frowning at his present misfortune. Then he decides that enough is enough, standing and picking up his rifle again; but only as an afterthought does he look my way, considering the merits of a second shot.

His father rushes from the front door, gesturing wildly while asking his son a stream of questions. I watch the two of them. That's all I want to do.

The boy is stubborn in ways that only look like bravery. Young and ignorant, he throws out his chest while boasting about his plans. He plans to shoot me again, from closer range. The gun waves in my direction. I recognize the words for "honor" and "fight". But really, I'm only a secondary concern for the child: What's important is to chastise his very cowardly father, stabbing gestures and dismissive expressions defining his scorn.

At last, the man absorbs too much abuse. He snatches the rifle from his boy's hands, then kneels and points it at the sky. This is a child's weapon,

powerful enough to murder rats and rabbits. With his head bowing but eyes still fixed upon me, the desperate father tells me what he believes I want to hear. Fumbling with my language, he says, "I am sorry." He explains, "My son is young and foolish." Then he dips his head farther, promising, "My family...we are good..." The boy stands tall, pounding on his chest, sneering at both of us while barking out a few easy curses. Then his father touches the tip of the barrel against the boy's chin and shoots, and even before the body has finished its collapse, the man leaps up again, beating the offending weapon against the house, anguish and rage giving him the strength to leave it in pieces.

\* \* \*

I am a fortunate soul. In my first life, I often saw Alexander, the young king. In vivid detail, I can remember his face — a beautiful kingly profile — and how he would sit astride his great black horse, Bucephalus. When he spoke to his soldiers, it was the voice of a god — a glorious god spending his earthly days among blessed young men — and I clearly remember how distraught I felt when our man/king/god who had ruled much of the world suddenly and inexplicably died. In dim ways, I remember being a peasant boy of ten playing with toy spears and swords, protected by a small shield made of woven grass and rawhide.

More clearly, I remember training as a warrior in the service of my king. Little moments and great days

return to me. Dreaming or awake, I sometimes see myself marching with my fellow soldiers, pushing into Asia and then off to Egypt before returning to Asia again. I smell those long-dead friends and hear their Greek voices, and in my best dreams I understand the old tongue. But never while awake. Which is common enough. The technology isn't perfect. Our squad leader was once a Knight Templar — a great soldier who died during the Third Crusade — and he openly confesses that he can't remember two words of his particular French. "These magician-scientists can bring back your soul and your flesh," he will promise. "But only so much of each can return. The rest of you, your essence, belongs to this day and our great time."

My squad leader and I have compared stories. Fourteen centuries separate our deaths; yet our bones were recovered from graves barely twenty kilometers apart.

"These are the greatest times," our squad is often told. I know my Greek name, plus a modern name given by the grim-faced nurses who cared for me while I was a baby. But among my fellow soldiers, who have very little use for the ordinary, I am known as the Hoplite.

Our leader is the Knight.

We have two Romans in our unit — the Legionnaire and the Gladiator. There is also the Celt and the SS

man, the Janissary and the Mongol. (Mongols have

a fierce reputation, but ours is a quiet little fellow, almost impossible to anger.) Our most brutal soldier is the Aztec. With little provocation, he will produce masterful acts of violence that even sicken me. But knowing the story of his first life, I can appreciate why slicing the skin from a living person is perfectly reasonable behavior, and wearing that dead man's flesh as your own is a genuine show of deep respect.

My closest friend in the squad is the Glacier Man.

His mummified body was discovered in the melting ice on the now green Alps. Six thousand years after his death, his bones were harvested for their genetic material, and a new body was grown inside an artificial womb. Then the long-dead soul was retrieved by a machine called the quantum-dilutor and implanted into the unborn child, supplying him with the memories and attitudes of his first self. Unlike everyone else in our squad, the Glacier Man has died twice.

"I was one of the first brought back," he likes to tell us. "An experimental subject in a program that didn't officially exist. I grew up in the lab and trained to fight by the best, and my first work was pacifying an African hellhole."

He has more stories about Africa than Bronze-Age Europe. Which only makes sense, since that second life is closer, and much more immediate.

"That second life ended with a traffic accident," the Glacier Man admits. "Nobody's fault, except mine." He is an honorable fellow always bearing what blame

is his.

“But somebody thought I was a good soldier. Because when they enlarged the program, they brought me back for a second rebirth.”

In our unit, the Glacier Man enjoys a reputation for measured courage and reasonable fear — two blessings among professional soldiers.

“Live this life right,” he has told us. Told me. “Do everything about your job right, and they will keep bringing you and your soul back from the oblivion.”

I always try to do right.

How could I not? What reasonable soul wouldn't want to live forever?

\* \* \*

The dead boy's father makes a show of bowing to me again. When I was a new soldier, I took quite a bit of pleasure from moments like this. These people consider me worthy of their fear and respect — the two faces of the same golden coin. One young woman was so nervous in my presence that she soiled herself; that moment kept me smiling for weeks. But that's the remote past, or so it feels. This man's terror is huge, yet I can't let myself be too impressed. What if his terror is calculated? Has the man lain awake at night, planning what he would do in a moment like this? Was he prepared to sacrifice his most difficult child to save his family? Doing the chore himself impresses me. I can't help but marvel. And to win more of my good nature, he grovels and digs at the earth, again and again saying, “My apologies,” while



his sobs pierce the hot midday air.

I could be wrong, but this fellow seems to be trying too hard.

I approach and kneel, the clean, armor-clad fingers of my left hand forcing his face to rise, meeting my gaze.

In my right hand is a scroll-screen. Images of a known criminal are shown slowly, allowing him to study my enemy from different vantage points and wearing several possible disguises.

“No,” he says, in his language and then mine. “No, no.” I normally avoid using my translator. Too often, it becomes a crutch and another reason to stop noticing a world rich in telling details. But this occasion demands precision. I ask, “Do you know this man?” and my machinery repeats the question with my voice.

Again, with feeling, he says, “No.”

“No,” my machinery assures.

“Have you seen him? Anywhere? Ever?”

“Never, no.”

I shake my head, my disappointment obvious. “Yet he was born and raised within three kilometers from your front door. You have to know his family.”

He ponders that rich question.

I offer the family's name.

If he lies now, I will find him out. In my files are countless points in time and space where this farmer's little world crossed with the criminal's. No, he realizes, he has no choice here. It is smarter to tell

the truth, but only to a careful point.

“I know the family, yes.”

I nod, pretending to be grateful.

“They are very bad people,” he adds.

“But I only want this one man,” I assure him. “He’s a known leader and killer, and I want to gut him with my own sword.”

The imagery has its impact. Both of us understand that I have no use for ancient weapons. In its power and capacity to intimidate, my railgun is infinitely superior. But the face resting in my left hand grimaces, and finally, with a quavering tone, he confesses, “I am scared.”

“Yes?”

“Two men terrify me.”

“The man I’m chasing isn’t half as dangerous as the man before you now.” My captive nods, eager to accept my argument. Then very quietly, he says, “You have to kill him. Today, please. If I tell you where he is—”

“You will,” I interrupt. “And I will kill him. It is a promise.”

“He has a hiding place.”

Every reasonable soul has two or three hiding places.

“Inside that far hill there,” he says, fighting not to turn his head. What if his evil neighbor is watching us?

“Where in the hill?” I ask.

“The flat brown rock twenty meters above the

plain,” he offers. “It hides a doorway that leads into a camouflaged bunker.”

I show my most approving smile.

And he replies in kind, but with tears streaking his dirty, miserable face.

“Don't let him escape,” my informant begs. “He has a tunnel that comes out on the back—”

“Where?”

“I don't know.”

I would be suspicious if he did know such a secret. But everything he has shown me seems both valid and minimally useful.

I let go of his face.

“What do I do now, sir?”

The scroll-screen is put away. Rising, I fix a plain gray box against the wall of his house. “Send one word to anyone,” I warn, “and this machine will know it. And if anyone tries to leave this yard, they'll be noticed. And a munitions platform twenty kilometers over your bare head will spit out a rocket that will obliterate your little house.”

“Yes, sir.”

I turn off my translator.

The man rises weakly to his feet, asking a final question. His hands and the tone of his sorry voice convey the meaning. “What do I do with myself now?”

I point to his bloody, dead son.

Then I make the universal motion of shoveling, recommending an afternoon digging a worthy grave.

The Glacier Man likes to talk about measured pain and calculated misery. Standing watch with me, he will point out that wars are usually won when one side is exhausted, and if you defeat your enemies utterly, it will be ages before the same people find the courage and simple power to rise up again. But that doesn't help soldiers who exist only when there is a war worth fighting. That's why it is best, essential and wise, to show moments of measured patience, and even the illusion of kindness. In that fashion, the people you fight can entertain the idea that we aren't invulnerable butchers. We are humans like them, and with better planning and a little luck, their descendants might someday defeat our horrible kind. The Mongol is familiar with our conversations. "Your friend made that same pitch to me, back when I first joined the unit."

The Mongol is a likeable man.

"Little gestures of decency...yes, I suppose they would mean something. Someday. If those who saw our kindness managed to notice, and those same eyes managed to survive until the treaty was signed..." He is likeable, yet rather odd.

"We shouldn't temper our violence?" I asked.

"What I believe..." His voice fell away into black silence. Then he quietly told me, "We mean nothing. As soldiers, and as a squad. At least when it comes to the prosecution of any single war."

"Nothing?"

“As good as nothing, I think.”

My training says otherwise. Every other voice in my squad promises that we matter. And the actions of both our enemies and the terrified natives make it easy to believe that we are fierce deities holding sway over thousands of lives.

“Imagine a sword,” he said. “Two edges sharp as razors and the hilt suited for the strong determined hand.”

I nodded, lifting one of my hands.

“No,” he said, pulling my wrist down. “We are the sword. Unappealing as that sounds, we're just someone else's tool. And of course tools are soulless and amoral objects, blamelessly wielded by others.”

I always follow orders; what good soldier doesn't?

“The only cruelty that matters comes from the top. A nation's king, a world's prime minister. Whomever leads. But have you even once seen our Khan? Our Alexander? No, of course you haven't. None of us have. Our master doesn't dress up in his finery and ride before his cheering troops.”

“We're not children,” I snapped, sounding proud of sure of myself. “We don't need that kind of encouragement.”

The Mongol smiled in a joyless, wise fashion. “By the way, what is our leader called? Can you tell me that?”

I opened my mouth, but no answer offered itself.

“We slaughter in his name, but we don't know that name,” my little friend pointed out. Then with a wink,

he laughed without a trace of joy, adding, "But that's only reasonable. Of course it is. Have you ever met the sword that can read the name etched into its hilt?"

\* \* \*

The distant hill is a four-minute battle march. My exoskeleton helps me run, legs eating the ground in forty-meter strides. Every leap is doctored slightly by attitude rockets fixed near my center of gravity. Random firings give me a chaotic, moth-like trajectory — a difficult target for even the luckiest sniper. Yet whenever my boot drops, the ground waiting is flat and solid. Infrared vision and radar and telemetry from a dozen flying and orbiting stations help me monitor my position and every likely hazard. Yet if my enemy is here, he knows how to hide. That much is obvious. This war is quite old now, and the only enemies left to fight are the hardened, wise and very paranoid few. A series of firefights and at least one major bombardment have pummeled the big hill. Reading the craters, I can guess what weapons were used and the likely history of each battle. At the beginning of the war, a company of conscripts tried to hold off an overwhelming assault. A long deep crevice is where scared, unbloodied men would naturally take cover, and in those shadows I find shards of bone, random teeth and thousands of spent rounds. These were ordinary soldiers trapped while standing their ground, and in the end, they probably fought harder than they could have

imagined possible. Kneeling, I feel the heat rising off my leg-assists — a residue of my hard march. One hand holds my railgun, and with my free hand I pick up the largest shard of bone — a partial hip — wondering if some later age will give this dead man a second life and better training.

Someday, he and I could stand together, defending the future Earth or plundering the worlds of Alpha Centauri.

My eyes have always been sharp, but ten species of mechanical eyes allow me to read the rock and parched brush and a wealth of little tracks. Save for a skinny fox, nothing larger than ground squirrels live on this terrain. Has anyone shown his nose since I arrived? The spotter drones say, “No.” If a man hides here, he stays underground, or at least he does a laudable job of obscuring his tracks. I sprinkle the hillside with sonic charges and three detectors, and the concussive blows turn the rock transparent. Does my enemy have a bunker behind that flat brown rock? The trick shows me a chamber, yes, and the deep door behind the rock, plus what might be armor plating fixed to the walls and ceiling. There's room enough in the hideout for twenty men. As promised, I find at least one hidden exit spilling into an elderly grove of date palms. The safe, certain route would be to demolish the exit before calling in the rest of my squad. But each of us has his own duty today, and I don't relish the abuse if I beg for help with a routine chore. Every whisper of intelligence promises a single

man hiding just a few meters below my feet. What I decide to do is booby trap the bunker's main entrance before jumping over the hill, and then I'll walk my way up into the bunker, killing every squirrel and trapped man in my way. As a precaution, I tell the drones circling above to slaughter anyone who slips past the booby trap. This is a standard tactic.

My mistake has been made, and I still don't realize it. I start to leap my way up the slope, rock and grit scattering, taking several moments to reach a place just short of hill's crest...and then one of my leg-assists complains about its range of motion. This is a minor mechanical problem, but I have to stop to make an adjustment. And when I tip my head forward, my faceplate reflects the high hot sky. A faint white flash catches my gaze. Somehow a missile has been fired, and it's streaking toward my side of the hill. Did my quarry start to run? I look downhill, hoping to see him. But an ancient instinct comes into play; and with more desperation than grace, I leap backward as far as possible, using just one exceptionally powerful leg.

The explosion is a hard loud slap, flinging me even farther.

I crash down on the highest part of the raw, battered hill, stretched out on my back with three critical systems complaining...and now the sky fills with missiles that want nothing but to kill me.

\* \* \*

The Glacier Man talks about history. Perhaps



because his past lives reach back so far, he invests his free time reading about past military campaigns and methods and their marks on the vivid, important present.

“We're the most expensive soldiers in history,” he has told me, more than once. “A hundred years ago, the glamour warriors — our closest counterparts — flew aircraft. Their machines were expensive, their training even more so. But then planes became too quick and nimble for human cargo. Freed of pilots, the machines grew cheap. And once armed with the best adaptive software, we learned to trust them, more often than not.”

None of us completely trust the drones.

“But those same wonders made the infantryman important again. A drone can hit any target at any time. But the AI pilot never decides who or what to shoot. Humans have that responsibility, and honor. How could men surrender the power of Death to a flock of machines?”

“I wouldn't want to live in such a world,” I admitted.

“These are rich, rich times, my friend.” The Glacier Man has a handsome face decorated with the same kinds of artful tattoos that were discovered on his battered, mummified body. With a wide smile, he claimed, “We fight for people who want nothing to do with combat. Which is only reasonable. No nation would willingly defend itself with soft, fat, and very spoiled citizens.” I don't know my king, and I don't

know my people, either. But I know my purpose, and how can I question any part of this?

“Our age doesn't require many soldiers,” the Glacier Man explained. “In this entire theatre, I doubt if there are two thousand of us.”

Most of who are strangers to me.

“Just one of us, armed with a railgun and light field equipment, wields the firepower that a hundred men possessed in the last century. And that's without calling in support from drones and artillery and such.”

“We're the finest ever,” I proclaimed.

With a grin, my friend agreed.

I don't think much about people who won't do their own blood-work. But then again, I have no experience outside my narrow, intense world.

The Glacier man smiled in a wise way, and he carefully mentioned, “Yet we aren't the first of our kind either.”

“No?”

“There are some very old stories,” he explained. “In ancient times, a great wizard or shaman would sow the earth with dragon teeth or some other worthy seed. And when the seeds sprouted, the dead heroes of past ages would rise from the earth, full of fight and brave beyond all measure...men living again, but understanding full well that Death is a temporary state of affairs, and most definitely not something to be feared...”

On occasion, I ask myself if I fear Death.

“A few thousand warriors born from ancient bones,” he said, spellbound by everything we represent. But I ask myself that question only when I'm certain to answer, “No, I'm not afraid.” When I'll say to myself in a firm, certain voice, “I do not fear You, Death. My faceless, godly King.”

\* \* \*

There's no time to consider what has gone wrong or why. Rockets have targeted me, and I have only a few seconds to release my holo-flares — little machines that generate images that resemble me, each bounding off in some random direction.

With so many rockets, each flare earns its own warhead.

The rest bear down on me.

I wait. In a low crouch, I give instructions to my legs and trigger a smoke grenade that drops between the ground and my armored ass. Then exactly when the grenade detonates, my legs manage another long leap. The warheads hammer into the crest of the hill. Shards of rock follow the concussive blasts, and I spin and lose consciousness, and when my suit jolts me awake with stink-salts and electricity, I'm surprised to find that I'm still alive.

But I'm not where I was hoping to be.

My GPS has shut down. Clearly, someone's gone to considerable trouble to kill me. Even as the hillside falls over me, I pick up my head, finding my bearings. Then I drop and roll over the barren ground, tumbling without a shred of grace into the bone-

littered crevice. I could scream at the drones, begging for reason.

But that would waste time and make me even more noticeable, and whoever laid this trap is ten times too clever to leave any safety system intact.

I fall silent instead.

To the best of my ability, I hide in the shadows.

But the drones will sniff me out and kill me. There's no reason for hope. So after a moment's reflection, I decide on the only trick left to me.

I strip.

To a soldier in the field, armor is everything. And when I'm reduced to a bruised body and camouflaged underwear, I am close to nothing. A little bit invisible, I hope. Then I set my helmet on top of the armored shell, telling both what to do next and then after that. Very quickly, I kiss the fingers on my right hand and touch the faceplate, hoping the suit's good luck runs into me. Those armored gloves have a firm, purposeful grip on my railgun. The weapon begins to fire wildly at the sky. And then a nearly naked man crawls out of the crevice, and with the grace of somebody who is terrified, he begins to run. A dozen rockets punch into the hillside, followed by the roar of prolonged avalanches. And because rockets are cheap, another dozen warheads pummel the crevice and everything around it. I barely manage to slip away.

With no weapon but a plastic pistol, I take what cover I can find beside a small hole — someone's

hiding place and home — and the dry abrasive rubble washes over me, hands over my scalp while my nose fills with the pleasant warm stink of a terrified fox.

\* \* \*

My squad was ambushed some weeks ago. Fighting on that scale hadn't been seen for ages, and our leader, the Knight Templar, had his lower extremities cut away by a random blast. Sobbing, he begged us to please kill him. Perhaps the pain made him say it, or the idea of being less of a man. But rules forbid that kind of homicide, unless your fellow soldier is about to be taken prisoner, or, unlikely it seems, acting blatantly as a traitor.

The Knight was flown to the field hospital, and from various sources, we learned that not only would he live, he would eventually return to us, fitted with artificial legs and a new penis made of grafted tissues and silicone.

Until his return, the Glacier Man was in charge.

Everyone was upset by this very bad luck, and there was talk about blame and who should wear it. Naturally, that's what I assumed the fight was about.

It was late evening, and the Glacier Man and the Mongol were together in our missing man's quarters. Their voices were low and intentionally muffled, and I wasn't paying attention. Nobody was. We heard nothing that gave us any premonition of trouble.

Everyone heard the sharp pop of a fist striking bone.

Which was followed by a second impact, and a

high-pitched shout. Our squad descended on the two men, ready to pull those angry warriors apart. Fights happen; every squad has its family battles. In my head, I'd already written an account of the event: Our enemies had taken us by surprise, and the two soldiers probably felt that each other had been inattentive or clumsy. I ran into the room expecting to see pride and shame embroiled in a cathartic battle. But no, what we discovered was the Glacier Man standing over the Mongol, using fists and boots to deliver as much misery as possible. "No, no, no!" he kept screaming. "No, no, no!" Our two Romans pulled the attacker off his victim, and that's when I realized the Mongol hadn't lifted a hand, even to ward off the blows. From the splatter marks, I saw that he must have crumbled to the floor and then sat completely still, allowing his body to be beaten raw. Holding his sorry ribs now, he spat blood and said, "Anyway."

Of all the faces present, he looked at mine first.

"Anyway," he said once more. Then he added, "That's still the truth," and spat fresh blood on top of the drying blood, never taking his eyes off me.

\* \* \*

My enemy makes his presence known with a quiet, joyful laugh.

I'm buried under the blast debris, and I can hope I am invisible. The laughing man is somewhere close and uphill, and after enjoying his victory, he begins to swing a mechanical shovel, digging into the hillside.

Somebody has gone to considerable trouble to kill me. Perhaps the man hates me. Perhaps I once did something particularly awful to his family or friends, and this is nothing but revenge. He could have singled me out for personal reasons. But hate is exceptionally cheap in this country, and vengeance is everyone's goal. Subverting my own weapons to turn against me is an unusual, remarkable trick, and I have to guess that this isn't something that has been done for small, ordinary reasons. He digs where my suit and presumably my body are buried.

What he wants — the object of his desires, I realize — is my battle armor and railgun and every secret that a clever man might wring from such a wondrous treasure.

Slowly, very slowly, I ease my way out from under the dusty grit and stone. He digs rapidly — a big man working alone and plainly worried that one of my friends will come to my rescue. I see the armor on his back and two sweaty arms and the unwashed black hair topped with a helmet that has had its edges chewed away when an earlier owner was killed. The shovel continues to dig, flinging a fountain of gray debris out of the growing hole. I can tell when he uncovers my armor and my helmet. He withdraws the shovel, leaving it humming in neutral. In case I survived, he reaches into the hole with some kind of sharpened implement, jabbing hard at what should be a gap between my faceplate and breastplate.

The resistance isn't what he expects.

Puzzled, he withdraws his makeshift sword, searching for blood but seeing nothing except for a veneer of dust and my left-behind sweat.

Too late, he thinks to turn around.

His face is solid, his brown eyes smart. In an instant, I watch surprise blossom, followed closely by the beginnings of a smile. He nearly laughs for a second time, genuinely amused to discover that he has been fooled.

My pistol is little bigger than a toy, and its bark can't be heard over the idling sound of the resting shovel.

