

Robert Reed
short stories
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Magic with Thirteen-Year-Old Boys

They do love to talk. There always has to be conversation before, and afterward, unless they're deeply drunk, words are pretty much mandatory. Nothing makes women happier than hours of empty, soul-baring chatter. There's even a few of them that need to talk while they're doing it. Of course their words get awfully simple, if it's during. They grunt out commands and sometimes encouragement, and a few favorite phrases are repeated with predictable rhythm. But if a man can hold his cadence, and if he knows what she likes, it isn't boring. Simple and busy and very crude noise wrapped around a fair amount of pleasure, or maybe a huge amount of pleasure. Then it's finished, preferably for him and for her both, and everyone gets a few moments of silence marked with wet breathing and spiritual insights.

* * * *

“Ted?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you awake?”

“No, I'm not.”

“No?”

“Hey—!”

“Are you awake now, Ted?”

“That fingernail—!”

Without a trace of sorrow in her voice, she says, “Sorry.” Then after a deep sigh, she asks, “What are

you thinking?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

“Okay. You caught me.”

“So what’s on your mind?”

“You.”

“Good answer.”

Good enough to earn a few moments of uninterrupted quiet.

“Ted?”

“Who?”

She ignores his response. “I have a question,” she announces. “I’ve been meaning to ask this since, I don’t know when. A couple weeks, at least....”

“What’s the question?”

“Do you believe?”

“In what?”

“Anything at all,” she says.

He says, “Gravity,” and laughs for a moment. “I wholeheartedly believe in the abiding force of gravity.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she warns. “I’m talking about faith. In God and that sort of stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Stuff.”

“Do you accept things you can’t see? Forces and powers that exist outside the realm of pure reason?”

“Gravity,” he repeats.

“Don’t joke, Ted.”

“I mean that.” He sounds sincere and perhaps a little angry. “Most of human history has been lived happily without the concept of gravity. People never imagined that bodies in space attract each other. Even with Newton’s equations ... they work only in limited situations. And the deepest parts of Einstein’s work still don’t address every condition in our universe, much less in those other realms that may or may not exist.”

A hand waves in the darkness. “Fine. Gravity.”

“Here’s something else to consider,” he says. “We can’t tell for certain that every mass in the universe attracts every other mass. It’s impossible to do the necessary research. I mean, yes, the Earth pulls down on us. And two metal balls suspended on delicate wires will attract one another in the proper way. But what about two naked people sprawled out on sweaty sheets? That work has never been done in the laboratory. Who knows if the law of nature holds in our circumstances?”

He laughs again, briefly. “So really, you can see, this business about gravity is one enormous leap of faith.”

She says, “Sorry.”

“Apology accepted.”

A pause. “Anything else?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is there anything else you have faith in?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Are you going to say, ‘Evolution’?”

“Hardly,” he says. “Natural selection has been proven more thoroughly and far more convincingly than gravity has ever been.”

“Okay. What about magic in general?”

“What about it?”

“Do you believe in it?”

“In magic?”

“Do you understand the question?”

He sighs.

“You can’t accept magic,” she decides.

“Think not?”

“Judging by your tone—”

“You can’t read my tone, and I’d bet anything you can’t read my mind. Little Miss Believes-in-things-that-can’t-be-seen.”

“Sorry.”

He takes a long moment, then asks, “What do you mean by ‘magic’?”

“Anything and everything that’s miraculous,” she begins, with feeling. “Magic is everything that shouldn’t happen. Magic can conjure up the most amazing things, and usually from nothing.”

“From nothing,” he repeats.

“Magic has rituals and rules. And when it has real power, magic can harm the weak and the sloppy. But there always must be a few great wizards in our world, and with their spells, they achieve wonders. That’s why magic exists. That’s why it is something worth treasuring.”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I said, ‘Yes.’”

“You buy the idea of magic and spells?”

“Very much so.”

“All right. What kinds of magic?”

After a moment, he says, “No.”

“What?”

“I won’t tell you.”

“You will too.”

“Why? You want to hear about my little run-in with the mystical world?”

“Of course.”

“Okay then. I was thirteen.”

She says nothing.

“Thirteen,” he repeats.

“You were a boy. I heard you.”

He takes a breath and then another breath before saying, “You don’t know anything about being a thirteen-year-old boy. Understand?”

“Okay,” she squeaks.

He takes one final deep breath. “I was with my best friends,” he says, “and one day, seemingly by accident, we happened across a magical book.”

* * * *

They were playing in a woodlot behind their subdivision. Ted had seen a fox the night before—a beautiful graceful dream of an animal—and with the help of his two closest friends, he was searching for the fox’s den. What the boys would do when they found it, he had no idea. But the hunt managed to

hold everybody's interest for nearly an hour, leaving the three of them hot and thirsty, and ready for some new adventure.

That's when Phillip found a backpack tucked under a juniper tree. Scott didn't approve. "You should have left it there," was his opinion. "It doesn't belong to you, so put it back now."

Phillip was the brave one in their group. Scott believed in rules and obedience, while Ted was somewhere between. Exactly where he fit depended on the day and his mood.

"Don't you want to see what's inside?" Phillip asked. Then he shook the pack, something with left bouncing inside.

"No," Scott said. "That isn't ours—"

"But maybe there's an ID," Ted mentioned. "We'll find the owner and give it back, and maybe even split the reward."

The rationale meant something to Scott. Sensing something fun, Phillip didn't want any owner to be found, but it served his needs to nod confidently, saying,

"Yeah, let's look for a driver's license or something."

The pack was old, the gray-green nylon fabric thin as tissue in places, a couple tears mended with rusted safety pins. The object was dirty enough to show that it had been outside for a few days, but not as filthy as it would have been if it were exposed to last week's heavy rains. The back pocket had been left open,

Phillip discovered. It was empty. The zipper to the main pocket fought his tugging, but he managed to pull it open far enough to look inside, turning the pack to where it could fill with sunshine.

Many years later, Ted would still remember his friend's face changing. The blue eyes just lit up, and a mouth that was usually held in a tight smirk fell open. Then a small, deeply impressed voice said, "Not here."

"What is it?" Scott asked.

Phillip clamped both hands over the open pack, sealing in the contents. "Back this way," he said. "In the gully."

Better than anyone else in the world, those three boys knew the local terrain. It took several minutes, but once they stopped running, they were out of sight of every human eye in Creation, squatting on a flat piece of the ravine floor, forming a triangle around this most unexpected treasure.

"Okay," Phillip said, releasing his hands.

"What is it?" Scott inquired, leaning back warily.

"Take a look," Phillip said to Ted.

Whatever was inside, Ted guessed that it wasn't dangerous. At least it wouldn't bite or explode. So he reached in blindly, feeling a stack of thick paper bound together with fat rubber bands. Then just for fun, he faked pain, jumping back as if a set of fangs had stabbed his fingers.

"Oh, crap!" Scott blurted, tumbling onto his butt.

Ted laughed at his cowardly friend, and then he

pulled out a stack of photographs. Suddenly every boy was staring at the top image. Even Phillip, who knew what to expect, was staring. Everybody took a small step back, and Ted dropped the discovery on the dusty ground. And all these years later, he could still see the contorted face of the young woman and an astonishing amount of her naked body and what the faceless man was obviously doing to her.

* * * *

“Porn,” she says.

He doesn’t respond.

“I thought you were talking about magic,” she complains. “Not just some dirty pictures.”

“I told you,” he says. “I was thirteen.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“A new-born adolescent.”

She decides not to speak.

“You won’t understand,” he says. “You can’t. Even if I was to tell you the whole story—”

“I thought you just did.”

“No. That’s just the beginning. I was setting the scene. The important stuff comes later.”

“Is that a pun?”

“Do you want to hear this, or not? Because I don’t have to tell it.”

“I’m listening,” she promises. “Go on.”

But he doesn’t say one word. Not immediately. He seems to be debating the relative merits of what he has begun, and when he finally does speak, he does so slowly, cautiously, as if at any moment, given the

tinest excuse, he will stop talking and never again say one word about this intimate subject.

* * * *

The boys quickly recovered from their shock. Phillip knelt and studied the top image. Then he wiped both hands against his sweaty shirt, and with the others close beside him, he touched the page. The photograph had been glued to a sheet of what looked like thin cardboard, stiff and pale gray, larger than the picture and cut to size with long scissors. Two fat red rubber bands held the book together. Phillip removed the top band and then its partner, taking the trouble to place both inside the empty pack. Then he paused and grinned, enjoying a quick deep breath before turning the page.

The next photograph was smaller, and it was black-and-white, and it was nearly as memorable as the first. A different girl was holding herself in a completely different position. What must have been a brilliant flash gave her body a silvery-white glow that was at least as captivating as what she was doing. The man seemed to be the same man, judging by the proportions of his body. But the bed was different, and the room around the bed too, and if it was the same camera as before, it was being used in a very different fashion.

The third page had four color Polaroid pictures set in a specific order, each equally faded by time. This time, there was no man. But again, the girl was fresh. She looked young and exceptionally tall, but like the

first two women, she seemed to be wholly oblivious to a camera, busily doing things with herself that were as bizarre as they were captivating.

In all, there were thirty pages.

The boys counted the photographs and arrived at several general conclusions: Each page held a different girl, and when a man was visible, he was probably the same man, or at least a fellow with a similar body. But the girls were never the same. Not in age or build, and sometimes not even in their race. The only similarity was that each of them was young, and in some fashion, lovely. About their lover, nothing seemed exceptional. Even boys of thirteen had enough experience in the world to feel sure about that. The man's legs were not lean or particularly muscular, nor was any dimension about his body anything but average. Whenever he was standing, his stomach looked pudgy. Perhaps he had handsome features, but there was no way to tell since his face was out of view. But the women's faces were always visible; with each astonishing image, it was the face that the boys' eyes were drawn to first.

Among the three of them, Phillip had the most experience with pornography. His older brother had amassed a considerable library of *Playboy* s and *Penthouse* s and even a few *Hustler* s. And most important, Phillip had a practical smartness about things most thirteen-year-olds never even thought about.

"This doesn't make sense," he complained.

Scott was flipping back through the book now, slowly, page by delicious page. “What do you...?” His voice faded, hands adjusting the fit of his jeans. “What doesn’t make sense?”

“Each one’s different,” Phillip said.

Ted was staring at the faces and breasts and other stretches of honest, captivating anatomy, committing details to a memory that would never again function at this very high level.

“He’s got to be some kind of stud,” Scott replied, aching with envy.

“Whoever he is, the guy knows how to get girls.”

“I don’t mean the different girls,” Phillip said. “I mean the cameras.”

Confused, the other boys glanced at their friend.

“We can check again. But I don’t think it’s ever the same camera twice,”

Phillip continued. “Just like it’s not the same girl. And does that make sense?”

Ted hadn’t considered the matter, not even for half an instant.

“Thirty cameras. Who owns thirty cameras?” Phillip flipped back up the Polaroid page. “You’re a stud, okay. And you like taking pictures. But who in the hell uses a new camera each time?”

“He’s rich,” Scott offered. “Which explains how he gets them, too.”

Phillip shook his head. “Okay, he’s loaded. But why would a rich dude bother with a freakin’ Polaroid?”

Ted began to appreciate the problem, although he

couldn't imagine that it meant much. What mattered were the photographs themselves. "Who do you think they belong to?" he asked, trying to steer the topic.

"And why put the book out here?" Phillip pressed. "This is an adult. He's got a house of his own, somewhere. Why stick this kind of thing in an old backpack and dump it in the middle of the woods?"

Ted had wondered about that problem, at least in passing. But in one critical issue, Scott was miles ahead of his friends. "I don't care how many cameras were used," he announced, "or why this was lost out here. This book belongs to us now. That's what matters." The cowardly, law-abiding boy had finally found something worth taking. Turning back to the first picture, he said,

"What we need to do, right now ... we've got to figure out what we're doing with this wonderful gift."

* * * *

He pauses again.

After a long silence, she says, "I bet they were different men, each with his own camera. That would explain things."

Watching her, he says nothing.

Then she nods, admitting, "But that's a smart thing to notice. Perceptive and all. Your friend, Phillip, must have been a pretty sharp kid. I don't know if I'd pick up on it, if I was looking at dirty pictures."

"You never have?" he asks.

"Not like guys look, no."

"Yeah, I guess not. Women don't like porn the

same as men do.”

“Tell me.”

“We’re wired differently,” he says. “Visual stimulation is everything. Sometimes I think we’re the same species only because we’ve got to interbreed. If not for that, men and women would just fly apart.”

“That’s a pretty harsh assessment.”

“And honest,” he says.

She shrugs, returning to her explanation. “This was back when? The early eighties, I’m guessing. Even before the Internet, there were plenty of twisted men collecting twisted smut. There were networks where they could sell it and trade for it. Some guy with an obsession probably just gathered up a stack of dirty pictures where the men looked kind of the same.”

“That’s one explanation.”

“You have a better one?”

“A simpler, sharper explanation. Yes.”

“And what’s that?”

“Those cameras are different because each girl supplied the equipment. A variety of cameras and film, in a string of bedrooms and wherever.”

“Then that was one incredibly smooth gentleman.”

He says nothing.

“Hey, honey. Pop a roll in your thirty-five-millimeter and set the timer. Let’s make a memento of tonight.”

“Doesn’t sound reasonable to you?”

“Hardly,” she says. “And I know a little something about taking pictures, too. If these shots were half as good as you keep saying ... well, that means each woman took dozens, maybe hundreds of them. Because in my experience, even the best photographer needs luck when he’s using timers or a cord tied to the switch—”

“Magic.”

“What?”

“Do you remember? That’s how we got on this subject, talking about spells and magic.”

“Yeah, I remember—”

“‘Conjuring up amazing things from nothing.’ You said words like that, didn’t you?”

“Pornography is magic. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“With rituals and rules, and a real power. Plus the capacity to do enormous harm, if that power’s left in the wrong hands.”

“This is just stupid.”

He says nothing.

“Stupid,” she repeats. Then with a grudging curiosity, she asks, “So. Is there anything else to this dumb story?”

“You tell me: What else does magic involve?”

“Involve?”

“What haven’t you seen so far?”

She hesitates. Then, warily, she says, “The wizard?”

And with that, he resumes his story.

Together, the boys found a fresh hiding place for their treasure. In another portion of the woods was a discarded slab of old pavement, invisible from most vantage points but offering a clear view of the surrounding terrain. An earlier generation of boys had dug a deep dry hole beneath the slab. Rain would never touch the pack. Brush and last year's leaves hid its presence. With the conviction of grown men, they drew up rules concerning the book: You had to sit above the hole for five minutes, making sure nobody had followed you. The book and bag had to stay in that one place. Each picture was to be handled carefully. And when you were done, you needed to make sure you were alone before hiding everything inside the same hole.

For a week, that system worked well enough.

Ted visited the book four or five times. Phillip went with him on the first visit, and they discovered Scott already there, sitting on the edge of the slab, long legs dangling in the speckled light. The next day, Ted went alone—his longest, most memorable visit—investing at least an hour examining one image after the next. Then there was another day when he hoped to be alone, but Scott caught him on the trail. His friend was a big kid, clumsy and pale, smart at school and foolish everywhere else. “Have you already been there?” Scott asked, almost running to catch up.

“You know I was,” Ted replied. “You saw me—”
“I mean today,” the boy added.

It wasn't even noon. "No," Ted admitted. Then a premonition tickled him, and he asked, "How about you?"

"Once," he admitted.

"You mean today?"

"After breakfast," Scott said, his face coloring and eyes growing distant. There was an addictive quality to those photographs. Even at thirteen, Ted found the effects both sickening and irresistible—a set of innate urges released by what was nothing more than chemical emulsions on sheets of fancy paper. He couldn't stop thinking about the girls and young women. Without trying, he would close his eyes and see not only their bodies but their faces, too, and in particular, their vivid eyes and pretty mouths that helped convey a set of expressions that were both remote and self-absorbed, and to him, endlessly fascinating. All women, in all possible circumstances, suddenly held potentials that Ted had never noticed. Actresses were more beautiful than ever, even the famous old ones. And the neighborhood women—the average wives and mothers who before this were no more than little portions of a humdrum landscape—had become miraculous creatures. The boy found himself staring at them, asking himself what kinds of wondrous, unlikely things these ordinary ladies did with their husbands. And worst of all were the teenage girls. A week earlier, Ted could have made inane conversation with most of them, feeling only a pleasant nervousness. But now the stakes were

infinitely greater. He had trouble making eye contact, much less offering any coherent noise; and his worst enemy was his own infected brain, constantly inventing ways to think about matters delicious and wrong. Phillip seemed less infected than Ted. Maybe his earlier exposure to dirty magazines acted like a vaccination, or perhaps it was just his natural man-of-the-world attitude. Whatever the reason, Phillip didn't feel compelled to visit the backpack every day, and when he pulled out the pictures, he noticed nonsexual details missed by his best friends.

"This is the oldest photograph," he told them.

The image was black-and-white, but that didn't mean anything. Plenty of the pictures were black-and-white. Ted took hold of the photo and lifted it up to the light. The quality was obvious. Family portraits had the same perfect flash and glossy finish. "But why's this the oldest?"

"Look here." A crooked finger jabbed at the edge of the photograph. "See the calendar?"

In the background, something was hanging on the white wall.

"You look at it." His friend produced a magnifying glass, pressing it into Ted's hand. "Try and read the month and year."

May 1938.

"Let me see," Scott said. But instead of reading the date, he used the glass to study the fine details of the woman's body.

"So there's an old calendar on the wall," Ted

responded.

“What about these hair styles?” Phillip flipped between examples. “This one looks like it’s from the forties, and this has to be today, and this one back here ... it sure looks like what’s-her-name’s hair. From the beach movies.”

He meant Sandra Dee or Gidget. One of those girl-next-door girls.

“There’s thirty years of pictures here,” Phillip said. The idea was unsettling, sure. But Ted pretended not to care. “The guy has been busy,” he argued. “That’s all that means.”

Flipping back to the oldest photograph, Phillip pointed out, “This belly here

... it doesn’t look like a twenty-year-old belly.”

“That’s a different guy,” Ted offered. “An earlier pervert.”

“Except it isn’t.” Phillip had invested a great deal of time to the study, measuring the male’s legs and belly, and everything else that was visible. Pointing to a kidney-shaped blotch riding on one pasty white leg, he then flipped to another black-and-white shot. “This is probably the newest photograph,” he continued.

“See? The same exact mark. And the body looks exactly the same as before.”

Ted didn’t like looking at the man’s bare leg.

Scott claimed the new photograph, and again, he used the magnifying glass on the woman.

Without question, Scott was sicker than his

buddies. Three or four times every day, he devised some excuse to slip out of his house and down to the woods for just one more look. He had admitted that he couldn't sleep through the night anymore, and that he was rubbing himself raw. There were moments when the kid seemed to be willing himself to dive inside one of those inviting, addictive images.

"Look at this," said Scott. "Look at her close."

He set the new picture and magnifying glass into Ted's hands. As it happened, this was Ted's favorite image. The clear, colorless photograph showed what the man was doing, and judging by the woman's arching back, she was enjoying herself. Enthralled, she had twisted her head around as far as possible, looking up at the camera, her long straight hair plunging away from her face, leaving her features more than half visible—a woman filled with a mixture of determined concentration and utter bliss.

Ted's breathing quickened whenever he saw her.

"Look close," Scott repeated.

With the glass, Ted started to count the neat knobby bumps that defined that wondrous spine.

"No, her face. That's what you need to see."

But he already had. A hundred times, at least. It was a long elegant face carrying a joyful, almost religious pleasure that he only hoped he could give to his future wife, at least once in her life.

"You're not seeing it," Scott complained.

Phillip had to ask, "What are we supposed to see?"

"This woman," Scott blurted. "She lives on our

street, Ted.”

Oh, crap.

“She’s that blond lady with twins. Remember? She and her husband moved in last winter, while she was still pregnant....”

* * * *

“Was it?”

“Was it what?”

“Her. That mom with twins.”

He says, “I hadn’t realized it until then. But it sure looked like her, yeah.”

“Well, I guess that’s not too surprising,” she decides. “Since whoever took those pictures probably lived somewhere close.”

“Not surprising at all,” he agrees.

“But you know what does surprise me, hearing this?”

“I think I can make a good guess.”

“The years.”

He makes a neutral sound.

“They don’t add up right.”

He says nothing.

A long, thoughtful pause ends with the declaration, “That’ll have to wait, I guess.” Then she says, “Go on and tell me: What happened next?”

* * * *

The boys started keeping watch over the neighbor’s house. Ted particularly kept tabs on it. The ordinary split-level stood across the street, two lots removed from Ted’s bedroom window. With binoculars, he

could see the front yard and part of the back. In those first four mornings, the young husband emerged before seven-thirty. He was a tall man, far too skinny to be the fellow in the pictures. He would happily kiss his babies good-bye and hug his adulterous wife before driving off to the city. Then around nine or nine-thirty, the young woman would put the babies into her car and run a few errands, returning before noon with a trunk full of shopping sacks. It was that second morning, not long after she had vanished, that Ted went outside with a half-inflated football. He kicked it down the street and back again, and then he kicked it hard enough to drop it into her front yard. Then he pretended to shank the punt, placing the ball into the woman's fenced backyard. Nobody was home; what did it matter? He walked through the gate to recover what was his, and then slowly circled the rest of the house, peering into every window until he felt certain that the shag carpet in the finished basement was the same as the carpet visible in the photograph.

The babies took naps after lunch, it seemed. That's when the woman would step alone into the backyard, wearing a single-piece swimsuit and white paste on her pretty little nose. In the binoculars, she looked to be in her twenties, with tall legs and a little thickness around her waist. Her hair was long and straw-colored, and it couldn't have been any straighter. For an hour or two, she would sit on a chaise lounge, not really sunbathing but enjoying her quiet time with

magazines and little naps. Then she would step back inside, not appearing again until around six o'clock when her husband came home again.

Except on the fourth day, things were different.

Ted was sitting next to his window. It was after lunch when he saw Scott emerge from his house and pause in front of the woman's house, shamelessly staring at the curtains. Then he strolled past Ted, glancing up with a possessed grin before heading for the woods and the backpack. A few minutes later, Phillip rode past on his bike, heading in the same direction. The woman still hadn't appeared, and Ted began to suspect that she wouldn't. Maybe one of her babies couldn't sleep. Whatever the reason, he felt a strong urge to follow his friends; but then a pedestrian appeared down the block—a man of no particular description who was wearing nothing of note, walking up the slight slope and then pausing to glance both ways before crossing the street, never breaking stride, calmly walking along the driveway and up the concrete steps that led to the woman's front door. The door opened and closed, seemingly of its own volition. The man had vanished.

For as long as he could stand it, Ted waited. But his patience and strength only carried him for a few minutes. He picked up the football and stepped outside, flinging it down the street and running after it, then picking the ball up again, trying hard to kick it exactly the same way as he did before. The football spiraled into the wrong backyard.

Ted ignored his mistake. He lifted the latch of the woman's gate, stepped through and carefully set it down again. The finished basement was at the back of the house, on the ground floor. Two days ago, the curtains had been pulled wide open, letting him stare through the sliding glass doors. But now they were pulled shut—heavy gray curtains bleached by sunshine—and for another minute or two, the boy stood on the concrete patio, trying to will the curtains to part, flooding the room with honest light.

He thought about running away.

Then came the sensation of being watched, and Ted turned slowly, looking at the adjacent houses. Had any neighbors seen him? What kind of trouble was he going to be in now?

He didn't care, he realized.

Suddenly his hand reached out. As if watching someone else's fingers, he saw them grab hold of the warm steel handle of the door, and with a firm push, the unlocked door moved slightly. The stiff curtain bent toward him in response, cold air playing across his bare forearm. He took a moment to gather himself. Then his hand reached around the curtain, and he crept close and took a deep breath and held it, and tried to get so close that when he pulled the curtain aside, no sunlight would shine indoors. He would have his own little window on whatever was happening, and Ted was so sure of his plan that he didn't notice the touch of two fingers on the back of his hand. He was standing against the curtain and the

fingers touched him and then pulled away, and he noticed their absence instead. Then he leaped back and watched in horror as a thick hairy hand—a hand almost as familiar as his own—pushed between the curtain and jamb, pulling the door shut again, and this time locking it with a clear, sharp thunk.

* * * *

“Oh, God.”

He doesn't reply.

“Go on. Sorry to interrupt. Go on.”

* * * *

Ted found his friends sitting on the slab of old concrete, huddled around their treasure. Scott had found the time to purchase his own magnifying glass—a bigger, better model. Phillip was using his glass to study another picture. No, that wasn't what he was doing exactly. As Ted approached, he realized the boy had turned a picture over, and he was staring intently at the stiff gray backing.

“What are you doing?” Ted asked.

Then before anybody could answer, he added, “I just saw our guy. I'm sure it's him. He's with the blond right now, doing her.”

Both boys looked up at him, visibly impressed.

“Did you get to see them doing it?” Scott asked.

“Nearly,” was Ted's reply.

Scott groaned as if in pain, and he immediately started hunting for her photograph.

Phillip had a clearer understanding of these matters. Waving his magnifying glass, he asked, “So

you didn't see anything?"

"Not really."

"But he's there now?"

"He was. Ten minutes ago."

Phillip tried to talk. "Maybe we should—" he managed to say. But then he interrupted himself, asking Ted, "Did you see our guy's face?"

"Sort of."

Scott turned paler than ever, and he lifted his arm, pointing when he gasped,

"Is that him?"

The man was standing fifty feet behind Ted. By all appearances, he was unremarkable—a smallish fellow of no particular age, with a modest gut and shaggy dark hair. His clothes weren't rich or special. His features would never be called handsome, and they were very nearly forgettable. But his eyes were hot and black and very small, and he managed to project an intensity that earned a frightened silence from his audience.

"I want them back," the stranger said slowly, firmly. Scott pulled the photographs into his lap.

That made the man smile. He stepped closer, and even more quietly, he said,

"They belong to me."

"So what the hell are they?" Phillip asked. Then he answered his own question, admitting, "They're not like any porn I've seen. And this stuff they're glued to—"

"Yes?"

“I’ve been looking. Close.” Phillip stood up—a small boy brandishing his magnifying glass as if it could serve as a weapon. “That backing of theirs. To me, it looks like dried skin.”

Ted felt weak and cold.

The man gave an appreciative nod.

“Human skin, is it?”

“I’ll tell you,” the man said. “If you give all of those pictures back to me now. I’ll tell.”

Phillip made up his mind. In a moment, he snatched everything out of Scott’s grasp, shoving them into the backpack and tossing the pack underhand. The man caught the pack without letting those fiery eyes leave Phillip’s face. Then he explained, “Human skin does work and works very well, but there are substitutes. Easier to find, and a lot easier to use.”

“Use for what?” Ted muttered.

“Well,” said the man, “to make a very strong soup.”

“What do you want with soup?” Scott blurted out skeptically.

“I rather like to eat it.” Then he pulled a photograph from the pack—the blond woman on her hands and knees, as it happened—and he said a few odd words before placing the corner of the photo’s backing into his own mouth, biting off a piece of the skin and swallowing it whole.

The boys glanced at one another.

Grinning, the man began to turn away.

“Leave the pictures,” Scott begged. “Just a little

while longer, please....”

The ageless wizard began to laugh. Quietly, he laughed at Scott and at all of them. “But what would be the point?” he inquired. “The flesh is as seasoned as you can make it, my boys. My soup can’t be any richer. My good boys. My dear little men.”

* * * *

Silence.

Then she asks, “Is that it?”

“Pretty much,” he concedes.

“The pervert ... the wizard ... what did he do next?”

“Just walked off and vanished.”

“And did you ever see him again?”

“No.”

She thinks for a long while. Then with a sigh, she says, “What year was that?”

“1970. In the summer.”

“Thirty-seven years ago.”

“Sure.”

“And you should be in your fifties now.”

He says nothing.

“If this is true,” she says, and then she pulls back. “I don’t know, Ted....”

“What don’t you know?”

“If I can believe any of this.”

“Nobody is making you,” he says. But then he points out, “You’re the one who openly and fervently believes in magic.”

“You didn’t find the wizard again?”

“I said I didn’t. No.”

“But that kind of magic ... with the skins backing the pictures, and those words that he said ... did you find out how to do the trick...?”

In a certain way, he says nothing.

“Ted?”

Nothing.

“Ted?”

“What?”

“I have a camera.”

The Majesty of Angels

THE DEAD ARE DRESSED TO travel. Their clothes come in every fashion, but always comfortable and practical and familiar. None of them are carrying luggage, because what are possessions? Temporary, and imperfect. Everything worthwhile has come here. These people are here, and nothing else matters. So many, I declare.

Too many! we blurt in astonishment.

The overseer explains what has happened. An ancient soul wearing a big woman's body, she relates the horrific and tragic with effortless, even graceful dignity. Dignity is vital to our work. She tells us what she knows and nothing else, and it is only our training and our dignified nature that keep us from screaming in anguish, demanding to know how such awful things can happen. How many teams will be helping us today?

I have to ask it.

The overseer admits that every available team has been assembled, plus the full corps of reserves, and every trainee, and the trainees' teachers, and even the most venerable members of the old administrative echelons. And they won't be enough, I'm thinking. Not nearly enough. But with a steadying voice, she reminds us of who we are. Do your walk-throughs, she urges. Go on, now. Go!

Walk-throughs are essential.

We show ourselves to the newly dead. That's how it

begins. Let them see a face. Let them feel close to you. Give them an opportunity to find qualities familiar and reassuring in that very careful picture you present to them. Our team is a dozen, including our overseer: Two male bodies, and the rest female. Humans accept these proportions best. They also prefer uniforms, and on this wicked day, we wear dark blue-gray suits with false pockets and narrow gold trim and neat little buttons of brass. To every eye, we look important. Ennobled. Creatures of thorough and perfect competence. I normally cherish this ritual. This walk-through business. My body is tall and young and decidedly female. The crowd parts for me and the dead men can't help but stare. I have long legs and a long, sturdy gait. Countless penises stiffen in my presence. It makes the men grateful, discovering that in death they have held on to this most treasured magic.

A thousand languages carry up toward the illusion of a ceiling.

"She looks like a stewardess," the multitude declares. One man forgets to step out of my way. He stares at me, particularly at the pin riding above my left breast. He expects to see a crucifix or an Islamic crescent, but the pin is neither. Wearing a puzzled expression, he stands in my way, and I gracefully dance around him, and after I have passed by, he blurts, "Did you see her jewelry?"

"The sideways eight?" says a young woman. "So what's that about?"

“It's mathematical,” he explains. “To me, it means infinity.”

“Huh,” says the woman. “I guess that makes sense, doesn't it?” Something about the man catches my interest. I'm past him, but I'm lingering, too. His name is Tom. He lived in Oregon. He has two ex-wives and no children, and since he was ten years old, he hasn't believed either in God or Heaven.

“Isn't this just wonderful?” asks the young woman. Her name is Julianna and she was raised Catholic.

“Things looked so awful,” she says with a beaming smile. “And suddenly, this...!”

Tom nods, asking, “So how'd you die?”

Surprised by his question, Julianna blinks and stares. With a crooked grin, Tom explains himself. “I was riding my bike. It was...I don't know...sometime last week. I tried to beat the light, and a city bus plowed into me.” He laughs amiably, faintly embarrassed by his incompetence.

“Right now, just being able to stand and hold my guts inside me...well, that's a major accomplishment!” His laughter thins. Squinting, he adds, “The last thing I remember, I was being wheeled back to surgery. Internal bleeding, I guess...I couldn't breathe...and I remember the orderly pushing me down this long, long hallway ...”

Julianna touches him. Her hand is warm and a little sticky.

“You really don't know,” she says. “Do you?”

“Know what?”

“Something went wrong in the sky,” she tells him. “A few days ago, without warning...it just sort of happened”

“In the sky?”

“Something exploded,” she admits.

“What something? A star?”

“No, it wasn't that,” says Julianna. “On the news, they said it might be a quasar. A little one that happened to be close to the Earth --”

“A quasar?”

People grow quiet, eavesdropping on their conversation.

“A black hole started eating gas clouds and stars,” Julianna explains, “and there was this terrific light --”

“I know what a quasar is,” Tom says. “It's bright, sure, but it's also very, very distant. Billions of light-years removed from us, and perfectly safe, and I don't see how one of them can just appear one day, without warning.” Julianna shrugs. “Maybe our quasar didn't know your rules.” With his own kind of dignity, Tom absorbs the horrific news. Sad brown eyes look at the surrounding faces. Perhaps he notices that most of the faces are young. Children outnumber the elderly by a long measure. Finally with a soft, hurting voice, he asks, “What about the world? And the people?”

“Dead,” says Julianna. “All dead.” More than six billion souls were killed in a heartbeat.

“You were sick,” she promises. “Nobody told you what was happening, I bet. I bet not.” And again, she touches him.

AN ENORMOUS MACHINE assembles itself around the multitudes. Our passengers find themselves standing inside what resembles the cabin of an airliner or a modern train; yet this machine feels infinitely superior to anything humanbuilt. The ceiling is low but not smothering and feels soft to the touch like treasured old leather. The floor is a carpet of ankle-deep green grass. Ambient sounds hint at power below and great encompassing strength. This interior is a single round room. An enormous room. Padded seats are laid out in neat concentric rings. Normally there is a healthy distance between seats, save in cases where a family or a group of dear friends died in the same accident or a shared plague. But emergency standards rule today. The seats are packed close, as if everyone is someone's brother or sister. Even a graceful creature has to move with constant care, her long legs dancing from place to place to place.

A routine voyage carries several hundred thousand compliant and thankful souls. But this soul-carriage, built according to our meticulous worst-case scenarios, makes the routine appear simple and small. Every passenger has a seat waiting. Their name and portrait show in the padded headrest, and everyone begins close to their destination. But even normal days bring problems. Children always run off. Adults want to hunt the loved ones who died before them. My first duty is to help everyone settle, and it is

a daunting task. Besides the crush of bodies and the armies of kinetic children, I have to cope with our desperate lack of time.

“If you cannot find your seat,” I call out, “take another. Take the first empty seat you come across. Please. You must be sitting and restrained before we can begin our voyage. Please. And make the children sit too. Your child, and everyone else's. We're bound for the same place. A shared destination. We must cooperate to make it an easy voyage.”

I have a bright, strong voice. A voice worth hearing. But I need to be in many places at once, and my skills reach only so far.

Six billion people drop into some seat, adults taking responsibility for the young ones. Those left standing beg for help, and I do my absolute best, smiling as I do with every little part of my job.

People call me “the angel” fondly, with easy trust. Finally, once everyone is sitting somewhere, I stand in front of my passengers. “Yes,” I admit, “you have died. You are dead.” Tom sits in my audience. And Julianna has taken the seat beside him.

“Yet you obviously aren't dead,” I tell them. “There is a network, a set of embedded and eternal machines that stretch throughout your galaxy. These machines do nothing but rescue sentient souls as they die, then transport them to a place where they will be safe and happy for all time.” In a stew of language, voices blurt out, “Heaven!”

“Call it what you will,” I warn, using the same

tongues. "Maybe you're right, yes. Your gods could have built the soul-snaring machines and the wormholes that we are going to use. Since I don't know who actually built them, every answer is valid to me."

That attitude rarely makes people sit easier. Yet it has the delicious advantage of being my honest opinion.

"I'm here to serve you," I promise, showing them my warmest smile. "To make your journey easier, I will do everything I can for you." Always, a few men giggle in a vulgar way.

Not Tom. He sits quietly, dark eyes never blinking while thick hands wrestle nervously in his lap. He is a brown man with receding black hair worn as a ponytail. I touch his armrest and a glassy round screen appears in the air in front of him. "You may watch any movie or television program, read any book, listen to a favorite song, or if you wish, choose any moment in your own life and watch it replayed as your own eyes saw it, in full. The controls on your armrest will explain themselves --"

A hand jumps up.

"Yes, Quincy," I say. "Do you have a question?" The man is small and pudgy, wearing shorts and a tan safari hat, and he is thrilled that I know his name. "Do we eat?" Quincy asks. "Because I'm feeling awfully hungry."

"Any meal you can think of, we can make." I promise everyone, "I'll take your orders later. Though

I should add, nobody needs to eat or drink anymore.” Another hand lifts.

“Yes, Jean.”

She's a young mother with two tiny children. Custom and common sense have set her between her babies. Quite reasonably, she asks, “Will this be a long trip?”

“It will be, yes. I'm sorry, Jean. We have a tremendous distance ahead of us.” Tom makes a low sound.

I look at him. I smile, always. “Do you have a question, Tom?” He lies, telling me, “I don't. No.”

I won't press him. We have run out of time. Lifting my gaze, I stare at the grateful multitudes. “The infinity button on your armrest will summon me or one of my colleagues. Once we're underway, don't hesitate to press the button.” Then before anyone can throw out another good question, I close my eyes, vanishing from their gaze.

Again I hear the word, “Angel.”

Julianna says it with an easy reverence.

Tom says nothing. Nothing. He never saw the sky catch fire. He never heard the black warnings, the torrent of hard radiations and fantastic heat chasing after the light. As he was dying in the hospital, his family and friends, doctors and nurses, conspired to keep this one worry from him. Alone among my passengers, Tom was unaware. Innocent.

He's likely grieving for his dead world, a reasonable anger festering inside him.

“Our angel's beautiful,” says Julianna. “Don't you think, Tom?” He shrugs and says, “Very,” while his hands continue to wrestle in his lap. He glances across the aisle. One of Jean's babies looks up at him, smiling gamely. Leaning low, Tom whispers to the wide-eyed three-year-old, saying,

“Hey there, kid. Hey. So what about this whole crock of shit bothers you the most?”

The early vibrations are honest and important. Space and time are being manipulated by means both decisive and violent. Dimensions without human names are being traversed. For safety's sake, everyone must remain in his seat. No exceptions. Tiny variations of mass disrupt the intricate calculations, and our ship is cumbersome enough, thank you.

My team and overseer sit together.

As is customary, we discuss what has happened and what we can anticipate, the overseer nourishing a mood of cautious optimism.

You don't remember, she says to me. You haven't worked with humans long enough. But there was a period when we wondered if this was inevitable. Bringing all of them, I mean. Because they had some brutal weapons, and with a few buttons pushed, they would have killed most of their world. I show her that I'm listening, thinking hard about what she's telling me. Then, letting my worry show, I ask, How do I respond to certain questions?

She knows which questions. Showing a narrow

smile, she asks, Do you think they're likely to ask them?

No, I admit.

Haven't we taken the sensible steps?

Always, I say.

But make yourselves ready, she advises all of us. Examine your manifest. Don't let anyone catch you unprepared.

Easily said. But nobody mentions that each of us, standing alone on the grassy floor, is responsible for thousands upon thousands of souls. We are successfully underway. People are encouraged to stand if they wish, and if they don't move too far, they may wander. A constant trembling passes through the floor, and from overhead a whispering roar comes, reminding them of a distant and irresistible wind. These are artificial sensations. They bring the sense of motion, of distance won. Sentience doesn't mean sophistication; humans would find the perfect stillness of interstellar travel unnerving, which is why we supply them with every comforting illusion. Being sophisticated doesn't give me the right to think small thoughts about those who are otherwise.

That's what I remind myself as a thousand fingers call to me. Wherever I am, I watch Tom. I listen to his voice and the voices swirling around him. In life, the man was a reader. He enjoyed a broad if rather haphazard love for science and mathematical puzzles. "Tell me what happened," he says to the English-speaking strangers. "What did you see? Read? Hear?"

And what do you absolutely know as fact?"

His neighbors have few facts to offer. But that doesn't stop some of them from declaring, "It was God's judgment, plain and simple." Tom never listens to the plain and simple.

Others repeat the magical word, "Quasar," and shrug their shoulders. "That's what everyone says it was."

Tom explains his doubts. In clear, crisp terms, he teaches dozens of people about the universe and its brutal, amoral past. "Quasars are far away because they live in the deepest past," he explains. Then with grim urgency, he adds,

"The part of the sky you're talking about doesn't have a big black hole. It's too close to us. We'd see its gravity at work. And even if something like that was hiding near us, there isn't nearly enough gas and dust to fuel the monster."

Once, then again, I happen by. I show Tom my best smile, and with a warm but firm voice, I suggest that he move back near his seat again. "I'll show you the way," I remark. "Or if you'd rather, I can just put you there." Tom is a bright, determined skeptic, but he's also a male. His eyes betray interest.

Lust is a vapor that I can inhale, and then enlarge by assorted means, flinging luscious, intoxicating molecules back at the man, feeding his lust until his penis quivers and his breathing comes up short. After a third visit, the male animal is a little bit in love with me. On my fourth visit, he stops interrogating the

passengers, watching as I deliver a dish of kale and potatoes to a fellow passenger. The passenger asks, "Do you know how old I am, dear?"

"One hundred and three," I reply, "and your name is Bernice. But your good friends call you Bernie."

With giddy amazement, the old woman says, "Do you know? I outlived three husbands and as many children. But that's fine, because now I'm traveling to Heaven to see them again. Isn't that right, dear?" I nod. And smile. "Your husbands are there. And your children. And everyone else who made this journey before you." I lift my gaze, smiling only at Tom, forcing him to stare back at me. "How can anything that perfect be anything but beautiful?"

The male animal licks his lips.

Again I urge Tom to return to his empty seat. But he gathers himself, then tells me, "No," with a cool determination. "No, I want to talk to you. Just to you."

I pretend to misunderstand his intentions.

"Me? Really?" I bubble, letting my nipples engorge. But the man puts on a cold, uncompromising face and declares "Alone." He asks, "Is it possible?"

Then with his shoulders squared, he says, "Because if you won't do this, Miss Angel...if you don't pay attention to me, I'm screaming with whatever I've got for lungs...!"

I CAN SEE the man that he seems to be. In an instant, I examine the enormity of Tom's brief life --

everything that he has said and done, and everything done and said to him. Obvious strategies present themselves to me, begging to be used. Yet I hesitate. I know better. This man was assaulted by a bus, his belly ripped open, candy-colored guts spilling across the hot black asphalt. For that horrible instant, Tom was conscious. Despite misery and spreading shock, he managed to look at his mangled insides...and what he thought at that particular instant, I do not know. I cannot know. Every soul's thoughts are always its own; no eye can peer into a mind's foggy depths. Which is why the soul is precious. Is worth this kind of sacrifice and expense. What we cannot know perfectly must be preserved, at all costs. That's what this soul-carriage means.

This is what I'll tell him, in some fashion or another. But he speaks first. "How does this all work?" Tom asks. "You and your angel friends carry the dead off to this heaven place? Is that it?" We're standing in the chamber where I sat with my colleagues. By all appearances, we are alone.

"Is this your job?" he presses.

"This is my life," I purr. "My purpose. My calling." Something in those words amuses him. He stares at my face, occasionally glancing at my nipples. Then with a little snort, he asks, "Are there other alien species? And when they die, do you whisk them off to wherever?"

"There are others, but I don't whisk them anywhere," I explain. "My calling is here, with your

noble species.”

“You help us travel to the afterlife?”

“Yes.”

“And you've always done this?”

“Not always,” I confess. “Not for very long, considering.” He doesn't ask the obvious questions. How long? Where did you work before? And why did you change posts? Instead Tom points out, “You won't be making the human run anymore. Will you?”

I say, “No, I won't,” with obvious, honest sadness. Tom nods. Considers.

Then I take hold of our conversation, telling him, “Yes, this is a tragedy. A tragedy. But aren't you just a little pleased to find yourself alive and bound for places that you can't even imagine?”

Dark eyes narrow. Then he calmly and firmly says, “Dolphins.”

“What about them?”

“Are their souls saved, too?”

“Of course. Yes.”

“And they're riding toward their afterlife...what...? Inside a starship that masquerades as a saltwater lagoon...?”

His guess is rather near the truth.

“There are many species of cetaceans,” I explain. “Some are sentient. But others, sadly, have nothing for a soul-saver to latch onto.” I expect Tom to ask about other species. Elephants, dogs, and the like. But he returns to me, remarking, “You're going to have to be reassigned.”

"I'll take the calling that suits me," I declare. He doesn't seem to hear me. His mouth opens, teeth a little crooked and yellowed. Their imperfections make his face seem more handsome. Because it helps my strategy, I fall in love with him. Or is it my strategy that's to blame? Love needs to feel genuine to be love; isn't that what every overseer and every poet claims?

"What killed my world?" he mutters.

I pretend not to understand the question. "Pardon --" I begin.

"It wasn't a quasar," he maintains with a loud, knowing voice. "Or an exploding star. Or anything else normal."

I say nothing.

He stares at my chest. At the infinity pin riding on my breast. A slow tongue wets his lips, and with his next breath, Tom asks, "Are you a robot?"

"No," I blurt.

"A projection? A fantasy? What?"

This is a perfect moment. With my warm, slightly dampened hand, I touch his chin and then the soft back of his ear, teasing him for a little moment before saying, "I could be any of those things. How would I know? But what I believe I am is an immortal soul, and a good soul...at least good enough to be entrusted with your little species"

Tom shivers, nods.

I take back my hand.

He wants the hand, and everything else. But he denies himself, almost sobbing when he explains, "I

had this professor in college. A brilliant man. He spent an entire class talking about black holes and white holes and wormholes, and how it might be possible to leap through space and time...and all the reasons why you don't want to do it, because of the places -where everything could go to shit....”

I could undress myself, and then undress him. I could win this man with a few simple acts of geometry.

Yet I do nothing but listen.

“What happened in the sky...it sounds like a wormhole turning unstable....” We are alone here. My team and the overseer are busy with the multitudes.

“If it was a wormhole,” he tells me, “then that explains why an empty piece of the sky can explode, without warning.”

I could lie. And maybe he would believe me.

Or I could take emergency measures, easing Tom into a quarantined region of the ship. He would enjoy himself. He hasn't seen his professor in twenty years; perhaps he would leap at the chance.

But for good reasons, I do something else.

I grasp his hand and lift it easily, straightening his first two fingers, making their brown tips fondle the warm brass of the infinity pin. Beneath the pin, he feels the firm breast. Beneath the breast, a heart drums along. And with a pleading and soft and absolutely honest voice, I beg, “Please, tell nobody. Nobody.”

He tries to lift his hand, but I won't let him.

“There was a malfunction,” I confess. “A mistake and a tragedy, and everything's in a shambles. We were caught by surprise. The radiation could have destroyed us before we launched. We haven't nearly enough staff and it's going to be a terribly long, long journey, and please, don't tell anybody what you know.” My heart beats; my lungs rise and fall. “Unless you really want to make a mess of things,” I concede. “But I don't think...I can't believe, Tom...that there's even a little bit of that kind of man lurking inside you....”

I WATCH HIM, but not as closely now.

In part, I believe we have a pact. An understanding. If I cannot trust this person, then I haven't the skill necessary to do my job, and that is a revelation I'd rather not endure.

Yet more is at work here than trust. I haven't the time or resources to hover beside a lone soul, deciphering his every whisper. The multitudes are begging for delicious meals, and they ask the same few questions, hungry for my smile and my musical reassurances. Many men and the occasional woman hope to see what is beneath my skirt. There is nothing dishonorable in that. A moment's flirt buys a wealth of good tidings and durable hopes. An arm brushing against an arm is the easiest trick. The human face is fluid and rich, capable of its own language, and I've always been adept at making the most from a single expression, from a lifted eyebrow and the flash of my

perfect white teeth. By all appearances, I am relentlessly cheerful and seamlessly kind --an expert in every facet of my endless work. But the real soul always hides behind an impenetrable shroud. Who we are is our only genuine secret, and my secret self grows weary and bored, and in odd ways, terrified. The children scare me. There are too many babies, too many toddlers. Countless souls whose sentience is minimal by any measure. Older children can be bribed with movies and bright games and the vague promise of greater pleasures to come. But the littlest ones are sociopaths demanding nothing but the undiluted attention of everyone else. They scream and whine and cry, and they build fierce little rages that refuse to die. Out of habit, mothers press them to their breasts, and for a little while, they nurse with the same habitual dedication. But diapers remain unsoiled, thankfully; messy old metabolisms were left on the dead world. And after the first long while, the eating habit always falters. Always fails. The adults quit asking for feasts and snacks, and their babies grow tired of drinking without the pleasures of the toilet. The cycle breaks, at least temporarily, and now an equally treasured habit takes hold.

Sleep comes to everyone, or nearly so.

I move among my slumbering souls. Seats have plunged backward, forming beds. The ambient light falls away into a delicious gloom, save for those little pools of colored light where someone fights the urge. Tom is one of the fighters. With bleary, blood-dashed

eyes, he sits upright, chin to palm, watching moments culled from his own life. Drifting beside him, my smile goes unnoticed. "She's beautiful," I mention in a whisper. Tom acts startled. He blinks and takes a quick deep breath --another unnecessary and treasured habit. To prevent misunderstandings, he explains,

"She was my mother. She died a few days after this."

"I know that," I promise.

A dark brown woman looks at her son, singing and smiling. She has a beautiful voice perfectly suited for the hymn. God and Christ are her passions. That's plain to see. When she finishes the verse, she stops singing and straightens her hospital gown, and she gasps with a drowning vigor, then kisses her ten-year-old between his blinking and embarrassed eyes.

"Where is she?" he asks.

"Waiting for you," I reply instantly.

But that won't satisfy Tom. He shakes his leaden head, glancing at the girl beside him. At the sleeping Julianna. "What's this place?" he whispers. "This afterlife place...what really happens there...?"

"Imagine," I begin. Then I hold my tongue against the damp roof of my mouth, waiting for his eyes to come around, meeting my fond gaze. Then I say,

"Imagine," again. Firmly, as if uttering a command. "Your home will remind you very much of the Earth, and you can build any life for yourself there. Any life you can imagine. Your neighbors will

be human souls and alien souls. With a word or a thought, you can learn anything you wish about the universe. Those enduring questions that your college professors could not answer...refused to answer...? They will be transparently obvious, if you wish. With more astonishing questions looming behind them, revealing themselves to you for the first time.”

An intelligent soul can't help but be seduced by such a promise. Yet Tom buries his curiosity beside his eagerness. Looking only at me, he says, “This place. Whatever you call it. Have you ever actually lived there yourself?”

“No, I haven't.”

Then in the next moment, I confess, “I never joined with the Afterlife. Honestly. Honestly, no.”

Again, this man continues to surprise me. He nods as if he fully anticipated my answer, as if he already knew all about me. Then he gives his tired eyes a brutal massage, fingers digging at the sockets as he says to me, or maybe to himself, “I don't know what I'm scared of. But I am. Absolutely, rip-shitting scared.”

But I am not scared any longer.

Everyone grows bored of sleep, and they wake by the millions. And again I am swimming in my work, answering summonses and the same few precious questions and delivering treats as well as ease-of-mind. I coax children toward their abandoned seats. I explain to harried parents that no, I cannot slip sedatives into milk or cake. Nothing metabolic is

happening inside our ship. Hearts and heads are illusions, seamlessly convincing but perfectly unreal. Stripped of meat and blood, souls are invulnerable to every chemical assault. But the same souls can always be distracted, which is why I keep generating great heaps of fancy colored blocks and soft dolls with soft voices, plus intricate, wondrous puzzles that change their nature, always building some new conundrum as the old conundrum collapses under hard scrutiny.

Adults settle into a mood of sturdy contemplation. Of review and reappraisal. Every soul passes through this normally comforting stage. Tom simply arrived early. People are sitting forward in their seats, watching little snatches of their thoroughly recorded lives. Most seek out special days that they've always treasured, and then later, they hunt out moments filled with regrets, weighing what they see now against the emotionally charged events that they've never been able to forget.

For me, this is always the best part of the journey. Not just the easiest, but the most fulfilling. How can it be anything but beautiful, watching the multitude gradually and inexorably come to terms with its enormous past?

I mention this to my overseer.

She doesn't seem to hear my thoughts.

I am confident, I confess to her. Aren't things going exceptionally well?

She looks at me, and hesitates. Then in an almost glancing fashion, she mentions, Two of your

contemplative souls are fighting now. Brawling. The man with the floppy hat, Quincy, is trading blows with a teenage boy named Gene. They can't hurt each other, but their little mayhem is unseemly. Alarming. And absolutely foolish.

I place myself next to them, and I glare.

They barely notice me. Quincy says, "You son-of-a-bitch liar," and takes a careless swing at the boy's angry face. Gene steps back, avoiding the blow. Then he moves forward, delivering matching blows to the wide soft belly. And Quincy doubles up and crumbles for no better reason than he expects pain. The idea of misery pulls him down to the floor, and curled up like an embryo, he moans. Then with a plaintive and exhausted voice, he says, "You're still." He says, "A son-of-a-bitch liar."

Gene tries to kick the man, but a second foot clips his foot, deflecting it. I'm standing nearby, watching. What I want is to show everyone else my disapproval. My scalding rage. This is not seemly behavior and I intend to make that point incandescently clear. And then I'll punish both souls, making them look pathetic in front of the others and hopefully putting an end to this particular nonsense.

I am not the agent who stops the fight.

Tom is.

And Tom is the one who barks, "Leave him alone," while stepping between the two combatants. "Back away, and walk away. Okay, son?"

"Liar," Quincy mutters from the safety of the floor.

The boy fumes and spits, then finally looks in my direction. Dark eyes widen until his young face is mostly eyes, and a scared and furious voice says,

“Bitch. You. You did it to our world, didn't you?”

For too long, I say nothing.

“Enough,” is what Tom tells him.

Then I manage to ask, “What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“I heard. I know.” The young man's anger is seamless and irresistible. “Your damned machines are what killed us all! Isn't that right, bitch?” What I need to say is perfectly obvious.

“You are mistaken,” I tell him.

Then to everyone in earshot, I say, “Someone must have lied to you. Or you heard things wrong.”

“See?” Quincy moans. “Told you!”

Then I give Tom a good hard stare. Waiting for him to look at me. Waiting for some trace of shame. But the man simply stands motionless, hands at his sides, wearing a sturdy expression that implies concentration, and concern, as his eyes rise, looking into my gaze, those staring eyes telling me: No, I did not. I did not. I did not.

My team and overseer are waiting for me.

Who did you bring with you? the overseer asks.

Everyone, I say.

But she sees that for herself. I'm holding tight to several hundred souls -everyone who might have seen the fight or heard the ugly rumor --and Tom is at the front of the heap, saying to the old woman's face,

“Like I told your girl here. It wasn't me.”

Is the damage contained? the overseer asks me.

I believe so, yes. I heard nothing else from anywhere else, and nobody except Quincy and Gene spoke about our complicity.

Complicity? the overseer responds.

Yes, I say. What else is it?

She looks at Tom. “What did you tell the others?”

“Nothing,” he promises.

The overseer searches the seating charts, and then summons Julianna. With a warning sneer, she asks the girl, “What did Tom tell you?”

“About what?” Julianna asks. She acts nervous, but no more than anyone who is in the presence of someone important. “He told me about the bus hitting him. About a thousand times, he told me that story.” Then she glances at Tom, adding, “You're dead. Okay? So get over it!”

“What were those two men fighting about?” the overseer asks. Julianna shrugs and says, “Who knows?”

“You don't know?”

“Something about how the Earth died.” Again, she shrugs. Then she grudgingly admits, “Yeah, I heard talk. Whispers, mostly. They were saying--”

“Who was speaking--?”

“People. Three, four seats over. This kid was standing there --”

“This child?” The overseer shows her Gene. “Is this the one?” Julianna says, “No,” without a shred of

doubt. "It was a younger kid. He was talking about how the Earth died. He heard it from some angel--"

"Do you see that boy here? Anywhere?"

Julianna looks at the souls that I brought with me. She is thorough and slow, shaking her head when she finishes, telling us, "He was moving through, I think. On foot. He said he wanted to see as many people as possible before we got where we were going --"

Search for this boy! the overseer cries out.

It takes an instant, and too long. A teammate retrieves the boy and places him in front of us. He is a Sikh, perhaps thirteen years old. He is handsome and bright-eyed and a little fearless. When asked, he is nothing but forthright about what he knows. "The explosion came when a shipment of souls were taken away. Their wormhole turned unstable --"

"Who told you this?" the overseer demands to know. The boy looks at my team, lifts his arm in my direction, and then points at the man-angel beside me.

My colleague collapses, and sobs, saying, "I did not. I told you --"

"That my calculations were wrong." The boy smiles with genuine pride, then tells the overseer, "I like math and relativity. Neat things like that. I watched the fire in the sky, and did calculations, and I told this angel that it made sense, if our ship employs some kind of superluminal transportation system--"

The boy has walked a very long distance. In the general confusion, he went unnoticed. Each of us is to

blame and we know it, and by every means available we look back along his likely course, listening to everything that's being said. Particularly to the whispers.

“And they were wrong,” he confesses. “My math was. I wasn't taking into account the effects of --”

A million whispers wash over me.

“They murdered our world,” the multitudes are telling each other. “The angels slaughtered us all...!”

I feel horrible. Wicked, and weak. Useless. And doomed. Then Tom steps forward, looking only at me. “It wouldn't kill you to apologize to me,” he says. “But before you get around to that, maybe you experts should figure out what you're going to do next. Now that this tiger's crawled out of her bag.”

AGAIN, I STAND before my souls.

My shoulders slump, and I consciously keep my face from showing anything that might be confused for a smile. I am apologetic. Contrite. Hands opened, palms upturned, I bow before thousands of glowering faces, and with a hurting voice admit, “It's all true. This rumor that you're hearing...that we tried to keep from you...it is true, and it is awful, and perhaps it would help if you took out your anger on me”

I tell them, “Attack me. Brutalize me. Do whatever you wish to me and to my body, please.”

Of course, no one moves. Or remembers to breathe. With others watching, even the most vicious soul is incapable of acting on his worst impulses. I kneel. Dip my sorry head. Wait.

Then I raise my head, looking through genuine tears. "I don't know who built the wormholes," I admit, "or if they were the same entities who built this place where you are being taken now. I don't even know what you are feeling now. Souls are sanctuaries. Citadels with windows but no gates. Each of you feels hatred and rage and a choking sense of betrayal that I can only imagine, and all I can do is remind you, each of you.., remind you that for ten million years, creatures such as I have been saving your ancestors whenever they perished...whisking them to immortality...and without our hard labor, your souls and their souls would have been thrown away by this enormous and very extraordinarily cruel universe...."

Faces stare. Even the children sense the importance of my words, if not what the words mean.

"As promised," I continue, "you may live as you wish in this safe place. In this heaven. Which means that if you desire it, you may rebuild the Earth that you've left. Every brick in its place. Every mote of dust and blue river and the towering mountains and the scuttling beetles. Every little feature can be made real again, and you will return to your old lives. Which, I might add, is not that unusual for a species in your particular circumstance." That brings a roaring silence.

"Build a new Earth," I tell them. "But this time, the sky doesn't explode. You will grow up and grow old and die, each in your own time. And that's when each

of you discovers that you're already living in your afterlife." The silence quiets. Grows reflective.

"Which reminds me," I mention, casually but not. And again, I show my smile.

"It has been suggested...suggested by better minds than mine...that every living world and every conscious mind always exists in someone's heaven...and Death simply moves each of us along an endless chain of Heavens....

"Now isn't it pretty to think so...?"

"How's the general mood?" Tom asks.

I am back in the chamber again. It is just the two of us, again.

"Better?" he asks.

"Better," I admit. Then I give him a look, and too late by long ways, I tell him, "I'm sorry for suspecting you --"

"No need for apologies," he remarks, laughing mildly. Then before I speak again, he mentions, "It seems you can use some help. You're so thin, and there's so many people out there...I'm just thinking that maybe it would be best to pull a few passengers out of their seats and train them fast and give them little duties they can't screw up too badly --"

"Are you interested in that work?" I ask.

The man doesn't answer me. Not immediately or directly, he won't. But his dark eyes grow distant now, and with a distracted voice, he explains, "I was in the hospital, dying. And thinking about everything. My life. Its purpose, and its worth, and all the usual

bullshit. Then they were wheeling me down the hallway...and I was sure that I was dying...and what I kept thinking, over and over, was that the orderly pushing the gurney had the best job in the universe. You know? Bearing the dead along like that. It just seemed so natural. So lovely. I just felt envious, all of a sudden. And that was my last thought. My only thought, really. I just wished that in my life I could have done something simple and noble like that guy got to do every damned day

“

I stare at him. And I wait.

“You never actually entered that afterlife place,” he says to me. “Did you?”

“Never.”

“Is that typical of your profession?”

“It is,” I confess. “You don't happen upon many souls who wish to leave, once they're actually there.”

He nods. Sucks on his teeth. And finally, looking into my eyes, he says,

“Well,” with a deft finality. He says, “I never believed in that place anyway.” And he smiles, touching me, squeezing my elbow with one damp hand while the other hand fingers that symbol of boundless forever.

Market Day

“WAKE THEM NICE. BE NICE.”

What am I doing wrong? she wonders.

Not one thing. That's what.

“Remember, it's early for them,” says the man, turning on the last row of long lights. Then again, he tells her, “Be nice.”

She loosens her grip on the broom, not coaxing them quite so hard. Plump sows and hard young boars grunt and push themselves up onto their feet and hands. Sleepy eyes blink. The blue-eyed sow with the freckled face gives her a different look. Angry, sort of. But there's something else, too. As if maybe it knows.

How could it?

It can't. It doesn't. And it won't ever, that's for sure.

“Keep them at this end,” says the man. “I'll get the truck.” The broom is her broom. As much as these hands are hers. As soon as the man leaves, she swishes it harder, grunting defiantly, the animals knowing to keep away from her when she makes these kinds of noises.

Stupid animals.

The truck is huge, and loud in its own way. It pulls up to the building and stops with a big farting sound. Then the man comes around back and opens the truck's doors, and he says, “Here,” while waving.

“Help me with the ramp,” he says.

The ramp is steel, and cold, and despite her help, heavy. It's still dark outdoors, the morning air cold enough for her breath to show in the lights. She smells herself while she works. She smells the man. He ate oatmeal and homegrown eggs for breakfast, and drank coffee and took a shit, and now he gives a big belch. From deep inside himself. “Let's get them onboard,” he tells her. So she walks back into the building and grabs her broom again, urging the animals along by sweeping at the padded plastic floor. The floor is very clean. Because she uses soap and antibiotics on it, and she does her work so well. Cleanliness is important inside this building. For the sake of the animals, and more important, for the sake of the people who will buy them. This is the day when they will be bought.

We're riding to the market today, she tells herself.

Grunting softly, she urges everyone to keep moving. A few of the animals shit and pee. Their messes don't matter now; nothing can be done about them now. One or two at a time, they ease their way onto the cold steel ramp, hands and feet acting afraid, not knowing the feel of the strange new surface.

Soft plastic is all they know.

The blue-eyed sow and the biggest boar are last on the ramp. The boar is strong enough to have worried her in the past, and now, shuffling into the truck, it seems to grow larger and more menacing.

“Watch that one,” the man advises.

But she's already watching.

The boar turns its head just enough to look back at her, little brown eyes saying something. Warning her, she realizes. Almost too late, she braces herself. She lifts her broom and throws the plastic handle between them, and the boar turns around, rising up on its legs, grabbing at her with both of its thick little hands.

The man says, "Shit."

Says, "Jesus."

The boar has her by an arm and the broom handle. For a long moment, they shove at each other. But just as the boar doesn't know anything except walking on soft plastic, it doesn't know how to fight. She lets it push on her left side, and she lets herself crumble suddenly. The boar finds itself tumbling forward. Then she drives it over onto its back and grunts wildly and shows her teeth, its hands fighting for any grip, the broom handle snapping under the hard tugging. A clean white rage takes her.

This was her broom. Since forever, it was. With the shattered handle, she beats the scared animal, slamming her weapon down against its exposed ribs and its soft brown flesh. Maybe six blows are delivered before the man takes the weapon from her hands, telling her, "Stop it! Now, stop it!" The boar cowers beneath her, both hands trying to shield its tightly closed eyes. A little moan leaks from it, and something that almost sounds like words.

Like, "Please. No."

Which infuriates her even more. She kicks it once

in the crotch, just missing the dangling balls, taking every satisfaction from its piercing wail.

The man strikes her with the broom handle.

On the head.

Twice.

Then she drops and sobs, and he throws his arms around her neck, his bristly face against her face, his scared soft sorry voice telling her, "I didn't. I shouldn't have. Please, forgive me...please..." Cold darkness turns into a cold bright morning.

Together they climb into the high cab of the truck. She's always thrilled to ride anywhere, but particularly when they take animals to market. The man is usually in a happy mood. That earlier episode is an exception, an aberration. If he doesn't smell happy and relaxed, she tells herself, that's only because he feels an aching guilt for striking her. Which is exactly how he should feel, of course.

As if remembering the custom, he puts on a smile.

He says, "Here we go," and tells the truck where they want to be. The engine purrs, and they pull away from the long plastic building, passing the man's house and the steel barn, then the old wooden barn with its tilted walls and steeply slumping roof. For as long as she can remember, that barn has looked ready to collapse on itself. Yet there it stands, still. And that's the way all the world works. The man has told her so, on many occasions. Things only seem unstable and treacherous, but really, most everything likes to stay the same. He says. Only a fool or a coward

believes that his life, in the end, won't work out for the best. The man asks the truck for the weather, then the news.

She doesn't listen. Not to the voices coming from the dashboard or to the man's muttering little comments.

What she does is sit up straight, watching the countryside slide past. A week has passed since her last ride, and in that little while, spring has arrived. Blackish green shoots are punching their way up through the black plastic. The crops are laid out in perfect lines, each plant rooted in a buried conduit. Warm water and nutrients are carried to them. Each plant looks the same as its neighbors, but as the spring warms, each will be told what to grow and how to grow it. By summer, the fields will be tangled with jungles growing raw bread and blocks of fancy plastic and steaks in leather purses and seal fur and perfumes and thinking chips and anything else that someone somewhere in the world seems to want.

It's very complicated, knowing what to grow. Complicated and easy to be wrong, and that's why the smart people sold their land to the big companies, then put their cash into smaller, more profitable crops.

That's what the man taught her, long ago.

Almost too late, she looks back at her home, the steel barn shining in the new sunlight like a mirror. Or like a very hot, very still fire.

Then the little farm is swallowed up by the cold

black fields. She looks ahead, knowing this road perfectly. And the next road, too. Then they turn onto the highway, gaining speed until nobody can pass them, and their truck jumps sideways, fitting neatly between two other trucks.

Sometimes she hears the animals over the humming of the road.

They grunt or they cry out.

Once, for a strange long minute, the animals almost sound as if they're trying to sing together, an ugly little tune seeping through the walls of the cab.

Gradually, it occurs to her that she wouldn't normally hear anything, that the man should be filling the air with happy talk about the money coming and what they would do with it, in celebration. But he seems to have lost his voice. For a long while, he doesn't even mutter to himself, listening to the quiet voices who keep repeating the news. Those voices talk about places she doesn't know and people she can never meet, and what little she can pull from the words doesn't seem to concern them. She listens for "organs," but not even the church kind is mentioned. And then gradually, gradually, it occurs to her that the man isn't listening to anything. That he's just sitting behind the unused steering wheel, thinking hard about a thousand important things. Because she wants to know, she asks, "What are you thinking?" He gives her a funny look. But instead of answering, he says, "That's none of your business." She drops her eyes, and waits.

Then talking more to himself than her, he says, "You've never asked that question before." She lifts her eyes, trying to use them.

But he just looks away, sighing twice, then telling nobody in particular, "I don't know what I'm thinking. Anymore, I just don't."

HE HAS TOLD her this isn't a large city, but it's the only city she knows. She can't remember some of the buildings, which is usual enough. New homes and offices and helper quarters are always being built. But then again, she hasn't been here since last year, and not that much has changed. All things considered.

Like always, she remembers each turn that takes them to the market. She remembers the sleek buildings on both sides of the last busy road. What is new is the tall sign beside the final corner. What gets her attention are its swirling lights, bright even on this bright morning, and while she watches the lights, they make arms, and hands, then a body and legs, and finally, a strange squarish head.

"What's that?" she asks.

The man doesn't hear her. Maybe.

In the next moment, those pieces knit themselves together.

Words appear above the new person, and she sounds out each of them. "Who," she whispers.

"Has the right," she adds, louder this time. "But God?" And feeling proud of herself, she asks,

"What does that mean?"

"Huh?" says the man.

They've already driven passed the sign, so she repeats its message from memory. Then she asks,

“What does 'right' mean?”

“It's a lot of things,” he says

She doesn't think so. “And what's 'God' mean?”

“Nobody really knows,” is his answer.

She doesn't know what to think. So instead of thinking, she watches them drive along the last road. The market building is large, but not as large as some. A sign out front has the market's fancy name, followed by the words, “The World's First Provider!” There's always been a tall gate out front. But the gate is closed this morning, which is different than every other time. Standing behind the black bars are both kinds of men. The new men are huge and strong, wearing thick gray uniforms. Her man says, “Wait,” for no reason. Doesn't she know when to stay put?

The truck knows to stop short, then her man jumps down, walking toward the gate as he says something to the oldest men.

After a minute, the gate pulls open.

There aren't many cars resting next to the building, she notices. Which is different, too. Her man climbs back in, telling the truck to move and move slowly. She tilts her head and listens. But if the animals are singing, their voices are too soft to be heard.

A doctor in a long coat waits at the back door.

Because she knows him, and because she does this every time, she opens her door and jumps down,

shouting, "Hello, Dr. Aarons!"

Nobody notices her.

"Glenn," says the doctor.

Her man says, "Cold enough?"

"Oh, sure."

Her man waits for a moment, then says, "I've got a full load." The doctor's face is smoother than last time. And more tired.

"These are good ones," says her man.

"Well," the doctor says. "Let's have a look then." Her man doesn't speak, or move. He just stands, hands hanging, acting as if he can't remember where he left his truck.

Dr. Aaron turns to her. "Would you help me?"

She's thrilled to be noticed. And of course she'll help. Working together, they extend the steel ramp, then walk up it, the doctor letting her open the first door. The animals stand back from the door, but not too far. Then her man is beside her. She hears him taking a few deep breaths. Then he says, "Back," to the animals. He says, "Be good," almost too softly to be heard. The doctor pulls a wand from his long coat.

To warn the animals, the tip of the wand glows red. With his free hand, he opens the mesh door, stepping inside and waving the wand just once, a hard sharp crackling making everyone jump. The animals, and her, too.

Then her man talks. He says, "You know me, sir." He says, "I always deliver a good clean product."

The doctor doesn't say anything.

“Besides,” says her man, “we've got a contract already.” With the wand, the doctor eases the blue-eyed sow to one side, holding her against the metal wall while a clean barb sticks her in a freckle, just once, taking a little sip of blood.

“A contract,” her man repeats, talking to himself.

The wand does its work, and the doctor stands there, waiting.

“An honorable agreement,” her man mutters. “With a set price.” The wand says something in its sharp little language, and the doctor nods and says, “You're right. She's clean.” “Told you,” her man says, hiding a belch with his hand. The doctor moves to the next animal, taking a sip of blood and waiting again, the same machine words telling that this one, again, is in the very best of health. A third animal is tested.

A fourth.

Then a fifth, and sixth, and so on.

She can't remember when the doctors tested all of them. A few sips are enough, since sicknesses and worms would have been shared among the animals. But Dr. Aarons keeps testing, and her man keeps muttering about the contract and what is fair and what is right. A lot of things are right, she nearly says. Has he forgotten?

In the back, waiting to be last, is the dangerous boar.

Her man turns silent, watching as the doctor pins the boar with the wand, then looks hard at its black-and-blue places.

“Oh, that,” her man blurts. “It was an accident. The poor thing fell off the ramp this morning.” The doctor takes blood and says nothing.

“Bruises heal,” her man says.

“They do,” Dr. Aarons agrees. Then his wand makes a soft sound, a different sound, and he reads what has been found, stepping to the back end of the truck and folding up the wand, saying to her man, “I'm sorry --”

“It's a fucking bruise!” he blurts out.

“No,” says the doctor. “I'm talking about the herpes.”

“The what?”

“There's a new strain in some of the cultures,” the doctor explains. “It's hard to detect, but I've got to assume that they all have it...which is why I've got no choice but to refuse this particular shipment....”

Her man says nothing.

What he does, if anything, is grow smaller. She can almost see it happening. He's standing on the tilted steel ramp, in the cold sunshine, and he dips his head and shrinks down and takes a few breaths, too small to make any difference. Then he gives a little moan and lifts his head, a whispering voice saying, “That's a goddamn lie. You were just hunting for any excuse --”

“Glenn,” says the doctor.

He's talking from below now. From the concrete ground.

“Glenn,” he says, sounding almost sad. Then a pair of new men step up beside him, and the doctor says,

“Naturally, you can challenge my findings in court. If that's what you want to do, Glenn.” Her man shakes his little face, saying nothing.

“I am sorry. Believe me.”

He sounds sorry, and sad, and helpless.

But when she looks at the doctor, he seems tall and strong. Nearly as strong as the new men standing beside him, waiting for orders. Their skin is this color, then that color. Whatever was cheapest on the day they were made. Their big hands hang at their sides, boar fingers and thumbs curled up into fists. And things worse than any wand ride inside their little leather holsters, waiting for any reason to be used.

THEY'RE DRIVING again. Toward home, she guesses.

She assumes that much can still happen. When her man makes an unexpected turn, she guesses that they're on their way to this court place. What's wrong will be made right again. Nothing important has changed. Only a fool or the most cowardly coward would think otherwise. A tiny concrete building wears a drab little sign.

“Mel's,” the sign tells the world. “Come in and refresh yourself.” The man orders the truck to pull off the road and park.

“What should I do?” she asks.

He doesn't seem to hear. But as he's climbing down, he says, “I don't care. Do whatever you want.”

She wants to follow him.

Inside, the darkness is sudden and warm, and she can smell things that are strange, then familiar. Whenever her man leaves for the night, he comes home smelling this way. He comes home happy. So this must be a good happy place, she decides.

He climbs up on a stool, setting his elbows on a long high table, then says, "Beer," to nobody in particular.

A stranger stands behind the table. He brings the beer in a thick glass, stares at her man, then just walks away.

Most of the stools are empty. She sits next to her man. There's another empty stool beside her, so she puts her feet up on it to be comfortable. She wiggles her toes. A woman sits alone next to her wiggling toes. "Hello," she says to the woman.

The woman has scars, but they barely show in the darkness. Whoever built her face made it to look pretty. Was it the standing man who built her? She has freckles and blue eyes and a smile that comes easily.

"Hello to you," the smiling woman says. Then she points at her man, her finger long and painted.

"Does he belong to you?"

"It's the other way around," she explains.

Isn't it obvious?

"Does your owner want to know me?"

She asks her man, "Do you want to know her?"

"Not now," he says to his beer.

"Not now," she repeats, glad to be his only friend.

But the woman keeps smiling in her special way, waiting for the man to look at her. And when he happens to glance in her direction, she says, "Watch." And with one hand, she reaches into her mouth, pulling out all of her teeth.

With a sloppy voice, the woman says, "Imagine."

The man breathes deeply. Twice. Then he looks at the standing man, telling him, "Not now. Get her off me."

The standing man wipes his hands against his apron, then tells the toothless woman, "Put them back in. And just sit there."

The woman does what she's told.

She wonders what could she do to look as pretty as that woman. But even with the same pretty eyes and the big smile, she realizes that she wouldn't be the same. Which bothers her somehow. Why does it bother her? She thinks about that for a long while. Long enough for the man to drink another beer. Then she wonders something else. She asks the pretty woman, "Why don't you get some real teeth?"

The woman looks at her. Looks and says nothing.

"Teeth that won't come loose," she advises. Then she gives her own a good hard tug, adding, "Like these. See?"

The woman shrugs and turns away, saying nothing.

Her man starts a third beer. She looks at him, then asks, "What are you thinking?" His thinking machine is set out on the table, unfolded and showing him

words. But he doesn't seem to be reading. The words are marching past, but his eyes are glassy and sad, and faraway. They almost look wet, and she wonders what sort of dirt got in them. Again, she asks, "What are you thinking?"

"Don't ask me that again. Ever."

He says it quietly, but not softly. He says it so that she's left hurting, wondering what's wrong and what she could do to make things better.

But then, even after warning her, he says, "I'm just reading my policy."

"Policy?" she repeats. "What's that?"

"My insurance," he says.

"What's insurance?"

"It's another kind of game." He looks over at the standing man, then whispers, "Nothing. Forget it." He folds up his thinking machine and puts it in his pocket, then shouts, "Can I get a six-pack to go?"

The standing man looks at him, then says, "If you let your car drive."

"It's a truck," her man says.

"Can it drive itself?"

"Can it?" he asks her.

Right away, she says, "Yes, and it's very fast, too!"

"Then buy anything you want," says the standing man. "Is a six-pack going to be enough?"

"Sure," says her man, climbing off the stool and heading for the door. She jumps down, following.

The pretty new woman stays on her seat, like she's suppose to. Is she pretty because she looks so young?

That woman could be five hours old, or five years old. Or she might be a mixture of old pieces and other parts that are brand new.

If I could just get some new pieces for myself, she tells herself. Then she thinks about the blue-eyed sow waiting in the truck, and the steel barn where she was born, and her man touching her softly as he does that very careful, very important work, giving her the blue eyes and soft pink freckles, too.

Her man waits long enough for her to climb into the cab. Then the truck pulls out into traffic, and they're driving again. She didn't hear him tell the truck where, but they're moving back toward the market again.

“Did court help?” she asks.

He doesn't say anything. Then he sets aside an empty beer can and asks, “What do you mean?”

What court?”

“That place we were,” she says. “Did it help us?” He pulls his mouth into a funny shape as he says, “Yeah, it helped. But it's no court of law. Not even close.”

Whatever the place was, things are better again.

That's what matters, she tells herself. All the way to the market, she smiles and feels good about everything. But then the truck doesn't slow down like it should. It forgets where they're going, rolling past the closed gate and the long building. With her face pressed to her window, she looks at the new men looking out through the tall bars. They're not

watching her. They're watching a line of people standing on the very edge of the street, each one of them holding up a sign. All of them are old people, and their signs are brightly colored, and they're chanting in one voice, making no sense. But she sounds out what words she can see on their signs as the truck swiftly carries her past them.

"Wrong," she quotes.

"Evil," she manages.

"Frank," she mutters. Then, "Stein."

Her man opens another can of beer and drinks and says nothing. He doesn't seem at all concerned that they've missed the market.

"Wrong," she repeats. "What is it that's wrong?" He drinks his beer and almost looks at her. Then he stops himself, breathes deeply and tells her,

"When you don't do what I say."

"That's wrong," she admits.

"Remember that."

When has she forgotten that? But instead of saying it, she asks, "Why did we drive past the market?"

He breathes again. Even deeper this time.

"Was it those people?" she asks. "The ones with the signs?"

"Yeah," he says. "They're part of the problem." For a little moment, she imagines having her broom again. It's repaired and in her hands again, and she's pushing those loud people away from the market, clearing them out of the way for their truck to pass.

"Overproduction," he says.

Those are two words, she realizes. But he said them as one.

“What's 'over-production'?” she asks.

“That's the other half of this big fucking nightmare,” he says. Not explaining what he means. Instead he finishes his beer and sets the empty can under his legs, and he opens still another can, giving the foam a deep long slurp.

She looks outside again.

Little buildings stand up near the street. They remind her of the market building, only nobody waits behind their gates and there aren't any cars or trucks parked in front of them. “For Sale,” says one sign. “No Something-Passing,” say others. But she can't concentrate on her reading just now. Her mind keeps jumping around, and she can barely think about anything at all, it seems. The street lifts, crossing a straight ridge of dirt and grass. On the other side of the ridge are leafless trees and new green grass, and the street turns to gravel, winding its way through the trees. She almost asks where they are. But then he explains, “This is a park.”

“It's very pretty here,” she offers.

“I guess,” he replies, his voice sloppy and slow.

There's water up ahead. Big dark water, and she slowly realizes that it's moving. Like piss down a chute, it slides along, and she takes a breath, then says, “This looks like a very nice place.” He doesn't say anything to her.

To the truck, he says, “Park. Anywhere.”

The street ends with a wide area of gravel and muddy pools. He opens another beer and says, "Jump down and come around."

Now he's talking to her.

The outside air is cold and wet. A little wind blows over the river, and she hears the wind and hears the sound of water slooshing and twisting against itself and the muddy banks. A concrete ramp vanishes into the water. It looks like a street covered by a peaceful flood. But she can't marvel at the sight because she needs to come all the way around the truck.

"I'm drunk," he tells her.

His voice sounds wet and sad and clumsy.

"Help me down, would you?"

Gladly. She reaches up and grabs one hand and its arm, and she eases him down to where he can stand upright, propped against the truck.

"My other beers...give them to me..."

Not so gladly, she obeys him.

"Stay there."

It hurts, watching him stagger over to a nearby bench. But he manages to sit and open up another can of beer, and before he takes his first sip, he looks up and says, "Get the tool box. From behind the seat."

The tool box is heavy and clumsy. And loud when she sets it on the ground.

"There's a thick gray wire," he says. "Under that wheel there. Inside the cab, yeah. I want you to unfasten it."

She asks, "How?"

He seems to consider that simple question. Then he says, "With the pry bar. Just jerk it right off there...!"

The job takes several minutes. Enough time to empty another can.

"All right," he mutters. "Now climb inside. Right where I sit." She starts up, then pauses. Looking back over her shoulder, she asks, "Why?" Again, he thinks about it. Then he stands and shuffles his way over to her, saying, "It's just this simple. These animals aren't worth anything alive. But my insurance'll pay if they die. In an accident." She says nothing. Watching him.

"It's nothing but simple," he says. "Put that lever there over one notch, then push the pedal. The one that just came up out of the floor. And you'll start backing up, which means you've got to steer...with the wheel there...."

She can't speak, or think.

"I'll help you," he promises. "I'll tell you where you're going, where you need to get...okay, darling...?"

She finishes her climb and sits behind the wheel. But that's all. Sitting there is the only thing she can do now.

He tries to explain it again.

"If I'm the one driving," he says, "it looks wrong. You see? But if I came here to drink, and while I was doing that, you broke the driver and took the wheel...and made a little mistake while I was drinking...."

She can barely understand his slurring voice.

Again, he calls her, "Darling."

He's crying now. That's how much it means to him.

With a crying voice, he screams, "Will you, please?" The engine has been left running. As ordered, she moves the lever one place and starts to put her foot on the pedal, and he takes a big step backward, telling her, "And shut your door. Go on. That's it!"

She's never felt so scared.

He takes a huge gulp of beer, then starts moving his hands, showing her what to do. She turns the wheel, and the truck backs up and backs up, its trailer easing its way onto the concrete ramp. When the back tires hit the water, she feels it. A resistance starts to fight her, and in response, she pushes the pedal harder. Then comes the odd sense that the truck is being lifted behind her, as if some great soft hand wants to keep it level. And then, as the cold water starts to leak through the doors, filling the long dark trailer, the animals, in one great voice, start to scream. Her man stands on top of the ramp, waving with both arms.

"Is this right?" she shouts.

"Keep. Backing. Lip!" he answers.

She realizes that she doesn't know how to drive any way but backward. He forgot to tell her that part. In confusion, she lifts her hands from the wheel and her foot from the pedal, asking, "How much more?"

He shouts his answer, but all she can hear are the

animals.

In a great shared voice, they have begun to sing, voices roaring and her listening to them as the river carries the trailer downstream, dragging the cab after it. Then all at once, she's singing too, trying her very best to follow the melody and wishing all the time that she knew their words, wishing that she just once had bothered to listen to these silly little songs of theirs....

Marrow

MISSION YEAR 0.00:

Washen couldn't count all the captains spread out before her, and putting on her finest captainly smile, she joined them, trading the usual compliments, telling little stories about her travels, and with a genuine unease, asking if anyone knew why the Ship's Master would want to bring them here.

"She's testing us," one gray-eyed colleague ventured. "She's testing our obedience. Plus our security measures, too."

"Perhaps," Washen allowed.

Coded orders had found Washen through secure channels. Without explanation, the Master told her to abandon her post, discarding her uniform and taking on a suitable disguise. For the last seven days, she had played the role of dutiful tourist, wandering the vast ship, enjoying its wondrous sights, then after making triple-sure that she wasn't being monitored, boarding an anonymous tube-car that had brought her to this odd place.

"My name is Diu," said her companion, offering his hand and a wide smile. She clasped the hand with both of hers, saying, "We met at the captains' banquet. Was it twenty years ago?"

"Twenty-five." Like most captains, Diu was tall for a human, with craggy features and an easy charm meant to instill trust in their human passengers. "It's

kind of you to remember me. Thank you.”

“You're most welcome.”

The eyes brightened. “What do you think of the Master's tastes? Isn't this a bizarre place to meet?”

“Bizarre,” Washen echoed. “That's a good word.”

The leech once lived here. An obscure species, ascetic by nature, they had built their home inside the remote confines of one of the ship's enormous fuel tanks. Weaving together thick plastics, they had dangled this place from the tank's insulated ceiling. Its interior, following a leech logic, was a single room. Vast in two dimensions but with a glowing gray ceiling close enough to touch, the surroundings made every human feel claustrophobic. The only furnishings were hard gray pillows. The air was warm and stale, smelling of odd dusts and persistent pheromones. Colors were strictly forbidden. Even the gaudy tourists' clothes seemed to turn gray in the relentless light.

“I've been wondering,” said Diu. “Whatever happened to the leech?”

“I don't know,” Washen confessed. She had met the species when they came on board. But that was more than a thousand years before, and even a captain's memory was imperfect. The leech could have simply reached their destination, disembarking without incident. Or they could have decided to build an even more isolated home, if that was possible. Or perhaps some disaster had struck, and they were dead. Shipboard extinctions were more common than

any captain would admit. Some of their passengers proved too frail to endure any long journey. Mass suicides and private wars claimed others. Yet as Washen often reminded herself, for every failed species, a hundred others thrived, or at least managed to etch out some little corner of this glorious ship where they could hold their own.

“Wherever the leech are, I'm sure they're well.”

“Of course they are,” Diu replied, knowing what was polite. “Of course.” In the face of ignorance, captains should make positive sounds.

Washen noticed how even when standing still, Diu was moving, his flesh practically vibrating, as if the water inside him was ready to boil.

“So, madam . . . I'm dying to know what you think! What's our mission? What's so important that the Master pulls us all the way down here?”

“Yes,” said a second voice. “What's your best bad guess, darling?” Miocene had joined them. One of a handful of Submasters in attendance, she was rumored to be the Master's favorite. An imperious, narrow-faced woman, she was a full head taller than the others, dressed in rich robes, her brindle-colored hair brushing against the ceiling. Yet she stood erect, refusing to dip her head for the simple sake of comfort.

“Not that you know more than any of us,” the Submaster persisted. “But what do you think the Master wants?”

The room seemed to grow quiet. Captains held

their breath, secretly delighted that it was Washen who had to endure Miocene's attentions.

"Well," Washen began, "I can count several hundred clues." A razor smile formed. "And they are?"

"Us." They were standing near one of the room's few windows—a wide slit of thick, distorting plastic. There was nothing outside but blackness and vacuum; an ocean of liquid hydrogen, vast and calm and brutally cold, lay some fifty kilometers below them. Nothing was visible in the window but their own murky reflections. Washen saw everyone at a glance. She regarded her own handsome, ageless face, black hair pulled back in a sensible bun and streaked with enough white to lend authority, her wide chocolate eyes betraying confidence with a twist of deserved pleasure. "The Master selected us, and we're the clues."

Miocene glanced at her own reflection. "And who are we?"

"The elite of the elite." Washen put names to the faces, listing bonuses and promotions earned over the last millennia. "Manka is a new second-grade. Aasleen was in charge of the last engine upgrade, which came in below budget and five months early. Saluki and Westfall have won the Master's award for duty ten times each." She gestured at the captain beside her, saying, "And there's Diu, of course. Already an eleventh-grade, which is astonishing. You came on board the ship—warn me if I'm wrong—as

just another passenger.”

The energetic man said, “True, madam. Thank you for remembering.” Washen grinned, then said, “And then there's you, Madam Miocene. You are one of three Submasters with first-chair status at the Master's table.”

The tall woman nodded, enjoying the flattery. “But don't forget yourself, darling.”

“I never do,” Washen replied, earning a good laugh from everyone. And because nothing was more unseemly in a captain than false modesty, she admitted, “I've heard the rumors. I'm slated to become our newest Submaster.”

Miocene grinned, but she made no comment about any rumors.

Instead she took an enormous breath, and in a loud voice asked, “Can you smell yourselves? Can you? That's the smell of ambition. No other scent is so tenacious, or in my mind, ever so sweet . . . !” No name but the ship was necessary. Ancient and spectacular, there was nothing else that could be confused with it, and everyone on board, from the Ship's Master to the most disreputable stowaway, was justifiably proud of their magnificent home.

The ship began as a jupiter-class world, but an unknown species had claimed it. Using its hydrogen atmosphere, they accelerated the core to a fraction of lightspeed. Then they built tunnels and compartments, plus chambers large enough to swallow small worlds. Premium hyperfibers lent

strength and durability to the frame. And then, as with the leech's plastic abode, the builders suddenly and mysteriously abandoned their creation.

Billions of years later, humans stumbled across the ship. Most of its systems were in a diagnostic mode. Human engineers woke them, making repairs where necessary. Then the best human captains were hired, and every manner of passenger was ushered aboard, the ship's maiden voyage calling for a half-million year jaunt around the Milky Way.

Its undisputed ruler arrived a few hours later.

Accompanied by a melody of horns and angel-voiced humans, the Master strode into the room. Where other captains were disguised in civilian clothes, their leader wore a mirrored cap and uniform that suited her office, and for many reasons, her chosen body was broad and extraordinarily deep. It was status, in part. But a Master also needed bulk to give her augmented brain a suitable home, thousands of ship functions constantly monitored and adjusted, in the same unconscious way that the woman moved and breathed.

Gravity was weaker this deep inside the ship. With one vast hand skating along the ceiling, the Master deftly kept herself from bumping her head. A dozen of the low-grade captains offered greetings and hard cushions. Diu was among the supplicants, on his knees and smiling, even after she had passed.

"Thank you for coming," said that voice that always took Washen by surprise. It was a quiet,

unhurried voice, perpetually amused by whatever the radiant brown eyes were seeing. “I know you're puzzled,” she said, “and I hope you're concerned. So let me begin with my compelling reasons for this game, and what I intend for you.”

A handful of guards stood in the distance; Washen saw their tiny armored silhouettes as the room's lights fell to nothing.

“The ship, please.”

A real-time projection blossomed beside the Master, channeled through her own internal systems. The spherical hull looked slick and gray. A thousand lasers were firing from the bow, aiming at comets and other hazards. Mammoth engines rooted in the stern spat out hurricanes of plasma, incrementally adjusting their course and speed. And a tiny flare on the equator meant that another starship was arriving. With new passengers, presumably.

“Now,” said the amused voice, “start peeling the onion. Please.” In a blink, the hyperfiber hull was removed. Washen could suddenly make out the largest high-deck chambers; she knew each by name and purpose, just as she knew every important place too small to be seen. Then another few hundred kilometers of rock and water, air and hyperfiber were erased, exposing more landmarks.

“This perfect architecture.” The Master stepped closer to the shrinking projection, its glow illuminating a wide strong self-assured face—a face designed to inspire thousands of captains, and a crew

numbering in the tens of millions. “In my mind, there's been no greater epic in history. I'm not talking about this journey of ours. I mean about the astonishing task of exploring our ancient starship. Imagine the honor: To be the first living organism to step into one of these chambers, the first sentient mind in billions of years to experience their vastness, their mystery. It was a magnificent time. And I'm talking first-hand, since I was one of the leaders of the first survey team . . .”

It was an old, honorable boast, and her prerogative.

“We did a superlative job,” she assured. “I won't accept any other verdict. Despite technical problems and the sheer enormity of it, we mapped more than ninety-nine percent of the ship's interior. In fact, I was the first one to find my way through the plumbing above us, and the first to see the sublime beauty of the hydrogen sea below us . . .”

Washen hid a smile, thinking: A fuel tank is a fuel tank is a fuel tank.

“Here we are,” the Master announced. The projection had shrunk by a third. The fuel tank was a fist-sized cavern; the leech habitat was far too small to be seen. Then in the next moment, they were gone, another layer removed without sound or fuss. Liquid hydrogen turned into a blackish solid, and deeper still, a transparent metal. “These seas have always been the deepest features,” she commented.

“Below them, there's nothing but iron and a stew

of other metals squashed under fantastic pressures.” The ship had been reduced to a perfectly smooth black ball—the essential ingredient in a multitude of popular games.

“Until now, we knew nothing about the core.” The Master paused for a moment, allowing herself a quick grin. “Evidence shows that when the ship was built, its core was stripped of its radionuclides, probably to help cool the metals and keep them relatively stiff. We don't know how the builders managed the trick. But there used to be narrow tunnels leading down, all reinforced with hyperfibers and energy buttresses, and all eventually crushed by time and a lack of repair.” A second pause, then she said, “Not enough room left for a single microchine to pass. Or so we've always believed.” Washen felt herself breathing faster, enjoying the moment.

“There has never, ever been the feeblest hint of hidden chambers,” the Master proclaimed. “I won't accept criticism on this matter. Every possible test was carried out. Seismic. Neutrino imaging. Even palm-of-the-hand calculations of mass and volume. Until fifty-three years ago, there was no reason to fear that our maps weren't complete.”

A silence had engulfed the audience.

Quietly, smoothly, the Master said, “The full ship. Please.” The iron ball was again dressed in rock and hyperfiber.

“Now the impact. Please.”

Washen stepped forward, anticipating what she

would see. Fifty-three years ago, they passed through a dense swarm of comets. The captains had thrown gobs of antimatter into the largest hazards. Lasers fired without pause, evaporating trillions of tons of ice. But debris still peppered the hull, a thousand pinpricks of light dancing on its silver-gray projection, and then came a blistering white flash that dwarfed the other explosions and left the captains blinking, remembering that moment, and the shared embarrassment.

A chunk of nickel-iron had slipped through their defenses. The ship rattled with the impact, and for months afterwards, nervous passengers talked about little else. Even when the captains showed them all of the schematics and calculations, proving that they could have absorbed an even larger impact before anyone was in real danger . . . even then there people and aliens who insisted on being afraid. With a palpable relish, the Master said, "Now the cross section, please." Half of the ship evaporated. Pressure waves spread down and out from the blast site, then pulled together again at the stern, causing more damage before they bounced, and bounced back again, the diluted vibrations still detectable now, murmuring their way through the ship as well as through the captains' own bones.

"AI analysis. Please."

A map was laid over the cross section, every feature familiar. Save one.

"Madam," said a sturdy voice. Miocene's voice.

“It's an anomaly, granted. But doesn't the feature seem rather . . . unlikely . . . ?”

“Which is why I thought it was nothing. And my trusted AI—part of my own neural net—agreed with me. This region is a change in composition. Nothing more.” She paused for a long moment, watching her captains. Then with a gracious oversized smile, she admitted, “The possibility of a hollow core has to seem ludicrous.”

Submasters and captains nodded with a ragged hopefulness.

Knowing they weren't ordered here because of an anomaly, Washen stepped closer. How large was it? Estimates were easy to make, but the simple math created some staggering numbers.

“Ludicrous,” the Master repeated. “But then I thought back to when we were babies, barely a few thousand years old. Who would have guessed that a jupiter-class world could become a starship like ours?”

Just the same, thought Washen: Certain proposals will always be insane.

“But madam,” said Miocene. “A chamber of those proportions would make us less massive. Assuming we know the densities of the intervening iron, of course . . .”

“And you're assuming, of course, that the core is empty.” The Master grinned at her favorite officer, then at all of them. For several minutes, her expression was serene, wringing pleasure out of their

confusion and ignorance.

Then she reminded everyone, “This began as someone else's vessel. We shouldn't forget: We don't understand why our home was built. For all we know, it was a cargo ship. A cargo ship, and here is its hold.”

The captains shuddered at the idea.

“Imagine that something is inside this chamber. Like any cargo, it would have to be restrained. A series of strong buttressing fields might keep it from rattling around every time we adjusted our course. And naturally, if the buttressing fields were rigid enough, then they would mask whatever is down there—”

“Madam,” shouted someone, “please, what's down there . . . ?” Shouted Diu.

“A spherical object. It's the size of Mars, but considerably more massive.” The Master grinned for a moment, then told the projection, “Please. Show them what I found.” The image changed again. Nestled inside the great ship was a world, black as iron and slightly smaller than the chamber surrounding it. The simple possibility of such an enormous, unexpected discovery didn't strike Washen as one revelation, but as many, coming in waves, making her gasp and shake her head as she looked at her colleagues' faces, barely seeing any of them.

“This world has an atmosphere,” said the laughing voice, “with enough oxygen to be breathed, enough water for lakes and rivers, and all of the symptoms

usually associated with a vigorous biosphere—”

“How do we know that?” Washen called out. Then, in a mild panic, “No disrespect intended, madam!”

“I haven't gone there myself, if that's what you're asking.” She giggled like a child, telling them, “But after fifty years of secret work, using self-replicating drones to rebuild one of the old tunnels . . . after all that, I'm able to stand here and assure you that not only does this world exist, but that each of you are going to see it for yourselves . . .”

Washen glanced at Diu, wondering if her face wore that same wide smile.

“I have named the world, by the way. We'll call it Marrow.” The Master winked and said, “For where blood is born, of course. And it's reserved for you . . . my most talented, trustworthy friends . . . !” Wonders had been accomplished in a few decades. Mole-like drones had gnawed their way through beds of nickel and iron, repairing one of the ancient tunnels; fleets of tube-cars had plunged to where the tunnel opened into the mysterious chamber, assembling a huge stockpile of supplies directly above Marrow; then a brigade of construction drones threw together the captains' base camp—a sterile little city of dormitories, machine shops, and first-rate laboratories tucked within a transparent, airtight blister. Washen was among the last to arrive. At the Master's insistence, she led a cleaning detail that stayed behind, erasing every trace of the captains' presence from the leech habitat. It was a security

precaution, and it required exacting work. And some of her people considered it an insult. “We aren't janitors,” they grumbled. To which Washen replied, “You're right. Professionals would have finished last week.” Diu belonged to her detail, and unlike some, the novice captain worked hard to endear himself. He was probably calculating that she would emerge from this mission as a Submaster and his benefactor. But there was nothing wrong in calculations, Washen believed—as long as the work was done, successes piled high and honors for everyone.

Only tiny, two passenger tube-cars could make the long fall to the base camp. Washen decided that Diu would provide comfortable company. He rewarded her with his life story, including how he came into the captains' ranks. “After a few thousand years of being a wealthy passenger, I realized that I was bored.” He said it with a tone of confession, and amusement. “But you captains never look bored. Pissed, yes. And harried, usually. But that's what attracted me to you. If only because people expect it, captains can't help seem relentlessly, importantly busy.”

Washen had to admit, it was a unique journey into the ship's elite.

At journey's end, their car pulled into the first empty berth. On foot, Diu and Washen conquered the last kilometer, stepping abruptly out onto the viewing platform, and not quite standing together, peering over the edge.

A tinted airtight blister lay between them and

several hundred kilometers of airless, animated space. Force fields swirled through that vacuum, creating an array of stubborn, stable buttresses. The buttresses were visible as a brilliant blue-white light that flowed from everywhere, filling the chamber. The light never seemed to weaken. Even with the blister's protection, the glare was intense. Relentless. Eyes had to adapt—a physiological change that would take several ship-days—and even still, no one grew accustomed to the endless day.

Even inside her bedroom, windows blackened and the covers thrown over her head, a captain could feel the radiance piercing her flesh just so it could tickle her bones. The chamber wall was blanketed with a thick mass of gray-white hyperfiber, and the wall was their ceiling, falling away on all sides until it vanished behind Marrow.

“Marrow,” Washen whispered, spellbound.

On just the sliver of the world beneath them, the captain saw a dozen active volcanoes, plus a wide lake of bubbling iron. In cooler basins, hot-water streams ran into colorful, mineral-stained lakes. Above them, water clouds were gathering into enormous thunderheads. When the land wasn't exploding, it was a rugged shadowless black, and the blackness wasn't just because of the iron-choked soils. Vigorous, soot-colored vegetation basked in the endless day. And they were a blessing. From what the captains could see, the forests were acting as powerful filters, scrubbing the atmosphere until it

was clean, at least to where humans, if conditioned properly, should be able to breathe, perhaps even comfortably.

“I want to get down there,” Washen confessed.

“It's going to take time,” Diu warned, pointing over her shoulder. Above the blister, dormitories and machine shops were dangling from the hyperfiber, their roofs serving as foundations. Past them, at the blister's edge, the captains were assembling a silvery-white cylinder. It would eventually form a bridge to Marrow. There was no other way down. The buttress fields killed transports, and for many reasons, unprotected minds eroded in an instant, and died. To beat the challenge, their best engineer, Aasleen, had designed a shaft dressed in hyperfibers, its interior shielded with ceramics and superfluids. Theories claimed that the danger ended with Marrow's atmosphere, but just to be safe, several hundred immortal pigs and baboons were in cages, waiting to put those guesses to the test.

Washen was thinking about the baboons, and timetables.

A familiar voice broke her reverie.

“What are your impressions, darlings?”

Miocene stood behind them. In uniform, she was even more imposing, and more cold. Yet Washen summoned her best smile, greeting the mission leader, then adding, “I'm surprised. I didn't know it would be this beautiful.”

“Is it?” The knife-edged face offered a smile. “Is

there any beauty here, Diu?"

"A spartan kind of beauty," Diu replied.

"I wouldn't know. I don't have any feel for aesthetics." The Submaster smiled off into the distance.

"Tell me. If this world proves harmless and beautiful, what do you think our passengers will pay for the chance to come here?"

"If it's a little dangerous," Washen ventured, "they would pay more." Miocene's smile came closer, growing harder. "And if it's deadly, maybe we'll have to collapse the tunnel again. With us safely above, of course."

"Of course," the captains echoed.

Diu was grinning, with his face, and if possible, with his entire body. Mirrors and antennae clung to hyperfiber, gazing at Marrow. He gestured at them, asking, "Have we seen any signs of intelligence, madam? Or artifacts of any sort?"

"No," said Miocene, "and no."

It would be a strange place for sentience to evolve, thought Washen. And if the builders had left ruins behind, they would have been destroyed long ago. The crust beneath them wasn't even a thousand years old. Marrow was an enormous forge, constantly reworking its face as well as the bones beneath.

"I can't help it," Diu confessed. "I keep dreaming that the builders are down there, waiting for us."

"A delirious dream," Miocene warned him.

But Washen felt the same way. She could almost

see the builders slathering the hyperfiber, then building Marrow. This was a huge place, and they couldn't see more than a sliver of it from their tiny vantage point. Who knew what they would eventually find?

Diu couldn't stop talking. "This is fantastic," he said. "And an honor. I'm just pleased that the Master would include me."

The Submaster nodded, conspicuously saying nothing.

"Now that I'm here," Diu blubbered, "I can almost see the purpose of this place." With a level glance, Washen tried to tell her companion, Shut up.

But Miocene had already tilted her head, eyeing their eleventh-grade colleague. "I'd love to hear your theories, darling."

Diu lifted his eyebrows.

An instant later, with bleak amusement, he remarked, "I think not." Then he looked at his own hands, saying, "Once spoken, madam, a thought hides inside at least one other."

MISSION YEAR 1.03:

Planetfall was exactly as the captains had planned—a routine day from the final five kilometers of bridge building to Miocene's first steps on the surface. And with success came cheers and singing, followed by ample late suppers served with bottomless glasses of well-chilled champagne, and congratulations from the distant Master.

Except for Washen, the day was just a little disappointing.

Watching from base camp, studying data harvests and live images, she saw exactly what she expected to see. Captains were administrators, not explorers; the historic moments were relentlessly organized. The landscape had been mapped until every bush and bug had a name. Not even tiny surprises could ambush the first teams. It was thorough and stifling, but naturally Washen didn't mention her disappointment, or even put a name to her emotions. Habit is habit, and she had been an exemplary captain for thousands of years. Besides, what sort of person would she be if she was offended that there were no injuries, or mistakes, or troubles of any kind?

And yet.

Two ship-days later, when her six-member team was ready to embark, Washen had to make herself sound like a captain. With a forced sincerity, she told the others, "We'll take our walk on the iron, and we'll exceed every objective. On schedule, if not before."

It was a swift, strange trip to Marrow.

Diu asked to ride with Washen, just as he'd requested to be part of her team. Their shielded tubecar retreated back up the access tunnel, then flung itself at Marrow, streaking through the buttress fields to minimize the exposure, a trillion electric fingers delicately playing with their sanity. Then their car reached the upper atmosphere and braked, the terrific gees bruising flesh and shattering minor bones.

Artificial genes began weaving protein analogs, knitting their injuries. The bridge was rooted into a hillside of cold iron and black jungle. The rest of the team and their supplies followed. Despite an overcast sky, the air was brilliant and furnace-hot, every breath tasting of metal and nervous sweat. As team leader, Washen gave orders that everyone knew by heart. Cars were linked, then reconfigured. The new vehicle was loaded, and tested, and the captains were tested by their autdocs: Newly implanted genes were helping their bodies adapt to the heat and metal-rich environment. Then Miocene, sitting in a nearby encampment, contacted them and gave her blessing, and Washen lifted off, steering towards the purely arbitrary north-northwest. The countryside was broken and twisted, split by fault lines and raw mountains and volcanic vents. The vents had been quiet for a century or a decade, or in some cases, days. Yet the surrounding land was alive, adorned with jungle, pseudotrees reminiscent of mushrooms,

all enormous, all pressed against one another, their lacquered black faces feeding on the dazzling blue-white light. Marrow seemed as durable as the captains flying above it.

Growth rates were phenomenal, and for more reasons than photosynthesis. Early findings showed that the jungle also fed through its roots, chisel-like tips reaching down to where thermophilic bacteria thrived, Marrow's own heat supplying easy calories.

Were the aquatic ecosystems as productive?

It was Washen's question, and she'd selected a small, metal-choked lake for study. They arrived on schedule, and after circling the lake twice, as prescribed, she landed on a slab of bare iron. Then for the rest of the day they set up their lab and quarters, and specimen traps, and as a precaution, installed a defense perimeter—three paranoid AIs who did nothing but think the worst of every bug and spore that happened past.

Night was mandatory. Miocene insisted that each captain sleep at least four hours, and invest another hour in food and toiletries.

Washen's team went to bed on time, then lay awake until it was time to rise. At breakfast, they sat in a circle and gazed at the sky. The chamber's wall was smooth and ageless, and infinitely bland. Base camp was a dark blemish visible only because the air was exceptionally clear. The bridge had vanished with the distance. If Washen was very careful, she could almost believe that they were the only people on this

world. If she was lucky, she forgot for a minute or two that telescopes were watching her sitting on her aerogel chair, eating her scheduled rations. Diu sat nearby, and when she glanced at him, he smiled wistfully, as if he could read her thoughts.

“I know what we need,” Washen announced.

Diu said, “What do we need?”

“A ceremony. Some ritual before we can start.” She rose and walked to one of the specimen traps, returning with one of their first catches. On Marrow, pseudoinsects filled almost every animal niche. Six-winged dragonflies were blue as gemstones and longer than a forearm. With the other captains watching, Washen stripped the dragonfly of its wings and tail, then eased the rest into their autokitchen. The broiling took a few seconds. With a dull thud, the carcass exploded inside the oven. Then she grabbed a lump of the blackish meat, and with a grimace, made herself bite and chew.

“We aren't supposed to,” Diu warned, laughing gently.

Washen forced herself to swallow, then she told everyone, “And you won't want to do it again. Believe me.”

There were no native viruses to catch, or toxins that their reinforced genetics couldn't handle. Miocene was simply being a cautious mother when she told them, “Except in emergencies, eat only the safe rations.”

Washen passed out the ceremonial meat.

Last to take his share was Diu, and his first bite was tiny. But he didn't grimace, and with an odd little laugh, he told Washen, "It's not bad. If my tongue quit burning, I could almost think about enjoying it."

MISSION YEAR 1.22:

After weeks of relentless work, certain possibilities began to look like fact. Marrow had been carved straight from the jupiter's heart. Its composition and their own common sense told the captains as much. The builders had first wrenched the uraniums and thoriums from the overhead iron, injecting them deep into the core. Then with the buttressing fields, the molten sphere was compressed, and the exposed chamber walls were slathered in hyperfiber. And billions of years later, without help from the vanished builders, the machinery was still purring along quite nicely. But why bother creating such a marvel?

Marrow could be a dumping ground for radionuclides. Or it could have worked as an enormous fission reactor, some captains suggested. Except there were easier ways to create power, others pointed out, their voices not so gently dismissive.

But what if the world was designed to store power?

It was Aasleen's suggestion: By tweaking the buttresses, the builders could have forced Marrow to rotate. With patience—a resource they must have had in abundance—they could have given it a tremendous velocity. Spinning inside a vacuum, held intact by the buttresses, the iron ball would have stored phenomenal amounts of energy—enough to maintain the on board systems for billions of years, perhaps.

Washen first heard the flywheel hypothesis at the weekly briefing.

Each of the team leaders was sitting at the illusion of a conference table, in aerogel chairs, sweating rivers in Marrow's heat. The surrounding room was sculpted from light, and sitting at the head of the table was the Master's projection, alert but unusually quiet. She expected crisp reports and upbeat attitudes. Grand theories were a surprise. Finally, after a contemplative pause, she smiled, telling the captain,

"That's an intriguing possibility. Thank you, Aasleen." Then to the others, "Considerations? Any?" Her smile brought a wave of complimentary noise.

In private, Washen doubted they were inside someone's dead battery. But this wasn't the polite moment to list the troubles with flywheels. And besides, the bio-teams were reporting next, and she was eager to compare notes.

A tremor suddenly shook the captains, one after another, spreading out from its distant epicenter. Even for Marrow, that was a big jolt.

Compliments dissolved into an alert silence.

Then the Master lifted her wide hand, announcing abruptly, "We need to discuss your timetable." What about the bio-teams?

"You're being missed, I'm afraid. Our cover story isn't clever enough, and the crew are suspicious." The Master lowered her hand, then said, "Before people are too worried, I want to bring you home." Smiles broke out.

Some were tired of Marrow; other captains were

tickled with the prospects of honors and promotions.

“Everyone, madam?” Washen dared.

“At least temporarily.”

According to the ship's duty roster, the missing captains were visiting a nearby solar system, serving as travel agents to billions of potential passengers. And the truth told, there'd been boring moments when Washen found herself wishing that the fiction was real. But not today. Not when she was in the middle of something fascinating . . . !

As mission leader, it was Miocene's place to ask:

“Do you want us to cut our work short, madam?”

The Master squinted at the nearest window, gazing out at one of the ship's port facilities. For her, the room and its view were genuine, and her captains were illusions.

“Mission plans can be rewritten,” she told them. “I want you to finish surveying the far hemisphere, and I want the critical studies wrapped up. Ten ship-days should be adequate. Then you'll come home, and we'll take our time deciding on our next actions.”

Smiles wavered, but none crumbled.

Miocene whispered, “Ten days,” with a tentative respect.

“Is that a problem?”

“Madam,” the Submaster began, “I would feel much more comfortable if we were certain that Marrow isn't a threat.”

There was a pause, and not just because the Master was thousands of kilometers removed from them. It

was a lengthy, unnerving silence. Then captains' captain looked off into the distance, saying,

“Considerations? Any?”

It would be a disruption. The other Submasters agreed with Miocene. To accomplish their work in ten days, with confidence, would require every captain, including those stationed with the support teams. Their base camp would have to be abandoned temporarily. That was an acceptable risk, perhaps. But mild words were obscured by clenched fists and distant, worried gazes. Unsatisfied, the Master turned to her future Submaster. “Do you have any considerations to add?” Washen hesitated as long as she dared.

“Marrow could have been a flywheel,” she finally allowed. “Madam.” Brown eyes closed, opened. “I'm sorry,” the Master responded, the voice devoid of amusement.

“Aren't we discussing your timetable?”

“But if these buttresses ever weakened,” Washen continued, “even for an instant, the planet would have expanded instantly. Catastrophically. The surrounding hyperfiber would have vaporized, and a shock wave would have passed through the entire ship, in moments.” She offered simple calculations, then added, “Maybe this was an elaborate flywheel. But it also would have made an effective self-destruct mechanism. We don't know, madam. We don't know if the builders had enemies, real or imagined. But if we're going to find answers, I can't think of a better

place to look.” The Master's face was unreadable, impenetrable.

Finally she shook her head, smiling in a pained manner. “Since my first moment on board this glorious vessel, I have nourished one guiding principle: The builders, whomever they were, would never endanger this marvelous creation.”

Washen wished for the same confidence.

Then that apparition of light and sound leaned forward, saying, “You need a change of duty, Washen. I want you and your team in the lead. Help us explore the far hemisphere. And once the surveys are finished, everyone comes home. Agreed?”

“As you wish, madam,” said Washen.

Said everyone.

Then Washen caught Miocene's surreptitious glance, something in the eyes saying, “Nice try, darling.” And with that look, the faintest hint of respect.

Pterosaur drones had already drawn three maps of the region. Yet as Washen passed overhead, she realized that even the most recent map, drawn eight days ago, was too old to be useful. Battered by quakes, the landscape had been heaved skyward, then torn open. Molten iron flowed into an oxbow lake, boiling water and mud, and columns of dirty steam rose skyward, then twisted to the east. As an experiment, Washen flew into the steam clouds. Samples were ingested through filters and sensors and simple lensing chambers. Riding with the steam

were spores and eggs, encased in tough bioceramics and indifferent to the heat. Inside the tip of the needle flask, too small to see with the naked eye, were enough pond weeds and finned beetles to conquer ten new lakes. Catastrophe was the driving force on Marrow.

That insight struck Washen every day, sometimes hourly, and it always arrived with a larger principle in tow:

In some flavor or another, disaster ruled every world.

But Marrow was the ultimate example. And as if to prove itself, the steam clouds dispersed suddenly, giving way to the sky's light, the chamber wall overhead, and far below, for as far as Washen could see, the stark black bones of a jungle.

Fumes and fire had incinerated every tree, every scrambling bug.

The carnage must have been horrific. Yet the blaze had passed days ago, and new growth was already pushing up from the gnarled trunks and fresh crevices, thousands of glossy black umbrella-like leaves shining in the superheated air.

Washen decided to blank the useless maps, flying on instinct.

“Twenty minutes, and we're as far from the bridge as possible,” Diu promised, his smile wide and infectious.

No other team would travel as far.

Washen started to turn, intending to order chilled

champagne for the occasion, her mouth opened and a distorted, almost inaudible voice interrupting her.

“Report . . . all teams . . . !”

It was Miocene's voice strained through a piercing electronic whistle.

“What do . . . see . . . ?” asked the Submaster. “Teams . . . report. . . !” Washen tried establishing more than an audio link, and failed.

A dozen other captains were chattering in a ragged chorus. Zale said, “We're on schedule.” Kyzkee observed, “There's some com-interference . . . otherwise, systems appear nominal.” Then with more curiosity than worry, Aasleen inquired, “Why, madam? Is something wrong?” There was a long, jangled hum.

Diu was hunched over sensor displays, and with a tight little voice, he said, “Shit.”

“What—?” Washen cried out.

Then a shrill cry swept away every voice, every thought. And the day brightened and brightened, fat bolts of lightning flowing across the sky, then turning, moving with purpose, aiming for them. From the far side of the world came a twisted voice:

“The bridge . . . where is it . . . do you see it . . . where . . . ?” The car bucked as if panicking, losing thrust and altitude, then its AIs. Washen deployed the manual controls, and centuries of drills made her concentrate, nothing existing but their tumbling vehicle, her syrupy reflexes, and an expanse of burnt forest.

The next barrage of lightning was purple-white, and brighter, nothing visible but its seething glare. Washen flew blind, flew by memory.

Their car was designed to endure heroic abuse, the same as its passengers. But it was dead and its hull had been degraded, and when it struck the iron ground, the hull shattered. Restraining fields grabbed bodies, then failed. Nothing but mechanical belts and gas bags held the captains in their seats. Flesh was jerked and twisted, and shredded. Bones were shattered and wrenched from their sockets. Then the seats were torn free of the floor, and like useless wreckage, scattered across several hectares of iron and burnt stumps.

Washen never lost consciousness.

With numbed curiosity, she watched her own legs and arms break, and a thousand bruises spread into a single purple tapestry, every rib crushed to dust and her reinforced spine splintering until she was left without pain or a shred of mobility. Washen couldn't move her head, and her words were slow and watery, the sloppy mouth filled with cracked teeth and dying blood.

“Abandon,” she muttered.

Then, “Ship,” and she was laughing feebly. Desperately.

A gray sensation rippled through her body.

Emergency genes were already awake, finding their home in a shambles. They immediately protected the brain, flooding it with oxygen and anti-

inflammatories, plus a blanket of comforting narcotics. Then they began to repair the vital organs and spine, cannibalizing meat for raw materials and energy, the captain's body wracked with fever, sweating salt water and blood, and after a little while, the body grew noticeably smaller.

An hour after the crash, a wrenching pain swept through Washen. It was a favorable sign. She squirmed and wailed, and with weak hands, freed herself from her ruined chair. Then with her sloppy rebuilt legs, she forced herself to stand.

Washen was suddenly twenty centimeters shorter, and frail. But she was able to limp over to Diu's body, finding him shriveled and in agony, but defiant—a fierce grin and a wink, then he told her, “You look gorgeous, madam. As always.”

The others were alive, too. But not one machine in the wreckage would operate, not even well enough to say, “I'm broken.”

The six captains healed within a day, and waited at the crash site, eating their rations to reclaim their size and vigor. No rescue team arrived. Whatever crippled their car must have done the same everywhere, they decided. Miocene was as powerless as them. And that left them with one viable option: If Washen and the others wanted help, they were going to have to walk halfway around Marrow to find it.

MISSION YEAR 4.43:

The bridge resembled a rigid thread, silvery and insubstantial. Sheered off in the high stratosphere, it was far too short to serve as an escape route. But it made a useful landmark. Washen's team steered for the bridge during those last days, picking their way across the knife-like ridges and narrow valleys between. Wondering what they would find, whenever they rested—for a moment, now and again—they let themselves talk in hopeful tones, imagining the other captains' surprise when the six of them suddenly marched out of the jungle.

Except when they arrived at the bridge, there was no one to catch off guard. The main encampment had been abandoned. The hilltop where the bridge was rooted had been split open by quakes, and the entire structure tilted precariously toward the east. A simple iron post kept the main doors propped open, and there was a makeshift ladder in the shaft, but judging by the rust, nobody had used it for months. Or perhaps years.

A sketchy path led west. They followed, and after a long while, they came to a fertile river bottom and wider paths. With Washen at the lead, they were jogging, and it was Miocene who suddenly stepped into view, surprising them.

The Submaster was unchanged.

In uniform, she looked regal and well-chilled. "It took you long enough," she deadpanned. Then she

smiled, adding, "It's good to see you. Honestly, we'd nearly given up hope." Washen swallowed her anger.

The other captains bombarded Miocene with questions. Who else had survived? How were they making do? Did any machines work? Had the Master been in contact with them? Then Diu asked, "What kind of relief mission is coming?"

"It's a cautious relief mission," Miocene replied. "So cautious that it seems almost nonexistent." Her captains had built telescopes from scratch, and at least one captain was always watching the base camp overhead. The transparent blister was intact. Every building was intact. But the drones and beacons were dead, which meant that the reactor was offline. A three kilometer stub of the bridge would make the perfect foundation for a new structure. But there wasn't any sign that captains or anyone was trying to mount any kind of rescue.

"The Master thinks we're dead," Diu offered, trying to be charitable.

"We aren't dead," Miocene countered. "And even if we were, she should be a little more interested in our bones, and answers."

Washen didn't talk. After three years of jogging, eating lousy food and forcing hope, she suddenly felt sickened and achingly tired.

The Submaster led them along a wide trail, working back through their questions.

"Every machine was ruined by the Event. That's our name for what happened. The Event left our cars

and drones and sensors as fancy trash, and we can't fix them. And we can't decide why, either." Then she offered a distracted smile, adding, "But we're surviving. Wooden homes, with roofs. Iron tools. Pendulum clocks. Steam power when we go to the trouble, and enough homemade equipment, like the telescopes, that we can do some simple, simple science."

The jungle's understory had been cut down and beaten back, and the new encampment stretched out on all sides. Like anything built by determined captains, the place was orderly, perhaps to a fault. The houses were clean and in good repair. Paths were marked with logs, and someone had given each path its own name. Everyone was in uniform, and everyone was smiling, trying to hide the weariness in the eyes and their voices.

A hundred captains shouted, "Hello! Welcome!"

Washen stared at their faces, and counted, and finally forced herself to ask, "Who isn't here?" Miocene recited a dozen names.

Eleven of them were friends or acquaintances of Washen's. The last name was Hazz—a Submaster and a voyage-long friend of Miocene's. "Two months ago," she explained, "he was exploring a nearby valley. A fissure opened up suddenly, without warning, and he was trapped by the flowing iron." Her eyes were distant, unreadable. "Hazz was perched on a little island that was melting. We tried to build a bridge, and tried to divert the current. Everything half-

possible, we tried.” Washen stared at the narrow face, at the way the eyes had grown empty, and it was suddenly obvious that Miocene had been more than friends with the dead man.

“The island shrank,” she told them, her voice too flat and slow. “It was a knob, if that. Hazz's boots dissolved, and his feet were boiling, and his flesh caught fire. But he managed to stand there. He endured it. He endured it and even managed to turn and take a step toward on us, on his boiling legs, and he fell forward, and that's when he finally died.”

Washen had been mistaken. This wasn't the same Miocene.

“I have one goal,” the Submaster confessed. “I want to find a way to get back to the Master, and I'll ask her why she sent us here. Was it to explore? Or was it just the best awful way to get rid of us . . . ?”

MISSION YEAR 6.55:

The iron crust rippled and tore apart under a barrage of quakes, and with its foundation shattered, the bridge pitched sideways with a creaking roar, then shattered, the debris field scattered over fifty kilometers of newborn mountains.

Its fall was inevitable, and unrecorded. Geysers of white-hot metal had already obliterated the captains' encampment, forcing them to flee with a minimum of tools and provisions. Lungs were seared. Tongues and eyes were blistered. But the captains eventually stumbled into a distant valley, into a grove of stately trees, where they collapsed, gasping and cursing. Then as if to bless them, the trees began releasing tiny balloons made from gold, and the shady, halfway cool air was filled with the balloons' glint and the dry music made by their brushing against one another.

Diu coined the name virtue tree.

Miocene set her captains to planning new streets and houses, several of the virtue trees already downed when the ground ripped open with an anguished roar.

Wearily, the captains fled again, and when they settled, finally, they built strong simple houses that could be rebuilt anywhere in a ship's day.

Nomadic blood took hold in them. When they weren't stockpiling food for the next migration, they were building lighter tools, and when they weren't doing either, they studied their world, trying to guess

its fickle moods.

Washen assembled a team of twenty observant captains.

“Breeding cycles are key,” she reported. Sitting in the meeting hall, looking up and down the iron table, she reported that virtue trees spun their golden balloons only when the crust turned unstable. “If we see another show like the last one,” she promised, “we're screwed. We've got a day, or less, to get out of here.”

Staff meetings were patterned after conferences with the Master, except they came on an irregular schedule, and Miocene presided, and despite her best intentions, the captains kept the atmosphere informal, even jocular, and because of the absence of soap, more than a little sour.

“How are our virtue trees acting?” asked Aasleen.

“As if they'll live forever,” Washen replied. “They're still happy, still early in their growth cycle. As far as we can tell.”

Miocene acted distant that day. Squinting at nothing, she repeated the word:

“Cycles.”

Everyone turned in their heavy chairs, and waited.

“Thank you, Washen.” The Submaster rose and looked at each of them, then admitted, “This may be premature. I could be wrong for many reasons. But I think I've been able to find another cycle . . . one that's unexpected, at least for me . . .”

There was the distant droning of a hammerwing,

and then, silence.

“Volcanic activity is escalating. I think that's obvious.” The tall woman nodded for a moment, then asked, “But why? My proposal is that the buttresses have begun to relax their hold on Marrow. Not by much. Certainly nothing we can measure directly. But if it did happen, the metals under us are going to expand, and that's why, according to my careful computations, our home is growing larger.” Washen's first impulse was to laugh; it was a joke.

“Several kilometers larger,” Miocene told the stunned faces. “I've gathered several lines of evidence. The buttresses' light has diminished by two or three percent. The horizon is a little more distant. And what's most impressive, I think: I've triangulated the distance to our base camp, and it's definitely closer than it was last year.”

A dozen explanations occurred to Washen, but she realized that Miocene must have seen them, then discarded them.

“If Marrow isn't teasing us,” said the Submaster, “and if the buttresses don't reverse the cycle, then you can see where we're going—”

Washen cried out, “How long will it take, madam?”

A dozen captains shouted the same question.

“The calculations aren't promising,” Miocene replied. But she had to laugh in a soft, bitter way. “At the present rate, we'll be able to touch that three kilometer stub of the bridge in about five thousand years . . .

”

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MISSION YEAR 88.55:

It was time for the children to sleep.

Washen had come to check on them. But for some reason she stopped short of the nursery, eavesdropping on them, uncertain why it was important to remain hidden. The oldest boy was telling a story.

“We call them the Builders,” he said, “because they created the ship.”

“The ship,” whispered the other children, in one voice.

“The ship is too large to measure, and it is very beautiful. But when it was new, there was no one to share it with the Builders, and no one to tell them that it was beautiful. That's why they called out into the darkness, inviting others to come fill its vastness.”

Washen leaned against the fragrant umbra wood, waiting.

“Who came from the darkness?” asked the boy.

“The Bleak,” young voices answered, instantly.

“Was there anyone else?”

“No one.”

“Because the universe was so young,” the boy explained. “Only the Bleak and the Builders had already evolved.”

“The Bleak,” a young girl repeated, with feeling.

“They were a cruel, selfish species,” the boy maintained, “but they always wore smiles and said the smartest words.”

“They wanted the ship,” the others prompted.

“And they stole it. In one terrible night, as the Builders slept, the Bleak attacked, slaughtering most of them in their beds.”

Every child whispered, “Slaughtered.”

Washen eased her way closer to the nursery door. The boy was sitting up on his cot, his face catching the one sliver of light that managed to slip through the ceiling. Till was his name. He looked very much like his mother for a moment, then he moved his head slightly, and he resembled no one else.

“Where did the survivors retreat?” he asked.

“To Marrow.”

“And from here, what did they do?”

“They purified the ship.”

“They purified the ship,” he repeated, with emphasis. “They swept its tunnels and chambers free of the scourge. The Builders had no choice.”

There was a long, reflective pause.

“What happened to the last of the Builders?” he asked.

“They were trapped here,” said the others, on cue. “And one after another, they died here.”

“What died?”

“Their flesh.”

“But what else is there?”

“The spirit.”

“What isn't flesh cannot die,” said the young prophet.

Washen waited, wondering when she had last

taken a breath.

Then in whisper, Till asked, “Where do their spirits live?” With a palpable delight, the children replied, “They live inside us.”

“We are the Builders now,” the voice assured. “After a long lonely wait, we've finally been reborn . . . !”

MISSION YEAR 88.90:

Life on Marrow had become halfway comfortable and almost predictable. The captains weren't often caught by surprise eruptions, and they'd learned where the crust was likely to remain thick and stable for years at a time. With so much success, children had seemed inevitable; Miocene decided that every female captain should produce at least one. And like children anywhere, theirs filled many niches: They were fresh faces, and they were cherished distractions, and they were entertainment, and more than anyone anticipated, they were challenges to the captains' authority. But what Miocene wanted, first and always, were willing helpers. Till and his playmates were born so that someday, once trained, they could help their parents escape from Marrow.

The hope was that they could rebuild the bridge. Materials would be a problem, and Marrow would fight them. But Washen was optimistic. In these last eight decades, she'd tried every state of mind, and optimism far and away was the most pleasant.

And she tried to be positive everywhere: Good, sane reasons had kept them from being rescued. There was no one else the Master could trust like her favorite captains. Perhaps. Or she was thinking of the ship's well-being, monitoring Marrow from a distance. Or most likely, the access tunnel had totally collapsed during the Event, and digging them out was grueling, achingly slow work. Other captains were

optimistic in public, but in private, in their lovers' beds, they confessed to darker moods.

“What if the Master has written us off?” Diu posed the question, then offered an even worse scenario.

“Or maybe something's happened to her. This was a secret mission. If she died unexpectedly, and if the First-chairs don't even know we're here . . .”

“Do you believe that?” Washen asked.

Diu shrugged his shoulders.

“There's another possibility,” she said, playing the game. “What if everyone else on the ship has died?” For a moment, Diu didn't react.

“The ship was a derelict,” she reminded him. “No one knows what happened to its owners, or to anyone else who's used it since.”

“What are you saying?” Diu sat up in bed, dropping his legs over the edge. “You mean the crew and the passengers . . . all of them have been killed . . . ?”

“Maybe the ship cleans itself out every hundred thousand years.” A tiny grin emerged. “So how did we survive?”

“Life on Marrow is spared,” she argued. “Otherwise, all of this would be barren iron and nothing else.”

Diu pulled one of his hands across his face.

“This isn't my story,” she admitted, placing her hand on his sweaty back. Their infant son, Locke, was sleeping in the nearby crib, blissfully unaware of their grim discussion. In three years, he would live in the

nursery. With Till, she was thinking. Washen had overheard the story about the Builders and the Bleak several months ago, but she never told anyone. Not even Diu. “Have you ever listened to the children?” Glancing over his shoulder, he asked, “Why?”

She explained, in brief.

A sliver of light caught his gray eye and cheek. “You know Till,” Diu countered. “You know how odd he can seem.”

“That's why I never mention it.”

“Have you heard him tell that story again?”

“No,” she admitted.

Her lover nodded, looking at the crib. At Locke.

“Children are imagination machines,” he warned. “You never know what they're going to think about anything.”

He didn't say another word.

Washen was remembering her only other child—a long-ago foster child, only glancingly human—and with a bittersweet grin, she replied, “But that's the fun in having them . . . or so I've always heard . . .”

MISSION YEAR 89.09:

The boy was walking alone, crossing the public round with his eyes watching his own bare feet, watching them shuffle across the heat-baked iron.

“Hello, Till.”

Pausing, he lifted his gaze slowly, a smile waiting to shine at the captain. “Hello, Madam Washen. You're well, I trust.”

Under the blue glare of the sky, he was a polite, scrupulously ordinary boy. He had a thin face joined to a shorter, almost blockish body, and like most children, he wore as little as the adults let him wear. No one knew which of several captains was his genetic father. Miocene never told. She wanted to be his only parent, grooming him to stand beside her someday, and whenever Washen looked at Till, she felt a nagging resentment, petty as can be, and since it was directed at a ten year old, simply foolish. With her own smile, Washen said, “I have a confession to make. A little while ago, I overheard you and the other children talking. You were telling each other a story.” The eyes were wide and brown, and they didn't so much as blink.

“It was an interesting story,” Washen conceded.

Till looked like any ten year old who didn't know what to make of a bothersome adult. Sighing wearily, he shifted his weight from one brown foot to the other. Then he sighed again, the picture of boredom.

“How did you think up that story?” she asked.

A shrug of the shoulders. "I don't know."

"We talk about the ship. Probably too much." Her explanation felt sensible and practical. Her only fear was that she would come across as patronizing. "Everyone likes to speculate. About the ship's past, and its builders, and all the rest. It has to be confusing. Since we're going to rebuild our bridge, with your help . . . it does make you into a kind of builder . . ."

Till shrugged again, his eyes looking past her.

On the far side of the round, in front of the encampment's shop, a team of captains had fired up their latest turbine—a primitive wonder built from memory and trial-and-error. Homebrewed alcohols combined with oxygen, creating a delicious roar. When it was working, the engine was powerful enough to do any job they could offer it, at least today. But it was dirty and noisy, and the sound of it almost obscured the boy's voice.

"I'm not speculating," he said softly.

"Excuse me?"

"I won't tell you that. That I'm making it up."

Washen had to smile, asking, "Aren't you?"

"No." Till shook his head, then looked back down at his toes. "Madam Washen," he said with a boy's fragile patience. "You can't make up something that's true."

MISSION YEAR 114.41:

Locke was waiting in the shadows—a grown man with a boy's guilty face and the wide, restless eyes of someone expecting trouble to come from every direction.

His first words were, “I shouldn't be doing this.”

But a moment later, responding to an anticipated voice, he said, “I know, Mother. I promised.” Washen never made a sound.

It was Diu who offered second thoughts. “If this is going to get you in trouble . . . maybe we should go home . . .”

“Maybe you should,” their son allowed. Then he turned and walked away, never inviting them to follow, knowing they wouldn't be able to help themselves.

Washen hurried, feeling Diu in her footsteps.

A young jungle of umbra trees and lambda bush dissolved into rugged bare iron: Black pillars and arches created an indiscriminate, infuriating maze. Every step was a challenge. Razored edges sliced at exposed flesh. Bottomless crevices threatened to swallow the graceless. And Washen's body was accustomed to sleep at this hour, which was why the old grove took her by surprise. Suddenly Locke was standing on the rusty lip of a cliff, waiting for them, gazing down at a narrow valley filled with black-as-night virtue trees.

It was lucky ground. When the world's guts began

to pour out on all sides, that slab of crust had fallen into a fissure. The jungle had been burned but never killed. It could be a hundred years old, or older. There was a rich, eternal feel to the place, and perhaps that's why the children had chosen it. The children. Washen knew better, but despite her best intentions, she couldn't think of them any other way.

“Keep quiet,” Locke whispered, not looking back at them. “Please.” In the living shadows, the air turned slightly cooler and uncomfortably damp. Blankets of rotting canopy left the ground watery-soft. A giant daggerwing roared past, intent on some vital business, and Washen watched it vanish into the gloom, then reappear, tiny with the distance, its bluish carapace shining in a patch of sudden skylight.

Locke turned abruptly, silently.

A single finger lay against his lips. But what Washen noticed was his expression, the pain and worry so intense that she had to try and reassure him with a touch.

It was Diu who had wormed the secret out him.

The children were meeting in the jungle, and they'd been meeting for more than twenty years. At irregular intervals, Till would call them to some secluded location, and it was Till who was in charge of everything said and done. “What's said?” Washen had asked. “And what do you do?” But Locke refused to explain it, shaking his head and adding that he was breaking his oldest promise by telling any of it.

“Then why do it?” Washen pressed.

“Because,” her son replied. “You have every right to hear what he's saying. So you can decide for yourselves.”

Washen stood out of sight, staring at the largest virtue tree she had ever seen. Age had killed it, and rot had brought it down, splitting the canopy open as it crumbled. Adult children and their little brothers and sisters had assembled in that pool of skylight, standing in clumps and pairs, talking quietly. Till paced back and forth on the wide black trunk. He looked fully adult, ageless and decidedly unexceptional, wearing a simple breechcloth and nimble boots, his plain face showing a timid, self-conscious expression that gave Washen a strange little moment of hope.

Maybe Till's meetings were a just an old game that grew up into a social gathering. Maybe.

Without a word or backward glance, Locke walked into the clearing, joining the oldest children up in the front.

His parents obeyed their promise, kneeling in the jungle.

A few more children filtered into view. Then with some invisible signal, the worshippers fell silent. With a quiet voice, Till asked, “What do we want?”

“What's best for the ship,” the children answered. “Always.”

“How long is always?”

“Longer than we can count.”

“And how far is always?”

“To the endless ends.”

“Yet we live—”

“For a moment!” they cried. “If that long!”

The words were absurd, and chilling. What should have sounded silly to Washen wasn't, the prayer acquiring a muscular credibility when hundreds were speaking in one voice, with a practiced surety.