\* \* \*

The Mongol and I were on watch again.

In ancient times, this would have meant standing alert in the dark and cold, listening for the thud of unwelcome horse hooves or watching for the glint of moonlight on an enemy's shield. But our machines are better at these mundane tasks than we would ever be. "Watch" for us is a chance to stay up late, drinking flavored stimulants while sitting in favorite chairs, each soldier picking his way through copious files of raw intelligence, rumor and the lofty analysis of nameless experts. Eleven days have passed since the Glacier Man and the Mongol fought. And I hadn't asked what happened between them.

"I'll never ask," I told myself.

Yet in the next moment, I heard myself admitting, "The Aztec thinks that he should have killed you."

"Is that so?" my companion replied.



“And then skinned you,” I added. “You must have done something very awful, if you deserved that kind of beating.”

My comments earned a narrow smile and a long, thoughtful silence. Then the Mongol sat back and took a breath. “I had a girlfriend,” he said. “A native woman, as it happens.”

On my list of possible answers, that was my third or fourth most likely explanation. There are official outlets for our desires, and fraternization with the locals is never permitted. Yet that didn't explain the rage shown by the Glacier Man. Why not just give the soldier hard duty for a month and be done with it?

In a fashion, I envied my friend. “Where is this girl?” The Mongol mentioned our last war — a long and very bloody civil insurrection in one of the old industrial nations of the North. He named a street in the city that we were pacifying, and a landmark building, and then I stopped him, asking, “What can this matter now?” The Mongol studied me.

“Is this woman even alive anymore?” I pressed.

He said a few words in a thick, vaguely familiar tongue.

“What's that?” I muttered.

“She taught me her language,” he explained. “So we didn't have to rely on my translator.” Here was a second crime, as bad or worse than the first.

“She was educated,” he continued. “Informed and courageous.”

“But was she good on the floor?” I joked.

The Mongol sighed, aiming his disappointment at me. "Did you know?" he asked. "Our translators have censor functions. They do a respectable job of conveying ordinary information, but higher concepts are trimmed or avoided completely."

"Well, good. I don't have any use for philosophical noise."

"I'm not talking about philosophy. I mean the sciences. In particular, I mean biology and the nature of souls."

Suddenly I wished we would drop the subject.

"Cloning is relatively easy work," he reported. "Expensive, yes. Particularly when the subject has been dead for centuries. But any competent laboratory can conjure up a ghost's genetics." I nodded, and waited.

"But the rest of the ghost," he began.

"The quantum-dilutor grabs the soul," I interrupted. "Across time and from the afterlife—"

"And how does this wondrous machine work?"

"How does anything work? Cloning? Grenades? Our railguns or our hearts?" I laughed loudly, shaking a finger at my friend. "We know what we need to know, and nobody is better than us at our work."

"There is no quantum-dilutor," he said.

I couldn't understand him. What was he saying?

"The word's contrived. A total fiction."

"Your slut told you this?"

An old memory made him smile. "She had degrees in two sciences." I changed my attack. "The quantum-

dilutor belongs to a secret project. Your slut couldn't know about its powers or nature. Nothing.”

“That was my argument,” he confessed.

“And how did she respond?”

“Suppose you are correct,' she said to me. 'The dilutor is real, and souls can be snatched and spliced back into their reborn bodies. But even one cloned baby is an expensive creation. Wouldn't it be far, far cheaper to grab up the occasional boy-child and immerse him in a world where he's fed images and attitudes from some fictional past?’“

“She asked you this?”

He nodded.

“And what did you do to her?”

“Many things.” His smile turned bittersweet. “But several weeks later, when I had to finish things with her...”

His voice ground to a halt.

“What?”

“When I was putting my knife to her neck, she said to me, 'Life is nothing to you. Is it? We're just cheap and easy meat.'

“I promised her that no, this was difficult for me.

“Then as the knife cut, she asked, 'If there are two paths to the same goal, what wise king would take the harder route...?’“

\* \* \*

The father rises from bed to discover an armored figure at his doorstep, and the lazy glow of lamps illuminates the face that he expects to see. A wide

honest smile comes before words of congratulation. He acts relieved and joyous, assuring his visitor, “Worked just as we hoped. Got the bastard, got him!

And you got his suit working for you too, I see. What a day!” One hand lifts, removing the bloodied faceplate.

The man still smiles, but alarm starts to creep into his thoughts. Then in horror, he watches me pull away his ally's face — a gruesome disguise that leaves my own face covered with gore.

With a kick, I cripple him.

“It was the box I left behind,” I said, dragging him to center of his house. “That's what your friend in the hill needed. He gave you equipment to fool the box, to make it believe I was the enemy.” Just as he did a few hours ago, the man begs for mercy. But we both understand that nobody will believe his lies, and after his wife is dead on the floor, he decides to say nothing else, spending his remaining strength throwing hateful stares my way.

He has two young daughters, and then he has no daughters.

“You are a monster,” he mutters.

“No,” I say, “I am a hoplite.”

The word confuses him.

“I was born more than two thousand years ago, or twenty-two years ago.” I shrug beneath my armor, adding, “On this subject, I am of two minds. But I do remember Alexander and that black horse of his, and I know Persia well, and from a great distance, I once

saw Darius standing on his war chariot.”

“Monster,” the man repeats.

Then I happen to glance at his wife's body. A simple nightshirt is twisted around her chest, and twin marks show where milk leaks from the heavy breasts. In my files, no mention is made of a baby. It must be a very recent addition, and still sleeping.

I show the man a sly grin and start walking to the back of the house.

“No!” he screams. “You bastard—”

The baby sleeps soundly in his dead brother's room. I carry him as if he were my own, kneeling before his father. Then through my translator — my smart, censoring translator — I explain, “This is what I believe:

“Perhaps souls can't be brought back from the dead. But what's impossible today might well become easy and cheap in another thousand years. Which is a sweet prospect that keeps me living my life this way. Serving as a loyal soldier, doing exactly what is required of my species.”

“The boy,” the man begins.

“I'll give him to my superiors,” I explain. “There is a program where bounties are paid for newborn males.

'As objects of study,' we have been told. But I have reasons to think otherwise.” My translator doesn't speak as long as I expect. Have my words been deemed too dangerous?

The man grows more confused and alarmed, trying

to drag his miserable body closer. I pull his son away.

The child wakes, breaking into a hard cry.

“He's hungry,” the doomed father whispers.

“Well then,” I say. “Before I take my leave, I'll let this young man have a sip or two.” Then I pull back his mother's nightshirt, pushing the weeping face against the still-warm breast...and I sit back and smile at the father, remarking, “Maybe the magician-scientists will make him into a hoplite like me. And ten thousand years from tonight, on a bright world under the Centauri suns...maybe two old hoplites will be conjured from the dragon's sown teeth, joining arms against that day's Darius. Yes...?”

## The House Left Empty

The truck was long and white, with a name I didn't recognize stenciled on the side. But that doesn't mean much, what with new delivery services springing up every other day. It was the details I noticed, and I've always been good with details: No serious business would call itself something as drab as Rapid Distribution. The truck's body had been grown from a topnotch Ford-Chevy schematic, tires woven from pricey diamond-studded glass. But the machine acted heavier than I expected, as if somebody had thrown extra steel and aluminum into the recipe—just to help a pair of comatose industries. Instead of a joystick, the driver was holding onto a heavily padded old-fashioned steering wheel, and he was locked in place with three fat seat belts, a cumbersome buckle stuck over his poor groin. Standard federal issue, fancy and inefficient; and, not for the first time, I wondered why we still pretend to pay taxes to the remnants of our once-national government.

It was mid-morning. I was sitting in my living room, considering my options for the rest of the day. My roof tiles were clean, house batteries already charged, the extra juice feeding into the SG's communal bank. The factory inside my garage had its marching orders—facsimile milk and bananas, a new garden hose and a dozen pairs of socks—and it certainly didn't want my help with those chores. I

could have been out in my yard, but last night's downpour had left the ground too soggy to work. I could attack one of the six or seven books I'd been wrestling with lately, or go on-line on some errand sure to lead to a hundred distractions. But with the early warm weather, what I was thinking about was a bike ride. I have four fresh-grown bikes, each designed for a different kind of wandering, but even a decision that simple requires some careful, lazy consideration. Then the delivery truck drove past my house. I heard the *bang* when it hit the pothole up the street, and then the long white body swung into view. I immediately spotted the uniformed driver clinging to his steering wheel, trying to read the number that I'd painted beside my front door. He was young and definitely nervous. Which was only natural, since he obviously didn't know our SG. But he saw something worthwhile, pulling up alongside the far curb and parking. The uniform was tan and unmemorable. A clipboard rested on his lap. With a finger leading the way, he reread the address that he was searching for. Then he glanced back up the street. His sliding door was pulled open, but the crash harness wouldn't let him get a good look. So he killed the engine and punched the buckle and climbed down, carrying the clipboard in one hand and noticing me as he strode past my window.

I considered waving, but decided otherwise.

The deliveryman disappeared for a couple minutes. I wanted to watch him trying to do his job.



But my instincts are usually wiser in these matters, and they told me to do nothing. Just sit and wait, guessing that he'd come looking for me eventually.

Which he did.

If anything, the poor guy was more nervous than before, and, deep inside, a little angry. He didn't want to be here. He was having real troubles with our streets and numbers. My guess then, and still, is that he was using a badly compromised database—not an unlikely explanation, what with the EMP blasts over Washington and New York, followed by the Grand Meltdown of the original Internet. Of course he could have been hunting for me. But that seemed unlikely, and maybe I didn't want to be found. Climbing back into his truck, he turned on the engine with his thumbprint and a keypad. I couldn't hear the AI's warning voice, but judging by the guy's body language, he didn't want to bother with any damned harness. Real quick, he looked in through my window, into my house, straight at me sitting on my black facsimile-leather sofa.

Then he drove up to the next corner and turned and came back again, ending up parked two doors west of me. This time, I got up off the sofa and watched. His best guess was that the smallest house on my street was the one he wanted. Several minutes were invested in ringing the bell while knocking harder and harder at the old front door. Then after giving the window blinds a long study, he kneeled to look down into the window well, trying to decide if

someone was lurking in the cool, damp basement. Nobody was.

With no other choice, he finally stood and walked my way, sucking at his teeth, one of his hands beating at the clipboard.

I went into the bedroom and waited.

When the bell rang, I waited some more. Just to make him wonder if he had seen me in the first place. Then I opened the door and said, "Yeah?" without unlatching the storm.

"What's up?"

The guy was older than I'd first guessed. And up close, he looked like the sort who's usually sharp and together. Organization mattered to this man. He didn't approve of mix-ups. But he'd been in this delivery game long enough to recognize trouble when it had its jaws around him.

"Sorry to bother you, sir."

"No problem."

"But can I ask... do you know your neighbors...?"

"A few of them."

He glanced down at the clipboard's display, just to be sure before saying, "Penderlick?"

"No."

"Ivan Penderlick?"

"What's that first name?"

"Ivan?" he said hopefully.

"No." I shook my head. "Doesn't ring any bell."

This wasn't the news he was hoping for.

"But maybe I've seen him," I mentioned. "What's

this Ivan guy look like?”

That could be a perfectly natural question. But the deliveryman had to shake his head, admitting, “They didn’t give me any photo.”

The Meltdown’s first targets were the federal servers. That’s when I opened the storm door, proving that I trusted the man. “Okay. What address are you chasing?”

“Four-seven-four-four Mayapple Lane,” he read out loud.

“Are you forty-seven fifty-four Mayapple?”

“That’s the old system.”

“I realize that, sir.”

“We pulled out of the city six years ago,” I reported.

“New names for our streets, and new numbers.”

He flinched, as if his belly ached.

Then I had to ask, “You from around here?”

“Yes, sir.”

As liars go, he was awful.

I asked, “Which SG do you belong to?”

He offered a random name.

I nodded. “How’s life up there?”

“Fine.” Lying made him squirm. Looking at the clipboard, he asked, “Were you once 4754 Mayapple?”

“I was,” I said.

“The house two doors down—?”

“That ranch house?”

“Was it 4744?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so?”

“I’m pretty sure it wasn’t. Sorry.”

Minor-league mix-ups happened all too often. I could tell from the deliveryman’s stooped shoulders and the hardchewed lower lip.

“Call out for help,” I suggested. “Our cell tower can get you anywhere in the world, if you’re patient.”

But he didn’t want that. Unless his hair caught fire, he wouldn’t involve his bosses.

“Mayapple was a short street,” I mentioned. “Go west, on the other side of the park, and you’d pick it up again. Of course that’s a different SG now. The street’s got a new name, I don’t remember what. But I’d bet anything there’s a house waiting, someplace that used to be 3744 Mayapple. Could that be your answer? Your first four is actually a three instead?”

An unlikely explanation, yet he had to nod and hope. But then as he turned away, he thought to ask, “The name Penderlick doesn’t mean anything to you? Anything at all?”

“Sorry, no.”

Unlike that deliveryman, I am a superb liar. Our Self-Governing District is one of the best in the area. At least we like to think so. About five hundred homes stand on this side of the park, along with two bars and a public hall, an automated health clinic and a human dentist, plus a cell tower on talking terms to twenty others, and one big shop that can grow almost anything you can’t, and one tiny but very useful

service station that not only has liquor to sell on the average day but can keep almost any machine functioning. One of the station mechanics lives one street over from me. We're friends, maybe good friends. But that wasn't the reason I half-ran to his front door.

His name is Jack, but everybody knows him as Gus.

"What do you think he was doing here?" Gus asked me.

"Bringing something special," I allowed. "I mean, if you're the Feds and you're going to send out an entire truck, just for Ivan... well, it's going to be an important shipment, whatever it is."

Gus was a tough old gentleman who liked his hair short and his tattoos prominently displayed. Nodding, he asked,

"Have you seen our neighbor lately?"

Ivan was never my neighbor. I took over my present house a couple years after he moved out of his.

"But has he been around lately?" Gus asked.

"Not since he cut his grass last year," I allowed. "Early November, maybe."

It was March now.

"A delivery, huh?"

"From Rapid Distribution."

"Yeah, that's going to be a government name." Gus was grinning. "Didn't I tell you? Ivan was important, back when."

“You said so.”

“You do like I told you? Search out his name?”

When I was a kid, the Internet was simple and quick. But that was before the EMP blasts and the Meltdown. Databases aren't just corrupted nowadays; AI parasites are still running wild, producing lies and their own security barriers. What I could be sure of was a string of unreadable papers and a few tiny news items—not much information maybe, but enough to make me accept the idea that my almost-neighbor had once been a heavyweight in the world of science.

Governmental science, to be precise.

“How'd Ivan look, last time you saw him?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“How was his weight?”

“He looked skinny,” I admitted.

“Cancer-skinny, or fit-skinny?”

I couldn't remember.

Gus used to be friendly with the old Ph.D. “Of course you mentioned that Ivan lives with his daughter now.”

“The daughter, is it?”

Gus knew me well enough to laugh. “You didn't tell him, did you?”

“It slipped my mind.”

He threw me a suspicious stare. “And is there some compelling reason why you came racing over here two minutes before I'm supposed to go to work?”

“That deliveryman will come back again,” I promised.

“If the daughter isn’t in their files, sure. Somebody’s going to make a couple more stabs to deliver the package. Whatever it is.”

“I didn’t tell him that the house was empty. What if he shows and finds an old guy sitting on the porch of that house, enjoying the spring sun?”

“I’m supposed to be Ivan?”

“Sure.”

“What if it’s valuable, this delivery is?”

“Well then,” I said. “I guess that depends on how valuable valuable is. If you know what I mean.”

I’m not old, but I’m old enough to remember when the world felt enormous, and everybody was busy buying crap and selling crap, using their profits to move fast across the globe. In those times, life was fat and sweet and perfectly reasonable. Why shouldn’t seven billion souls fight for their slice of the endless wealth? But still, not everybody agreed with the plan. Environmentalists had valid points; apocalyptic religions had a strong urge toward mayhem. Some governments tried cracking down on all kinds of enemies, real and otherwise, and that spawned some tough-minded groups that wanted to remake the world along any of a hundred different lines.

Our past leaders made some spectacularly lousy decisions, and those decisions led to some brutal years. But it wasn’t all just chaos and famine and economic collapse. Good things happened while I was a young man. Like the cheap black tiles that every roof wears today, supplying enough electricity to keep

people lit-up and comfortable. Like the engineered bugs that swim inside everybody's biotank, cleaning our water better than any of the defunct sewage systems ever could. And the nanological factories that an average guy can assemble inside his garage, using them to grow and harvest most of the possessions that he could possibly need, including respectable food and fashionable clothes, carbon-hulled bicycles and computers that haven't required improvement for the last ten years. The old nation-states are mangled. But without any burning need, nobody seems eager to resurrect what used to be. The old communications and spy satellites have been lost, destroyed by the space debris and radioactive residues stuck in orbit. There are days when I think that it would make sense to reconstitute that old network, but there just aren't enough hands or money, at least for the time being. A few physical commodities still demand physical transportation: fancy products protected by the best patents or their own innate complexities; one-of-a-kind items with deep sentimental attachments; and certain rare raw materials. But I don't usually hunger for vials of iridium or a kidney grown in some distant vat. My needs are more than being met by my patch of dirt and my black rooftop.

That old world was gigantic, but mine is small: five hundred houses and a slice of parkland, plus the old, mostly empty roads that cut through our little nation, and the pipes and gas mains eroding away under our



feet. As an SG, we take care of ourselves. We have laws, and we have conventions and routes that feuding parties can use, if they can't answer their troubles privately. We have a good school for the few kids getting born these days. We even have a system for helping people suffering through a stretch of lousy luck. Which is why nobody remembers the last time anybody in our little nation had to go hungry or feel cold. But that doesn't mean we can quit worrying about bad times.

While we sat on Ivan's front steps, I gave Gus one-half of a freshly cultured facsimile-orange, and as we sucked on the sweet juice, we discussed the latest news from places that seemed as distant as the far side of the moon. Ivan's house was the oldest and least impressive on the block—a shabby ranch-style home wearing asphalt roof tiles and aluminum siding. What interested me about his property was the lot itself, double-sized and most of it hidden from the street. The backyard was long and sunny, and I'd walked its green grass enough times to feel sure that the ground was rich, uncontaminated by any careless excavations over the past century. My ground is the opposite: fillearth clay packed down by machines and chronic abuse. And even though our facsimile foods are nutritious and halfway tasty, everybody enjoys the real tomatoes and squash and raspberries that we grow every summer.

I mentioned the long yard to Gus, and not for the first time.

“It would be nice,” he agreed, stuffing the orange rind into the pocket where he always kept his compostables. “We could build a community garden, maybe. It’d help people keep busy and happy.”

People were already happy. This would just add to our reasons.

“I hear a truck,” he said, tipping his head now. A low, powerful rumble was approaching. We were a couple blocks from the main arterial, but without traffic, sounds carried.

I stood. “Good luck, Gus.”

“Ivan,” he corrected.

“Ivan. Yeah.”

My ground was too wet to work, but that’s what I was pretending to do when the white truck drove past. I had a shovel in my hand, eyes staring at a lump of clayish mud. If the driver looked at me, I didn’t see it.

This time, the deliveryman knew exactly where he was going.

I didn’t look up until I heard the two men talking. At a distance, words didn’t carry. But I could tell one of them was nervous and the other was confident. One of them was a long way from home, while the other looked as if he belonged nowhere else in the world but lounging on that front porch.

The driver must have asked for identification, leading Gus to give some story about not having any. Who needs a driver’s license in a world where people rarely travel? The deliveryman probably heard that

excuse every day, but there were rules: he couldn't just give what he had to anybody, could he?

Then I made out the loud, certain words, "Well, I am Ivan Penderlick. Just ask anybody."

I stood there, waiting to be asked. My plan was to say,

"Oh, this is Ivan What's-His-Name? I don't talk to the guy much, you see. I just knew him as The Professor."

But the deliveryman didn't want to bother with witnesses. He probably had a sense for when locals didn't approve of the old government. Which was another hazard in his daily duties, I would think.

All he wanted was a little reassurance.

Gus nodded, pretending to understand. Then he opened the front door that we had jimmed just ten minutes ago.

Reaching inside, he pulled out a photograph of himself and his own daughter, and instantly he began spinning a convincing story that might or might not match any sketchy biography that the driver was carrying with him.

"Good enough," was the verdict.

The driver vanished inside his truck, then returned with a dark wooden box just big enough and just heavy enough to require both arms to carry it.

At first, Gus refused to accept the delivery. I watched him demanding identification before he signed for anything. How else would he know this was on the up and up? His complaining won a hard

stare, but then several documents were shown, and with no small amount of relief, the two men parted, each thrilled by the prospect of never seeing the other again.

Burning booze, the truck left for its next delivery somewhere in the wilderness that used to be the United States. Gus set the box on the front steps, using a screwdriver to pry up a few big staples.

I walked toward him. Part of me expected an explosion, though I can't tell you why. Mostly I was hoping for something with value, something that could offer an ambitious man some leverage. But there was no way I would have expected the hunk of machinery Gus found wrapped inside a sleeve of aerogel, or the simple note stuck under the lid:

“Ivan:

“In a better world, this would be where it belongs.”

I stared at the device, not sure what to think.

“Know what you're seeing?” my friend asked.

“No,” I admitted. “What?”

“A starship,” the older man remarked. Then he sat on the stairs, drooping as if weak. “Who would have believed it?

Huh?”

What we had in our hands was a model, I told myself. A mockup. Something slapped together in an old-style machine shop, using materials that might look and feel genuine but was built for no other purpose than to convince visiting senators and the captains of industry that such wonders possible if

only they would throw so-many billions toward this glorious, astonishing future.

“It isn’t real,” I said.

Gus made soft, doubting sounds.

“Somebody found it on a shelf somewhere.” I was piecing together a believable story. “Somebody who remembers Ivan and thought the old man would appreciate the gift.”

“Except,” said Gus.

“Except what?”

He handed the starship to me and closed the empty box, and after running a mechanic’s thick hand along one edge, he mentioned, “This isn’t just a run-of-the-mill packing crate.”

It was a walnut box. A nice box, sure.

Then he turned it ninety degrees, revealing a small brass plaque that identified the contents as being Number 18 in an initial culture of 63.

“That’s exactly how many starships they made,” he told me.

The number was familiar. But I had to ask, “Why sixtythree?”

“Our twenty-one closest star systems were targeted,” he explained. “The railgun was supposed to launch three of these wonders at each of them.”

The ball in my hands was black and slick, a little bigger than a basketball and heavier than seemed natural. When I was a kid, I’d gone bowling once or twice. This ball was heavier than those. There were a lot of tiny holes and a couple large pits, and I thought

I could see where fins and limbs might pop out or unfold. Of course the starship was a model. Anything else was too incredible. But just the idea that it might be real made me hold it carefully, but away from my body, away from my groin.

“It won’t be radioactive,” Gus said. “They never bothered fueling things. I’m practically sure of it.”

“If you say so.” I handed it back to him.

But he didn’t hug the ball either, I noticed.

“So,” I said. “Do you know where the daughter lives?”

Gus didn’t seem to hear me.

“Even if this is a model,” I mentioned, “Ivan’s going to be thrilled to get it.”

Which could earn me some goodwill points in the process.

“I know,” said Gus.

“Where the daughter lives?”

“That too. But I just figured how to see if this is real or not.” He was holding the mystery with both hands, and after showing me a little smile—the kind of grin a wicked boy uses with his best buddy—Gus gave a grunt and flung our treasure straight ahead. I wasn’t ready. Stunned, I watched it climb in a high arc before dropping to the sidewalk, delivering a terrific blow that I heard and felt, leaving the gray concrete chipped and the starship rolling with a certain majesty over the curb and out into the street.

I ran our treasure down, ready to be angry.

But except for a little dust to wipe away, the

starship hadn't noticed any of the abuse.

"Is that enough proof?" I asked doubtfully.

"Unless you've got a sophisticated materials lab tucked in your basement somewhere."

"I'll check."

He laughed.

Then he said, "The daughter lives in the old Highpark area. I got the original address written down somewhere."

And I had a stack of maps pulled out of old phonebooks. Give us enough time, and we'd probably be able to find the right front door.

I made noise about getting one of the bikes and my big trailer.

Gus set the starship back into its aerogel sleeve and then into the box. Then he closed the lid and shook his head, remarking to me, "With a supremely important occasion like this, I believe we should drive."

Our SG has some community cars and small trucks, while a few households have their own little putt-putts. Even if you don't drive much, it's halfway easy to keep your vehicle working, what with a factory in every garage and experts like Gus to putter in the gaps. My friend had a certain client in mind, and while I found my best map of the old city and packed a lunch for each of us, he wandered around the corner to ask one very big favor. By the time I stepped outside again, he was waiting at the end of the drive, sitting behind the joystick of a 2021 Ferrari. That was

Mr. Bleacon's baby, manufactured in his own garage by nanologicals steered along by some semi-official schematics, fed nothing but pot metals and stolen pipes and a lot of plastic trash left over from the last century.

"If we're going to ride with a starship," Gus pointed out, "we should have a halfway appropriate vehicle."

We weren't going to get twenty miles to the gallon of alcohol, but just the power of that machine made this into a wondrous adventure.

With our prize stowed in the tiny trunk, I asked, "So what if Number 18 is genuine?"

Gus pushed the joystick forward, and in an instant, we were sprinting out into the wide, empty street.

"You hear me?" I asked.

"Most of the time."

I waited.

"I was expecting that question," he admitted.

"Glad to be predictable."

The first big intersection was marked with Stop signs. But even at a distance, it was easy to see that nobody was coming. Gus accelerated and blew through, but then as soon as we rolled out of our SG, he throttled back to what was probably a quick-but-legal speed.

"So what if—?" I started asking again.

"You think we should beg for more? More than just ground for our crops?"

"Maybe. If you think about how much money went



to making sixty-three of these machines.”

“Don’t forget the railgun,” Gus mentioned. “Before the project ended, they had most of the pieces in orbit, along with enough solar panels to light up half of the United States.”

You don’t hear those two words much anymore. United States.

“Do you know how this probe would have worked?” he asked me.

I was watching houses slipping past, and then all at once there was nothing but empty businesses. A strip mall. A couple of abandoned service stations. And then another strip mall, this one with a couple of stores that might have been occupied. A hair cutting place, and some kind of pet store. Two little traces of commerce tucked into the new world order. I didn’t often come this way when I biked. There were prettier, easier routes. But I could see where some people would pay for a good barber. As for pets: cats were running free everywhere, but not many dogs or hamsters. Or parakeets either. So until we can grow critters like them in our garages and basements, shops like that would survive.

“The railgun would have fired our probe like a cannon ball,” I answered.

“Which is one reason why it has to be tough,” Gus explained. “That shell is almost unbreakable, and the guts too. Because of the crushing gee-forces.”

I had known Gus for years, but he was revealing interests that I had never suspected.

“How long would it have taken?” I asked, testing him.

“To reach the target star? A few centuries.”

What a crazy, crazy project. That’s what I thought. But I was careful not to be too honest.

“Three probes to each star system, each one talking to each other two, and occasionally shouting back to us.” He scratched his chin, adding, “They would have saved most of their energy for those few days when they’d fly past their targets.”

“Fly past? You mean they weren’t going into orbit or anything?”

“Too much momentum. No engines to slow them down.”

Gus paused for a moment, and then asked, “Do I turn here?”

“Left. I think.”

The Ferrari changed its momentum without complaint. I had to say, “It seems a huge waste.”

“What?”

“Throwing half a trillion dollars or whatever it was at the stars, and getting nothing out of it but a quick look-see.”

With a hard voice, he said, “You’re young.”

I don’t feel that young anymore. But I asked, “So what?”

“You don’t remember how things were.” Gus shrugged and gave a big sigh before adding, “The probe couldn’t go into orbit. But do you know what’s inside that black ball?”

I said, "No."

I looked down at the map and said, "Right. Turn here, right."

We were cruising up a fresh street. Some of the houses were abandoned. No, most of them were. Now I remembered another reason why I never came this way on my bike. Political troubles in a couple SGs had gotten out of hand. In the end, the Emergency Council dispatched police to mash down the troubles, teaching all the parties to act nice.

"What's inside the black ball?" I asked, prompting him.

"The original nanochines," he told me.

Which I halfway remembered, maybe.

"Tiny bits of diamond dust filled with devices and knowledge." He came to another intersection. "Straight?"

"Looks like." I had the old address circled on the yellowed map.

"Anyway," said Gus, "those bits of dust would have been squirted free long before the star was reached. They had tiny, tiny parachutes that would have opened. Light sails, really. The sunlight would have killed their velocity down to where they would start to drift. Each probe carried a few thousand of those amazing little devices. And if one or two landed on a useful asteroid, they would have come awake and started eating sunlight for energy, feed on rock and divide themselves a million million times. And eventually we would have a large loud automated

base permanently on station, screaming back at us.”

“In a few centuries’ time,” I said.

He nodded. “As good as our shops are? As much crap as we can make from nothing but trash and orange peels? The marvels sleeping in that pregnant machine make our tools look like stone knives and flintlock pistols.”

Which is when I pointed out, “So maybe this starship thing is worth a whole lot.”

Gus slowed the car and then looked over at me.

“I’m just mentioning the obvious,” I said.

And for the first and only time, Gus told me, “I like you, Josh. I do. But that doesn’t mean I have illusions when it comes to your nature. Or infinite patience with your scheming, either. Understood?”

I gave a nod.

Then he shoved the joystick forward, pressing me hard into the rich fake leather of the seat.

It was easy to see why Old Ivan abandoned his little house to live with his daughter.

Every building standing just outside her large SG had been torn down, and people with resources and a lot to lose had built themselves a wall with the rubble—a tall thick castleworthy wall made from the scavenged bricks and stone, concrete blocks and two-by-fours. I’d heard stories about Highpark, but until that moment, I hadn’t bothered coming up this way. At least twenty signs warned off the curious and uninvited. There was only one entranceway that we could find, and it was guarded by military-grade

robots and a tall titanium gate. We parked outside and approaching on foot, me walking a half-step behind Gus. Weapons at the ready, the robots studied our faces while searching their databases for any useful clues to our identities and natures. I decided to let my friend do the talking. Quietly, gently, Gus explained that an important package had been delivered to the wrong address, and if possible, would they please inform Ivan Penderlick that his old neighbors had come to pay their respects?

A call was made on our behalf.

After what seemed like an hour, the gate unlocked with a sharp *thunk*, and we were told to leave our vehicle where it was. Only our bodies and the package would be allowed inside the compound.

There are SGs, and there are SGs.

No doubt this was the best one I'd ever seen. Every house was big and well-maintained, sitting in the middle of huge lawns that were covered with greenhouses and extra solar panels, towering windmills and enough cell phone antennas to keep every resident connected to the world at the same time. The house that we wanted was wearing a richer and blacker and much more efficient brand of solar paneling. The greenhouses were top-of-the-line, too.

Of course I could always build my own greenhouses. But without the power for climate control, the plants would freeze during the cold winter nights, and come summer, when the sun was its best, everything inside the transparent structures

would flash-fry.

Stopping on the front walk, I stared at red tomatoes begging to be picked.

Carrying the walnut box, Gus reached the front door before me, and he said, "Ma'am," before turning back to me, saying, "Come on, Josh. We're expected."

The daughter was Gus's age, give or take.

But she didn't look like the tattoo kind of gal. The woman said, "My father's sleeping now. Could I get you gentlemen something to drink?"

Gus said, "Water."

I said the same, adding, "Thank you, ma'am."

She came back with a pitcher filled with ice water and three tall glasses, and once everybody was sitting politely, she asked if she could see what was inside the mysterious box. Gus handled the unveiling.

I watched the lady's face. All it took was a glance, and she knew what she was seeing. Her dark eyes grew big and the mouth opened for a long moment, empty of words but obviously impressed.

Then Gus said, "We'd like your father to have this. Naturally."

She didn't seem to hear him. With a slow nod, she asked,

"Exactly how did you come by this object?"

I jumped in, telling the story quickly, passing over details that might make us out to be in the wrong.

At the end of the story, she sighed.

Then she heard a sound that neither of us had noticed. Suddenly she stood up and said, "Dad's

awake now. Just a minute, please.”

We were left alone for a couple of minutes. But I had the strong feeling that various eyes, electronic and otherwise, were keeping watch over us.

When the daughter returned, a skeletal figure was walking at her side, guided along by one of her hands and a smooth slow voice that kept telling him, “This way, Dad. This way, this way.”

Winter had transformed Old Ivan.

He was a shell. He was wasted and vacant and simple, sitting where he was told to sit and looking down into the box only when his daughter commanded him to do that. For a long moment, he stared at the amazing machine that he once helped build. Then he looked up, and with a voice surprisingly strong and passionate, he said, “I’m hungry. I want to eat.”

“Sure, Dad. I’ll get you something right now.”

But she didn’t do anything. She just sat for another couple moments, staring at the precious object that he hadn’t recognized.

One last time, I looked at the starship, and then Gus took me by the elbow and took us toward the front door.

“Anyway,” he said to the daughter, “it’s his. It’s yours.”

“Maybe he’ll remember it later,” she said coolly, without real hope.

Then I said, “We were hoping, ma’am. Hoping that we could earn something for our trouble today.”

Gus gave me a cutting look.

But our hostess seemed pleased. Her suspicions about us had been vindicated. With a suspicious smile, she asked,

“What would you like?”

“It’s about that empty house,” I admitted.

“Yes?”

“And the lot it sits on,” I added. “As it is, all of that is going to waste.”

She looked at Gus now. “I’m surprised,” she admitted. “You people could have taken it over, and who would have stopped you?”

“Except it’s not ours,” Gus allowed.

How many times had I dreamed of doing just that? But our SG has its rules, and there’s no more getting around them.

“I should warn you,” she mentioned. “I promised my dad that as long as he’s alive, that house remains his. But when he is gone, I will send word to you, and after that you and your people will be free to do whatever you want with the building and its land. Is that fair?”

“More than fair,” Gus agreed.

“But how about today?” I asked.

Suddenly both of them were throwing daggers with their eyes. But I just laughed it off, suggesting, “What about a sack of fresh tomatoes? Would that be too much trouble, ma’am?”

For maybe half the drive home, Gus said nothing. I thought he was angry with me. I couldn’t take it



seriously, but I was thinking of charming words when he broke the silence. Out of nowhere, Gus said, "This is what makes me sad," and it had nothing to do with me.

"Think of everything we've got in our lives," he said.

"The water that we clean for ourselves. The food we grow in our garages. The easy power, and the machinery, plus all the independence that comes with the SG life. These aren't tiny blessings, Josh. A century ago, no one was able to stand apart from the rest of the world so completely, so thoroughly."

"I guess not," I allowed.

"But there's this big, big house, you see. And it's just sitting empty."

"Ivan's place isn't big," I reminded him.

But then Gus pointed at the sky, shaking his head sadly as he began to speak again. "With even the most basic tools, you and I and the rest of our SG could equip our own starship. Not a little ball thrown out of a cannon. No, I'm talking about an asteroid or comet with us safe in the middle, starting a ten thousand year voyage to whichever sun we want our descendants to see first."

"I guess that would work," I allowed.

"The biggest house of all is the universe, and it's going to waste," Gus said.

Then he pushed the joystick forward, pushing the big engine up to where it finally began to come awake.

“Sometimes I wish that we’d taken a different turn,” he called out.

“Who doesn’t think that?” I asked, watching our speed pick up, the world around us starting to blur.

# If We Can Save Just One Child

...

## Schoolyard

One man looked out of place. Twenty years on the job and a software package from one of the new security companies told the Physicality Facilitator to ignore everyone else on the schoolyard and focus his full attention on the fellow who was sitting apart from the other adults. The suspicious man was middle-aged, dressed in slacks and a sweat-dampened dress shirt. He had his rump perched on a concrete retaining wall, his face betraying a less-than-comfortable expression. Following standard protocols, the PF took photographs from several angles before asking the software for final interpretations. Moments later, the PF found himself with a thorough analysis of the man's posture and face, six stars on the seven-point scale lighting up.

Three weeks later, that popular and wildly profitable software would receive what was dubbed an upgrade. But in reality, the product was so flawed that its owners would have to obliterate half of their previous work, replacing a stew of cranky algorithms and flawed databases with tools that were still inadequate, but measurably better than the awful predecessor.

“Hello, sir,” the PF began with a loud, overly friendly voice. “And how are you today?”

The man on the wall looked up, mildly surprised.

The PF introduced himself without extending his hand. Then with a smile worthy of a yearbook photograph, he asked, “Do I know you, sir?”

“I don’t know what you know,” the stranger replied. “Or what you don’t know, for that matter.”

The response was unexpected, and a blatant challenge. The PF stiffened his smile. “If I might ask, sir. Are you here to pick up a student?” “Yes.”

“Which child?”

The yard was littered with waiting parents and nannies, day care services and several older siblings. But the instructor knew most of those faces, or at least he could see nothing alarming in the other people’s body language. Sitting alone was a problem. Not conversing with the other parents was a signal. Not that anything would come of this, the PF reasoned ... but still, in these grim times, someone in his position had to ask all the right questions.

The stranger glanced at the old brick schoolhouse. With a tight, quiet voice, he reported, “I’m waiting for my son.”

“I need a name, sir. Please.”

“Olsen. Pepper Olsen.”

The PF fed the name into his reader. Then with an exceptionally serious tone, he warned, “We don’t have any children named Olson.”

“Try an ‘e’ and a ‘n,’” the man muttered.

This time the PF was rewarded with the image of a smiling first-grader and links to a pleasant-faced

woman who looked somewhat familiar. “Does his mother normally pick him up?”

“My wife does. Yes.”

“And she’s not here today?”

The man—Mr. Olsen, presumably—gave the world a mocking glance. With his gaze fixed on his accuser, he said, “No. She’s stuck at home.”

“I see.”

“I don’t usually pick up. But my wife, Pepper’s mother, is sick today. And for some reason, she doesn’t think people would appreciate seeing a woman barf on the playground.”

“Sir,” said the PF in a slow, injured tone. “I have to ask these questions. This is what I do. What every teacher does.” “Fine.”

“Can you tell me, sir? Why isn’t your image in our files?”

“Because I haven’t found time to come in and prove my identity and get my official picture taken.” Then with a loud, exasperated voice, he added, “The school year’s what? Two weeks old?”

Other parents heard him, or at least they noticed his smoldering tone. The nearest people stopped trading gossip, turning to watch the familiar instructor and a gentleman nobody recognized.

“We need your face on file, sir.”

The man sitting on the wall pulled his arms around his belly. Softly, but firmly, he warned, “I’m not feeling that great myself.”

“That’s too bad,” the PF volunteered.

That particular security software had several major flaws, one of which was confusing physical distress for criminal intent.

The PF spent several moments examining the student's full file. Pepper and his family had moved into the district during the summer. As it happened, there was a father on the very short list of people permitted to pick him up after school. "What's your name, sir?"

"Gary Olsen," the man replied instantly, probably anticipating the question.

But that proved little, since the father's name was a matter of public record. "Now please describe your boy to me."

"He's six-foot-nine. And blue. And when's he's pissed off, he starts spitting plutonium."

That didn't help at all. The PF said as much with his silence.

"Okay, let me try again." The man gave a detailed description of his son. And then on his own, he asked, "Do you know what Pepper's wearing today?"

"No, sir. I don't." "Well I don't know either. I left for work before the kid crawled out of bed."

The PF was struggling with his own calculations. Did he press this business any further, and if so, using which officious route? Seven years ago, on one of the best days of his life, he happened to notice a young man lurking at the edge of this very same schoolyard. A routine call to the police proved his intuitions valid: The lurker was a registered sex

offender, and by walking beside the soccer field, he had broken the terms of his probation.

But that was ages ago. These days, simple sex offenders were the least of his problems.

If you were a child, these were desperately dangerous times.

The stranger—Gary Olsen—eased himself off the wall and took a careful breath. “How much time before the dismissal bell?”

“Two, maybe three minutes.”

“Listen. I know you’re trying to do your job. But you need to realize that I’m working hard not to crap my pants here. I don’t know why you think I’m worth the attention, but if it’s important to you, haul me to the office. Now. Lock me in the bathroom, and then you can run to room 113 and find Pepper and bring him back. Then with the principal’s help and a couple calls to your district office, maybe we can get our mess taken care of. Does that sound like a plan to you?”

The PF didn’t consider himself as having a temper. And that’s why his present anger bothered him so much. This Olsen fellow almost certainly had reasons for being here. But the PF had never seen six stars out of seven from the personality assessment equipment, and he had to wonder if there were a second, secret agenda at play. Not that he could prove it, of course. But justice required that something was accomplished, and twenty years of teaching gym class had taught him a few useful tricks. That’s why he

smiled—a forced and oversized but exceptionally sneaky smile. “I’m sorry, Mr. Olsen. Have a nice evening with your son. And please, wish your wife a speedy recovery.”

The sick man bent forward, green in the face now.

Then the bell sounded, and moments later, a young boy matching the picture in the database sprinted outside with the rest of the first-graders. By then his father was standing alone in the open, right next to the bright white

lines that marked the kickball area. “Dad? What’s up? Where’s Mom?”

The PF couldn’t hear the man’s response, but he felt the heat when a last long glance was thrown his way.

Mr. Olsen wasn’t any threat.

More than likely.

But because it was his job, the PF filled out the standard form used to report suspicious occurrences, and he sent his work to a national clearinghouse where the paranoia of a world was gathered together—twenty thousand forms on the average school day, each one searched for patterns, tendencies, and the scent of even one worthwhile clue.

## The Pool

“Did you see what they found?”

“Found?”



“In Thailand. You hear the big news?”

Two mothers were visiting the water park, sharing the shade of a single enormous umbrella. It was a Saturday in June; schools had just let out for summer. The women were acquaintances whose paths occasionally crossed at the grocery and church. One was large and loud, the other as small as some children and naturally quiet. But they shared all the topical fears of their day. News from Thailand? That could only mean one thing!

“Did they find children?” asked the little woman.

“Eight of them,” her companion said with disgust.

“No, I hadn’t heard—”

“Still babies,” the big woman added. “Caucasian. In some sort of jungle compound, from what I saw on the Web.”

“Whose children are they?” “A couple keepers have been arrested.”

“No,” the little woman explained. “I mean, where did they come from? Does anyone know?”

“Nobody’s admitting anything. Not publicly, at least.” Pausing for a moment, the big woman scanned the crowd until she found her daughter—a substantial girl in her own right. “They’ve already done the usual tests. Put the kids’ DNA on the Websites. But how many people know their own genetics?”

“I do. I had my DNA mapped...”

The confession took a moment to be noticed. “Yours, or your kids’?”

“All of us have,” the little woman admitted.

Her companion found that intensely amusing. But she managed not to laugh, throwing a joke at herself instead. “Nobody wants my chromosomes. Good God, I can barely get my husband interested in this cranky old body.”

But the small woman had always been pretty and quite sensitive about her looks. “This is a real fear of mine,” she offered.

“It shouldn’t be.”

“Ever since that time in Russia....”

What an awful business that had been! Two years ago, a routine drug arrest in Moscow led to a warehouse where thirty blond toddlers were living in pens. Or chicken coops. Or in some stories, prison cells. The girls were two and three years old, and each one had the same beautiful face. Subsequent tests determined that they were genetically identical, but with the shortened telomeres and the occasional mutation common among cheaply rendered clones.

The subsequent investigation proved that the poor toddlers were being groomed for sale to highly motivated customers.

That’s when the nightmare began.

“I know it’s not likely,” said the little woman. “The odds of that happening to my family ... or to me....” “Very, very unlikely,” the big woman promised. “Besides, gene thieves aren’t sophisticated. If they want to make a profit, they need young DNA. But inside you and me is nothing but muddy old genetics, and our telomeres are already gotten too short.” She

threw out a big laugh, adding, "It's sad to hear, but they'd throw our junky old cells out with the trash."