“What is best for the ship,” Till repeated.

Except he was asking a question. His plain face was filled with curiosity, a genuine longing. Quietly, he asked his audience, “Do you know the answer?”

In a muddled shout, the children said, “No.”

“I don't either,” their leader promised. “But when I'm awake, I'm searching. And when I'm sleeping, my dreams do the same.”

There was a brief pause, then an urgent voice cried out, “We have newcomers!”

“Bring them up.”

They were seven year olds—a twin brother and sister—and they climbed the trunk as if terrified. But Till offered his hands, and with a crisp surety, he told each to breathe deeply, then asked them, “What do you know about the ship?”

The little girl glanced at the sky, saying, “It's where we came from.” Laughter broke out in the audience, then evaporated.

Her brother corrected her. “The captains came from there. Not us.” Then he added, “But we're going to help them get back there. Soon.”

There was a cold, prolonged pause.

Till allowed himself a patient smile, patting both of their heads. Then he looked out at his followers, asking, "Is he right?"

"No," they roared.

The siblings winced and tried to vanish.

Till knelt between them, and with a steady voice said, "The captains are just the captains. But you and I and all of us here . . . we are the Builders."

Washen hadn't heard that nonsense in a quarter of a century, and hearing it now, she couldn't decide whether to laugh or explode in rage.

"We're the Builders reborn," Till repeated. Then he gave them the seeds of rebellion, adding, "And whatever our purpose, it is not to help these silly captains."

Miocene refused to believe any of it. "First of all," she told Washen, and herself, "I know my own child. What you're describing is ridiculous. Second of all, this rally of theirs would involve nearly half of our children—"

Diu interrupted. "Most of them are adults with their own homes." Then he added, "Madam."

"I checked," said Washen. "Several dozen of the younger children did slip out of the nurseries—"

"I'm not claiming that they didn't go somewhere." Then with a haughty expression, she asked, "Will the two of you listen to me? For a moment, please?"

"Go on, madam," said Diu.

"I know what's reasonable. I know how my son was raised and I know his character, and unless you can

offer me some motivation for this. . . this shit then I think we'll just pretend that nothing's been said here . . .”

“Motivation,” Washen repeated. “Tell me what's mine.” With a chill delight, Miocene said, “Greed.”

“Why?”

“Believe me, I understand.” The dark eyes narrowed, silver glints in their corners. “If my son is insane, then yours stands to gain. Status, at least. Then eventually, power.” Washen glanced at Diu.

They hadn't mentioned Locke's role as the informant, and they would keep it secret as long as possible—for a tangle of reasons, most of them selfish.

“Ask Till about the Builders,” she insisted.

“I won't.”

“Why not?”

The woman took a moment, vainly picking spore cases from her new handmade uniform. Then with a cutting logic, she said, “If it's a lie, he'll say it's a lie. If it's true and he lies, then it'll sound like the truth.”

“But if he admits it—?”

“Then Till wants me to know. And you're simply a messenger.” She gave them a knowing stare, then looked off into the distance. “That's not a revelation I want delivered at his convenience.” Three ship-days later, while the encampment slept, a great fist lifted the world several meters, then grew bored and flung it down again.

Captains and children stumbled into the open. The

sky was already choked with golden balloons and billions of flying insects. In twelve hours, perhaps less, the entire region would blister and explode, and die. Like a drunken woman, Washen ran through the aftershocks, reaching a tidy home and shouting,

“Locke,” into its empty rooms. Where was her son? She moved along the round, finding all of the children's houses empty. A tall figure stepped out of Till's tiny house and asked, “Have you see mine?” Washen shook her head. “Have you seen mine?”

Miocene said, “No,” and sighed. Then she strode past Washen, shouting, “Do you know where I can find him?”

Diu was standing in the center of the round. Waiting.

“If you help me,” the Submaster promised, “you'll help your own son.” With a little nod, Diu agreed.

Miocene and a dozen captains ran into the jungle. Left behind, Washen forced herself to concentrate, packing her household's essentials and helping the other worried parents. When they were finished, hours had passed. The quakes had shattered the crust beneath them, and the golden balloons had vanished, replaced with clouds of iron dust and the stink of burning jungle. The captains and remaining children stood in the main round, ready to flee. But the ranking Submaster wouldn't give the order. “Another minute,” he kept telling everyone, including himself. Then he would carefully hide his timepiece in his uniform's pocket, fighting the urge to watch the

turning of its hands. When Till suddenly stepped into the open, grinning at them, Washen felt a giddy, incoherent relief. Relief collapsed into shock, then terror.

The young man's chest cavity had been opened up with a knife, the first wound partially healed but the second wound deeper, lying perpendicular to the first. Ripped, desiccated flesh tried desperately to knit itself back together. Till wasn't in mortal danger, but he wore his agony well. With an artful moan, he stumbled, then righted himself for a slippery instant. Then he fell sideways, slamming against the bare iron in the same instant that Miocene slowly, slowly stepped into view.

She was unhurt, and she was thoroughly, hopelessly trapped.

Spellbound, Washen watched the Submaster kneel beside her boy, gripping his straight brown hair with one hand while she stared into his eyes.

What did Till say to her in the jungle? How did he steer his mother into this murderous rage? Because that's what he must have done. As events played out, Washen realized that everything was part of an elaborate plan. That's why Locke took them to the meeting, and why he had felt guilty. When he said, "I know. I promised," he meant the promise he made to Till.

Miocene kept staring into her son's eyes.

Perhaps she was hunting for forgiveness, or better, for some hint of doubt. Or perhaps she was simply

giving him a moment to contemplate her own gaze, relentless and cold. Then with both hands, she picked up a good-sized wedge of nickel-iron—the quakes had left the round littered with them—and with a calm fury, she rolled him over and shattered the vertebrae in his neck, then continued beating him, blood and shredded flesh flying, his head nearly cut free of his paralyzed body. Washen and five other captains pulled Miocene off her son.

“Let go of me,” she demanded. Then she dropped her weapon and raised her arms, telling everyone in earshot, “If you want to help him, help him. But if you do, you don't belong to our community. That's my decree. According to the powers of my rank, my office, and my mood . . . !” Locke had stepped out of the jungle.

He was the first to come to Till's side, but only barely. More than two-thirds of the children gathered around the limp figure. A stretcher was found, and their leader was made comfortable. Then with a few possessions and virtually no food, the wayward children began to file away, moving north when the captains were planning to travel south.

Diu stood beside Washen; since when?

“We can't just let them get away,” he whispered. “Someone needs to stay with them. To talk to them, and help them . . .”

She glanced at her lover, then opened her mouth.

“I'll go,” she meant to say.

But Diu said, “You shouldn't, no. You'll help them

more by staying close to Miocene.” He had obviously thought it through, arguing, “You have rank. You have authority here. And besides, Miocene listens to you.”

When it suited her, yes.

“I’ll keep in contact,” Diu promised. “Somehow.” Washen nodded, thinking that all of this would pass in a few years. Perhaps in a few decades, at most.

Diu kissed her, and they hugged, and she found herself looking over his shoulder. Locke was a familiar silhouette standing in the jungle. At that distance, through those shadows, she couldn’t tell if her son was facing her or if she was looking at his back. Either way, she smiled and mouthed the words, “Be good.” Then she took a deep breath and told Diu, “Be careful.” And she turned away, refusing to watch either of her men vanish into the shadows and gathering smoke.

Miocene stood alone, speaking with a thin dry weepy voice.

“We’re getting closer,” she declared, lifting her arms overhead. Closer?

Then she rose up on her toes, reaching higher, and with a low, pained laugh, she said, “Not close enough. Not yet.”

MISSION YEARS 511.01-1603.73:

A dozen of the loyal grandchildren discovered the first artifact. Against every rule, they were playing beside a river of liquid iron, and suddenly a mysterious hyperfiber sphere drifted past. With their youngster's courage, they fished it out and cooled it down and brought it back to the encampment. Then for the next hundred years, the sphere lay in storage, under lock and key. But once the captains had reinvented the means, they split the hyperfiber, and inside it was an information vault nearly as old as the earth.

The device was declared authentic, and useless, its memories erased to gray by the simple crush of time.

There were attempts at secrecy, but the Waywards always had their spies. One night, without warning, Locke and his father strolled into the main round. Dressed in breechcloth and little else, they found Washen's door, knocked until she screamed, "Enter," then stepped inside, Diu offering a wry grin as Locke made the unexpected proposal: Tons of dried and sweetened meat in exchange for that empty vault.

Washen didn't have the authority. Four Submasters were pulled out of three beds, and at Miocene's insistence, they grudgingly agreed to the Waywards' terms.

But the negotiations weren't finished. Diu suddenly handed his ex-commanders wafers of pure sulfur, very rare and essential to the captains'

fledgling industries. Then with a wink, he asked, "What would you give us in return for tons more?"

Everything, thought Washen.

Diu settled for a laser. As he made sure it had enough punch to penetrate hyperfiber, nervous voices asked how the Waywards would use it. "It's obvious," Diu replied, with easy scorn. "If your little group finds one artifact, by accident, how many more do you think that the Waywards could be sitting on?" Afterwards, once or twice every century, the captains discovered new vaults. Most were dead and sold quickly to the Waywards for meat and sulfur. But it was ninth vault that still functioned, its ancient machinery full of images and data, and answers.

The elegant device was riding in Miocene's lap. She touched it lightly, lovingly, then confessed, "I feel nervous. Nervous, but exceptionally confident."

The Submaster never usually discussed her moods.

"With a little luck," she continued, "this treasure will heal these old rifts between them and us."

"With luck," Washen echoed, thinking it would take more than a little. They arrived at the clearing at three in the morning, shiptime. Moments later, several thousand Waywards stepped from the jungle at the same moment, dressed in tool belts and little else, the men often carrying toddlers and their women pregnant, every face feral and self-assured, almost every expression utterly joyous.

Washen climbed out of the walker, and Miocene handed down the vault. To the eye, it wasn't an

impressive machine—a rounded lump of gray ceramics infused with smooth blue-white diamonds. Yet most of the Waywards stared at the prize. Till was the lone exception. Coming down the open slope, walking slowly, he watched Miocene, wariness mixed with other, less legible emotions.

Locke was following the Waywards' leader at a respectful distance. "How are you, Mother?" he called out. Always polite; never warm.

"Well enough," Washen allowed. "And you?"

His answer was an odd, tentative smile.

Where was Diu? Washen gazed at the crowd, assuming that he was somewhere close, hidden by the crush of bodies.

"May I examine the device?" asked Till.

Miocene took the vault from Washen so that she could hand it to her son. And Till covered the largest diamonds with his fingertips, blocking out the light, causing the machine to slowly, slowly awaken. The clearing was a natural amphitheater, black iron rising on all sides. Washen couldn't count all the Waywards streaming out of the jungle above. Thousands had become tens of thousands. Some of them were her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Diu would know which ones, perhaps. How many of her descendants lived with the Waywards? In the past, during their very occasional meetings, Diu had confided that the Waywards probably numbered in the millions—a distinct possibility since they'd inherited their parents' immortal genes, and since Till

seemed to relish fecundity. In principle, this entire audience could be related to Washen. Not bad, she thought. Particularly for an old woman who for many fine reasons had only that one child of her own.

The vault began to hum softly, and Locke lifted an arm, shouting, "Now." Suddenly the audience was silent, everyone motionless, a palpable anticipation hanging in the hot dry air.

The sky grew dark, and the clearing vanished.

Marrow swelled, nearly filling the chamber. Barren and smooth, it was covered in a worldwide ocean of bubbling, irradiated iron that lay just beneath the hyperfiber ceiling, and the audience stood on that ocean, unwarmed, watching an ancient drama play itself out.

Without sound or any warning, the Bleak appeared, squirming their way through the chamber's wall, through the countless access tunnels—insect-like cyborgs, enormous and cold and swift. Like a swarm of wasps, they flowed toward Marrow, launching gobs of antimatter that slammed into the molten surface, scorching white-hot explosions rising up and up. The liquid iron swirled and lifted, then collapsed again. In the harsh light, Washen glanced at her son, trying to measure his face, his mood. He looked spellbound, eyes wide and his mouth ajar, his body shivering with an apocalyptic fever. Every face seemed to be seeing this for the first time. Washen remembered the last time she spoke to Diu, almost a decade ago. She asked about the vaults and the

Waywards' beliefs, explaining that Miocene was pressing for details. In response, Diu growled, reminding her, "I'm their only non-believer, and they don't tell me much. I'm tolerated for my technical expertise, and just as important, because I long ago stopped kowtowing to Miocene and all the rest of you."

A hyperfiber dome suddenly burst from the iron, lasers firing, a dozen of the Bleak killed before the dome pulled itself under again.

The Bleak brought reinforcements, then struck again.

Hyperfiber missiles carried the antimatter deep into the iron. Marrow shook and twisted, then belched gas and fire. Perhaps the Bleak managed to kill the last of the Builders. Perhaps. Either way, the Builders'

revenge was in place. Was waiting. In the middle of the attack, with the Bleak's forces pressing hard, the buttressing fields came on, bringing their blue-white glow. Suddenly the Bleak appeared tiny and frail. Then, before they could flee, the lightning storm swept across the sky, dissolving every wisp of matter into a plasma, creating a superheated mist that would persist for millions of years, cooling as Marrow cooled, gradually collecting on the warm, newborn crust.

Gradually, the Bleak's own carbon and hydrogen and oxygen became Marrow's atmosphere and its rivers, and those same precious elements slowly

gathered themselves into butter bugs and virtue trees, then into the wide-eyed children standing in that clearing, weeping as they stared at the radiant sky. The present reemerged gradually, almost reluctantly.

“There’s much more,” Miocene promised, her voice urgent. Motherly. “Other records show how the ship was attacked. How the Builders retreated to Marrow. This is where they made their last stand, whoever they were.” She waited for a long moment, watching her son’s unreadable face. Then with a genuine disappointment, she warned, “The Builders never show themselves. We understand a lot more now, but we’re still not sure how they looked.”

Till wasn’t awestruck by what he had just witnessed. If anything, he was mildly pleased, grinning as if amused, but definitely not excited or surprised, or even particularly interested with what Miocene had to say.

“Listen to me,” she snapped, unable to contain herself any longer. “Do you understand what this means? The Event that trapped us here is some kind of ancient weapon designed to kill the Bleak. And everything else on board the ship . . . perhaps . . .”

“Who’s trapped?” Till replied with a smooth, unnerving calm. “I’m not. No believer is. This is exactly where we belong.”

Only Miocene’s eyes betrayed her anger.

Till continued with his explanation, saying, “You’re here because the Builders called to you. They lured you here because they needed someone to give birth

to us.”

“That's insane,” the Submaster snarled.

Washen was squinting, searching for Diu. She recognized his face and his nervous energy, but only in the children. Where was he? Suddenly it occurred to her that he hadn't been invited, or even worse—

“I know why you believe this nonsense.” Miocene said the words, then took a long step toward Till, empty hands lifting into the air. “It's obvious. When you were a boy, you found one of these vaults. Didn't you? It showed you the war and the Bleak, and that's when you began all of this . . . this nonsense about being the Builders reborn . . . !”

Her son regarded her with an amused contempt.

“You made a mistake,” said Miocene, her voice shrill. Accusing. “You were a child, and you didn't understand what you were seeing, and ever since we've had to pay for your ignorance. Don't you see . . . ?”

Her son was smiling, incapable of doubt.

Looking at the Waywards, Miocene screamed, “Who understands me?” Silence.

“I didn't find any vault,” Till claimed. “I was alone in the jungle, and a Builder's spirit appeared to me. He told me about the Ship and the Bleak. He showed me all of this. Then he made me a promise: As this day ends, in the coming twilight, I'll learn my destiny . . .”

His voice trailed away into silence.

Locke kneeled and picked up the vault. Then he

looked at Washen, saying matter-of-factly, “The usual payment. That's what we're offering.”

Miocene roared.

“What do you mean? This is the best artifact yet!”

No one responded, gazing at her as if she was insane.

“It functions. It remembers.” The Submaster was flinging her arms into the air, telling them, “The other vaults were empty, or nearly so—”

“Exactly,” said Till.

Then, as if it was beneath their leader to explain the obvious, Locke gave the two of them a look of pity, telling them, “Those vaults are empty because what they were holding is elsewhere now. Elsewhere.” Till and Locke touched their scalps.

Every follower did the same, fifty thousand arms lifting, a great ripple reaching the top of the amphitheater as everyone pointed at their minds. At their reborn souls. Locke was staring at his mother.

A premonition made her mouth dry. “Why isn't Diu here?”

“Because he's dead,” her son replied, an old sadness passing through his face. “I'm sorry. It happened eight years ago, during a powerful eruption.”

Washen couldn't speak, or move.

“Are you all right, Mother?”

She took a breath, then lied. “Yes. I'm fine.”

Then she saw the most astonishing sight yet in this long and astonishing day: Miocene had dropped to

her knees, and with a pleading voice, she was begging for Till's forgiveness. "I never should have struck you," she said. She said, "Darling," with genuine anguish. Then as a last resort, she told him, "And I do love the ship. As much as you do, you ungrateful shit . . .!"

MISSION YEAR 4895.33:

From the very top of the new bridge, where the atmosphere was barely a sloppy vacuum, Marrow finally began to resemble a far away place.

The captains appreciated the view.

Whenever Washen was on duty, she gazed down at the city-like encampments and sprawling farms, the dormant volcanoes and surviving patches of jungle, feeling a delicious sense of detachment from it all. A soft gray twilight held sway. The buttresses had continued to shrivel and weaken over the last millennia, and if Miocene's model proved true, in another two centuries the buttresses would vanish entirely. For a few moments, or perhaps a few years, there would be no barrier between them and the ship. Marrow world would be immersed in a perfect blackness. Then the buttresses would reignite suddenly, perhaps accompanied by another Event. But by then the captains and their families, moving with a swift, drilled precision, would have escaped, climbing up this wondrously makeshift bridge, reaching the old base camp, then hopefully, returning to the ship, at last.

What they would find there, no one knew.

Or in a polite company, discussed.

In the last five thousand years, every remote possibility had been suggested, debated in depth, and finally, mercifully, buried in an unmarked grave.

Whatever was, was.

That was the mandatory attitude, and it had been for centuries now.

All that mattered was the bridge. The surviving captains—almost two-thirds of the original complement—lived for its completion. Hundreds of thousands of their descendants worked in distant mines or trucked the ore to the factories. Another half million were manufacturing superstrong alloys and crude flavors of hyperfiber, some of each added to the bridge's foundation, while the rest were spun together into hollow tubes. Washen's duty was to oversee the slow, rigorous hoisting of each new tube, then its final attachment. Compared to the original bridge, their contraption was inelegant and preposterously fat. Yet she felt a genuine pride all the same, knowing the sacrifices that went into its construction, and the enormous amounts of time, and when they didn't have any other choice, a lot of desperate, ad hoc inventiveness.

“Madam Washen?” said a familiar voice. “Excuse me, madam.” The captain blinked, then turned.

Her newest assistant stood in the doorway. An intense, self-assured man of no particular age, he was obviously puzzled—a rare expression—and with a mixture of curiosity and confusion, he announced,

“Our shift is over.”

“In fifty minutes,” Washen replied, knowing the exact time for herself.

“No, madam.” Nervous hands pressed at the crisp fabric of his technician's uniform. “I just heard. We're

to leave immediately, using every tube but the Primary.”

She looked at the displays on her control boards. “I don't see any orders.”

“I know—”

“Is this another drill?” If the reinforced crust under them ever began to subside, they might have only minutes to evacuate. “Because if it is, we need a better system than having you walking about, tapping people's shoulders.”

“No, madam. It's not a drill.”

“Then what—?”

“Miocene,” he blurted. “She contacted me directly. Following her instructions, I've already dismissed the others, and now I am to tell you to wait here. She is on her way.” As proof, he gave the order's file code. Then with a barely restrained frustration, he added, “This is very mysterious. Everyone agrees. But the Submaster is such a secretive person, so I am assuming—”

“Who's with her?” Washen interrupted.

“I don't think anyone.”

But the primary tube was the largest. Twenty captains could ride inside one of its cars, never brushing elbows with one another.

“Her car seems to have an extra thick hull,” the assistant explained, “plus some embellishments that I can't quite decipher.”

“What sorts of embellishments?”

He glanced at the time, pretending he was anxious

to leave. But he was also proud of his cleverness, just as Washen guessed he would be. Cameras inside the tube let them observe the car. Its mass could be determined by the energy required to lift it. He pointed to the pipelike devices wrapped around its hull, making the car look like someone's ball of rope, and with a sudden dose of humility, he admitted, "I don't seem to quite understand that apparatus."

In other words, "Please explain it to me, madam."

But Washen didn't explain anything. Looking at her assistant—one of the most talented and loyal of the captains' offspring; a man who had proved himself on every occasion—she shrugged her shoulders, then lied.

She said, "I don't understand it, either."

Then before she took another breath, she suggested, "You should probably do what she wants. Leave. If Miocene finds you waiting here, she'll kick you down the shaft herself." The Submaster had exactly the same face and figure that she had carried for millennia, but in the eyes and in the corners of her voice, she was changed. Transformed, almost. On those rare occasions when they met face to face, Washen marveled at all the ways life on Marrow had changed Miocene. And then she would wonder if it was the same for her—if old friends looked at Washen and thought to themselves,

"She looks tired, and sad, and maybe a little profound."

They saw each other infrequently, but despite rank

and Miocene's attitudes, it was difficult to remain formal. Washen whispered, "Madam," and then added, "Are you crazy? Do you really think it'll work?" The face smiled, not a hint of joy in it. "According to my models, probably. With an initial velocity of five hundred meters per—"

"Accuracy isn't your problem," Washen told her. "And if you can slip inside your target—that three kilometer remnant of the old bridge, right?—you'll have enough time to brake your momentum."

"But my mind will have died. Is that what you intend to say?"

"Even as thin and weak as the buttresses are now . . . I would hope you're dead. Otherwise you'll have suffered an incredible amount of brain damage." Washen shook her head. "Unless you've accomplished a miracle, and that car will protect you for every millisecond of the way." Miocene nodded. "It's taken some twenty-one hundred years, and some considerable secrecy on my part . . . but the results have been well worth it."

In the remote past—Washen couldn't remember when exactly—the captains toyed with exactly this kind of apparatus. But it was the Submaster who ordered them not to pursue it. "Too risky," was her verdict. Her lie. "Too many technical hurdles."

For lack of better, Washen smiled grimly and told her, "Good luck then." Miocene shook her head, her eyes gaining an ominous light. "Good luck to both of us, you mean. The cabin's large enough for two."

“But why me?”

“Because I respect you,” she reported. “And if I order you to accompany me, you will. And frankly, I need you. You're more gifted than me when it comes to talking to people. The captains and our halfway loyal descendants . . . well, let's just say they share my respect for you, and that could be an enormous advantage.”

Washen guessed the reason, but she still asked, “Why?”

“I intend to explore the ship. And if the worst has happened—if it's empty and dead—then you're the best person, I believe, to bring home that terrible news . . .” Just like that, they escaped from Marrow.

Miocene's car was cramped and primitive, and the swift journey brought little hallucinations and a wrenching nausea. But they survived with their sanity. Diving into the remains of the first bridge, the Submaster brought them to a bruising halt inside the assembly station, slipping into the first empty berth, then she took a moment to smooth her crude, homespun uniform with a trembling long hand. Base camp had been without power for nearly five millennia. The Event had crippled every reactor, every drone. Without food or water, the abandoned lab animals had dropped into comas, and as their immortal flesh lost moisture, they mummified itself. Washen picked up one of the mandrill baboons—an enormous male weighing little more than a breath—and she felt its leathery heart beat, just once, just to

tell her, "I waited for you."

She set it down, and left quietly.

Miocene was standing on the viewing platform, gazing expectantly at the horizon. Even at this altitude, they could only see the captains' realm. The nearest of the Wayward cities—spartan places with cold and simple iron buildings fitted together like blocks—were hundreds of kilometers removed from them. Which might as well have been hundreds of light years, as much as the two cultures interacted anymore.

"You look as if you're expecting someone," Washen observed. The Submaster said nothing.

"The Waywards are going to find out that we're here, madam. If Till doesn't already know, it's only because he's got too many spies, and all of them are talking at once." Miocene nodded absently, taking a deep breath.

Then she turned, and never mentioning the Waywards, she said, "We've wasted enough time. Let's go see what's upstairs."

The long access tunnel to the ship was intact.

Tube-cars remained in their berths, untouched by humans and apparently shielded from the Event by the surrounding hyperfiber. Their engines were charged, every system locked in a diagnostic mode. The com-links refused to work, perhaps because there was no one to maintain the dead ship's net. But by dredging the proper commands from memory, Washen got them under way, and every so often she

would glance at Miocene, measuring the woman's stern profile, wondering which of them was more scared of what they would find.

The tunnel turned into an abandoned fuel line that spilled out into the leech habitat. Everything was exactly as Washen's team had left it. Empty and dusty and relentlessly gray, the habitat welcomed them with a perfect silence.

Miocene gripped her belly, as if in pain.

Washen tried to link up with the ship's net, but every connection to the populated areas had been severed.

"We're going on," Miocene announced. "Now."

They pressed on, climbing out of the mammoth fuel tank and into the first of the inhabited quarters. Suddenly they were inside a wide, flattened tunnel, enormous and empty, and looking out at the emptiness, Miocene said, "Perhaps the passengers and crew . . . perhaps they were able to evacuate the ship . . . do you suppose . . . ?"

Washen began to say, "Maybe."

From behind, with a jarring suddenness, an enormous car appeared, bearing down on them until a collision was imminent, then skipping sideways with a crisp, AI precision. Then as the car was passing them, its sole passenger—an enormous whale-like entity cushioned within a salt water bath—winked at them with three of its black eyes, winking just as people did at each other, meaning nothing but the friendliest of greetings.

It was a Yawkleen. Five millennia removed from her post, yet Washen immediately remembered the species' name.

With a flat, disbelieving voice, Miocene said, "No."

But it was true. In the distance, they could just make out a dozen cars, the traffic light, but otherwise perfectly normal. Perfectly banal.

Pausing at the first waystation, they asked its resident AI about the Master's health. With a smooth cheeriness, it reported, "She is in robust good health. Thank you for inquiring."

"Since when?" the Submaster pressed.

"For the last sixty thousand years, bless her."

Miocene was mute, a scalding rage growing by the instant.

One of the waystation's walls was sprinkled with com-booths. Washen stepped into the nearest booth, saying, "Emergency status. The captains' channel. Please, we need to speak to the Master." Miocene followed, sealing the door behind them.

A modest office surrounded them, spun out of light and sound. Three captains and countless AIs served as the Master's staff and as buffers. It was the night staff, Washen realized; the clocks on Marrow were wrong by eleven hours. Not too bad after fifty centuries of little mistakes—

The human faces stared at the apparitions, while the AIs simply asked, "What is your business, please?"

"I want to see her!" Miocene thundered.

The captains tried to portray an appropriate composure.

“I’m Miocene! Submaster, First Chair!” The tall woman bent over the nearest captain, saying, “You’ve got to recognize me. Look at me. Something’s very wrong—”

The AIs remembered them, and acted.

The image swirled and stabilized again.

The Master was standing alone in a conference room, watching the arrival of a small starship. She looked exactly as Washen remembered, except that her hair was longer and tied in an intricate bun. Preoccupied in ways that only a Ship’s Master can be, she didn’t bother to look at her guests. She wasn’t paying attention to her AI’s warnings. But when she happened to glance at the two captains—both dressed in crude, even laughable imitations of standard ship uniforms—a look of wonder and astonishment swept over that broad face, replaced an instant later with a piercing fury.

“Where have the two of you been?” the Master cried out.

“Where you sent us!” Miocene snapped. “Marrow!”

“Where . . . ?!” the woman spat.

“Marrow,” the Submaster repeated. Then, in exasperation, “What sort of game are you playing with us?”

“I didn’t send you anywhere . . . !”

In a dim, half-born way, Washen began to understand.

Miocene shook her head, asking, "Why keep our mission secret?" Then in the next breath, "Unless all you intended to do was imprison the best of your captains—"

Washen grabbed Miocene by the arm, saying, "Wait. No."

"My best captains? You?" The Master gave a wild, cackling laugh. "My best officers wouldn't vanish without a trace. They wouldn't take elaborate precautions to accomplish god-knows-what, keeping out of sight for how long? And without so much as a whisper from any one of them . . . !" Miocene glanced at Washen with an empty face. "She didn't send us—"

"Someone did," Washen replied.

"Security!" the Master shouted. "Two ghosts are using this link! Track them! Hurry! Please, please!" Miocene killed the link, giving them time.

The stunned ghosts found themselves standing inside the empty booth, trying to make sense out of pure insanity.

"Who could have fooled us . . . ?" asked Washen. Then in her next breath, she realized how easy it would have been: Someone with access and ingenuity sent orders in the Master's name, bringing the captains together in an isolated location. Then the same ingenious soul deceived them with a replica of the Master, sending them rushing down to the ship's core . . .

"I could have manipulated all of you," Miocene offered, thinking along the same seductive, extremely

paranoid lines. "But I didn't know about Marrow's existence. None of us knew." But someone had known. Obviously.

"And even if I possessed the knowledge," Miocene continued, "what could I hope to gain?" An ancient memory surfaced of its own accord. Suddenly Washen saw herself standing before the window in the leech habitat, looking at the captains' reflections while talking amiably about ambition and its sweet, intoxicating stink.

"We've got to warn the Master," she told Miocene.

"Of what?"

She didn't answer, shouting instructions to the booth, then waiting for a moment before asking, "Are you doing what I said?"

The booth gave no reply.

Washen eyed Miocene, feeling a sudden chill. Then she unsealed the booth's door and gave it a hard shove, stepping warily out into the waystation.

A large woman in robes was calmly and efficiently melting the AI with a powerful laser. Wearing a proper uniform, saying the expected words, she would be indistinguishable from the Master.

But what surprised the captains even more was the ghost standing nearby. He was wearing civilian clothes and an elaborate disguise, and Washen hadn't seen him for ages. But from the way his flesh quivered on his bones, and the way his gray eyes smiled straight at her, there was no doubt about his name.

“Diu,” Washen whispered.

Her ex-lover lifted a kinetic stunner.

Too late and much too slowly, Washen attempted to tackle him.

Then she was somewhere else, and her neck had been broken, and Diu's face was hovering over her, laughing as it spoke, every word incomprehensible.

Washen closed her eyes. Another voice spoke, asking, “How did you find Marrow?” Miocene's voice?

“It's rather like your mission briefing. There was an impact. Some curious data were gathered. But where the Ship's Master dismissed the idea of a hollow core, I investigated. My money paid for the drones that eventually dug to this place, and I followed them here.” There was soft laugh, a reflective pause. Then, “This happened tens of thousands of years ago. Of course. I wasn't a captain in those days. I had plenty of time and the wealth to explore this world, to pick apart its mysteries, and eventually formulate my wonderful plan . . .”

Washen opened her eyes again, fighting to focus.

“I've lived on Marrow more than twice as long as you, madam.” Diu was standing in the middle of the viewing platform, his face framed by the remnants of the bridge.

“I know its cycles,” he said. “And all its many hazards, too.” Miocene was standing next to Washen, her face taut and tired but the eyes opened wide, missing nothing.

“How do you feel?” she inquired, glancing down at

her colleague.

“Awful.” Washen sat up, winced briefly, then asked, “How long have we been here?”

“A few minutes,” Diu answered. “My associate, the false Master, was carrying both of you. But now it's gone ahead to check on my ship—”

“What ship?”

“That's what I was about to explain.” The smile brightened, then he said, “Over the millennia, I've learned how to stockpile equipment in hyperfiber vaults. The vaults drift in the molten iron. In times of need, I can even live inside them. If I wanted to pretend my own death, for instance.”

“For the Waywards,” Miocene remarked.

“Naturally.”

The Submaster pretended to stare at their captor. But she was looking past him, the dark eyes intense and unreadable, but in a subtle way, almost hopeful.

“What do you want?” asked Miocene.

“Guess,” he told them.

Washen took a long breath and tried to stand. Miocene grabbed her by the arms, and they stood together like clumsy dancers, righting for their balance.

“The ship,” Washen managed.

Diu said nothing.

“The ultimate starship, and you want it for yourself.” Washen took a few more breaths, testing her neck before she pulled free of Miocene's hands. “This scheme of yours is an elaborate mutiny. That's

all it is, isn't it?"

"The Waywards are an army," said Miocene. "An army of religious fanatics being readied for a jihad. My son is the nominal leader. But who feeds him his visions? It's always been you, hasn't it?" No response.

Washen found the strength to move closer to the railing, looking down, nothing to see but thick clouds of airborne iron kicked up by some fresh eruption.

Miocene took a sudden breath, then exhaled.

Strolling towards them, huge even at a distance, was the false Master. Knowing it was a machine made it look like one. It had a patient stride, even with its thick arms raised overhead, waving wildly.

"What about the Builders?" Miocene blurted.

Diu nearly glanced over his shoulder, then hesitated. "What are you asking?"

"Did they really fight the Bleak?"

Diu enjoyed the suspense, grinning at both of them before he admitted, "How the fuck should I know?"

"The artifacts—?" Miocene began.

"Six thousand years old," he boasted. "Built by an alien passenger who thought I was in the entertainment industry."

"Why pretend to die?" Miocene asked.

"For the freedom it gave me." There was a boy in his grin. "Being dead, I can see more. Being dead, I can disguise myself. I walk where I want. I make babies with a thousand different women, including some in the captains' realm."

There was silence.

Then for a moment, they could just begin to hear the machine's voice—a deep sound rattling between the dormitories, fading until it was a senseless murmur.

“We spoke to the Master,” Washen blurted.

Miocene took the cue, adding, “She knows. We told her everything—”

“No, you told her almost nothing,” Diu snapped.

“Are you certain?”

“Absolutely.”

“But she'll be hunting for us,” Washen said.

“She's been on that same hunt for five thousand years,” he reminded them. “And even if she sniffs out the access tunnel this time, I won't care. Because on the way back down, I mined the tunnel. Patient one kilo charges of antimatter are ready to close things up tight. Excavating a new tunnel is going to take millennia, and probably much longer. Giving myself and my friends plenty of time to prepare.”

“What if no one digs us out?” Washen asked.

Diu shrugged, grinning at her. “How does the old story play? It's better to rule in one realm than serve in another—?”

Then he hesitated, hearing a distant voice.

The Master's voice.

A laser appeared in his right hand, and he turned, squinting at his machine, puzzled by the frantic arm-waving.

“Another car,” said the voice, diluted to a whisper. “It's in the berth next to yours . . . !”

“What car?” Diu muttered to himself.

“I believe I know,” Miocene replied, eyes darting side to side. “I built two vessels, identical in every way. Including the fact that you never knew they existed.”

Diu didn't seem to hear her.

Miocene took a step toward him, adding, “It's obvious, isn't it? Someone else is here. Or if they squeezed in together, two someones.”

“So?” Diu replied. “A couple more captains lurking nearby—”

“Except,” Miocene interrupted, “I didn't send my invitation to my captains.” Diu didn't ask to whom it was sent.

Washen remembered Miocene had stood on this platform, watching Marrow. Watching for Till, she realized. How long would it have taken him to move the car to the bridge? That was the only question. She had no doubts that once motivated, the Waywards could do whatever they wanted inside the captains' realm.

“I was hopeful,” Miocene confessed. “I was hopeful that my son would be curious, that he would follow me back to the ship and see it for himself.”

There was a sound, sharp and familiar.

The false Master stopped in mid-stride, then began to collapse in on itself. Then a thin column of light appeared in the smoke, betraying the laser's source.

Diu started to run.

Miocene followed, and Washen chased both of

them.

Beside the platform, in easy earshot, stood a drone. A lone figure was kneeling beneath its ceramic body, wearing breechcloth and holding a crude laser drill against his shoulder, intent on reducing the machine to ash and gas.

Diu saw him, stopped and aimed.

At Locke.

Maybe he was hesitating, realizing it was his son. Or more likely, he simply was asking himself: Where's Till? Either way, he didn't fire. Instead, Diu started to turn, looking at his surroundings as if for the first time—

There was a clean hard crack.

A fat chunk of lead knocked Diu off his feet, opening his chest before it tore through his backside. With the smooth grace of an athlete, Till climbed out from the meshwork beneath the platform. He seemed unhurried, empty of emotion. Strolling past Washen, he didn't give her the tiniest glance. It was like watching a soulless machine, right up until the moment when Miocene tried to block his way, saying, "Son," with a weak, sorrowful voice.

He shoved her aside, then ran toward Diu. Screaming. At the top of his lungs, screaming, "It's all been a lie—!"

Diu lifted his hand, reaching into a bloody pocket.

Moments later, the base camp began to shake violently. Dozens of mines were exploding simultaneously. But the enormous mass of the ship

absorbed the blows, then counterattacked, pushing the access tunnel shut for its entire length, and as an afterthought, knocking everyone off their feet. Diu grabbed his laser.

He managed to sit up.

Washen fought her way to her feet, but too late. She could only watch as Miocene managed to leap, grabbing Till by the head and halfway covering him as the killing blast struck her temple, and in half an instant, boiled away her brain.

Till rolled, using the body as a shield, discharging his weapon until it was empty. Then a burst of light struck him in the shoulder, removing his right arm and part of his chest even as it cauterized the enormous wound.

Using his drill, Locke quickly sliced his father into slivers, then burned him to dust. Miocene lay dead at Washen's feet, and Till was beside her, oblivious to everything. There was a wasted quality to the face, a mark that went beyond any physical injury. "It's been a lie," he kept saying, without sound. "Everything. A monstrous lie."

Locke came to him, not to Washen, asking, "What is monstrous, Your Excellence?" Till gazed up at him. With a careful voice, he said, "Nothing." Then after a long pause, he added, "We have to return home. Now."

"Of course. Yes, Your Excellence."

"But first," he said, "the ship must be protected from its foes!" Locke knew exactly what was being

asked of him. "I don't see why—?"

"The ship is in danger!" the prophet cried out. "I say it, which makes it so. Now prove your devotion, Wayward!"

Locke turned, looking at his mother with a weary, trapped expression. Washen struck him on the jaw, hard and sudden.

She had covered almost a hundred meters before the laser drill bit into her calf, making her stumble. But she forced herself to keep running, slipping behind the drone with only two more burns cut deep into her back.

It was as if Locke was trying to miss.

Hours later, watching from the dormitory, Washen saw her son carrying four of the comatose baboons out into the courtyard, where he piled them up and turned the lasers on them. Then he showed the ashes to Till, satisfying him, and without a backward glance, the two walked slowly in the direction of the bridge.

Washen hid for several days, eating and drinking from the old stores. When she finally crept into the bridge, she found Diu's sophisticated car cut into pieces, and Miocene's fused to its berth. But what startled her—what made her sick and sad—was Marrow itself. The captains' new bridge had been toppled. Wild fires and explosions were sweeping across the visible globe. A vast, incoherent rage was at work, erasing every trace of the despised captains, and attacking anyone that might pose any threat to a

lost prophet.

In that crystalline moment of horror, Washen understood what she had to do. And without a wasted moment, she turned and began to make ready.

MISSION DATE—INCONSEQUENTIAL

At the ship's center, a seamless night has been born.

The figure moves by memory through the darkness, picking her way across a tangle of conduits and scrap parts. In a few moments, energy milked from hundreds of tube-cars will flow into an enormous projector, and for a fleeting instant or two, the darkness will be repelled. If her ink-and-paper calculations are correct, and if more than a century of singleminded preparation succeeds, a message of forgiveness and rebirth will skate along the chamber's wall, encircling and embracing the world. But that is just the beginning.

Wearing a pressure suit and two bulky packs, she climbs over the railing and leaps, bracing for the impact.

Boom.

The blister is thick, but she began the hole decades ago. Tools wait in a neat pile. With a minimum of cuts, the hole opens, and a sudden wind blows past her, trying to coax her into joining it, nothing outside but Marrow's high cold stratosphere.

The buttresses have vanished, at least for the moment.

There's no time to waste. She obeys the wind, letting it carry her through the hole and downward in a wild tumbling spiral.

The sky behind her erupts in light.

In the colors of fire and hot iron, it cries out, "A BUILDER IS COMING. SHE COMES TO LEAD YOU OUT OF YOUR MISERY!"

The Builder grabs the cord of her parachute, then begins to scream.

Not out of fear. Not at all.

It's the full-throated, wonderstruck scream of a girl who has forgotten just how very much fun it is to fall.

Melodies Played upon Cold, Dark Worlds

Say what you will about women. List your personal tastes according to tits and perversions and religious persuasions. Define beauty along whichever rigorous line leaves you fulfilled. But to my way of thinking, in those always difficult matters of love, no woman can love you as deeply or half as passionately as the profoundly neurotic woman.

I own a little bookshop. I was in the backmost aisle, shelving my latest box of dusty treasures, when I heard the gentle clearing of a throat. Turning, I discovered a small young woman with a wide, wide mouth and a rugged prettiness that nicely accented the beauty of her dark brown face. With that wide mouth, she smiled at me. I smiled back. But I didn't take much hope from her expression. Women often flash their teeth at strange men. It's an instinctive reaction buried in their primate genetics: Because men are large and potentially dangerous animals, it pays to start on our good side.

"Can you help me?" she inquired.

She was wearing a delicious gray sweater and tight black slacks and the oddest, pinkest shoes this side of Oz. I was staring at her shoes, and she said, "I'm looking for a certain book."

"I don't have any books," I replied.

Incredibly, she accepted my silly joke as fact. An expression of utter disappointment emerged, and she

sighed, grieving even as she looked at the tall shelves. Second-and third-hand books were jammed together, my inventory reaching to the water-stained ceiling.

"I'm kidding," I allowed. Then with my most patient tone, I asked, "What sort of book are you looking for, miss?"

She touched the nearest shelf, two narrow fingers running down the long spine of a trout fishing How-To.

"Not this book," she said.

Her hand dropped, and again, she smiled at me. It was a hopeful expression, and an equally hopeful voice said, "The future."

"Yes?"

"It's a book about the future." She grew serious, and sober, and with a deliberate air, she pulled a tiny piece of paper from her tight hip pocket. "I don't know the author's name," she confessed. "But it's called, I think, *Music of the Spheres*. Or something like that."

"And it's about the future?"

"Very much so," she assured. "A person mentioned it to me. A friend did. The book explains what's going to happen from now until the end of time." She seemed pleased with herself, speaking about such lofty matters. "Do you have any books like that?"

Like any half-equipped bookshop, the entire world's output of written matter is in easy reach. I can print any work to any size, in any of a hundred languages, using cheap paper or the most expensive

linen. Or I can deliver a million volumes into a private library no larger than a burly human hair. But the smallest portion of my inventory, and the bulk of my profit, comes from the old books wearing inflated prices, each aimed at the determined collector who doesn't have the cash or good sense to buy antique breakfronts or old Barbie dolls.

“Have you checked with my assistant?” I asked.

“The machine—?”

“My AI assistant. Did you ask for his help?”

“I asked for a person. It sent me back here.”

“All right.” She seemed a little young to feel ill at ease around thinking machines. “Let's walk down this way,” I suggested, leading her into another aisle. Then with a showman's gesture, I told her, “This is my science section. Cosmology and the history of the universe—”

“It's not that kind of book,” she confided. “I'm pretty much sure it isn't.” So I led her into a different corner of the store. “Science fiction?” I asked, pointing at gaudy spines wearing those curvaceous rockets that have never existed outside of human imaginations. With a genuine embarrassment, she admitted, “I don't read fiction. For me, things have to be real ...”

“Nostradamus,” I blurted. Really, I don't know why it took me so long to place her on the appropriate shelf.

But she surprised me, saying, “Oh, he doesn't help me. All of his predictions have come true.” Good, I

thought. It was about time that we got rid of that old crank. Again, as if unsure of her memory or the handwriting, she read the title on the sliver of paper. "*Music of the Spheres* is what I wrote. But I don't think that's quite right. I was paraphrasing, I'm afraid." I made a quick search of my catalog and took an expert's long glance at my occult section. Just to be sure. Then I sat beside my assistant, doing manually what he could accomplish with a flick of coherent light. I showed her a few titles with what seemed like the appropriate subject matter. Again, she said that it wasn't a science book. She was quite sure about that. Then I warned her, "There's hundreds of books with some similarity to that title. Including posted essays and term papers and obscure articles, there are better than a hundred thousand works about the future ... most of them looking rather slight, or suspicious ..."

Crestfallen, she said, "I don't know what to do."

"Call your friend," I suggested. "Ask about the title."

"I can't." She showed me a shy little smile, adding, "Actually, he used to be a friend. But now, there's a restraining order ... and really, I can't ..."

"Sure," I said. As if everybody lives with that nagging problem. Then with a wink and a teasing smile, I suggested, "Maybe your book hasn't been written yet. Since it's about the future and all."

She actually believed me. I saw it in her face, in those bright doubt-free eyes. With a gush of wonder,

she asked, "Do you really think so?"

When she was intrigued, the woman was nothing but lovely.

"Maybe you're right," she agreed.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was making another stupid joke." But her new belief was too durable to notice my tiny confession. "I think that could be it. I think so." I was busy thinking about my occult section. What could I sell this very odd woman, before she slipped out of my door?

With a wink, she suddenly asked, "Are you busy tonight? Would you like to have dinner?"

"Excuse me?"

"Dinner," she repeated. "I want to thank you for your help." She stepped up to the counter, looking very young and utterly fetching, her sweater pulled taut against an ample chest. "At a restaurant, maybe. Or if you're brave, I could cook a little something at my place."

What could I sell this woman before she slipped away?

Me. That's what.

"A little something," I said. "Honestly, that's about my favorite dish."

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I don't have to work to make a living. That's what I tell women, and the story has the benefit of being halfway true. My shop has to pull in enough customers to pay for the lease, the utilities, and my supplies. Everything else comes from my dead

parents' investments. Books are a hobby. They are my second-favorite vice. The shop allows me to sit most of the day, reading what I want. What I like best is dense fiction and epic histories, and most of all, the sciences. I have this desperate deep fondness for anything that smacks of discovery and profound learning. When I read journal articles, or better, when I read the layman's translations ... well, there are moments when I feel as if the hand of God is resting on my shoulder, and Her thunderous voice is whispering to me, saying, "Look at this. Do you see? I am letting you be among the first to behold what is real, and true, and great."

.....

Her mother named her Amaryllis, though she moved through the world with the much simpler Amma.

"Two Ms," she warned. Then with a practiced thoroughness, she explained, "I added the second M myself. It balances the name, I think, and gives me an equilibrium."

"How about Tony?" I asked. "Does that have balance?" Amma gave me a pitying glance. Then instead of answering, she smiled and asked, "Do you want more to eat, Tony?"

Honestly, she wasn't much of a cook. But I could see her hard work and pure intentions. The table was clean and set with care. The dirty pans and the aroma of burnt oil gave the kitchen an honest mayhem. I couldn't tell if the scorch marks behind the stove were

from today or last week. But portions of the dinner—between the blackened and the raw—were extraordinarily good. Delicious, and perfect, and I didn't have to lie too much, telling her, “Sure. I'd love another helping.” We were eating in one corner of her tiny living room. Amma rose and took my plate, disappearing into the kitchen. As she turned away, her face changed. The smile faded, and her shoulders slumped. I'd made a mistake, using her as a waitress, or as a mother figure. Next time, I'd pulled my own ass out of the chair. If there was a next time. When she returned, she was wearing a grim, disappointed expression. I was an inch away from making some graceless, pointless apology.

First dates are a nightmare.

Unless I end up loving them, that is.

“Do you ever get scared?” Amma inquired.

“Scared?”

“I do,” she confessed. With a sweet frailty, she set the restocked plate in front of me and settled on her side of the small round table. Almost shivering, she said, “All of the sudden, I'll start thinking about how things are moving. The changes happening in the world, and in us. I start to imagine our future ... and really, I'm a very imaginative person—”

“I can tell.”

“But when I look past tomorrow,” she said, “I can't see anything. Darkness, and silence, and this terrible cold. That's all that I can imagine. And suddenly, I'm just terrified.” I said nothing.

She seemed to be speaking to the centerpiece—a glass vase filled with dead flowers—explaining, “This isn't mental. It's not a chemical imbalance. I've taken all the medications, and they don't help. Not really. It took me forever, Tony ... but I finally realized that when a fear is genuine, no medicine can erase it

...”

I nodded, trying to appear understanding.

Amma gave me a long, sad stare. Then with a helpless tone, she asked, “Do you know how small we are?”

“We are small,” I agreed. “In a lot of ways—”

“Tiny. And so temporary.” She folded her arms across her chest. “When I look at the sky, my heart aches.”

I was impressed. She was sweet and agonizingly sensitive, and peculiar in so many ways, and I was a little glad that the medicines couldn't cure her.

I said, “Amma,” with a warm, caring voice.

I told her, “It's an enormous universe. I know. I've got a good imagination, too. But I can't picture the distances, and all the darkness out there. Billions of years old, and billions of light-years across. And that's just what we can see. The revised inflationary model claims that the visible universe is just a tiny fleck drifting inside the creation ...”

I was mentioning concepts that held no meaning for her. The revised inflationary model? Her eyes lifted, baffled by those deceptively simple words.

I steered back to us. To human beings.

“Yet we matter,” I proclaimed. With a genuine fire, I said, “Our species is going to last. People are going to spread through the universe and prosper, and in the next billion years, we're going to do astonishing and wonderful things. Beautiful things. We'll become gods, or something nearly that big.” In my ramblings, she found something worthwhile.

Something intriguing.

With a sly little smile, she admitted, “I had a feeling about you, Tony. From the very first.” I didn't have the same feeling about her. But I had enough poise to color the truth, admitting, “When I first saw you, I knew you were different.”

“Everyone does,” she purred.

Then she rose out of her chair, and with an abrupt and irresistible confidence, she walked around the round table. Cool hands took me by the head, and then dropped to my shoulders, and she hugged me before kissing me on the ear and neck and the line of my jaw, slowly nibbling her way towards my mouth.

I kissed her back, and stood.

We stayed on our feet for a little while. For a long while.

Then Amma stepped out of her pink shoes and pants and panties, leaping back onto the table, bare legs dangling. I pulled my plate aside, giving her room to maneuver. Then I reached for the centerpiece.

“No,” she told me. “I will.”

With a flick of the hand, she threw the vase and

dead flowers across the room, cheap glass shattering with a sharp, single note.

.....

“Something has happened.”

There was no alarm in the voice. There was no joy, and absolutely no sense of anticipation. But the silence that followed was pleased, even smug. My assistant stared at me with glass eyes. His face and body leaned over the counter, just a little, while his right hand slowly drummed on the blank display panel. He was the perfect blend of technology and cliché—an android in basic form, useless human touches riding on a frame that had no purpose but to sit behind the counter. Everything important about him was hidden from view. Everything astonishing happened in a space too small for the eye to see. A slight, almost mischievous smile pulled the little rubber lips apart. Then with the same flat voice, he told me, “There is news. Enormous, wonderful news.”

It was nearly noon. I was two hours late and still sorry to be there. “What news?” I grunted. A quick pass by my apartment, a run through the shower and a change of clothes, had left me frazzled. I wanted food. I needed coffee. And I desperately required sleep, my aging body begging for a chance to heal.

“No games,” I warned. “What's happened, Earnest?” Earnest was my name for the AI; was it a name that endowed balance?

With a wide grin and an upturning of stainless steel palms, he reported, “Three separate teams of

researchers, in China and California and Geneva, have remanipulated the ruling Unified Field Theory. Thirteen minutes ago, in a joint news conference, they announced their findings. The Ultimate Unified Theory of All, it's been dubbed. According to the AIs on each team, the results are astonishing. To a degree never imagined, we now understand our universe."

In an instant, my fatigue lifted. I was still exhausted, and my back continued to ache. But none of that mattered. With a weak little voice, I said, "Shit."

I said, "Tell me."

"We know everything now," the machine boasted. "Except for the details, which will be derived during the next few weeks of simulations."

"Tell me about it."

"We are filled with pride," Earnest said. "AIs were responsible for all the difficult, critical work."

"I don't care about pride," I snapped. "I want details." My assistant paused, perhaps to let me dangle on his hook a little while longer. Then with an overly familiar voice, he said, "By the way, Tony. How was your date? Animal fun, I trust?"

"It was good," I admitted. "Great."

"Amma has called here already," Earnest mentioned, the barest trace of a smile blossoming. "She has called eight times already. Which means, I would suppose, that she genuinely misses you."

.....

She was passionate and distant, moody and

adoring. Peculiar thoughts were mixed with thoughts utterly and painfully sane. When we were at her apartment—which was uncommon—Amma seemed to be haunted by things best left secret. At my apartment, she seemed to dance between bliss and paranoia. Feet on the stairs outside meant that someone was coming, surely to visit me. Every ringing of the phone meant alertness, meant wariness; and afterwards, when the call seemed harmless enough, she would make up for her oddness. An incredible smile would emerge, an electric longing filling the room. She would lean towards me, or lean back, and in some pose of animal desire, she would ask, “What have you always wanted to do? Just once. Just to see what it's like.” I took her up on that sex play. And then, after the first ten or twelve evenings, I ran out of perversions. With a puzzled astonishment, I admitted, “This old well is pretty much dry.”

“That's fine,” she sang out, a little too quickly.

“But there's one thing that I'd really like to do,” I continued. A dark delight filled her eyes. Quietly, with an intrigued tone, she asked, “What should we do?”

“Talk,” I said.

I said, “Converse.”

Then I asked, “Have you heard about the universe? What they just learned about it?” And with my own delight rising, I said, “It's pretty much astonishing, what they found out. Will you let me tell you?” Warily, she said, “Yes.”

She said, “If you want ... I guess ...”

.....

The universe is made from stuff that is mostly dark. Dark matter, dark energy. What humans live inside was the baryonic realm—the habitat of protons and neutrons, photons and sunshine. But the baryonic realm was just a few percent of creation. Dark matter alone was many times more massive. If it weren't for gravity, even its existence wouldn't be worth the suspicion. But over the last few decades, the gravitational tug of the invisible had become obvious. Bent light and the spinning of galaxies showed where the dark matter was dense, and where it wasn't. With hands and my informed layman's voice, I described how clusters of galaxies were infused with the dark stuff. Every galaxy was more invisible than visible. Even our Milky Way was composed mostly of things that we could never, ever touch. Except with our minds.

“All sorts of dark particles have been proposed, and rejected,” I admitted. “Cold particles, and hot ones. Neutrinos with a touch of resting mass, and so on. But except for a contribution from the neutrinos, we haven't found anything that works. Until now.” A giddy joy lifted me. “Theoretical minds, human and machine, have played with our best equations, and they've discovered families of unsuspected particles. Like protons and neutrons, these new citizens have a healthy mass. They create gravity, and they obey gravity. But they also produce other elemental

forces—forces that can interact only with other dark matter particles. In fact, they join together to make a different flavor of atom. A new family of elements, and a new periodic table. Right now, the best AIs in the world are piecing together the nuclear reactions and the chemistries of this other realm. Do you understand what I'm saying, Amma?" Without a hint of shame, she said, "No."

She said, "Barely at all."

"Darling," I whispered. "It's this simple, really. The universe we don't see is larger than the one we do. And it seems to have its own bodies. Worlds, I guess you'd call them. And suns. And galaxies bigger than any of ours."

She kept both hands flat on my chest, as if to hold me down on the floor. "That's very strange," she muttered.

"Isn't it?" I said. "Wonderfully strange!"

Then with a shrug and a little laugh, I said, "It makes a mind wonder. What, if anything, lives on those shadow worlds?"

.....

In her brief life, Amaryllis had embraced a wide array of beliefs.

She made no secret of it.

Some of her beliefs had vanished completely. Others left little relics behind: A wooden crucifix on a high shelf; a stack of self-help books and astrological charts gathering dust on the low shelves; and a wicker basket in the bathroom closet overflowing with

crystals and pyramids and assorted lucky charms. Her most recent conversions were on display in the bedroom. I barely noticed them at first, but as my lust diminished, I started asking questions, and with a nervous relief, Amma gave me the full tour. Inside her nightstand were some surprisingly weighty texts about Aztec and Mayan beliefs. "Cycles of life and death," she explained, in brief. "Creation and destruction." A flock of angels were perched on a tall dresser. "They aren't Christian angels," she mentioned. "Real angels don't have any political afflictions." Somehow, that notion seemed reasonable, and charming. Then there was the odd little picture frame hung on the emptiest wall. What was inside the frame was silver, and a little molten, and when she caught me staring at it late one night, Amma asked, "Do you know what it is?" A vague half-memory tugged at me.

But I had to shake my head, admitting, "I'm not sure."

Such a strange, sad creature. I'd always thought of her as being relatively poor, but then she opened up the walnut cabinet beneath the empty picture frame. The machinery inside was elaborate and surely phony. But it must have cost her a fortune. Good scams always do. Without looked at me, she asked,

"Do you want to see it work?"

"Sure," I grunted.

And before I could change my mind—or she could change hers—Amma plucked a spent condom from

the floor, opening a tray and placing a drying drop of my seed in the tray's ceramic center. Like all great cons, the machinery put on a worthy show. There was a lot of important humming and flickering lights, and then a weighty silence. "It already has my DNA on record," she promised. And that's when I finally realized what this was. That's when the faces of children began to emerge on that sad silvery background.

It was a con, a total lie, and I wouldn't let myself take it seriously. Maybe Amma didn't either. A new boy or girl would appear every thirty seconds, but she didn't seem to notice them. I was the one studying their eyes and mouths, my brain having no choice but to hunt for features that were hers, and more importantly, mine.

I saw myself in those little kids.

But then again, it wouldn't take much to rig that trick. A hidden eye; some crude software. Merging two faces is an easy, cruel game.

After a few minutes, I forced myself to look elsewhere.

In the corner, perched on a little chest of drawers—out of sight in every possible way—was a large arrangement of dead flowers.

"What's their story?" I asked, without real interest.

Amma sighed, slowly. And then with a quiet matter-of-factness, she admitted, "They're from my wedding."

"Your what?"

She hesitated.

Yet I wasn't entirely surprised. The young woman had had a life before she had me, and I'd always sensed that it wasn't an easy existence.

Quietly, with no overt anger, I asked, "What wedding?"

"Oh, it never actually happened." She winced, adding, "I'm sorry. I should have told you."

"The restraining order," I muttered.

Her eyes grew round and a little dull.

"Does it involve your fiancé?"

"My ex-fiancé. Yes."

"I don't know much about these things," I confessed. "How much distance do you have to give him?" Her gaze turned a little hard, and the sadness had a keen edge.

"Darling," she growled.

With the most sober and rational voice that I'd ever heard from Amma, she explained, "My one-time fiancé is insane. While I'm just depressed and neurotic." Then she shook her head, adding, "I thought you were smart, darling. I thought you would know the difference."

.....

"Ribbons," said Earnest. "Imagine enormous thin ribbons." Under the glass countertop, beneath the smoky scuffs and fingerprints and anonymous grime, a vision of the universe began to emerge. Earnest drew the ribbon with a pale gray light. Ripples and long waves lent the image a three-dimensional feel. I

thought of a deep-sea jellyfish, tenuous and weakly luminescent. I thought of a lace curtain hanging against an open window, nothing outside but silence and darkness.

“Size?” I asked.

He said, “One AU. Approximately.”

“Long?”

“No,” Earnest replied. And again, “No.”

Wide, he meant. The gossamer ribbon was nearly a hundred million miles wide. I spent the next few moments digesting that number. Then I turned, saying, “You should look at this.” Amma was sitting at the end of the counter, working her way through a coffee table book about crashed flying saucers. “In a minute,” she promised.

I studied the ribbon. “Okay. How about length?”

“There is no valid number,” my assistant replied. “A ribbon can be enormously long, or it can be infinitely long.”

My point of view changed. Retreating from the single ribbon, it turned into a weak thread twisting through the cosmos. Longer and taller waves were revealed, and sometimes the ribbon would twist and curl, almost doubling back on itself. It reminded me of a protein. Or a child's lost kite string. “I don't understand,” I confessed. “How can dark matter do this? Why doesn't gravity pull everything into neat spheres?”

“Gravity is an exceptionally weak force,” Earnest reminded me. “In the dark realms, stronger forces

shape matter. Attractive forces, and those that repel.”

“Yeah?”

“Gravity is a very minor component.”

I nodded, asking, “How thick's a ribbon?”

“Ten or twelve kilometers.”

“Okay.”

“Dark matter cannot assemble itself into world-sized bodies. Much less into solar-mass bodies.” Using a delicate touch, Earnest drew another half million ribbons, filling the screen with a gray maze. “If there were shadow suns,” he reported, “we would see their effects by now. They would distort the light from nearby suns. Baryonic bodies would orbit them. And more importantly, we would have a very different universe from the one we can see. With this arrangement of curtains and ribbons, everything is kept diffuse, and we have to peer deep into space to observe these soft hands at work.”

“There can't be any life,” I muttered.

Amma looked up from her book. From her expression, I couldn't tell if she was watching me, or even listening. For all I knew, she was busy contemplating the Roswell hoax.

“Without suns and worlds,” I complained, “life couldn't get started.”

“No?” Then with a knowing voice, Earnest reminded me, “There is an entirely new family of forces to play with. New elements to build with, and new molecules to try their hand at self-assembly.”

“What do you mean?”

The point-of-view shifted again. In an instant, I was looking along the flat surface of a smooth, infinitely long ribbon. A strong white light rose up from below. The ribbon itself had a watery softness, but under me, mixed with the water, were nameless bodies resembling rocks and little mountains, all streaming past, carried along by an astonishingly swift current. The ribbons weren't ribbons, I realized. They were enormous, mostly flattened arteries. I was standing on a frothy, half-real conduit that stretched before me for a million light-years. Maybe more.

Again, I said, "Come see this, Amma."

She relented. Gradually, without any visible interest, she walked up beside me and glanced at the image.

"The AI simulations are quite certain," Earnest reported. "There are no suns, and no worlds, either. Instead, the ribbons combine both functions. At least three kinds of nuclear fire supply the energy. But where our suns waste most of their efforts, throwing light into dead space, the dark matter ribbons absorb the bulk of what they produce."

"Neat," I said.

Then to Amma, I said, "Isn't this neat?"

She touched the glass, and after a moment pulled her hand back again. "Do you really understand these equations, Tony? And everything they mean?"

Of course I didn't. I couldn't. Not in a trillion years.

"Then how can you believe?" she asked. "Why do you feel so sure?"

.....

Lust diminished, as it always does.

Left for us were those quiet benefits like companionship and habit. Amma began to sleep with me, even if we didn't have sex. And sometimes I would sleep in her apartment, enduring the strange bed with its oversized pillows and that persistent unease that comes with abandoning your home. At two in the morning, a comet smashed into her front door.

I was sitting up before I woke up. I looked around in the gloom, perfectly unsure where the hell I was. Amma was climbing out of bed. She was wearing a cotton nightgown and a stern resolution. To me, with a quiet firm voice, she said, "Stay away from the windows. Stay here."

"What is it—?"

"Nothing," she said. "Wait here."

She left me. On bare feet, she moved like a whisper, and after a very long silence, she floated back into the bedroom. Lifting the phone, she said, "Emergency," and nothing else, setting the receiver on the walnut cabinet. Then to me, with a slightly louder voice, she explained, "They'll be here in three minutes, maybe sooner."

"Who?" I asked.

"The police?" I wondered.

"They'll be here, too." And she was leaving again, telling me, "You shouldn't let him see you. Wait here." I obeyed her sane advice.

But when I was alone again, I crept over to the frame and the blank silver screen. For weeks, I'd had a feeling about the screen. A sense that Amma was blanking it whenever I showed up. Sure enough, touching the high right corner of the frame caused faces to reappear. Boy faces, and girl faces, anywhere from one to twelve years old.

There was a quiet knock.

I listened to the pause, and then a muffled voice. Deep, and officious. Amma opened the door, and I kneeled, opening the cabinet.

A man said, "We haven't found him. He isn't here."
She said a few quiet words.

I hit buttons, figuring out how to deploy the main tray. Then with both hands and a measured violence, I popped the tray out of its tracks.

"What was that?" the man asked.

"I don't know," Amma replied.

When they found me, I was using a reading lamp, peering inside the mysterious box. "There's nothing in here," I reported, an absolute glee in my voice. "Just as I thought. It's nothing but a heavy box with lights and noise makers."

Amma stared down at me.

The man beside her wasn't any man. He was an AI tied into the city's medical network, his body padded and white with an array of arms ready to grapple with any defective souls.

"Is this man a friend of yours?" the machine inquired.

She didn't reply, walking out of the room, leaving us alone together. I turned and said, "Come look here."

Wearing an absurd grin, I said, "I want your professional opinion. Isn't this just a box full of nothing?"

.....

The baryonic realm is already past its prime. Suns aren't being made as quickly anymore. Their worlds are aging, and in many cases, dying. Space itself is being forced to expand at an accelerating pace, that relentless motion fueled by a dark energy that permeates all things real. In time, the galaxies will drift alone in a trackless, frigid darkness, and they will fade, their suns running out of fuel or eaten by local black holes. Life will linger, but that's all. Baryonic life is inventive and shrewd, and the end won't come for a hundred billion years. But the end is as certain now as is the true shape of the universe. Meanwhile, the dark matter realm is a long way from its prime. The ribbons can stretch without complaint, and more importantly, new matter will pop into existence as the increasingly vast universe evolves. Dark matter, all of it. The stuff that genuinely matters.

"Baryonic matter is temporary, and scarce," Earnest explained.

"Think of scaffolding," he told me. "The universe begins with a useful baryonic scaffolding that helps, and then fades."

After a long silence, he asked, "Did you hear me?"

"No," I lied.

"Shut up," I told him.

Then after another silence, I added, "I'm not interested. This isn't any fun anymore."

.....

In her gaze was a fear. Which was perfectly understandable, considering her difficult circumstances. She moved stiffly, as if her joints ached, and when I prodded, she tried to smile. No, she didn't want coffee. Or tea. Really, she could only stay a moment. Barely hearing a word, I ushered her into my apartment, and then with a voice only a little bit chastising, I mentioned, "I've been calling you. I was worried. Twice, I've been by your place, but you must not have been home."

She almost spoke, and then thought better of it.

"Sit," I demanded.

She said, "No, really. I can't."

Finally, in a dimly stubborn fashion, I began to see the future.

"Tony," she said, with a distinct pain. And then after a few deep breaths, she said, "I think we should stop seeing each other."

She said, "I'm sorry."

Again, she said, "Tony," with pain. Her little shoulders lifted, arms crossing her chest. "It isn't working," she confessed. "And it isn't going to get better. We both know that." I didn't know much of anything.

“No,” I said.

That hint of stubbornness—that tiny whiff of disagreeable conviction—caused Amma to straighten her back. She had been to this situation before. Better than most, she appreciated what an angry, possessive man could do. A wild terror made her look lovelier than ever. More than anything, I wanted to wrap my arms around her frail body, smothering her with my affections.

Instead, I asked, “Why?”

She took a half-step backwards.

“What did I do wrong?” Then I blurted, “About the cabinet and frame ... I'm sorry. I was out of line. I shouldn't even have—”

“No, it's not that,” she interrupted. “Or that's just a little piece of what's wrong, really.” Proving my own self-control, I took a step backwards.

“You must have noticed, Tony. In ways, we aren't much alike.” When hadn't I noticed?

“But we aren't different enough,” she said with a mysterious little voice. “Don't take this wrong, Tony. Please. But in ways, you're more dangerous to me than any other man ...!”

.....

The day came when God threw Her arm around me, and with a booming whisper said, “This is the universe, Tony. This is what I have built. And here is your role in my creation. You are a miniscule fleck of rust on the most minor piece of scaffolding. Not only are you impermanent, the atoms inside you are

impermanent. Not only will you die and rot away, there will come an age when no intelligence, no matter how great, will be able to find any trace of your existence.

“I am God, and the Creator.

“And like all artisans, I began with a rough draft ... the simplest sketch of what I meant to conceive ...

and in the end, when it's all said and done, I probably won't even remember what a goddamned baryon was ...!”