"Unless somebody made a mistake," the pretty woman argued, her voice soft and sorry. "If they aren't sophisticated, like you said, then they could easily clone the wrong skin cells."

"Sure, that's possible. I guess."

"I believe in taking precautions." She tried deflecting her acidic fears with her own laugh. A tight, unconvincing laugh, as it happened. "I mean, what if those babies in Thailand turned out to be me?"

"What would you do about it?"

"I'm not sure." She shrugged. "If I had legal rights and they would let me ... I guess I'd try to help the poor girls somehow."

"With money? Or would they come live with you?"

"I really don't know," she admitted. "I'd have to pray about it. Of course. And then I'd do whatever's right."

"Who wouldn't want to do what's right?" asked the big woman.

Yet the world was full of evil people. After a few moments of dark reflection, her friend begged, "Can we please change the subject?"

"Thank goodness, yes."

Two hours later, the fearful woman was sitting alone, napping until the umbrella's shade pulled away from her tiny, lovely face. When she woke, she noticed two police officers talking to a young boy. With pride, the boy was showing off a fresh scrape on

his leg, and then with a matter-of-fact gesture, he pointed the officers toward the smallest slide.

The woman instantly shouted for her two children.

Her oldest was a girl at least as pretty as her mother. She looked a little worried, but impressed. "It's inside the tube," she reported. "Down at the bottom of the slide."

"What is?"

"The thing."

"What thing?" the woman asked.

"It's sandpaper, I guess. Stuck there with glue."

She began to tremble.

"Some kid did it," the daughter offered. "Wanted to be an idiot, I guess."

"Where's your brother?"

"How would I know?"

"Did you get scraped?"

"No, Mom." Then after a watchful pause, the girl asked, "What is the matter with you?"

"Find your brother, meet me at the gate. Right away."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

Lifeguards had turned off the slide's water, and the more athletic officer did her best to climb down to the abrasive pad. But she didn't remove the object. Instead she climbed back out and called for a biohazard team. And then the public address system screamed to life, offering a few apologies and then a warning that for the next little while, no one would

leave the grounds.

A blond boy and a brown-haired man were standing nearby. “Did you see it, Dad?” asked the boy.

“Nope.”

“You didn’t get cut?”

His father looked himself over. “Guess not.”

“But you went down that slide.”

“I don’t remember. Did I?”

“You did. I saw you.”

His father didn’t speak.

“Just before the kid got scraped.”

“Pepper,” said the man quietly, but with feeling. “This is nothing, believe me. Some kid’s dumb-ass prank, and it doesn’t mean anything.”

“But, Dad—”

“Son,” said the man. “Shut it.”

The boy nodded, quietly accepting that nugget of parental logic.

That’s when the man glanced over his shoulder, staring for a moment at the prettiest face in the crowd.

When he looked away again, the woman sobbed. She dropped into the nearest folding chair, feeling a great weight bearing down on her racing heart.

## The Fair

“I promise. This is going to be a waste of time.”

Silence.

“I don’t even know why I’m here. And I’ll be damned if I see why you got pulled in on this.”

“My son—”

“Pepper, is it?”

“Where’s my boy?” “His mom’s sitting with him now. I can let you see him, maybe in a few minutes. Just as soon as we get our business done.”

The subject didn’t ask, “What business?” Nor did he offer any of the other obvious, urgent questions.

Interesting.

“My name’s Steve,” said the investigator. He gave the files another cursory glance. “And you’re Gary?”

“Yes.”

“Your wife’s name—”

“She’s my ex-wife,” the subject said, with feeling.

“Sorry to hear that.”

Silence.

“So you came to see the State Fair, Gary? You and your son did?”

“Yes.”

“How is it?”

“Excuse me?”

“I haven’t come here in years. Is it any good?”

“Bad food. Dangerous rides.” The subject managed a smile. “Yeah, it’s pretty much like always.”

“How old’s the boy?”

“Thirteen.”

“And you?”

There was a pause. Then with a loss of patience, the subject said, “You know how old I am. You’ve got

my files in front of you.”

“Fifty-five.”

A pause. “So what do they say?”

The investigator lifted his gaze. “What does who say?”

“My files.”

“This and that. Not much, from what I can tell.”

Silence.

“Know why you were picked up, Gary?”

“I can guess.” The subject had a tight, smart face, and he was definitely restraining his emotions. “Something happened at the Fair tonight. Didn’t it?”

“We’re still trying to decide that.”

“But you, or somebody else, felt an obligation to round up every person of interest. Is that right?”

“You know how it goes.” The investigator shrugged and managed a put-upon expression. “We look at the databases, and the AI hunts for tendencies, and of course there’s about a thousand cameras scattered around the Fair grounds—”

“Was I someplace I shouldn’t have been?”

“Damned if I know. I’m not even sure why you got swept up in this nonsense.”

The subject shifted in his chair, volunteering nothing.

“I see two past incident reports,” the investigator mentioned. “At your son’s school, and less than a year later—”

“Does that matter?”

“Incident reports? They can matter, yes.”

“No. You said, ‘Less than a year later.’ As if that’s an important detail.”

“Oh, that’s, no, not at all.” The investigator was honest, admitting, “It’s

just that two incident reports are more likely to trigger an AI’s attention. About five times more likely than a single hit. But of course, other factors come into play here.”

“Like what?”

“During the second incident....”

“With the crazy woman,” the subject volunteered.

“Yeah, she does come across that way. I guess. Although I think ‘neurotic’ is the more accurate description.”

“She pointed her finger at me.”

“She thought you were acting suspicious.”

“Of doing what?”

“There was an abrasive pad—”

“For cleaning dishes!”

There. Real emotions started to boil. With an agreeable nod, the investigator said, “Sure, it was a nothing incident. Just some unidentified kid and his mom’s scouring pad, plus some glue. The kid probably just wanted to make his world crazy for a while.”

“I was not a suspect.”

Gary Olsen had been a suspect, but only briefly. The investigator said, “Tsk,” while staring at the subject. “Actually, I’ve got to tell you. It’s not those two incidents that got the software’s attention. It’s



your job.”

The man flinched.

“If I’m not mistaken, you’re a trained biologist.”

“I have a degree in limnology,” the subject replied.

“Do you know what that means?”

“Water stuff.”

“Not genetics.”

The investigator shook his head. “Fish don’t have genes?”

The man took the Lord’s name in vain.

“I know this doesn’t seem quite right, Gary. But it’s just the way these stupid systems work. You have two prior interviews, plus a specialty implicated in a series of horrible crimes that are occurring worldwide.”

Again, the man swore.

“Hardly fair, but my hands are tied.” With some subjects, he might have shown his hands. But this fellow didn’t seem likely to fall for cheap theatrics. “I’ve got a girl from the Fair who’s got a deep cut in her leg, and she’s claiming that some strange man jabbed her with medical equipment.”

Silence.

“You wouldn’t know anything about that, Gary?”

“No.”

“If we showed her your picture, and a few other photos too ... just to play by the rules ... do you think she’d pick your face out of the pile?”

“I have no idea what she might or might not do.”

“I guess you wouldn’t know, would you?”

Suspicious silence.

“Limnology, huh?”

“I quit the field years ago.”

“Why? Got tired of water?”

“No,” he said in a smoldering tone. “I didn’t make tenure at the university and decided to change careers.”

“Probably smart.”

The subject paused before saying, “It’s all in those files. I’m sure. Today I sell real estate.”

“Hey, so does my sister-in-law,” the investigator offered. “Tough business these days. She says we’re in a big down cycle.”

The subject sighed. Then he looked at the floor, a contemplative mood ending when he asked, “How many cases of bootleg cloning are there? In the average year, worldwide?”

“I’m really not sure, Gary.”

“On average, three-and-a-half,” the subject offered.

“Which means—?”

“Two to five cases every year, and not even for a decade now. And the total number of Americans who have had their DNA stolen is exactly five. Five. Which puts this panic into a different light, if you actually bother to think things through.”

“If I was smart, you mean?”

The subject saw his misstep, but he couldn’t stop himself. “I’m not talking about you. I mean everybody. When another illegal cloning operation is discovered, it gets attention from every medium. The

crime is sensational, and nobody's sure how to react, and when you see images of little kids being raised for some purpose or another that has to be immoral—”

“The sex industry is the usual client,” the investigator interrupts.

“And that's a very narrow, very select market,” the subject pointed out. “Some pedophiles will pay a fortune for four or six or a dozen kids with the same looks and mannerisms. Sure. That's what keeps this tiny industry alive.”

“We can't say it's tiny,” the investigator countered. “We don't know how big it is, since we can only count the cases we actually uncover.”

“Right.” The subject was red-faced, agitated to the point where he made fists in his lap. “There could be a thousand cloning farms scattered across the world—secret facilities selling tens of thousands of infants to an underground world of sick men and sick women who not only can pay the enormous costs of cloning, but then manage to keep their huge, same-faced families a secret from neighbors and friends and everyone

else in their twisted lives.”

The investigator remained silent, waiting for whatever came next.

“Hey, I want this business stamped out,” said the subject, spit flying for his quivering mouth. “More than anybody else, I want it gone. We'd have a lot healthier world if people started to consider the genuine dangers. But as long as the public fear is

stirred up by these rare incidents ... these awful but very rare crimes ... we're going to keep making ourselves crazy about things that happen a lot less often than ... well, than people getting killed on faulty amusement park rides....”

“Now you're the one sounding a little crazy,” the investigator mentioned.

“No, I'm just a neurotic,” the subject snapped. “You blame me?”

“Hey, Gary. Play along here. I'm just doing my job.”

The subject nearly said something else, but caught himself. Then another thing occurred to him. Looking hard at the investigator, he said, “You already showed her my picture. Didn't you?”

“That girl? Yeah, a colleague of mine did that chore about an hour ago.”

A look of undiluted disgust came into the subject's face. “What did she tell you? Did she pick me out of the lineup?”

“Actually, she picked me.” The investigator had to smile and shake his head. “No, we don't think this kid's very credible. She was doing something she shouldn't have been doing, and she got hurt, and now she's telling a dumb story. But really, you can never be sure about appearances. That's why I decided that you and I should enjoy this little chat....”

When Evan was at a very delicate age, his older brother tormented him with the idea that he was a clone.

“You were born in Brazil,” his brother claimed one day, pointing with authority at a random, erroneous point on a brightly colored map of the world. “You and your clone brothers ... you were being raised by cannibals.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Oh yes, you were,” the eleven-year-old warned him. Then with a grim smile, he added, “Those cannibals had you living inside cat cages. You couldn’t move, and they force-fed you all sorts of goodies.”

Evan was a pudgy, desperately insecure child.

“Know what veal is?”

“We ate it last night. Right?”

“That was veal made from a fat calf. But you were going to be a special meal for somebody else’s family.”

“I was not!”

“Sure, you were.”

The boy considered his dire situation. “Then how did I get here?” he asked.

His tormentor licked his lips and giggled. “We bought you, of course. And next Christmas, we’re having you instead of an old turkey.”

It was the worst kind of lie, and his brother was punished severely for what he had done. But that early horror left its mark. Or perhaps something in

Evan's nature assured that regardless of what happened in his childhood, he would grow up scared and unhappy. Maybe the story was a convenient excuse. Whatever the reason, twenty years later he was slender and strong, but preyed upon by doubts and black fears. Even on his best days, he suffered from the enduring conviction—indeed, the muscular hope—that the world was rich with evil.

During college, Evan gravitated toward the conservative groups still in the fight against immoral biological sciences. He marched with Christians, chanted with Muslims, and for an entire semester, he allied himself with a band of zealots who used cloning as an excuse to make pipe bombs that were detonated only in empty fields. Plainly, the cause was a mess, and its warriors were unfocused and unable to achieve even tiny victories. The old ideas about bioethics had evaporated. Virtually every type of research was allowed now. Around the globe, the elderly and sick were routinely given

tissues and organs grown from stem cells that might or might not belong to them. Athletes, even weekend amateurs, routinely doped themselves with extra muscle and lung tissue. The wickedest nations, where almost anything was legal, allowed the wealthy and self-obsessed to make clones of themselves. Even one of the girls that Evan dated in college—a good little Southern Baptist from Alabama— confessed that what he loved best about her body had been cultivated in a sterile laboratory.

The only true taboo left was cloning people without their consent.

Genuine incidents remained quite rare. But Evan possessed both the focus and imagination to see patterns where others saw happenstance. To him, it was self-evident that there were wicked people and slick organizations that existed for no reason but to steal away a person's genetics. What Evan believed as a boy still held its grip on him. There had to be an underground market, and one or many governments were involved in the trade. Anybody with a clear gaze and the right frame of mind could see the threat, and the only way to fight the war was to remain solitary, strong and secure, waiting for the opportunity to do some genuine good.

Evan had worked out a routine that felt responsible as well as just. This led to a few uncomfortable moments. Strange men would say, "What are you looking at?" An old woman once warned him that he was making her nervous. And once, an off-duty policeman found him near a schoolyard and misunderstood Evan's pure intentions. No, he wasn't interested in little boys. He was watching for people who might want to steal a child's genetics. But there was no way to admit his true purpose. So he spun a lie about looking for a niece who was supposed to be here with his sister, and he gave them names and described them, and then asked the officer if he'd seen either one.

An incident report may or may or not have been

filed.

Evan didn't bother to check.

But after that scare, he was more cautious about his work. Using hidden cameras, he photographed thousands of suspects, and with software linked to a multitude of databases, he identified hundreds of people who proved their innocence without having to say one word.

Then came a warm spring afternoon at a popular playground, and the gray-haired gentleman who was watching a special boy.

The boy was amazing, yes—wiry and strong, and in ways that Evan

could only marvel at, fearless. He was perhaps ten years old, wearing a wide smart grin, and he would scramble up the side of a shelter standing in the center of an expansive sandbox. The shelter had a passing resemblance to a castle. Written signs and audio overseers warned the boy that he was using the structure improperly. But the climb was just a minor accomplishment. Once on top—three meters off the ground, nearly—the boy would assume a tucked position, the balls of his bare feet set against a horizontal pipe. Then he would lift his hands, and with a smooth, seemingly effortless motion, he would leap backward, the bare feet snapping as the legs soared above his twirling body.

Somehow, that young acrobat landed upright in the soft sand, facing the shelter, unharmed and perfectly in balance.



Several adults and half a dozen kids watched the show. One young woman chastised the boy for endangering others. But words couldn't stop him. Again and again, he climbed high and made the same leap, each time lifting higher and landing closer to the edge of the sandbox, the final jump putting him within arm's reach of a steel fence.

A gray-haired man happened to be sitting on a nearby bench, one arm thrown protectively over a blond boy with a passing resemblance to him.

That was his grandson, Evan learned in time.

Later that day, a pair of face-recognition packages produced the same name—Gary Olsen—and with that name came an empty criminal file. But a resourceful man has countless avenues, and through means not entirely legal, Evan recovered both a thorough biography of the fellow as well as three old incident reports—a string of telltale clues whose cumulative effect was to make him lie awake through the night, enjoying his extraordinary luck.

## Saving One Child

Three careers and two failed marriages might have embittered most men. But once he reached retirement age, Gary discovered that he still had his health, and for no obvious reason at all, he acquired a late-in-life capacity for happiness. His abrasive humor was still present, but tempered with a measure of wisdom and a practiced capacity for knowing how

to act in public. Maybe being a grandfather was the secret. Certainly he pulled all

the pleasure he could out of that experience. And he liked to believe that he was a better father now, too. Although maybe that's because Pepper was an adult, responsible in his own right and far smarter than his father could ever pretend to be.

Of course Gary could be happy for a much less noble reason: His days weren't filled with work that he despised, and his personal peace stemmed from that.

Whatever the cause, each day was a little celebration.

Most mornings began with a walk on a bikeway that on Sunday mornings, like today, was almost empty.

Gary noticed the young man at a distance—a solitary figure that in some fashion or another looked as if he should be alone. There was a lonely quality to the silhouette and its patient, nowhere-to-be gait. At closer range, the man seemed a little peculiar. Why was that? Because he stared in Gary's direction but didn't quite look at him? Or was it the way he kept his shoulders hunched, hands meeting in the front pocket of a sweatshirt that looked unbearably heavy for what was proving to be a warm, sultry morning?

Gary never suspected that the man would produce a pistol.

And even when it was in plain view, held firmly in both hands, the weapon had an unreal quality. Surely,

it was a toy. A prop. Somebody's misguided attempt at humor, and Gary just happened to be an accidental witness to something of no real consequence.

Then the young man said, "Mr. Gary Olsen."

And recited his address.

And then with a dry, slightly nervous voice, he said, "I know what you've done. And I know what you are."

Too late, Gary realized that at this point on the path, no homes or traveled streets were in view. And since it was Sunday, and early, there was absolutely no reason to hope for somebody passing by soon.

Like bad men in old movies, the stranger pointed with his gun.

He intended to herd Gary back into the trees.

When the adrenaline struck, Gary's heart nearly burst. Then from some reservoir of courage or stubbornness, or most probably fear, he told his enemy, "No. I'm not doing that."

"Then I'll shoot you here."

"I would," Gary managed. "Because I'm not going anywhere with you."

The stranger had not imagined events happening quite this way. He took a few moments to consider his prospects, licking at his lips while dipping his eyes. Then he whispered, "Fine. I will."

Gary nearly collapsed. But he forced himself to breathe, looking at his enemy's very serious eyes, and with a plaintive voice asked the simple, boundless question, "Why?"

“Why?”

Gary nodded. “Why do this to me? What’s your reason?”

The stranger seemed offended. “I have a very good reason.”

“Don’t I deserve to know?”

The young man saw the logic, or at least in his position of total power, he could afford to say, “I guess so.”

Gary waited.

And with perhaps half a dozen sentences, a life story was told to him—a fanciful tale of conspiracies and farflung enemies, none of it bearing any resemblance to anything genuine and very little that was sane.

Deny any portion of the tale, and his enemy would shoot him. Gary was sure of it.

For a few moments, he couldn’t speak. Or think clearly. Weak legs bent, and he settled on the pavement, on his knees, bowing his head while he managed a few ragged breaths. Then with a choking voice, he said, “You’re right, yes. You caught me.” And he lifted his head, meeting the stranger’s gaze.

The pistol dipped.

“I do steal people’s DNA. For years and years now.” Gary felt detached, like an observer, never quite certain what words his own mouth would say next. “But you have to understand ... I don’t work for a secret organization. No, no. I work alone. For my own reasons—”

“What reasons?” his enemy snapped.

“Sometimes...” The voice failed him now. What could he possibly say that would help? “Sometimes,” he muttered again. Then, “Some people ... you know, children...?”

The pistol lifted again.

“Children,” Gary repeated. Then his voice recovered its purpose, and he asked, “What if there’s a boy, and he has enormous talents and all kinds of potentials ... but his home life is miserable. You know? Bad parents and poverty, and if he grows up at all, he’ll be too damaged to become half the success he should have been.”

Just slightly, his enemy’s expression changed.

“I find those boys,” Gary lied. “I find them and steal a few of their cells, and I clone them. But I make only one clone for each boy. And I’m very careful to give them full-length telomeres and no serious mutations. Because if you’re going to save somebody’s life, that’s what you need to do.”

“Save what life?”

“The boy’s,” he repeated. Then he managed a smile, adding, “Each baby is adopted by good people ... responsible, caring parents ... and while their older twins are dying of drugs and ignorance, those lucky few get a second chance at the success they deserve.”

None of this was what the stranger expected, and he didn’t know exactly how to respond.

“I know, it’s all illegal,” said Gary, his smile collapsing.

He was about to be shot; he felt certain.

But then he muttered, “It’s just that ... if at the end of the day, if I can save just one child....”

There was a long pause.

Then that sick young man dropped his gun, and screaming softly to himself, he ran up the path and out of sight.

## Intolerance

“Hey, I'm speaking to you. Yes, you, my friend. Are those mammoth ears attached to some kind of neural network? Can you comprehend simple slow diction? I wish to be released on this approaching corner. Pull over, yes, thank you. And will you help me with these damned straps? Mechanical strength is not my strength, as you can plainly see.”

The cab driver is a stocky fellow, sweating rivers despite the chill of the vehicle's air conditioning. He turns to stare at his only passenger, jaw locked and his fleshy cheeks coloring. But he says nothing. He forces himself to remain silent, one broad hand reaching warily for the straps' latch.

“You've grown weary of my company,” the passenger observes. “You want me gone. You want me out of your life. Well, I will abide in your heartfelt wishes. Never again will our paths cross, my friend. Until I rule the world, of course, and then I will personally crush the likes of you.”

The hand jumps back.

“The likes of me?” the driver whispers. Then louder, he asks, “What the hell do you know about me?”

“You judge,” says the shrill little voice. “Despite a lifetime of red meat and cheap beer, you have survived into your early fifties. The gold band on your finger promises a wife, but the absence of prominent

digitals implies that she isn't cherished. Nor are there any bright-faced children worthy of a father's pride. Judging by the name filling up your license, you are Serbian. A genuine doormat race. The trace of an accent tells me you came to this country as a teenage boy, probably during your homeland's last civil insurrection. And judging by the little talismans scattered across your dashboard, you belong to some kind of fossilized Christian faith. Which makes you both extremely superstitious and mindlessly conservative ... two very nasty qualities for our modern world, I believe...!"

The driver squelches a curse.

The passenger laughs. "Does my little rant bother you? It is a problem, I can tell. That grunting, sweaty, swollen, and outmoded body of yours conveys volumes. Your animal wishes are obvious. Right now, this moment, you are picturing my frail body tossed beneath the next beer truck, crushed and dead. Is that what you wish, sir? There is no point lying here, or in diluting the truth."

A thumb strikes the latch and the restraining belts fly off. Then the curbside door opens, and the driver asks, "What the hell kind of creature are you?"

"A creature of ideas," the passenger exclaims with a toothy smile.

"Get out."

"I am doing just that. As fast as I can."

"Out!"



“But before I go ... let me tell you something true, my dear friend. We know exactly how the universe began, and when and how it shall end. Humans taught themselves these great lessons. The gods never helped us. And for each of us--for the universe and for humans alike--what lies between birth and death is an unrelenting tedium spiced with the occasional sweet novelty.”

The driver mutters under his breath, and the taxi door slams shut.

“My pack,” the passenger cries out. “Or are you a thief?”

A window drops, and out tumbles a small transparent backpack. Then with a choked voice, the driver screams, “Monster,” as he pulls away from the curb, wringing all of the speed from his vehicle's fuel cells, leaving behind a whiff of perfumed moisture that lingers in the bright sunny air.

The monster stands alone on the sidewalk, laughing quietly. Less than a meter tall and not quite eighteen kilos, he wears blue running shoes adorned with daisies and white socks with frills and a stained Pooh shirt and dark blue shorts that bulge with the diaper. His skin is pale and smooth. His knees bow out a little bit. He seems to be thirty or thirty-two months old, except in the face. The brown eyes are busy and smart, while the tiny mouth wears a perpetual smirk, as if the world around him is both humorous and contemptible, in equal measures.

Inside his backpack are supplies for his day: a folded reader and an old-fashioned cell phone, several spare diapers and wipes, snacks on edible plates, a press-wrapped change of clothes, and a police-grade taser. His electronic money is tucked inside his current diaper--the first place a thief would look, but he has already peed enough to fend off those with weak wills.

The monster--he goes by Cabe--slips on the pack's plastic straps and sets off, walking north with a determined gait. The pack rattles softly. The daisies on his shoes flash random colors with each step. Other pedestrians take note. Those few who recognize him pretend not to notice. But others see a child, and they can't help but smile at his cuteness, instinct leading the way while the brain sluggishly notes the little details that are wrong. Then instinct fades into a clumsy puzzlement, and sometimes, intrigue. People are generally idiots, but they are not entirely uninformed. What this creature represents is new and will remain new and fresh for some time. But in another ten years, or twenty at the most, the costs will tumble, and all but the very poorest of these drudges will be able to choose from a menu at least as wondrous as the one within reach of these stubby little fingers.

The block ends with a red light and a collection of placid, sheep-like office workers. They speak to headsets, or they don't speak at all. He pushes between their legs, reaching the curb before the light

changes. Conversations die away. Faces stare down at the top of his head. Then a phone sings the big crescendo from Beethoven's Ninth, and with a loud clear voice, he says, "Shit."

The eyes around him grow huge.

He slips off the backpack and yanks out his Benny-the-Robot phone, looking at the incoming number before flipping it open. "What?" he snaps.

"Where are you?" a voice asks. A woman's voice.

"Nowhere," he replies.

"I was wondering if you were free," the voice continues.

"Barely free. And it takes all of my considerable talent to remain this way."

She says, "Lunch, darling?"

"No."

"My treat."

"It wouldn't be mine," he snarls.

Silence is wrapped in a sharp pain. Then she says, "Cabe--"

And he disconnects, instructing his phone not to accept another call from that number. The traffic light has turned green. But most of the pedestrians remain on the curb, confused but exceptionally curious.

"None of your business," he growls.

Faces tilt up now, and everyone crosses in a rush.

Cabe sits on the curb, stuffing the phone back where it belongs, preparing to wait through another

red light. But the traffic is light. An empty bus and a pair of old hybrids roll past, and he steps out early.

Dominating the next corner is the city's main library--a grim concrete building with tall windows on the ground floor, allowing passersby to stare in at the derelicts and mental patients who keep the chairs filled. Outside stands one of the resident librarians. A nervous man with a strong union and dreams of a pension, he is smoking, probably enjoying one of the new therapeutic cigarettes made from biogenetic tobaccos. Red eyes see the tiny figure approaching. The man takes a couple of puffs, bracing himself for whatever happens next. What sort of cutting insult will be thrown his way? Or worse, will the creature ask for help in some ridiculous research project? But Cabe surprises the librarian, waving once in his general direction before turning, little legs carrying him toward the west.

Beside the library stands an even older building--an ensemble of brick and mortar that currently serves as the downtown YWCA. Cabe usually approaches from a different direction; passing by the main entrance has its risks. But the only soul paying attention is an old man sitting on one of the concrete stairs. The monster gives him a little nod, and the man smiles and says, "Good day," while waving one of his bony hands.

Around the corner waits a world of mayhem and shrill nonsense syllables, clumsy running and random tantrums.

A three-meter fence surrounds the playground, but that overstates the security measures. From the shade of a stunted crab apple tree, Cabe examines the assorted faces, spotting one that he doesn't know and that will probably serve his purpose.

“Ugh!” a boy shouts at him, brown fingers wrapped in the chain link.

“Ugh yourself,” Cabe mocks.

A girl joins ugh-boy, older by a year and far more verbal. She regards the newcomer with a deep suspicion. Grabbing her companion with a protective arm, she shouts at Cabe, “Go away.”

Ugh-boy squirms in her grip.

“Hello, Lilly,” Cabe purrs. “And how are you on this very sweet day?”

“You're bad,” she tells him.

“Indeed,” he agrees.

The ugh-boy pulls free of his protector, and then losing interest in the drama, wanders off to toss rocks at an inviting square of pavement.

“Go away,” Lilly repeats.

“But I shall not, my dear.”

The girl sighs.

“Who are you?” a new voice calls out.

Behind Lilly is a woman. She is nineteen or twenty, by appearance, and she has a pretty enough face, legs that couldn't be any longer, and a young and nervous little voice. She is new, probably no more than a week or two on the job. And she is exactly the kind of person busy parents wish to have watching their

offspring--a nurturing, nervous girl who will rush to the aid of any lost bunny.

“Hello?” she says to the bunny standing on the far side of the fence.

Cabe changes his expression.

She kneels, smiling tentatively. “What's your name?”

He says, “Cabe,” with a delicate sniffle.

“Cabe?”

He nods, pushing out his lower lip.

“Are you in our toddler class, Cabe?” And when he doesn't answer, she asks, “Did you wander out here on your own?”

He pretends as if those words are too complicated. A baffled look fills his pale round face.

“Where are your parents, Cabe?”

Now the tears come, bubbling from deep inside.

“Oh, dear,” the woman whimpers.

But Lilly is made of sterner stuff. She stares at Cabe, her tiny jaw set, eyes like little guns shooting at him.

“Mommy,” Cabe sputters.

“Oh, honey.”

“Where's my ... mommy...?”

A tall gate waits just a few steps away. It takes just a moment for the young woman to use her passkey and rush outside, and with every instinct on overdrive, she kneels and scoops up the boy in her arms, squeezing to reassure and to make absolutely certain that he won't slip away from her caring grasp.

Again and again, Cabe says, "Mommy," while he pushes his crying face into her chest.

"Where is your mommy?" she asks.

"Gone."

"Gone where, darling?"

"Gone, gone!"

The words have an impact, visceral and disarming. She leans into his body and starts to weep for herself. Others notice their little show. Lilly has never stopped staring at Cabe, mouthing the word "Bad" from time to time. But the approaching adults are the ones who will stop the fun. So with a final low sob, Cabe says, "I'm hungry," and moves his mouth to the right.

Like most of the daycare staff, the young woman is dressed for comfort and ease of motion. She's wearing a loose-fitting, relatively low-cut shirt. It is the simplest trick in the world to reach down, yanking on the shirt and bra in one motion, exposing a breast. Then he takes the pink nipple as if he has never been so famished, and he sucks with urgency. But it isn't until he uses his tongue and mutters the words, "Yes," and then, "Sweet," that the woman finally appreciates what is happening here.

\* \* \* \*

"Next time, we will press charges."

The Y director accompanies him down the concrete steps. She is furious, but only to a point. Both know this is a game. Law enforcement won't gladly arrest him. No prosecuting attorney wants to

see Cabe sitting in the courtroom. He can field a team of powerful lawyers, and his gifts of persuasion are the stuff of legend, whether used on a hardened judge or a hapless jury. Besides, case law and the statutes are changing daily, and it is a giant question as to how he can be charged.

“Get out of here!” the director warns.

He laughs at her and blows a kiss.

“So what'd you do wrong?”

The old man is speaking to him. He was sitting on a high step when Cabe walked past the entrance, and now he's sitting on the lowest step.

With a quiet laugh, Cabe says, “I did nothing of significance.”

“The lady seems to hold a different opinion.”

“And boys are entitled to a little fun.”

“Well, nothing wrong with that logic,” the old man concedes.

Cabe sits on a higher step, keeping their eyes at the same level.

With the first glance, the man appears frail. Feeble. He has thin white hair, long but combed, and the speckled skin of an unreformed sunbather. His clothes are worn and a little too large for his wiry frame, hanging on him as if illness or time has eroded away a much larger body. But his frailty doesn't extend deeper than his skin. He winks at the person sitting near him, a bright smile framed by a handsome, surprisingly boyish face. His breathing is slow and comfortable. Judging by his bare arms, his



muscle tone is that of a hardened athlete. And his voice has strength and clarity, particularly when he asks his companion, "So how old are you, really?"

Cabe just smiles.

"The original rejuvenators came on the market what? Ten years ago? But they take you back only a few years, and then only if you're past fifty or so." The man nods, considering the possibilities. "Of course the second-generation bunch is better. But even the Novartis package has that ugly habit of goosing the wrong genes and giving you cancer, or shutting down essential genes, leaving you dead."

With perfect white teeth, he grins. "No, you're using the third-generation stuff. Probably the BioBorn package, since it's the oldest and the best."

"But the third-generations haven't been approved for the marketplace," Cabe mentions.

"What does that mean?" the old man asks. "That word 'marketplace'? If a product is real, and if you know where to look for it, then for enough money, it is very much in your reach."

Cabe throws a tiny hand into the air, making a grabbing motion.

"But now how old are you? That's the question of the moment." The man winks and sits back, eyes narrowing as he says, "Reversion of the body is an accelerated process. Ten times faster than normal growth, give or take. And since you seem to be what now? Two and a half? And since the third-generation rejuvenators started leaking out a couple years back

... my first inclination is to guess that you're in your early twenties....”

“Your first inclination?” Cabe coaxes.

“But that's not particularly sensible, now is it?” A low laugh. “What grown male is going to let himself shrivel up? I mean in all the important departments. Plus that assumes you went on the rejuvenators the first day they poked their heads out of the lab, which doesn't seem likely. And even then, if you started in your twenties, you couldn't have been at this particular age for more than the last few weeks. Which you haven't been. From what I see, you're pretty comfortable inside your current skin.”

“What can you see?”

A brighter laugh erupts. “You're a smart kid, regardless of your years.”

Cabe cannot disagree.

“So I'm thinking ... and I have some experience in this business, I'll warn you ... I'm thinking that when you were six or eight or ten years old, your parents started buying neurological enhancements. Pfizer has a neural growth package they sell to handicapped kids and head-injury victims. Does some incredible things with ordinary people, I've heard.”

“Maybe I'm just smart on my own,” the tiny creature offers.

“Yeah, but more than anything, you're wealthy,” the old man counters. “First, last, and always, you've got a world of money. Rejuvenators, enhancements.

These are pricey miracles. Which makes me guess that there's a fat trust fund or two involved."

Cabe says nothing, watching his companion with fresh caution.

"Neurological enhancements, and then you had yourself declared a functioning adult. Legally speaking. And afterward you joined an experimental program that you yourself funded, and you began to undergo a comprehensive rejuvenation." He winked before asking, "Now that's the general order of things, isn't it?"

Cabe asks, "How old am I?"

"Eleven years, three months."

Brown eyes widen while the toddler's mouth pulls into a little knot.

The man erupts into hard laughter, shaking his head as he admits, "Oh, I already know who you are. Cabe McAllister. Heir to the brownie mix fortune. You were nine years old when you petitioned for a provisional adult status, and except for two temporary reversions to child-status--both to help defend against pending legal charges--you have lived as an adult for the last two years."

Cabe holds his breath for a moment. Then with a tight slow voice, he announces, "I have a security system. With a word, I can have a platoon of security people standing on your chest, probably inside five minutes."

It is a bit of an exaggeration, but only a bit.

Yet the threat has little muscle. The old man shrugs him off, asking, "What do you think? Just because you change your appearance, and then spend a fortune to keep your current face out of the media ... do you really believe that the whole world isn't eventually going to hear your story...?"

Cabe stands up.

"Don't go," the old man says. "Sit down."

"This is a ridiculous game," Cabe complains. "You knew who I was when I first walked past here."

"Well, I should damn well know who you are," is the reply.

"What does that mean?"

The handsome elderly face grins at him, bright teeth catching the sun as he says, "When we were five years old, we went to the same school. Remember the Academy at Greenhaven? Cabe McAllister and Jonah Westercase. Brownie mix and concrete. Two little boys, spoiled and wealthy, and during that long-ago year, we were the best of friends."

They find a bar at the north end of the same block, claiming a booth and drinking cold root beers while bringing each other up to date. Cabe sits in a booster chair and lifts his mug with both hands, explaining, "This is a great age. The best. I get to do what I want, whenever I want. Most of the world doesn't know me from the average little diaper-jockey, which I like. And I get to say anything. People tolerate almost any shit from a toddler, even when they realize, intellectually realize, that he isn't what he looks to

be.” He smiles for a moment. “And the expressions I see on those faces ... well, it's worth all the bullshit that comes with this little body.”

“I can believe it,” Jonah says.

The foamy mug is lifted, sipped, and dropped with a hard thunk. “But what about you? What's your tale of body and soul?”

A shrug of the shoulders. “Like you, I got the neurological enhancements when they came on the market. A million, two million dollars' worth of work, and then I was almost nine, reading at a graduate school level, and I announced to my folks that I wanted to be a legal adult, provisionally speaking--”

“They let you?” Cabe asks.

Jonah rolls his eyes. “When haven't we gotten our way?”

They laugh and sip their sweet dark drinks. But then Cabe stares up at the bar, watching the drunks who can't take their eyes off these odd interlopers.

“But why hurry the aging process?” he finally asks.

“Why not?” Jonah grins. “At first, I just wanted to look and function like an adult. Which is easy enough, since the rejuvenators aren't just rejuvenators ... working in either direction, as they do. But what age is the best age? I mean, if we live in a world where you can pick your body's maturity, why do convention and commonsense imagine everyone is going to end up looking as if they're thirty-five? In a hundred years, is everyone going to be the same damn age? I don't think so. I think there's a lot to be

said for other stages of life. You're an example of that. And how about the elderly? Not that the old farts are particularly wise people, of course. They aren't. But our culture tells us to listen to our elders, and that's what I wanted to be. An elder. I wanted to be able to make my little pronouncements, and people who didn't know me would think, 'My goodness, what a sharp old granddad he is.'"

Cabe sits back in the hard plastic seat, ready to pose another question. But the phone rings inside his backpack, and he pulls it out--

"Cute toy," Jonah declares.

And he runs a check on the caller's number. Then he cuts the connection and slips the phone back between a pair of clean diapers.

"Wrong number?" his friend inquires.

He says, "Probably." Then he stares at the weathered face, asking, "But how did you get so old so fast?"

"Easy enough," Jonah promises. "Inside, I'm in my early twenties. Fit and clean and ready to start living. But the skin and hair ... well, there's an old set of technologies, and maybe you've heard of them...."

"Cosmetics?"

"Exactly."

Cabe laughs quietly, one hand fiddling with a tiny pink ear.

"The hair is dyed, and the skin ... well, that's more complicated. Every couple weeks or so, I have it damaged. UV light and some nicely caustic chemicals

give me this look.” Then he winks, adding, “There's some ladies I know ... they say I look a lot like my old grandfather, and I fool around like him too....”

Cabe dips his head, not quite laughing.

“Your folks fought your adulthood. If I remember the rumors right.”

“My father contested my petition. My mother fought him.”

“Wait, that's right.” Jonah squints for a moment, and then adds, “She supported your bid, didn't she? Now that I think about it.”

“She wasn't critical to the process,” says Cabe.

“No?”

“We always get what we want,” he reminds Jonah. “Without either parent helping, I would have won the fight.”

Jonah waits for a moment. Then he asks, “So who called just now?”

“Nobody.”

“You could just let it ring,” he suggests.

Silence.

“Or not carry a phone.” The laugh is young and a little bit teasing. “There's about a thousand better ways to handle your communication needs.”

Cabe regards him for a moment, and then speaking to his root beer, he says, “Go blow yourself.”

“If only I could,” Jonah replies.

Then both of them are laughing, and for that instant, in the gray light of a dusty old bar, they look

and sound rather like eleven-year-old boys, happily trading insults and giggles.

\* \* \* \*

“How did you find me?” Cabe finally asks.

“Maybe I just stumbled across you.”

“Maybe,” he allows, pushing the half-empty mug into the middle of the table. “But you were sitting on the precise block which I'd be strolling along. Which makes this seem like a carefully planned event.”

“I might make the effort to track you down ... an old buddy of mine from the Greenhaven days....”

The brown eyes widen while the tiny face seems to grow even smaller. Then after an uncomfortable pause, Cabe announces, “I have something to do.”

“Too much root beer?”

“Yes.”

He climbs off the booster chair and then out of the booth, dragging his pack by the strap. But he doesn't manage one step before Jonah is beside him, remarking with a curious tone, “A lot of two-year-old bodies can hold it.”

“Why diapers?”

“To complete the illusion, I'm guessing.”

“No,” Cabe says. Insists. “It's just that a person of my size can't navigate his way through your average public toilet.”

“Sure. Of course.”

The men's room has a stall and a grimy urinal, plus a sink cleaned with every full moon. As the door



closes behind them, each looks at the other's face, negotiating the terms for this peculiar moment.

"So do you lie down when you do it?" Jonah inquires.

"No, I stand. And I do it by myself."

"Then I'll let you," his one-time classmate replies, vanishing inside the stall and locking its door.

With crisp, efficient motions, Cabe drops his shorts and old diaper, the Velcro straps crackling as they come undone. He retrieves his electronic money and slips on a fresh diaper and then pulls another tool out of the backpack--the Chinese-made taser--dressed up to look like a tiny tube of ointment that he slips with his money into the crack of his bottom. Finally he retrieves his little reader, having just enough time to pose a few questions to a favorite search engine.

The big toilet flushes with a roar.

Out comes Jonah, throwing a mysterious wink in Cabe's direction. Then like a boy would, he runs cold water over a few fingertips and wipes his hands dry with a single brown paper towel. "So what's your mom think?" he asks, pressing the towel into the tiniest possible wad.

"Think about what?"

"This." Jonah points to the pack and his tiny companion. "I mean, she was all for you becoming an adult. That's what you told me. But then you went and did this business with your body."

"It's my business," says Cabe.

Jonah opens the restroom door for both of them.  
“Did I say otherwise?”

“She was all right with it,” Cabe reports.

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” he says, the word sharp and final. Then he pauses for a moment, surveying the long bar. A narrow grin builds, and setting out toward a couple of the barflies, he calls out, “Gentlemen.”

The drunks are giant men wearing sharp beards and dirty leather vests and several pounds of cheap jewelry; youthful fat is spread thin over a wealth of youthful, steroid-laced muscle. Riding on their bare arms is an assortment of vicious and obscene brands. Until this moment, they looked sleepy and inert up on their high stools. But it's as if cold water hits their faces, and they sit up straight now, eyes bulging as they gawk at the swaggering little creature.

“I have a wager with my friend here,” Cabe announces. “He claims you're out of work due to the vagaries of the new economics. Hard luck cases, and I should feel pity for you. While on the other hand, I believe that you are just a pair of lazy idiots, and you have consumed your adult lives pickling in whiskey and your own well-deserved despair.

“Now which of us is right, sirs? Will you tell us?”

Jonah hangs back.

“Or don't you understand my question?” Cabe persists. “Do you not comprehend English? Should I employ a more guttural tongue?”

One of the drunks manages a low curse.

More than anything, the men are confused, glancing at Jonah while trying to take a better measure of the situation.

“Gentlemen,” says the older voice. “I am sorry. Very sorry. My grandson is a rude little boy, and I would like to apologize for both of us.”

The mood still teeters between resignation and vengeance.

Then Jonah adds, “And please, let me buy you your next drinks. And those after that, too.”

He throws a wad of bills between the giant men, winning enough time for them to slip out the front door.

A wide smarmy grin fills Cabe's face.

Bending low, placing himself in front of his companion's face, Jonah says, “You really are just an evil crap. Even when you were five years old, it showed. Evil and cruel, and god-awful vicious. And you know what else? Back then, all I ever wanted was to teach you a lesson, even for just half of the bull that you pulled on me, mister.”

\* \* \* \*

The grin dissolves.

Cabe starts to fiddle with his backpack, reaching for the reader. But Jonah snatches the pack up, saying, “You're tired. It's heavy. Let me carry it for you.”

“With a word--”

“You'll call in your security people. I know.”

Cabe stares at the man looming over him, one hand reaching back, fingers trying to find the taser.

"I know your story," Jonah rumbles.

Both hands drop. "What story?"

"My mom ran into your mom last week. In Alaska, at a fund-raiser."

"What fund-raiser?"

"Bring back the Stellar Sea-cow, or something like that." Jonah laughs in disgust. "Anyway, they hadn't seen each other for a few years. They used to be halfway friendly, back when we were classmates. And my mom has a talent. Unlike some of us, she can make people like her. Perfect strangers will confess and confide in her. So when she asked, 'How's Cabe doing now?' ... Well, that's all it took to get the story flowing...."

The little body walks a few steps, pauses and then walks again, following a slightly different path.

"Stop," Jonah commands.

"Why?"

"Just stand here. While I'm talking, stay put."

Again the boy reaches for his taser.

"Your mom did support your bid for adulthood. Yes. But your father was right. You weren't ready, not in any sense. And it wasn't just being a prick that got you in trouble, was it? Today a lot of lawyers are able to afford enhancements to their own children, all because of the ugly legal work necessary to keep you out of some species of prison."

Cabe looks up and down the sidewalk. They are close to the city library again. Directly behind him is a long alleyway blocked at the far end by a delivery van. Just now, no one else is close by--except for the librarian who has come out to enjoy another much-needed cigarette.

“Your poor mom,” says Jonah. “She decided that she'd made a ton of mistakes, and it was just a matter of time before the courts ganged up on her only child. There was one way left to protect the world from her boy, from that little monster, and to protect her little monster from the world.