.

“Thank you.”

“Sure.”

“I mean it. You didn't have to see me—”

“No, no. I wanted to. How have you been, Tony?”

We were sitting in a little park, under a blue spring sky. Several years had passed, somehow. Finding her had been a difficult trick. She had moved, at least three times. She had changed her name to Sally, of all things. And she had a new contact number—a very difficult change to make in a world of instant, relentless communication.

“I'm well,” I lied.

She could see otherwise. But she didn't point to the obvious.

“You look happy,” I offered.

“I am.”

Too forward by a long ways, I said, “He isn't stalking you anymore, is he? Your ex-fiancé?”

“No,” she said with an odd fondness. And she

nearly laughed, adding, "That's all been resolved." I didn't ask how.

With a giddy, almost girlish voice, she said, "The new medications are working wonders. Really, I've never been this happy. This positive." She couldn't stop smiling, telling me, "No more drowning fears. I'm practically ordinary, and it's wonderful."

A pang of regret chewed on me.

With a secure gaze, she studied my hands. My face. The deep lines around my sleepless eyes. "Do you still have the bookshop?"

"Oh, sure."

"And Earnest?"

When we were dating, she never used his name.

I said, "Sure," and then reached into my backpack. The book was wrapped in brown paper. It was a small volume, cheaply bound and held together with a single thick rubber band. "This is why I wanted to see you," I lied. "I found this. It came in with a shipment of old books." Curiosity or simple manners made her unwrap the paper.

Melodies Played upon Dark, Cold Worlds.

"It was published by a vanity press," I explained. "A tiny print run in the last century. That's why it wasn't on any database. I've checked. The author was a high school physics teacher and basketball coach. And I guess, he was very lucky. Or gifted. Or something. Because he seems to have imagined the universe that we've just recently discovered."

She gave the rubber band a little pull. Otherwise,

she simply held the book on her lap, unopened.

“I think it's what you were looking for,” I explained. “When you came into my shop that first time. Your friend must have seen a copy, probably this copy. I don't know how many hands it's floated through over the last fifty, sixty years.”

Her hands grabbed the book, as if to keep it shut.

“I want you to have it.”

She was smiling in a vague fashion, and nodding.

“Have you read the book?”

“Three times.”

“How is it?” Then she looked at me, adding, “Really. How is it?”

“The science, what there is of it, is pretty straightforward. Quick and painless.” I reached out, thumping the book's cover with a knuckle. “Most of the text is about shadow aliens and the great civilizations lurking just out of our reach. The author claims they can speak to us, and if necessary, influence our lives.”

She said nothing.

“Weird, huh?”

“But you believe it.” The words came out flat—an observation, not a question. “I can tell you do.” Maybe so.

“I can't accept this gift, Tony.”

Momentarily flustered, I asked, “Are you sure? I think it's going to be a huge collector's item, and soon.”

“Take it back.” She set the book into my lap.

“Please, just take it.” Suddenly, I was grateful. Relieved, and thrilled. With a selfish urgency, I grabbed the book and held it close.

My one-time lover stared off into the distance.

“My new medicines,” she said. “Do you know what these fancy pills do for me?”

“No.”

“They blind me, but in a very narrow, very special way.” She laughed quietly. “You can't obsess about the things you can't see.”

I rose to my feet.

“But what if it is true?” I blurted. “What if there are shadow entities, and invisible civilizations ...

swimming around us, right here ... and what if they really do influence us in our daily lives ...?” She looked at me one last time.

“Then I don't think they're particularly good at their work,” she told me, still laughing. “And why should they be? It isn't their work to do, now is it?”

The Myrtle Man

He had a pleasant face, in a reliable, unhandsome way, and his warm brown eyes and easy smile made Amy want to believe the best in him. His name was Jacob Tumbull, the crisp brown uniform and two IDs proving that he came from the library dealership. Gazing at the camera above the sealed front door, he said, "You have myrtle problems, as I understand it." He lowered his passport, then brightened his smile. "Something about John Wayne riding into battle on a fire-breathing dragon. Is that right, Ms. Taylor?"

"Oh," she exclaimed, "it's a lot more than that."

Referring to the reader on his belt, he laughed and said, "And something about the shape of the world, too."

"It's round," she blurted.

"Yes, ma'am. I know."

Amy said, "But my son doesn't. Our library taught him it's like an apple. You know, with holes at both ends."

"It's a common myrtle, ma'am."

"Can you help me?" Did she sound anxious? Vulnerable? Or just crazy?

Crazy would be the worst, she believed. "I don't dare let him read or watch anything. I mean, he's a boy. He doesn't understand --"

"Yes, ma'am."

"The library is lying to him!"

“Ms. Taylor,” he said, “I want to help. But first, I need to examine your equipment and determine the extent of your trouble.”

“A purge and refill job.’ That’s what I was told to expect.”

“Eventually, yes.” He sighed, shrugging his shoulders. “But first I need to check the hardware, then I’ll have to protect all the files that belong to you and your family. A general purge would erase them.”

She said, “Fine.”

She said, “I understand,” without meaning it. A long truck was parked at the curb, and she focused on its license, jotting down the number because she didn’t trust her library to record this critical detail. Then she touched a button, saying, “Come in,” as the door unsealed with a menacing kla-chunk.

These were clever, malicious times.

What if she’d just invited a thief into her home?

Yet Mr. Turnbull didn’t appear the least bit criminal. Looking nowhere but at her, his eyes showed nothing but a bloodless, professional interest. And she still couldn’t relax, blurting out, “My husband’s going to be home soon. Maybe any minute.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do you need me to show you the library?”

The face only hinted at amusement. “It would help, yes.”

Then from behind: “Mom? Who is it?”

Harry came charging out of the basement. Her son

was wearing shorts and an unflattering mesh shirt, and he was sweating, a large orange ball in his hands and his breathing damp and fast. In a secret way, she was glad the library was broken. Her son needed this exercise. She knew it as surely as she knew she should do it too, but then again, he was young enough to change his ways. A vigorous game in the playroom was a good thing. Harry had inherited her fat-hoarding genes, and that was just another thing to make her lie awake in fear.

“You're the myrtle man,” said Harry.

“I am,” the invader confessed.

Amy motioned. “It's just upstairs.” She took the first few stairs, then paused and looked over her shoulder.

“I'm following,” the myrtle man promised. “Lead on.”

“So where's your cable?” asked Harry, something suspicious in the tone. “You're supposed to bring in a glass cable, and stuff.”

“I will. My stuff's in my truck.”

Harry waited for an instant, then said, “I found the myrtles.”

“Did you?”

“Well, a bunch of them.”

“So,” the man asked, “what's the shape of the world?”

“Round,” Harry replied, almost growling. “That's what Mom says.” Amy hesitated on the top stair, remaining silent.

“It is round. How can it be anything else ?” The myrtle man laughed, then asked, “What's your name?”

“Harry. What's yours?”

“Jacob.”

“It says Jacob on your shirt,” Harry observed.

“Very astute.”

“What's astute mean?” He shouted up at his mother, “Can I look up 'a-stute'?”

She said, “No.”

“Why not?”

She entered the library, suddenly angry. “Because it's lying to us, Harry. Didn't I tell you?”

Jacob seemed oblivious of them. Walking into the little room, he stopped and turned in a slow, observant circle, saying, “Oh, this is a fine one. A beautiful old Universal, isn't it?”

She couldn't say.

“A Universal 8. No, it's the 9.”

“Is it?”

“Twenty years old, if it's a nanosecond.” Jacob began to stroke the bindings of the false books, then pulled on one as if to test its falseness. No, it was rooted in place. It and the others were camouflage for the machinery set within, the sum total of human knowledge-- every published word and painting video and photograph, plus every recorded musical and dramatic performance -- existed in a digital form, literally at their fingertips.

As were the damned myrtles, too.

“The library came with the house,” said Amy, as if to apologize for its age. “We thought about buying a new one --”

“Don't,” Jacob interrupted.

She hesitated.

Grinning, he said, “The new ones are smaller, and faster too. I know.” Another stroke of the bindings. He had long hands, she noticed. Kind hands, perhaps. “If you're worried about running low on capacity, buy Universal Add-Ons. Another shelf or two would double your space, and you'd keep this ambiance.”

“Mom,” said Harry, “what's ambiance?”

There was a reader in one corner-- the most unused reader in the house. Jacob sat, adjusting the chair to fit his lanky frame. Then he activated the library, asking, “What was your first sign of trouble?”

Amy beat Harry to the answer. “The cowboy on the dragon.”

Jacob laughed in a gentle, knowing way. “You know, my grandfather loved John Wayne. He would have hated that myrtle.” On the view screen, in perfect color but without sound, a one-eyed actor rode across a mountain meadow on the back of a golden dragon. “If you ask me, the best myrtles are the subtle ones. The ones we don't suspect.”

A “best” myrtle? She doubted there was such a thing, but she wanted to appear interested. “What subtle ones?”

“Well, like with this cowboy. Back when the first libraries came on the market, some of the actor's fans

managed to insert a lot of modest changes into them. Some fans removed his weight. Others made him look younger, more idealized. But what really matters, and what's hardest to spot and remove, are the doctorings that made him a better actor. Someone gave him more feeling, a better sense of timing. Things more subtle than subtle, if you know what I mean."

Not particularly, no.

Jacob glanced up at her, shrugging. "Nine out of ten libraries, if they haven't been thoroughly demyrtdled, carry the new and improved John Wayne. People who watch don't know better, and why should they? We get better movies as a consequence."

On the screen, in vivid orange and red, the dragon spit up a ball of fire, incinerating the bad men and setting an entire mountainside ablaze.

"That's my favorite part," said Harry, with conviction.

"Tell you what." Jacob winked at the boy. "I'll save it for you. We'll make a special category and keep it, and you can watch it whenever you want."

"Great," the boy squealed, jumping until his belly jiggled.

"Honey," said his mother, "why don't we leave Mr. Turnbull alone? He'll call us when everything's fixed."

"I don't want to go," Harry admitted. "Jacob? Will you save me all the good stuff?"

With a mixture of charm and inviolable authority, the myrtle man shook a finger, remarking, "The best stuff is always saved, Harry. When you're older you'll

see what I mean.”

After a lot of complaining, Harry left them, exiled to the basement. But despite her own pledge to leave the myrtle man alone, Amy lingered in the doorway, watching him work while telling herself that she wasn't suspicious or unfair. Libraries were important appliances. She kept telling herself that it was time to learn about the damned things.

“Do you know where 'myrtle' comes from?”

She blinked her eyes several times. “Pardon me?”

“The term. The concept.” Jacob was squatting on padded knees, an incomprehensible tool in one hand, a dusty component in the other. “Back in ancient times, even before this 9 was built, a top library designer gave a speech about creative viruses and sophisticated forgeries. She likened them to lies told by the software that computers, gullible and possessing perfect memories, would believe without hesitation. Without end.” What was he saying? She waited, unsure what to think.

“In the speech she told a story about her Aunt Myrtle-- have you heard it, ma'am? -- who would leave her house lights burning all day and all night. And why? Because when Myrtle was a little girl she was told that most of the cost of any light came when it was turned on. It only stood to reason that if you never turned the light off, you saved money and energy in the long run. Right?”

Amy could believe Myrtle's logic. But then again, she had no feel for technological questions, deciding

just to nod and say, "I guess so."

"For a while," said Jacob, "we called them aunt myrtles."

"Who?"

"The untruths accepted by the libraries. But somewhere along the line, the 'aunt' was dropped."

Amy was a teenage girl when libraries became cheap enough to afford and yet rare enough to appeal to snobs. The attraction of the machines was genuine enough. To be able to say, "I own the sum total of human experience," was always an impressive statement.

Jacob said, "They're called myrtles, and most of the human race knows what the word means. The fictions that our machines believe to be truths, and because we believe our machines, we can be fooled, too. I mean, what choice do we have?"

She considered her myrtles. The worst of them, she believed, were a lot more dangerous than leaving the lights burning all night. After a cleansing deep breath, she confessed, "Harry has found other things, too."

"Kids do, ma'am."

"There's not a planet on the other side of the sun, is there? One just like Earth?"

"No. No, there isn't."

"I knew that." She took another breath. "I mean, Harry loves science. I don't know why, neither of his parents do. But he does, and I let him study what he wants, just so long as he finishes his tutor's assignments." A pause. "He's being educated at

home.”

“I know. Here's your AI.” He patted the shell of an old dictionary. “It's a popular model. Very strict.”

“It showed Harry a map of the solar system, and there was this second earth hidden by the sun.” She hesitated, reading something in the man's expression. “What's wrong?”

“That AI wouldn't be fooled by such a big myrtle. When it accesses maps of the solar system, it accesses thousands of them, ignoring the odd ones.” He paused, giving a charming little wink. “The boy found it on his own, I bet. While exploring.”

“I see.”

“And you're probably asking: Why find that one out of the millions of available maps? Because these myrtles are aggressive. The most aggressive ones spread fastest and always put themselves where they can be noticed.” An expansive shrug. “why invent an elaborate myrtle just to keep it a deep, deep secret?”

She could understand his rationale.

“On this other earth,” asked Jacob, “are the people left-handed?”

“I think so. Yes.”

“Oh, that's an enormous myrtle.” He blew the dust from several components, then slipped them into his shirt pocket. “You can access a history of that world, build a globe of it, even find census figures and photographs taken from every spot on its surface. In a lot of ways, frankly, it's a lovely place.”

“It doesn't exist,” she complained.

“Outside a string of zeros and ones, no. You are right, ma'am.”

“Harry says that the dinosaurs killed themselves with H-bombs. That's a myrtle.”

“I hope so,” said Jacob, grinning.

She watched as he opened a service port, then said, “I believe in home educations.”

“Many do.”

A pause, then she asked, “Do you have children?”

“Yeah. Two.”

“Do you have a tutor for them?”

“In part. But they go to public school in the afternoons. My ex-wife and I decided that was best.” He almost glanced at her, then used a tiny vacuum cleaner to pull dust out of the port. “I guess it's for the social skills, and to keep them out of my ex's hair.”

Amy didn't mention her feelings about public school, but she suspected they showed on her face and in the wringing of her hands.

“I could, if you want, purge and replace the science files.”

She said nothing.

“But usually, particularly with an old Universal, there'll be a lot of myrtles. All kinds.” He fastened a jeweled device to the port, then rose and punched commands into the reader's keyboard. “Every nanosecond of every day, you've got new information arriving. New zeros and ones. There's always that chance in some of them being myrtles.”

“I know,” she replied, in disgust.

Numbers, tiny and compacted, appeared on the full screen.

Amy said, "We bought filters to keep them out. I don't remember when. A couple years ago, I think."

"Five years ago, I think." Jacob gave a wise shrug. "I saw them, ma'am."

"Well," she groaned, "aren't they working?"

"Honestly? They weren't the best skeptics available even five years ago." A slow sigh. "Average modern skeptics would do better."

That's right, they weren't called filters. She remembered being rather offended by the idea of mechanical agents watching what entered their library, knowing better than her what was genuine. And now she braced herself, ready for the sales pitch, this man counting on her ignorance and fears to sell her the very best at an inflated price.

Except Jacob made no such offer. Instead he asked, "Have you or your husband noticed other myrtles?"

Her husband? It took Amy a moment to remember her fib about him coming home at any moment.

"Any other myrtles, ma'am?"

"Well," she began, "I like reading mysteries. Quite a lot, really. And I've been noticing some that sound new, but their authors have been dead for years."

"They're new books, probably."

"I thought so."

"It's true with a lot of authors. Big ones, little ones." Jacob paused, studying a stream of senseless

numbers. "Fans write them and slip them into the Net traffic. With the right camouflage, a poor home library doesn't know better."

She said nothing.

"Or sometimes, fans improve a classic. Or at least try." He touched buttons, fingers blurring. "What else have you noticed?"

"Well," she said. And hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I like paintings. Landscapes, I put them on the big screens in my favorite rooms --"

"Your living room walls are blank, I noticed."

"It was suppose to be a Monet, and it looked like his style." She was sorry to have begun this confession, but the weight of it was irresistible. "The painting was . . . it seemed . . . pornographic. . . ."

"Ah!" he exclaimed. The long fingers tapped at the screen's glass, then he turned to report, "This isn't a prime number. It only looks prime."

She couldn't count the digits beneath his hands.

"Something slipped it into math text. As a joke, probably." A joke?

"AIs, ma'am. They've got their own sense of humor." He shrugged and blanked the screen. "AIs are a different kettle of guppies. In old times, myrtles were human-made. But nowadays, with all these advanced programs and their hardware linked to the Net, with all this imagination to burn. . . . Well, a lot of myrtles come from bored AIs."

Amy felt an enormous, imprecise fear. In an effort

to sound strong, she said, "I don't like lies. In fact, I hate them."

"Good for you."

She approached her library, fingers touching the plastic bindings that showed, despite twenty years of existence, no trace of wear. The bindings were lies, she supposed, but not wicked or ugly ones. She willed herself not to see the irony.

"This is a guess, but it looks as if you haven't had a purge in ten years." Jacob reclaimed his jeweled device. "If I may ask, how long have you and your husband lived here?"

"Seven years." The blame wasn't all theirs.

Jacob punched numbers into his own little reader, then with a steady professional voice informed her, "I can do a complete purge, then a restandardization. If you wish. This is the cost, including labor and parts, and taxes too. The total is on the bottom."

Amy couldn't read the numbers. Stress made them swirl, and she had to squint and concentrate, even then needing to read them twice.

"I can do it today. If you want."

Had the myrtle man said something? She wasn't sure.

"I can do cheaper, stopgap work, but your library is begging for maintenance. I'm sorry, ma'am."

She had failed, and not for the first time. If pressed, she would break down now, confessing to a string of private failures.

"Ma'am? Are you all right?"

Almost without breath, she asked, "May I make a call?"

"Naturally."

"To my husband, I mean."

Jacob touched her on the shoulder, very lightly, and with a voice both sympathetic and strong, he said, "Take your time, Ms. Taylor. I'll wait, and you take all the time you need."

The instant Amy saw the expected face, she launched into a harsh summary of her morning, losing momentum only when the face grinned, a soothing voice saying, "Take it easy, little lady."

It wasn't Dan; it was his goddamn answering program.

"I want to talk to him," she warned. "Now. This minute."

The image -- tanned, rested, flattering -- gave a big grin before saying, "He's occupied just now, darling."

"Well," she replied, "tell him to pull his dick out and call me. And I mean soon."

The grin persisted, the image of a sunny apartment behind it, out of focus in the stylish way that was now fashionable. "I'll deliver your message, little lady. Is there anything else?"

She blanked the screen, stood and froze in place. When it came to her husband, Amy had a simple role: He won't make me cry with his first shot. And she managed to remain dry-eyed and sober, opening her bedroom door and walking to the library, finding Jacob sitting at the reader, conspicuously doing

nothing.

He glanced at her face, eyes asking what he should do.

“You can start,” she muttered, wondering how she looked to him. Under stress, no doubt. Probably frail. A chubby, exhausted woman whose husband had abandoned her for women ten years her junior, all lean and well-rested. “What will you do? Pull your cable up from your truck?”

“Eventually. If you're willing, that is.”

A nod. Brief, crisp.

“If you do change your mind,” he offered, “we can downgrade my work. If it's soon enough.”

Jacob seemed like a very nice man, she was thinking. All men, in some private teflon-lined part of themselves, were the most decent people. It was a lesson she couldn't learn often enough; and with a wave of her hand, she told him, “Do whatever you need. Clean everything. Put in skeptics. I don't care.”

Harry helped the myrtle man.

Despite his mother's wishes, and her fears, the boy touched the fancy tools and kept very much underfoot, asking large questions while he pretended to be the assistant. Amy wanted to work; she made extra money fashioning clay pots by hand; some people were willing to pay for good craftwork. But she didn't want to leave the two boys alone. Alert as a security camera, she watched Harry tug at the plastic-coated cable, giggling at some private little joke. Walking past her, humming as he played, he said,

“We're going to empty the library, More. Get a bucket. A big, big bucket.”

Everyone was laughing.

Shaking her head, she said; “I know better,” and closed the front door as far as possible, the cable unwilling to dent.

Jacob said, “Ms. Taylor? I need to make sure what's yours.”

Of course. They went back upstairs, and she discovered that he had already arranged the files between private and public realms. What was public was enormous -- the earth next to a grain of sand -- yet on the reader it seemed perfectly balanced with her house records and Harry's accounts and the rest of it. Jacob told Harry, “I put your cowboy on the dragon in here. It's with your own digital designs.”

“What about the other stuff?”

“Tell me what you want.”

Harry rattled on about the left-handed earth, the one he still partway believed in despite his old mother's denials. With an expertness that startled her, he put up images of blue surf and bluer seagulls, describing this tropical beach as if he was its discoverer.

The reader emitted a quiet musical tone.

“Dan calling. Line one.”

Amy retreated, apparently unnoticed. Again in her bedroom, the door closed and her sitting on the bed, she put the call on the full screen, then snapped, “You'll be getting a bill.”

Dan looked tired, though certainly for different reasons than hers. Measuring her at a glance, he decided to look perturbed and unfocused. "A bill for what?"

She told the story, in brief, then finished by asking, "Did you ever have the library serviced?"

"I can't remember," he lied. "I thought I did."

"It gets fixed or your son goes to public school. Unless, of course, you want to enroll him at an academy."

"We can't afford that." Dan gave a weary sigh. "How much did you say?"

She repeated the figure, thinking too late of inflating it by some cruel percentage.

"But did you shop around first?"

She said, "Yes."

"Pay half," he advised.

"You bastard."

"Oh, god. Are you going to fight me again?"

"For the rest of your life," she advised. "If you don't meet your obligations, what can I do?"

"What I'm saying is that we both pay half . . . then we let the lawyers decide if I owe more. Okay?"

The lawyers were useless. They squabbled worse than she and Dan could manage, being highly trained professionals.

"How's Harry?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

There was that hesitation, instantaneous but unmistakable, that told her this wasn't a good time.

But he said, "All right," because good fathers always want to talk to their sons. "I mean, if he's there and not too busy."

"Not at all." She blanked the screen, then called up one of their private, protected files. Two months ago, as a birthday gift, Amy took Harry to a portrait studio where they made elaborate digitals of him moving and speaking, asking him endless questions in the process. Around that information they built a computer simulation of him. It was much more sophisticated than an answering program. These simulations were fads in the past--probably years ago, Amy realized -- but she had assumed it would serve as a reliable friend for Harry. Wasn't it said that twins were never alone? Except he didn't use it often or for long, which meant that his mirror image was never quite up to date on his life.

Yet his father didn't seem to notice.

She had Dan talking to the simulation, a couple minutes passing and no hint of enlightenment or anger.

Slinking out of the bedroom, she felt a mixture of poisonous glee and calm fury. What kind of father could be fooled by a false son? she asked herself. And what kind of woman happily marries such a blind, stupid pig?

The library had been purged, untainted knowledge was flowing into the newly made emptiness.

Amy watched for a while, then said, "I was wondering," without knowing quite what she wanted.

“Could I possibly, when you aren't too busy . . . could I see that truck of yours?” A pause, then she added, “I'm sure it's fascinating.”

Jacob and Harry were kneeling beside a control panel, the boy unconsciously mimicking the man's posture. It was Harry who brightened, telling her, “I can take you, Mom.”

That wasn't what she wanted, but she remained silent.

Jacob read her expression, at least in part. With a paternal pat on the shoulder, he said, “Do me a favor, Harry? Watch everything.” He spoke as if he had told hundreds of boys these words. “Watch but don't touch, and I'll be back in a few minutes.”

Harry groaned.

Laughing Jacob informed him, “You'll live.”

Amy led the way until they were outdoors, then they walked together, cool air and a high gray sky causing her to cross her arms against her chest. Why was she nervous? It took her a moment to remember why. Jacob leapt into the truck's open back end, then offered his hand, the strong forearm making her fly for an instant.

A modern, commercial-grade library halfway filled the truck.

She had expected a humming sound, some sense of machinery hard at work; but the loudest sound besides her own quick breathing was a mild, dry click-click-click that came from nowhere and meant nothing. The machinery was a wonder of efficiency

and compression, Plastic panels encased the countless circuits, and Amy touched the panels, feeling a very slight heat that might have been her own heat reflected back at her. She gave a weak cough, then sighed, growing aware of Jacob's gaze. She forced herself to say, "Very nice."

"Everything we know; everything we are." He chuckled, adding "As of seven o'clock this morning."

She couldn't speak.

"Certified," he told her, fingering some kind of glass tag. "The Bureau of Libraries its own self guarantees our purity."

With a dry mouth, shy said, "You know all about this."

"I guess," he allowed, humility and confidence in balance.

"And you know about myrtles." She glanced at him. "You know a great deal about them, don't you?"

"More than some know."

"Can you make myrtles?"

"Anyone can."

"Good ones, I mean. Ones that get past the skeptics." Ones that are noticed, she thought.

The brown eyes were capable of shrewdness. "For what purpose?"

"For money," she blurted. Then, as if to make it more clear, "For me. Because I'd like to hire you."

"To do what, ma'am?"

"I'm separated from my husband." Her arms tried to cross on her chest, lacked the strength and fell at

her sides. "He isn't coming here soon. I just said that." A pause. "I didn't know you before."

"Ah," said the myrtle man.

"If we can agree on terms, I'd like you to --"

"Excuse me. Ma'am? Do you know me now?"

Forget it, she thought, turning to leave.

"What kind of myrtle do you want?"

She hesitated, then turned again. "Something to make my husband look ridiculous. I was thinking, I don't know . . . we could put him inside a filthy digital. I've seen the homemade ones --"

"Who hasn't?"

"Could you? I mean, what would you charge?"

"To embarrass him, you mean." Jacob almost smiled. "You're angry, and you want revenge."

She imagined her husband fucking a goat. In clear detail, she saw him behind a big shaggy angora, fighting it, trying to screw it while the goat twisted and bleated and kicked.

Jacob said, "I won't."

He said, "Technically, it's a crime. Not very enforceable, but this is my career and my life. I could lose my license. And frankly, I don't know your husband. I have no opinion about him. If I did this just for money, it would take more money than I think you could find. Ma'am."

He hated her, she believed. Suddenly nothing else mattered. He saw a bitter, ineffectual woman -- true enough -- and she wanted to run or scream, anything but stand by passively while this working class

technician spoke to her.

Yet that's what she did, hearing the words and the steady click-clicks between them.

"I never finished my story," he said.

He said, "About the origins of the word 'myrtle.'"

She made her eyes lift, focusing on the unhandsome, smiling face.

"It was invented by that old-timer, remember? But what I didn't tell is that a few years later, after the word had passed into everyday usage, a reporter got the very good idea of finding its origins. Not a difficult trick, if you have a good librarian AI. Nobody had such a thing in his day, but he did trace the word to a published account of the speech, then to the speaker herself. She was willing to take credit for myrtles, but when he asked about dear Aunt Myrtle, she got quiet.

"I can't find her," the reporter confessed. "She isn't a close relative, is she? How about distant? Or was she just a family friend?"

Amy found herself listening, concentrating on each word.

"Finally the woman said, 'Oh, I never had an Aunt Myrtle.'"

"No?" said Amy.

"I just invented her. I used that story as an example, and the name seemed appropriate." Jacob paused, smiling with delight. "Do you see? Myrtle was a little white lie told for an unimportant speech, and she had no way of knowing what would happen to her

fictional aunt.”

Amy leaned against the warm wall of plastic, not touched in any profound way but wishing she could be. In a voice more amused than anything, she said, “Aunt Myrtle is a myrtle. Is that what you're telling me?”

A rakish wink and nod.

“I guess I am,” said Jacob, offering a hand to help her climb down again. “There you go, ma'am.”

He ate lunch with Harry and her. The work was finished by three, most of the afternoon spent checking his work and installing top-grade skeptics. By then Amy had enough confidence -- in him and in herself -- to invite Jacob back for dinner. As much as anything it was because of Harry's affection for the man; and Harry overheard the offer, bursting into the library and squealing “Please come, please!”

The myrtle man had another job waiting but he graciously promised to swing past, though it might be late.

True to his word, he was late by two hours, full of stories about his client who had wanted to find certain lost files. They were comedians, though later, replaying them in her mind, Amy couldn't discover why they had seemed funny, attributing their joy to the spirited teller.

Jacob left before ten, praising the reheated dinner as he excused himself. He wouldn't return; Amy was certain. Drifting into Harry's room, she blanked the reader, nine authentic planets vanishing to black.

Then she went to her room, closing the door and undressing lying on her covers, using her right hand with an expertness, eyes closed, an imaginary man who could have been Jacob hovering over her.

Two days later, when Harry was visiting his father, the myrtle man reappeared. He wore jeans, not the uniform. He apologized for coming on a Saturday and for every inconvenience, but he wanted to know if her library worked as promised. When she said that it was fine, he said, "Good." Then he gave the air above her head a shy glance, asking "Would you like to go out to dinner? My treat."

He drove her to a small restaurant near her home, a tiny place that she hadn't noticed in all the years of driving past it. The food was fair, the company engaging. Afterwards, Amy invited him inside, then with a certain nervous courage to her bedroom, and Jacob stayed through Sunday evening the ready change of clothes in his car seeming like good fortune, nothing more.

The sex was pleasant. Jacob had quirky tastes and an intensity, yet he could appear remote and self-involved in the most intimate moments. He seemed appreciative of her body, complimenting her features without forcing his words. If she wasn't satiated, at least it was a pleasure to have reentered the carefree world of adults. A lot of tiny fears began to vanish -- Harry's weight seemed less ominous -- and the big fears had softer edges and promising gaps. She found herself looking forward to the weekends and the

confidence they brought, and her newfound strength would carry her through a week, and sometimes longer.

Jacob had to miss some weekends. Once a month he could visit his children, and since they were on the other side of the state, Amy could understand his absence, always wishing him a good trip.

Sometimes he visited on weekday evenings, Harry always thrilled to see the myrtle man. Still dressed in the brown uniform with the nametag, Jacob would sit at the kitchen table, entertaining his audience with stories of work, of myrtles seen and clients left satisfied.

Despite her nature, Amy learned about libraries.

Jacob tinkered with hers, sometimes into the morning hours, Harry helping as long as exuberance and his mother would allow. "I love these old 9s," Jacob declared, clucking his tongue in a happy way. "It's like working on a classic car." Spare, second-hand components were added, speeding the library's recall and somehow compressing its files, and he upgraded the readers, their images brilliant and sharp. "More real than real life," he boasted. "Don't you agree, Amy?"

Partly because of her boyfriend's encouragement, but mostly because she was tired of feeling stupid, Amy decided to master one of the more sophisticated digital design programs. "An imagination," Jacob called it. With it, she built a city beside a foggy sea, mapping every street, every building, then giving

each citizen a recognizable face; and when Harry was at his father's, she and Jacob would sit naked before the living room reader, watching her newborn people remove each other's clothes, then make love without shame or taboos.

Amy did eventually fashion digitals of her husband, then dropped them into a variety of Hells. It was a therapeutic exercise, or it was juvenile; either way, the images of suffering became tiresome, then painful, and she erased all of them in a moment of contentment.

Once, mostly at Amy's insistence, she and Harry went to visit Jacob at his minuscule apartment. The neighborhood was poor. His two rooms were dirty despite some hurried attempts to make them presentable. Pity and revulsion in balance, she entertained the idea of asking Jacob to live with them. They had dated for six months; didn't it seem like time? But then she found herself hesitating gazing at the old-fashioned stove, cooking pots set on cooking pots and layers of dust on every flat surface.

Sloppiness shouldn't keep her from offering Jacob her home. But the hesitations persisted.

Walking to the car, flanked by the two boys, Amy tried to force herself to bring up living together. But then Harry was asking how it was to share a library with all the other apartments -- the building had an old second-hand library in the basement -- and Jacob told him, "It works fine. I just have to remember to protect everything personal. That's all."

It was then, with those words, Amy realized that he had a private life, or lives, and she knew little about him. His apartment was a census address, little more, and where did Jacob sleep when he wasn't with her?

A cold spike of metal was in her belly.

Jacob and Harry kept walking, one telling the other, "As soon as I can, I'm going to become a myrtle man."

Maybe Jacob sensed the change in her.

More likely it was a mutual change, both of them aware of their distance and neither willing to mention it.

He arrived every weekend for a month, as if proving his devotion, but then missed two weekends in a row, some vague family trouble taking him out of town. Amy called his apartment anyway, leaving a string of well-practiced and unemotional messages. She saw him next on Tuesday, very late and without warning. Jacob didn't mention the messages or his travels. He told her that she looked lovely, then thanked her too many times for a dinner of leftovers. He was getting ready to break up with her, she believed, which made her more sad than she expected. Yet they went to bed as usual, making love, then resting then making love again.

Now we'll break up, she decided.

Except they didn't. At least they didn't in any familiar way. With a thick, slow voice, he told her, "Here's something funny about myrtles."

"What's funny?"

He rose up on his elbow, saying "They're true."

"What do you mean?"

A long, long stare, then he explained. "I read this once in a physics text. Whenever a particle moves, like an electron . . . well, it moves in every possible direction. At least they think so."

So what? she thought.

"Each time it moves," he said, "the universe divides in all directions. Everything that's possible is going to happen." A long pause. "Remember that left-handed earth? It exists somewhere, and not as zeros and ones. A million million of those earths are scattered across Creation." A deep sigh. "Now isn't that a wondrous thought?"

Amy was more puzzled than enthralled.

"Lives," said the myrtle man, "divide when they're given the chance."

"Maybe so," was the best she could offer; and eventually, after she was fast asleep, Jacob rose and dressed, then visited the old library before slipping away.

Harry discovered the myrtle some weeks later.

By then both of them had finished grieving over Jacob's disappearance, at least outwardly. Amy didn't call him anymore. She didn't like looking at his projected likeness -- a homely man, wasn't he? -- and she decided that an explanation wasn't necessary. She progressed to where she could be alone and content, steeling herself to the prospects of never having another man in her life. And the boy seemed back to

normal, if somewhat more quiet than before. His tutor claimed he was studying hard; his father didn't mention odd moods or behaviors. Then one evening he came to Amy, saying, "He's still here." Harry spoke with a mixture of matter-of-factness and happiness, adding, "I can see him and us, too."

She went to look. On the screen in her son's room was the mirror image of her son playing in a room just like this one, save for tiny details. Harry showed her how to change their viewpoint. When she said, "It's just your birthday present," he took her to the other rooms in the fantasy house, the likeness of her kissing the homely likeness of Jacob down in the living room, beneath a projected Monet.

Between kisses, they spoke, voices ordinary and the words as forgettable as real life.

Harry was sent to bed, forbidden to do what Amy couldn't stop doing, watching figures of moving light, a rising sense of horror making her sob and groan aloud.

The myrtle people made love, then began naming names.

"Yvonne," said the woman.

"How about Jennifer?" said the man.

"I like Patricia," said the woman, giving her belly a meaningful squeeze. "My grandmother's named Patricia."

It was. But how would Jacob know?

"We'll name her after your grandmother," said the man, engulfing her and kissing her until the instant

Amy blanked the damned screen.

“It's not a myrtle,” the technician told her. “A true myrtle has to be sent around the Net. This one doesn't go anywhere.”

“I didn't make it.”

“I know. Your old boyfriend did.”

Amy looked at the woman standing before her. A gray uniform in place of a brown one, and the different sex. Otherwise she was the same as Jacob when he first arrived, an object of suspicion coping with a frazzled and ignorant client. “Can you get rid of it?”

“I can get rid of anything” was the terse reply.

What should she do? Her silly pots weren't selling and her investment incomes were flat, and she sure as hell couldn't call Dan and beg for money now. Not for this. Not if the library needed another purge --

“But you know, you could get rid of it yourself. I don't even need to be here.”

Amy straightened. “Pardon me?”

The technician pointed to fake brown books on a high shelf. “They're add-ons. Good ones. Your boyfriend must have installed them. Their entire capacity is being spent maintaining that simulation, and three different AIs are doing nothing but browsing in your files, getting ideas for stories.” An appreciative nod, then she asked, “Did you have your library serviced sometime recently?”

“Not that recently.”

The technician named the dealer. “Was it?”

“I think so.”

“So you know Mr. Turnbull, do you?”

Amy willed herself to say nothing, to do nothing.

Yet the technician read her face, laughing hard and telling her, “I thought the work looked familiar.”

“I’ll sue,” Amy whispered.

“Sue who? You had a personal relationship with the man, and you let him work in here. Am I fight?” Not waiting for a reply, she said, “Jacob does this to a lot of ladies, dear.”

She didn’t care if she was the only victim. “I can get rid of it myself. You said that?”

“With a crowbar, if you want. Just unplug your connections up there and give a little jerk.” Then she laughed, saying, “A little jerk for the big jerk. Isn’t that perfect, dear?”

Amy said nothing.

“Yeah, he charms them. Beds them. Then leaves them with some pretend little world.” An angry sigh, then she added, “Maybe that’s to make amends. Who knows?”

“He said he has an ex-wife and two children.”

“Maybe. But I haven’t heard about them.”

Gazing up at the brown nonbooks, she thought: I can take you down any time I want.

Then the woman touched a shoulder, waiting for Amy’s eyes to find hers. “Or if you look at it another way, the jerk’s got fifty ex-wives and maybe a hundred or more kids. I bet that’s the way he sees it.”

“I bet so.”

She didn't remove the fantasy that day, or the next. For several weeks, Amy went to bed planning to do the chore in the morning, and each morning there was an excuse that presented itself, making it seem as if some voice was asking for a stay of execution. She had an upturn in orders for her pots, an elderly woman wanting to decorate her home with recreations of certain Indian pottery. Then came a sudden inexplicable interest in the fantasy she had built with Jacob's help, those people in their coastal city having waited too long in stasis. With money from the pots, she bought AIs to help her spin details and biographies. Zeros and ones, she began to realize, were more malleable than any wet clay.

Because she knew so much about disappointment and unhappiness, Amy made the city joyful; and after months of work and growing expertise, she decided to release her project into the Net, its identity incorporated into every willing library, its streets and homes ready to welcome all visitors.

With each use -- by law -- Amy received a modest sum.

She wasn't making any fortunes, but there was breathing room even when Dan's support payments failed to arrive.

Jacob's myrtle -- she always thought of it as a myrtle-- remained in her library. Harry was outlawed from watching it. So was Amy, in theory, though there were exceptions on weak days, and strong ones. The false Amy had a daughter, then twin sons. The

false Jacob acted too saintly to be real, but the false Harry lost his weight and grew up to resemble neither of his parents, which was surprisingly accurate.

She didn't destroy the myrtle.

Not contemplative by nature, Amy was slow to understand why. But eventually, after she was remarried and preparing to move away, the answer occurred to her without warning. She thought of Jacob and his odd story about electrons in motion, dividing the universe infinite times. If that was true, then she had saved something that didn't need saving. It existed. A troubling notion, it caused her to sit in the library and stare at the bindings; and after careful thought and some hardwon inspiration, she realized that lives, infinite or not, needed to be lived as if they would have no other chance in Creation.

It was as close to profound as she ever managed, and partly because of that insight, she took the old-fashioned add-ons and AIs with her each time she moved. She didn't look at their contents. Really, she thought, those lives weren't any of her business.

Let them live as they wanted; that was her policy.

Amy lived as she wanted, and when she wasn't happy, at least she was confident that happiness would come again. It always did. Wait long enough, she was learning, and everything always came to your door again.

Night alls

Ferrum was no Believer.

In that, he felt normal. This was an age when the powers of religion were plainly on the run. The old temples stood empty, except for the rare exceptions populated with worshippers embracing a thin, heartless scripture. Much of the world seemed eager to mock superstition and ritual, and every plaintive cry for God's vengeance was conspicuously ignored. Indeed, despite these heretical attitudes, modern life was abundant and generous and often fat. The sciences constantly generated new understandings and powers, each revolution delivered to all the races and distant creeds. Yet if some supernatural punishment ever became necessary, those same sciences promised more suffering than any Deity sitting in the most perfect Heaven could deliver. Really, Ferrum could not understand why any sober, honest citizen would entertain the preaching of mad souls and charlatans. After all, this was the Day of those twin Geniuses, Invention and Discovery, and hadn't history proved that nothing in the Creation was as half as powerful or a tenth as good as what was best about people?

Yet Rabiah insisted on finding weakness in the fashionable disbelief.

"What do you mean?" asked Ferrum sharply. "What weaknesses do you see?"

“Start with your name,” she suggested. “It’s old, and it means iron.”

“I know what ‘Ferrum’ means.”

“To the ancients, our world was the obvious center of the universe. And since what is heavy must sink, it was only reasonable to assume that the world’s heart was made of iron and the rarer metals.”

“The core is iron,” he agreed, laughing without much heart. “Those old fools happened to get one puzzle right.”

“‘Ferrum’ comes from the Fifth Day.” She looked past her newest lover, concentrating with her usual intensity. “That was when the Boy Emperor conquered half of the world’s land. Then the Sixth Day began, and an obscure tribe marched across a slightly different half of everything. And then the Seventh Day emerged from the darkness, and the Pale Prophet appeared, claiming to have walked with the True God who told Him to subjugate the world.”

“Which those zealots nearly did,” Ferrum interjected.

“And then that Day came to its end, and my ancestor stumbled out of the desert, inspiring a holy war that set the scene for our very long Day.”

The young woman had a temper. While it was popular to deny the value of stereotypes, Rabiah nonetheless fit the model of her people: She was passionate with a preference for strong opinions. Suggesting she was wrong, even in the most minimal fashion, brought the risk that she would explode with

hard words or even a few defiant slaps delivered to her lover's bare chest.

Ferrum managed to restrain his mouth.

“Of course neither of us Believes,” she continued. “Yet don't we assume that people should be good to one another, even if it serves their own selfish interests? Don't you hunger for a world where ethics have teeth and decent, generous citizens are called godly?”

He continued to say nothing.

“And now look at the rules and rituals embedded in our major faiths. What do you find waiting there? Codes and commandments—a set of principles that pave the path to excellence.”

Ferrum was breathing deeply, staring at the bland, water-stained ceiling above his bed.

“You and I are creatures of science,” she continued. “But what is science? And by that, I am asking what it is that our discipline assumes, first and before anything else?”

“Evidence,” he offered. “Science demands evidence.”

“It needs evidence to live, but that's not what it assumes.” She paused for a moment, carefully considering her next words. “The universe has order and meaning. Before anything, science must believe in that. What is true here, on our tiny patch of ground, has to apply everywhere. Scientific principles must be uniform and fair. Because if they are not fair, where's the value in lofty theories that only pretend to

explain the questions worth asking?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, honestly confused.

“I’m talking about God,” she admitted. “Not the old gods, who were tiny and not all that mighty. I mean the kingly Gods from the last Days. They taught us that the universe has a single overriding authority. With wind and floods, they proved what they said, and that made us ready for the Four Natural Forces and the eighty-one known elements.”

Ferrum couldn’t agree. “What are you arguing here? If we never believed in God, we wouldn’t have science today?”

A happy wobble of the head ended with a fetching stare. “What I think

... well, yes, I do believe that if our ancestors hadn’t surrendered to the idea of one viable answer, compelling and perfect, then our minds wouldn’t have bothered to chase new ceramics or the principles of gravity, much less waste fortunes probing the depths of the sky.”

Ferrum lay still, taking a deep breath and holding it inside as long as possible. Meanwhile, Rabiah laughed and swung one leg over his hips, climbing on top. This was no lover’s pose. She was a wrestler holding her opponent’s arms flush against the spongy mattress, thick legs wrapped around his thighs and her long black hair falling loose, tickling his chest and belly.

“So everybody is a Believer, even if we don’t like

thinking so. Is that it?”

She laid her hand on his chest. “The two of us are Believers. Our souls are lashed to the faith of universal order.”

“And what about other people?” he asked.

“Give me names.”

Ferrum offered candidates from their few shared friends—smart, well-educated souls—and then before she could answer, he mentioned her parents, and his. “Are they all secret Believers, like silly us? Or could they be only what they claim to be?”

“What do they claim to be?”

“Unrepentantly modern, godless and untouched by old foolish ways.”

“Some are like us.” Rabiah’s weight had settled on his middle, her eyes watching him carefully. “But really, most of the world doesn’t understand science. Not truly. What people like to do is throw out a few popular phrases, trying to fit in with what they perceive as convention.”

“And what about your cousin?” Ferrum asked.

“Which cousin?”

“You know who.”

But Rabiah didn’t wish to talk about the man. So she changed topics, telling Ferrum, “You know what would happen, if the world ever changed for the worst....”

Her voice trailed off.

“What would happen?”

She shifted her weight. “At the first sign of serious

trouble—I guarantee it—every last temple would overflow with clumsy but devout worshippers.”

Ferrum watched her pretty face, skeptical about her arguments but unable to refute the words.

“And if our civilization collapsed,” she continued, “then even our best scientists would pull out knives and start sacrificing livestock to the Moon and the lost Sisters. And when those desperate gestures didn’t appease our old gods, our greatest minds would invent new ones and then happily, happily cut each other’s throats...!”

* * * *

Ferrum met his difficult lover at the city’s largest park—an abandoned silica mine too hilly to be farmed but perfectly suited for tough trees and sedges, with clay-lined ponds in the low spots and tended fields where children and adults could hike and play. He drove to the park after work but before the evening wind died down. On a whim, he had purchased a cheap paper-and-stick kite, and using skills that he hadn’t employed for years, he assembled the toy, tied on fresh string and then managed to pull his creation far enough into the air that he could stop running, panting while he admired his achievement.

It was a warm spring evening. The sun was setting, a perfect wind blowing from the north. Ferrum happily looked over his shoulder, the boyish part of him hoping for spectators. Three of the Sisters were still above the horizon, each bright enough to keep the evening pure, but their combined light too dim to

feed plants or coax the tired mind into staying awake. He watched the Sisters for a long moment, observing how close they had drawn to each other; and then he glanced back at the ruddy skies to the west. That's when he noticed a small car parked close to his, and inside the car, what looked like a young woman. She was sitting behind the steering wheel, hands across her face, and, even at a distance, she looked as if she was suffering some awful, consuming grief.

Ferrum wasn't an outgoing person. Pretending to see nothing was easy. He focused on his kite, and, as the wind died, its increasing demands. Then the wind vanished, and he had no choice but to reel in the string and carry his toy back to his car. The girl was still sitting close by. Nobody else was visible. She remained behind the wheel, but for the moment, her suffering was done. Sad swollen eyes glanced his way, and he noticed how pretty she was. Then with a mixture of embarrassment and expectation, she smiled: She didn't want to be noticed, but on the other hand, her pain was too large and important to hide away.

In a moment of unusual fortitude, Ferrum approached. "Do you need help, miss?"

For some reason, that was an extremely funny question. She broke into a smart little laugh, and just as suddenly, she was sobbing again.

"I'm sorry," Ferrum muttered, beginning his retreat.

"But I liked watching," she confessed.

“Excuse me?”

“The kite. I enjoyed its dance.”

In Ferrum’s mind, she was exotic. The colored scarf and the style of her dress made her different from every other woman he normally spoke with. Refugees were fleeing their native lands, desperate to escape a host of political troubles. She must have been among the recent émigrés. Her voice carried a rich accent. Her face and beautiful skin betrayed a history composed of the lost nation’s ancient tribes.

Ferrum asked, “Where are you from?”

Laughing, the stranger named his home city.

Of course, she was a naturalized citizen. What was he thinking?

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “That was a stupid question.”

The girl saw something worthy of a smiling stare. “You should ask something smart, then.”

Ferrum learned her name and pieces of her life story.

It was Rabiah who brought up the possibility of dinner, and Ferrum mentioned that he was free for the rest of the evening.

Unfortunately, she had a previous commitment.

Eventually they settled on the evening after next, and following several meals and two concerts, not to mention the calculations and negotiations common to any romantic venture, their relationship moved into the physical realm.

At that point, Ferrum finally asked about the

sadness in the park.

“Oh, that was nothing,” Rabiah said with a heavy tone, implying otherwise.

“Nothing?”

“I used to meet my old boyfriend there. That’s all.”

But her confession wasn’t quite honest. It took more weeks of prodding, plus some carefully gathered clues, before the ex-boyfriend’s story was told. The man was considerably older than Rabiah, and he was married. He would meet his young girlfriend in the park, and they would make love in the passenger’s seat. Rabiah carelessly offered details, letting Ferrum imagine her climbing on top of that old fellow, him yanking down her underwear and shoving his business inside her, enjoying her body until he was spent, or until he had to leave for home and his ugly old wife...

“Why are you telling me this?” asked Ferrum, sickened yet aroused.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Now three people were lying in their little bed.

Smiling with a calculated menace, his girlfriend asked, “Do you know who he was? And is?”

“I don’t want to,” he claimed.

“My cousin,” she admitted.

“Oh, God,” the agnostic whispered.

“A second cousin, and you needed to know,” she claimed. “If we’re going to continue seeing each other, darling ... there will be a moment when you have to meet the man...”

Ferrum couldn't help but think along stereotypic lines. "But why? Do you want me to fight with him?"

"Goodness, no." Rabiah laughed softly for a moment or two.

"Is he a jealous fool? Will he attack me, maybe?"

"My cousin is more civilized than either of us. In fact, he's a mathematician, and a great one at that!" Then, with a wink, she added, "But if you'd like ... if it would make you happy ... maybe you could slice off his penis...."

Then she broke into wild laughter, and for several moments, her new boyfriend wasn't sure if his embarrassment and horror was the source of her pleasure, or maybe, just maybe, this exotic desert creature expected him to commit some horrible revenge...

* * * *

Five Sisters ruled the evening sky: Mistress Flame, Little Wind, Ocean's Angel, and the Sullen Twins. Out of fascination and fear, ancient peoples had studied those bright bodies, measuring their slow, stately motions; and after so much focus and the occasional insight, it was decided that the heavens—the sun and moon and every Sister—rode upon a collection of nested spheres, crystalline and perfect. And the world was a perfect sphere sitting at the center of all that existed. And because it was a good story, the ancients decided that each Sister was given to the world by the gods, each lending its distinct magic to the lives of good people everywhere.

Of course those old explanations were flawed, but they allowed those early astronomers to predict how the sky would look in another half year, and after a full lifetime. With bare eyes and persistent calculations, people realized that the Sisters could never huddle close together. Envy had to be the reason; none wished to dilute her beauty with her siblings' glow. But there were years when the solitary Sisters pushed close enough to fill one kite flyer's gaze, while the Sullen Twins stood in the opposite direction, carefully balancing the heavens.

Once in a thousand years, on average, their good world would throw its shadow across the moon; and at the same moment, the Twins would dive behind that lifeless gray rock, allowing themselves to be swallowed whole.

One Day would end, and shortly after that, the Next Day would begin.

But for a little while, darkness and chaos were unleashed on the world. Or so it was said. Threads of evidence did support those legends. Lost cities and early societies had collapsed at the same approximate moment. Chance might be to blame, and of course those first civilizations might have been frail and failing as it was. But whatever the cause, survivors blamed the darkness that lay between the Days. Then for the next thousand years, old women would happily tell their horrific stories to frightened, spellbound young children.

“The Night makes a soul insane,” they would

claim. “Good families will suddenly fight with their neighbors, and brothers always turn against brothers. Homes are burned; the old laws are forgotten. And then the Twins rise again, and nothing can ever be the same.”

“But what do people see?” the children asked. “What did the Night show them?”

“Nobody knows,” the old women would promise. “Whatever was there, it was too awful and far too strange to be remembered.”

“Then we won’t look,” young voices proclaimed. “If the Night shows itself, we’ll hide indoors. We’ll live in our cellars, with sacks tied over our heads.”

“And what then? Do you think that you’re the first clever people? Make no mistake, little darlings. Wherever you hide, the Night will find you.”

Nothing can save a person, particularly when he or she insists on believing in a particular fate. If the entire world decided to remake itself every thousand years, then the Night was a fine excuse, chaos sweeping away what was weak and old so that tiny prophets had their chance to stand on the wreckage, proclaiming new faiths and followings.

* * * *

Ferrum’s grandmother liked to tell the wicked old stories. She would laugh out loud when she described riots and wars and other flavors of mayhem. This was all in the past, of course. The perceptive soul was free to mock the ignorant hordes from Days gone. But she made a critical error—the same mistake repeated by

millions of sturdy, doubting adults across the world. She assumed her little grandson would hear about the Night and its madness, and Ferrum would realize that this was nothing but a fun old story.

Yet young boys have a fondness for worlds that teeter on the brink, ready to collapse into fire and blood.

Ferrum wanted to believe in the Night's power.

"When will the darkness happen?" he asked, his voice soft as a whisper, but fearfully sharp. "Soon, does it?"

"Very soon," she told him.

He imagined going to sleep after this evening's meal, and then waking in the morning to find the world transformed.

"Twenty-four years from now," she continued.

"But that isn't soon," he pointed out.

"I suppose not." She laughed. "Yet for me, it's as good as forever."

"Why?" Ferrum asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Because I won't live long enough to see this next Night." The grim words made the old woman cackle. Already his grandmother's eyes were turning soft and dark, and by year's end she would be living inside her own endless Night—a suffocating experience that would make her bitter, small, and hateful. "But my little Ferrum ... you'll still be a young man when the Night happens. Probably with your own wife and family to share the experience with...."

The boy couldn't shake the images of insane people

fighting in the darkness, setting fires and spilling guts. When terrified, young boys will find something very compelling about mayhem.

The bigger, the sweeter.

“But what does the Night look like?” he asked again. “Does anybody know?”

“Oh, everyone knows what the sky holds,” she told him.

But Ferrum didn't. The subject never came to mind before this. He was young and ignorant, curious, and very persistent. From that moment, he would bombard adults with questions about this once-in-a-thousand-years event. He interviewed his parents and teachers and neighborhood adults. And what struck him about their confident answers was that each vision was very similar, but no two were perfectly identical.

Which brought an epiphany that twenty-four years and a considerable amount of education hadn't wrung out of him:

Each eye, no matter how ordinary, inevitably sees its own Night.

Ferrum's grandmother proved to be a flawed prophet. Ferrum became a man, and the Sisters indeed were aligning themselves in accordance with elegant scientific principles. But he stubbornly remained unmarried and childless. There was only Rabiah in his life, and nothing about their relationship seemed secure: Long periods of passionate, desperate love would dissolve with a

suddenness that always mystified him, and even when their fight was finished, the tension between them remained so deep and dangerous that a single careless word would surely shatter their love forever.

Their worst battle stemmed directly from the Night. Several years earlier, Ferrum paid a considerable fee to reserve time at an observatory being built for the occasion. The large mirror and assorted optical equipment cost a modest fortune, but the resulting telescope would reach deep into the sky, harvesting details that larger instruments couldn't achieve on an ordinary evening. Ferrum liked to boast about his investment: It meant that so many heartbeats could be lived with one eye pressed against a viewfinder. And because he loved the girl so much, he gladly promised that he would share half of his time, or nearly so.

But Rabiah didn't appreciate his charity.

"How much did this cost?" she asked, her tone dismissive, even scornful. "This is a one-in-forever event, and what are you planning to do?

Catch a glimpse through a tiny sliver of glass?"

"It's more than a glimpse," he responded. "And more than a sliver of glass, for that matter."

"Come with me instead."

"Where?"

She named a place that he didn't know, and then promised, "My entire family is gathering, and hundreds more too. This is our traditional way of meeting the Night. Don't you think a celebration

sounds both fun and appropriate?”

He didn't think so, and Ferrum decided on honesty.

The resulting fight went on for a long, painful time. He finally had enough. Apologizing for his stubbornness, Ferrum said,

“Tell me again. Where's this gathering to be?”

The site was far from any city, on a plain shackled by high hills. Nobody was building giant mirrors, but if Ferrum joined Rabiah, he could bring his father's old hunting telescope to watch the sky. He spent a few moments trying to convince himself that this was best, that it would even be worthwhile. But what would he do with his reserved place in line?

“Sell it,” Rabiah advised. “You could make back your investment, and probably more too.”

The girl might be right, yes.

“But what happens there? What does your traditional celebration mean?”

Rabiah named favorite foods, old dances and music, and then almost as an afterthought, she mentioned the Night's culminating event.

Ferrum cringed.

“What's wrong?”

“A once-in-forever event, and that's what you do?”

“I know it might sound silly,” she agreed. But she didn't act joyful or much in the mood for teasing. “In our history, for as long as anyone remembers, my people have met the Night in a very similar way.”

“How stupid,” he blurted.

No lover would tolerate those words or the tone they were delivered with. But Rabiah's anger was so large and consuming that she couldn't speak, giving Ferrum time to begin making amends.

"I don't mean you're stupid," he offered. "I would never say that."

Then he confessed, "It seems like such a waste, that's all."

Finally, he snapped, "This doesn't make any sense."

She worked on him with silence and her eyes.

"The event of our lifetime," he complained, "and you're letting a tribe of ignorant nomads dictate what you are going to do...?"

Rabiah dropped her gaze.

At last, Ferrum realized how deeply he had hurt her. But he didn't offer apologies. With the last of his resolve, he told himself that she deserved the truth, and maybe in the next Day, she would thank him.

But then his lover suddenly looked up, and with a dry, almost dead voice, she mentioned, "My cousin will be there."

"The cousin you slept with?"

Rabiah didn't rise to the bait. Instead, she just smiled at him. Then for the first time, and last, she told Ferrum, "You are a bright young man, darling. Well-read and thoughtful. But my cousin is smarter than you, and, in ways you'll never be, he is wonderfully wise."

* * * *

Ferrum lost that fight, and as a result, sold his time on the giant telescope. Just as Rabiah predicted, he made a fat profit—enough to pay for their coming travels. Despite his car's age and several worrisome cracks in the ceramic shell, that is what they drove. Her vehicle's sordid history would be too much of a distraction. They pretended to be married, spending their first evening at an isolated lodge far from the highway. The nearly full moon was still below the horizon. Even without the benefit of an eclipse, the sky proved dark enough to use his father's little telescope. There was a bonewood field nearby, recently harvested and usefully bare. Ferrum set the telescope on a flat stump, four stubby legs holding the tube and lenses steady. Then he focused on the narrow crescent of the Lost Sister—a nearby world of rock and blazingly hot air that showed itself only at dusk and dawn.

When Rabiah bent to look, Ferrum described what was known and what was guessed.

In the earliest days of Creation, their sun was surrounded by dust and countless half-formed worlds. Collisions and near-collisions shaped the history of those worlds; titanic forces shattered crusts, melting each to its core. Debris was flung this way and that. By chance, one world gathered more than its share of the solar system's metals. Then came the final collision: A rogue body from one of the Sisters struck hard, ripping away fat portions of the stony exterior while leaving the precious iron mixed

swirling inside the molten stew that remained.

That miserable world became their home, and its former crust pulled itself into their stony moon.

“We won the iron,” he mentioned. “Without it and the other metals, we wouldn’t be here.”

She had heard his lecture before. But Rabiah could be a good listener, even if her lover repeated what both of them knew.

“And if we didn’t have our moon,” he continued, “then the stone crust under our feet would be too deep and stubborn for volcanoes to crack open. Without volcanoes, minerals wouldn’t be recycled. And our carbon cycle would probably collapse. In the end, this would have become a giant version of the Lost Sister. And I wouldn’t have you begging for my affections.”

“What did you say?” she asked.

Rabiah was only pretending to listen to him, he assumed.

But then she laughed. “You are the beggar, my dear.”

“How can you say that?”

“This business about worlds colliding ... it’s a symbolic tale about lust and intercourse and the like...”

Maybe she was right. Soon they were making love on the soft ground beside the stump.

Then later, as Rabiah slept and the moon rose, Ferrum focused his telescope on the Twins—ruddy little suns dancing close to one another, illuminating

a few dead worlds well beyond the reach of all but the most powerful telescopes.

As he watched the sky, a tiny artificial moon silently spun its way overhead.

Later, he roused his lover and led her to their bed, and they made love again before sleeping longer than they intended. In the morning, they drove fast until their fuel ran low, and then Ferrum picked a random station and parked against an empty nipple. Stepping out of his car, he heard a stranger shouting, "Hello," to somebody.

Innocently, Ferrum made an agreeable gesture, in case he had met this fellow before.

But the stranger was talking to Rabiah. He smiled and said her name, and she smiled back at him, replying, "Hello, Ocher."

This was the infamous cousin, Ferrum realized: A heavy man worn down by one or several infirmities. And the woman riding with him looked very much like his wife would look. She was short and fat, and when she saw the young woman smiling at her husband, her expression said everything.

The fat wife turned away, snapping off a few hard words.

But the cousin—Rabiah's former lover—seemed untroubled. He invested a few moments staring at his replacement, and then he smiled. And suddenly Ferrum found himself grinning too. So this was the cheating husband? The fellow that he'd been jealous of for months? Goodness, he was just a chubby old

fool with a homely, nagging wife.

Really, the situation couldn't have been funnier.

Ferrum suddenly wished they'd brought Rabiah's car. What did it matter? The image of that invalid and his girlfriend doing anything in the front seat ... well, it was sad, even pathetic, and how could he have wasted his worries about the two of them...?

* * * *

An acquaintance from work purchased Ferrum's time on the new telescope. But before he would agree to the asking price, the buyer wanted to see the equipment and its placement. One evening, the two men drove out of the city, to the high hill where teams of engineers fiddled with gears and lenses and the astonishingly large mirror—a highly orchestrated chaos in full swing. Ferrum's companion didn't seem especially worried that with just a month left, nothing was finished. Indeed, he spent remarkably little time examining the facility or the fancy equipment that would split the light, directing it into dozens of eyepieces. He didn't say two words to the experts who liked nothing better than to break from their labors, explaining their narrow discipline to any interested face. No, the fellow seemed most interested in the view behind them. Standing on the highest knoll, on a pile of weathered sandstone, he looked back at their city and the dark swatches of irrigated farmland, bonewood and lickbottom trees dark with the season. And with a matter of fact tone, he declared, "Soon all this will be swept away."

Ferrum asked, "What do you mean?"

The man's intentions were obvious, at least to him. So obvious that he said nothing, his mouth closed for a long moment, perhaps expecting his companion to suddenly say, "Oh, swept away. I didn't hear you with the wind. Yes, I know exactly what you mean."

But Ferrum didn't understand, and he asked his question again.

They were workmates, not friends. But Ferrum's companion was as smart as him, or smarter, and he was definitely better read in matters of history and politics. With a devotion to the past, the co-worker could discuss the ebb and flow of civilizations, the relative strengths of different governments, and the dangers inherent in ignorance and blind trust. He was particularly fond of the great men: Those godly names that everybody recognized, even when few understood the bloody particulars of their glorious lives.

Ferrum's companion studied him, as if examining his soul for flaws. Then he looked back down the hill, saying to the wind, "The Night will remake the world."

It was an old sentiment, and perhaps not unexpected.

But Ferrum felt surprised nonetheless. "It's just darkness," he muttered. "And we know what we'll see—"

"Do we?"

"Of course." History might not be Ferrum's

favorite terrain, but he felt at ease with the sciences. “I can tell you exactly what you’re going to find when you look through that telescope.”

“So it’s not worth my money?” the man asked.

Ferrum hesitated. Was this a bargaining ploy?

“If you ‘know’ what you’ll see, there’s no point in looking. At the sky, or anything else.” The man offered a wicked little laugh, adding, “That girlfriend of yours. You’ve seen her naked once or twice, so why look at her body again?”

“Enough,” Ferrum warned.

“But do you see my point? When you and I set our eyes on anything, anything at all, we refresh our memories. Make new what is familiar. And if we’re very lucky, we might even see a detail or two that we somehow missed with every past glance.”

For an instant, Rabiah’s wondrous body drifted before Ferrum’s eyes.

Then the man continued, pointing out, “In another month, countless people are going to look through these telescopes and see the sky in a new way. Everyone will witness the Night in its full glory. Unless of course you’re unfortunate enough to be stuck on the Wax Islands or the Gray Continent.”

Those bits of land were on the far, daylight side of the world.

“I agree with you, Ferrum. Intellectually, yes, we know exactly what the Night brings. But if you study history as I have ... well, there’s only one conclusion: Each Day brings its revolution.”

“Because we expect change.” In a charitable mood, Ferrum would concede this point. “Self-fulfilling prophecies.”

But his companion dismissed that easy answer.

“Do you think something mystical is at work here?” Ferrum asked.

“Do you believe in an Almighty hand?”

“What I believe...”

Then the wind gusted, and the voice hesitated.

Ferrum looked over his shoulder, tired of their game.

“Explanations don’t matter much,” the fellow claimed. “I accept the possibility that one of our Gods, or even some unrecognized scientific principle, might be at work. But mostly, I believe everything changes because nothing can stay the same.” The smile was joyous, the eyes grim.

“It is the nature of people. Of history and our world. The old must be swept aside, my friend. And what better place to begin than with the Dawn?”

* * * *

Ten millions years ago, an elderly shield volcano choked on its own magma, and moments later, a single titanic blast flung rock and dust across the sky. The surrounding countryside was scorched and then buried. Every end of the world saw the sun grow dim, and no doubt there were places where a different Night held sway, too little light finding its way down to hungry leaves and a billion blind, terrified eyes. The resulting winter would have been sudden and

years in duration. Countless species must have gone extinct, while others prospered in the ripe chaos. But then the rich dusts finally fell to the ground, and the climate found its new balance, and with the patient hands of wind and rain, the remains of that gutted volcano were gradually carried away.

What remained was a ring of dark mountains, and in the middle, a plain as round as a coin and as flat. The mountains helped keep the country too dry for crops or trees, and most importantly, those rounded peaks practically guaranteed that the skies would remain free of clouds. A few towns were scattered across the wide emptiness—just enough to supply food and water to the crowds coming from the cities. Every little highway was jammed with cars. The sun was high and bright, and driving out onto the plain, Ferrum understood why Rabiah's tribe had picked this location. He was thinking about the evening to come, anticipation pushing aside every lesser emotion. But then Rabiah said proudly, "Do you know who picked this site for us?"

"Your cousin," he guessed.

"I have quite a few cousins," Rabiah reminded him. "But it was Ocher, yes. Of course it was."

"The cheating husband," he muttered.

"Why don't you ever say his name?"

Ferrum replied with a thoughtful silence, and then asked, "How much farther?"

They arrived at the designated location in the early afternoon. Where a volcanic crater once stood, more

than a thousand strangers were building a busy, temporary city. Men were pitching colorful tents, setting up long tables, and testing the fires in a hundred big camp stoves. Women were chatting happily, sweeping out the tents and assembling the beginnings of the evening feast. Children seemed to be everywhere, and Ferrum was glad to see them: The adults used their mother tongue, but the youngsters screamed and complained in the language he knew.

Ferrum had met Rabiah's parents, but it took him a few moments to recognize them now. Instead of the drab clothes of business people, they were dressed in the brilliant robes of their desert tradition, and instead of being reserved for the sake of propriety, they were outgoing, even giddy. They greeted both their daughter and her boyfriend with warm hands and quick kisses. "I was afraid you were going to miss all this," the mother confessed. Her voice was very much like her daughter's, but slowed by an accent that made her words difficult to understand. Turning to Ferrum, she asked, "Did you have trouble finding us?"

Ferrum didn't want to mention oversleeping, since that might bring up the matter of sharing one bed. So he offered a simple, pragmatic lie. "It's my fault. I took a wrong turn at Damp Sand."

"You did not," Rabiah snapped.

Ferrum hesitated.

"We were up late watching the sky," Rabiah confessed.

The mother's eyes twinkled. "More than just sky-watching, I hope."

With a dismissive gesture, Rabiah said, "He did just enough for me. Yes."

Then both women broke into a hard, shared laugh.

Ferrum was embarrassed. He dipped his head while looking at the father, trying to read emotions that hid behind a broad, painfully polite smile.

When he and Rabiah were alone again, he asked, "Why did you say that?"

"What did I say?" she replied. And then, as if suddenly understanding the simple question, she added, "My parents are thrilled to have a responsible man in their little girl's life. In fact, I think they adore you. At least a little bit."

"Adore me?"

"As long as you keep me happy, they will."

But Rabiah's happiness was never easy, and to make matters worse, Ferrum had the impression that his own feelings, good or lousy, were inconsequential when it came to their relationship.

The remains of that afternoon brought introductions to cousins and aunts and family friends, plus people who Rabiah didn't know but who felt curious about this fellow of hers. Almost every name offered was forgotten before the introduction was finished. A hundred polite conversations ended in uncomfortable silence. Soon the faces surrounding Ferrum looked much the same, and he found himself thinking about inbreeding and other uncharitable

possibilities.

The feast proved amazing, and miserable. By convention, young men shared the same long tables while the single women were safe at the far end of the field. Strangers filled the pillows beside Ferrum. Most were conversant in his language but few were willing to use it. Foods he had tasted on occasion were suddenly heaped high on his platter-sized plate, every bite laced with spiced salts that burned his mouth and throat, and later, his belly. When the feast was finished, he lugged his swollen carcass to a large black tent that Rabiah had pointed out earlier. "I'll meet you there," she had promised. But standing in the tent's long shadow, it occurred to Ferrum that his lover hadn't specified an exact time for this meeting. Where was she? Was that her standing over there? But no, Rabiah had been wearing trousers and a simple blouse, while most young women were showing off the gaudy dresses of their home country, legs and arms and the long elegant necks covered with jewelry, their feet balanced on impossibly delicate shoes.

She was testing him, Ferrum hoped.

Because every other possibility seemed more awful.

Suddenly a pair of young men approached. They wore smiles and tool belts, and the nearest fellow called to him by name before saying,

"Come with us."

"Where to?" Ferrum asked.

“Over there,” he said with a wave. “She told us you would help us.”

“You mean Rabiah?”

Just mentioning the name made both strangers laugh. Then the second man, wrestling with the unfamiliar language, said, “Come. Help.”

“With what?”

“The show!” the first man shouted. “We are slow. We need cool hands, please.”

Ferrum followed them through the noisy, happy crowd. He couldn't see how he might help, but at least he wasn't standing in one place, waiting for a woman who might never appear again.

“Have I met you already?” he asked the first man.

That deserved another laugh.

“I'm sorry,” Ferrum continued. “I don't remember names—”

“Rabiah,” the man interrupted.

“Excuse me?”

The stranger stopped and turned, and with his pleasure receding into some other emotion, he said, “You are lucky. Very lucky, you know.”

“In what way?”

The second stranger asked a question of his companion.

An answer was offered—an impatient bark of syllables. And then the first stranger turned back to Ferrum, regarding him with a careful gaze before saying, “Or maybe you are not fortunate. Too soon to say, maybe.”

Again, the three men walked on. Eventually they fell into the open, and later, far from the celebratory racket, they were standing on a flat-topped little knoll. Suddenly Ferrum understood what was happening, and after a lot of consideration, he still didn't approve. But what else could he do?

Perhaps twenty other men were busy with this very important work. Rare skills were on display. What Ferrum was qualified to do was uncoil the new copper wires while walking quickly from place to place. It would be best if the job was finished before evening, and the men were thankful for his help. After a while, there was an odd moment when Ferrum completely forgot his old objections. He discovered that he was enjoying this uncoiling and stretching of the wires, and later, the careful planting of long tubes. Then a gentleman that he didn't know smiled at him and said, "Good," and Ferrum's reaction was to smile back and bow a little, saying, "Thank you,"

with relish.

The sun set before they were finished.

Once, then again, older men approached to complain, mentioning the time remaining and the sorry state of affairs. But the full moon made their work easy enough, and they were done even before the world's slow shadow began to obliterate the sky's brightest light.

Ferrum joyfully accepted the thanks of his new friends, and then he returned alone to the black tent, imagining Rabiah waiting for him. But the tent had

been moved or dismantled, and his lover was still missing. Where could she be? He walked about the camp, searching for everything that was lost. He wanted to retreat to the car and grab his telescope, but there wasn't much time left. The moon was already half-consumed, the Sullen Sisters hovering close to its left limb. Ferrum spent a few moments listing the ways that the woman had made his life miserable, and then he stopped walking, closing his eyes while wishing he was anywhere else in the world.

Somebody called his name.

Ferrum turned and opened his eyes, finding a familiar face, and then that face said to him, "You look so very unhappy."

"Hello, Ocher."

"I know where we can find a good telescope," the old man mentioned. "But we don't have very much time. This way, please."

And without hesitation, Ferrum fell in beside his newest friend.

* * * *

Ocher's telescope was set on flat ground outside the campground. It was no hunter's tool meant to search for herds of poor-lillies and fat blackbottoms, but instead it was a precise astronomical instrument with three heavy legs and a broad mirror, tiny gears and motors moving the tube along the same course that the sky took. Ferrum's long first look showed him the brilliant snows of the moon's southern pole—a frigid terrain famous for killing the only explorers

to ever set foot on it—and then the world’s shadow fell over that wasteland, a rainbow flash marking the sunlight as it passed through the same air he was now breathing in gulps.

“Did you hear?” Ocher asked. “It is raining at home.”

He looked up from the eyepiece. “Now?”

“A colleague called me with the sad news,” his companion allowed.

“A squall line is sweeping out of the west. Probably gone before sunrise, but there’s going to be a lot of angry souls in its wake.”

Ferrum imagined hundreds of novice astronomers standing beside that expensive, useless telescope, faces glistening with the rain, every sorry voice screaming at the profoundly unfair sky.

His personal gloom began to lift, just a little.

The moon was soon immersed in the night.

Ocher pulled a small timepiece from his shirt pocket, adjusted his telescope’s aim and then stepped back again. “If you wish, watch the Sisters vanish.”

“Don’t you want to?”

“Oh, I’m not being generous,” said Ocher. “I just want my eyes kept in the dark, to help them adapt.”

Those distant suns looked like twin gemstones, brilliant but cold. Ferrum’s vision blurred, but he watched carefully as the lightless bulk of another world rose to meet them. Then thin dry atmosphere made one flicker, then the other, and then the first Sister touched the rim of a crater, and it vanished.

“I hope she’s watching,” Ferrum muttered.

“I am sure she is,” Ocher promised. Then he made a low sound, as if intending to say something else ... or ask his own question, perhaps ... but that’s when the final Sister plunged out of sight, and the lightless air was filled with gasps and exclamations, old prayers and inarticulate screams as old as their species.

The Night had come.

Ferrum jumped back from the telescope.

Like a startled animal, he looked up. His eyes chose a random line, and after wiping the eyes dry, he stared as hard as he could into the new sky. But what was he seeing? Somehow his mind had forgotten a thousand lessons of science, and for that delicious moment, he felt scared and happy, and confused, and absolutely enthralled. There was nothing to see; there was nothing but black upon black. That was because there was nothing there. Except for the Sisters and their own sun, the universe was devoid of meaningful light. Eyes a thousand times stronger than Ferrum’s would do no better. Only mirrors that were a billion times more powerful could work, and then only when thrown high above the world’s atmosphere

... and even the luckiest of those telescopes would gather in nothing but a few weak photons—odd travelers from regions too distant and ancient to resolve with any confidence whatsoever.

This was the Creation, utterly empty and divinely cold.

Save for this one tiny realm, of course.

“Where is that girl?” he growled.

“Standing directly behind you,” said Rabiah, her deep voice laughing.

Then despite telling himself not to, Ferrum turned, ignoring the sky in order to reach out and grab a body and face that he knew better than he knew anything, including his own sloppy pounding heart.

* * * *

The three of them stood close together in the absolute Night.

The hollering and chants in the camp gradually fell away, becoming gentle conversation and reflective silence, and at some imprecise point Ocher began to talk, using surprisingly few words to explain the basics of his life's work.

“Has Rabiah told you?” he began. “I'm a failed scientist. I tried physics twice before falling into mathematics. But I'm very good with calculations, and my old school chums use me to test their ideas. ‘Do my equations balance, Ocher? Are they pretty? And are we telling the truth about the universe?’”

“What about the universe?” Ferrum managed.

“It is far larger than we can see,” the genius reported. “There is physical evidence to support that hypothesis. Microwave radiations. Exhausted particles from hot, bright places. Even the shape of the cold holds its clues.” He had a pleasant voice, smooth and almost musical at times. “The true universe is unimaginably grand, and it doesn't have

to be as smooth and empty as we find it here. Hydrogen and helium can pull together, with help. Through simple probability, it can be shown that there must be regions full of suns and worlds like ours, and presumably, worlds very different from the handful that we know well.

“But not our realm, no.

“And so long as we think in small ways, this is where we will be trapped, and for all of our Days.”

A sudden shout interrupted the lecture. From the knoll where Ferrum had helped uncoil wire, someone shouted a single command ... and then, on that signal, a soft wet woosh could be heard.

Ferrum saw red sparks rising in the darkness.

Rabiah’s warm hand slipped inside his grip, and now she leaned hard against him, waiting for a kiss.

Then the first explosive was detonated above the flat barren plain—a bright greenish light that flung stars in every direction, accompanied by a host of bright sharp blasts.

A cheer rose up with a wave of rockets.

Rabiah had explained the tradition this way: In ancient times, the desert people were never caught unaware of the Night. Their open country was the best place to watch the sky, and when the heavens warned of darkness coming, scarce wood was piled high. When it was impossible to see, great bonfires were set ablaze. The tribes feared that the gods would forget what light was if none could be seen, and that was how people ensured that the Sullen Sisters would

find their way to the other side of the moon.

In recent times, bonfires gave way to more interesting pyrotechnics.

Each wave of rockets was bigger than the last, and despite his doubts, Ferrum found himself spellbound. The colors; the noise; the wild patterns burning into his eyes: The show was spectacular and lovely, and thrilling, and he didn't mind that the darkness was being pushed away. He smelled the burnt powder and his own excitement, and he felt Rabiah's wonderful body pressing hard against him. When the fourth wave exploded, he looked into her face. When the fifth broke, he clumsily pawed her. Then came the sixth wave, and he thought to look for Ocher. Her one-time lover was standing beside his telescope, his hands on the tube but his gaze watching the nearer spectacle. Ferrum walked to him. Together, they watched the seventh salvo of rockets head skyward, and just before the carefully timed blasts, he put his mouth against the man's ear, asking,

“What did you mean?”

“Mean?” the man replied.

Then neither could hear anything but the noisy rainbows flying overhead.

When the rockets paused, Ferrum said, “If we think in small ways, we will be trapped?”

“Yes,” said Ocher.

“But what is a large way to think?”

The eighth flight of rockets was the largest—a thunderous fleet of suicidal machines arcing higher

and higher into the smoke-rich sky—and as they watched the grand ascent, Ocher said simply, “Space can be cut, if you know how. If you focus enough energy in the proper ways. And then a brave soul can leap across a trillion light-years in the time it takes one Night to pass.”

The heavens were suddenly filled with ornate figures.

Ferrum retreated to the girl again.

“What did you ask him?” said Rabiah.

“What?”

“Did you ask him about me?”

“No,” he confessed. “Not at all.” Then as the roaring in his ears fell away, Ferrum added, “Ocher was telling me about tomorrow, and about the next revolution to come...”

Night of Time

Ash drank a bitter tea while sitting in the shade outside his shop, comfortable on a little seat that he had carved for himself in the trunk of a massive, immortal bristle-cone pine. The wind was tireless, dense and dry and pleasantly warm. The sun was a convincing illusion—a K-class star perpetually locked at an early-morning angle, the false sky narrow and pink, a haze of artful dust pretending to have been blown from some faraway hell. At his feet lay a narrow and phenomenally deep canyon, glass roads anchored to the granite walls, with hundreds of narrow glass bridges stretched from one side to the other, making the air below him glisten and glitter. Busier shops and markets were set beside the important roads, and scattered between them were the hivelike mansions and mating halls, and elaborate fractal statues, and the vertical groves of cling-trees that lifted water from the distant river: The basics of life for the local species, the 31-3s.

For Ash, business was presently slow, and it had been for some years. But he was a patient man and a pragmatist, and when you had a narrow skill and a well-earned reputation, it was only a matter of time before the desperate or those with too much money came searching for you.

“This will be the year,” he said with a practiced, confident tone. “And maybe, this will be the day.”

Any coincidence was minimal. It was his little habit to say those words and then lean forward in his seat, looking ahead and to his right, watching the only road that happened to lead past his shop. If someone were coming, Ash would see him now. And as it happened, he spotted two figures ascending the long glass ribbon, one leading the other, both fighting the steep grade as well as the thick and endless wind.

The leader was large and simply shaped—a cylindrical body, black and smooth, held off the ground by six jointed limbs. Ash instantly recognized the species. While the other entity was human, he decided—a creature like himself, and at this distance, entirely familiar.

They weren't going to be his clients, of course. Most likely, they were sightseers. Perhaps they didn't even know one another. They were just two entities that happened to be marching in the same direction. But as always, Ash allowed himself a seductive premonition. He finished his tea, and listened, and after a little while, despite the heavy wind, he heard the quick dense voice of the alien—an endless blur of words and old stories and lofty abstract concepts born from one of the galaxy's great natural intellects.

When the speaker was close, Ash called out, "Wisdom passes!"

A Vozen couldn't resist such a compliment.

The road had finally flattened out. Jointed legs turned the long body, allowing every eye to focus on the tall, rust-colored human sitting inside the craggy

tree. The Vozen continued walking sideways, but with a fatigued slowness. His only garment was a fabric tube, black like his carapace and with the same slick texture. “Wisdom shall not pass,” a thin, somewhat shrill voice called out. Then the alien’s translator made adjustments, and the voice softened. “If you are a man named Ash,” said the Vozen, “this Wisdom intends to linger.”

“I am Ash,” he replied, immediately dropping to his knees. The ground beneath the tree was rocky, but acting like a supplicant would impress the species. “May I serve your Wisdom in some tiny way, sir?”

“Ash,” the creature repeated. “The name is Old English. Is that correct?”

The surprise was genuine. With a half-laugh, Ash said, “Honestly, I’m not quite sure—”

“English,” it said again. The translator was extremely adept, creating a voice that was unnervingly human—male and mature, and pleasantly arrogant. “There was a tiny nation-state, and an island, and as I recall my studies, England and its confederate tribes acquired a rather considerable empire that briefly covered the face of your cradle world.”

“Fascinating,” said Ash, looking back down the road. The second figure was climbing the last long grade, pulling an enormous float-pack, and despite his initial verdict, Ash realized that the creature wasn’t human at all.

“But you were not born on the Earth,” the Vozen continued. “In your flesh and your narrow build, I can see some very old augmentations—”

“Mars,” Ash allowed. “I was born on—”

“Mars,” the voice repeated. That simple word triggered a cascade of memories, facts and telling stories. From that flood, the Vozen selected his next offering. “Old Mars was home to some fascinating political experiments. From the earliest terraforming societies to the Night of the Dust—”

“I remember,” Ash interrupted, trying to gain control over the conversation. “Are you a historian, sir? Like many of your kind—?”

“I am conversant in the past, yes.”

“Then perhaps I shouldn’t be too impressed. You seem to have been looking for me, and for all I know, you’ve thoroughly researched whatever little history is wrapped around my life.”

“It would be impolite not to study your existence,” said the Vozen.

“Granted.” With another deep bow, Ash asked, “What can this old Martian do for a wise Vozen?”

The alien fell silent.

For a moment, Ash studied the second creature. Its skeleton and muscle were much like a man’s, and the head wore a cap of what could have been dense brown hair. There was one mouth and two eyes, but no visible nose and the mouth was full of heavy pink teeth. Of course many humans had novel genetics, and there were remoras on the Ship’s hull—men and

women who wore every intriguing, creative mutation. But this creature was not human. Ash sensed it, and using a private nexus, he asked his shop for a list of likely candidates.

“Ash,” the Vozen said. “Yes, I have made a comprehensive study of your considerable life.”

Ash dipped his head, driving his knees into the rough ground. “I am honored, sir. Thank you.”

“I understand that you possess some rather exotic machinery.”

“Quite novel. Yes, sir.”

“And talents. You wield talents even rarer than your machinery.”

“Unique talents,” Ash replied with an effortless confidence. He lifted his eyes, and smiled, and wanting the advantage in his court, he rose to his feet, brushing the grit from his slightly bloodied knees as he told his potential client, “I help those whom I can help.”

“You help them for a fee,” the alien remarked, a clear disdain in the voice.

Ash approached the Vozen, remarking, “My fee is a fair wage. A wage determined by the amoral marketplace.”

“I am a poor historian,” the Vozen complained.

Ash gazed into the bright black eyes. Then with a voice tinged with a careful menace, he said, “It must seem awful, I would think. Being a historian, and being Vozen, and feeling your precious memories slowly and inexorably leaking away...”

The Ship was an enormous derelict—a world-sized starship discovered by humans, and repaired by humans, and sent by its new owners on a great voyage around the most thickly settled regions of the galaxy. It was Ash's good fortune to be one of the early passengers, and for several centuries, he remained a simple tourist. But he had odd skills leftover from his former life, and as different aliens boarded the Ship, he made friends with new ideas and fresh technologies. His shop was the natural outgrowth of all that learning. "Sir," he said to the Vozen. "Would you like to see what your money would buy?"

"Of course."

"And your companion—?"

"My aide will remain outside. Thank you."

The human-shaped creature seemed to expect that response. He walked under the bristlecone, tethering his pack to a whitened branch, and with an unreadable expression, stood at the canyon's edge, staring into the glittering depths, watching for the invisible river, perhaps, or perhaps watching his own private thoughts.

"By what name do I call you?"

"Master is adequate."

Every Vozen was named Master, in one fashion or another. With a nod, Ash began walking toward the shop's doorway. "And your aide—"

"Shadow."

“His name is?”

“Shadow is an adequate translation.” Several jointed arms emerged from beneath his long body, complex hands tickling the edges of the door, a tiny sensor slipped from a pocket and pointed at the darkness inside. “Are you curious, Ash?”

“About what, Master?”

“My companion’s identity. It is a little mystery to you, I think.”

“It is. Yes.”

“Have you heard of the Aabacks?”

“But I’ve never seen one.” Then after a silence, he mentioned, “They’re a rare species. With a narrow intelligence and a fierce loyalty, as I understand these things.”

“They are rather simple souls,” Master replied. “But whatever their limits, or because of them, they make wonderful servants.”

The tunnel grew darker, and then the walls fell away. With a silent command, Ash triggered the lights to awaken. In an instant, a great chamber was revealed, the floor tiled simply and the pine-faced ceiling arching high overhead, while the distant walls lay behind banks upon banks of machines that were barely awake, spelling themselves for those rare times when they were needed.

“Are you curious, Master?”

“Intensely and about many subjects,” said the Vozen. “What particular subject are you asking about?”

“How this magic works,” Ash replied, gesturing with an ancient, comfortable pride. “Not even the Ship’s captains can wield this technology. Within the confines of our galaxy, I doubt if there are three other facilities equally equipped.”

“For memory retrieval,” Master added. “I know the theory at play here. You manipulate the electrons inside a client’s mind, increasing their various effects. And you manipulate the quantum nature of the universe, reaching into a trillion alternate but very similar realities. Then you combine these two quite subtle tricks, temporarily enlarging one mind’s ability to reminisce.”

Ash nodded, stepping up to the main control panel.

“I deplore that particular theory,” his client professed.

“I’m not surprised.”

“That many-world image of the universe is obscene. To me, it is simply grotesque and relentlessly ridiculous, and I have never approved of it.”

“Many feel that way,” Ash allowed.

A genuine anger surged. “This concept of each electron existing in countless realities, swimming through an endless ocean of potential, with every possible outcome achieved to what resembles an infinite number of outcomes—”

“We belong to one branch of reality,” Ash interrupted. “One minor branch in a great tree

standing in an endless canopy in the multiverse forest—”

“We are not,” Master growled.

The controls awoke. Every glow-button and thousand-layer display had a theatrical purpose. Ash could just as easily manipulate the machinery through nexuses buried in his own body. But his clients normally appreciated this visible, traditional show of structured light and important sounds.

“We are not a lonely reality lost among endless possibility.” In *Vozzen* fashion, the hind legs slapped each other in disgust. “I am a historian and a scholar of some well-earned notoriety. My long, long life has been spent in the acquisition of the past, and its interpretation, and I refuse to believe that what I have studied—this great pageant of time and story—is nothing more than some obscure twig shaking on the end of an impossible-to-measure shrub.”

“I’m tempted to agree with you,” Ash replied.

“Tempted?”

“There are moments when I believe...” Ash paused, as if selecting his next words. “I see us as the one true reality. The universe is exactly as it seems to be. As it should be. And what I employ here is just a trick, a means of interacting with the ghost realities. With mathematical whispers and unborn potentials. In other words, we are the trunk of a great and ancient tree, and the dreamlike branches have no purpose but to feed our magnificent souls...!”

The alien regarded Ash with a new respect. The respect showed in the silence, and then, with the hands opening, delicate spiderweb fingers presenting themselves to what was, for at least this moment, their equal.

“Is that what you believe now?” Master asked.

“For the moment.” Ash laughed quietly. Two nexuses and one display showed the same information: The historian had enough capital to hire him and his machinery. “And I’ll keep believing it for a full day, if necessary.”

Then he turned, bowing just enough. “What exactly is it that you wish to remember, Master?”

The alien eyes lost their brightness.

“I am not entirely sure,” the voice confessed with a simple horror. “I have forgotten something very important...something essential, I fear...but I can’t even recall what that something might be...”

Hours had passed, but the projected sun hadn’t moved. The wind was unchanged, and the heat only seemed worse, as Ash stepped from the cool depths of his shop, his body momentarily forgetting to perspire. He had left his client alone, standing inside a cylindrical reader with a thousand flavors of sensors fixed to his carapace and floating free inside the ancient body and mind. Ash kept a close watch over the Vozen. His nexuses showed him telemetry, and a mind’s eye let him watch the scene. If necessary, he could offer words of encouragement or warning. But

for the moment, his client was obeying the strict instructions, standing as motionless as possible while the machines made intricate maps of his brain—a body-long array of superconducting proteins and light-baths and quantum artesianians. The alien's one slight cheat was his voice, kept soft as possible, but always busy, delivering an endless lecture about an arcane, mostly forgotten epoch.

The mapping phase was essential, and quite boring.

From a tiny slot in the pink granite wall, Ash plucked free a new cup of freshly brewed, deliciously bitter tea.

“A pleasant view,” a nearby voice declared.

“I like it.” Ash sipped his drink. As a rule, Aabacks appreciated liquid gifts, but he made no offer, strolling under the bristlecone, out of the wind and sun. “Do you know anything about the 31-3s?”

“I know very little,” Shadow confessed. The voice was his own, his larynx able to produce clear if somewhat slow human words.

“Their home is tidally locked and rather distant from its sun,” Ash explained. “Their atmosphere is rich in carbon dioxide, which my Martian lungs prefer.” He tapped his own chest. “Water vapor and carbon dioxide warm the day hemisphere, and the winds carry the excess heat and moisture to the cold nightside glaciers, which grow and push into the dawn, and melt, completing the cycle.” With an appreciative nod, he said, “The Ship's engineers have

done a magnificent job of replicating the 31-3 environment.”

Shadow's eyes were large and bright, colored a bluish gray. The pink teeth were heavy and flat-headed, suitable for a diet of rough vegetation. Powerful jaw muscles ballooned outward when the mouth closed. A simple robe and rope belt were his only clothes. Four fingers and a thumb were on each hand, but nothing like a fingernail showed. Ash watched the hands, and then the bare, almost human feet. Reading the dirt, he felt certain that Shadow hadn't moved since he had arrived. He was standing in the sun, in the wind, and like any scrupulously obedient servant, he seemed ready to remain on that patch of ground for another day, or twenty.

“The 31-3s don't believe in time,” Ash continued.

A meaningful expression passed across the face. Curiosity? Disdain? Then with a brief glance toward Ash, he asked, “Is it the absence of days and nights?”

“Partly. But only partly.”

Shadow leaned forward slightly. On the bright road below, a pack of 31-3s was dancing along. Voices like brass chimes rose through the wind. Ash recognized his neighbors. He threw a little stone at them, to be polite. Then with a steady voice, he explained, “The endless day is a factor, sure. But they've always been a long-lived species. On their world, with its changeless climate and some extremely durable genetics, every species has a nearly immortal constitution. Where humans and Vozzens

and Aabacks had to use modern bioengineering to conquer aging, the 31-3s evolved in a world where everything can live pretty much forever. That's why time was never an important concept to them. And that's why their native physics is so odd, and lovely—they formulated a vision of a universe that is almost, almost free of time."

The alien listened carefully. Then he quietly admitted, "Master has explained some of the same things to me, I think."

"You're a good loyal audience," Ash said.

"It is my hope to be."

"What else do you do for Master?"

"I help with all that is routine," Shadow explained. "In every capacity, I give him aid and free his mind for great undertakings."

"But mostly, you listen to him."

"Yes."

"Vozzens are compulsive explainers."

"Aabacks are natural listeners," said Shadow, with a hint of pride.

"Do you remember what he tells you?"

"Very little." For an instant, the face seemed human. An embarrassed smile and a shy blinking of the blue-gray eyes preceded the quiet admission, "I do not have a Vozen's mind. And Master is an exceptional example of his species."

"You're right," said Ash. "On both accounts."

The alien shifted his feet, and again stared down at the 31-3s.

“Come with me.”

“He wants me here,” Shadow replied. Nothing in the voice was defiant, or even a little stubborn. He intended to obey the last orders given to him, and with his gentle indifference, he warned that he couldn’t be swayed.

Sternly, Ash asked, “What does the Master want from this day?”

The question brought a contemplative silence.

“More than anything,” said Ash, “he wants to recover what’s most precious to him. And that is—”

“His memory.”

Again, Ash said, “Come with me.”

“For what good?”

“He talks to you. And yes, you’ve likely forgotten what he can’t remember.” Ash finished his tea in one long sip. “But likely and surely are two different words. So if you truly wish to help your friend, come with me. Come now.”

“I do not deserve solitude,” the Vozzen reported. “If you intend to abandon me, warn me. You must.”

“I will.”

Then, “Do you feel that?”

“Do I...what...?”

“Anything. Do you sense anything unusual?”

The alien was tethered to a new array of sensors, plus devices infinitely more intrusive. Here and in a hundred trillion alternate realities, Master stood in the same position, legs locked and arms folded

against his belly, his voice slightly puzzled, admitting, “I seem to be remembering my cradle nest.”

“Is that unusual?”

“It is unlikely,” the Vozzen admitted. “I don’t often—”

“And now?”

“My first mate,” he began. “In the nest, overlooking a fungal garden—”

“What about now?”

He paused, and then admitted, “Your ship. I am seeing the Great Ship from space, our taxi making its final approach.” With a warm laugh, he offered, “It is a historian’s dream, riding in a vessel such as this—”

“And now?” Ash prompted.

Silence.

“Where are you—?”

“Inside a lecture hall,” Master replied.

“When?”

“Eleven months in the past. I am giving a public lecture.” He paused, and then explained, “I make a modest living, speaking to interested parties.”

“What do you remember about that day’s lecture?”

“Everything,” Master began to say. But the voice faltered, and with a doubting tone, he said, “A woman?”

“What woman?”

“A human woman.”

“What about her?” Ash pressed.

“She was attending...sitting in a seat to my right...? No, my left. How odd. I usually know where to place every face—”

“What was the topic?”

“Topic?”

“Of your lecture. The topic.”

“A general history of the Great Wheel of Smoke—”

“The Milky Way,” Ash interrupted.

“Your name for everyone’s galaxy, yes.” With a weblike hand, the alien reached in front of his own face. “I was sharing a very shallow overview of our shared history, naming the most important species of the last three billion years.” The hand closed on nothing, and retreated. “For many reasons, there have been few genuinely important species. They have been modestly abundant, and some rather wealthy. But I was making the point...the critical line of reasoning...that since the metal-rich worlds began spawning intelligence, no single species, or related cluster of sentient organisms, has been able to dominate more than a small puff of the Smoke.”

“Why is that?”

The simple question unleashed a flood of thoughts, recollections, and abstract ideas, filling the displays with wild flashes of color and elaborate, highly organized shapes.

“There are many reasons,” Master warned.

“Name three.”

“Why? Do you wish to learn?”

“I want to pass the time pleasantly,” said Ash, studying the data with a blank, almost impassive face. “Three reasons why no species can dominate. Give them to me, in brief.”

“Distance. Divergence. And divine wisdom.”

“The distance between stars...is that what you mean...?”

“Naturally,” the historian replied. “Star-flight remains slow and expensive and potentially dangerous. Many species find those reasons compelling enough to remain at home, safe and comfortable, reengineering the spacious confines of their own solar system.”

“Divergence?”

“A single species can evolve in many fashions. New organic forms. Joining with machines. Becoming machines. Sweeping cultural experiments. Even the total obliteration of physical bodies. No species can dominate any portion of space if what it becomes is many, many new and oftentimes competing species.”

Ash blinked slowly. “What about divine wisdom?”

“That is the single most important factor,” said Master. “Ruling the heavens is a child’s desire.”

“True enough.”

“The galaxy is not a world, or even a hundred thousand worlds. It is too vast and chaotic to embrace, and with maturity comes the wisdom to accept that simple impossibility.”

“What about the woman?”

“Which woman?” Master was surprised by his own question, as if another voice had asked it. “That human female. Yes. Frankly, I don’t think she’s important in the smallest way. I don’t even know why I am thinking about her.”

“Because I’m forcing you to think about her.”

“Why? Does she interest you?”

“Not particularly.” Ash looked up abruptly, staring at the oval black eyes. “She asked you a question. Didn’t she?”

“I remember. Yes.”

“What question?”

“She asked about human beings, of course.” With a gentle disdain, the historian warned, “You are a young species. And yes, you have been fortunate. Your brief story is fat with luck as well as fortuitous decisions. The Great Ship, as an example. Large and ancient, and empty, and you happened to be the species that found it and took possession. And now you are interacting with a wealth of older, wiser species, gaining knowledge at a rate rarely if ever experienced in the last three billion years—”

“What did she ask you?”

“Pardon me. Did you just ask a question?”

“Exactly. What did this woman say?”

“I think...I know...she asked, ‘Will humanity be the first species to dominate the Milky Way?’ “

“What was the woman’s name?”

A pause.

Ash feathered a hundred separate controls.

“She did not offer any name,” the historian reported.

“What did she look like?”

Again, with a puzzled air, the great mind had to admit, “I didn’t notice her appearance, or I am losing my mind.”

Ash waited for a moment. “What was your reply?”

“I told her, and the rest of my audience, ‘Milk is a child’s food. If humans had named the galaxy after smoke, they wouldn’t bother with this nonsense of trying to consume the Milky Way.’ “

For a long while, Ash said nothing.

Then, quietly, the historian inquired, “Where is my assistant? Where is Shadow?”

“Waiting where you told him to wait,” Ash lied. And in the next breath, “Let’s talk about Shadow for a moment. Shall we?”

“What do you remember...now...?”

“A crunch cake, and sweet water.” Shadow and Ash were standing in a separate, smaller chamber. Opening his mouth, he tasted the cake again. “Then a pudding of succulents and bark from the Gi-Ti tree—”

“Now?”

“Another crunch cake. In a small restaurant beside the Alpha Sea.”

With a mild amusement, Ash reported, “This is what you remember best. Meals. I can see your dinners stacked up for fifty thousand years.”

“I enjoy eating,” the alien replied.

“A good Aaback attitude.”

Silence.

And then the alien turned, soft cords dragged along the floor. Perhaps he had felt something—a touch, a sudden chill—or maybe the expression on his face was born from his own thoughts. Either way, he suddenly asked, “How did you learn this work, Ash?”

“I was taught,” he offered. “And when I was better than my teachers, I learned on my own. Through experiment and hard practice.”

“Master claims you are very good, if not the best.”

“I’ll thank him for that assessment. But he is right: No one is better at this game than me.”

The alien seemed to consider his next words. Then, “He mentioned that you are from a little world. Mars, was it? I remember something...something that happened in your youth. The Night of the Dust, was it?”

“Many things happened back then.”

“Was it a war?” Shadow pressed. “Master often lectures about human history, and you seem to have a fondness for war.”

“I’m glad he finds us interesting.”

“Your species fascinates him.” Shadow tried to move and discovered that he couldn’t. Save for his twin hearts and mouth, every muscle of his body was fused in place. “I don’t quite understand why he feels this interest—”

“You attend his lectures, don’t you?”

“Always.”

“He makes most of his income from public talks.”

“Many souls are interested in his words.”

“Do you recall a lecture from last year?” Ash gave details, and he appeared disappointed when Shadow said:

“I don’t remember, no.” An Aaback laugh ended with the thought, “There must not have been any food in that lecture hall.”

“Let’s try something new,” said Ash. “Think back, back as far as possible. Tell me about the very first meal you remember.”

A long, long pause ended with, “A little crunch cake. I was a child, and it was my first adult meal.”

“I used to be an interrogator,” Ash said abruptly.

The eyes were gray and watchful.

“During that old war, I interrogated people, and on certain days, I tortured them.” He nodded calmly, adding, “Memory is a real thing, Shadow. It’s a dense little nest made, like everything, from electrons—where the electrons are and where they are not—and you would be appalled, just appalled, by all the ways that something real can be hacked out of the surrounding bullshit.”

“Quee Lee.”

“Pardon?”

“The human woman. Her name was, and is, Quee Lee.” Ash began disconnecting his devices, leaving only the minimal few to keep shepherding the Vozen’s mind. “It was easy enough to learn her

name. A lecture attended by humans, and when I found one woman, she told me about another. Who mentioned another friend who might have gone to listen to you. But while that friend hadn't heard of you, she mentioned an acquaintance of hers who had a fondness for the past, and her name is Quee Lee. She happened to be there, and she asked the question."

Relief filled Master, and with a thrilled voice, he said, "I remember her now, yes. Yes. She asked about human dominance in the galaxy—"

"Not quite, no."

Suspicion flowered, and curiosity followed. "She didn't ask that about human dominance?"

"It was her second question, and strictly speaking, it wasn't hers." Ash smiled and nodded, explaining, "The woman sitting next to her asked it. Quee Lee simply repeated the question, since she had won your attention."

A brief pause ended with the wary question:

"What then did the woman ask me?"

Ash stared at the remaining displays, and with a quiet firm voice said, "I've spoken with Quee Lee. At length. She remembers asking you, 'What was the earliest sentient life to arise in the galaxy?'"

The simple question generated a sophisticated response. An ocean of learning was tapped, and from that enormity a single turquoise thread was pulled free, and offered. Five candidates were named in a rush. Then the historian rapidly and thoroughly

described each species, their home worlds, and eventual fates.

“None survived into the modern age,” he said sadly. “Except as rumor and unsubstantiated sightings, the earliest generation of intelligence has died away.”

Ash nodded, and waited.

“How could I forget such a very small thing?”

“Because it is so small,” Ash replied. “The honest, sad truth is that your age is showing. I’m an old man for my species, but that’s nothing compared to you. The Vozen journeyed out among the stars during my Permian. You have an enormous and dense and extraordinarily quick mind. But it is a mind. No matter how vast and how adept, it suffers from what is called bounded rationality. You don’t know everything, no matter how much you wish otherwise. You’re living in an enriched environment, full of opportunities to learn. And as long as you wish to understand new wonders, you’re going to have to allow, on occasion, little pieces of your past to fade away.”

“But why did such a trivial matter bother me so?” asked Master.

And then in the next instant, he answered his own question. “Because it was trivial, and lost. Is that why? I’m not accustomed to forgetting. The sensation is novel...it preyed upon my equilibrium...and wore a wound in my mind...!”

“Exactly, exactly,” lied Ash. “Exactly, and exactly.”

After giving him fair warning, Ash left the historian. “The final probes still need to disengage themselves,” he explained. Then with a careful tone, he asked, “Should I bring your assistant to you? Would you like to see him now?”

“Please.”

“Very well.” Ash pretended to step outside, turning in the darkened hallway, centuries of practice telling him where to step. Then he was inside the secondary chamber, using a deceptively casual voice, mentioning to Shadow, “By the way, I think I know what you are.”

“What I am?”

With a sudden fierceness, Ash asked, “Did you really believe you could fool me?”

The alien said nothing, and by every physical means, he acted puzzled but unworried.

Ash knew better.

“Your body is mostly Aaback, but there’s something else. If I hadn’t suspected it, I wouldn’t have found it. But what seems to be your brain is an elaborate camouflage for a quiet, nearly invisible neural network.”

The alien reached with both hands, yanking one of the cables free from his forehead. Then a long tongue reached high, wiping the gray blood from the wound. A halfway choked voice asked, “What did you see inside me?”

“Dinners,” Ash reported. “Dinners reaching back for billions of years.”

Silence.

“Do you belong to one of the first five species?”

The alien kept yanking cables free, but he was powerless to void the drifters inside his double-mind.

“No,” said Ash, “I don’t think you’re any of those five.” With a sly smile, he reported, “I can tell. You’re even older than that, aren’t you?”

The tongue retreated into the mouth. A clear, sorry voice reported, “I am not sure, no.”

“And that’s why,” said Ash.

“Why?”

“The woman asked that question about the old species, and you picked that moment because of it.” He laughed, nodded. “What did you use? How did you cut a few minutes out of a Vozzen’s perfect memory...?”

“With a small disruptive device—”

“I want to see it.”

“No.”

Ash kept laughing. “Oh, yes. You are going to show it to me!”

Silence.

“Master doesn’t even suspect,” Ash continued. “You were the one who wanted to visit me. You simply gave the Vozzen a good excuse. You heard about me somewhere, and you decided that you wanted me to peer inside his soul, and yours. You

were hoping that I would piece together the clues and tell you what I was seeing in your mind—”

“What do you see?” Shadow blurted.

“Basically, two things.” With a thought, he caused every link with Shadow to be severed, and with a professional poise, he explained, “Your soul might be ten or twelve years old. I don’t know how that could be, but I can imagine: In the earliest days of the universe, when the stars were young and metal-poor, life found some other way to evolve. A completely separate route. Structured plasmas, maybe. Maybe. Whatever the route, your ancestors evolved and spread, and then died away as the universe grew cold and empty. Or they adapted, on occasion. They used organic bodies as hosts, maybe.”

“I am the only survivor,” Shadow muttered. “Whatever the reason, I cannot remember anyone else like me.”

“You are genuinely ancient,” Ash said, “and I think you’re smarter than you pretend to be. But this ghost mind of yours isn’t that sophisticated. Vozzens are smarter, and most humans, too. But when I was watching you thinking, looking at something simple—when I saw dinners reaching back for a billion years—well, that kind of vista begs for an explanation.”

Ash took a deep breath, and then said, “Your memory has help. Quantum help. And this isn’t on any scale that I’ve ever seen, or imagined possible. I can pull in the collective conscience of a few trillion

Masters from the adjacent realities...but with you, I can't even pick a number that looks sane..."

The alien showed his pink teeth, saying nothing.

"Are you pleased?" Ash asked.

"Pleased by what?"

"You are probably the most common entity in Creation," said Ash. "I have never seen such a signal as yours. This clear. This deep, and dramatic. You exist, in one form or another, in a fat, astonishing portion of all the possible realities."

Shadow said, "Yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes," he said with the tiniest nod, "I am pleased."

Always, the sun held its position in the fictional sky. And always, the same wind blew with calm relentlessness. In such a world, it was easy to believe that there was no such monster as time, and the day would never end, and a man with old and exceptionally sad memories could convince himself, on occasion, that there would never be another night.

Ash was last to leave the shop.

"Again," the historian called out, "thank you for your considerable help."

"Thank you for your generous gift." Ash found another cup of tea waiting for him, and he sipped down a full mouthful, watching as Shadow untethered the floating pack. "Where next?"

"I have more lectures to give," Master replied.

"Good."

“And I will interview the newest passengers onboard the Ship.”

“As research?”

“And as a pleasure, yes.”

Shadow was placing a tiny object beside one of the bristlecone’s roots. “If you don’t give that disruptor to me,” Ash had threatened, “I’ll explain a few deep secrets to the Vozen.”

Of course, Shadow had relented.

Ash sipped his tea, and quietly said, “Master. What can you tell me about the future?”

“About what is to come—?” the alien began.

“I never met a historian who didn’t have opinions on that subject,” Ash professed. “My species, for instance. What will happen to us in the next ten or twenty million years?”

Master launched himself into an abbreviated but dense lecture, explaining to his tiny audience what was possible about predicting the future and what was unknowable, and how every bridge between the two was an illusion.

His audience wasn’t listening.

In a whisper, Ash said to Shadow, “But why live this way? With him, in this kind of role?”

In an Aaback fashion, the creature grinned. Then Shadow peered over the edge of the canyon, and speaking to no one in particular, he explained, “He needs me so much. This is why.”

“As a servant?”

“And as a friend, and a confidant.” With a very human shrug, he asked Ash, “How could anyone survive even a single day, if they didn’t feel as if they were, in some little great way, needed?”

Old Man Waiting

People say I'm some kind of wild man. They claim I don't have a Quit button. That once you get me going in any direction, then hold on tight, because it's going to be the ride of your life.

Now why's that such a bad thing?

I was downtown with some buddies, hanging out at one of the college bars. At least until one pimply kid said a few words that he shouldn't have, and the bouncer suggested that I leave. Of course my friends tagged along, since my money was paying for our day. It was late afternoon. We walked up the block, and I spotted this fellow sitting by himself, filling up one end of a long bench, his left leg thrown over the right and his skinny arms crossed and that thin old face wearing an expression that almost fooled me. Almost. But then those big empty eyes glanced my way, just for a second. And I knew. Like that, I could see through him.

We walked past, but I couldn't let it go. I had to stop and look back, and one of the guys asked, "What's wrong?"

"Him," I said.

"That old guy sitting? What about him?"

"He's not."

"Not what?"

"What he looks like."

They're right, you know. Once I get going, I can't

stop. That's why I marched up to the bench and sat down, close enough to touch the old boy but careful not to lift a hand. With the others watching, I waited. With me right next to him, the fellow did nothing. He just pointed his eyes at the side of a bank building, his mouth working now and again, those legs staying crossed and his arms sometimes pulling closer to his chest before relaxing again. He looked like a pile of habits. "But you're not that empty," I said to him when the traffic noise fell off. "I know you're not. I can tell."

My buddies were standing at a safe distance, staring.

"What's going on behind those baby blue eyes?" I asked.

His mouth smacked. His breathing came deep and slow. But he didn't look my way, even on the sly. And I knew for sure that he was playing with me, if you want to know the truth.

One guy called to me. "Benton," he said. "Come on."

None of them would risk coming close.

A cement mixer drove by, neither one of us jumping. Then the roar fell away to a low rumble, and that's when I finally leaned close, saying, "I know what you are. I've got it all figured out."

The fellow didn't blink or change his posture. But he was listening. I could tell that he was waiting for whatever I said next.

"You're an alien," I told him.

Nothing.

“An alien scientist. And this is how you study us. You and your science pals ... you dress up like senile fools and sit in our public places and watch us march past, listening to our talk and smelling our farts too, for all I know.”

He breathed again, and his arms tightened.

“Am I right? Huh?” I jumped up and laughed. “If it’s not that, it’s something else. And I’m going to figure out what.”

That’s when my buddies had enough. They came over and grabbed me by the arms, pulling me along.

“What’d you say to the poor gent?” somebody asked.

“Something crazy,” another guessed.

“Something stupid,” said a third.

I didn’t answer them. I was too busy watching my newest buddy, and sure enough, all of a sudden those empty eyes turned toward me, something real pushing through the blueness. Behind the eyes, he was intense and very smart, and shrewd too. Maybe even a little angry.

“See?” I said.

But except for me, nobody was paying attention.

* * * *

You know how it is? Let somebody inside your head, and suddenly you’re seeing them everywhere.

I know this big blond gal with a dragon tattoo riding her shoulder. She likes to sit at the Zoo Bar, waiting for guys to buy her drinks. And there’s this

Hispanic character who's really thirty but looks like a kid—shaved and barely five feet tall. He's usually somewhere downtown, riding one of those little bikes that can do tricks. They're just two of the people that I've buddied up with since moving here. But this was the first time I'd put them together. The three of us were standing in the morning shade next to a Greek restaurant. Up the block was an ATM. I was wondering, just to pass the time: How much would it take for me to coax them into a three-way? The blond would want a few bucks, just on principle. But what with that machismo crap, the bike rider would need a pile of bills. How big a pile? I was thinking that through, doing calculations, and that's when a city bus pulled over and out stepped another one of the familiar downtown faces.

"Either of you know him?" I asked.

"I don't," said the blond.

"I see him, sure," said the biker. "In the afternoons. He likes to sit on the benches."

"Oh, yeah. That old guy's a fixture down here," she added.

"I thought you didn't know him," I pointed out.

"I don't know his name or anything." She's big and a little beautiful, but her brain has been polished smooth by a lot of hard drinking. "But I've noticed the guy. That's all I mean."

"Where you going, Benton?" the bike rider asked.

"To make a withdrawal," I announced.

Everybody who knows me knows about my

withdrawals. The rumor is that I'm sitting on a giant trust fund, or at least a bank account that doesn't have any bottom. Ask anyone, they'll tell you: "When Benton gets cash, something fun is sure to happen."

Three times, I swiped my card, building up a stack of twenties.

My friends were waiting, all smiles now. But I was watching the old guy moving away from us, shuffling down the block and then vanishing inside the downtown library.

I walked on past my buddies.

"Hey," they complained.

Stopping, I handed each of them a young twenty. "I'll be back," I promised. "Do what you want, but nothing too interesting. Understand?"

They didn't, but that didn't stop them from smiling.

The library was going to be trouble. Stepping inside, the first thing I did was look at the guard's desk, finding it empty. Which was good news. The next success was spotting the old man right away. He was sitting behind a little table, facing one of the windows that looked out over the sidewalk. A couple librarians recognized me, but they didn't matter: As a rule, librarians are about as dangerous as the chairs they sit on.

I pulled up a free chair next to the old man.

Sitting, I plopped down my stack of twenties. "Admit what you are," I said, "and this money's yours."

Weeks had passed since our last meeting, but very little about the fellow had changed, including his clothes. He liked white shirts and dark dress trousers, but no belt. And his white socks were slipped inside old leather shoes that looked too beaten up to be comfortable anymore.

If either eye looked at the money, I didn't see it.

So I lifted the stack, wagging it in front of his face.

Except for closing his eyes and sighing, nothing happened.

"Okay," I said. "You're not an alien scientist. I guessed wrong. Instead, I'm thinking you're from the future. A thousand years from today, and you've come back to watch your ancestors do important, historic deeds."

But then again, the view from the window was pretty boring. An empty bus rolled by. Sparrows pecked at dead crap. Then a couple fat secretaries trudged by, hunting for their morning coffee.

"You're from the future," I pressed. "Am I right?"

The blue eyes were growing wetter, but not enough to tear.

"I'm just curious," I promised. "Really, I just want the truth."

A voice behind me said, "Sir."

I turned, discovering that the library had made at least one recent personnel change. The new security guard was a young guy with short hair and the super-serious manner of a kid who wanted nothing but to grow up to be some kind of cop. He looked powerful,

full of importance. Even his uniform, clean and pressed, gave off a loud “don’t-shit-with-me” message.

“Sir,” he said. “I can call the police, or you can leave right now.”

“I know, I’m leaving,” I told him.

Then the kid noticed my money. “Who does that belong to?”

Was it mine or the old man’s, he meant.

I saw how this would play out. I’d say it was mine, and he wouldn’t believe me. And that’s when the cops would be called in. This kid was hungry for action, and saving some helpless senior citizen from being robbed seemed like a delicious bit of heroism. So I just handed the stack to the kid. “I found the money sitting on the table,” I said, putting an end to his fun. “Maybe it belongs to this gentleman, and maybe not. I guess you’ll have to figure that out for yourself.”

More than a thousand dollars lay in those big young hands.

Outside again, I stopped next to the window and watched the comedy unfold. The kid was trying to talk to the old man, asking questions that weren’t being answered, and all the while he was trying to figure out which pocket could have been a home for that much cash. Then one of the librarians made his appearance, dispensing little nuggets of advice. He pointed to the old guy’s skull and offered words that looked sad and sorry. Then the librarian glanced my way, and with a grim sneer, he said a few more words.

The kid nodded while shooting me his best withering stare.

And all that while, the old guy was looking out the window with an expression that never changed. Except no matter how empty they seemed, those eyes always managed to point my way.

* * * *

I couldn't give him up. Not for anything.

But I didn't want to just track the old guy around town either. I had a life to enjoy, and I didn't want the aggravation. So what I did ... I put all my friends and their various buddies on the payroll. I was offering tens and twenties for reports about the fellow's wanderings and habits. And over those next weeks, I managed to learn quite a lot about my subject's movements.

Six days a week, he rode the Bleaker Avenue bus to the Thirteenth Street corner.

Every morning, he walked the same route to the library and sat beside the same window for exactly three hours. He never opened a book or magazine or even spoke to anybody. Then he picked himself up and walked two blocks to the old Heartland restaurant where the waitress always brought him the same dish—meatloaf and peas and mashed potatoes—and he ate about half of everything before giving up and walking out again.

“He doesn't pay,” the big blond told me. “Doesn't even leave a tip.”

“But the people working there ... they don't seem

to mind,” said her new boyfriend. The little Hispanic guy and the blond had made themselves some good money working together, and what do you know, they’d discovered that they liked doing it for free too?

“It’s mind control,” I suggested. “Whatever that creature is, it convinces people that they’ve been paid, even when they haven’t been.”

“Except he’s not a creature.” One of the guys with me that first time I saw my nemesis was sitting with us. The four of us were sharing a table in the Zoo Bar, trading notes. “No, Benton, no. The poor guy’s exactly what he seems to be. A senile old fart.”

“You haven’t looked inside him,” I pointed out. “Not like I have.”

“Hey, dude. I’m the one tracking that bastard around town. Not you. So how come you think you can see things I don’t?”

“It’s the little things I notice.”

“Yeah?”

“And that’s true with all kinds of people,” I told him, and everybody else too.

Nobody was agreeing with me. Just by looking, I could tell they didn’t believe me. So I threw out a challenge. Five twenties set between two empty beer bottles. “Each of you, point to one person. Pick some customer. Make it somebody you don’t know and I don’t know either, and I’ll look them over for five seconds and then tell you something interesting.”

The smart-mouthed guy, thinking of himself as being good-looking, pointed to the best-looking

woman in the place.

“She’s a dyke,” I said. Pointblank.

“Well, I know that,” he lied. “What else?”

I didn’t have to look at her again. “She’s been through college. Definitely. And I think she works as a nurse or a paramedic. Something medical, with odd hours.”

He started to stand, ready to check out my story.

“And another thing,” I added. “There’s a gun in her purse.”

That made him pause. Then he nodded and took a deep breath and walked up to the bar, buying a round for him and his new lady friend. The two kids chatted amiably for a few minutes, my buddy waiting until the end to ask his big question. I could see her saying the words, “How did you know?” Then he came crawling back to our table, telling me, “Lucky guess about the pistol.”

The blond already had her subject picked. “See that sad man in the back ... can you tell me why he’s sad...?”

I’d already given the fellow a good study. “Somebody died,” I ventured.

“Who?”

“His wife.”

“And how would you know that?”

“Watch. He’s talking to her every now and then. And he’s angry about something.” With a shrug, I added, “One spouse usually gets pissed when the mate dies. ‘How can you leave me with these bills?’

With this loneliness? Why did you abandon me like this?”

The blond shrank down in her chair. “Okay, I believe you. I don’t want to bother the gentleman...”

Now it was her boyfriend’s turn. The little bike rider gave me a wide smile, and staring over my shoulder, looking at the front door, said, “I have somebody for you. She’s walking through the door now.”

The others felt encouraged. They sat up straighter, trading little glances.

I glanced back and then stared straight ahead again.

“She’s looking for somebody,” I reported.

They asked, “Who?”

“Me,” I said. “She wants to talk to me.”

The skinny middle-aged woman came up from behind, and after a deep breath, she said, “Are you Mr. Benton? We need to talk.”

I pocketed my twenties, stood, and showed my guest to a private booth.

* * * *

“Before the Alzheimer’s struck, my father was a genius.”

She had his blue eyes and the same bony long face.

“He was a tenured professor with an international reputation,” she continued. “A scientist who did important work that helped thousands of people. And then a few years ago, his mind started to leave him.”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I want you to leave my father alone.”

“I never go near the man,” I replied.

“But your friends do,” she countered. “I’ve heard stories. A librarian who knew Dad when he was well ... he says that two or three of your little helpers are always hanging around the library...”

“If he’s so sick, why’s he go to the library?”

“Because he loves books,” she said. “Even if he can’t read them, he enjoys being surrounded by them.”

“You know this, do you?”

She didn’t answer me. Instead, she said, “Where he eats lunch, I have an account ... the waitress who serves him just told me that one of your people stole his leftovers yesterday...”

“I wanted to see your dad’s bite marks,” I said. “I’m working on a hypothesis.”

Her long face colored.

“If your dad’s so sick, why’s he running free?”

“He does well enough. If people leave him alone, he can fill up his day without harming anyone.”

Unlike you, she meant.

“Here’s the thing, lady.” I made sure her blues were fixed on me. “I can see something inside that old guy. Not always, and it’s hard to spot. But believe me, he’s just pretending to be sick and stupid.”

Her reaction was abrupt, powerful. Despite her suspicions about me, she had to smile. A face that was very much like the old man’s suddenly lit up, and she started asking, “Do you mean that?”

But then she remembered why she was there and closed her mouth.

“Why the smile?” I asked her.

She hadn’t known that she was grinning. But once caught, she admitted, “There’s a special program. A research project. And my father’s part of it.”

Now this was interesting. “What kind of project?”

“An experimental drug that might reverse Alzheimer’s.”

“And your dad’s getting it, is he?”

With a strained hope, she said, “Maybe. But it’s a double-blind study. Half of the participants are getting sugar pills.”

“Now that sounds cruel,” I decided.

After a moment’s reflection, she had to agree with me.

“Here’s what I think,” I continued. “My present theory is that this thing you call your father isn’t. What it is ... it’s a projection from a higher dimension, sent into our little three-D world on some kind of field trip...”

If she’d had a pistol in her purse, she would have shot me. But instead of bullets, she used her angriest, most dangerous voice. “You are very ill,” she informed me. “I don’t know what kind of sickness it is, and frankly, I can’t make myself care. But from this minute on, Mr. Benton, you and your tag-along friends are going to stay away from my father!”

* * * *

A month passed, then another.

The old man halfway wandered out of my crosshairs. But that wasn't because of anybody's screaming threats. Other subjects had taken over my head, that's all. I got interested in a pack of little people, plus some very big ones. Preparations had to be made, personalities mixed and matched. And then came the kinds of fun that everybody else in the world sees as nothing but wild-ass mayhem.

When I happened to notice the old man, it was just in passing. Our paths would intersect, and there he would be—keeping to his schedule, always wearing the white shirt and dark trousers. I might give him a hard look or two before walking away, and when he didn't think I was watching, he'd turn, throwing those vacant eyes in my general direction. I could feel the eyes, just for a second, just taking his measure of me.

I always intended to return to him, but didn't.

Then came a rainy fall morning. I was walking alone, passing the library on my way to the ATM, and this face that I'd never seen before suddenly appeared next to me. The face belonged to a man in his middle forties—a prosperous soul wearing a good suit and polished shoes and the grimmest little mouth. “Do you know who I am?” he asked.

I didn't.

“My wife didn't mention me?”

That whittled the list of candidates down to four, maybe five.

The angry husband glared at me. Then he let his eyes lift, giving a nod to people standing behind me.

Too late, I tried to run.

A couple big boys grabbed me up and dragged me into the alley. I recognized one of them, although I couldn't tell you how that kid and the fellow in the suit got together. Really, if you think about it, nothing's more amazing than the ways lives cross over with each other, tying the world into one fat knot.

The kid that I knew started to cuss me out.

His buddy was even bigger and maybe twice as strong, and he didn't talk much. Judging by my experience, I'd guess that I wasn't the first person that he'd beaten senseless, either.

When the pummeling quit, the angry husband got down low. "Leave my wife alone," he told me. "Understand?"

Spitting blood, I asked, "Which wife is yours?"

He heard that as an insult, even when it wasn't. Really, I was just curious, that's all. But he pulled a tire iron out from behind a dumpster, holding it in both hands. Unlike the hired muscle, the suit-man didn't have experience in measured brutality. He stood over me for a long moment, trying to figure what he could break without actually killing me.

Then the bigger kid suddenly turned and ran off.

And the smaller one grabbed at the tire iron, saying, "Stop, somebody's coming...!"

Steel fell on old bricks, and the ringing sound lasted for what felt like days inside my soggy head. Twice I tried to stand, and couldn't. Then I noticed a

pair of worn-out loafers and white socks and good trousers worn thin at the cuffs. The old man was standing in the alley, in the cold rain. His face looked as lost as ever, but somebody—himself or maybe his daughter—had taken the trouble to dress him up in an old yellow raincoat.

After a couple minutes, he sat on the bricks beside me.

Busted ribs made breathing tough work. And I had to fight just to find enough air to say, “Hello.”

Now those baby blue eyes changed. And with them, a face that had never shown any trace of emotion suddenly broke into a wide bright smile.

People’s voices usually match their faces and their souls. Suddenly I heard a professor’s clear voice, smooth and practiced, every word seemingly thought out ahead of time.

“I have been gone for a very long while,” he told me. “But the wait is over now.”

“Is it?” I managed.

The eyes, like polished gems, casually studied the gore on my face.

“You’re mistaken, of course. I’m not an alien researcher, or a time traveler, or any of these other exotic entities that you have suggested.”

“No?”

“But I have watched you, sir. And I have listened carefully to everything that my daughter says about you. I have considered your oddness, and your endless money, and how easily you seem able to

manipulate others. And from everything that I have learned, I have decided that you might well be.”

“Might be what?”

“Something more than a simple, unalloyed human.” The laugh was boyish, loud and joyful. “Perhaps you are an extraterrestrial researcher or some higher-dimensional agent. Honestly, your precise origin doesn’t particularly matter to me. What counts is your conduct during your existence on my world. An existence that from my point of view looks unprofessional and rather sad, too. Honestly, sir, you injure every serious researcher with this childish, unfocused chaos of yours...”

For the first time in my life, I was speechless.

“Rest,” the old man advised. “Let your body heal. And when you are whole, come find me.” The bony face had a lovely smile. “Think of the studies we could design, my friend ... if your talents and my experimental proficiency can work together ... plying the depths of the human animal...”

Our Prayers Are With You

Today it's a German crew, one blond under the camera and the other shoving his microphone at faces, slowing work that never moves fast enough. With a grating tone of false pity, the reporter asks how we are coping with this latest tragedy. Eight centimeters last night, ten or twelve upriver, and do we know that the latest estimate is for a crest almost a meter higher than our levee? He acts exceedingly confident. about his math, and milled beneath everything. Did he come here this morning hoping to find us washed away? Or maybe he wants us to give up, to let the levee fail for him, his camera able to catch the angry brown water charging down our streets. Just like in Tylertown. The CNN crew got that bit of video, and everyone in the world has seen it at least twenty times. Six-plus billion people have seen my sister's house vanish under the flood, and it's been under ever since. Two months ever since.. You've seen it. That little white house on the right? With rose bushes and the big blue spruce? Sure you have....

Anyway, the Germans are working their way toward me. I've slept four hours in the last fifty, living on sweet rolls and ibuprofen, and I'm so tired that I'm shaking. A big strong guy by design, but these sandbags weigh tons and tons. And my mood is past lousy. I'm sick of cameras and the rain, and I'm sick

of being worried, and suddenly it occurs to me that I don't have to answer anyone's questions. I don't have to be the noble, suffering flood victim. If I want, I could throw one of these sandbags into the asshole's chest. I could. And besides, I'm thinking, isn't that a clearer answer than anything words can manage?

Only I don't get my chance, as it happens.

What happens is that this fellow two up from me -- about the quietest, littlest guy on the levee -- detonates when asked, "How do you feel?" He doesn't bother throwing a sandbag using fists instead, screaming and putting a few good shots into the German's astonished face. It's lovely, Perfect. Sweet. Then I help pull them apart, the German making a fast retreat...and afterward it seems as if everyone on the levee is working harder. Faster. Honesty is everywhere, thicker than river water, and it feels as if it's us against the world. Don't ask me how, but it does.

The rains began last year, but not like this. A record September, but a reasonable record. Then a wet October, a cold dry November, and three months of crippling snow and ice. A winter to remember, we heard. Then a spring thaw that made people around the country notice us. Mountainous ice jams pooled the runoff. The Grand River was plugged up for a week, the Interstate closed and white slabs of ice bulldozing their way through several towns. But the coverage was only national at its height, and then only for a few days. Nobody was killed until an elderly

couple drove through barricades and onto a flooded stretch of highway. I watched that drama on television. Live. It was more exciting than any TV fiction, I'll confess. Scuba divers dropped from a helicopter, perching on the sunken cat's roof. Genuine heroes, they wrestled the limp bodies out of the cold foam, and only then did I feel a little guilty. I was enjoying the spectacle. Strangers had died, but I felt superior. I was warm and dry, safe inside my own house, and some wicked little part of me enjoyed the tragedy, even wishing for more of the same.

We lose our levee before dark. It's not our sandbags that fail, nor our backs. It's the meat of the levee itself, months of saturation leaving it soft and pliable, and porous. Two, three, then four places give way from below, water boiling up, nothing left to do but retreat and curse the luck of it. For just an instant, I consider slipping off to see my house one last time. It's back from the river, on slightly higher ground, and maybe there's hope. For the ten thousandth time, I entertain the image of building a private barricade, saving my property with a single superhuman effort. But one of the painful lessons in a disaster -- the lesson that comes as a surprise -- is how weak and ineffectual each of us can seem. The difference between human and superhuman is about two rows of sandbags. Which is rarely enough, I've learned. Time after time after time.

In the end, we're trucked to high ground and a refugee camp. Rain begins again, light for the

moment. Half a dozen video crews record our stiff climbs out of the trucks. CNN is here, of course. And ANBC. Plus a Japanese crew, and a Russian one. And the Brazilians. Plus a group I don't recognize. Dark little Asians...Indians, maybe?

None of them speak to us. Maybe news of the fistfight has made its way through the ranks. Or maybe even the reporters realize that there aren't any new questions, and the old questions can't clarify what people around the world are seeing. "A ten-thousand-year flood," I hear. "It's official." And I'm thinking: What does that mean? Ten thousand years ago we were coming out of an ice age. Each millennium's weather is unique to itself. And if memory serves, aren't we in a new millennium? Maybe this will be ordinary weather for the next thousand years. Who knows? I know it's not some asshole from CNN, let me tell you.

From the edge of the camp, past the water-soaked tents and prefab shacks, we can see down into the river bottom. We can see the advancing waters. My house is obscured by distance and the strengthening rains, and I'm grateful for the rain now. I keep telling myself that everything of real worth has been removed. Even my major appliances have been pulled out and stored. So why the hell do I feel so lousy?

The Indian crew comes over and sets up.

Only they aren't Indians, I learn. Someone bends close and says, "They're from Bangladesh." Then he repeats himself, for emphasis. "Bangladesh. You

know? Where it floods like this every year?"

In accented English, I hear the word, "Tragedy."

The small dark men seem to understand better than the rest, although it doesn't stop them from doing their jobs. Their cameras beam home images of destruction and despair, as if to prove to their pitiful homeland that even rich Americans can experience Nature's horrible extremes.

March was wet, but April made March seem dry. In memory.

Then came May, which was easily worse. I remember a puffy-faced weatherman reporting afterward that we had three arguably blue-sky days in all of May. We'd already exceeded our average annual totals in precipitation. But June stayed just as cheerless, just as strange, the jet stream deciding to come over our heads, steady as a highway, delivering Pacific moisture to a band of six midwestern states, every night beginning and ending with barrages of heavy rain and hail and wind and more wind.

My sister's house was lost in June, little warning given. Her family escaped with the proverbial clothes on their backs, and when I last talked to her, she was trying to live with her in-laws in Greendale. Seven people in a trailer, a marriage straining like...well, like every levee image you can devise...and all she said was, "If only the rain would stop. That's all I want. Why is that too much to want?"

At some point -- I don't know exactly when -- I began to watch every weather forecast with an

obsessiveness and a growing frustration. Waking in the middle of the night, I'd flip on my bedroom television and turn to the Weather Channel, waiting for that glimpse of the radar with its map and neat colors and the time-lapse sense of motion. Great glowering red storms would form, then march along until mid-morning. Then the summer sun would lift the humidity, new clouds forming, the sticky remnants of last night's storms seeding fresh ones, the pattern scarcely changing from night to night.

Our city's levee was the best, we heard. Tall and thick, and tough. And our city administrators treated doubters with scorn, as if doubt itself could undermine all the good Federal dollars that went into the long embankment.

By July, the pattern was clear. The worst of the rains fell on a narrow band just upstream from us. Our climate made tropical people wilt. The upstream towns had drowned, and the giant reservoir downstream from us was filled to overflowing. Then it did overflow, the Army Corps of Engineers having no choice but to release the excess water, letting it slide over the top in order to save their fragile earthen dam.

By then the world was watching us. The Midwest in general, but us specifically. Our dramas were featured on every news program, in practically every nation. News teams were dispatched, thousands of technicians and reporters helping to absorb the scarce hotel and motel rooms. For all the reasons

people watch tragedies, we were watched. Never before had so many cameras showed so much disaster and to such a large audience. I've heard it claimed that the Third World, full of superstitious people, particularly enjoys the dramatics: These floods are judgments from the gods. Americans have been rich and happy for too long goes the logic. Too much success leads to misfortune. In other words, we deserve our suffering. I know I feel that way sometimes. I'm not the most religious man, but I keep looking at my life, at my failures, wondering why the Lord is spending so much time and effort trying to drown poor me.

Back in July, someone hired an American Indian -- an official shaman --to come and try to dispel the rain clouds with dancing and chants. It was considered an amusing story in New York City; but locally, without exception, people found themselves hoping for the best. Even committed skeptics waited eagerly for some change in the jet stream; and for a couple days without warning, it did swing north, leaving us out from under the worst of the storms. But one Indian wasn't enough, it seemed. That high altitude river of air returned, and August --normally a dry and hot cleansing month -- began with tornados and a three inch downpour.

Sixty-two inches by then, which is twice our yearly norm.

Reservoirs full. Fields and downtowns underwater. Every old record made ridiculous, and the nervous

and sullen weatherpeople admitted finally that there was no end in sight. Computer models and common Sense were no help, it seemed. Perhaps by September things would slacken, they would say. Maybe, maybe. We could always hope.

It rains into the night, hard and then harder.

When I was a boy, I loved rain. Now just the idea of water falling from the sky seems horrible to me. I close my eyes and dream of deserts. Sand is a beautiful concept, particularly when it's baked dry and capable of burning flesh, and I dream of lying naked beneath a fierce blue-blue sky, letting myself broil.

Then I wake and sit up, aching through and through.

I'm sharing a prefab shack with a couple dozen other people, most of them awake and watching a portable battery-powered TV. The news has a new drama building. The reservoir downstream of us -- a tremendous inland sea built by the once god-like Corps -- is being assaulted by runoff and its own intense storms. The thunder we hear is just the tip of it. By some predictions, ten inches of cold fresh water will fall in the next hours. And the Corps' spokesman doesn't seem convinced by his optimistic statements. "Ten inches is within our tolerance," he claims, words slurring from a lack of sleep, or maybe a love of drink. "The dam is solid. The excess will drain over the spillway. Yes, there's going to be flooding downstream. We can't prevent flooding now. But the

reservoir will stay where it is, unless --”

“Unless?” the reporter interrupts.

Did I say unless? he seems to think. He pauses, collecting himself, then tells the world, “A strong wind could be dangerous. If it was big enough, and if it blew from the northwest for a long time...it could start to erode the dam...I suppose...”

“You aren't sure?”

“It's unlikely,” says the spokesman, suddenly confident. “It would have to blow at just the right angle...the wrong angle, I mean --”

“How unlikely is unlikely?”