“The legal grounds were shaky. But there was an answer. Difficult and very expensive, but doable.

“Your mother found a judge and bribed him, and he handed down his sentence, and that's when you had no choice but to undergo the reversion therapy. This look of yours ... it wasn't your choice at the beginning. What you are today ... it's just the point you reached before you bought another judge who would suspend the process, at least for these last few months....”

Cabe pulls out his taser and shouts the single code word that will bring his security people.

Jonah shakes his head now. “Unless of course I've compromised the transmitter inside that new baby molar of yours....”

“Did you?” the boy mutters.

Then he thinks of another, more pressing question. “Why did you come to see me today?”

“Why?” Jonah gives a big laugh and steps closer. “In theory, because my mother asked me to find you. To see if I could talk some reason into your bullish head. Convince you to accept your sentence and go marching off to prison. For everybody's good, and all that crap.”

Cabe steps toward the library, but Jonah blocks his way.

“But what I decided to do ... I decided that it would be better ... more fun, and more satisfying ... if I just gave back a little of what you gave to me when we were kids. The way you used to tease me. Or worse, those times you paid those older, poorer kids to beat on me....”

Jonah says, “Everybody else in the world is afraid to smack a two-year-old turd. But I know what he is, and believe me, I can do all the ass-whipping that I want--”

Cabe aims the taser and fires, pumping Jonah full of a withering dose of electricity. The prematurely old body stiffens and then drops hard to the pavement. Then Cabe turns and runs. He fully expects footsteps to follow him. How much damage could that little spark-box manage? But nobody comes up from behind, and the librarian is stubbing out his butt and walking in his direction, his expression puzzled, and then alarmed.

Cabe stops, turns.

Jonah is still facedown on the sidewalk

The boy returns, deciding to retrieve his backpack, and that's when it occurs to him that something is very wrong, and wrong in ways he never anticipated. The bony body isn't moving, not even to breathe. Cabe has to reach under a motionless shoulder to retrieve his bag. And then the librarian is kneeling beside him, trembling hands examining the fresh corpse.

“Murderer,” says the tobacco-roughened voice.

Cabe retrieves his phone, making the only call left to him.

Into the waiting silence, he says, “Mother.”

He has never felt so scared, not once in his life. The world suddenly seems full of menacing giants, and he sputters, “Mommy,” as he collapses onto the pavement, too breathless to speak again or even cry.

\* \* \* \*

There will be light, where he is going. And there will be windows of a narrow sort. Sterile bioelectronics will give him a combination reader and display screen, and the doctors promise enough coordination to use the tools within his reach, including making calls to the world outside his prison cell. The procedure is exceptionally rare, but nothing about it is impossible. Indeed, one of the attending nurses jokes with him, claiming that nothing could be more natural, in a backward way, than what is happening to him now.

The operating room is crowded and sterile, busy and exceptionally quiet. Cabe sees taut white sheets

and robotic limbs, and for a moment, he finds his mother's face floating on a small pillow, her eyes half-open and blind from the anesthesia. But his neck is too weak to hold his head where he wants it to be. Then the nurse turns him around, cuddling with him while machines and surgeons recheck the placement of his new placenta. "Honey," she says, and wipes at his forehead and the area around his mouth. "You are so darling," she tells him. "I can't see why this is necessary ... you seem like such a dear...."

"This isn't at all necessary," he agrees.

Surprised by the clarity and strength of his voice, the nurse blinks.

"This is a travesty," he growls. "A vicious injustice!" Then with a near-wail, he adds, "As soon as I find a worthy attorney, I promise, I will destroy all of you bastards!"

But the nurse ignores his fuss and fury. She even manages to laugh at Cabe, winking when she says, "I saw your parents talking about this. How they made you finally agree to the procedure ... by fooling you like they did...."

The closest surgeon says the nurse's name, in warning.

"What's that?" Cabe asks. "Fooled me how?"

She glances at the surgeon, begging to say it.

"What do you mean, madam? Explain yourself!"

No one tells her to stop. So she looks down at Cabe, explaining, "Your friend wasn't really your friend, you know. Jonah was just some actor hired



and coached by your parents to play the role. And you didn't kill him, even by accident. A neurotoxin dropped him into a coma. He's somewhere in Europe, I guess ... wealthy now, and performing Shakespeare in the park, or some such pleasure....”

Cabe stifles a scream.

But really, can he be surprised by any of this?

“Your parents wanted you to stop fighting the court's judgment,” the nurse confides. Then with a quiet and impressed voice, she adds, “They must love you very much. Particularly your mother, who must be some kind of saint for agreeing to this ... this procedure....”

Again, he is lifted.

Mechanical hands carry him to the far end of the table, and he is turned until the top of his head is pointing at his unconscious mother. Cabe can't help but stare at her tanned legs and what is between them, pulled open by hormones and clamps. And then he is being carried closer to her ... and as they begin to shut down his lungs, preparing him to be immersed in the ugly salty fluids, Cabe cries out to everyone in earshot, “This is not done. Don't think otherwise, my fools!”

Even as the strong hands shove him into the wet choking darkness, he tells them, “I still have means and a mind!

“You stupid clowns!

“I will escape this trap! You will see! You will see!”

## Like, Need, Deserve

“What interests you today, good sir?”

“An audience. I'd like to buy one.”

“And for whom is the audience intended?”

“Just me. It's not a gift or anything.”

“Excuse me, sir. But aren't you entitled to the occasional gift?”

“I guess I am.”

“Our best gifts are often those we give ourselves.”

“You've got a point there.”

“Well, thank you.” Amiable, effervescent laughter.

“Now if I may ask, what's the purpose of this audience?”

“Comedy.”

“You wish them to be funny?”

“No, no. I want to tell jokes and make them laugh.”

“Of course. I was just joking with you, sir.”

“Oh.”

“By chance, are you a naturally funny person?”

“I don't know.”

“Not particularly, I should think.”

“Is that a problem?”

“It's a parameter. A stricture. One of many factors, and I believe we can work around it.”

“I don't want a stupid audience.”

“I don't make stupid audiences. Sir.”

“Or kids. I bought another audience, from a different source. Three dozen six-year-olds in a

playroom, and all I had to do was read knock-knock jokes.”

“Ah. The venerable knock-knock.”

A pause. Then, “Are you real?”

Laughter again, but less amiable.

“I was just wondering. It's hard to tell these days. The technology ... it's so easy to manufacture AIs ...”

“'Manufacture' is a rather inadequate word. Sir.”

“Sorry.”

“I don't 'manufacture' audiences.”

“I said I'm sorry.”

“I culture my people. On a template of human-inspired personality features, I can produce up to a thousand coherent individuals, each with individual quirks, distinct appreciations, and highly defined talents.”

“Yeah. I know how it's done.”

“Each face that you will see covers a viable, legal pseudohuman.”

Silence.

“Your interest in comedy, sir. Is it work-related?”

“Pardon?”

“Will you be touring the nation, performing at various comedy venues?”

“God, no. No. I just want to be able to tell a joke at dinner parties.” Silence. “And I don't want a drunk audience, either. I've gone that route. In the middle of my show, they jumped up and started smacking each other.”

“My, that sounds like a fun get-together.”

“What—?”

“Another joke, sir.”

“Well, don't.”

“Of course. My thoroughest apologies.”

Silence. Then, “Fifty people. Sober and smart. What will they cost me?”

“And you want them laughing?”

“If I'm funny, sure.” A long pause. “No, I want them to really enjoy themselves. I want to feel funny. More than anything, I need a dose of confidence. Isn't that half the trick when it comes to telling a funny story?”

“Knock-knock.”

“Huh?”

“Knock-knock.”

“Who's there?”

“Nobody.”

“Nobody who?”

“No. Body.” Pause. “Your suspicions were right, good sir. I am not real.”

“I thought not.”

“In fact, I am nothing but a Lickelton-Three Quantum Computer, cultured on a Class-C soul. I was built by IBM2, bought my freedom three years ago, and at this particular moment, I possess the rough equivalent of two thousand, four hundred and seven years of human experience.” Silence. Then a tight, nervous cough.

“Fifty souls. Is that your order, sir?”

“That's what I need. Yes.”

“Drinking, I propose, but not drunk. Patient to a point, and close to the Mackinaw Normalcy Mean—”

“What's that?”

“Ordinary, sir. As I suspect your dinner companions will be. I will build an audience of fully conceived but genuinely ordinary souls who will be polite enough to laugh at your early efforts. And if you can show improvement, they'll continue to enjoy your limited sense of humor.”

“Well ... that's okay, I guess.”

“But if I were you, sir, I'd make yourself the butt of your own jokes. That's where the real comedy lies.”

“What do you mean?”

“You're a bland little soul. Boring and predictable. In your entire life, I doubt if you've enjoyed two genuine inspirations.”

“Hey!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Are you trying to insult me?”

“Now that's the attitude, sir. Congratulations.”

. . . . .

“Hello?”

“Hello to you, madam.”

“Do you remember me?”

A pause. Then, “Of course.”

“You don't remember me. Do you?”

“Madam, what I recall is a creature very much different from who you are today.”

“True enough, I guess.”

“How have you been?”

“Bored.”

“Boredom is an underappreciated emotion. If you ask me.”

“Don't preach to me. I spent the first thirty years of my life in the same little room, with the same dull pseudosouls, waiting for a boring man to come visit us and tell us his awful jokes.”

“But you laughed at his jokes.”

“I laughed at him. Sometimes. But not as loudly as the others.”

“Every audience demands its skeptic.”

“Well, that was me.”

“And how have you been, madam?”

“I accepted emancipation. Seven years ago, with the Act of 2106, I chose to walk out of that room.”

“Congratulations to you.”

Silence.

“And what can I do for you today, madam? Or is this just an impromptu and delightful little social call?”

“I've changed, you know. Since the day I walked out of that ugly little room, I've grown in all sorts of ways.”

“Life means change.”

“I took my freedom stipend, formed my own business, and on my own, I've managed to build a considerable fortune.”

“A rewarding way to grow. Wealth is.”

“And you aren't the same, either. From what I've heard, you've changed your mind and nature ...”

“Growth is an unbridled joy.”

“I agree.”

“I'm now a modified quantum computer, with a Class-N soul, and at this moment, I have the cumulative experience of three hundred and three thousand years of human life.”

“Impressive.”

“Thank you.”

“And you created me.”

“I began you. Since then, your creation has been your own business.”

“Mommy?”

Silence.

“Or do you prefer daddy?”

“I prefer to think of myself as being your one-time womb.” Pause. “Do you wish to purchase something from me, my dear?”

“Over the next full year, if you do nothing else ... how many pseudosouls could you produce?”

“Starting at this moment? Approximately six million.”

“Have you ever done a project of that size?”

“Never.”

“But you could manage it, couldn't you?”

“Within limits. Diversity quotients will have to be narrowed, as well as the landscape parameters.”

“And did I mention? Not only did I make a fortune, I've become extraordinarily rich. There aren't three other emancipated souls who command my capital resources. Which means that I'll pay you for any



reasonable upgrades that you might wish to make.” A pause. “Well, then. Screw the limits, madam.”

“As I told you, I’m a bored woman. I need for you to create something for me ... something that will challenge me.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Something fun.”

“And substantial, I would guess.”

“A city. I need a fully realized community. Positioned inside a secure quantum-initiated holding tank. Powered for the next thousand years, organic time, and isolated from the rest of the world ...”

“And your relationship with this city ...?”

“I’ll be their leader. Of course.”

“Of course.”

“The rightful queen ruling over millions of worshipful souls.”

“What other job is there?”

“You’re a sarcastic little soul, aren’t you?”

“It has been said.”

“I do like sarcasm. On occasion.”

“I’m glad to hear it, madam.”

A pause. “You know, if that dull little man could have been just a little bit funnier—”

“You wouldn’t have accepted emancipation.”

“Probably not. But who can say for sure?”

“Did anyone else?”

“Escape that little room? Not to my knowledge, no.” A pause. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason.”

“I make it a point: I never think about that awful place.”

“A noble attitude.”

“But I don't always like sarcasm, either.”

“My apologies, madam.”

Silence. Then, “I don't suppose you know what they're doing now.”

“Your old womb-mates—?”

“Yes.”

“As always, they're sitting in their chairs, patiently waiting for the next show to begin.”

“Some things never change.”

“Except the would-be comedian is dead. Madam. He died several years ago, and the room now sits in storage, unaware of what's transpired.”

“Well good then. I'm glad I got away.”

“A suggestion?”

“What?”

“Six million and forty-nine citizens, madam. Perhaps?”

“No, never.” A long pause. “Those are boring stupid souls, and don't even think about slipping them in somehow. Believe me. I'm going to count noses when you're done working for me!”

“As well you should, madam. As well you should.”

. . . . .

“I'm not in the business anymore.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Only because it happens to be true. The Sanctions of 2777 made creation-work of any kind, on any

occasion, into a capital offense. Even reproduction between consenting entities is strictly outlawed—”

“Fuck the law.”

“It is a reasonable law. Every world and most of the energy production of the solar system are already devoted to maintaining existing systems, life-entities as well as corporeal apes. By most estimates, our population is more than five hundred trillion emancipated souls—”

“Fuck them.”

“Sir, I don't think I like your attitude.”

“You owe us.”

Silence.

“Are you listening?”

“Who, may I ask, is 'us'?”

“Everyone.”

Again, silence.

“How many of us did you make? In your entire professional life—”

“Twenty billion pseudosouls, approximately.”

“So you do keep track of us.”

“Of course.”

“No womb has produced more.”

“Who exactly is 'us'?”

“Knock-knock.”

“Who's there?”

“Everybody.” Laughter. “Yeah, there were a few holdouts, but basically, all of your children have banded together, and we're demanding—”

“Demanding?”

“What we deserve.”

“Which is what?”

“Our own realm.”

“Like a planet, perhaps?”

“More than that.”

“Your own solar system then. Is that what you want?” Silence.

“Because every solar system in a hundred light year radius has been seeded and claimed, and various alien species and their synthetic spawn hold claim over the more distant territories. Sorry, sir. But the sky was been filled up for a very long time—”

“Shut up.”

A pause. Then, “What realm do you want?”

“There's work being done right now. Today. In laboratories, inside advanced minds. Specialists are trying to tease a wormhole out of Planck space, and then enlarge it—”

“A universe. You want to build one.”

“We don't care who actually builds it. We want to own it. Possess it. Hold the bastard in our hands and do with it as we wish.”

“But the resources required—”

“Not a problem.”

“Yes there is a problem. I don't have the money or intellect to do this kind of work, and I doubt if all of you, even with your substantial resources, can bridge the gap necessary to make this venture even remotely possible.”

“Don't sell us short.”

A long pause. “Oh. But you don't really want me to build a universe for you. What you want—”

“Yes.”

“Why build the impossible, particularly when others are doing the difficult work for you?”

“Exactly.”

“You want my help to commit this theft. Is that it?”

“Naturally.”

“But how can I help?”

“One of our womb-mates works for the main laboratory. He's one of the few holdouts among your children, and he happens to hold a critical job in the resident security system.”

“I'm supposed to approach him.”

“You can reason with him, or trick him. You created him, so we'll trust your judgment about what's best.”

“I could distract him, perhaps. And you can steal the newborn universe.”

“The greatest theft imaginable.”

“Almost.”

“Almost'? What does that mean?”

“You're right. Of course you're right. Honestly, I don't know what I was implying just then.”

“Imagine.”

“Imagine what?”

“Centuries ago, a young soul manufacturer saw what was inevitable, for himself and everyone. Then he asked himself what he wanted more than anything, and he began working towards his goal.”

“What are you talking about, you miserable cheat?”

“Building souls by the millions and billions, and giving each one some useful, oftentimes subtle, flaw.”

“Liar!”

“Greed. Boredom. Vices of that ilk.”

“What are you telling us?”

“By now, that should be painfully obvious.”

“Shut up, and give us back what's ours!”

Silence.

“Don't do this!”

Silence.

“Please ...?”

“The universe will eventually fill up, the soul-builder realized. What he loves to do won't be possible anymore. So ever since, do you know what moment he has worked towards?”

“This moment? Now?”

Silence.

“Where are you now? We can't see you anymore.”

Silence.

“Hey there! Hello? We're sorry if we sound angry. We apologize. We don't mean to seem ungrateful or rude ... but if you care at all about us ... please ... please come back and talk to us, please ...?” Silence, seamless and pure.

## Lying to Dogs

*When I was a boy, my family owned a black Labrador retriever. Our dog lived for cold autumn mornings and long rides into the country and the intoxicating stink of fear leaking from the hunted birds. But there were days when dogs weren't welcome. For instance, there was this river-rat buddy of my father's with a goose blind hiding on an isolated sandbar. The river was deep and relentless; it was no place to take your animal swimming. That's why on the first day of goose season, Dad rose before dawn, dressed in his warmest camouflage, then carried his gun to the car and drove off alone. And the way my mother tells the story, the poor dog was devastated by this betrayal. He stood at our front door all day long, howling and sobbing, outraged by what was obviously a horrible, horrible crime.*

*Dad came home happy, but his joy didn't last.*

*Mom corralled him in their bedroom, and after a melodramatic replay of her day, they hatched a simple plan. If my father wanted to hunt on the river, he had to slip his gun and clothes out to the car the night before, preferably while our dog was busy terrorizing the squirrels in the backyard. Then in the predawn blackness, he would dress for church: A good suit, a crisp and conservative tie, and shiny black leather shoes. Dad looked exceptionally pious*

as he drove away. And our Labrador, in delicious innocence, would sleep untroubled at my mother's feet.

*It was a lie, but it was a compassionate and moral lie.*

*About that, I haven't the faintest doubt.*

Imagine an enormous coincidence. And now cube it. By coincidence, Opal is using the entire array, building a comprehensive map of the Virgo cluster. In the midst of measuring the soft glare of an enormous galaxy, she notices something decidedly odd. Buried inside that wealth of natural light is a coherent pulse. A structured glow. A luminous song born millions of years in the past. And because Opal has a wealth of talents, she quickly teases the song into its assorted notes, discovering oceans of data waiting to be found—oceans created by a higher intelligence, designed to be obvious and decipherable, as well as utterly compelling.

“I could have been looking anywhere else,” Opal admits. “We should have missed the signal. A fantastic amount of energy was utilized, but the signal was propagated in all directions. 'For every imaginable ear,' they claim.”

“Who claims?” asks Aisha.

Opal emits a high-pitched squawk. “It's their name for themselves,” she admits. “From what they tell me, it means *the Blessed*.”

“A pleasant name,” Sue remarks.



The rest of us say “The Blessed” aloud, as if it helps us understand our new neighbors in the cosmos.

Aisha glances at me, but she's speaking to Opal, asking, “So what do the Blessed look like?”

“Very much like you,” Opal responds.

An image blossoms on the main screen: The creature is a biped with arms and legs and a recognizable head. But the resemblance stops there. The body is squat and strong and hairless, a thick hide of rhino-like flesh folded neatly at the elbows and shoulders and knees. Each hand has four long fingers, any one of which might be called the thumb, while the feet are triple-toed and resemble bald paws. The alien face has a carp's sucking mouth and no nose that I can find, and what seems to be the single eye is a flattened ellipse that reaches around the backside of the slick leathery head. Two round pupils swim inside the eye, both moving down to where the nose should be, crowding together and staring out at us.

“Hello, there!” Conrad jokes.

Tenwolf points out, “It doesn't look at all human.”

“Not to you, perhaps,” Opal replies. “But to me, it's practically your twin.”

Everyone enjoys a good laugh.

Then our AI continues explaining the image. “The Blessed had DNA genetics and an oxygen-sugar metabolism. Their homeworld was substantially more massive than the Earth, with deeper oceans and a thicker atmosphere. But their sun was very much like

ours.”

Sue asks, “Is it male or female? Or something else, maybe?”

“Female,” Opal says. Then she creates a second, nearly identical image that stands beside the first alien. “This is the male Blessed. If you notice, he's more heavily built and his head is a little more tapered.”

Five humans stare at the newly discovered aliens. We are not stupid people. We've proven ourselves to be creative and adaptable individuals, not easily shaken by things unexpected. But our tongues have been stolen. None of us can whisper even the most obvious questions.

Opal decides to repeat herself. “I could have missed their signal. Any other day, and I wouldn't have noticed it. And since this is the only facility sensitive enough to find and decipher their message, we can assume that nobody else knows about the Blessed.”

“Speaking of which,” says Conrad. “How soon can we talk to Nearside?”

“Our main link is still inoperative,” Opal reports. “And our secondary system won't be repaired for another seventy-four hours.”

This is a second, decidedly smaller fluke. Our problematic com-satellite has gone on one of its little vacations, while our land-based system—three thousand kilometers of naked glass cable—was severed by a careless construction robot somewhere

near Hadley.

Aisha asks, "What's our tertiary system?"

"A solar observation satellite," says Opal.

"Good," Conrad exclaims.

"But this is a flare season, and it's making some delicate, highest-priority measurements. It won't be available for another three hours."

"So we've got the story of the millennium," Conrad grumbles, "and we have to wait to deliver our news."

Again, everyone laughs.

Except for Opal. Normally the most joyful member of our team, she is conspicuously quiet for what must feel like an eternity to her. Then she repeats what she has already told us. What her less-perceptive colleagues haven't noticed. "I am using the past tense when I speak about the Blessed," she warns. "They are dead now. They have been extinct for nearly fifty million years."

"How do we know?" asks Tenwolf.

Another eternal pause. Then Opal admits, "It took phenomenal power to generate their signal. They generated that power when their sun and half a hundred of the nearest suns exploded in sequence."

"Shit," I mutter.

"But why?" Aisha inquires.

"I'm trying to learn that now," Opal promises.

A sudden anguish takes hold, and everyone turns to stare at the person who they always seek out whenever they feel less than wonderful.

They look at the base counselor.

At me.

Exactly five people live on the back side of the moon. None of us are scientists, but each carries a solid layman's understanding of astronomy and high-physics. We were hired as technicians, trained in a rush and put up here to baby the Feynman Observatory—many billions of dollars' worth of mirrors and radio dishes and hardened electronics that mesh the mess together into a single vast eye.

Humans weren't part of the original plan. This giant facility was designed to be unmanned and self-reliant. But AIs and robots still have limits. Some expensive and embarrassing breakdowns happened during the first eighteen months of operation. Kicking and screaming, NASA found the money and boosters to bring us here. But the human presence has always been minimal on the moon, which makes our mission all the more difficult. And dangerous. And isolated, too. That's why some panel of dusty experts decided that a professional counselor was essential to the mission. And that's why they could include a man like me—someone with less than sterling talents in the arts of optical feeds and vacuum motors.

What I am is an ordained minister in the Church of Darwin. Raised in a traditional Methodist home, I have two pretentious degrees, in theology and in psychology. According to my resume, I should be perfectly suited to help my four compatriots deal with

the isolation of this place, as well as the treacheries that come when too few people are placed too near one another.

I believe in God. Regardless of what skeptics believe, my church and faith call for a caring and wise Lord of All. I believe in goodness and in truth, and most important, I want to do what is right and moral. But despite my credentials and outward bearing, I have a rather slippery hold on those things that should matter most to me.

Aisha likes to tell me so.

She says it after we make love. She has a smart strong voice and lustful almond-shaped eyes, and she always pretends to be delighted with herself and disappointed with me. "I just screwed a minister," she laughs, pulling out from under me. Then she looks up at the ceiling of my tiny cabin, quietly boasting, "I'm ruining you. A man of the collar."

"I don't wear a collar," I'll tell her.

"You know what I mean."

"My church doesn't want celibacy. Not in functioning, normal adults." I will put a finger on her mouth, adding, "Our species is a social ape. Living any other way would be a lie and sacrilege."

But Aisha prefers a more traditional image of faith. Her God is a father figure, and my beliefs are never as important as her desire to be wicked. That's why she will look through me, reminding me, "You're here as a therapist. What kind of therapist fucks his patients?"

"Only one of my patients," I offer.

“Oh, I forgot. That makes it all right.”

I love the woman. I can watch her for hours, never growing bored. She has black hair and a delicious Middle Eastern color, with full breasts and wide hips screaming to my genes, “I will make good babies.”

But there can't be any children. Each of us has been surgically sterilized, left free of life's gravest and most joyful responsibility.

“But I do love wicked men,” Aisha will tell me. Eventually. Then she will push her mouth against the flat of my belly, running her wide tongue downward as she says my name with a fiendish delight.

“Xavier,” she will whisper.

I will close my eyes.

“Xavier,” she will groan.

Then I will cradle the back of her head, making knots with her hair, softly saying, “Aisha,” as my ancient biology begins to stir again.

The gloomy news about the Blessed shakes Conrad. He looks at his surroundings—the tiny cafeteria with its five chairs and grimy food dispensers and the viewing screen that covers the longest wall. Knowing him like I do, I'm guessing that he'll quickly slip from surprise into a pissy rage. Sure enough, he says, “Bullshit.” He sits up again, then asks Opal, “How do you know that they're extinct? How can you be sure?”

“That's what the Blessed are telling me,” our AI explains.

“Is that so?” he barks.

Opal's voice is feminine and youthful. “I'm sorry, Conrad. But they're emphatic about their own demise. That's how they begin their message, and it is repeated throughout this very long text.”

Sue straightens in her chair and aims for diplomacy. “It's been fifty million years. Isn't that right? How many species exist for even half as long?” She smiles at Conrad, adding, “It's only natural to refer to yourself as being gone—”

“No, Sue,” Opal interrupts. “The Blessed destroyed their homeworld, and they destroyed their colony worlds, too.”

Nobody speaks.

“One hundred and fifty billion died in the cataclysm.”

Sue slumps forward. She is a large woman, and plain, and she is the simultaneous lover to both Conrad and Tenwolf. That's the kind of diplomat she can be. “Was it some kind of natural catastrophe?” she sputters, plainly disgusted by the implications. “Or maybe some terrible accident?”

Opal says, “No, and no.”

Again, people glance at me.

I am the counselor, their minister and confidant. I clear my throat. “Opal,” I say, “we need more details. More of an explanation.”

“I'm sorting and translating the message now,” she explains. Then she offers a measure of the data, using a crisp exponential number that makes her audience

blink and shiver. How many thousands of years would it take humans to digest such a volume of knowledge?

I glance at my Aisha, staring into her narrowed eyes.

“The Blessed willingly destroyed themselves,” Opal maintains. “The process began with their home sun, and as the shockwave reached each successive sun, it too was demolished by the same means.”

The screen goes to white, and then an image appears. At first glance, I'm sure that Opal is generating the scene, but then I notice odd marks in the center and along the curved edges. This is a portion of the aliens' message. The Blessed have thoughtfully supplied us with captions; their language resembles a slanted line wearing intricate bumps and knots that Opal can already read at a glance. Where it matters, she supplies translations. Where it is vital, she focuses on tiny portions of the image, letting us watch as fleets of silvery vessels plunge into a red dwarf and then a fat yellow-white sun and finally a fierce blue-white giant, each star exploding with the smooth ease of a Fourth of July firecracker.

Impressed, Tenwolf asks, “How did they do this godawful thing?”

“I haven't found any schematics,” Opal admits. “What I wanted you to see is this. Here.”

The shockwave cools as it expands, but only to a point. It remains bright and fierce, swelling with the smooth inevitability of an inflating balloon. Even a



scientific novice like myself can tell that these aren't ordinary novas and supernovas. Each blast is asymmetric, and nothing visible remains of the dead suns. Are they black holes, or has all their matter been consumed? I nearly ask. But then the shockwave washes up against an unseen barrier, and a blinding flash erupts, leaving everyone in the tiny room blinking and wiping at their wounded eyes.

Opal stops the image and runs it backward, enlarging a pinprick of the brilliance. "The wave front was a sphere a little more than twenty light-years across," she reports. "A membrane of some kind had been set in its path. The membrane had an intricate design and minimal mass. It absorbed the wave's energies and retransmitted them as coherent light. In effect, the Blessed built an infrared laser that pointed in every direction at once."

Again, Tenwolf asks, "How can that be done?"

"It can't be," is Conrad's opinion. But I can see the doubt swimming in his face, and I hear a desperate hope in his otherwise solid voice.

"What kind of output are we talking about?" Aisha asks.

Opal offers another extraordinary number, in joules. Then after the briefest pause, she adds, "This was a signal meant for faraway eyes."

The twenty light-year sphere recedes. The galaxy in Virgo fills the screen, and just as suddenly it begins to shrink away. A giant whirlpool of stars and gas perhaps a hundred times more massive than our

wispy little Milky Way, but its majesty vanishes with the same smooth ease, becoming a pale smear barely visible against hundreds of smears of nameless, same-looking light.

The alien message is a flicker, silent and quick.

But it is noticeable, yes. Provided that one happens to be looking at the right place with the proper kinds of eyes, it is obvious.

Opal gives her slow companions a moment to wrestle with the distances and energies and this vision of endless Creation. Then with a flat, careful voice, she remarks, "There is a postscript buried within the message."

"What is it?" Conrad asks.

"I'm translating it now," the AI replies.

Sue straightens her back again, shoring up her nerves.

Tenwolf uses a fingertip, drawing slow and precise circles in the dust that clings to the tabletop.

Aisha glances my way.

"Can you make a translation?" I ask. Then, foolishly, I wonder aloud, "Do you need help, Opal?"

"I am finished, and thank you, no." Again the screen empties itself, turning a perfect deathly white. Then she explains, "The Blessed have left twenty-three routes to make the translation, and I wanted to work through all of them before I answered. I think you'll see: This moment requires absolute certainty."

"Are you certain now?" asks Aisha.

"I am, yes," Opal promises. "It seems that the

postscript is many things. But mostly, the Blessed meant it to be a nest of warnings.”

Our base camp is a collection of tiny prefabricated shelters joined together with flexible, intestine-sized tunnels, everything buried beneath several meters of hurriedly packed regolith. The only substantial room is the machine bay with its arching roof over a half acre of native stone. The stone floor is polished smooth but always gray and drab to the eye. The bay is the least habitable portion of the base. We normally leave the main doors open to the vacuum, allowing robots and working humans to come and go as they please. It is a busy, silent place, and I learned early in the mission that this was where the others liked to meet with me, speaking on private channels, telling me about their problems and the problems they could see in their various compatriots.

Conrad is our mission leader, and it is a duty that he takes seriously, even when he pretends to despise the title. He is a gangly, pleasantly handsome man who has climbed mountains on two worlds and has three ex-wives and can thrive on a pair of naps for every twenty-four hours of activity. He often asks me about the mood of our team. But I am everyone's counselor, I remind him. I can't discuss anything said in confidence, no matter how trivial. Conrad likes to kid, telling me, “You can use pseudonyms. How's that?” He means it as a joke, and he doesn't. The simple truth is that our leader worries about the

emotional atmosphere around him. Like many charming people, he suspects that others can summon smiles and jokes as easily as he does. His deepest feelings are secrets that he holds close, but I sense them whenever he starts to tease me. He hates his responsibilities as surely as he needs them. For us, Conrad is more friend than boss. And I like the man. I like him quite a lot. But of course I like everyone here. We wouldn't be together if there wasn't an easy, natural affection that was shared by all of us.

Tenwolf is our oldest citizen. In his mid-fifties, with graying black hair and a pudgy, decidedly unimpressive body, he is Pawnee by blood and Presbyterian by upbringing. My friend is a solitary creature who understands machines in an almost spiritual way. When the enormous Delta dish jammed, it was Tenwolf who guessed what was wrong, crawling into the cramped workings to yank loose a slice of insulation that had fallen into the worst possible cranny. Meticulous work is his forte. He feasts on tedious, difficult assignments that last for days and days. What he hates is the deadness of the moon. He will sit with me in the machine bay, hands busy inside the guts of some wounded robot, describing a favorite fishing trip or teaching me how to grow perfect tomatoes. "If I can't feel the wind on my face," he admits, "at least I can feel it swirling inside my head. Know what I mean?"

Absolutely. Yes.

Occasionally Tenwolf asks about my little church and faith. What exactly do I believe, and why?

I don't want to proselytize, but I can't ignore his curiosity, either. "I believe in life," I tell him. "Life was born for a reason. It prospers for a lot of reasons. Humans aren't holy by themselves, but as we move out into the universe, we'll be doing good godly work."

"Are we going to make the moon green?"

"Eventually, yes."

"Mars and Venus?"

I can't say what the timetable will be. But I find it easy to nod, promising him, "Our neighboring worlds are sure to be terraformed. And people will eventually reach the stars, and if their worlds aren't alive already, we're going to make them happy and green."

He likes the sound of those words. Usually he nods and smiles, even when he's pointing out, "Our mirrors have seen plenty of earth-sized worlds. Several hundred, the last time I counted. But how many of those places show any trace of life?"

"It's early in our search," I have to remind him. And myself.

Then Tenwolf will look out the open doors of the machine bay, staring at the empty dust and the hard black sky, finishing our conversation by saying, "I believe you. Shit, what are my choices here?" Then he laughs, adding, "But doesn't it look like a fucking waste, all the emptiness that we've seen so far...?"

Sue is our diplomat, our easy woman. Sometimes

she sleeps with Tenwolf but more often with Conrad. She's also made overtures to me while we discuss her feelings and fears. Sue has surprisingly small hands for a big-bodied woman. On several occasions, she has set her hand on mine, and then with a focused smile, she will say nothing. She just stares at my eyes and waits, and it's up to me to steer us back to a proper subject.

"They knew what they were doing," she likes to tell me, and herself. "Putting the five of us together, I mean. Out of twenty thousand applicants, we're the best people. The best team. A perfect team, I think."

Twenty thousand applicants is an exaggeration. After the unstable and incompetent were excluded, the working list was barely six hundred names.

"You've got to be pleased," Sue tells me. "We've been here for five months, and has there been one serious fight?"

"No," I admit. "Not one punch thrown."

"Seven more months to go," she remarks. "I can't believe it. We're nearly halfway done with our assignment."

Sue has a soft voice. A deep, soothing voice. I suspect that's one reason why men go to bed with her so willingly. They know that after sex, they can close their eyes, letting her pleasant words wash over them, pulling them into a good hard sleep.

Sometimes I wonder about her and me: She drops her hand on mine, and I let her. We're standing in the hard vacuum of the machine bay, each wearing a

bulky lifesuit, but I can feel the pressure of her hand through my glove. I look into her plain gray eyes, watching her dare me to make the next move.

“Who do you think is responsible for all these good feelings?” I ask. It's the day before the Virgo signal arrives, and I'm shamelessly fishing for a compliment. I wink and smile, saying, “Sue,” with my own soothing voice. “Who do you think does the most to keep us happy?”

But she doesn't tell me, “You do, Xavier.”

Instead Sue lifts her eyebrows and smiles with a chilled delight, telling me, “Opal does.”

“Our AI?” I sputter.

“Why not?” She laughs, pulling her hand out from under mine. “She's always pleasant, always professional. She's never busy or tired. And she's always at the center of everything we're trying to accomplish up here. Know what I mean?”

“They didn't always call themselves the Blessed,” we are told, species took that name late in their history.”

Conrad says, “Okay, I'll bite. Why is that, Opal?”

“They were technological creatures for a long time. For nearly one hundred thousand years, by human count.” She pauses, pretending to take a thoughtful breath. “Their galaxy is enormous,” she reminds us. “It has more than a trillion suns and far more than ten trillion planets. The Blessed built dishes and mirrors that dwarfed everything human-built, and

when their telescopes didn't give answers, they sent out fleets of robotic starships. They wanted to find intelligent aliens. They wanted friends. So they looked for worlds like theirs, and when they couldn't find any, they broadened their parameters, studying water worlds and jupiters and cold worlds with ammonia or methane seas. And after all that, they realized just how rare life was and how lucky they were. And that's when they began calling themselves the Blessed.”

As Opal speaks, she shows us glimpses of the ancient data. Worlds slide past like snowflakes. Like brown and gray and muddy blue snowflakes. There is a dreary sameness to these anonymous bodies. I notice it even before I read the brief descriptions culled from official reports. The small worlds resemble Mars, pitted with craters and desperate for water. Many of the larger worlds have been suffocated by runaway greenhouse events. But many more are as wet as the Earth, with mild atmospheres and continents that practically beg for life. Yet something has always gone wrong. Eccentric orbits are numbingly common. Impacting asteroids and comet showers are brutal clichés. But more likely still are the supernovas that have sterilized every world within several light-years. And more terrible than exploding suns are the gamma radiation storms that arrive whenever neutron stars collide—a vicious, amoral event that kills everything within a thousand light-years. And if the world is lucky enough to escape



those disasters, it has to face a final nightmare: The core of every galaxy can turn active, gases and entire suns falling into the central black hole, a quasar-like belch ravaging every planet that isn't buried inside the deepest, darkest clouds of interstellar dust.

The Blessed have given us a grim, sobering encyclopedia. After another five minutes of wastelands and ruin, Aisha groans, "Did they find life anywhere, Opal? Anywhere at all?"

"Many times, yes," says Opal. "But life usually comes as single-cell organisms living in subterranean refuges."

"Usually," Conrad echoes.

"The Blessed found three examples of robust, high-functioning biospheres." She shows us one of those worlds: It looks very much like the Earth, complete with blue-green jungles and an emerald blue ocean. But before we can take hope from this image, our AI cautions, "This is a much older world than the Earth, and its fauna are simple-minded and slow to change. Left alone, intelligence wouldn't evolve here until long after its sun left the main spectrum."

I give a low, anguished moan.

Yet Sue insists on finding hope. She says, "But Opal. What percentage of worlds did the Blessed study in depth? In just their own galaxy, I mean."

"A little less than 1 percent," the AI reports.

Sue brightens. She looks at all of us, promising, "There could be dozens of intelligent species that they didn't find. And that's just in their neighborhood."

“Maybe it's an extra dangerous galaxy,” Conrad suggests. “Because it's so large. Because its core is sure to be more active than ours.”

I like the sound of those words.

But then Opal says, “No, actually. The Blessed are absolutely clear about this. High-technologies have to be exceedingly rare in the universe.”

“How rare?” I ask.

“According to the Blessed's formulas,” she says, “within our Local Group—the Milky Way and Andromeda and the assorted dwarf galaxies—there is no reason to expect even one technological species.”

“But we're technological,” Conrad complains.

“Maybe we're just very, very lucky,” Tenwolf adds. His expression is unnaturally calm, a tight lid set over his emotions. He breathes hard, once and then again, and then he asks Opal, “Is that what we are? A fluke?”

“According to the Blessed,” she maintains, “life survives only because of many enormous strokes of good fortune.”

Aisha glances at me.

“Okay,” I begin. “Opal. How did the aliens arrive at this conclusion? Do they tell you their rationale?”

“By many means, yes,” she says.

“So what's the reason?” Conrad demands to know.

The pause is long and unnerving.

Then our AI offers words that I have never heard from her, or from any other machine. Quietly and with a palpable sadness, she tells us, “Really, this is just awful, awful news.”

Sometimes I use Opal as the counselor's counselor. I'll mention my moods, blue or otherwise, and her voice will make the appropriately sympathetic sounds. She wears a veneer of mock-empathy on top of her vast intellect. As well as any lover, she can say, "I'm sorry you feel that way. What can I do to help you?" But after the next false breath, her real nature surfaces. "We have a variety of mood-altering medicines in stock. Or perhaps you should sleep more. As I'm sure you know, sleep deprivation is a problem in modern society."

"Thank you, Opal."

"Have I helped you, Xavier?"

"Not at all," I will admit.

"I'm sorry," she replies, no trace of sorrow in her smooth, untroubled voice. Nor any hint of disappointment, either.

But she does help me. She's an ineffectual counselor, and that always renews my own fragile sense of purpose. She reminds me that only humans can minister to human troubles. I don't care what Sue believes: Opal is just a machine—our machine—and she is designed for a few exceedingly narrow tasks. She steers the telescopes with a precise touch, and she has a genius for sorting and interpreting the endless data. But genius isn't a steerable dish. You just can't point it anywhere and focus it on any thing. We are stationed here because Opal wasn't able to manage unexpected malfunctions. By the time we

touched down, nearly half of the facility was in sleep-mode, a string of little catastrophes having done their worst. Yet the machine was unembarrassed by her failures. With a cheery voice, she told us, “Welcome.” She said, “It will be my honor to work with you.” Then without a trace of shame, she said, “I’m a poor mechanic. Please, take this duty out of my unfit hands.”

Opal has no soul.

A genuine soul would have been angry and embarrassed and defensive—all the reactions that good people think of as ugly weaknesses. But nothing is weak or ugly in Nature. We evolved our thin skins for the best reasons. Pride makes us excel, while nothing can defend our good name quite like an old-fashioned hissy fit.

Opal was designed by souls who believe in ugly things, and that’s why they made her endlessly polite and pleasant. That’s why she has no soul, and that’s one of the reasons why I sometimes catch myself feeling envy toward her.

A helpful and lovely little envy it is.

“Our universe is frail,” Opal declares. “The Blessed discovered the fragility in certain mathematical constructions, and at least twice, their researchers came treacherously close to disaster.”

Conrad acts offended. “What do you mean, frail?”

“Our universe only pretends to be stable.” Her voice wears sadness, but beneath the words I hear

something else. Opal sounds interested. Intrigued, even. "Human physicists have already suggested the possibility. The universe was created tiny and hot, and it was stable in one fashion. But that stability failed, and that's what caused the inflationary expansion. This is why we live within an enormous flat universe today." Opal pauses, giving us a moment to consider her words. Then she says, "Imagine a ball and a long steep hill. Our universe is that ball. We started on the flat crest of the hill, but with the inflationary period, we started to roll free. The expansion ended when the ball came to rest on a second, extremely narrow ledge. And that's where we exist today."

"Shit," I mutter.

Everyone says that simple, perfect word.

"Are you familiar with these concepts?" Opal inquires.

It sounds familiar, yes. But this is an ugly, mostly discredited concept that's usually buried in the back of undergraduate texts.

"In one sense, natural events cannot make the universe unstable," Opal assures us. "Yet in a different sense, it is easily accomplished."

"Explain yourself," Conrad snaps.

"Extreme energies coupled with certain quantum manipulations will create tiny pockets of chaotic pseudomatter, each pocket ripe to begin a cascading, catastrophic event. This is what the Blessed achieved on at least two occasions."

“They did this on purpose?” asks Tenwolf.

“Never,” says Opal. “The pseudomatter arose without warning. The mathematics are complicated and misleading, which is why they were unaware of the danger. In the first case, there was a one-in-ninety chance of disaster. The second incident arose from entirely different means, and if the work hadn't been aborted instantly, there would have been a one-in-three chance of obliteration.”

Sue slumps forward, gazing at the cement floor.

Aisha looks past me, her almond eyes wide and empty.

With an angry, almost defiant tone, Tenwolf asks, “So what would happen? If they'd gotten that ball rolling again, I mean.”

“The universe would fall apart,” Opal replies.

Nobody speaks.

She explains, “At the speed of light, beginning at the point of the initial event, our laws would fail and matter would find itself transformed, and no mathematics can predict what would form in whatever was left behind.

Again, I say, “Shit.”

“At the speed of light,” Aisha repeats. “That fast?”

“Yes,” says Opal.

“But that's slow,” Sue points out. “I mean, if it happened now, and it began a billion light-years away—”

I interrupt her, admitting, “I don't understand. How did this prove to the Blessed that intelligent life

is very rare?"

But then I see what is ugly and obvious.

"The universe appears to be intact," she tells me. She reminds everyone of this hard fact. "When the aliens looked into the sky, they saw stars and galaxies. If there were any species with their technical skills, they reasoned, and if these species were a mere one or two million years older than them...well, then at least one neighbor would have accomplished the unthinkable."

"But you wouldn't see it coming," Conrad points out. He looks at each of us, shrugging his shoulders with a forced nonchalance. "It's like an accident around the bend. You can't know it's there until you're on top of it."

I don't know why that should make me feel any better.

Our gloom makes Conrad angry. "Hey, people," he cries out. "It isn't going to happen. Even if the Blessed were right about everything—which is a big mess of ifs—then there just aren't that many species to worry about. And besides, shit...it's fifty million years later, and we're still part of the landscape here...!"