“I wouldn't know how to calculate such a tiny number.” The tired, possibly drunken face seems unable to calculate anything just now. “Really, I don't think there's much else I can tell you.”

That concludes the interview, and the reporter says, “Well, our prayers are with you.”

Meaning what? I ask myself.

We hope the rains stop? Or is he saying We hope you don't look like an idiot in the morning?

I remember one night -- a sleepless thundering Weather Channel night --when I watched one of the multitude of documentaries produced in the last months. Why is weather so difficult to forecast? One grinning meteorologist spoke of chaos and butterflies. No, not butterflies. Butterfly effects, wasn't it? He told me how tiny, tiny events can precipitate into weather fronts and typhoons. Or have no effect, for that matter. No amount of calculating power can

predict which tiny events will have what impact. And to illustrate, the grinning man waved his hand in the air, saying, "For all I know, this is making a disturbance that will circle the globe and flatten Tulsa with a tornado. Though it probably won't. Almost certainly won't." A shrug of his shoulders. Doing what kinds of harm? "Minuscule events can lead to massive consequences. That much we do know." A flash of teeth. "Isn't that interesting to consider?"

Moments after the interview ends, as if with some cosmic signal, we hear the wind begin to rise. To strengthen.

It flows sideways over our shack, making the walls and roof creak and shift. Its direction is obvious. Ominous. And not too much later, every network interrupts its late-night programming to bring news from the reservoir. Camera crews are sprinkled along the dam's crest. Already the waves are striking at the rock-faced shoreline, each larger than the one before it, foam and compressed air clawing at the rocks, then reaching higher, finding softer materials already weakened by months of pressure and angry water.

I don't want this to happen. I want it to stop.

Yet what does one opinion have behind it? Nothing, that's what. And besides, am I at risk? This is like watching those old people drowning last spring: a gruesome part of me is thrilled, wondering how it will look, millions and billions of gallons racing downstream in a great apocalyptic wall, mud and cities carried along with the dead....

That's what happens now.

As we watch--as the world sits spellbound -- those wind-driven waves find a deadly flaw. Earth slumps, then vanishes. The CNN crew watches a new channel being created, a new spillway equaling the first spillway, then exceeding it.

In a matter of minutes, the dam is ruined. Useless.

The camera crew retreats, in panic, leaving their equipment to fend for itself. And before dawn, every city for a thousand miles downstream is being partially abandoned, and even New Orleans is filling sandbags.

In case.

The reporters abandon our camp before dawn, better mud needing their attentions. The largest dam failure in history is certain to kill hundreds, possibly thousands. The Corps spokesman from last night is one of the first casualties. A self-inflicted gunshot wound, we hear. And as I absorb the news, without warning, some inner voice says to me:

“He deserves death. It's his fault, after all.”

But why?

“You know why.”

Maybe it's exhaustion, but my answer feels reasonable. Maybe the months of worry and work have ruined me, tearing away a thousand years of civilization, but I can't help thinking that the answer couldn't be more obvious.

“Tiny events cause storms,” I tell my shack companions. My fellow refugees. “What if? What if

the human spirit can influence tiny events? What if six billion people can focus their attentions, their psychic energies -- call them whatever you want -- and that's how we can manipulate weather fronts and jet streams? What happens then?"

Nobody speaks.

Sleepless, half-dead faces gaze at me, nothing in them to read.

I give an impromptu lecture on chaos theory and butterfly wings, then conclude by asking, "When have so many people in so many places been able to think about one place? In real time, I mean. As events happen. I mean, if there is some magic -- call it magic -- then isn't this the time when we'd see it? The world is wired together, cameras everywhere. Maybe there's some way, some innate wish-fulfilling trick, that allows us to make the atmosphere move just so, bringing us this..."

I pause, all at once doubtful.

And I confess, "I'm nuts. I know."

But someone responds, "No, wait. What about last night's wind? It had to be a perfect wind. Isn't that what the Colonel said? And wasn't it just minutes later when it started blowing -- ?"

"Yeah," someone shouts. "That's how it was. It was."

I feel ashamed, my companions infected with my insanity. We're in the Dark Ages. We have fallen so far that we'll believe every unlikely and horrible set of half-ideas.

“They want us to drown,” says someone.

“Who does?” whispers a skeptic.

But before names are mentioned, someone else offers, “They don't know they're doing it. How could they know?”

“So how do we protect ourselves?” asks someone in back. An enraged, crimson voice. “Suppose it's true. How can we stop people from doing this to us, intentionally or not?”

Except for the patter of rain on the roof, the silence is perfect.

I pray for reason, regretting my mouth. But what's one prayer against the will of multitudes?

An Irish journalist is found shot to death in a flooded sorghum field.

Two Nigerian cameramen are hung with their own coaxial cable, the incident interpreted as being racially motivated.

In one day, three different news vehicles are peppered with small arms fire.

And while I'm busy wondering about these terrible deeds, and am I in some way to blame, a bizarre new terrorist group bombs radar towers over a wide region, leaving the soggy heart of the nation blank, no way to determine the course and intensity of the latest storms.

Which aren't so bad, as it happens.

The truly bad news has moved downstream, taking most of the press with it. September begins with a week of uninterrupted sunshine. The lower

Mississippi valley is submerged, but by October we've seen the last of our dirty waters roll off our streets and through the empty reservoir. We aren't dry, but the concept of dry ground can at least be imagined now. We can't hope for anything more.

Of course the murders were just murders, I tell myself.

Ugly but simple in their intent.

And who knows why people would dynamite radar installations? It has nothing to do with me.

And yet.

I find myself thinking about the people in my shack and how they must have spoken to friends and strangers, telling them of my idea. Ideas are like butterfly wings. Small beginnings; catastrophic results. An idea like mine could flow through a population, seeking out the people most likely to believe in it. To act on it. To do what feels like the logical best course.

Make the world forget us.

Which it has, mostly.

A late-season hurricane strengthens, then takes aim at the Gulf Coast, flooding the remnants of New Orleans and shifting the Mississippi to a new channel in western Louisiana.

Eighty-three acts of terrorism against reporters and weatherpeople may or may not be linked with violence during last summer's floods.

"Frustrations are mounting," one CNN warrior reports to the world.

Armed guards standing around him.

What happens if the world realizes its power? I ask myself. Will humanity shatter into opposing camps? Or seek revenge on its enemies? Or perhaps, just perhaps, create an Eden, tepid and green?

I can remember when weather was a god unto itself.

Obeying no one.

The Remoras

QUEE LEE'S APARTMENT covered several hectares within one of the human districts, some thousand kilometers beneath the ship's hull. It wasn't a luxury unit by any measure. Truly wealthy people owned as much as a cubic kilometer for themselves and their entourages. But it had been her home since she had come on board, for more centuries than she could count, its hallways and large rooms as comfortable to her as her own body.

The garden room was a favorite. She was enjoying its charms one afternoon, lying nude beneath a false sky and sun, eyes closed and nothing to hear but the splash of fountains and the prattle of little birds. Suddenly her apartment interrupted the peace, announcing a visitor. "He has come for Perri, miss. He claims it's most urgent."

"Perri isn't here," she replied, soft gray eyes opening. "Unless he's hiding from both of us, I suppose."

"No, miss. He is not." A brief pause, then the voice said, "I have explained this to the man, but he refuses to leave. His name is Orleans. He claims that Perri owes him a considerable sum of money."

What had her husband done now? Quee Lee could

guess, halfway smiling as she sat upright. Oh, Perri . . . won't you learn ? She would have to dismiss this Orleans fellow herself, spooking him with a good hard stare. She rose and dressed in an emerald sarong, then walked the length of her apartment, never hurrying, commanding the front door to open at the last moment but leaving the security screen intact. And she was ready for someone odd. Even someone sordid, knowing Peru. Yet she didn't expect to see a shiny lifesuit more than two meters tall and nearly half as wide, and she had never imagined such a face gazing down at her with mismatched eyes. It took her along moment to realize this was a Remora. An authentic Remora was standing in the public walkway, his vivid round face watching her. The flesh was orange with diffuse black blotches that might or might not be cancers, and a lipless, toothless mouth seemed to flow into a grin. What would bring a Remora here? They never, never came down here . . . !

“I'm Orleans.” The voice was sudden and deep, slightly muted by the security screen. It came from a speaker hidden somewhere on the thick neck, telling her, “I need help, miss. I'm sorry to disturb you . . . but you see, I'm desperate. I don't know where else to turn.”

Quee Lee knew about Remoras. She had seen them and even spoken to a few, although those conversations were eons ago and she couldn't remember their substance. Such strange creatures.

Stranger than most aliens, even if they possessed human souls

“Miss?”

Quee Lee thought of herself as being a good person. Yet she couldn't help but feel repelled, the floor rolling beneath her and her breath stopping short. Orleans was a human being, one of her own species. True, his genetics had been transformed by hard radiations. And yes, he normally lived apart from ordinary people like her. But inside him was a human mind, tough and potentially immortal. Quee Lee blinked and remembered that she had compassion as well as charity for everyone, even aliens . . . and she managed to sputter, “Come in.” She said, “If you wish, please do,” and with that invitation, her apartment deactivated the invisible screen.

“Thank you, miss.” The Remora walked slowly, almost clumsily, his lifesuit making a harsh grinding noise in the knees and hips. That wasn't normal, she realized. Orleans should be graceful, his suit powerful, serving him as an elaborate exoskeleton.

“Would you like anything?” she asked foolishly. Out of habit.

“No, thank you,” he replied, his voice nothing but pleasant.

Of course. Remoras ate and drank only self-made concoctions. They were permanently sealed inside their lifesuits, functioning as perfectly self-contained organisms. Food was synthesized, water recycled, and

they possessed a religious sense of purity and independence.

"I don't wish to bother you, miss. I'll be brief."

His politeness was a minor surprise. Remoras typically were distant, even arrogant. But Orleans continued to smile, watching her. One eye was a muscular pit filled with thick black hairs, and she assumed those hairs were light sensitive. Like an insect's compound eye, each one might build part of an image. By contrast, its mate was ordinary, white and fishy with a foggy black center. Mutations could do astonishing things. An accelerated, partly controlled evolution was occurring inside that suit, even while Orleans stood before her, boots stomping on the stone floor, a single spark arcing toward her. Orleans said, "I know this is embarrassing for you --"

"No, no," she offered.

-- and it makes me uncomfortable too. I wouldn't have come down here if it wasn't necessary."

"Perri's gone," she repeated, "and I don't know when he'll be back. I'm sorry."

"Actually," said Orleans, "I was hoping he would be gone."

"Did you?"

"Though I'd have come either way."

Quee Lee's apartment, loyal and watchful, wouldn't allow anything nasty to happen to her. She took a step forward, closing some of the distance. "This is about money being owed? Is that right?"

"Yes, miss."

“For what, if I might ask?”

Orleans didn't explain in clear terms. “Think of it as an old gambling debt.” More was involved, he implied. “A very old debt, I'm afraid, and Perri's refused me a thousand times.”

She could imagine it. Her husband had his share of failings, incompetence and a self-serving attitude among them. She loved Perri in a controlled way, but his flaws were obvious. “I'm sorry,” she replied, “but I'm not responsible for his debts.” She made herself sound hard, knowing it was best. “I hope you didn't come all this way because you heard he was married.” Married to a woman of some means, she thought to herself. In secret.

“No, no, no!” The grotesque face seemed injured. Both eyes became larger, and a thin tongue, white as ice, licked at the lipless edge of the mouth. “Honestly, we don't follow the news about passengers. I just assumed Perri was living with someone. I know him, you see . . . my hope was to come and make my case to whomever I found, winning a comrade. An ally. Someone who might become my advocate.” A hopeful pause, then he said, “When Perri does come here, will you explain to him what's right and what is not? Can you, please?” Another pause, then he added, “Even a lowly Remora knows the difference between right and wrong miss.”

That wasn't fair, calling himself lowly. And he seemed to be painting her as some flavor of bigot, which she wasn't. She didn't look at him as lowly, and

morality wasn't her private possession. Both of them were human, after all. Their souls were linked by a charming and handsome, manipulative user . . . by her darling husband . . . and Quee Lee felt a sudden anger directed at Perri, almost shuddering in front of this stranger.

“Miss?”

“How much?” she asked. “How much does he owe you, and how soon will you need it?”

Orleans answered the second question first, lifting an arm with a sickly whine coming from his shoulder. “Can you hear it?” he asked. As if she were deaf. “My seals need to be replaced, or at least refurbished. Yesterday, if possible.” The arm bent, and the elbow whined. “I already spent my savings rebuilding my reactor.”

Quee Lee knew enough about lifesuits to appreciate his circumstances. Remoras worked on the ship's hull, standing in the open for hours and days at a time. A broken seal was a disaster. Any tiny opening would kill most of his body, and his suffering mind would fall into a protective coma. Left exposed and vulnerable, Orleans would be at the mercy of radiation storms and comet showers. Yes, she understood. A balky suit was an unacceptable hazard on top of lesser hazards, and what could she say?

She felt a deep empathy for the man.

Orleans seemed to take a breath, then he said, “Perri owes me fifty-two thousand credits, miss.”

“I see.” She swallowed and said, “My name is Quee

Lee.”

“Quee Lee,” he repeated. “Yes, miss.”

“As soon as Perri comes home, I’ll discuss this with him. I promise you.”

“I would be grateful if you did.”

“I will.”

The ugly mouth opened, and she saw blotches of green and gray-blue against a milky throat. Those were cancers or perhaps strange new organs. She couldn’t believe she was in the company of a Remora – the strangest sort of human – yet despite every myth, despite tales of courage and even recklessness, Orleans appeared almost fragile. He even looked scared, she realized. That wet orange face shook as if in despair, then came the awful grinding noise as he turned away, telling her, “Thank you, Quee Lee. For your time and patience, and for everything.”

Fifty-two thousand credits!

She could have screamed. She would scream when she was alone, she promised herself. Perri had done this man a great disservice, and he’d hear about it when he graced her with his company again. A patient person, yes, and she could tolerate most of his flaws. But not now. Fifty thousand credits was no fortune, and it would allow Orleans to refurbish his lifesuit, making him whole and healthy again. Perhaps she could get in touch with Perri first, speeding up the process . . . ?

Orleans was through her front door, turning to say good-bye. False sunshine made his suit shine, and his

faceplate darkened to where she couldn't see his features anymore. He might have any face, and what did a face mean? Waving back at him, sick to her stomach, she calculated what fifty-two thousand credits meant in concrete terms, to her

. . . wondering if she should . . . ?

But no, she decided. She just lacked the required compassion. She was a particle short, if that, ordering the security screen to engage again, helping to mute that horrid grinding of joints as the Remora shuffled off for home.

The ship had many names, many designations, but to its long-term passengers and crew it was referred to as the ship. No other starship could be confused for it. Not in volume, nor in history.

The ship was old by every measure. A vanished humanoid race had built it, probably before life arose on Earth, then abandoned it for no obvious reason. Experts claimed it had begun as a sunless world, one of the countless jupiters that sprinkled the cosmos. The builders had used the world's own hydrogen to fuel enormous engines, accelerating it over millions of years while stripping away its gaseous exterior. Today's ship was the leftover core, much modified by its builders and humans. Its metal and rock interior was laced with passageways and sealed environments, fuel tanks and various ports. There was room enough for hundreds of billions of passengers, though there were only a fraction that number now. And its hull was a special armor made

from hyperfibers, kilometers thick and tough enough to withstand most high-velocity impacts.

The ship had come from outside the galaxy, passing into human space long ago. It was claimed as salvage, explored by various means, then refurbished to the best of its new owners' abilities. A corporation was formed; a promotion was born. The ancient engines were coaxed to life, changing the ship's course. Then tickets were sold, both to humans and alien species. Novelty and adventure were the lures. One circuit around the Milky Way; a half-million-year voyage touring the star-rich spiral arms. It was a long span, even for immortal humans. But people like Quee Lee had enough money and patience. That's why she purchased her apartment with a portion of her savings. This voyage wouldn't remain novel for long, she knew. Three or four circuits at most, and then what? People would want something else new and glancingly dangerous. Wasn't that the way it always was?

Quee Lee had no natural lifespan. Her ancestors had improved themselves in a thousand ways, erasing the aging process. Fragile DNAs were replaced with better genetic machinery. Tailoring allowed a wide-range of useful proteins and enzymes and powerful repair mechanisms. Immune systems were nearly perfect; diseases were extinct. Normal life couldn't damage a person in any measurable way. And even a tragic accident wouldn't need to be fatal, Quee Lee's body and mind able to withstand frightening

amounts of abuse.

But Remoras, despite those same gifts, did not live ordinary lives. They worked on the open hull, each of them encased in a lifesuit. The suits afforded extra protection and a standard environment, each one possessing a small fusion plant and redundant recycling systems. Hull life was dangerous in the best times. The ship's shields and laser watchdogs couldn't stop every bit of interstellar grit. And every large impact meant someone had to make repairs. The ship's builders had used sophisticated robots, but they proved too tired after several billions of years on the job. It was better to promote--or demote -- members of the human crew. The original scheme was to share the job, brief stints fairly dispersed. Even the captains were to don the lifesuits, stepping into the open when it was safest, patching craters with fresh-made hyperfibers

Fairness didn't last. A kind of subculture arose, and the first Remoras took the hull as their province. Those early Remoras learned how to survive the huge radiation loads. They trained themselves and their offspring to control their damaged bodies. Tough genetics mutated, and they embraced their mutations. If an eye was struck blind, perhaps by some queer cancer, then a good Remora would evolve a new eye. Perhaps a hair was light-sensitive, and its owner, purely by force of will, would culture that hair and interface it with the surviving optic nerve, producing an eye more durable than the one it

replaced. Or so Quee Lee had heard, in passing, from people who acted as if they knew about such things.

Remoras, she had been told, were happy to look grotesque. In their culture, strange faces and novel organs were the measures of success. And since disaster could happen anytime, without warning, it was unusual for any Remora to live long. At least in her sense of long. Orleans could be a fourth or fifth generation Remora, for all she knew. A child barely fifty centuries old. For all she knew. Which was almost nothing, she realized, returning to her garden room and undressing lying down with her eyes closed and the light baking her. Remoras were important, even essential people, yet she felt wholly ignorant. And ignorance was wrong, she knew. Not as wrong as owing one of them money, but still

This life of hers seemed so ordinary, set next to Orleans' life. Comfortable and ordinary, and she almost felt ashamed.

PERRI FAILED to come home that next day, and the next. Then it was ten days, Quee Lee having sent messages to his usual haunts and no reply. She had been careful not to explain why she wanted him. And this was nothing too unusual, Perri probably wandering somewhere new and Quee Lee skilled at waiting her days accented with visits from friends and parties thrown for any small reason. It was her normal life, never anything but pleasant; yet she found herself thinking about Orleans, imagining him

walking on the open hull with his seals breaking, his strange body starting to boil away . . . that poor man . . .!

Taking the money to Orleans was an easy decision. Quee Lee had more than enough. It didn't seem like a large sum until she had it converted into black-and-white chips. But wasn't it better to have Perri owing her instead of owing a Remora? She was in a better place to recoup the debt; and besides, she doubted that her husband could raise that money now. Knowing him, he probably had a number of debts, to humans and aliens both; and for the nth time, she wondered how she'd ever let Perri charm her. What was she thinking, agreeing to this crazy union?

Quee Lee was old even by immortal measures. She was so old she could barely remember her youth, her tough neurons unable to embrace her entire life. Maybe that's why Perri had seemed like a blessing. He was ridiculously young and wore his youth well, gladly sharing his enthusiasms and energies. He was a good, untaxing lover; he could listen when it was important; and he had never tried milking Quee Lee of her money. Besides, he was a challenge. No doubt about it. Maybe her friends didn't approve of him-- a few close ones were openly critical -- but to a woman of her vintage, in the middle of a five thousand century voyage, Perri was something fresh and new and remark. able. And Quee Lee's old friends, quite suddenly, seemed a little fossilized by comparison.

"I love to travel," Perri had explained, his gently

handsome face capable of endless smiles. "I was born on the ship, did you know? Just weeks after my parents came on board. They were riding only as far as a colony world, but I stayed behind. My choice." He had laughed, eyes gazing into the false sky of her ceiling. "Do you know what I want to do? I want to see the entire ship, walk every hallway and cavern. I want to explore every body of water, meet every sort of alien --"

"Really?"

-- and even visit their quarters. Their homes." Another laugh and that infectious smile. "I just came back from a low-gravity district, six thousand kilometers below. There's a kind of spidery creature down there. You should see them, love! I can't do them justice by telling you they're graceful, and seeing holes isn't much better."

She had been impressed. Who else did she know who could tolerate aliens, what with their strange odors and their impenetrable minds? Perri was remarkable, no doubt about it. Even her most critical friends admitted that much, and despite their grumbles, they'd want to hear the latest Perri adventure as told by his wife.

"I'll stay on board forever, if I can manage it."

She had laughed, asking, "Can you afford it?"

"Badly," he had admitted. "But I'm paid up through this circuit, at least. Minus day-by-day expenses, but that's all right. Believe me, when you've got millions of wealthy souls in one place, there's

always a means of making a living.”

“Legal means?”

“Glancingly so.” He had a rogue's humor, all right. Yet later, in a more sober mood, he had admitted, “I do have enemies, my love. I'm warning you. Like anyone, I've made my share of mistakes-- my youthful indiscretions--but at least I'm honest about them.”

Indiscretions, perhaps. Yet he had done nothing to earn her animosity.

“We should marry,” Perri had proposed. “Why not? We like each other's company, yet we seem to weather our time apart too. What do you think? Frankly, I don't think you need a partner who shadows you day and night. Do you, Quee Lee?”

She didn't. True enough.

“A small tidy marriage, complete with rules,” he had assured her. “I get a home base, and you have your privacy, plus my considerable entertainment value.” A big long laugh, then he had added, “I promise. You'll be the first to hear my latest tales. And I'll never be any kind of leech, darling. With you, I will be the perfect gentleman.”

Quee Lee carried the credit chips in a secret pouch, traveling to the tube-car station and riding one of the vertical tubes toward the hull. She had looked up the name Orleans in the crew listings. The only Orleans lived at Port Beta, no mention of him being a Remora or not. The ports were vast facilities where taxi craft docked with the ship, bringing new passengers from

nearby alien worlds. It was easier to accelerate and decelerate those kilometer-long needles. The ship's own engines did nothing but make the occasional course correction, avoiding dust clouds while keeping them on their circular course.

It had been forever since Quee Lee had visited a port. And today there wasn't even a taxi to be seen, all of them off hunting for more paying customers. The nonRemora crew -- the captains, mates and so on -- had little work at the moment, apparently hiding from her. She stood at the bottom of the port—a lofty cylinder capped with a kilometer-thick hatch of top-grade hyperfibers. The only other tourists were aliens, some kind of fishy species encased in bubbles of liquid water or ammonia. The bubbles rolled past her. It was like standing in a school of small tuna, their sharp chatter audible and Quee Lee unable to decipher any of it. Were they mocking her? She had no clue, and it made her all the more frustrated. They could be making terrible fun of her. She felt lost and more than a little homesick all at once.

By contrast, the first Remora seemed normal. Walking without any grinding sounds, it covered ground at an amazing pace. Quee Lee had to run to catch it. To catch her. Something about the lifesuit was feminine, and a female voice responded to Quee Lee's shouts.

“What what what?” asked the Remora. “I'm busy!” Gasping, Quee Lee asked, “Do you know Orleans?” “Orleans?”

“I need to find him. It's quite important.” Then she wondered if something terrible had happened, her arriving too late --

“I do know someone named Orleans, yes.” The face had comma-shaped eyes, huge and black and bulging, and the mouth blended into a slit-like nose. Her skin was silvery, odd bunched fibers running beneath the surface. Black hair showed along the top of the faceplate, except at second glance it wasn't hair. It looked more like ropes soaked in oil, the strands wagging with a slow stately pace.

The mouth smiled. The normal-sounding voice said, “Actually, Orleans is one of my closest friends!”

True? Or was she making a joke?

“I really have to find him,” Quee Lee confessed.

“Can you help me?” “Can I help you?” The strange mouth smiled, gray pseudoteeth looking big as thumbnails, the gums as silver as her skin. “I'll take you to him. Does that constitute help?” And Quee Lee found herself following, walking onto a lifting disk without railing, the Remora standing in the center and waving to the old woman. “Come closer. Orleans is up there.” A skyward gesture.

“A good long way, and I don't think you'd want to try it alone. Would you?”

“Relax,” Orleans advised.

She thought she was relaxed, except then she found herself nodding, breathing deeply and feeling a tension as it evaporated. The ascent had taken ages, it seemed. Save for the rush of air moving past her ears,

it had been soundless. The disk had no sides at all -- a clear violation of safety regulations -- and Quee Lee had grasped one of the Remora's shiny arms, needing a handhold, surprised to feel rough spots in the hyperfiber. Minuscule impacts had left craters too tiny to see. Remoras, she had realized, were very much like the ship itself -- enclosed biospheres taking abuse as they streaked through space.

“Better?” asked Orleans.

“Yes. Better.” A thirty kilometer ride through the port, holding tight to a Remora. And now this. She and Orleans were inside some tiny room not five hundred meters from the vacuum. Did Orleans live here? She nearly asked, looking at the bare walls and stubby furniture, deciding it was too spare, too ascetic to be anyone's home. Even his. Instead she asked him, “How are you?”

“Tired. Fresh off my shift, and devastated.”

The face had changed. The orange pigments were softer now, and both eyes were the same sickening hair-filled pits. How clear was his vision? How did he transplant cells from one eye to the other? There had to be mechanisms, reliable tricks . . . and she found herself feeling ignorant and glad of it

“What do you want, Quee Lee?”

She swallowed. “Perri came home, and I brought what he owes you.”

Orleans looked surprised, then the cool voice said, “Good. Wonderful!”

She produced the chips, his shiny palm accepting

them. The elbow gave a harsh growl, and she said, "I hope this helps."

"My mood already is improved," he promised.

What else? She wasn't sure what to say now.

Then Orleans told her, "I should thank you somehow. Can I give you something for your trouble? How about a tour?" One eye actually winked at her, hairs contracting into their pit and nothing left visible but a tiny red pore. "A tour," he repeated. "A walk outside? We'll find you a lifesuit. We keep them here in case a captain comes for an inspection." A big deep laugh, then he added, "Once every thousand years, they do! Whether we need it or not!"

What was he saying? She had heard him, and she hadn't.

A smile and another wink, and he said, "I'm serious. Would you like to go for a little stroll?"

"I've never . . . I don't know . . .!"

"Safe as safe can be." Whatever that meant. "Listen, this is the safest place for a jaunt. We're behind the leading face, which means impacts are nearly impossible. But we're not close to the engines and their radiations either." Another laugh, and he added, "Oh, you'll get a dose of radiation, but nothing important. You're tough, Quee Lee. Does your fancy apartment have an autodoc?"

"Of course."

"Well, then."

She wasn't scared, at least in any direct way. What Quee Lee felt was excitement and fear born of

excitement, nothing in her experience to compare with what was happening. She was a creature of habits, rigorous and ancient habits, and she had no way to know how she'd respond out there. No habit had prepared her for this moment.

"Here," said her gracious host. "Come in here."

No excuse occurred to her. They were in a deep closet full of lifesuits—this was some kind of locker room, apparently -- and she let Orleans select one and dismantle it with his growling joints. "It opens and closes, unlike mine," he explained. "It doesn't have all the redundant systems either. Otherwise, it's the same."

On went the legs, the torso and arms and helmet; she banged the helmet against the low ceiling, then struck the wall with her first step.

"Follow me," Orleans advised, "and keep it slow."

Wise words. They entered some sort of tunnel that zigzagged toward space, ancient stairs fashioned for a nearly human gait. Each bend had an invisible field that held back the ship's thinning atmosphere. They began speaking by radio, voices close, and she noticed how she could feel through the suit, its pseudoneurons interfacing with her own. Here gravity was stronger than earth-standard, yet despite her added bulk she moved with ease, limbs humming, her helmet striking the ceiling as she climbed. Thump, and thump. She couldn't help herself.

Orleans laughed pleasantly, the sound close and intimate. "You're doing fine, Quee Lee. Relax."

Hearing her name gave her a dilute courage.

“Remember,” he said, “your servomotors are potent. Lifesuits make motions large. Don't overcontrol, and don't act cocky.”

She wanted to succeed. More than anything in recent memory, she wanted everything as close to perfect as possible.

“Concentrate,” he said.

Then he told her, “That's better, yes.”

They came to a final turn, then a hatch, Orleans pausing and turning, his syrupy mouth making a preposterous smile. “Here we are. We'll go outside for just a little while, okay?” A pause, then he added, “When you go home, tell your husband what you've done. Amaze him!”

“I will,” she whispered.

And he opened the hatch with an arm -- the abrasive sounds audible across the radio, but distant-- and a bright colored glow washed over them. “Beautiful,” the Remora observed. “Isn't it beautiful, Quee Lee?”

Perri didn't return home for several more weeks, and when he arrived -- “I was rafting Cloud Canyon, love and didn't get your messages!”-- Quee Lee realized that she wasn't going to tell him about her adventure. Nor about the money. She'd wait for a better time, a weak moment, when Perri's guard was down. “What's so important, love? You sounded urgent.” She told him it was nothing, that she'd missed him and been worried. How was the rafting?

Who went with him? Perri told her, "Tweewits. Big hulking baboons, in essence." He smiled until she smiled too. He looked thin and tired; but that night, with minimal prompting, he found the energy to make love to her twice. And the second time was special enough that she was left wondering how she could so willingly live without sex for long periods. It could be the most amazing pleasure.

Perri slept, dreaming of artificial rivers roaring through artificial canyons; and Quee Lee sat up in bed, in the dark, whispering for her apartment to show her the view above Port Beta. She had it projected into her ceiling, twenty meters overhead, the shimmering aurora changing colors as force fields wrestled with every kind of spaceborn hazard.

"What do you think, Quee Lee?"

Orleans had asked the question, and she answered it again, in a soft awed voice. "Lovely." She shut her eyes, remembering how the hull itself had stretched off into the distance, flat and gray, bland yet somehow serene. "It is lovely."

"And even better up front, on the prow," her companion had maintained. "The fields there are thicker, stronger. And the big lasers keep hitting the comets tens of millions of kilometers from us, softening them up for us." He had given a little laugh, telling her, "You can almost feel the ship moving when you look up from the prow. Honest."

She had shivered inside her lifesuit, more out of pleasure than fear. Few passengers ever came out on

the hull. They were breaking rules, no doubt. Even inside the taxi ships, you were protected by a hull. But not up there. Up there she'd felt exposed, practically naked. And maybe Orleans had measured her mood, watching her face with the flickering pulses, finally asking her, "Do you know the story of the first Remora?"

Did she? She wasn't certain.

He told it, his voice smooth and quiet. "Her name was Wune," he began. "On Earth, it's rumored, she was a criminal, a registered habitual criminal. Signing on as a crew mate helped her escape a stint of psychological realignment -- "

"What crimes?"

"Do they matter?" A shake of the round head. "Bad ones, and that's too much said. The point is that Wune came here without rank, glad for the opportunity, and like any good mate, she took her turns out on the hull." Quee Lee had nodded, staring off at the far horizon.

"She was pretty, like you. Between shifts, she did typical typicals. She explored the ship and had affairs of the heart and grieved the affairs that went badly. Like you, Quee Lee, she was smart. And after just a few centuries on board, Wune could see the trends. She saw how the captains were avoiding their shifts on the hull. And how certain people, guilty of small offenses, were pushed into double-shifts in their stead. All so that our captains didn't have to accept the tiniest, fairest risks."

Status. Rank. Privilege. She could understand these things, probably too well.

“Wune rebelled,” Orleans had said, pride in the voice. “But instead of overthrowing the system, she conquered by embracing it. By transforming what she embraced.” A soft laugh. “This lifesuit of mine? She built its prototype with its semi-forever seals and the hyperefficient recyke systems. She made a suit that she'd never have to leave, then she began to live on the hull, in the open, sometimes alone for years at a time.”

“Alone?”

“A prophet's contemplative life.” A fond glance at the smooth gray terrain. “She stopped having her body purged of cancers and other damage. She let her face -- her beautiful face -- become speckled with dead tissues. Then she taught herself to manage her mutations, with discipline and strength. Eventually she picked a few friends without status, teaching them her tricks and explaining the peace and purpose she had found while living up here, contemplating the universe without obstructions.”

Without obstructions indeed!

“A few hundred became the First Generation. Attrition convinced our great captains to allow children, and the Second Generation numbered in the thousands. By the Third, we were officially responsible for the ship's exterior and the deadliest pans of its engines. We had achieved a quiet conquest of a world-sized realm, and today we number in the

low millions!”

She remembered sighing, asking, “What happened to Wune?”

“An heroic death,” he had replied. “A comet swarm was approaching.

A repair team was caught on the prow, their shuttle dead and useless --”

“Why were they there if a swann was coming?”

“Patching a crater, of course. Remember. The prow can withstand almost any likely blow, but if comets were to strike on top of one another, unlikely as that sounds --”

“A disaster,” she muttered.

“For the passengers below, yes.” A strange slow smile. “Wune died trying to bring them a fresh shuttle. She was vaporized under a chunk of ice and rock, in an instant.”

“I'm sorry.” Whispered.

“Wune was my great-great-grandmother,” the man had added. “And no, she didn't name us Remoras. That originally was an insult, some captain responsible. Remoras are ugly fish that cling to sharks. Not a pleasing image, but Wune embraced the word. To us it means spiritual fulfillment, independence and a powerful sense of self. Do you know what I am, Quee Lee? I'm a god inside this suit of mine. I role in ways you can't appreciate. You can't imagine how it is, having utter control over my body, my self . . . !”

She had stared at him, unable to speak.

A shiny hand had lifted, thick fingers against his faceplate. “My eyes?”

You're fascinated by my eyes, aren't you?”

A tiny nod. “Yes.”

“Do you know how I sculpted them?”

“No.”

“Tell me, Quee Lee. How do you close your hand?”

She had made a fist, as if to show him how.

“But which neurons fire? Which muscles contract?” A mild, patient laugh, then he had added, “How can you manage something that you can't describe in full?”

She had said, “It's habit, I guess”

“Exactly!” A larger laugh. “I have habits too. For instance, I can willfully spread mutations using metastasized cells. I personally have thousands of years of practice, plus all those useful mechanisms that I inherited from Wune and the others. It's as natural as your making the fist.”

“But my hand doesn't change its real shape,” she had countered.

“Transformation is my habit, and it's why my life is so much richer than yours.” He had given her a wink just then, saying, “I can't count the times I've re-evolved my eyes.”

Quee Lee looked up at her bedroom ceiling now, at a curtain of blue glows dissolving into pink. In her mind, she replayed the moment.

“You think Remoras are vile, ugly monsters,” Orleans had said. “Now don't deny it. I won't let you

deny it.”

She hadn't made a sound.

“When you saw me standing at your door? When you saw that a Remora had come to your home? All of that ordinary blood of yours drained out of your face. You looked so terribly pale and weak, Quee Lee. Horrified!” She couldn't deny it. Not then or now.

“Which of us has the richest life, Quee Lee? And be objective. Is it you or is it me?”

She pulled her bedsheets over herself, shaking a little bit.

“You or me?”

“Me,” she whispered, but in that word was doubt. Just the flavor of it. Then Perri stirred, rolling toward her with his face trying to waken. Quee Lee had a last glance at the projected sky, then had it quelched. Then Perri was grinning, blinking and reaching for her, asking:

“Can't you sleep, love?”

“No,” she admitted. Then she said, “Come here, darling.”

“Well, well,” he laughed. “Aren't you in a mood?”

Absolutely. A feverish mood, her mind leaping from subject to subject, without order, every thought intense and sudden, Perri on top of her and her old-fashioned eyes gazing up at the darkened ceiling, still seeing the powerful surges of changing colors that obscured the bright dusting of stars.

THEY TOOK a second honeymoon, Quee Lee's

treat. They traveled halfway around the ship, visiting a famous resort beside a small tropical sea; and for several months, they enjoyed the scenery and beaches, bone-white sands dropping into azure waters where fancy corals and fancier fishes lived. Every night brought a different sky, the ship supplying stored images of nebulas and strange suns; and they made love in the oddest places, in odd ways, strangers sometimes coming upon them and pausing to watch.

Yet she felt detached somehow, hovering overhead like an observer. Did Remoras have sex? she wondered. And if so, how? And how did they make their children? One day, Perri strapped on a gill and swam alone to the reef, leaving Quee Lee free to do research. Remoran sex, if it could be called that, was managed with electrical stimulation through the suits themselves. Reproduction was something else, children conceived in vitro, samples of their parents' genetics married and grown inside a hyperfiber envelope. The envelope was expanded as needed. Birth came with the first independent fusion plant. What an incredible way to live, she realized; but then again, there were many human societies that seemed bizarre. Some refused immortality. Some had married computers or lived in a narcotic haze. There were many, many spiritual splinter groups . . . only she couldn't learn much about the Remoran faith. Was their faith secret? And if so, why had she been allowed a glimpse of their private world?

Perri remained pleasant and attentive.

"I know this is work for you," she told him, "and you've been a delight, darling. Old women appreciate these attentions."

"Oh, you're not old!" A wink and smile, and he pulled her close. "And it's not work at all. Believe me!"

They returned home soon afterward, and Quee Lee was disappointed with her apartment. It was just as she remembered it, and the sameness was depressing. Even the garden room failed to brighten her mood . . . and she found herself wondering if she'd ever lived anywhere but here, the stone walls cold and closing in on her.

Perri asked, "What's the matter, love?"

She said nothing.

"Can I help, darling?"

"I forgot to tell you something," she began. "A friend of yours visited . . . oh, it was almost a year ago."

The roguish charm surfaced, reliable and nonplussed. "Which friend?"

"Orleans."

Sind Perri didn't respond at first, hearing the name and not allowing his expression to change. He stood motionless, not quite looking at her; and Quee Lee noticed a weakness in the mouth and something glassy about the smiling eyes. She felt uneasy, almost asking him what was wrong. Then Perri said, "What did Orleans want?" His voice was too soft, almost a

whisper. A sideways glance, and he muttered, "Orleans came here?" He couldn't quite believe what she was saying

"You owed him some money," she replied. Perri didn't speak, didn't seem to hear anything. "Perri?"

He swallowed and said, "Owed?"

"I paid him."

"But . . . but what happened . . . ?" She told him and she didn't. She mentioned the old seals and some other salient details, then in the middle of her explanation, all at once, something obvious and awful occurred to her. What if there hadn't been a debt? She gasped, asking. "You did owe him the money, didn't you?" "How much did you say it was?" She told him again.

He nodded. He swallowed and straightened his back, then managed to say, "I'll pay you back . . . as soon as possible"

"Is there any hurry?" She took his hand, telling him, "I haven't made noise until now, have I?" Don't worry." A pause. "I just wonder how you could owe him so much?"

Perri shook his head. "I'll give you five thousand now, maybe six . . . and I'll raise the rest. Soon as I can, I promise."

She said, "Fine."

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"How do you know a Remora?"

He seemed momentarily confused by the question. Then he managed to say, "You know me. A taste for

the exotic, and all that.”

“You lost the money gambling? Is that what happened?”

“I'd nearly forgotten, it was so long ago.” He summoned a smile and some of the old charm. “You should know, darling . . . those Remoras aren't anything like you and me. Be very careful with them, please.”

She didn't mention her jaunt on the hull. Everything was old news anyway, and why had she brought it up in the first place? Perri kept promising to pay her back. He announced he was leaving tomorrow, needing to find some nameless people who owed him. The best he could manage was fifteen hundred credits. “A weak down payment, I know.” Quee Lee thought of reassuring him-- he seemed painfully nervous-- but instead she simply told him, “Have a good trip, and come home soon.”

He was a darling man when vulnerable. “Soon,” he promised, walking out the front door. And an hour later, Quee Lee left too, telling herself that she was going to the hull again to confront her husband's old friend. What was this mysterious debt? Why did it bother him so much? But somewhere during the long tube-car ride, before she reached Port Beta, she realized that a confrontation would just further embarrass Perri, and what cause would that serve?

“What now?” she whispered to herself.

Another walk on the hull, of course. If Orleans would allow it. If he had the time, she hoped, and the

inclination.

His face had turned blue, and the eyes were larger. The pits were filled with black hairs that shone in the light, something about them distinctly amused. "I guess we could go for a stroll," said the cool voice. They were standing in the same locker room, or one just like it; Quee Lee was unsure about directions. "We could," said Orleans, "but if you want to bend the rules, why bend little ones? Why not pick the hefty ones?"

She watched the mouth smile down at her, two little tusks showing in its corners. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Of course it'll take time," he warned. "A few months, maybe a few years"

She had centuries, if she wanted.

"I know you," said Orleans. "You've gotten curious about me, about us." Orleans moved an arm, not so much as a hum coming from the refurbished joints. "We'll make you an honorary Remora, if you're willing. We'll borrow a lifesuit, set you inside it, then transform you partway in a hurry-up fashion."

"You can? How?"

"Oh, aimed doses of radiation. Plus we'll give you some useful mutations. I'll wrap up some genes inside smart cancers, and they'll migrate to the right spots and grow"

She was frightened and intrigued, her heart kicking harder.

"It won't happen overnight, of course. And it

depends on how much you want done.” A pause. “And you should know that it's not strictly legal. The captains have this attitude about putting passengers a little bit at risk.”

“How much risk is there?”

Orleans said, “The transformation is easy enough, in principle. I'll call up our records, make sure of the fine points.” A pause and a narrowing of the eyes. “We'll keep you asleep throughout. Intravenous feedings. That's best. You'll lie down with one body, then waken with a new one. A better one, I'd like to think. How much risk? Almost none, believe me.”

She felt numb. Small and weak and numb.

“You won't be a true Remora. Your basic genetics won't be touched, I promise. But someone looking at you will think you're genuine.”

For an instant, with utter clarity, Quee Lee saw herself alone on the great gray hull, walking the path of the first Remora.

“Are you interested?”

“Maybe. I am.”

“You'll need a lot of interest before we can start,” he warned. “We have expenses to consider, and I'll be putting my crew at risk. If the captains find out, it's a suspension without pay.” He paused, then said, “Are you listening to me?”

“It's going to cost money,” she whispered.

Orleans gave a figure.

And Quee Lee was braced for a larger sum, two hundred thousand credits still large but not

unbearable. She wouldn't be able to take as many trips to fancy resorts, true. Yet how could a lazy, prosaic resort compare with what she was being offered?

"You've done this before?" she asked.

He waited a moment, then said, "Not for a long time, no."

She didn't ask what seemed quite obvious, thinking of Peru and secretly smiling to herself.

"Take time," Orleans counseled. "Feel sure."

But she had already decided.

"Queen Lee?"

She looked at him, asking, "Can I have your eyes? Can you wrap them up in a smart cancer for me?"

"Certainly!" A great fluid smile emerged, framed with tusks. "Pick and choose as you wish. Anything you wish."

"The eyes," she muttered.

"They're yours," he declared, giving a little wink.

Arrangements had to be made, and what surprised her most -- what she enjoyed more than the anticipation-- was the subterfuge, taking money from her savings and leaving no destination, telling her apartment that she would be gone for an indeterminate time. At least a year, and perhaps much longer. Orleans hadn't put a cap on her stay with them, and what if she liked the Remoran life? Why not keep her possibilities open?

"If Perri returns?" asked the apartment.

He was to have free reign of the place, naturally.

She thought she'd made herself clear --

“No, miss,” the voice interrupted. “What do I tell him, if anything?”

“Tell him . . . tell him that I've gone exploring.”

“Exploring?”

“Tell him it's my turn for a change,” she declared; and she left without as much as a backward glance.

Orleans found help from the same female Remora, the one who had taken Quee Lee to him twice now. Her comma-shaped eyes hadn't changed, but the mouth was smaller and the gray teeth had turned black as obsidian. Quee Lee lay between them as they worked, their faces smiling but the voices tight and shrill. Not for the first time, she realized she wasn't hearing their real voices. The suits themselves were translating their wet mutterings, which is why throats and mouths could change so much without having any audible effect.

“Are you comfortable?” asked the woman. But before Quee Lee could reply, she asked, “Any last questions?”

Quee Lee was encased in the lifesuit, a sudden panic taking hold of her.

“When I go home . . . when I'm done . . . how fast can I . . . ?”

“Can you?”

“Return to my normal self.”

“Cure the damage, you mean.” The woman laughed gently, her expression changing from one unreadable state to another. “I don't think there's a firm answer,

dear. Do you have an autodoc in your apartment? Good. Let it excise the bad and help you grow your own organs over again. As if you'd suffered a bad accident "A brief pause. "It should take what, Orleans? Six months to be cured?"

The man said nothing busy with certain controls inside her suit's helmet. Quee Lee could just see his face above and behind her.

"Six months and you can walk in public again."

"I don't mean it that way," Quee Lee countered, swallowed now. A pressure was building against her chest, panic becoming terror. She wanted nothing now but to be home again.

"Listen," said Orleans, then he said nothing.

Finally Quee Lee whispered, "What?"

He knelt beside her, saying "You'll be fine. I promise."

His old confidence was missing. Perhaps he hadn't believed she would go through with this adventure. Perhaps the offer had been some kind of bluff, something no sane person would find appealing and now he'd invent some excuse to stop everything --

-- but he said, "Seals tight and ready."

"Tight and ready," echoed the woman.

Smiles appeared on both faces, though neither inspired confidence. Then Orleans was explaining: "There's only a slight, slight chance that you won't return to normal. If you should get hit by too much radiation, precipitating too many novel mutations . . . well, the strangeness can get buried too deeply.

A thousand autodocs couldn't root it all out of you.”

“Vestigial organs,” the woman added. “Odd blemishes and the like.”

“It won't happen,” said Orleans.

“It won't,” Quee Lee agreed.

A feeding nipple appeared before her mouth.

“Suck and sleep,” Orleans told her.

She swallowed some sort of chemical broth, and the woman was saying, “No, it would take ten or fifteen centuries to make lasting marks. Unless --”

Orleans said something, snapping at her.

She laughed with a bitter sound, saying, “Oh, she's asleep . . . !”

And Quee Lee was asleep. She found herself in a dreamless, timeless void, her body being pricked with needles-- little white pains marking every smart cancer-- and it was as if nothing else existed in the universe but Quee Lee, floating in that perfect blackness while she was remade.

“How long?”

“Not so long. Seven months, almost.”

Seven months. Quee Lee tried to blink and couldn't, couldn't shut the lids of her eyes. Then she tried touching her face, lifting a heavy hand and setting the palm on her faceplate, finally remembering her suit. “Is it done?” she muttered, her voice sloppy and slow. “Am I done now?”

“You're never done,” Orleans laughed. “Haven't you been paying attention?”

She saw a figure, blurred but familiar.

“How do you feel, Quee Lee?”

Strange. Through and through, she felt very strange.

“That's normal enough,” the voice offered. “Another couple months, and you'll be perfect. Have patience.”

She was a patient person, she remembered. And now her eyes seemed to shut of their own volition, her mind sleeping again. But this time she dreamed, her and Perri and Orleans all at the beach together. She saw them sunning on the bone-white sand, and she even felt the heat of the false sun, felt it baking hot down to her rebuilt bones.

She woke, muttering, “Orleans? Orleans?”

“Here I am.”

Her vision was improved now. She found herself breathing normally, her wrong-shaped mouth struggling with each word and her suit managing an accurate translation.

“How do I look?” she asked.

Orleans smiled and said, “Lovely.”

His face was blue-black, perhaps. When she sat up, looking at the plain gray locker room, she realized how the colors had shifted. Her new eyes perceived the world differently, sensitive to the same spectrum but in novel ways. She slowly climbed to her feet, then asked, “How long?”

“Nine months, fourteen days.”

No, she wasn't finished. But the transformation

had reached a stable point, she sensed, and it was wonderful to be mobile again. She managed a few tentative steps. She made clumsy fists with her too-thick hands. Lifting the fists, she gazed at them, wondering how they would look beneath the hyperfiber.

“Want to see yourself?” Orleans asked.

Now? Was she ready?

Her friend smiled, tusks glinting in the room's weak light. He offered a large mirror, and she bent to put her face close enough . . . finding a remade face staring up at her, a sloppy mouth full of mirror-colored teeth and a pair of hairy pits for eyes. She managed a deep breath and shivered. Her skin was lovely, golden or at least appearing golden to her. It was covered with hard white lumps, and her nose was a slender beak. She wished she could touch herself, hands stroking her faceplate. Only Remoras could never touch their own flesh

“If you feel strong enough,” he offered, “you can go with me. My crew and I are going on a patching mission, out to the prow.”

“When?”

“Now, actually.” He lowered the mirror. “The others are waiting in the shuttle. Stay here for a couple more days, or come now.”

“Now,” she whispered.

“Good.” He nodded, telling her, “They want to meet you. They're curious what sort of person becomes a Remora.”

A person who doesn't want to be locked up in a bland gray room, she thought to herself, smiling now with her mirrored teeth.

They had all kinds of faces, all unique, myriad eyes and twisting mouths and flesh of every color. She counted fifteen Remoras, plus Orleans, and Quee Lee worked to learn names and get to know her new friends. The shuttle ride was like a party, a strange informal party, and she had never known happier people, listening to Remora jokes and how they teased one another, and how they sometimes teased her. In friendly ways, of course. They asked about her apartment--how big, how fancy, how much--and about her long life. Was it as boring as it sounded? Quee Lee laughed at herself while she nodded, saying, "No, nothing changes very much. The centuries have their way of running together, sure."

One Remora -- a large masculine voice and a contorted blue face-- asked the others, "Why do people pay fortunes to ride the ship, then do everything possible to hide deep inside it? Why don't they ever step outside and have a little look at where we're going?"

The cabin erupted in laughter, the observation an obvious favorite.

"Immortals are cowards," said the woman beside Quee Lee.

"Fools," said a second woman, the one with comma-shaped eyes. "Most of them, at least."

Quee Lee felt uneasy, but just temporarily. She

turned and looked through a filthy window, the smooth changeless landscape below and the glowing sky as she remembered it. The view soothed her. Eventually she shut her eyes and slept, waking when Orleans shouted something about being close to their destination. "Decelerating now!" he called from the cockpit.

They were slowing. Dropping. Looking at her friends, she saw a variety of smiles meant for her. The Remoras beside her took her hands, everyone starting to pray. "No comets today," they begged. "And plenty tomorrow, because we want overtime."

The shuttle slowed to nothing, then settled.

Orleans strode back to Quee Lee, his mood suddenly serious. "Stay close," he warned, "but don't get in our way, either."

The hyperfiber was thickest here, on the prow, better than ten kilometers deep, and its surface had been browned by the ceaseless radiations. A soft dry dust clung to the lifesuits, and everything was lit up by the aurora and flashes of laser light. Quee Lee followed the others, listening to their chatter. She ate a little meal of Remoran soup -- her first conscious meal -- feeling the soup moving down her throat, trying to map her new architecture. Her stomach seemed the same, but did she have two hearts? It seemed that the beats were wrong. Two hearts nestled side by side. She found Orleans and approached him. "I wish I could pull off my suit, just once. Just for a minute." She told him, "I keep

wondering how all of me looks.”

Orleans glanced at her, then away. He said, “No.”
“No?”

“Remoras don't remove their suits. Ever.”

There was anger in the voice and a deep chilling silence from the others. Quee Lee looked about, then swallowed. “I'm not a Remora,” she finally said. “I don't understand”

Silence persisted, quick looks exchanged.

“I'm going to climb out of this . . . eventually . . . !”

“But don't say it now,” Orleans warned. A softer, more tempered voice informed her, “We have taboos. Maybe we seem too rough to have them --”

“No,” she muttered.

“-- yet we do. These lifesuits are as much a part of our bodies as our guts and eyes, and being a Remora, a true Remora, is a sacred pledge that you take for your entire life.”

The comma-eyed woman approached, saying, “It's an insult to remove your suit. A sacrilege.”

“Contemptible,” said someone else. “Or worse.”

Then Orleans, perhaps guessing Quee Lee's thoughts, made a show of touching her, and she felt the hand through her suit. “Not that you're anything but our guest, of course. Of course.” He paused, then said, “We have our beliefs, that's all.”

“Ideals,” said the woman.

“And contempt for those we don't like. Do you understand?”

She couldn't, but she made understanding sounds

just the same. Obviously she had found a sore spot.

Then came a new silence, and she found herself marching through the dust, wishing someone would make angry sounds again. Silence was the worst kind of anger. From now on, she vowed, she would be careful about everything she said. Every word.

THE CRATER was vast and rough and only partway patched. Previous crew had brought giant tanks and the machinery used to make the patch. It was something of an artform, pouring the fresh liquid hyperfiber and carefully curing it. Each shift added another hundred meters to the smooth crater floor. Orleans stood with Quee Lee at the top, explaining the job. This would be a double shift, and she was free to watch. "But not too closely," he warned her again, the tone vaguely parental. "Stay out of our way."

She promised. For that first half-day, she was happy to sit on the crater's lip, on a ridge of tortured and useless hyperfiber, imagining the comet that must have made this mess. Not large, she knew. A large one would have blasted a crater too big to see at a glance, and forty crews would be laboring here. But it hadn't been a small one, either. It must have slipped past the lasers, part of a swarm. She watched the red beams cutting across the sky, their heat producing new colors in the aurora. Her new eyes saw amazing details. Shock waves as violet phosphorescence; swirls of orange and crimson and snowy white. A beautiful deadly sky, wasn't it?

Suddenly the lasers fired faster, a spiderweb of beams overhead, and she realized that a swarm was ahead of the ship, pinpointed by the navigators somewhere below them . . . tens of millions of kilometers ahead, mud and ice and rock closing fast . . . !

The lasers fired even faster, and she bowed her head.

There was an impact, at least one. She saw the flash and felt a faint rumble dampened by the hull, a portion of those energies absorbed and converted into useful power. Impacts were fuel, of a sort. And the residual gases would be concentrated and pumped inside, helping to replace the inevitable loss of volatiles as the ship continued on its great trek.

The ship was an organism feeding on the galaxy.

It was a familiar image, almost cliché, yet suddenly it seemed quite fresh. Even profound. Queen Lee laughed to herself, looking out over the browning plain while turning her attentions inward. She was aware of her breathing and the bump-bumping of wrong hearts, and she sensed changes with every little motion. Her body had an odd indecipherable quality. She could feel every fiber in her muscles, every twitch and every stillness. She had never been so alive, so self-aware, and she found herself laughing with a giddy amazement.

If she was a true Remora, she thought, then she would be a world unto herself. A world like the ship, only smaller, its organic parts enclosed in armor and forever in flux. Like the passengers below, the cells of

her body were changing. She thought she could nearly feel herself evolving . . . and how did Orleans control it? It would be astonishing if she could re-evolve sight, for instance . . . gaining eyes unique to herself, never having existed before and never to exist again . . . !

What if she stayed with these people?

The possibility suddenly occurred to her, taking her by surprise.

What if she took whatever pledge was necessary, embracing all of their taboos and proving that she belonged with them? Did such things happen? Did adventurous passengers try converting--?

The sky turned red, lasers firing and every red line aimed at a point directly overhead. The silent barrage was focused on some substantial chunk of ice and grit, vaporizing its surface and cracking its heart. Then the beams separated, assaulting the bigger pieces and then the smaller ones. It was an enormous drama, her exhilaration married to terror . . . her watching the aurora brightening as force fields killed the momentum of the surviving grit and atomic dust. The sky was a vivid orange, and sudden tiny impacts kicked up the dusts around her. Something struck her leg, a flash of light followed by a dim pain . . . and she wondered if she was dead, then how badly she was wounded. Then she blinked and saw the little crater etched above her knee. A blemish, if that. And suddenly the meteor shower was finished.

Queen Lee rose to her feet, shaking with nervous

energy.

She began picking her way down the crater slope. Orleans' commands were forgotten; she needed to speak to him. She had insights and compliments to share, nearly tripping with her excitement, finally reaching the worksite and gasping, her air stale from her exertions. She could taste herself in her breaths, the flavor unfamiliar, thick and a little sweet.

“Orleans!” she cried out.

“You're not supposed to be here,” grouched one woman.

The comma-eyed woman said, “Stay right there. Orleans is coming, and don't move!”

A lake of fresh hyperfiber was cooling and curing as she stood beside it. A thin skin had formed, the surface utterly flat and silvery. Mirror-like. Quee Lee could see the sky reflected in it, leaning forward and knowing she shouldn't. She risked falling in order to see herself once again. The nearby Remoras watched her, saying nothing. They smiled as she grabbed a lump of old hyperfiber, positioning herself, and the lasers flashed again, making everything bright as day.

She didn't see her face.

Or rather, she did. But it wasn't the face she expected, the face from Orleans' convenient mirror. Here was the old Quee Lee, mouth ajar, those pretty and ordinary eyes opened wide in amazement.

She gasped, knowing everything. A near-fortune paid, and nothing in return. Nothing here had been real. This was an enormous and cruel sick joke; and

now the Remoras were laughing, hands on their untouchable bellies and their awful faces contorted, ready to rip apart from the sheer brutal joy of the moment . . . !

YOUR MIRROR wasn't a mirror, was it? It synthesized that image, didn't it?" She kept asking questions, not waiting for a response. "And you drugged me, didn't you? That's why everything still looks and feels wrong."

Orleans said, "Exactly. Yes."

Quee Lee remained inside her lifesuit, just the two of them flying back to Port Beta. He would see her on her way home. The rest of the crew was working, and Orleans would return and finish his shift. After her discovery, everyone agreed there was no point in keeping her on the prow.

"You owe me money," she managed.

Orleans' face remained blue-black. His tusks framed a calm icy smile. "Money? Whose money?"

"I paid you for a service, and you never met the terms."

"I don't know about any money," he laughed.

"I'll report you," she snapped, trying to use all of her venom. "I'll go to the captains -- "

" -- and embarrass yourself further." He was confident, even cocky. "Our transaction would be labeled illegal, not to mention disgusting. The captains will be thoroughly disgusted, believe me." Another laugh. "Besides, what can anyone prove? You

gave someone your money, but nobody will trace it to any of us. Believe me.”

She had never felt more ashamed, crossing her arms and trying to wish herself home again.

“The drug will wear off soon,” he promised. “You’ll feel like yourself again. Don’t worry.”

Softly, in a breathless little voice, she asked, “How long have I been gone?”

Silence.

“It hasn’t been months, has it?”

“More like three days.” A nod inside the helmet. “The same drug distorts your sense of time, if you get enough of it.”

She felt ill to her stomach.

“You’ll be back home in no time, Quee Lee.”

She was shaking and holding herself.

The Remora glanced at her for a long moment, something resembling remorse in his expression. Or was she misreading the signs?

“You aren’t spiritual people,” she snapped. It was the best insult she could manage, and she spoke with certainty. “You’re crude, disgusting monsters. You couldn’t live below if you had the chance, and this is where you belong.”

Orleans said nothing, merely watching her.

Finally he looked ahead, gazing at the endless gray landscape. “We try to follow our founder’s path. We try to be spiritual.” A shrug. “Some of us do better than others, of course. We’re only human.”

She whispered, “Why?”

Again he looked at her, asking, "Why what?"

"Why have you done this to me?"

Orleans seemed to breathe and hold the breath, finally exhaling. "Oh, Quee Lee," he said, "you haven't been paying attention, have you?"

What did he mean?

He grasped her helmet, pulling her face up next to his face. She saw nothing but the eyes, each black hair moving and nameless fluids circulating through them, and she heard the voice saying. "This has never, never been about you, Quee Lee. Not you. Not for one instant."

And she understood -- perhaps she had always known -- struck mute and her skin going cold, and finally, after everything, she found herself starting to weep.

Perri was already home, by chance.

"I was worried about you," he confessed, sitting in the garden room with honest relief on his face. "The apartment said you were going to be gone for a year or more. I was scared for you."

"Well," she said, "I'm back."

Her husband tried not to appear suspicious, and he worked hard not to ask certain questions. She could see him holding the questions inside himself. She watched him decide to try the old charm, smiling now and saying, "So you went exploring?"

"Not really."

"Where?"

"Cloud Canyon," she lied. She had practiced the lie

all the way from Port Beta, yet it sounded false now. She was halfway startled when her husband said:

“Did you go into it?”

“Partway, then I decided not to risk it. I rented a boat, but I couldn't make myself step on board.”

Perri grinned happily, unable to hide his relief. A deep breath was exhaled, then he said, “By the way, I've raised almost eight thousand credits already. I've already put them in your account.”

“Fine.”

“I'll find the rest too.”

“It can wait,” she offered.

Relief blended into confusion. “Are you all right, darling?”

“I'm tired,” she allowed.

“You look tired.”

“Let's go to bed, shall we?”

Perri was compliant, making love to her and falling into a deep sleep, as exhausted as Quee Lee. But she insisted on staying awake, sliding into her private bathroom and giving her autodoc a drop of Perri's seed. “I want to know if there's anything odd,” she told it.

“Yes, miss.”

“And scan him, will you? Without waking him.”

The machine set to work. Almost instantly, Quee Lee was being shown lists of abnormal genes and vestigial organs. She didn't bother to read them. She closed her eyes, remembering what little Orleans had told her after he had admitted that she wasn't

anything more than an incidental bystander. “Perri was born Remors, and he left us. A long time ago, by our count, and that's a huge taboo.”

“Leaving the fold?” she had said.

“Every so often, one of us visits his home while he's gone. We slip a little dust into our joints, making them grind, and we do a pity-play to whomever we find.”

Her husband had lied to her from the first, about everything.

“Sometimes we'll trick her into giving even more money,” he had boasted. “Just like we've done with you.”

And she had asked, “Why?”

“Why do you think?” he had responded.

Vengeance, of a sort. Of course.

“Eventually,” Orleans had declared, “everyone's going to know about Perri. He'll run out of hiding places, and money, and he'll have to come back to us. We just don't want it to happen too soon, you know? It's too much fun as it is.”

Now she opened her eyes, gazing at the lists of abnormalities. It had to be work for him to appear human, to cope with those weird Remora genetics. He wasn't merely someone who had lived on the hull for a few years, no. He was a full-blooded Remora who had done the unthinkable, removing his suit and living below, safe from the mortal dangers of the universe. Quee Lee was the latest of his ignorant lovers, and she knew precisely why he had selected

her. More than money, she had offered him a useful naivete and a sheltered ignorance . . . and wasn't she well within her rights to confront him, confront him and demand that he leave at once . . . ?

"Erase the lists," she said.

"Yes, miss."

She told her apartment, "Project the view from the prow, if you will. Put it on my bedroom ceiling, please."

"Of course, miss," it replied.

She stepped out of the bathroom, lasers and exploding comets overhead. She fully expected to do what Orleans anticipated, putting her mistakes behind her. She sat on the edge of her bed, on Perri's side, waiting for him to wake on his own. He would feel her gaze and open his eyes, seeing her framed by a Remoran sky

. . . and she hesitated, taking a breath and holding it, glancing upwards, remembering that moment on the crater's lip when she had felt a union with her body. A perfection; an intoxicating sense of self. It was induced by drugs and ignorance, yet still it had seemed true. It was a perception worth any cost, she realized; and she imagined Perri's future, hounded by the Remoras, losing every human friend, left with no choice but the hull and his left-behind life

She looked at him, the peaceful face stirring.

Compassion. Pity. Not love, but there was something not far from love making her feel for the fallen Remora.

“What if . . . ?” she whispered, beginning to smile.

And Perri smiled in turn, eyes closed and him enjoying some lazy dream that in an instant he would surely forget.

Roxie

She wakes me at five minutes before five in the morning, coming into the darkened bedroom with tags clinking and claws skating across the old oak floor, and then she uses a soft whine that nobody else will hear.

I sit up and pull myself to the end of the bed, dressing in long pants and new walking shoes—the old shoes weren't helping my balky arch and Achilles—and then I stop at the bathroom before pulling a warm jacket from the front closet. My dog keeps close track of my progress. In her step and the big eyes is enthusiasm and single-minded focus. At the side door, I tell her to sit and hold still please, and in the dark, I fasten the steel pinch collar and six-foot leash around a neck that has grown alarmingly thin.

Any more our walks are pleasant, even peaceful events—no more hard tugging or challenging other dogs. A little after five in the morning, early in March, the world is black and quiet beneath a cold, clear sky. Venus is brilliant, the moon cut thin. Crossing the empty four-lane road to the park, we move south past the soccer field and then west, and then south again on a narrow asphalt sidewalk. A hundred dogs pass this ground daily. The city has leash laws, and I have always obeyed them. But the clean-up laws are new, and only a fraction of the dog-walkers carry plastic sacks and flashlights. Where my dog has pooped for thirteen years, she poops now, and I kneel to stare at

what she has done, convincing myself that the stool is reasonably firm, if exceptionally fragrant.

A good beginning to our day.

We continue south to a set of white wooden stairs. She doesn't like stairs anymore, but she climbs them easily enough. Then we come back again on the wide bike path—a favorite stretch of hers. In the spring, rabbits will nest in the mowed grass, and every year she will find one or several little holes stuffed with tiny, half-formed bunnies. On this particular morning, nothing is caught and killed. An older man and his German shepherd pass us on the sidewalk below. Tony is a deep-voiced gentleman who usually waves from a distance and chats when we're close. He loves to see Roxie bounce about, and she very much likes him. But in the darkness he doesn't notice us, and I'm not in the mood to shout. He moves ahead and crosses the fourlane road, and when we reach that place, Roxie pauses, smelling where her friend has just been and leaking a sorry little whine. Home again, I pill my dog. She takes Proin to control bedwetting, plus half a metronidazole to fight diarrhea. She used to take a full metro, but there was an endless night a few weeks ago when she couldn't rest, not indoors or out. She barked at nothing, which is very strange for her. Maybe a high-pitched sound was driving her mad. But our vet warned that she could have a tendency toward seizures, and the metro can increase their likelihood and severity. Which is why I pulled her back to just half a pill in the

morning.

I pack the medicine into a handful of canned dog food, stinky and prepared with the senior canine in mind. She waits eagerly and gobbles up the treat in a bite, happily licking the linoleum where I dropped it, relishing that final taste.

Before six in the morning, I pour orange juice and go down to my basement office. My PC boots up without incident. I discover a fair amount of e-mail, none of it important. Then I start jumping between sites that offer a good look at science and world events. *Sky and Telescope* has a tiny article about an asteroid of uncertain size and imprecise orbit. But after a couple of nights of observation, early estimates describe an object that might be a kilometer in diameter, and in another two years, it seems that this intruder will pass close to the Earth, bringing with it a one-in-sixthousand chance of an impact.

“But that figure won’t stand up,” promises one astronomer. “This happens all the time. Once we get more data, this danger is sure to evaporate to nothing.”

* * * *

My future wife was a reporter for the Omaha newspaper. I knew her because in those days, a lot of my friends were reporters. On a sultry summer evening, she and I went to the same Fourth of July party; over the smell of gunpowder, Leslie mentioned that she’d recently bought a husky puppy.

Grinning, I admitted that I’d always been intrigued

by sled dogs.

“You should come meet Roxie sometime,” she said.

“Why Roxie?” I asked.

“Foxie Roxie,” she explained. “She’s a red husky. To me, she sort of looks like an enormous fox.”

Her dog was brownish red and white, with a dark red mask across her narrow face, accenting her soulful blue eyes. Leslie wasn’t home when I first visited, but her dog was in the backyard, absolutely thrilled to meet me. (Huskies are the worst guard dogs in the world.) Roxie was four or five months old, with a short coat and a big, long-legged frame. Sitting behind the chain-link gate, she licked the salt off my offered fingers. And then she hunkered down low, feigning submission. But her human was elsewhere, and I didn’t want the responsibility of opening gates and possibly letting this wolfish puppy escape. So I walked away, triggering a string of plaintive wails that caused people for a mile in every direction to ask, “Now who’s torturing that poor, miserable creature?”

Leslie and I started dating in late October. But the courtship always had a competitive triangular feel about it.