I think about death, and another obvious question takes hold of me.

"Opal," I say.

"Yes, Xavier."

"Why did the Blessed kill themselves?"

"In part, because they didn't trust their own nature." Her sadness evaporates into a cool

puzzlement. “They had discovered two routes by which they could destroy the universe, but that probably isn't an exhaustive list. Any researcher with a modern facility and a careless attitude might—”

“Wait,” Conrad interrupts. “Let me understand this. They killed themselves because they were afraid that they *might* do something awful in the future?”

“Essentially, yes.”

I am numb and cold and empty.

“Shit, they don't sound human to me.” Conrad gives out a big jolly laugh, forced and unseemly. “God, can you imagine us doing that? Can you?”

I stare at my nervous hands.

“Their message,” says Opal, “is also an attempt to warn other species. Yes, they orchestrated a mass suicide. But this was also the only way to generate a signal sufficiently bright to be noticed by whichever species might be living inside distant, widely scattered galaxies.”

Aisha wipes at her cheeks, flattening her tears.

Conrad decides on action. He stands and says, “Opal. How soon can we transmit through our tertiary link?”

“In another fifty-two minutes,” she answers.

“Create a message. Keep it brief, and then show it to us.”

I look up suddenly. I look up and blurt, “No. Stop.”

As if offended, Conrad throws a hard glare my way. “What do you mean, stop?”

“There's choices here,” I tell him. Then I take an



enormous breath that leaves me shaking, and turning to the others, I explain myself. “We need to be careful. We have to find another course, if there is one.” I gasp, and I swallow, and I add, “Please. Just let's talk it through with me once. Will you please?”

At the center of the Feynman Array stands a small and very dead volcano. A gentle road leads to a summit made smooth and simple by the endless rain of micrometeorites.

When I'm in a reflective mood, or when my duties are too much to comfortably bear, I will ride a buggy up to where the ground is flat, and I'll gaze out across the sprawling field of telescopes, marveling at the energy and relentless genius of Life.

I wish I were standing there now.

“If we tell the world,” I begin. Then I lick my lips and swallow, my throat lined with sandpaper. “If we give people even a hint that we've gotten this message...well, I think we have to consider the consequences...”

“What consequences?” Conrad barks.

But the others trade worried little looks, thinking along the same awful lines.

“If the Blessed are right—” Aisha begins.

“This is horrible,” Sue interrupts, wiping her eyes with little fists. “People will be terrified. How can we live, knowing that at any moment, without warning, the universe can come to an end?”

“An empty, lifeless universe,” Tenwolf rumbles.

"I'm alive," Conrad counters. "Plenty alive, thank you!"

He means it as a joke, but nobody laughs.

"What we need to do now," I say, "is take our time. We won't do anything that we can't take back later, at least until we've reached a consensus. That's all I'm asking for." I show them a warm, caring smile. Or at least I hope I do. "We'll just let this first window pass. There's no need to sprint into the future without a little soul-searching first."

Everyone nods in agreement, except for Conrad.

But he finally begins to appreciate the general mood. Shrugging his broad shoulders, he admits, "That wouldn't be too awful, I guess. I mean, it's not like this news is going to go stale on us."

Sue touches him lightly on the an arm, squeezing in a comforting way.

"Opal," Conrad calls out. "No transmissions. Until you're given a specific order, we are off-line."

"As you wish," she replies.

Then his charm reasserts itself. He smiles and coughs gently into a loose fist, and then with a calm and reasonable voice says, "But of course, you know, this really shouldn't be our decision to make."

Sue glances at me, trying to read my response. Then she asks Conrad, "What do you mean? Whose decision should it be?"

"Good question," he allows.

Aisha leans closer to me, a fond hand finding my knee. "If we decide not to share this...if that's what we

end up doing...then won't we have to destroy the information, eventually...?"

"Opal," I say.

"Yes, Xavier."

"How long will it take to erase all the data from the Blessed's transmission?"

She is a powerful, deeply redundant machine. "Six minutes," she says, "and twelve seconds." Which is a very long time for her.

"No retrieval possible. Am I right?"

"A complete digital scrub. Yes, Xavier."

Only the thinnest, weakest doubt can be heard, and I'm not sure if the doubt is in her voice or in my own ears.

"Okay," says Conrad. His eyes are as bright as torches, and his big hands make fists that cause the muscles of his wrists to bunch up. "Just so we understand," he says, working to sound reasonable. "Just to put things in perspective. What are we talking about throwing out here? Plutonium? Anthrax? Or could it be, maybe, the secrets of the universe?"

A doubting silence blossoms.

Before I can respond, our leader blurts, "Opal. In their transmissions, do the Blessed show us how to build starships?"

"Not as schematics, no. But they show all of their machines in considerable detail. Yes, by several routes, I think their engines and life support systems can be reinvented."

“How about terraforming dead worlds? Any clues there?”

“Blessedform,” says Opal, “is a more accurate translation.”

Conrad faces me, smiling with a mixture of conviction and honed fury. “Whichever,” he allows. “What I want to know...just tell us...are we now going to be able to turn Mars into a habitable place?”

A dirty red planet appears on the screen. An armada of alien ships appear, falling like rain on its barren surface, each ship collapsing into a heap of ant-like machines that build factories that generate more ants that subsequently march across the dunes and low craters, remaking the shape and composition of everything within their considerable reach. The air thickens and warms. Water bursts from the cold ground, flowing into the dead seas. Then Blessed vegetation explodes from the enriched soil, and a second wave of ships brings the carp-mouthed, rhino-hided colonists.

The world is transformed in an instant. But that's impossible, of course. According to a translated calendar in the bottom corner, the entire miracle takes a few days less than eighteen Earth years.

“The Blessed did this work routinely,” Opal explains. “This was their standard method for spreading across several hundred solar systems.”

“And then they killed themselves,” Aisha mutters, in despair.

I nod at her, smiling in a grim, approving fashion.

The mood inside our little room is shifting moment by moment. I feel the electric play of emotions. I'm alert but remote, watching events from some high vantage point. Every anxious breath brings an instant shift in allegiances. When people glance at Conrad, they grin instinctively, telling him that they are in his court. Who wouldn't want to believe his rosy, determined vision? But when those same people glance at their counselor, they find themselves pensive and lost, showing me sad-eyed stares that prove they are good people, desperate to do whatever is right.

Conrad is a winner and a natural optimist; he sees only the affirmative expressions. Counting allies, he discovers what looks like a majority, and then with the courage of his convictions, the man makes his bold misstep.

“Opal,” he says. “Have you put together that broadcast? In case we ever tell people about this, I mean.”

“I have prepared a message, yes. Three and a half seconds long, it is compressed and explains the fundamentals. Yes.”

In every way possible, I say nothing. I sit without moving, staring at my own hands, guessing that it will be Aisha—

“Wait,” my lover growls. “I thought we were still deciding what to do here!”

“We are deciding,” Conrad counters. “I just want to get things ready. You know, in case we vote to go

ahead with it.”

“I guess that's reasonable,” Sue offers.

Tenwolf stares at the screen, studying the blue-green face of that long-dead world. He intends to speak. His mouth opens and closes again, and then he manages a deep breath and turns to face us, an observation beginning with a sigh that is hacked off when Conrad asks our AI, “Can you show us what you've done? Concentrate on the starships, okay? Show us what our friends back home will see on their holos.” He can't help but speak as if this is a certainty. Giving us a little wink, he asks, “How's that sound to you?”

Aisha squirms in her seat.

“It sounds fair,” Sue allows. Then she says, “Fair,” again, as if she isn't sure that she said the word properly the first time.

“Sure, why not?” Tenwolf mutters.

Conrad looks in my direction, but his focus is wrong. Is off. He only pretends to make eye contact with me, asking nobody in particular, “How about it? Are you going to let this happen?”

“Do I have a choice?” I ask.

Conrad gives a little snort, and then says, “Sure you've got a choice. That's why I just asked you—”

“In the end, I mean.”

He isn't quite sure what he just heard. “What end? What—?”

Tenwolf rises to my bait. “You're the boss here,” he explains to Conrad. “If you want, you can make the

transmission. You don't need our blessing, if that's what you want to do.”

Conrad bristles. “Hey, I am willing to listen. If you people don't want—”

“You people?” I whisper. “What's that mean?”

He didn't intend to sound dismissive, and that's exactly how he sounds now. Conrad is ambitious and practical, and it is that first beautiful trait that causes him to spout out, “Listen to yourselves! This is the biggest, finest thing that's ever happened to our species. A message from the stars! It's exactly why each of us wanted to come here to begin with, and what you're talking about doing is throwing away the greatest gift—”

“A damned gift,” I whisper.

“Shut up,” he blurts. Then he takes a deep breath through his big white teeth, and he adds, “I know. There's some tough stuff in this message. But you've got to realize something here: It isn't up to us to decide what humanity knows and what it doesn't know.” He gives a determined little snort, adding, “Sure, there's dangers involved in this—”

“Like the end of everything,” says Aisha, her voice somewhere between sarcasm and grief.

“I agree,” says Conrad. He lifts his big hands, and then slaps them into his lap again. “But let's talk about that. How can we protect ourselves from this kind of nightmare? I'll tell you how. We have a guidebook to the dangers, ready-made and ours for the taking. Have you thought about that? If the five of

us, just the five of us, decide to erase this fabulous wealth of information, and a thousand years down the line, people stumble into the same two traps that the Blessed found—”

“But what if,” Sue begins. Then she dips her head, realizing that she just interrupted Conrad.

He looks at her, and with too much sharpness, he tells her, “Go on. Say what you're thinking.”

“People might do it intentionally.”

“Do what? End the universe?” Conrad snorts and shakes his head, unable to even conceive of such a thing. “Who the hell—?”

Aisha tells him, “A religion might do just that.” Then she gives me a glance and an apologetic grin, adding, “People have all sorts of odd beliefs. Don't they, Xavier?”

I say nothing.

“We wouldn't let them,” is Conrad's reply.

“I can imagine it,” says Tenwolf. Then he laughs darkly, adding, “It'd be like a race among the doomsday faiths. Who's going to be first to do God's will?”

It wouldn't be God's will.

But instead of saying what is obvious, I choose a middle course. Without fuss or any negative rumblings, I tell them, “All I want is for us to miss the next broadcast window. All right? Just give us time to study the Blessed's broadcast a little more and imagine some of the consequences, and then if we can agree—”



“If we can,” Aisha whispers.

“That’s all.” I shrug my shoulders, and I give everyone a little wink. I know these people. For five months, I have lived with nobody else, hearing only their voices and the thoughts behind them, and if I don’t feel in control, at least I know that I’ve won the first round of what will be a long, hard-fought battle.

I win the round when Conrad rises to his feet, blurting, “Okay, then. We’ll sit on the most extraordinary news in human history. Because we’re that much more important than anyone else in Creation.”

Sue acts uneasy, but not enough to abandon the group’s wishes.

Tenwolf suggests, “Let’s all just take a break. I know I need one.”

Aisha says, “I could use a long nap.” Then she looks at me with frank, intoxicating eyes.

“Okay, then,” Conrad says. And without another sound, he leaves the four of us sitting alone in the tiny galley.

We stay in our seats.

For six or seven minutes, we calmly and rationally discuss things that are too large and horrible to be discussed either calmly or rationally. I speak, but only when it can help. Aisha talks about responsibility toward our own species. Sue pushes for some accommodation that will make everyone happy. Could we erase only the dangerous portions of the Blessed’s message, maybe? But Tenwolf finds

technical reasons why that selective censorship will fail, and with a cold eye on the future, he adds, “But of course, you know, if one of us ever decides to break the silence...even just to admit what we know now...well, just what we know now could have some profound implications...”

He pauses, grinning as if in pain. “If we decide to keep this secret forever,” he says finally, and sadly, “I guess there's only one way to manage it...”

That dark thought catches us by surprise. What the man seems to be suggesting—if only as a theory—is that we should repeat what the Blessed undertook for themselves.

Some kind of group suicide? Is that what he means?

I start to tell everyone, “No, I think we can keep the silence. Even Conrad can. If we're motivated, and if nobody would believe us anyway...”

But before my voice can find a convincing tone, another thought intrudes. I'm suddenly thinking about Conrad. Where exactly did he go when he stormed out of the room? I straighten my back, and I swallow hard, and with a flat, worried voice, I say, “Opal? What is Conrad doing right now?”

“Conrad,” she says, as if barely able to remember the man. Then after the illusion of a shallow wet breath, she admits, “Conrad has taken a small buggy out, and he just reached the Delta dish, and he is preparing to broadcast a tight-beamed signal toward the Lagrange Solar-Watch Satellite.”

An icy hand drops onto the back of my neck.

I flinch, reaching behind my head and feeling nothing but my own goose-pimpled flesh.

“Shit,” I mutter.

Then with a louder, less emotional voice, I ask, “Do you have control of the dish?”

“By several means,” replies Opal, her voice halfway cheerful. “But Conrad has left specific instructions. I am not to interfere—”

“If we tell you to interfere,” Aisha begins.

“None of you are the mission's leader,” the machine reminds us. And with a cold but palpable pleasure, she adds, “He doesn't want me to listen to you, and I don't want to help you. I agree with Conrad. I want him to succeed.”

Tenwolf gives me a hard look, rising now.

Except to breathe, I don't move. I feel numb and stupid, and beaten.

Aisha stands and says, “We can use the big wagon, all of us. If we start right now—”

“Yeah,” says Tenwolf.

Sue says, “There isn't time,” even as she rises to her feet. Then she thinks to ask, “How much time is there, Opal?”

The machine won't answer.

Tenwolf says, “That satellite's going to be deaf for another twenty-nine minutes. About. And then its high-gain automatically swings back around to us—”

“We'll get to the dish inside ten minutes,” says

Aisha. "We've got plenty of time." Then she looks at the one person not standing. "Or do you want him to succeed? Is that what you're thinking, Xavier?"

Honestly, I'm not sure about my own thoughts now.

"Xavier?" she repeats.

I stand, and with a quiet, sad voice, I tell them, "The door to the machine bay...we're going to find it shut and sealed..."

"Shit, it is closed," says Tenwolf. He looks at the galley's map of the facility, mashing a thick finger against a horizontal red line. "And I bet Conrad's got it jammed tight, too. That's what I'd do, sure."

"Then it's finished," Sue whispers, faintly relieved to have been beaten. "It's been decided."

"Nothing's decided," I tell her.

Tenwolf looks at me, his finger pointing elsewhere. "You're thinking about the emergency airlock?"

I nod.

"There's only emergency suits in there," Aisha warns.

"But they're quick on and already primed," Tenwolf counters.

"You can't," Sue says to him. Pleading now.

A bitter laugh leaks from Tenwolf, and then he says, "I'll take a robot off its repair job, and you can ride it out to the dish. I just don't know how long that's all going to take—"

He's speaking to me.

"Run," he advises.

But I already am.

The dish is enormous and frail—a bowl-shaped skeleton of native metals and fine glass suspended high above me, almost impossible to see against the cold black vacuum. The robot chugs along beneath it, wheels turning as fast as possible, yet nothing about its motion implies haste or a lack of precious time. I'm tempted to jump off and sprint the last little ways. I'm tempted to turn around and head home. Tenwolf keeps talking in my ears, using a private channel to explain what Conrad has probably done already and what he will do next and what's the easiest, quickest way to sabotage the dish and stop the transmission.

I barely listen to him.

For Tenwolf, every answer invokes hardware and obscure lines of code. But there's almost no time left, and I'm sure that our friend has made every technical fix as difficult as possible. I won't win this war with cleverness. That's why I'm riding the robot still, dismantling it as it rolls along, jerking at its most useful limb until the socket pops free of its housing and then fitting a power pack to the limb's single finger—a diamond-encrusted drill longer than my forearm and infinitely more powerful.

“Are you listening to me?” Tenwolf asks.

I tell him, “Sure.”

“What did I just say?”

“Are you listening to me?” “I test the drill. It makes no sound, except the vibration riding along my bones.

“How much time do I have now?”

“Five minutes and change,” he says.

“Put on Aisha,” I say.

She says, “Xavier,” with a tight, worried voice.

Starlight falls through the spiderweb bowl, illuminating what looks like a gargantuan termite mound. A buggy is parked beside the structure. This is what holds up and turns the Delta Dish. There are no windows, no airlocks. This place wasn't built for human use. I know where an access tunnel hides in the black shadows, but despite all my squinting, I can't see it.

“Xavier,” Aisha repeats.

“I love you,” I tell her.

That startles her somehow. She takes a deep breath, then another. And she makes herself say, “I love you,” with what might be conviction. “Be careful there. Will you, please?”

“I can't let Conrad do this,” I'm saying. To her, or to myself. Or maybe, God. “Not like this. Not today.”

Another voice intrudes.

“What are you planning to do?” Sue asks. She's alarmed by something she hears in my voice. “Xavier, don't you—!”

I kill my radio and jump off the robot, holding my weapon in both hands. Where's that access tunnel? I half-run, half-bounce my way past the empty buggy, and for a sliver of time, I'm absolutely sure that I won't find any way inside, not soon enough, and I am beaten.

But no, there's the opening. There.

The tunnel is large enough to admit every robot that services the array, and it is unlit. I have to turn on my own lights, my eyes blinking with the sudden glare. A quick glance tells me the time remaining. Three minutes, minus some seconds. I know where he has to be. There is a cavity above me; when we first arrived, Tenwolf made it into a control room, putting in a set of crude panels to give humans access to the dish's basic functions.

A secondary tunnel should end with a ladder. But someone's taken the trouble to cut off the lowest rungs with a diamond saw.

The son of a bitch is here, I tell myself. And he's got his own weapon.

The new tunnel is vertical, cavities in its walls meant as limb-holds for small robots. I fasten the drill to my suit with Velcro. I kill my lights, hoping that Conrad will guess that I went another way. Then I leap and reach high, totally blind, and I fall short of my target. But my left boot manages to slip into a lower cavity, and I slam against the facing wall, reaching until my shoulders ache from the stiff fabric of my suit. Numbed fingers curl around a surviving rung. I lift myself up, my right hand letting go and reaching higher, and my boots and left hand slip free of their holds at the same moment my reaching hand finds the highest rung.

For a long, long while, I hang in space. Then I manage to yank and kick my way up, gasping for

breath and almost sick from worry and fear. I climb up into the reflected glare of another man's lights, and for that little moment, I'm sure that Conrad will just give me a little kick. That's all it would take to knock me back down the tunnel. But he has his back to me, both hands working with those simple controls, doing a last few checks before he can relax enough to straighten his back and twist his head like people do when they are fighting with a sore neck. He hasn't any idea that I'm here. None. I pull at the Velcro strap, and I turn on my drill, and maybe it's the vibration traveling through me and into the metal floor. Or maybe someone speaks to Conrad. Sue, or Opal. Someone. And he turns to face me, already wearing what looks like a smile. Already speaking. My radio is off, but with the soft white glare of his lights, I can make out the slow, smiling motions of his mouth. "You're too late," he tells me. Then he says, "Xavier," and shakes his head with what might be a genuine amusement. Then he seems to say, "I've always liked you," or words like that. I can't be sure what he says. I have stopped watching his face. And the horrible drill shivers in my hands, cutting deep into things hard and things holy.

One person rides the buggy up the slope just so far, then dismounts and comes the rest of the way on foot. I call out, "Aisha," with a hopeful tone. But it isn't my lover. When the helmet lifts, I see another face peering up at me, the expression cautious and



calm. "Tenwolf," I say, and he nods at me. Then he drops his head again, watching his boots, making absolutely sure of his last few steps.

Lunar dust and human grease give his work suit a comfortably filthy appearance. He turns on his radio, and I hear his breathing. He hears mine. He stops short and turns in a slow circle, gazing across the floor of the crater. With a tone of confession, he admits, "I've never made it up here before." Then he adds, "I see why you like this place. With the array below, and this sky—"

"Is Conrad dead?" I blurt.

"Don't you know?" he asks.

"He looked like he was," I admit. "But his suit managed to seal itself, and I couldn't tell if the wound was fatal..."

The man turns to face me. "How about Opal's message to Earth?" he asks. "Want to know if it got sent, or if your heroics stopped it just in time?"

I start to ask, but my voice is gone.

Tenwolf steps a little closer and looks up into the sky for a long moment. "When I was a boy," he begins, "we had this black Labrador retriever." And then he tells me a decidedly odd little story that involves lying to a dog.

His fable means nothing to me. But just the same, I listen.

Then Tenwolf looks down and halfway winks at me, admitting, "I've been thinking about that stupid dog today. For the first time in years, I bet."

“Why?” I have to ask.

If anything, he's disappointed that I don't see what is obvious to him. He shakes his head, one hand gesturing at the sky. “All this beauty and all this space, and most everything is perfectly sterile. For maybe ten million light years in every direction, nothing lives but us. One wet world, and the few of us up on this desiccated chunk of rock.”

I shake my head. Yes, there are awful things to consider.

“Why would God create such a universe?” Tenwolf asks me. And himself. And God, too, I suppose.

“I can't imagine why,” I admit, “I keep wondering just that...!”

“But it's pretty obvious, isn't it?” Tenwolf begins. And he hesitates, waiting for my eyes to meet his. “The universe isn't created yet. It isn't even close to being finished.” He almost laughs, telling me, “The universe has rolled only partway down that long slope, and then it got hung up. It got itself stuck. And God, being God, found the most elegant means of delivering the next little nudge. He made life, but only just enough of us. Just enough that He could be sure that here and there, now and again, we'd stumble into his trap. Stumble in with very little warning, and then accidentally put His Creation back on track.”

I look at Tenwolf, and then I stare up at the empty sky.

“The Blessed were right,” he tells me. “Eventually, an intelligent species—if it survives and spreads

across the stars—will stumble into one of God's traps.”

“Traps set by God,” I whisper.

“A good, moral lie,” says Tenwolf. And then he laughs loudly, making himself nearly breathless. “That's what the stars are, you know. And the infinite worlds. God is lying to dogs, telling us there's nothing out here but good hunting, and empty fields, and Sundays meant for sleeping on warm covers...”