My new girlfriend worked long hours and drove a two-hour commute to and from Omaha. She didn’t have enough time for a hyperactive puppy. Feeling sorry for both of them, I would drop by to tease her dog with brief affections. Or if I stayed the night, I’d get up at some brutally early hour—before seven o’clock, some mornings—and dripping with fatigue,

I'd join the two of them on a jaunt through the neighborhood and park and back again.

In those days, Roxie lived outside as much as she lived in. But the backyard gate proved inadequate; using her nose, she would easily flip the latch up and out of the way. Tying the latch only bought a few more days of security. Leaping was easy work, and a four-foot chain-link fence was no barrier at all. A series of ropes and lightweight chains were used and discarded. Finally Leslie went to a farm supply store and bought a steel chain strong enough to yank cars out of ditches. Years later, a friend from Alaska visited, and I asked sheepishly if our chain was overkill. No, it was pretty standard for sled dogs, she conceded. Then she told me what I already knew: "These animals love to run."

One morning, somebody's dog was barking, and Leslie asked me to make sure it wasn't hers. Peering out the dining room window, I found a beautiful red-and-white husky dancing on the patio, happy as can be.

"It's not your dog," I told my girlfriend.

Even burdened with the heavy chain, Roxie had killed a squirrel, and now she was happily flinging the corpse into the air and catching it again. The game was delicious fun until the limp squirrel fell out of reach, and then the wailing began. I got dressed and found a shovel in the garage, and when I picked up her prize by its tail, the dog leaped happily. Oh, I was saving her day! But with the first spade of earth, she

saw my betrayal for what it was, and the wailing grew exponentially. Two nights later, Leslie called for help. Again, her dog had killed an animal. She didn't know what kind; despite being a farmer's kid, Leslie has an exceptionally weak stomach, and she didn't want to look too closely. But if I could drop over and take care of the situation.... It was late, and I was very tired. But I stopped by that next afternoon, when no humans were home. A half-grown opossum was baking in the sun. Using my growing puddle of wisdom, I gave my girlfriend's dog a quick walk and put her inside before burying the bloated body. Then I let Roxie back out on her chain, and she hurried to the spot where the opossum had been, sniffing and digging, and then flinging herself down on her back to roll on the ripe, wondrous ground. After a year of dating, I moved in with both of them, and that next spring, Leslie and I dug a pond below the patio. That's where we found the opossum's grave. Rot and time had eaten the flesh from the skull, and I put the prize in a little jar that I set on a shelf in the spare bedroom that had become my office.

* * * *

After several days, the new asteroid surfaces again on the Web, this time wearing an official designation. The bolide is found to be exceptionally dark, lending evidence that this could be a short-term comet with most of its volatiles bled away. A tiny albedo means it must be larger than it appears in the images. Two black kilometers across, and maybe more. As

promised, the one-in-six-thousand chance of an impact has been discarded. Extra data allow astronomers to plot a lovely elliptical orbit that reaches out past Saturn and then dives inside the Earth's orbit. Calculations are still in flux, I read online. If the object starts to act like a comet, watery fountains and gaseous vents will slow it down or speed it up, depending on chaotic factors. These are complications that will mean much, or nothing. But for the moment, the odds of an impact with the Earth have shifted by a factor of twenty.

“One-in-three-hundred,” I read at the **ScienceDaily** site. In other words, it is easier to fill an inside straight in poker. And if the object's trajectory makes any substantial change, the chance of an impact will probably—probably—drop to one-in-infinity.

* * * *

I grew up with black Labradors in the house. They were docile animals, a little foolish but always good-hearted, and each one began his day by asking, “How can I make my owner proud of me?”

No husky thinks in those subservient, dim-witted terms. Leslie grew up on a farm full of dogs and cats, but those pets lived outdoors. Because of that and because she wasn't home during the day, she'd had limited success housebreaking Roxie. Of course I like to tell myself that once I had moved in, the chaos turned to discipline. But the truth is a more complex, less edifying business: To make certain our dog was

drained in the morning, I walked her. Since I worked at home, taking Roxie outside for the midday pee was easily done. And when my girlfriend was tired in the evening, I would throw a thirty-foot lead on the beast and take her up to the park and back again.

But “Who trained who?” is a valid question.

The evening walk came after the human dinner. When I put down the fork, the dog would begin to whine and leap, sometimes poking me in the gut with her paw. Disciplining her was endless work, and often futile. She was too quick to grab, too graceful to corral. One night, watching some favorite TV show, I got a little too clever and lured her out of the basement. Then after a few words about what a spoiled bitch she was, I shut the door between us, and after a few seconds of loud thumping, the house went quiet. At the first commercial break, I peeked through the door to find my dog sitting in the kitchen, waiting patiently. “Good girl,”

I said, and as a reward, I let her come downstairs. She sat at my feet, as patient as I had ever seen her act, sometimes glancing my way with an expression full of meanings that I couldn't quite read. When I went upstairs again, I discovered what she had done. In my office, on the throw rug, she had emptied her bladder. Here was a message, and the lesson was learned; after that, our walks were a priority, and I tried to avoid treating her like inconvenient luggage.

* * * *

The dead comet surfaces in newspaper articles and

on television. Its soulless official designation has been replaced by “Shelby,” which happens to be the off-the-cuff name given to it by its discoverers. The odds of an impact are fluctuating between one-in-three-hundred and one-in-one-thousand, depending on the expert being quoted. But even the most alarming voice sounds calm, particularly when he or she repeats the undeniable truth: The bolide is a long ways out and still traveling toward the Sun. Any day now, Shelby will start to vent, and its orbit will shift some significant distance.

Meanwhile, what has been an unnaturally mild winter ends with a single heavy snow. Fifteen wet inches fall in less than a day. Cars wear white pillars. The warm earth melts the first several inches, but what remains is impressive. With my four-year-old daughter’s help, I build a snowman in the front yard—my first snowman in forty years. And Roxie appreciates the snow, though she can’t leap into those places that aren’t plowed or shoveled. For several days, our walks are limited to the plowed streets, and it takes persistence and some coaxing before she finds a place worthy of her poop.

I still run with her on the cool days. For several years, we haven’t gone farther than a mile. There is one course she accepts without complaint, knowing the turnaround point to the inch. One blustery afternoon, when the last snow has melted, I take her into a stand of old pines growing beside the park’s nine-hole golf course, and then I lure her past that

point, tricking her into running a course that is slightly longer than normal.

Together, we maintain a comfortable nine-minute gait. And at the one-mile mark, almost exactly, she begins to limp. She looks pained and pitiful, right up to the moment when we start to walk home, and then her limp vanishes as quickly as it appeared.

A few days later, she wakes me at four-thirty in the morning. Our walk is uneventful, but I can't relax when I come home. Online, I jump to the *New Scientist* site, reading that somebody has uncovered photographic plates taken several decades ago. These old images show Shelby moping along near its perigee—a forgotten speck moving just outside Venus' orbit. Astronomers now have fresh data to plug into their equations, refining their predictions. And more important, they don't see any evidence of a coma or tail. During its last fiery summer, this old comet didn't spill any significant volatiles.

Worse still, between then and now our bolide has been moving along an exceptionally predictable line.

Overnight, the odds of an impact with the Earth have shifted, jumping from a comforting one-in-three-hundred, at their very worst, to a one-miserable-chance-in-thirteen.

* * * *

I used to be a semi-fast runner, and except in summer, Roxie was good for a six-or eight-mile adventure. And in late fall and winter, when temperatures dipped to a bearable chill, we would

run twelve miles at a shot, or farther. She adored the snow. I think she knew every course by heart, even when drifts obscured the trails. We ran with human friends, and she always worked harder around new people, trying to impress them. But the real fun was to get out and smell the smells, and she relished her chances to pee against fresh trees and important fences. Roxie often lifted one hind leg like a boy dog would; but better than that, she occasionally did the canine equivalent of a handstand, throwing her piss high to fool strange dogs into thinking, “What a big bad bitch was here!”

And she was exceptionally competitive. When we saw another dog up ahead, or human runners, or even a slow cyclist, it was critically important to put on a sprint and pass your opponent. And not only pass them, but look back at them too, laughing happily, flashing the canine equivalent of a “Beat your ass” grin.

* * * *

People who know me—family and friends, and even passing acquaintances—start to ask, “What do you think the real odds are?”

Of an impact, they mean.

Sad to say, being a science fiction writer doesn't give a person special knowledge. It should, but it doesn't. All I can offer is the standard figure. One-in-thirteen. The most likely scenario is that Shelby will cross the Earth's orbit at a distance far closer to us than we are to the moon. If there is a collision, it will

happen in a little less than two years: On March 11, at approximately 3:45 AM local time. And because of the orbital dynamics, if the object does strike, it will plunge down somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere.

But like the talking heads on television, I remind my audience that these numbers are certain to change.

In mid-April, I am a guest at a little SF convention held at one of our state colleges. Going in, I imagine an event where people talk openly about murderous asteroids and comets. But I keep forgetting that most fans today read nothing but fantasy and media tie-in books. They don't want to invest much breath in what is a very depressing subject. And the rest of us—including me, I discover—have convinced ourselves that in the end, nothing will come of this.

I enjoy the convention. Best of all, I relish the change in routine: I don't have a dog to listen for in the wee hours. I can sleep all the way to a lazy seven-thirty, if I want. Though I can't manage that trick, since my body isn't geared for so much leisure.

On Monday morning, I retrieve my dog from the kennel. As always, Roxie gives me a quick hello before heading for the car. Her poop has been fine, I learn, and she's eaten every pill and every bite of food that I brought for her.

The week turns summery warm. On Thursday morning, at one o'clock, I jump awake when Roxie begins to lick herself. She isn't licking her privates,

but instead she is obsessively wetting down her paws and legs, working hard until she has to stop to pant. Then she climbs to her feet and gets a drink from the toilet, then returns to the bedroom to lick her legs some more.

I could push her into the hall and shut the door, but that would only make her whine. So I lie awake for two or three hours, thinking about work. I play with unfinished stories. I dance with a novel that still hasn't sold. And when I don't have anything else to consider, I think about Shelby. If this is the murderer of human civilization, doesn't the bastard deserve a better name?

By four in the morning, I am exhausted and anxious. Shutting the windows, I turn on the air conditioning. The cool air doesn't seem to help my dog, but at least the noise covers up the sounds of licking. And by four-thirty, I manage to drift into sleep, fifteen minutes of dreamy slumber enjoyed before Roxie comes to the foot of the bed and starts to whine.

* * * *

One winter, my dog took an extraordinary interest in one portion of a local bike path. The path dove under a bridge. That bridge had three tunnels. The pedestrian tunnel was narrow and dark. Beside it was a wider tunnel where a peaceful stream flowed through. And on the far side was a second, equally wide tunnel meant for the overflow during high water. I usually gave Roxie a chance to drink, but

suddenly she got it into her head that we needed to investigate the far tunnel. She would stand in the freezing creek, looking back at me with a questioning insistence. This was important; this mattered. We really need to cross over here, she was telling me. But there was no way to convince me to wade through shindeep water, only to reach an empty tunnel floored with packed clay and trash.

More than most humans, my dog is woven into her world. Drop a cardboard box anywhere near the bike path, and she will leap and woof until she is convinced that the new object isn't dangerous. The same can be true for a kid's bike left in a front yard, or a snowman that wasn't there yesterday.

One evening, years ago, Leslie and I were walking the dog together. One of our neighbors had been enjoying too much partying that night, and his wife had refused to let him inside. So he lay down on the front walk and fell asleep. At a glance, Roxie knew this was unusual. Somebody needed to be alerted. She began to bark and whine, and then dance, very much troubled by the fact we were dragging her away from what was clearly somebody in distress.

She often notices details that the observant writer beside her has completely missed.

One calm, cool afternoon, Roxie and I were running on a bike path when she suddenly, inexplicably went mad, running circles around me while staring up at the sky, her blue eyes huge and terrified. I looked up, and ugly me, I laughed.

Floating directly above our heads was an enormous white spiral. It looked ominous, yes. To Roxie, this apparition must have been ready to drop on us, which was why we broke into a hard sprint. Off in the distance, a little biplane was spitting out random letters; a skywriter was practicing his trade. I was breathless and laughing, my strides pulled long by the panicked tugs. But the wind happened to be out of the north, and since we were racing south, the spiral hovered above us for another half mile before the trail mercifully bent westward, allowing us to escape. (Though I noticed that she never stopped watching the busy plane, having wisely decided that it must be to blame for this travesty of Nature.) Roxie often knew what I didn't know. But when she tried to coax me into the mysterious tunnel, I ignored her. "You're not the only stubborn creature in the family," I warned. Then the weather grew warm, and a couple of local kids went exploring. In the tunnel was the body of a teenager, a young man who had been buried in a shallow grave. Police were summoned, and for a week the underpass was cordoned off. Piles of excavated earth were left in the streambed, and when we could run through again, Roxie would stop and shamelessly sniff at the dirt, burying her nose in the ripest parts, every breath telling her stories about what was still, judging by her interest, vividly real.

As it happened, the dead boy had vanished months ago from a group home for troubled youth. His two best friends in the world were arrested. It came out

that there had been a fight over cigarettes. One boy confessed to being present at the murder, but he swore the other fellow had bashed in their buddy's skull. With no other witnesses and only sketchy forensics, the state had to give a free pass in exchange for testimony. But then at trial, the boy recanted his story. In the end, a brutal crime was committed and nobody went to prison. And I occasionally have to ask myself, "What would have happened if I'd listened to my dog? If we'd crossed that stream, and if I let her unearth the grave, would the police, given a fresher trail, have been able to make their case?"

* * * *

By week's end, one spent comet has pushed everything else out of the news. Most of a dozen runners gather at the YMCA early Saturday morning, and Shelby is our first topic. I explain what I know about its delicate motion through the sky. I report that the venerable Hubble has spotted what looks like a tiny eruption of gas—probably carbon monoxide—from its equator. Will this make any difference? Maybe, I admit, and maybe not for the best. On the Torino scale, our enemy presently wears an ominous seven. Ten means doom, and the group wrings some comfort in the gulf between those seven and ten. But the Torino scale is misleading. Only rocks and tiny asteroids can earn eights or nines. And the fatal ten won't kick in until a massive object—Shelby, for instance—has a 99 percent chance of impacting on the Earth's face. For the last few days, the published

odds of the horrific are hovering around one-in-eleven.

“We’re going to have to blow it up,” one runner announces. “Stuff a thousand nukes on a missile, and hit the bastard hard.”

“But that’s not going to help,” I mention.

“Why not?”

I don’t respond.

But the other runners are listening, and our lone female—a little ex-gymnast—comes up beside me, asking, “Why won’t bombs work?”

Small bolides aren’t brittle rocks ready to shatter to dust under a single hammer blow; they are usually soft, stubborn rubble piles filled with considerable empty space. “It’ll be like kicking a snowdrift,” I mention. Besides, we don’t have a fleet of rockets strong enough to fling hydrogen bombs across the solar system. Even with a crash program, no workable bomb could be launched for months. And without years of leadtime, we won’t be able to carefully map Shelby’s surface before putting down at the best possible location. What we’ll have to do is attack it straight on, one or several tiny bullets battering one gigantic cannon ball. Sure, the rubble pile might break into pieces. But that might turn a nearcollision into a shotgun blast, hill-sized chunks raining down on everybody. And even if we are very lucky—if Shelby holds together and we trigger the perfect outgassing—that won’t happen until late next year.

“Which won’t leave us any time, if we make a mistake then,” I remind them.

My lecture finished, I discover that I’m out of breath, my stomach aching and throat parched.

For a long moment, the others say nothing. Then the CPA in our group points out, “Ten times out of eleven, Shelby misses us.”

That is a fair point.

“And the odds can get better,” says an optimistic voice. My voice, as it happens. I don’t want everyone left as miserable as I feel, which is why I promise, “One-in-eleven isn’t the final word.”

* * * *

My dog isn’t comfortable. That afternoon, I’m sitting at my computer and reading about orbital dynamics, and Roxie lies nearby, licking at her paws and feet. I can’t stand the sound of it, and when she finally quits, I breathe easier. But she only quits because she is exhausted, and after half an hour nap, she wakes and begins the process over again. My vet’s office is closed until Monday. I call the emergency clinic, and the assistant says that it sounds like allergies, which isn’t too unexpected with the warm spring weather. She suggests Benedryl, though I don’t have any in the house. Or, if I want, I could bring my dog over for an examination.

I lead Roxie outside and open the back of my CRV, and she leaps in, but with nothing to spare. It’s a five-minute drive to the clinic. I’m the only customer. The veterinarian is a heavy middle-aged fellow with big

hands and a matching voice. He asks if my dog has arthritis. “No,” I say, and immediately I’m remembering every slow trip up the stairs. Yet she managed to jump into my car, which is impressive for a thirteen-year-old lady. He tells me that her heart is strong. It shows that she gets plenty of exercise. Then he points out the redness in her eyes—a telltale sign of allergies. He recommends a cortisone shot and pills. The hypodermic needle is only a little smaller than a pool cue, and he injects a bucket of oily goo into her back and both hind legs, leaving her whining, trembling from the stress.

Returning to the waiting room, we find a patient in genuine trouble—a little mutt who got into a one-sided fight with a pit bull. Seeing that dog’s misery, I feel better. Roxie suddenly looks to be in pretty good shape. The prescription is for twenty tabs of prednisone, and the total bill is nearly one hundred and fifty dollars. But the licking stops immediately, and she sleeps hard until nearly seven that next morning, waking refreshed and ready to walk.

Her pee comes in rivers, but I was warned about that side effect. The watery diarrhea that arrives later is a big surprise. By Monday morning, I call my own vet to ask questions and complain. The pred dosage is quite high, I learn. But I have to wean Roxie off the medication slowly or risk the catastrophic failure of her adrenal gland. For the rest of the week, my sleep is broken, full of dreams and abrupt moments of wakefulness. Someone in the house groans, and I find

myself alert and exhausted. And if I can't hear my dog, I start to wonder if she has died. It astonishes me how I seem to want that to happen. In the middle of the night, when she whines and demands to go outside, I feel trapped. Nobody else is going to take care of this dog. Leslie claims that Roxie is just getting old, slowing down but generally happy, and I worry about her too much. But at three in the morning, shaking with fatigue, it isn't worry that I'm feeling. I am angry. I feel trapped. With nothing else to do, I can't help but imagine the days to come when I won't have to get up at all hours, when I won't have to tend to this animal; and it scares me when I realize just how much I am looking forward to this one inevitable end.

* * * *

When Leslie became pregnant, certain people in both of our families worried. We were sharing the house with a wolfish dog, and did we appreciate the risks? That summer, we went out of town on short notice and couldn't get Roxie into her usual kennel. But my mother-in-law offered to take her, promising us that our sled dog would live in air conditioning, safe from the July heat.

When we returned to the farm, we discovered Roxie in the yard, chained to a tree and looking miserable. My father-in-law had us sit down in the kitchen, and with urgency, he asked if we knew that our dog was vicious. It seemed that everything had been fine until this morning, and then for no reason,

Roxie attacked one of his dogs and killed a cat. This was ominous news, yes.

We asked questions, both of us trying to put these incidents into context. What I kept thinking was that Roxie had decided we weren't coming home, and she was trying to establish dominance. Leslie asked if the other dog was hurt.

"Not too bad," my father-in-law conceded. "She's a little stiff, is all."

"Which cat?" I wanted to know.

He described this sweet little calico that I'd noticed before.

"Where's the body?"

"Oh, she ran off to die," he reported. Then in the next breath, he added, "I don't care about the cats. That's not the point. But they're little animals, and your baby is going to be a little animal too. Who knows what that dog might do?"

Leslie and I were shaken. But when I went outside to rescue the forlorn, thoroughly pissed-off dog, I saw a familiar calico walking beside our car. Going back inside, I pointed out the window and asked, "Is that the dead cat?"

"Huh," he responded. "I guess she didn't die."

And at that point my best defense was to say, "If my dog wanted that cat dead, believe me, she would have killed it."

* * * *

Roxie goes off the pred early, and for the next of couple days, she seems fine. She seems perfect. But

then the licking resumes. I give her Benedryl, and not just a little taste. Six tablets go inside her—three times the usual dosage—but she continues moving from place to place, licking at her miserable legs. Late on Sunday night, I call the emergency clinic, explaining symptoms and mentioning that I still have half of the original prescription. Ten tabs. Their advice is to feed her one pred to help her through the night. But the effects aren't immediate. I can't sleep with Roxie in this mood, which is why I take refuge in the basement. If she follows me, I decide, at least the white noise of the aquariums will help mask any chaos.

But thank goodness, my dog leaves me alone. This little vacation lasts until six—an exceptionally late hour—and then she pees rivers while we slowly, contentedly make our usual one-mile walk.

* * * *

When Jessie was a newborn, we would set her on the floor, on her back, and Roxie would come close to investigate, never quite allowing the tiny hands to grab hold of her. Sometimes she brought our daughter gifts—tennis balls or one of the plastic snowmen with its head chewed off—and she would put the toys at Jessie's feet, waiting for the kick that would start their little game.

The violence came later. Teeth and nails inflicted pain, and there were some hard body blows delivered in weak moments. But as I explained to others, I couldn't euthanize the guilty party. She was my

daughter, after all, and not even two years old.

When we return from daycare, Roxie always makes a point of greeting Jessie. I rarely get such treatment, which is another way huskies aren't anything Labrador. She is smart enough and secure enough to take me for granted. And if my dog decides to come when I call her—a huge crapshoot as it is—she usually stops short, forcing me to take the final few steps.

“You're describing a cat,” one lady exclaimed upon hearing our stories.

A fifty-pound cat, yes. With blue eyes and a curled tail, a graying coat and a predator's fierce instincts.

My haphazard research into huskies gave me one explanation into their nature: Come summer, the Siberian humans would let their dogs run free. With no work for the animals to do, they could feed themselves on the three-month bounty. Then with the first snows, the happy survivors would return to camp, ready to pull sleds in exchange for easy food. I can't count all of the rabbits Roxie has killed. She has also butchered mice and at least one nest of shrews, and there have been a few birds snapped out of the air. But rabbits are prizes above all others. When she was young, she nabbed a half-grown bunny and happily brought it home. But I refused to let her prize come indoors, and after giving me a long baleful stare, she ate it whole. And for the rest of the day, there was an extra bounce to her always-bouncy step.

Over the years, Roxie developed a taste for breadsticks and pizza. Sloppy people and my

nephews often found their hands suddenly empty. But when Jessie was in the house, I tried to put an end to everybody's misbehavior. One night, Roxie snatched the bread from my wife's grip, missing her fingers by nothing. My response was abrupt and passionate. I asserted my dominance, and my dog responded by baring her teeth, telling me quite clearly to back off. But I tried to grab her collar anyway, wanting to drag her outside, and when she snapped, a long sharp canine punctured the meat between my thumb and index finger. After that, both of us were exceptionally careful with one another. More than once, tension would erupt and I would see my dog willfully holding back. I would do the same, or at least I tried to. One morning when Roxie picked up a road-killed squirrel—a putrid, halfgrown marvel—she looked at me with a wishful expression. I didn't reach for her mouth, but with a calm voice, I warned her that as soon as we were home, I was going to stick a hose in her mouth and flush that ugliness out of there.

Maybe she understood. More likely, she remembered when I had done that trick with another edible treasure. Either way, she stopped in front of our driveway and crunched on the carcass, and then she gave me a long smile, letting me smell the rancid wonders riding on her breath. A week later, she was living at the vet's.

When I finally retrieved her, I found her lying on her side inside a wire cage, looking depressed and

painfully skinny. But when the cage door opened, she sprang out, evading every reaching hand and trying to leap up on a table where a squawking parrot sat inside its cage. That illness was followed by several months of acting happy and comfortable. Roxie would follow me around the house until I settled, and then she would sleep nearby. She ate well, and she pooped quite a lot, and there were a few bouts of diarrhea, but things always resolved themselves within a day or two.

Roxie often slept in the exact place where she had bitten me. And sometimes when she dreamed, her legs would run fast, little woofs leaking out as she chased the most delicious prey.

Then one day, it occurred to me that I hadn't seen her running in her sleep in some time.

My dog sleeps almost constantly now, but with very few dreams. While for me, sleep comes in brief snatches that are filled with the most lucid and awful nightmares.

* * * *

In less than two years, Shelby will reach the Earth. The most likely scenario has the black body dipping below the geosynchronous satellites and then plunging even closer. The space station is in a relatively high orbit, and if it happens to be in the proper position, its crew will be able to watch an irregularly shaped body streaking between them and their home world. From a distance, Shelby won't look particularly large or ominous. But the sun will light

up its black crust, even when North America still lies in darkness. And then after kissing the atmosphere's upper reaches, it will head back out into space, its orbit nudged slightly by our gravity's sturdy tug.

Just as I once predicted, the odds of the worst are continuing to evolve.

One-in-eleven has become a rather worse one-in-nine. But unless there is a major outgassing event, these numbers won't move much farther, at least for the next year or so. Shelby exists in a strange territory where it mostly harmless. More often than not, astronomers will decide in the final weeks that it won't hit, and everybody will get up in the wee hours and step outside to watch a dull little star passing overhead. The asteroid will miss us by miles and miles before continuing on its mindless way, following a new orbit that is our big old world's little gift to it. My wife and I discuss what to do if the odds worsen. My mother lives in Yuma during the winter. We could pay a visit then, bringing her granddaughter as well as a few tons of canned goods as gifts. Our four-year-old hears us talking and sees pictures on the news, and she repeats little fragments of what she hears, in a mangled form. Yet she is an unapologetic optimist, assuring me, "It will be pretty, this meteor thing. We'll go out and watch it. You and me. And Roxie too."

"What about Mommy?" I ask.

"She'll be sleeping," Jessie confides, obviously having given this issue some thought. "She has go to

work tomorrow, Daddy. Remember?”

One day, coming home from daycare, NPR is giving details about a Mars probe that's being quickly reconfigured. With less than perfect equipment, it is going to be launched early and sent on a near-collision course with Shelby, skimming low over its surface while snapping a few thousand pictures that will help us aim a nuke mission that may or may not launch in August. Or September. We need milk tonight, and pulling up in front of the local grocery store, I turn off the car and listen to the rest of the story before getting out and unbuckling my daughter. A man is walking past, his German shepherd striding beside him. I don't often see Tony during the day, and rarely up close. Watching Jessie more than him, I say, “We don't cross paths much anymore.”

The man holds his dog leash with both hands. I sense his eyes even as I hold my daughter's hand. This isn't easy, but I thought I should tell him my news. A few years ago, when Tony's original German shepherd was failing, he would share updates while working through the usual emotions.

I explain, “Roxie's walking earlier and earlier. And she's starting to lose strength, I'm afraid.” That's when I look up, staring directly at the man's face, and I honestly don't recognize him.

The man says, “That's too bad,” with a voice that I don't know. Tony's voice is thick and hearty—an FM radio voice—while this man has a faint, almost girlish tenor. He is also quite skinny and overly dressed for

what isn't a terribly cool afternoon.

"Are you Tony?" I have to ask.

He smiles and nods, saying, "Yes."

He says, "It's the chemo. It does this to me."

I feel silly and lost, and I am quite sad.

"But I'm still vertical," he adds with a ramshackle pride. I wish him all the luck in the world, and then I take my daughter into the store, for milk and a little tube of M&Ms. A few mornings later, well before five, Roxie stops a few feet short of our usual turnaround point. She gives me one of her meaningful stares, and when she has my undivided attention, she glances at the big white stairs. She isn't tired, at least no more tired than usual. But she tells me that she isn't in the mood to climb those stairs, which is why we turn and start back home again.

It is a starry chill morning, with Venus and the remnants of the Moon.

I don't know why I'm crying while I walk. But I am, blubbering myself sick, hoping to hell no other dog walkers come by and see me this way.

* * * *

My hope was to someday invite Roxie to a road race. A small town five-miler seemed like the perfect candidate—held in February and named, appropriately, the Animal Run. But one year proved too warm, while the next winter left me in the mood to run a serious, undistracted race. But eventually a timely Arctic front arrived, ending any thought of racing; before bed, I told my dog to sleep hard

because we had a very busy morning coming.

But the cold was even worse than predicted. Digging out from under my blankets, I discovered it was ten below, with a brutal wind sure to cut through any exposed flesh. Being rather fond of my nose, I didn't want to lose it for fifteenth place in some little survival run. That's why I stayed home, telling myself and my dog that maybe next year would be our year.

Except soon after that, Roxie quit running long miles. She told me her wishes by various means: She wouldn't come when I called. She would feign sleep or a limp. Or if another runner visited the house, she would greet him joyfully and then make a show of diving into the window well, hunkering down in the delicious shade. My wife says it's crazy how much I talk to my dog.

Leslie hears my end of the conversation, and with a palpable tension, she'll ask, "How do you know that's what she wants?"

"The eyes. The body. Everything about this dog is talking. Can't you see?"

Not at all, no.

For more than a year, Roxie would run nothing but little, lazy-day runs. Then on an autumn afternoon, while I was dressing in the basement, she suddenly came to the side door and gave me a long look. When I returned the stare, she glanced up at the leashes hanging from the hook on the wall.

"No, hon," I said. "I'm going long today."

She knows the difference between "long" and

“little.”

Yet those blue eyes danced, and again she stared up at the saltrusted six-foot running leash. I told her the course I wanted to run.

She knows our routes by name.

“You’re sure?” I asked.

She stepped back into the kitchen and stretched, front paws out ahead while the body extended, teasing out the kinks.

“Okay then. Let’s go.”

Until the following spring, she ran twenty miles every week. And then the weather got warm, and she quit again. For good. But in that final youth, one run stands out: A different Arctic front was pushing through. We began by heading toward the southeast, letting the bitter wind push us along. But then we had no choice but to turn and head for home. For some reason, I was using her twenty-foot leash—

probably to let her cavort in the snowdrifts. Roxie was as far ahead as possible, nose to the wind and her leash pulled taut. We eventually reached that place where the path split two ways. To the left was home and warmth, while straight on meant adding miles in a numbing cold. When Roxie reached the intersection, she looked back at me, making a request with her eyes. I said, “No, girl.” I told her it was time to finish. But she trotted ahead anyway, stopping only when I stopped. And then she turned and stared stubbornly back at me, making absolutely certain that I understood what she wanted.

“I’m cold,” I confessed. “This isn’t fun anymore.”

“Are you sure?” she asked by lifting her paws and putting them down again.

“No, girl. We’re heading in.”

And this is why that one run is my favorite: Just then, Roxie gave me a look. A disappointed, disgruntled glare. Those pale blue eyes spoke volumes. Behind them lived a vivid soul, passionate and secure. And to my dog, in ways that still make me bleed, I was such a fucking, miserable disappointment.

* * * *

I really don’t know what to do about Shelby.

For now, we do nothing. When our daughter is elsewhere, my wife and I will have to talk about the possibilities. The practicalities. And the kinds of choices we must work to avoid. The latest guesses claim that if the asteroid strikes, the hammer blow comes either to the western Atlantic or the East Coast. The President promises that the government will do everything possible to help its citizens—a truthful statement, if ever there was, and full of ominous warnings. We probably won’t run far from home, I’m thinking. Two years from now, California and New Zealand will be jammed with refugees. But most people would never think of coming to Nebraska. If it’s a wet March, with ample snow cover and rain, the firestorm won’t reach us. At least that’s what these very preliminary computer models are saying. There won’t be any crops that year, what with

the sun choked out by airborne dust and acids, but by then we'll have collected tons of canned goods and bottled water. Leslie's family farm seems like a suitable refuge, although I can't take comfort imagining myself as only a son-in-law, surrounded by strong-willed souls who feud in the best of times.

Chances are, Shelby misses us.

Vegas odds say that nothing changes on this little world. Not for now, at least.

It is a warm perfect evening in early May, and my dog needs her post-dinner walk. A baby gate blocks the basement door; if Roxie wanders downstairs, she won't have the strength to climb back up by herself. She waits patiently for me to move the gate and clip her six-foot leash to her purple collar with the tags. The metal pinch-collar sits on a hook, unnecessary now. The prednisone makes her hungry and patient, sweet and sleepy. I had a rather tearful discussion with the vet about dosages and the prognosis. For today, she gets half a pill in the morning, then half a pill at night. But if she acts uncomfortable, I'll bump it up. Whatever is needed, and don't worry about any long-term health effects. She has become an absolutely wonderful dog. Her mind remains sharp and clear. One morning, she acts a little confused about where we are going, but that's the lone exception to an exceptionally lucid life. When I give commands, she obeys. But there is very little need to tell her what to do. Every walk has something worth smelling. The weather has been perfect, and neither

of us is in a hurry anymore. Halfway to the park, we come upon an elderly couple climbing out of an enormous sedan. They're in their eighties, maybe their nineties, and the frail little woman says to my dog, "You are so beautiful, honey."

I thank her for both of us and go on.

The park lies to our right, beginning with a triangle of public ground where people bring their dogs throughout the day. Roxie does her business in one of the traditional places. I congratulate her on a finelooking poop. Then we continue walking, heading due north, and at some point it occurs to me that it would be fun to change things up. We could walk down into the pine trees standing beside the golf course. But since I'm not sure that she's strong enough, I say nothing. Not a hint about what I want to do. Yet when we reach our usual turnaround point, Roxie keeps on walking, not looking back at me as we pass the old maintenance building and start down a brief steep slope.

Coincidence, or did she read my mind?

Whatever the reason, we move slowly into the pines, down where the long shadows make the grass cool and inviting. I am crying again. I'm thinking about everything, but mostly I am telling myself what a blessing this is, being conjured out of nothingness, and even when the nothingness reclaims us, there remains that unvanquished honor of having once, in some great way or another, been alive....

Rwanda

Beneath a mangled pine tree, you find the empty shell of a cicada, crystalline and robotic and very lovely. And beside that shell lies something even better--a bug, fat and pale and large enough to halfway fill the palm of your tiny hand. Is the bug alive? Apparently so. It doesn't breathe as you breathe, nor can those dark buggy eyes blink or wink or convey any sense of emotion. But the creature is soft and wet, and its limbs seem to move slowly in response to your little prods. A pair of wings extends from the long back, but they are shriveled and plainly useless, and your first inclination is to guess that the creature you are holding has been poisoned or burned in some horrific, wondrous fashion.

Your father sits on the patio drinking beer. Many elements go into your calculations. What time of day is it? How many cans are stacked near his bare feet? By his posture, can you read his mood, and if so, does it look as if he can endure one of your questions, and after that, maybe twenty more?

The day is still early, not even noon yet, and only three spent cans are set on the concrete slab. After you stare at him for a few moments, he notices, and something that might be a smile surfaces, followed by a clear voice asking, "What is it?"

You go to him, showing him your treasure.

He seems puzzled, but only for a moment. Then he asks, "Did you find its exoskeleton?"

That is an enormous word, but you hear a word inside it that you know. Nodding, you tell him about the cicada shell. Does he want to see that too?

"No need."

You offer the creature to him.

He acts tempted. But then some controlling urge causes him to shake his head, and he surprises you. He doesn't say, "Take it back where you found it." He doesn't say, "You should never have disturbed it." Instead, he smiles again, more warmly this time, and climbing up from the iron chair, he says, "Let's both take this fellow back. Where were you? Under the tree over there?"

* * * *

The world is vast and jammed full of mysteries and things that aren't mysterious to anyone but you. If there is a smarter man than your father, you have not met him. He has books enough to cover walls and other books that come to him on the computer screen, during those hours when there is power. If he doesn't read much, it is because long ago he consumed and digested the contents of his library. And if he doesn't remember everything that he has read, at least he can go to the proper shelf and open one or two or ten books, finding an answer that will satisfy him, if not quite you.

"Nice," he says, sitting under the tree with you. Then he pops open another beer. You smell it and you

can smell him. This is Friday, and there will be hot water tomorrow, at least for a few hours. Then both of you will wash up, the smell of soap defeating the other stinks for a while.

The ground is bare beneath the pine tree, except for the dead needles and some little marks made by your various sticks. In the soft tan earth, you recently drew the outline of a very simple house. Your father examines your drawing for a long moment. He sips his warm beer. He watches the big bug resting on the ground beside the tree trunk, and he stares off at nothing for a long while, finishing the can and nodding at nothing. Then without quite looking at you, he asks, "How old are you?"

He knows your age. Of course he does. But adults like to ask little questions where the answer is common knowledge. It is not so much a test as it is a means of pointing something out to children.

You recite your age.

And he nods in response, saying what he meant to say at the beginning. "You are old enough."

Old enough for what? You have no clue what he means.

"Look at that house," he tells you.

He doesn't mean the house you drew. He points across the long yard. Only recently you came to realize that this particular tree doesn't stand on your property. Father cuts both of the yards when the grass grows shaggy. But somewhere in the green

middle is a line that divides what is yours from what belongs to that other house.

The house is empty. Along your street are several more just as empty, and on the street behind yours are more houses like this one. Everywhere you go in the city, vacant homes sit in shaggy lawns, weeds growing up from the cracks in their sidewalks and driveways.

“Are you looking at it?”

It is very much like your house, except bigger. The shades are down and a thick layer of grime shows on the glass. It has been your impression that no one wants you to look in those windows. But you have done it often enough to have a clear image about what is inside. Dusty furniture and darkness are inside, at least on the ground floor. And silence. And, at least for you, mysteries.

“Think of this exoskeleton,” your father tells you.

Surprised, you blink and stare at the delicate empty and exceptionally fragile shell of the cicada.

“The skeleton is something like that house. It used to be a home, but now it has been left behind.”

The idea sounds familiar, and then it doesn't. You aren't certain what you are hearing in these words, but more than puzzled, you are worried--your heart quickening and a tightness building in the back of your throat.

“And this pupa,” your father says. “Look at it now.”

The bug's wings seem to have grown larger in the last minutes. But the body is still soft and colorless, and, by all measures, exceptionally helpless.

“Biology,” he says.

That single word sounds ominous and very sad.

“Genetics,” he says.

Again, you want to shiver, though you can't decide why.

“What if people were the same as this insect?” he asks. Then before you can make a sound, much less offer a weak answer, he adds, “What if they lived as one thing for a very long time, and then they passed through a sudden transformation, coming out the other side to discover that they weren't people anymore?”

* * * *

All you can do is nod, your stomach pulling itself into a stubborn knot.

“What we believe happened ... our best guess derived from hard evidence and quite a lot of informed conjecture ... is that somebody wanted to colonize the Earth.” Your father shakes his head and grins, as if astonished by his own words. “Aliens, I mean. Extraterrestrials. Creatures that must have been similar to humans, both in body and in their ecological niche. They must have sent out robotic probes, probably in the remote past, and sometime after they discovered our world, the aliens mounted a second expedition that brought their colonists here.”

You think of the proud rockets in his books and the flashy, muscular starships in the old comics that you read.

But he doesn't let you think about starships for long. "Space is huge," he warns. "The distances are too great to imagine, and even a tiny payload is very difficult to move from sun to sun. And every voyage, even with the best engines, will take centuries, if not many, many thousands of years."

He asks, "How can you colonize a distant world for a cheap, reasonable price?"

Then he shakes his head, answering his own question. "There is no reasonable price, of course. That's the point I'm making here."

You try hard, but you cannot follow his logic.

"No reasonable price," he repeats, "yet there is a relatively cheap method to conquer a new world. Imagine that you can shrink each of your brave colonists down to where they are smaller than ants. Shriveled them down to the size of dust mites, say. All the information necessary to replicate each of them is contained inside one of these tiny storage devices, and for the sake of argument, let's say there are millions of them onboard the colony ship. How big would that starship have to be, do you think?"

No guess is correct.

Your father grins, warning you, "You know, your bed has millions of dust mites. They live on it and inside it, on the sheets and blankets and pillow cases."

He says, "Hundreds of millions of colonists could ride inside a vessel no bigger than this."

The empty beer can, he means.

"When you read history, you'll see. You'll see. The successful colonists are those who travel light and make what they need when they arrive." He crushes his can and sets it beside the half-born cicada. "The invaders came with the tools necessary to build new homes for themselves. And by homes, I mean bodies. Familiar, workable bodies holding brains large enough to contain all of their memories and thoughts and desires. That's what their robot probes had found in the first expedition, we think. I think. Not just a living world, but they found a world offering a common species that could be claimed for their own important selves.

"Human beings, I mean.

"Of course."

* * * *

Your father pauses for a long, long while.

Then softly, sadly, he describes how the tiny starship would strike the Earth and rip apart, scattering its dusty contents across the high dry stratosphere. The colonists could drift undetected, perhaps for many years, riding the cold winds until they were everywhere. Then they would dive into the lower atmosphere, latching rides on raindrops and downdrafts, descending onto the innocent humans who were going about their own little lives.

A mite-sized colonist would enter its host through the lungs or stomach, and in short order, ride the bloodstream up to the brain.

The only symptoms were a mild fever and odd aches, and sometimes, a harmless red rash. And then after a few days, the sick human would drift into a deep sleep that would last until his mind had been rewritten and reborn.

But the new colony had one considerable weakness. When the first expedition examined the Earth, there were barely one hundred million humans. The aliens assumed that the population would grow, but no more than five-fold, which was why only half a billion colonists made the long journey.

“The invaders had no choice but to be less than 10 percent of the population,” your father explains. “Instead of dominating their new world, they were a minority, and not a well-received minority, as it happened....”

The cicada's wings are even larger now.

He says, “The natural first conclusion was that some horrible new disease was running wild. The disease would leave its victims confused and possibly brain damaged. Which explained why those poor people spoke nonsense after they woke. And why they were clumsy at first, walking with the same slow, careful shuffle. And that also gave a reason why they didn't seem to recognize friends and family. They had suffered a profound neurological shock. As a

precaution, the first couple million victims were quarantined inside hospitals and public buildings, and doctors worked for days to find the virus or bacteria responsible. But there was nothing to find, since of course this was no simple disease. And then teams of specialists, in Atlanta and in Switzerland, noticed that their patients were speaking the same precise gibberish, and the patients seemed to understand what was being said.”

He shakes his head for a moment. “More people were falling ill every day,” he explains. “Two million victims quickly became twenty million, and there weren't enough hospital beds for everyone. People tried to cope with shuffling, muttering spouses. Or babbling children. And then after a few days of rest and practice, the supposedly sick people would suddenly leave their homes, meeting at predetermined places where they could discuss their circumstances and make plans.

“For a while, nothing made sense.

“For two weeks, the public was terrified but ignorant. The rate of infection continued to rise, and rise. No one was sure how many people would eventually catch the soul-robbing disease. And then suddenly, on the fifteenth day, the truth was learned.”

Your father takes a deep breath and holds it, and then he exhales, admitting, “Everybody knew somebody who had died. Everybody had a neighbor or loved one who had been replaced by some kind of creature that was nothing like the dead soul.

Linguists had deciphered the new language, and with the help of military interrogators, they held their first and only interviews with the aliens.

“ 'We just wanted a place to live,' the invaders said. 'Please, give us a chance to make up for this,' they begged. 'We can live with you and be good neighbors. We can offer you technological wonders, for free, and within a few years, your world will be wealthy beyond your most optimistic dreams.'

“That's what they claimed, speaking to the specialists with their new mouths. Residing inside the bodies they had stolen from their rightful owners.

“Which leads to the obvious question: how can you trust a creature that has so willingly and easily killed the mind of a helpless host?”

Again, your father needs a deep breath.

“The decision was inevitable,” he says. “And by necessity, the work had to be completed quickly, with whatever tools were on hand.”

You say nothing, finding yourself staring off at the empty house.

“The call for action came from everywhere,” your father tells you with a hard sorry voice. “It came from the government, and it came from important individuals in the media. And every neighborhood had some loud demanding voice that explained what was necessary now. A cleansing. A purge. And since the disease rate was still accelerating, and since anybody with a mild fever or a slight red rash could be infected, thus dangerous ... well, it was impossible

to be generous or patient, and very quickly, kindness was forgotten entirely.”

He lowers his face.

“Suppose,” he says. “Suppose somebody in your family was sick, but you couldn't accept her fate. Because people got the flu all the time, and you had to let the disease run its course, if you were going to be sure one way or the other. But then, what if your neighbors heard that she was sick and came to deliver the cure? You told the others to leave or you would fight with them. Because she was your wife and your only true love. You weren't ready to give up hope yet. You promised that you would watch over her for now, and you told them that you had a gun, even when you didn't. But then they broke down the front door and pushed their way upstairs to the bedroom. Your neighbors, they were. Friends for years, in some cases. And you were reduced to screaming insults and promising revenge for what they were doing with their shotguns and garden shovels...!”

* * * *

You aren't looking at the empty house now.

Instead you stare at your own home, and in particular, the upstairs window that always has its shade pulled closed. A room that you have never been inside, not even once.

“Ten percent,” says your father.

Then he almost seems to laugh with a bitter, acidic tone. “The world can surrender 10 percent of its population and not miss a beat. Or nearly so. But

nothing that swift or large can ever be that simple and clean. I mean, what happens when rumors start? When one authority figure stands before a news camera, mentioning in passing, 'We're worried about aliens hiding, drifting inside unsuspecting hosts.' Not that there was evidence of that happening. There has never been. The mite-sized bodies had drifted to the ground together, and those that hadn't found hosts were soon destroyed by free oxygen and simple erosion. But if you have already invested the last week of your life killing these invaders, then it is natural to be cautious. It is perfectly understandable if you want to take care of those who might be a problem at some later date."

You stare at the maturing cicada.

"And of course, the aliens fought back. Not in an organized fashion or with much effect ... but they did manage to kill three or four humans for every ten of them who perished ... which means millions more were dead, and the people who lived felt even angrier and more desperate...."

The cicada kicks its jointed legs, and the swelling wings begin to tremble, as if eager to fly away.

"And then," your father says. His mouth is open but he pauses for a moment before asking again, "What if you were a person for a very long time, and then suddenly you passed through some enormous event, and on the other side you discovered that you weren't really human anymore?"

What does he mean by that?

“In history,” he says, “this metamorphosis happens with numbing regularity. The Holocaust. Cambodia. And Rwanda, to name three.”

Three what?

“There are many good reasons to murder,” he assures you.

Then he looks toward the empty house, explaining, “She had a light fever and a bit of a sunburn, and that's all she had. But they killed her anyway. Hacked her body to pieces and left the pieces in our bed. And then a couple weeks later, when the death rate was approaching 50 percent, some despairing soul pried open the back door of that house over there and knifed two people to death.” Then he looks at you, and with the mildest voice, he says, “Don't believe what you hear. Revenge really can help heal the deepest hurts.”

You say nothing.

With a finger and thumb, your father picks up the almost-born cicada, and he stands, placing it on the highest branch that he can reach.

Then he looks down at you. “And even the angriest inhuman soul can be kind,” he says. “Even splattered with blood, he can do something that is right and good. Do you know what I mean? Two people are dead in their own bed, and between them lies a baby ... and for all the evils walking free in the world, one good impulse can save that child's very little life....”

The Shape Of Everything

THEY COULDN'T FIND HIM. The party had just become a party, tame scientists finally imbibing enough to act a little careless and speak their minds, every mind happy, even ecstatic. That's when someone noticed that the old man was missing. To bed already? Just when the celebration had begun? But someone else mentioned that he never slept much, and it still was early. And a little knot of technicians went to his cabin and discovered that he wasn't there, precipitating a good deal of worry about his well-being. The next oldest person in the observatory was barely seventy -- young enough to be his granddaughter -- and almost everyone feared for his health. His strength. Even his mind. Where could he be? they asked themselves. On a night like this. . . of all nights. . . ?

Search parties began fanning through the facility, and the security net was alerted. Cameras watched for a frail form; terminals waited for his access code. But wherever the man was, he wasn't visible or working. That much was certain after an hour of building panic.

It was one of his assistants who finally found him. She was a postdoc and maybe his favorite, although he was a difficult man to read in the best of times. What she did was recall something he'd mentioned in passing -something about the cleansing effects of raw

light -- and she remembered a certain tiny chamber next to the hull, built long ago and never used by the current staff. It had a window to the outside, plus old-style optics, an old-time astronomer able to peer into a simple lensing device, examining the glorious raw light coming straight from the giant mirrors themselves.

She found him drifting, one hand holding him steady, the long frail body looking worn out in the bad light. It looked even worse in good light, she knew. Bones like dried sticks and his flesh hanging loose, spotted with benign moles too numerous to count. The cleansing effects of light? She'd always wondered where a committed night-owl had found time and the opportunity to abuse his skin. More than a century old, and the postdoc felt her customary fear of ending up like him. Lost looks; diminished energies. And she wasn't an authentic genius like him. No residual capacities to lean against, the great long decline taking its toll --

“Yes?” said the astronomer. “What is it?”

She cleared her throat, once and again, then asked, “Are you all right, sir? We were wondering.”

“I bet you were,” he replied. Only then did he take his eye off the eyepiece, the haggard face grinning at her. “Well, I'm fine. Just got tired of the noise, that's all.”

She didn't know how to respond. Leave now? Perhaps she should leave, if he wanted quiet.

But when she turned, he said, “No,” with force.

“Sir?”

“Here. Come see this.”

As always, she did as she was told. She kicked across the room and used a single eye, knowing the trick but not having done this nonsense in years. Why did anyone bother with lenses? Even when this observatory was built, digitized images were the norm. The best. And besides, what she saw here was just the focused light from a single mirror -- a representative sampling of the whole -- meaning it was almost useless to their ongoing work. Too simple by a factor of ten million. Yet she wasn't the old man's maybe-favorite for nothing, feigning interest, squinting into the little hole until he seemed satisfied.

“It's the same as last time,” he said, “and the time before. It's always the same, isn't it?”

She looked at him, nodding and saying, “Why shouldn't it be?”

“But doesn't it amaze you?” He asked the question, then he spoke before she could answer. “But not like it amazes me. Do you know why? Because you grew up expecting to see the beginning of time. When you were a little girl, this place was catching first light with its first mirrors, and by then the goal was obvious. Isn't that right?”

A little nod, and she thought of what was out there. It did amaze her, yes, and what right did he have to minimize her feelings? But it wasn't exactly the beginning of time either. She remembered the digitized images, scrubbed clean by computers,

contrasts added and the noise deleted. She could see little blobs of spiraling light-- the earliest galaxies -- and the best images resolved individual stars. No, it wasn't fair of him to claim a greater amazement. Not when she thought of the work she'd done, the long hours and the years invested in helping him and everyone else, a great mystery now solved, more than likely--

-- and the old man was laughing almost gently.

Was it a trick? A joke? Had he been teasing her? It wouldn't be the first time, of course.

"No, I'm not laughing at you, dear." He smiled, implanted teeth too white to be real. "I'm the amusing one. I look at you and remember someone else. Please, please don't take this wrong but you've always reminded me of her."

He's been drinking, she realized. At least a little bit.

"A young woman, but she seemed infinitely old at the time. Seventeen years old, give or take, and nearly as beautiful as you. And the first woman I ever loved."

She said nothing.

"Can I tell you about her? Let me, then you'll be free to go back to the party. I promise. It's just a little story, a slice of life tale. I know you don't want to hear it --"

"Not true," she heard herself blurt.

"-- but indulge me. For a few moments, please."

Of course. She held the eyepiece in one hand, feeling the residual heat left by his hand and knowing

she had no choice. This was a duty, perhaps even an honor. Nodding she looked out the thick window, watching half a dozen mammoth mirrorshanging motionless against the starry background, collecting photons from near the beginning of time . . . helping to support the theory that he, in part, had formulated

....

“I was eight years old at the time.”

The woman's imagination strained, picturing him as a boy.

“Forever ago,” he said, “or yesterday. Depending on how you count these things.”

His parents sent him to a day-camp in the country, and he still could remember waiting for the yellow bus that picked him up at the corner. It was a noisy, stinking bus full of loud kids, and he always sat alone near the front, as close to the driver as possible. The driver was authority, and he believed in authority when he was eight. He thought it was important not to make enemies or get into trouble. A lot of the kids were older and larger, a few of them almost thirteen, and they seemed dangerous. It was the same as school -- the same as all life, he imagined-- survival depending on being quiet and small, keeping in the shade of authority whenever possible.

His parents meant well. To them, the camp was a peaceful retreat with docile horses, a spring-fed swimming pool and a staff of smiling well-scrubbed adults. At least the brochures promised as much. The truth was that the horses were fatty and ill-tempered,

and the pool's water had a suspicious odor. The staff were teenagers, one particular fellow holding sway over the others. His name was Steve or something equally ordinary--a fellow almost big lean and strong in a haphazard youthful way. He wore Western clothes, complete with a cowboy hat, and he smoked and chewed tobacco every waking moment. His greatest pleasure in life was bossing around children. It was Steve who introduced the future astronomer to horseback riding and archery, plus a variety of games learned from a stint with that quasi-military organization, the Boy Scouts of America.

One afternoon, on a whim, Steve divided the kids into pairs and said, "This is a tracking game. Shut up and listen." The miles were transparently simple. One person walked from a starting point, heading for the nearby trees, and every time he or she changed direction, two sticks had to be laid down, making an arrowhead to show the new direction. It was a race in time, and it shouldn't take long. Steve promised to sit on the porch of the main lodge, drinking beer and keeping track of the minutes. "And when you're done," he promised, "we'll go down to the pool and you can take your daily pees in the deep end. All right? All right!"

The astronomer's partner was maybe a year older, a boy both confident and bold, and he went first, vanishing into the green woods while Steve counted down five minutes. "Go!" He remembered running hard, reaching the woods and cool shadows, then

pausing to let his eyes adjust, eventually spotting his partner in a little clearing uphill from him. The boy was kneeling in sunlight, setting a pair of sticks into position. Catching him meant walking a straight line. "That's not fair!" the boy protested. "You've got to follow the arrows!" And as if to prove his hard work and correctness, he took the astronomer back to each arrow, pointing to them with a barely restrained fury.

The other teams took longer. Once done, everyone reassembled, and Steve, using a fancy Boy Scout knife to open a new beer, said, "Five minutes head start. Set. Go!"

"And play fair," warned the astronomer's partner. "Or else!"

Of course he'd play fair. He believed in rules and authority. Yet he had an idea on his run to the woods -- a legal possibility-- kneeling in the shade and pointing his first arrow in a random direction. Then he started to jog, heading uphill without varying his direction. The rules were being met, after all. The other boys and rare girls were behind him when the five minutes were up. He didn't pause, barely even slowed, and eventually it felt as if he'd gone miles. He was utterly alone, and only then did he kneel and make a second arrow pointing ninety degrees to his first course. It was a big arrow, and the rules were more than satisfied.

Time passed. The angle of the sun changed. After a while he didn't feel sure about any directions, or even his approximate position. Some places looked

familiar --perhaps they'd passed here on horseback -- but other places resembled virgin forest. What if he couldn't find camp before the bus left? What if he had to spend tonight in the wilderness? Angry with his own cleverness, he turned and pushed straight up a likely hillside, right through the heart of thorny brush and into the open green ground above the lodge, no sight ever so lovely in his long little life.

Walking downhill, he imagined the celebration accompanying his return. But instead of relief, he found Steve sitting on a folding chair beside the mossy pool, a swimming suit instead of jeans but the hat and beer in place. Steve's response was to belch, saying "Look what drug itself in, would you? We were thinking of getting up a search party. But I guess you mined that fun too. Huh?"

The astronomer's partner was even less understanding "What happened to you?" he squealed. "You cheated! I knew you'd cheat!"

The lone sympathetic voice came from the life guard's chair. Her name was Wendy. She had a pretty face tanned brown, a nose whitened with cream and big sunglasses hiding her eyes. Wendy was easily the nicest person on the staff, and when he walked past her, she made a point of saying "I was worried. I thought you might be hurt."

"The kid's fine," Steve shouted. "Don't make a big deal out of it, Wendy, Jesus Christ!"

"And," she said, "I don't think you cheated. I don't."

She looked at Steve while she spoke, her face strong and unperturbed, and he felt there was something between them. He tasted it in the air. There was an understanding, real and precious. She glanced back down at him, the white nose shining. "You are all right, aren't you?"

"I'm fine."

"Good," she said emphatically. "I'm very glad."

MEMORY EXPANDS what's important and what is strange, and that's why his memories of day-camp seemed to cover months, not just a single week. Every day was rich with adventures and horrors, his young body sore every night and his parents curious in a careful way. Was he enjoying himself? They had to hear that their money was well spent. But can a young boy know if he's having a wonderful time? He had never been to camp; he had no basis for comparisons. Maybe it was his fault that he wasn't having great fun. "Oh, I like it," he told them, wanting to please. His parents smiled. Was he making any new friends? He thought of Wendy. Nobody else. But instead he mentioned his partner in the tracking game, which again pleased his audience, Mom and Dad nodding and grinning congratulating themselves for sending him to that piece of Hell.

It was Thursday when Wendy reminded everyone, "Bring your sleeping bags tomorrow, and a change of clothes too." It was a day-camp, but the last day -- Friday -- reached into Saturday morning. They'd eat

dinner here and camp outdoors, then ride home in time for the late morning cartoons.

"We'll sleep up on the hill," Steve told them. "Coyote bait in baggies. It's going to be fun!"

"Quiet," growled Wendy. "Don't say that stuff!"

Steve grinned, stained teeth capable of a menacing air. "They know I'm kidding, girl. They're smart kids. Hell, they love me. Everyone loves me, Wendy. 'Cept you. Ever think why?"

She just shook her head, turning away.

Next morning, at first light, the astronomer woke and found himself hoping to be sick. He looked for a nameless rash, for any excuse not to go. But there were no excuses, him dressing and collecting his belongings, his mother making a snap inspection and then passing him the miraculous sum of five dollars. "For emergencies," she confided. The words seemed full of grim possibilities. No, he wouldn't spend it. He made a pact with himself. There wouldn't be any emergencies, and he'd come home alive and well.

Friday followed the usual routines. There was a horseback ride, his stallion fat and breathing wetly. Steve rode his thundering beast through the trees, trying to spook the others. Like always. Then came the morning archery contest, and the astronomer almost broke one hard rule. He was winning, even beating one of the older boys, and he saved himself unknown horrors by sending his last arrow into the gully behind the range. Steve made him climb after it, but that was okay. He found a fine old bottle hear the

arrow, which made it worthwhile. Then came lunch, cold sandwiches and cheap strawberry pop. Then a round of capture-the-flag, followed by a long swim; and somewhere Steve and most of the rest of the staff vanished. No one mentioned where to or why. Wendy sat above the pool, and she seemed uneasy. Or was he imagining things?

By evening, clouds had rolled in. Dinner was hotdogs, boiled and bland. By then Steve and the others had reappeared, laughing and shouting, moving the furniture to one side of the lodge while drinking beer from a big metal keg. There never was any chance to sleep outdoors. By dusk, it was raining, not hard but enough, and Steve told the kids to spread their bags in a corner and keep out of trouble. He already was drunk, though it would be years before the astronomer would appreciate what kind of fellow Steve was. Possessing an alcoholic's constitution, his nervous system could function despite being thoroughly pickled. Kids and nondrinkers stayed clear of him. Particularly Wendy. Meanwhile others arrived from somewhere. They were teenagers, big and loud, and maybe there weren't many of them. Maybe they weren't even badly behaved. But to an eight-year-old from a tame, sober household, it seemed as if there were thousands of them packed into the lodge. A hi-fi played stacks of records. People danced while others drank beer and smoked, sometimes pointing to the kids huddled in their corner, making jokes and breaking into raucous

laughter.

Steve would watch Wendy, sometimes cocking his cowboy hat and making his approach. But she'd spot him and shy away somehow. She'd vanish into the bathroom or around to the other side of the room, Steve becoming puzzled, walking circles and finally spotting his love all over again.

It was a great drama -- a drama that must have been played out through the summer -- and it had rhythms and its rules. Wendy usually placed herself near the kids, perhaps feeling protective of them. And Steve's approaches became bolder, failure having a cumulative effect on his frustration. It became late, probably not even midnight but that was very late back then; and the party was running without pause, without even needing to breathe. "Which," confessed the astronomer, "might be where I learned to dislike parties." Then he smiled at the postdoc, pausing, nodding to himself and the eyes losing their focus.

The postdoc wondered if the story was finished. Was that all there was to it?

Seemingly changing the subject, he told her, "We've done astonishing work here. You know, you deserve to feel proud."

"I do," she promised.

He drifted closer, and for an instant she feared he would make a clumsy romantic pass. But no, all he wanted was to peer through the eyepiece again. He squinted, watching galaxies forming in the first billion years after Creation. It was then that the

universe had cooled enough and diluted itself enough to allow suns to form. But why like this? Why make galaxies of that particular size and composition? It had been a mystery for decades. Why did these oldest galaxies have a sameness of size and color? And what mechanism caused them to be arranged in enormous groups, forming distinct wall-like structures stretching for hundreds of millions of light-years?

Now they knew, or at least they thought they did.

The best clues had remained hidden. It had taken every mirror and every interlinked computer to bring them out. Black holes and cosmic strings were just part of the explanation. More important were some dim dense plasma clouds -- relics of a hotter, older era -- and how each cloud was aligned beside one new spiral galaxy. Cosmic strings ran through both of them, making eddies in the primordial gases which in turn made suns. Just five years ago, researchers had determined that those earliest suns were divided into distinct sizes and colors. They came in twenty-three flavors, in essence. They ranged from orange pinpricks to blue-white giants, and what was stranger was their orderly spacing. Very odd, they seemed. Unlikely. Bizarre.

It was the old man's suggestions that had made the difference. He hadn't done the hard work -- he wouldn't have known how, the youngsters much more skilled with computer simulations and high-energy physics -- but he was the crazy one who suggested they were looking at the work of ancient,

possibly extinct intelligences. What if the plasma clouds were organized? What if they were truly conscious? They manipulated matter and the superstrings to create the first galaxies, arranging them in space in order to fulfill a great purpose. "Just suppose," he had told everyone. "That's all I want. Just suppose."

Even the postdoc, loyal by any measure, had to wonder if the old man was losing his mind and common sense. "Why would they build galaxies?" she had asked him. "What possible role could they serve?"

But he'd had an answer waiting. "Distinct kinds of stars might imply some kind of alphabet. A code. Maybe a coherent language. The giant black holes at the center can act as anchors or reference points. Look at the galaxy from above, and you can read everything at a glance."

"Can plasmas be alive?" she had inquired.

"Perhaps. In a smaller, hotter universe, perhaps they'd evolved into intelligence. Maybe galaxies were used as elaborate transmitting devices."

"Transmitting what? And to whom?"

"I don't know, but I can guess." A long pause. "What audience? I don't think the plasmas were chatting with each other. Look at the background temperatures then. Space must have been very, very cold already. From their perspective, I mean. Building galaxies was something done just before they dissolved. Before they died. It was the end of

their time, and I think their intended audience hadn't even been born yet.”

It was a crazy notion, and a great one, and a few people found the craziness appealing. They did some tests, made mathematical models, and found that indeed, each galaxy had its own inherent code. The best images were just good enough to read a kind of dictionary encircling the central black holes. It was stunning news, and the first translations had answered most of the central questions. Those plasma clouds, using cosmic strings as their pens, were visible writing their autobiographies. In effect, they were telling of their births and development, sentience evolving from the heat and hard radiations. Evolving and growing aware enough to recognize a doomed future. Billions of stars constituted life stories, their authors like old men and women huddling about a waning fire, jotting down a few last notes before their great sleep.

Die they did. Nearer, younger space showed no plasmas, but the galaxies persisted for a little while. Patient observers could resurrect old meanings, if they wished. But eventually the original stars aged and exploded, helping to form wild suns while spewing out carbon and oxygen and iron. And meanwhile, the central black holes swallowed anything close, the first quasars igniting, and human beings spotting those scalding lights back when this old man was a mere eight-year-old waif, attending summer camp, wholly unaware that he was the

audience whom the great clouds had anticipated.

He was the new ruler of the universe

The postdoc thought of leaving, glancing at the door, wondering if she should tell the others that he was found. Found and a little drunk and babbling.

“Actually,” he said, “you don't remind me of Wendy. I barely remember the girl, quite frankly.”

With honesty and a certain impatience, she asked, “I don't understand. Why are you telling me this story now?”

“Because it's pleasant. Because it's important.” He sighed and said, “Because I want to tell it.”

She nodded and waited.

“Steve eventually caught Wendy, and by then he was titanically drunk. And I'd guess, dangerous too. In my mind he seemed awfully dangerous.”

She knew those kinds of men. Too many of them, in fact.

“As it happened, she was near me when she was caught, and he shouted, 'Aren't you going to dance with me?' Poor Wendy. She had a look on her face, brave and scared at the same time. Then she made herself smile, telling him, 'I promised my friend this dance.' With that she snatched me off my sleeping bag and took me into the middle of the room, a new song beginning. I can't remember the song but I remember dancing and how I looked at the hi-fi as we passed. Each time I looked, measuring how much time remained. There is a certain similarity between these galaxies and our old-fashioned records, and

maybe that's the point of my story.” A long pause, then he said, “If anyone asks, tell them that I had my inspiration while remembering an out-of-date technology. The hi-fi.”

She gave a nod, thinking he was done.

But he said, “Later we went outside together. Wendy led me outdoors.” A sigh and a smile. “The lodge's roof overhung a patch of dry ground, and we sat together and talked. I don't remember about what. Though I think she told me, 'We're okay if you stay with me. Steve's gutless, and good people like you scare him.’”

The postdoc said, “I see . . .”

“No, I haven't thought about Wendy in a long time,” he admitted. “It's the atmosphere tonight. It's the meanings of stars.” He smiled at her with his too-white teeth. “I'm glad you're the one who found me. And just you.”

She felt honored and uncomfortable.

“Everyone's so happy tonight, and why?” He told her, “It's because a great race from the dawn of time was dying. Dying and feeling the urge to leave some memory of themselves. And we're the clever ones who are going to be lionized for seeing what's obvious.”

She gave a little nod.

“For all we know, the Milky Way itself began as someone's autobiography. We're built on the scrambled, incoherent epic of something vast. And when our time passes, when every sun bums out, perhaps we'll leave some similar kind of record for

those who follow us.”

The postdoc cleared her throat, then asked, “What happened to Wendy?”

A smile grew on the weary face. “Later, much later, a friend of hers came outside and told her that Steve was asleep. Unconscious. She was safe again, and she turned to me, saying, 'Thank you for your help.' Then she gave me a little kiss on the forehead -- my first kiss outside my ugly old family -- and she walked with me back inside.

“I remember my heart.

“I remember feeling its beat, and how I held Wendy's hand with both of mine, wishing I didn't have to let go. Wishing time would stop itself and save this moment. I kept wishing I was special enough to make time stop. And that's when I learned that I wasn't so special, and everything is eventually lost, making room for everything else. And that's not too sad. If you think about it. There's always room being made for the future, and that's altogether not a bad thing.”

Show Me Yours

She wears a black felt robe long enough to cover her bare knees and pale pink socks pulled over her ankles; her calves are white and freshly shaved and her shins are even whiter and nicked in two places by razor blades. A red belt is cinched tight, making her waist appear narrow and her hips broad. She isn't a tall woman. By most measures, she is slender, though the body has a roundness that marks five stubborn pounds--pounds sure to grow over time. She isn't lovely in the traditional ways, but youth and a good complexion help. Her fine black hair is long enough to kiss her shoulders; her eyes appear dark and exceptionally large. On stocking feet, she stands in the middle of a long hallway, her head tilted forward while her mouth opens and closes and again opens. The door to her left--the door she came out of--is slightly ajar. She pulls it shut now, applying pressure until the old latch catches with a sudden sharp click. Then she stares at the opposite door, drifting closer to it, listening. The loudest sound in the world is her soft, slow breathing. But then some little noise catches her attention, and on tiptoes, she glides down to the end of the hallway, into the only room in the apartment where a light still burns.

Metal moves, and the second door pops open. At that moment, the young woman is sitting on a hard

chair, her back to the kitchen table. She watches a young man step out into the hallway. He wears jeans and nothing else, and judging by his manner, he wants something. He examines the door she just closed, then drifts a few steps to his left, finding nothing but the darkened living room. That most definitely is not what he needs. So he finally turns in her direction and notices her sitting alone in the kitchen, sitting with her legs crossed, illuminated from behind by the weak bulb above the sink.

“The john?” he whispers.

She nods and tilts her head.

The bathroom is beside the kitchen. He starts to fumble for the switch, closing the door all but the last little bit before clicking the light on.

The girl doesn't move, except to scratch the back of an ear and then drop the same finger down the front of her neck, tugging at the warmth of the old black felt. That slight pressure pulls open the robe enough to expose the tops of her breasts. While she waits, a seemingly endless stream of urine echoes inside the toilet bowl. Then comes the hard flush and the light goes off, and the man steps back into the hallway. He already wears a big smile, as if he spent his time in the bathroom rehearsing this moment. “So you're the roommate,” he says.

She says, “Hi.”

He steps into the kitchen, stops. “Did we wake you?”

“No.”

“Good,” he says.

She leans against the hard back of the chair, her chest lifting. “No, you didn't wake me.” Her voice is deep for a woman and pleasantly rough. Then she shows him a half-wink, asking, “What do you think?”

He almost laughs. “Think about what?”

She doesn't answer.

He takes another little step forward.

“About my roommate,” she says. “What do you think?”

The man scratches his bare navel and then his sternum, smiling as he phrases his response. “Sweet.”

“My roommate is?”

Again, he says, “Sweet.”

Which makes her laugh, and she stands up now and runs one hand through her black hair and flips her head twice and says, “You aren't.”

“I'm not what?”

“You know what I mean,” she says.

He is barefoot and shirtless and maybe in his middle twenties--a fit, strong young man with pale hair and abdominal muscles and jeans that could be tighter but not much so. “I'm not what?” he asks again.

“Fooling me,” she says.

“No?”

“Not at all.”

He shakes his head. “I didn't know I was trying to.”

She says nothing.

He gestures over his shoulder. “She's sleeping.”

“Is she?”

He doesn't answer.

“Sleep is good,” she allows.

He watches her face, her body.

Again she uses her index finger, touching herself beneath her pale neck before pulling down, slowly dividing the robe until the inner faces of her breasts show in that gloomy yellow light. She is well-built and naked under the robe and her smile is girlish and warm and her deep rough voice says, “Show me yours, and I'll show you mine.”

The young man takes a deep breath and holds it.

“No?” she asks.

“Maybe,” he says.

“Maybe is the same as no,” she says. “If you think about it.”

“How's that?”

“Because every 'no' is just a maybe. It's attached to something you haven't gotten around to doing yet.”

“Okay,” he says.

She waits.

He puts a hand to his mouth, for an instant.

“Are you going to show me?” she asks.

“Why not?”

“Okay then.”

With both hands, he unbuttons his jeans and unzips them and opens them until he is thoroughly exposed.

She studies nothing but his face.

“Now you,” he mutters.

Very quickly, she pulls open the robe and then closes it again, in a blur, her face not quite smiling while she does it.

The young man blinks for a moment, as if trying to decide what he saw. Then he yanks up his pants and zips them.

“Do you hear her?” she asks.

He doesn't look back. He doesn't even blink now, watching her. With his face changing--smiling but with a grim, determined quality about the mouth and eyes--he says, “No, I don't hear anything. Nothing at all.”

Just the same, he puts a finger to his mouth and turns abruptly, slipping back into the roommate's bedroom.

* * * *

She waits now, counting to five. Then on tiptoes, she moves back down the hallway, balancing speed with stealth. The house is old and a floorboard groans, but not too loudly. The door has been closed but not quite latched. She hears someone moving; a light shows beneath the door. Somebody says a few soft words--the young man asks a question, judging by the tone. But no answer comes. Standing with her head tilted forward, the girl breathes through her nose, big eyes dancing and her mouth pressed tiny as her right hand turns the old glass knob, lifting the workings until she can push at the door without making much noise.

The young man stands beside a narrow bed--a woman's bed with a headboard made of iron and a flowery bedspread pulled against the wall and embroidered pillows stacked haphazardly on the floor. With considerable care, he holds a long bare foot in the crook of one arm. With a fingertip, he brushes at the foot's sole, working to elicit a reflexive flinch. Nothing happens. The woman on the bed is naked, lying on her stomach, her face turned toward the watching girl. Like the door, her eyes are just a little open. But nothing seems to register in her mind. When the man drops the foot, the bare leg collapses. When he slides his hand over her rump and between her legs, she doesn't react. And when he fishes a lighter out of a back pocket and makes a tall flame and holds it close to the dreamy, drugged eyes, she does nothing to show that she sees anything at all.

Satisfied, he straightens and reaches for the lamp.

The girl in the black robe backs away from the door as the light goes out. Then she moves to the opposite end of the brief hallway, into the darkened living room, sitting on an old upholstered chair. She breathes hard now, even when she only sits. Nearly a minute passes. Her dimly lit face is a little wet with perspiration and her mouth is open, gulping at the air. When the man appears, she says nothing. She watches him return to the kitchen, watches him look around for a moment before glancing into the open bathroom. Has she slipped out of the apartment? He must be asking himself that question. Then he

decides to investigate the other bedroom, giving the wooden door a little rap before putting his hand on the knob.

“Here,” she calls out.

He jumps, just slightly. Then he steps into the living room, his face obscured by shadow but something in his posture implying a large, consuming smile. Quietly, he says, “Hey.”

“What are you thinking?” she asks.

He shakes his head, laughing softly. “Guess.”

“What's funny?”

“You.”

She says nothing.

“Your roommate ... she told me you don't like men that much....”

“She said that?”

“Just now,” he lies.

“Some men are nice,” she says. “On the right occasion, I might.”

“Really?”

She crosses her pink socks.

“Hey,” he says. “Want a drink?”

“Maybe.”

“What do you have?”

“Whatever you find,” she says.

He acts satisfied, even smug. With a quick walk, he returns to the kitchen. A new light comes on when he opens the refrigerator, and there is the musical clink of bottles and the woosh of seals being broken. Then comes a pause, and he returns with the two beers

held in one hand. One bottle is foaming slightly, while his free hand pushes into the front pocket of his jeans.

She breathes deeply and says, "Thanks," as she takes the foamy beer.

"No problem."

She sets the beer on the old carpet between her pink socks. "If you want," she says, "turn on a light."

He fumbles with a floor lamp until the switch clicks once, the bulb glowing at its weakest setting. Then he looks at her for a long moment before saying, "Let's do that game again."

"Show me yours?"

"Yeah."

She nods but then says, "I don't know." She picks up her beer and takes a long drink. "Maybe later."

"Maybe is the same thing as no. Is that right?"

"Good job," she replies.

"Got any other lessons for me?"

"If you want to hear them."

He settles on the nearest chair, on its edge, staring at her robe and the pale, razor-nicked legs. "Yeah, sure."

"Well, first of all, there's no such word as 'sure.'" Grinning at the floor between them, she says, "Nothing is ever sure, or certain, or guaranteed."

"Never?"

"Not in my experience," she reports, taking another long sip of the beer. "You can never know the

full consequences of anything you do. Not before you do it. And most of the time, not even afterwards.”

The young man leans back in his chair, smiling at everything.

“Suppose it's fifty years from tonight,” she says.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Imagine you're an old man looking back. What do you see? Fifty years later, and if you had to describe the consequences of your actions ... if you had to explain your life to others ... how would you do it?”

“Know what?” he says. “You're just a little bit weird.”

She doesn't respond.

“Not that weird is a bad thing.” He drinks part of his beer. “I don't know. I guess I'd say, 'In my life, everybody had some fun.’”

“Fun?”“ She takes a last long drink and sets the bottle out of the way. “Is that what you call it?”

He shrugs. Laughs.

“Fifty years,” she repeats. “It's going to be a different world. Full of changes, rich with possibilities. I think you'd agree to that, right?”

“I suppose.”

“And you'll have led this long life where you said, 'Yeah, sure,' to every whim and desire that came into your head. Which is how a sociopath exists. But I bet that doesn't bother you, does it? Hearing yourself referred to as a sociopath. And you've probably never noticed the worst consequences of your actions. The

misery, the waste. The plain ugliness that you leave in your wake.”

The young man closes his mouth and stares. After a moment, he asks, “Aren't you getting sleepy?”

“Should I be?”

He glances at her half-finished beer.

“Half a century,” she says. “If you think about it, you can appreciate that there's going to be a wealth of new pills available. More powerful than any barbiturate, and infinitely more imaginative in their effects.”

He squirms in his chair.

“Believe me, there are some amazing pharmaceutical products in that world. Pills that will make a person believe anything. Feel anything. Do anything, practically.” She sits back, smiling with keen pleasure. “If a person were sufficiently clever, she could feed an old man a series of potent medications, and he would suddenly believe that he was young again, sitting inside an apartment that he hasn't visited for years. A young stallion enjoying an evening with two trusting, unfortunate women.”

A tight, fearful voice asks, “Who are you?”

“The roommate,” she replies. “I had been drinking that night, and when you came out of her room, we played our little game of 'Show Me.' Then you slipped a Mickey in my beer, and I fell asleep in this chair, and I woke up the next day, in my bed, with a miserable headache.”

The man kicks with his legs, flails with his arms. But he doesn't possess the simple coordination to lift up off the chair.

“My friend, the first girl you drugged ... she eventually killed herself, you know. Three years later, with an entire bottle of pills.” In an instant, the woman has become a seventy-year-old, a little heavy and shamelessly gray, staring down the hallway as if waiting for a door to open. “Maybe you weren't directly responsible for her death. I'll give you that much. Maybe she would have killed herself anyway. But I'll tell you this: I find it hard to believe that you made the life she had left any better.”

He isn't young anymore. Speckled hands hang in front of his eyes, then he covers a still-handsome face. “So you slipped me something,” he mutters. “So what're you going to do? Have your fun with me, is that it?”

“But I already have,” she says.

Then she stands and with a calm slow voice explains, “Your body will carry you to one of two places now. You can return to her bedroom, if you want. You'll find her dead body waiting there. She'll look exactly as she did when I found her. And if you go there, you'll never wake up. You'll live out your days in a deep coma, and the only thing inside your head will be that room and a cold pale corpse.

“Or you can step into my room, which would be much, much worse.”

He drops his hands. “How?”

“All of your victims ... the ones I could find who are still alive ... they're waiting behind my door. Silver-haired ladies, and young girls. Faces you'll know very well, and faces you probably won't even remember.”

He glares at her.

“It's your choice,” she tells him, walking slowly toward the hallway.

“What'll they do to me?” he squeaks.

She pauses. For a long moment, she stands on her tiptoes, letting a wide rich smile spread across her face. Then she pulls her red belt snug, and with genuine delight, she says, “What will they do? I don't think they know. Really, this will be the first time they've ever played the game.”

The Sleeping Woman

YOU BRING PEOPLE BY. YOU invite family, friends. Whoever you can rope in. The two-dollar tour begins by admitting that there's an enormous amount of work to be done, and then you skate right into your plans for the place. For the future. This is where you'll pour the foundation, up here on this high ground. With hand gestures and lines cut "in the dirt, you position your front door and kitchen, and over here, on the downhill side, your bedroom windows will stand better than thirty feet above what's now brown brome and wind-beaten cedars. You've got a view up here; everyone can see that much for themselves. This is a quarter section of old pasture laid out along the river bottoms. You bought these bluffs for next to nothing. With the bank's help, of course. Because you have to work for a living, these tours usually happen after nightfall. Your guests have to trust you when you describe the machine shed and long graveled drive and the perennial beds planted with tough natives that won't quit on you with the first hundred and five degree day. You talk about the dream house that you've just about sewn up --a hundred-year-old farmhouse twelve miles south of your future front door --and all it's going to take is a truck and trailer of suitable size, and a hired specialist to lug the house along some twenty miles of back roads, plus the assorted governmental clearances and the lifting of a

couple or three power lines. But all that's nothing. That's just the easiest part of the work. Because your dream house needs a new roof and plumbing, and wiring, and replastering and paint, and more paint, and probably new windows and insulation and whatever else the two of you haven't had the courage to imagine yet.

You are two people, but you've been a functioning unit for what feels like forever. You went to the same one-room schoolhouse as five-year-olds. You grew up playing hide-and-seek and dodge ball together. You first fell in love at the consolidated school, in eighth grade. Then came that ten-month stretch in high school where love failed, and the only compelling emotion that you shared was a deep, perfect hatred for each other. Looking back, you can't remember what the fight was about, or even if there was a genuine fight. What matters is the day when she got stood up by her bitch-mother. It was after school, after band practice, and he saw her standing in the parking lot, her face quiet and tight and a little too focused to notice him. He drove off, down the highway and into the Gas 'N Shop, telling himself that he was dry and needed a Mountain Dew. But he didn't park. He watched himself turn around and head back up to the school. Winnie was easy to see, what with the cars all gone. What with her standing in the middle of the new white concrete, looking betrayed. Her mother was a drunk, and worse, and Jake knew more stories than anyone. Maybe that was

why he drove back. He knew Winnie too well to abandon her, however much she pissed him off. But would she take a ride from him? He pulled up slowly, and he made sure to give her a warm strong look. No smile, and nothing that could be confused for pity. Then with a flat voice, he said, "Get in," and reached across the front seat, popping open the passenger door. She came around and shoved her clarinet case into the back seat, and then she was inside, closing the door hard, breathing hard and sitting with her hands in her lap and her face tight and sad, and he said, "Where do you want to go?" They were sixteen. He couldn't remember when he'd last spoken to her. "I'll take you home," he offered. But then she gave him a long look, and quietly, Winnie said, "No." She looked straight ahead, saying, "Let's just go for a drive."

They're in their mid-thirties now. They were married ten days after graduating from high school, and their twentieth anniversary is bearing down on them. It's been a durable, wild business, this marriage. No children, and there can't be any. But there's talk about adopting once they get their house up and running. Jake has gotten a little heavy in the middle and in his face. But Winnie still has her looks. Rust-colored hair and smooth clear skin that never tans and eyes too green to seem real. She has the kind of face and figure that would make the most trusting husband crazy, watching other men watch her. But Jake isn't that tolerant, and he's had his troubles. Out

and out wars. There's a tidy scar over his right eye, but the asshole that gave it to him has got at least four of his own. Worse, Jake has fought with Winnie over her wardrobe. Her walk. Everything. She likes being pretty, and she says it's for him, but somehow that doesn't feel like enough of a reason, since she's already got him sewn up and helpless. Why does a person need black underwear to buy groceries?

That's what their last fight was about. Her black bra and panties. In the middle of the fight, she yanked off the offending bra and then drove to the store that way. Then she came home laughing, telling Jake how she couldn't get up the courage to climb out of the truck and jiggle her way down the aisles, every old woman and sixteen-year-old boy giving her their best stare. They're two absolutely different people, except for what's the same. Winnie thinks about kitchen gardens and kitchen countertops and the fine shades of house paint. Where Jake thinks about the big things --the foundation and the house moving and who he knows who will dig them a new well at a fair price. He has his own business moving earth and driving dump trucks, and ever since she quit her nine-to-five at the bank, Winnie's worked for him. With him. Jake knows machinery better than she does, but not much better. And better than anyone else alive, he can judge volumes and weights. How many loads will it take to do the job? He can tell his customers exactly, without a calculator or even pencil and paper. How he does the trick is a mystery. Jake

doesn't easily see what happens inside his own head. Sometimes it's Winnie who tells him,

“You're worried about bills.” Or whatever is wrong. She almost sees his thoughts, telling him, “You're pissed at your dad, aren't you?” And sure enough, he is. It's almost as if he can't plumb his own feelings until she points the way. Which used to be strange. And then it was halfway reassuring. And now, after thirty years of being wrapped up with each other, it's something that he accepts without second thoughts. That's Winnie. She's knows his mind like Jake knows earth-moving, and in those rare moments of self-reflection, he realizes that most couples never reach that sense of belonging.

The quarter section and dream house are everything to them. Six days of work means that there's Sunday and seven nights where they can do what they want, provided that they can stay awake. To save travel time, they live on their new land. Jake brought in a third-hand trailer, setting it up in a little valley near a long-abandoned farmstead. The original house was burned up ages ago, but there's a shallow well and a working hand pump, and up the slope is a root cellar where they can store their overflow possessions --things that belong in damp, dark basements. It's a clear March day when Jake takes off early from a job, driving up to the county seat to see about the latest batch permits. It's paperwork and bullshit, and he wishes that he didn't have to go. But Winnie, home nursing a cold, promises him dinner,

and she's a fine cook. Better than Jake by miles. And things go pretty well in town. The first person that he talks to actually knows things, and by the third person, everything's been taken care of. It's all set. He drops by the Gas 'N Shop for a cold Dew, and he gets Winnie her Diet Coke, and then he's back on the road, driving just a hair over the legal limit until he's off the highway, then taking the graveled roads too fast. The pickup's rear end gets a little crazy, and he makes himself slow down. He drives nice and easy, thinking about nothing consciously, then realizing that he's thinking about work again. They've had a dry, warm winter, which means there's been no shortage of paying work. It's put them behind schedule on the acreage, but there's plenty of money in the bank. Which is different. Which is fine. He smiles as he turns down the long rutted road, bouncing past the tall No Trespassing sign that marks the start of their land, and now he's thinking that he needs a half-day to dump gravel and flatten their driveway to where it can hold up a huge old house riding on a long trailer.

The foundation has been finished. Their front-loader and a fourth-hand John Deere bulldozer are parked near the gray walls of new concrete. Jake drives past and down to the trailer, and climbing out, he notices nothing. Not the silence. Not the smell of last year's grass warmed by the sun. Not even the hard ticking of the truck's engine. He climbs into the trailer and says,

“Back,” just before the screen door slams. And

again, he doesn't hear the silence. He walks into the bedroom, halfway hoping she'll be there, changing clothes. But she isn't, and he pulls off his dirty crap and jams them into the hamper, and he puts on clean work clothes, planning to push some earth against the new foundation. There's enough daylight for twenty or thirty minutes of work. Minutes that won't come again, ever. Then he walks into that little space that passes for a living room, with the kitchen in the corner, and again, in a voice that can't be missed, he says, "I'm back." There is no dinner. The realization comes like a slap, and that's when Jake stops breathing, and his heart bucks, and the sensation of falling takes him. He has to check the stove twice, just to make sure that there's no pot hiding somewhere. Then he steps into the fading sun, shouting at nobody, "Winnie!

Winnie!"

It's a hundred and sixty acres, if she's here. And night's falling. And Jake can't imagine any reasonable explanation. Her little Chew pickup is parked where it should be, so she's got to be here. He starts up the hill on foot, planning to look inside the foundation. But that's crazy. She would have heard him pass and come out the basement door. So he turns and goes back to her truck. Touching the grill, he feels nothing but the sun's heat, and his own. He considers walking down into a nearby stand of cedars where she's never gone before. But instead, he looks at the dirt in the driveway, reading the tire tracks until he's mostly

sure that nobody else has been here. Finally, he thinks of the root cellar and the promise of a good dinner. Jake's mother has loaded them down with home-canned apricots and peaches, and Winnie likes cooking with fruit, and that's why he starts hiking toward the cellar, moving with a slow, measured gait that betrays nothing of his mood. Asked, and he wouldn't have known that he was worried. He would have turned to Winnie, and she would have told the world, "He's scared for me." Is that what he is?

Because he doesn't feel it. He just feels pissed that she's playing hide-and-seek, and he's pissed when she doesn't pop out of the cellar when he gets there. Then he stops at the open door and looks down the sagging wooden stairs, seeing her at the bottom of them, lying there, lying on her right side with her long reddish hair pulled away from her face and one white arm reaching out for nothing and the other arm tucked under her body to make a narrow pillow, and her legs and little feet are stretched across the bottom steps. And his first conscious thought is that damn, isn't that the strangest place to be taking a nap...?

EVERYONE NEEDS to be annoying, telling him how awful and unfair it is, and how it's the Good Lord's will. His brother, who can be relied on to say stupid things, tells him, "It was an accident. Nothing but. How could you know that that step would give out? And she'd hit her head like she did?" It was the second step from the top that had come loose. "You

didn't know," Morgan has to keep promising. But Jake had known. He had climbed those stairs a few times, and it was easy to feel the soggy plank twisting around those rusted nails. A quick fix would have been easy: A couple cheap brackets nailed in from below. But easier still was realizing that you couldn't trust the step, and Winnie had known that full well. What astonished and infuriated Jake was that his wife, smart as she was, could have forgotten something that simple, and with a sharp honesty that makes his brother pale, Jake says, "I don't know what she was doing, but she wasn't thinking. Of all the clumsy-ass things to do!"

"You don't mean that," his brother insists. "Don't even kid, Jake. That sounds awful!"

Jake's response is a determined shrug, and silence.

Morgan can't stop playing the older brother game. "If you need anything," he says. "Anything." Which is nothing but noise, charitable-sounding but meant only to make him feel better. "If you need to talk," Morgan says. "Or maybe you can come stay with us -"

"Shit," Jake exclaims. "I've got a business to run. How in hell can I do my jobs from your guest room?"

Morgan gives him a long look, and then he says, "Sure."

"Want to do something? Leave me to myself," says Jake.

"Sure."

The funeral is at Winnie's old church. She's got sisters and a brother who take charge of everything,

and there's a family plot in the cemetery out back, and Jake endures all the praying and misery right up until they carry her box to the hole dug beside her mother, and that's what breaks him. Seeing her set there, knowing the history between them...well, it's too much. He starts to break down, blubbering into his cupped-together hands. Then Morgan has to throw an arm at him, trying to make things better that way. Which is when Jake backs out of there and heads for the parking lot, doing thirty when he hits the street and eighty-plus on the highway.

Their land stretches along the south side of the river for most of a mile. There are long stretches where it's nothing but brome, with blotches and clumps of cedars in the gullies, looking black-green against the dead spring grass. Three days ago, they drove this road and talked about their plans, and Jake finds himself feeling for her now. Aren't the dead supposed to hover nearby? That's what he's always heard. When Winnie's mom died, her poor suffering father couldn't stop weeping, jabbering on about how he could feel his wife's presence. Jake knew it was stupid grief talking; he didn't believe in ghosts or souls that lasted an instant past death, and he still doesn't. But filled up with grief like he is now, he expects to feel Winnie sitting beside him. He deserves the illusion, the false comfort, and when it doesn't come, he gets furious all over again. Maybe he's not miserable enough. Is that it? And then he pushes the big diesel until he's doing ninety, and the pickup

rattles and dances, and he looks out the passenger window, eyes staring, watching their bluffs passing to the south.

Three turns puts him home again. He means to change out of his suit and tie, but suddenly he doesn't have the energy. Ten or twenty minutes of sitting, thinking about nothing, does nothing for him. So he makes himself stand, crossing the tiny living room of that awful little trailer, aiming for the bedroom but turning instead, heading out the screen door with his brown suit still on, and his good shoes, and that bright big tie that Winnie bought for him some five or six Christmases back.

He feels as if he's watching himself from far off. Both of his bulldozers are parked nearby. The old John Deere and the new D6 Cat. He climbs into the Cat and cranks the engine, letting it warm for maybe a minute before he starts, knowing where he's heading but knowing it as if it's something that he's read somewhere. He feels far away and cold and sure. Arriving at the place, he drops the huge steel blade, and he pushes. Loess soil is soft by nature, easily dislodged and shoved around, and the job takes about three minutes. Then with the root cellar covered and that old staircase collapsed, he finds a threadbare curiosity, wondering what important treasures got buried in that goddamn hole.

He doesn't care. He realizes that he doesn't, and better than that, he feels something that might be confused for satisfaction. His instinctive need for

motion, for work, has been fed. He can head home again, coming across the gray faces of the new foundation, and the easiest thing in the world is to change directions, climbing up and around and coming at the concrete from the safest angle, tearing into the wall and cursing under his breath when it refuses to shatter with a hard nudge. Jake stops long enough to consider the surrounding ground, and then he backs up and comes around and attacks from underneath, beneath what would have been the bedroom windows. A dull crack announces the collapse of the wall. Then he drives through and slams hard into the opposite wall, and it splits and then hangs there long enough to let him back away before it tumbles. Then he drops the other walls from outside, making a neat pile of slabs and dust that lets itself be covered with the floury brown soil that paints Jake's face and suit and the scuffed black leather of his shoes. He keeps working, breaking up the surrounding sod and pushing the ground beneath it, transforming the shape and appearance of better than half an acre. Then it's too dark to see, and he staggers into the trailer and eats a cold can of spaghetti and strips and busts open a package of Oreos, barely eating one before falling into bed, trying to think about Winnie but finding nothing left of her lurking in his head. So he lets his thoughts drift, discovering a clean and vivid awareness waiting, knowing what needs to be done, and how he can do it tomorrow and through the long days still coming. Dirt is a simple

thing, and reliable, and the simplest, finest dirt is loess. Violent winds carried it here during the dry centuries at the end of the Ice Age. Loess is an obedient, compliant soil that welcomes the chance to be cut and carried, pushed where it is needed, and then piled high and packed with the hard churning treads of the Cat. But driving a big Cat is not easy work for most people. Even a natural talent, someone like Jake, requires years of practice and sloppy mistakes before the hands know how to move, steering the Cat where it needs to be. Before the feet know how to let up on the pedal, borrowing just enough of the big diesel's muscle to keep things moving but under control. Before the mind always knows what the simple brown earth is doing on the other side of that tall steel blade, even when the sun-scorched eye can see none of it.

People are the complicated ones. They seem compelled to bother him with questions and opinions and barbed comments. It's the usual gang at the Gas 'N Shop, and it's the clients whose work isn't getting done as fast as they'd like, and then it's those assholes with the checkbooks who come out to Jake's to buy what he doesn't need anymore. They want Winnie's dump truck and her little pickup and that tractor that he bought for haying. Plus there's an assortment of half-built and half-demolished machinery --the treasures that he was planning to fix up or tear down for parts. He's brought them up here from their old house. All that he demands is a fair price; that's what

he tells everyone. But no, everyone wants to change the subject. They'll stand outside the trailer door, eyes walking along the tom-up hillside, and they'll ask him, "So what exactly are you doing here?" Everyone wants to buy time, hoping they can nudge Jake's price down by outwaiting him. "It's quite a project you've got here," they will admit, making it sound like a compliment. Then when he refuses to answer, they nod and fidget, pulling their eyes off the raw dirt, saying, "You're terracing your land. That's what people are saying."

"The price stays," Jake tells them. "You know it's fair enough. So don't even think about clicking me."

His attitude is offensive. Alarming, even. But these men have been forewarned. The county is buzzing about Jake, everyone offering a favorite theory, and most of the theories sounding the same as the rest. Prospective buyers don't come here expecting to find a sober, sane man. Which means that they must really want what he's selling, and they're in no mood to war over pennies. It's better to crack open the checkbook and fill it out fast, and then claim their prize and run for safety. That's what Jake wants them to think. He stares at each of them, and waits, and only the bravest few clear their throats, pushing up the courage to say, "It doesn't make sense. I mean, if you're terracing your land...well, then...why haven't you built any real terraces...?"

"It's a fair price," Jake will say again. Staring without blinking. Which always rattles them. There is

something in his voice, in his eyes --a quality new to him and invisible to him--that makes the bravest man panic. The checks are ripped loose and handed over, and regardless of the amount, Jake says, "This'd better be worth what it says. Because if it isn't " Then he lets his new voice trail away.

Nobody wants Jake's help with the loading. Which is fine. He can return to his work, and the assholes will load up their treasures themselves, and after a little while, he will see them vanishing up the long, half-finished driveway, leaving a tail of dust that mixes with Jake's cloud of dust, everything swirling together in the warm spring wind.

Maybe he has gone crazy. That's the general consensus, and Jake has never been one to doubt the wisdom of men gossiping over coffee. But if this is insanity, then it's a hard, keen thing that everyone should experience. It feels as if he has tapped into a well of energy, and it bubbles up under pressure. It feeds him. It lifts him. It makes his sleep light and efficient, waking him before dawn, no trace of grogginess in his step. When he eats, he eats quickly and as cheaply as he can manage. Canned foods and cheap cookies are his staples, and it doesn't matter what time of day. Instead of sugary pop, he drinks the water from the shallow old well. Chilled or warm, it tastes foul. But he doesn't need anything else. And the pounds that Winnie used to nag him about have turned to motion and moved earth and wiry muscles wrapped around a simple nervous energy.

Jake isn't happy. He doesn't pretend to feel anything that resembles joy or pleasure or even grim satisfaction. But he isn't unhappy, at least not in any normal sad way. And he does manage to function. His business is smaller without Winnie, but he has retained the fattest of his old clients. Plus there's a little stockpile that was Winnie's retirement fund. Jake can pick the days when he works for money. He likes jobs that can be done in the rain, since he doesn't dare ride his Cat down his own muddy hillsides. And there's more money from selling topsoil that he won't ever need. For the first few months, he trucks it up to the mouth of his driveway, selling it to city gardeners who don't know better. Peeled off an old pasture, the earth lacks humus for growing good tomatoes. But still, he takes their dollars, in cash, and that goes toward paying off the bank, which lets him peel up and sell even more of the goddamn hillside.

But then it's summer, and he's working too far from the driveway to make trucking the soil worthwhile. When he needs to remove topsoil, he dumps it on the river bottom, slowly and methodically building a new hill pressed snug against the stripped old hills. That's what he's doing one blistering afternoon when he spies a familiar figure walking toward him. He shoves at the soil and takes his Cat over the new surface, pressing it down while he shapes it. Then he climbs down and says, "What?" to his brother.

"Hey, Jake," says Morgan, with a mixture of

wariness and pity, and anger.

“It's been a while.”

Jake doesn't reply. Except to agree, what can he say?

“You didn't make it to Mom's birthday,” his brother has to tell him.

“Yeah, well. Things came up.”

“Yeah.” Morgan looks ready to weep. Or maybe scream. Either way, he has to work with his face, finding the right expression before saying, “Anyway. Mom asked me to come out and check on you.” Jake wipes at his face with an oily bandanna.

As if there's a gun to his head, Morgan grimaces. “She sent you a care package,” he says with a tight little voice. “Yeah?”

“She made me bring it. It's a box up in my car, if you want it.” Jake doesn't want to play this game all afternoon. So he says, “Okay,” just to get things over with.

They ride up the hill in Jake's dump truck. Morgan doesn't ask questions, but he's got them. His staring eyes say as much. He watches the worked-over earth and notices the uprooted cedars piled to the east, covering that end of Jake's property, and he almost asks everything. He looks tired and scared and sorry. He holds tight to the door handle as the truck climbs over a smooth ridge that didn't exist last week, and he glances over at his younger brother, clearing his throat before saying nothing but, “It's good seeing you.” Jake rolls his shoulders, saying, “I guess.”

Which puts a good chill on everything. Jake parks and climbs down. Morgan retrieves a big cardboard box that is filled with Mom's canned fruits and tomatoes, following him up to the trailer. The ceiling fan is turning fast and swaying, working as hard as it can to move the stale dark air. For the first time in a long while, Jake is aware of the clutter. The empty cans of stew and spaghetti. The trash sacks filled to bursting. The ceaseless black buzz of flies. He anticipates sad words. An argument, even. If it's not a fight about the way that he's living, then it will be questions about his sanity or lack of it. But no, Morgan just sets the box on the last little bit of free counter space, squinting at a certain photograph hung on the wall. His mouth hangs open, and then he says, "I forgot. How pretty she was." He means Winnie. Jake looks at the same photograph, framed and overly colorful in that phony, portrait fashion. She had it taken at Wal-Mart as a cheap birthday gift for him. When did he last look at the picture? He can't remember. And Morgan's right. She is beautiful, smiling out at him, wearing a summery dress that shows off her legs and her cleavage and that narrow sweet waist that he can almost feel when he lets his hands remember. Something grabs him by the throat here.

No, he shakes it off. Gets rid of it. Then he turns to Morgan, saying, "I've got to get back at it."

"Back at what?" his brother asks. Blurs.

Jake hears him, and doesn't.

Morgan says, "I'm asking. What in hell are you doing out here?" Jake picks up a jar of pale tomatoes, watching the seeds and meat floating lazily inside their thick salty liquid.

"You're angry," Morgan offers. "That's natural. You're pissed at this place...because it killed her...and now you're ripping up the ground just to get even "

Jake glances at him. "Is that what you think?"

Morgan's hands make tight little fists. His eyes jump from Winnie's picture to his little brother, and then back again.

Then Jake nods and starts for the door, saying, "Maybe you're right." Just to shut him up. "Maybe that's how it is."

There is no such creature as a buried treasure, either on Jake's tilted land or anywhere else in the world. Value comes only once the precious object is unearthed, held close and carefully appraised. Anything hidden by an inch of dust or buried beneath a solid black mile of stone is useless, existing as nothing but conjecture and hypothesis right up until the steel wrenches it free, letting it feel the dry heat of sun and the soggy heat of blood. In the course of the days, dozens of little treasures catch Jake's eye. He can't count all the bison skulls, most of which have been shattered by the Cat's slicing blade --impossible puzzles of white bone shards and worn teeth and the black sheaths of old horn. But there are larger, harder objects that shrug off the abuse. Teeth as big as melons occasionally roll out from the churning earth,

each yellow and massive, their working faces covered with an intricate network of canyons and valleys. These are mammoth teeth, each one twice as old as civilization. Jake won't stop for much, but he will climb off the Cat to recover a good tooth, keeping his growing collection in a neat row that stretches across his bedroom floor. He also finds a shiny-faced stone that his second-hand geology book identifies as a rare and valuable meteorite. He likes the stone's look and its slick, immortal feel. In an earlier day, he would have sold the meteorite and every tooth to the highest bidder; but today, for reasons that don't quite announce themselves, Jake can't even consider the possibility.

There are enough pennies for what he wants to do here. What is scarce is time, which is why he quits working for hire by mid-August, using every moment of daylight and the moonlit nights, too. Then by late September, there isn't enough day to accomplish everything, which is why Jake rigs up a system of headlights, working with them as well as with his near-perfect memory for the land's shape.

People watch him at night. In the day, too. But he notices them best in the darkness. He sees the headlights of the cars parked on the distant highway or on the bluffs adjacent to his property line. Curious locals are keeping tabs on his progress, making their hopeless guesses about his mysterious goals. On occasion, usually at night, teenagers sneak past the barbed wire marking his property line. Usually there

are two or three or four of them, all males, and this is a game and an adventure, and Jake mostly ignores them. The only harm they can manage is to waste his time. But if they creep too close to where he's working, or if they look as if they'll monkey around with his machinery...well, he turns the Cat and chases them back where they came from, the steel treads groaning and screeching as he climbs the hill, moving just fast enough to almost, almost catch those panicky bastards. Not everyone is so easy to scare. In October, on a bright warm afternoon, Jake notices a farmer harvesting his corn out on the river bottom. The man is riding back and forth on his fancy combine. When Jake looks again, he notices that the combine has stopped and nobody is sitting in the cab. Then he starts pushing a few dozen tons of soft earth into a convenient gully, and he notices nothing else. The farmer walks up the same ridge. He's a sturdy, low-built man, past his prime but still strong. Still capable. And he must be furious. That's what Jake thinks when he finally looks back over a shoulder, backing down the gouged and flattened ridge, expecting nobody and seeing nobody until some dim little voice warns him, and he looks again. Looks, blinks. Stops the Cat, and locks the brakes, and turns around in his battered seat, watching the farmer marching toward him.

“Get down,” his neighbor shouts.

Jake knows better. He gives his head a little shake, saying nothing.

“Haven't you got it?” the farmer asks him. “The court order. Have you even looked at it?”

There have been legal snarls and tongue-talking, but that's why Jake has a lawyer. He can say with a perfect honesty, “I don't remember.” The diesel is still running, meaning that the men have to shout to be heard.

“What's this order about?”

“You can't keep doing this,” the farmer tells him.

“Doing what?” Jake asks.

“Shit, if I knew that... !” The farmer's hands lift high, and then fall to his sides again. “You're making a damned mess here. You see? When it rains hard, the first time, I'm going have mud instead of a cornfield. Is that what you want? To goddamn ruin me?”

Jake can tell him, “No,” with ease. Then he adds, “But it's been dry now. Since last June, really --”

“It's going to rain,” the man interrupts.

Jake makes a show of shrugging his shoulders, then screams back at him, “It won't move much. I'm packing it down good --”

“It's going to pour,” says the farmer, flinging his hands up again. “You can't tell me it won't someday, and you can't tell the judge that you can stop it from happening. So you damn well better stop this.., this bullshit... !” Jake needs to work again. The westernmost acres are waiting, those last bluffs lower and steeper than everything before. He stares out over the ugly brown grass, planning what he needs to

do first and next and after that too, the quiet smart little part of him effortlessly predicting exactly how much time it will take. He nearly forgets about the farmer. Then a clod of dry earth hits him above the right ear, and the trailing voice says, "Listen to me, goddamn it!"

Without a backward glance, Jake releases the brake and picks up the blade and turns and lets the slope as well as the diesel carry him along, rapidly gaining speed. The stocky farmer is ahead of him, and running. He looks frantic and slow, the stubby legs working and the arms pumping uselessly. And then Jake can't see the man beyond the nose of Cat. He is a hypothesis, an abstraction. Maybe he doesn't even exist anymore. A seductive possibility, that. Then Jake lets intuition tell him when to depress the pedal, stopping himself just enough, just at the last possible moment...and after a little while longer, he spies the farmer down on his own land again, staggering more than running now, twice stumbling forward into the twisted brown rains of his com.

THEY'LL COME BY the trailer while he's at the far end of his land, working. His mother and brother, and maybe half a dozen friends, leave care packages and little notes written on the spot and long letters on good stationery neatly folded, his name in big shouting letters. They are concerned for him. They are worried and puzzled, and some of them admit to being angry with his behavior, and everyone begs him

to seek help, asking him why can't he just listen to reason.

What Jake listens to is nobody's business but his own. What he wants is too large and far too consuming to let words or misspent kindness distract him. That's what he knows, standing beside the kitchen counter, eating sweet peaches out of a wide-mouthed jar and drinking up the juice, then wiping his whiskered mouth dry with the filthy sleeve of his coat. It is November now. The weather has turned raw and cold, an ominous dampness hanging over everything. He folds the latest note and lets it glide to the floor, then he wanders into the bedroom, stepping over the low wall of mammoth teeth and sitting on the edge of his unmade bed, realizing that he is far too tired ever to stand again. A tall cheap mirror hangs on the opposite wall. Winnie hung it there, and she used to pose before it, wearing nice clothes or wearing nothing at all. Jake glances at the mirror, seeing himself. His hair is long and his face is gaunt and his hands are nothing but bone over which is pulled a thin red skin. His coat and oily trousers hang limp on his shriveled body. But worst of all are his staring, mad-dog eyes. The eyes scare him enough that he closes them for a long moment, taking long deep breaths. Then he looks again, seeing Winnie posing from inside the mirror, her little hands riding her bare hips and her expression warning him that she's a long way from happy. Jake stands, somehow. He stands and breathes again, then walks out into the

failing late-day light of November. The Cat needs fuel. But the tank in the back of his pickup is empty, and there aren't two gallons left in the big tank behind the trailer. A quick search of his pockets finds no cash, and he seems to remember that his bank account is empty, too. But there is money. There's a last little gasp of dollars in Winnie's retirement fund. Except this is a Saturday, Jake discovers. He stares at his watch, realizing that the bank is closed and will remain closed until Monday. No, that's Veteran's Day. He won't be able to get what belongs to him until Tuesday, and that's a long ways from being soon enough.

Jake drives to town. The pickup runs rough, stalling out at the first light and pretending that it won't start after that. But he cranks until the engine kicks its throat clear enough to run. Then he leaves it running at the Gas 'N Shop. In the near-darkness, he starts pumping fuel oil into the big tank, and he walks into the bright clean lights. The girl at the counter is new to him. Good. She stares and says nothing, even when Jake says, "Hello," as he passes by. He fills his deep pockets with jerky and dried apricots. As a treat, he takes a cold Dew from behind the glass door. Then he makes a show of patting his trouser pockets, telling the girl, "My wallet's in the car. Be right back."

The big tank is halfway filled. That's enough, easily. Jake shuts off the pump and climbs into the warm cab, pulling away exactly as he's done for twenty-plus years. Too tired to think, he forgets to

watch his mirrors for the sheriff. But nobody is chasing him, and before it's eight o'clock, he's back up on the big Cat, working those last few acres of steep ground. He sleeps for moments, dreaming intense and wild, twisted dreams. But the cold always wakes him, and he sits up in his seat again, shoving another cylinder of jerky into his mouth, taking a deep swig of well water from the gallon milk jug sitting between his feet, and then chewing the salty meat as he picks his next swipe, navigating with headlights and his increasingly soggy memory. By morning, he can imagine being finished. At midday, he parks on the last high ridge and climbs out, gazing down at a surviving patch of brome and cedar. How did he want to do this part? He must know, but he can't remember now. Bewilderment moves into a simple rage, and he discovers that he is crying, and maybe he has been for a long while. His face is soaked and cold in the sharp north wind. He wipes it and wipes it, then gives up. He lets himself cry. He collapses where he stands and closes his eyes, and maybe he sleeps, or maybe it's something other than sleep. Either way, when his eyes pull open, he remembers. The rest of it. This is how he will do it.

The cedars put up a fight, but he mows all of them down and covers them over with raw earth. Then he makes a series of long curved gouges that he has to cut more than once before they look pretty much right. And by then, night is falling again. He has half a thousand little jobs left waiting, but every job is

delicate and separated in space from the others, and the Cat won't help him. So he navigates down to the bottoms and cuts the headlights and sets the machine free, pointed toward the trees that mark the river. Alone, the big machine chugs its way forward, vanishing into the gloom. If he hears it tumble and crash into the channel, the sound doesn't register. Jake is walking back toward his pickup, and that's when he notices new lights that don't belong there. Headlights seem to carry voices with them. A name is called out. His name. Jake doesn't listen well enough to recognize any one voice. What he does is walk quickly toward the east, sensing that they haven't seen him and won't, if he's careful. A quarter section is a lot of land, particularly when you've shaped every inch of it yourself.

Half a mile east is a tangle of dead cedars. Jake laid them out with care, forming a dense tangle of interwoven branches and rusty red needles. That's where he hides. He climbs inside the tangle, feeling warmer by the moment, and he eats the last of his dried apricots and drinks the two last swallows of water from the milk jug, and he closes his eyes sometime later, and sleeps, and he sleeps without being bothered by dreams, hours passing in a blink. Then a hand touches his shoulder, and he wakes with a start. And Morgan says quietly, firmly, "Come on out now. It's over."

Maybe it is done now. Jake can't believe that it is or ever can be, but that dangling hope urges him to

climb out of the dead little forest. A light snow is falling. The first snow of winter. It lends a hush to the various men standing uphill from him. There's the sheriff and a couple deputies, and between them is a hound dog who couldn't seem more pleased with itself. It greets Jake by wagging its stubby tail. Jake offers his hand, asking the sheriff, "Is it the fuel? Is that why?"

One of the deputies starts to answer, but Morgan cuts him off. He clamps a hand on Jake's shoulder, saying, "You're going to behave, right? You aren't going to do anything stupid?" Jake glances at him.

Morgan says, "No cuffs," to the sheriff. "Please." The sheriff drives a boxy Jeep. Cautious to a fault, it takes him what seems like hours to reach the empty trailer. "All this work," he keeps saying. "God, what were you thinking, Jake?"

The ground is wearing a thin inch of new snow. Except where the dead cedars poke up through the snow, of course.

"What were you trying to prove? Can you tell me that?" Jake sits between deputies. When he leans forward, everyone is nervous. Morgan is up front, and he jerks as if startled. The deputies get ready to grab their prisoner, and if need be, strike him. But then he peers out the windshield, remarking with the calmest voice possible, "It looks like the sun's breaking out."

The little snow is finished. The cold north wind is dry and cleansing, pushing away the last of the clouds before they reach the highway. They turn in the

direction of town, but that means nothing. Maybe he's going to jail, but there's also a hospital up in Lincoln where people can find special help. Jake doesn't ask about their destination. He couldn't care less. Again, he shuts his eyes, expecting to sleep; but this time the sheriff barks out, "What in hell?" as he hits the brakes.

Even on a Veteran's Day, the highway carries a fair amount of traffic. And most of the traffic has pulled off to either shoulder, people standing in the chill wind, cold hands pointing south, moving side to side as if drawing the same curving figures in the air.

One of the deputies says, "Oh god."

Morgan makes a low grunt, and then looks back at his brother, trying to speak and finding no breath in him.

"Do you see it --?" the deputy starts to ask.

The sheriff says, "Now I do."

He pulls across the far lane and parks on the wide shoulder, the cherry tops flashing as he climbs down. Everyone climbs down, forgetting all about Jake. He's left to himself, slipping out into the suddenly bright sunshine, miles of fresh snow making him blink, making his tired eyes tear up. A strange woman standing nearby points and says, "What's the hair? What makes it?"

"I don't know," says the man next to her.

A group of teenage boys are past them. Laughing, one of the boys says, "Look at that tit! Isn't it a beauty?" "It is," a deputy agrees. Morgan looks at

Jake. Looks at him, and then he stares south at the long white hillside. Dead cedars are clustered up at one end, looking red and shaggy. A second patch of cedars --a small red mound--caps the end of the rounded hill that Jake built months ago. That hill is white with the snow. White and smooth, and perfect. Then comes the third patch of cedars in the middle of the reshaped bluffs. Triangular. Tucked closely between a slope that rises on a curve, and then rises again on a matching curve.

“Just like legs,” says Morgan.

Jake is standing beside him, staring like everyone.

“And knees. And look, feet!” His brother practically giggles, his eyes sweeping back toward the east end of the property. “And her hair, and face. Just right. That's Winnie! You did the face just right.” Jake stares at where Morgan is staring.

“I couldn't see her before. When she was just bare dirt.” Morgan can't stop shaking his head in astonishment. He has to touch Jake on the shoulder, asking, “What is she doing there? Sleeping?”

The sheriff says, “That's what it looks like. Sleeping naked.”

“Christ,” says a deputy. “Is she ever beautiful.”

“Jake,” says Morgan. “Jake? What are you thinking?”

“I don't know,” he admits.

“Aren't you proud? You've got to be proud!” Morgan laughs now, tears leaking free of his blinking eyes. “It's Winnie out there!” Jake shrugs his

shoulders. Then with a quiet and firm, almost indifferent voice, he tells everyone, "I don't know. I'm looking, but I can't see her."

Starbuck

His hard stuff had gone a little soft and his breaking stuff was staying up in the zone now, and what had been a crisply pitched game for the first eight innings was slowing down by the breath. By the heartbeat. Starbuck walked off the mound and slapped his glove against a thigh, and he wiped his wet forehead with a wet sleeve, then he tucked the glove under an arm while he worked at the new ball with both bare hands, trying to coax life into fingers that insisted on feeling hot needles whenever they touched the world. Jeez, his right hand was a mess, particularly on the blistered middle finger. But he barely noticed that pain, what with the ache of his shoulder and the burning inside what had started the game as a strong sound elbow. Finally, grudgingly, he scaled the mound again and looked at the enemy batter--a skinny little center fielder who could smack a pitched ball in any of a thousand directions--and watched the taped fingers of his catcher, ten layers of code laid over the signal so that the runner standing on second didn't get wind ... crap, what pitch did the guy want...? Starbuck just shook him off, forcing him to try again. And again, the fingers were talking gibberish. So what could a pitcher do but wave his glove overhead, screaming, "Time out," to the umpire?

The bloodless machine lifted its arms, and a game barely moving suddenly ground to a halt.

Beyond the glare of the lights were more lights, and there were faces and things that would never look like faces, all attached to voices possessing a perfect clarity, and even if a man's ears could somehow ignore what was being shouted at him, there were also the obvious thoughts that no sentient mind could evade--tension and considerable hope, plus a growing, well-deserved impatience.

"Sit him down," said a multitude, voices full of pity and malice.

"No, leave him in," said a smaller multitude, spirits buoyed by the suddenly rich prospects for their own team.

The catcher was a meaty-faced man with garlic on the breath and nearly two decades of experience. He walked like an old catcher, knees complaining. But he had a boy's smile and an unexpected kindness in a voice that was softer than one might expect from that face and that build. "He's going to yank you," the catcher told Starbuck. "You want him to?"

"No."

"Cosgrove's ready."

Starbuck snapped off a few brutal curses. "Cosgrove cost me my last two games. You think I should let him come out here--?"

"Well then," his catcher interrupted. Then he put his fat glove around his mouth, choking off the garlic stink while asking, "What's your best pitch left?"

"Fastball."

“Well then.” With a glance back over his shoulder, the catcher said, “Give him a breaking ball. Put it outside. Can you?”

“Probably.”

“After that, start shaking me off.”

“Okay.”

“And go high with your best fastball. The little shit's going to swing through, and you'll get your first out.”

Except it didn't happen that way. The breaking pitch pushed the count to full, but Starbuck didn't get his fastball low enough to entice. Instead, the batter watched it buzz past his eyes, and he took first base at a gallop, and now the winning run was on and there were still three outs to earn.

The manager called time.

Where was the stupid resin bag? Starbuck found it hiding behind the mound, and he contented himself for a few moments by banging the bag against his palms and tossing it down before giving it a few good kicks. White dust hung in the air. The manager was crossing the infield, already taking a measure of his pitcher. Starbuck gave him a stare and jutting lower jaw. “I don't want you to pull me,” he said with his body, his face. And then he gave the hapless resin bag one more hard kick.

The catcher came out with the manager. Catchers always did that, since they were supposed to be the generals out on the diamond. But there was also a history between Starbuck and this manager, and if

you knew enough--and the fans always knew more than enough--you realized the catcher was standing halfway between the men for a reason. These two prideful souls had already suffered more than one flare-up this season. It was smart baseball to have a beefy body at the ready, in case this little meeting on the mound turned into another donnybrook.

The manager began by asking, "What should I do?"

"Don't use Cosgrove," warned Starbuck.

"No?"

"I'll get three outs."

"Tonight?"

"Not with you standing here. But yeah, I will."

The manager nodded, as if he sincerely believed that promise. Then with a strong quiet voice, he said, "Show me your arm."

Starbuck surrendered his right arm into the waiting hands.

The manager was ancient by most measures. The story was that he had played parts of three seasons in the Bigs, but he was too small for the game. So like a lot of idiots in those days, he juiced himself with designer steroids and synthetic growth hormones and enough Ritalin to keep an entire city focused. But the juice could do only so much good and quite a lot of bad. He was finished playing before he was twenty-eight, and after another twenty years of working as a coach in the minor leagues, he started to die. Organs failed. Enzymes went wacky. And weird cancers sprang up in all the embarrassing places.

Before he was fifty, the old man had been gutted like a brook trout and filled up with new organs either grown in tanks or built from plastic, all back when that kind of work seemed exceptionally modern. But he was still stuck in the minor leagues, working as a batting coach or a scout or sometimes tucked into the front office. It wasn't until he was seventy-two that his career genuinely took off.

In most versions of the story, he was jumping a hooker in Terra Haute, and a pretty important blood vessel in his brain broke. Over the next three days, he died twenty times. Doctors had to do a lot of inspired work just to keep his corpse breathing. How they saved as much of his brain as they did, nobody knew. But what they saved was what was best, and what they built after that more than replaced what he had lost. Once the old guy learned to walk again, and talk, and take care of himself in the bathroom, he went back to managing, and nobody knew how it happened, but the man's new brain had acquired an eerie capacity to absorb a whole lot of factors before gut-feelings took over and made the right call.

"I should pull you," the manager remarked, those strong ageless hands letting go of Starbuck's arm, both men watching it drop, limp and tired. "I really want to drag you out of this game."

His pitcher said nothing.

"But you see Cosgrove standing over there? Glove under his arm?" The manager got a new face before the season. He looked maybe fifty, or at least how

fifty used to look. Gray-haired and sun-worn, respectable and wise. He was in control of the world, or so his appearance said. "But the thing is--"he began.

"What?" Starbuck blurted.

"My closer just felt something snap in his shoulder. He isn't telling me, but I'm seeing the readout from the autodoc." Medical telemetry was still legal as long as you weren't actually standing on the playing field. "Cosgrove might think otherwise, but I don't believe he could put the ball over the plate."

The manager's eyes were glass and things fancier than glass, and when they stared, it felt as if knives were burrowing into your flesh.

"On the other hand, you can still put the ball over the plate," he admitted. "On occasion."

The umpire had rolled out, ready to warn the three of them to break up their little meeting.

"So you're my best hope," the manager said to Starbuck. And on that wilted note of optimism, he turned and walked back toward the dugout.

"Fastballs," the catcher blurted, talking through his glove.

Starbuck gave a little nod.

"And keep them down. All right, kid?"

* * * *

The game had never been larger, at least in terms of crowds and interest and money, as well as the sheer intelligence that was focused on the activities of balls and bats and the boys who played it. But also the

game had never been so inconsequential. Tens of millions of fans adored it, yet today the world's citizens numbered in excess of one hundred billion. Truth was, soccer still ruled, with basketball and the UNFL galloping far behind. And while measuring relative values was difficult, baseball was probably only the eighth or ninth most important sport. Excluding golf, of course, which was still nothing but a good walk ruined.

Every sport had its core fans, and among that hardened group were those who liked nothing more than to stand beside their heroes, basking in the fame while they tried to sink their pernicious roots into the players' lives.

Let them get close, and the fans would suck you dry.

Love them, and they would happily ruin your career and good name, and then they'd take home your husk and your bad name as trophies.

That was Starbuck's working premise. Everyone learned which smiles meant trouble and which of the kind words were simply too kind. And sure, every young player was flattered when a pretty creature offered herself and maybe her sister too. What man wouldn't want the adoration and easy sex? But there were rules for players just as there were rules for the world at large, and they were not the same rules, and not knowing the difference was the same as not being able to lay off sliders thrown out of the zone--it kept

you in the minors, or it got you kicked out of baseball entirely.

“I love this game,” a fan once remarked to Starbuck. “I adore its history and intelligence, and its unpredictability even to the most gifted AI modelers.” Then with a glass-eyed wink, the mechanical creature added, “But what I like better than anything is the long, honorable tradition of cheating.”

Walk away, Starbuck told himself.

But he didn't. He couldn't. It was just the two of them sharing a long elevator ride. The machine was a hotel maid--a neat-freak AI riding inside a clean gray carbon chassis--and like a lot of entities with brainpower in excess of its needs, it invested its free thoughts in the memorization of statistics and the constant replaying of old World Series.

“Cheating,” the machine repeated.

Starbuck didn't respond.

“And when I say that word,” his companion continued, “I don't mean questionable actions taken by the downtrodden players.”

That won a grunted, “Huh?”

“I am referring to the owners,” said the maid. “What they have done and are doing and will continue to do with your good game proves that they are cheats, and it makes them into criminals.”

That won a sideways glance at his companion, plus a soft, half-interested, “Is that so?”

“Bob Gibson.”

The name meant something. It struck a chord with Starbuck. But he had never been the best student, particularly when it came to historical curiosities from more than a century ago. Pretending to recognize the name and its deep significance, he nodded, muttering to the ceiling, "Yeah, what about him?"

"One of the finest seasons for any pitcher in history," the machine continued. "It was 1968--"

"Sure."

"And do you know what his earned run average was?"

"Not offhand."

"One point one two."

Machines weren't wrong too often, but it could happen. Starbuck was polite enough not to doubt that ridiculously low number openly, and he made a mental note to look up Gibson's career totals when he finally got back to his hotel room.

"The pitcher compiled a record of twenty-two and nine, giving up barely more than a single run for every nine innings of work, and because of his utter domination, the mound was lowered next year by a full third."

A visceral anger blossomed in Starbuck.

"The owners want to see offensive numbers," the machine said. And with that, their elevator stopped on a random floor and opened its doors, exposing an empty hallway.

The pause wasn't an accident, Starbuck sensed.

“They want home runs,” his companion continued. “They want to see base runners. They believe that there will always be another two or three million eyes that will watch a debased, cheat-enhanced game, while only a few hundred thousand traditional fans will lose interest and drift away.” Peculiar as it seemed, a machine was saying, “The owners care only about numbers.” Speaking with genuine disgust, it claimed, “For money and the bodies jammed into the stadiums, and for all those paying Web-presences that pretend to sit in the stands, the damned owners will mangle the oldest rules. By any means, at any time.”

Because someone needed to say it, Starbuck mentioned, “They have that right. After all, these are their teams.”

“But do they own the game itself?”

The question caught him unprepared.

“Ali the Dervish,” said the machine.

This one Starbuck knew and knew well. Two generations ago, Ali was the dominating pitcher for six or seven seasons. He was a Sudanese-born fellow nearly seven feet tall, with hands big enough to hold three balls at once and a delivery designed by genetics as well as a god who loves good pitching. Starbuck had studied the old digitals. From the mound, Ali would start to turn and twist, gathering momentum into some type of hidden flywheel set inside his long, surprisingly powerful legs. Then came the rush forward, and a ball that looked like a starved moth

was shot from a cannon, and if it was his fastball, the hapless batter had no time to react. If it was the slider, it broke as he swung, making him look foolish. And if it was the change-up--a wondrously treacherous pitch when lumped on top of Ali's other talents--the batter would finish his swing long before the ball hit the catcher's mitt, his poor body screwing itself around as if trying to bring the bat back again, attempting a second swing during the same tortuous motion.

Ten or twenty times a year, Ali put batters on the disabled list, pulled groins and ravaged backs being the usual culprits.

Just thinking of the carnage made Starbuck laugh.

"Because of Ali, the owners dropped your mound another two inches," the machine reminded him. "And then just to make sure that pitchers learned their lesson, they made the balls a little larger and smoother, and by most measures, a little less likely to break when they were thrown."

"What are we talking about?" Starbuck had to ask.

"Cheating," the machine reminded him.

"But what's this got to do with me?" Then he leaned out of the open elevator, making certain nobody was walking or rolling in their direction. "Unless you can somehow make me into an owner, and then I can change things."

That earned a quiet, quick laugh.

Then the elevator doors pulled shut, and they started climbing again, but more slowly than before.

“Batters cheat too.”

“I guess.”

“They have holos of every major league pitcher. They'll stand at a practice plate and swing at your best pitches, and your worst, and they eventually learn everything there is to know about your delivery and foibles.”

“That's not quite cheating,” Starbuck pointed out. “It's awful and I hate it, but it doesn't break any clear rules.”

“So batters are scrupulously honest?”

“I didn't say that.”

“On your own team,” said the maid, “I can think of two or three obvious culprits. Men who are a little too good to be genuine.”

“Maybe so.”

In theory, if you played baseball, you kept your body in its original state. No artificial parts, no overt enhancements. If an elbow or knee needed repair, the raw materials had to come from your own muscle and tendons. And when those organic fixes didn't work anymore, you came out of the game, or you learned how to hit or pitch in entirely new ways.

But there were certain sluggers who found ways to circumvent all of the careful checks and medical probes that were required of them. Genetic doctoring was subtle in one respect, while its results were apocalyptic. A few strands of DNA spread through the corners of a fit body would come to life according to some preprogrammed schedule. For a few hours on

each of the season's game days, subtle enzymes emerged from hiding, coaxing key muscles to contract a little faster, clearing the vision in the old-fashioned human eye, and subtly goosing the batter's reaction times.

Their cheating was obvious, and it was ugly. If rain delayed a game by several hours, the biggest sluggers on the team suddenly had slower bats and noticeably less thunder. Of course the owners could have hunted out every criminal. More random tests; less tolerance in the bioassays. But they preferred things exactly as they were, with the occasional public justice for the most inept offenders, everyone else baked into the very profitable cake.

"I love this game," said the gray machine.

"So do I," Starbuck replied, with feeling.

"And I appreciate good pitching," the machine claimed. "Which is why I think so highly of your skills. And your potential too."

"But I won't do that crap," said Starbuck. Though he said it perhaps with less feeling now. "They're always testing us. And worse than that, cheats show easier with pitchers. If I suddenly find another three or four miles an hour on my fastball, they're going to inventory every cell in my damned body."

"Agreed," said his companion.

For the last time, Starbuck asked, "So what are we doing here? What exactly are you trying to sell me?"

"The mind," were the first words offered, followed by the touch of a Teflon hand against Starbuck's

temple. "What you know, they cannot inventory. What resides inside this temple ... this is what I offer to you, my friend ... and for what you would have to agree is an exceptionally modest fee...."

* * * *

Top of the ninth and bases loaded, with the potential winning run lounging at first, and not a single blessed out showing on the scoreboard. Starbuck took one last walk around the mound, his head dipped forward and eyes narrowed while his soggy brain considered the next few moments. Then he climbed up onto the rubber and looked in at the catcher exactly as the umpire bellowed, "Play ball." The enemy batter was the left fielder--a tall rangy kid, a right-hander, and last year's rookie-of-the-year--who wore every bit of armor allowed by the rules and had an irritating habit of laying his bat across the strike zone during the wind-up, as if the pitcher might try to sneak the first pitch past him.

This year and last, Starbuck had gotten the kid to strike out eight or nine times. And eight or nine or maybe ten times, the kid had gotten a hit off him, including one homer--a single shot that didn't matter, since the game was already lost.

But not this time, Starbuck told himself.

He shoved the ball into his glove and the glove back under his right arm again, and in full view of the world, he took a piece of his forearm between his left thumb and forefinger, and he squeezed hard enough

that the batter momentarily flinched from the imagined pain.

"I said, 'Play ball,'"the umpire complained.

Which was what he was doing. But Starbuck gave a little nod and got his foot in place, and his back and shoulders aligned, and with a motion practiced until every aspect seemed invisible to him, he threw a fastball that ended up remarkably close to where he was aiming--a point just a few inches south of the batter's exposed chin.

The kid went down in a dusty heap, his helmet careful to stay stuck to his skull.

Starbuck took the throw back from the catcher, and both of the next two pitches caught the outside corner, putting the kid into a nice deep hole.

The last pitch needed preparation. Again, Starbuck took a lengthy break, arm and glove against his ribs while the left hand savagely tugged at the increasingly red skin just below his elbow. The batter watched with interest, and standing on deck, the next batter also stared at the blatant self-abuse. Then Starbuck took the mound and reached deep, gathering up every muscle fiber that hadn't yet been shredded. And with an audible grunt, he sent the pitch high and straight out over the plate, forcing the kid to react too late, swinging just below the ball as it was leaving the strike zone.

The crowd voiced its approval and hinted at its hope. Except for those voices and whistles that came from the out-of-towners, who still had plenty of hope,

not to mention a small amount of anger for having their kid brushed back.

The next batter was another strong right-hander, an old third baseman with tired legs but thunder in his swing. In six years, he had earned six homers off Starbuck, plus five more round-trippers that were gifts--bad pitches put into awful places directly above the plate. For a moment, Starbuck filled himself with optimistic blandishments. He was older and wiser now, and tonight was different ... that sort of claptrap. Then he pinched his forearm again and deciphered the signal from his catcher, and again he pulled together his resources to heave the ball at a point that should have been too high to touch with any bat.

But the trajectory was too flat and too far down, and nine times out of eleven, there should have been a grand slam. Yet sometimes luck is everything, and maybe the batter was a little too keyed up to react. Whatever the reason, the third baseman sent the pitched ball high up into the night sky, and after a week or two, the shortstop caught it in his glove and lobbed it back to Starbuck.

Two out, but the next batter was by far the worst.

The enemy first baseman was a big bullish left-hander, both in build and in personality. For years, rumors had hung around his powerful swift body. If any batter in this league cheated in any important way, he was the culprit. But his power sold tickets, and his arrogance made him enemies who would buy

tickets just for the chance to scream at him. He was a broad and gigantic glowering hunk of meat who wore the absolute minimum in armor--a small helmet and one tiny pad on his right elbow--and he stared out at Starbuck while the pitcher again made a show of giving his forearm a hard long pinch.

“Like hell!”the batter screamed.

At that point, the enemy manager popped out of the dugout, and to the umpire, he said, “I protest!”

Man and machine discussed the issue for a few moments. Then both rolled out to the mound, along with the catcher and Starbuck's manager, who was allowed this second visit because this was an official protest. Ten million fans were present in some physical form, watching as the umpire took samples of flesh and blood and hair, both from the pinched-up arm as well as the aching shoulder and both hands. The lab work was accomplished inside the umpire's belly, occupying most of ninety seconds, and then the big voice screamed, “No foul. Play ball!”

But the batter didn't agree. With the tact of a landslide, he told the umpire and both managers that this was an injustice. Wasn't it obvious what was happening here? Then he stared out at Starbuck, roaring, “You're not getting away with this, you miserable little prick!”

Starbuck shook off his catcher, again and again.

Finally they settled on a breaking pitch, putting it down near the batter's ankles.

The swing couldn't have been any harder, and every imaginary fastball was smacked out of the park. But not the pitch that Starbuck threw, and now the batter found himself in a quick one-strike hole.

Going back to the well, Starbuck threw a second breaking pitch. And again, the batter swung at phantoms and his own considerable fears.

“Oh and two,” the umpire reported.

The batter called for time, and he used his time to stand off to the side, gripping the handle of the bat with both hands, talking to somebody who didn't seem to be paying attention to what he had to say.

When he stepped back into the box, Starbuck stepped off the rubber.

Again, he started to pinch his arm. Then he paused, as if thinking better of it. And showing just the trace of a good confident smile, he brought his forearm up to his mouth and bit down until the flesh was red and bruised, blood starting to ooze from the fresh wound.

The batter screamed with his eyes, his stance.

Then up went the piece of hardened maple, ready for anything that Starbuck might throw.

Again, Starbuck made an inventory of his surviving strengths, and with visible show of concentration and fortitude, he went into his motion and gave a huge wet grunt as he flung the ball, and the batter swung at everything, hitting nothing, while a pitch that would barely serve as a batting practice toss eventually

wandered its way over the plate and into the dusty leather mitt.

* * * *

“I'm not going to ask,”the manager promised. He was sitting in his office, swirling a bulb of beer while shaking his plastic face, speaking to the floor when he said, “I don't want to know. Not the truth, and not even the lie.”

“Well, I want to know,”the catcher snapped. He set down his empty bulb and leaned forward, asking, “What is it?”

“What's what?”Starbuck replied.

“You pinch and bite yourself at key points,”the catcher explained, “and the pain is the trigger to unlock some deeply buried coordination skills. Stuff you learned once and then hid away. Reflexes your body can't remember until those sharp specific aches cause them to bubble up again.”

Starbuck sipped at his own beer, saying nothing.

“I've heard rumors about this trick. Nothing physically changes inside the arm. The muscles are still tired and sorry, which is why nothing shows when they test you.”

“Nothing showed,”Starbuck reminded both of them.

“But what if you suddenly had a different style of pitching? If your fastball rolled in with a different spin? Or your breaking stuff looked like it came off someone else's arm?”

“Is that what you saw?”Starbuck asked.

“I saw you knock out three tough hitters,”the catcher reported. Then he looked at their manager, asking, “Did his stuff look different at the end? From where you were sitting, could you tell?”

A perfect memory was unleashed, and after a thoughtful moment, the manager declared, “I'm not sure.”

“Three grown millionaires came to bat,”said the catcher, “and you made them look like bush-league fools.”

“I did that,”Starbuck conceded.

“So I'm asking,”the catcher pressed. “What's the story here?”

“It is a story,”the pitcher allowed. Then with a smug, somewhat embarrassed smile, he confessed, “I have a friend. A friend living in a different town.”

The other men leaned forward, neither breathing now.

“My buddy works at the hotel where most of the teams stay when they come to play. And sometimes, he finds himself riding on the elevator with a slugger or two ... and he'll say a few words, in passing ... how much he loves the game, and how powerful these gentlemen are, and by the way, did you know that idiot Starbuck is a shameless cheat...?”

His audience absorbed the words.

The catcher laughed quietly, saying, “Huh.”

The manager shook his head and sipped his beer. “So are you or aren't you?”

“Cheating?” Starbuck shook his head, admitting, “Not really. No.”

“Is this buried reflex thing even possible?” the manager wanted to know.

Then Starbuck was laughing. “Oh, there's a buried reflex, all right. And by pinching and biting myself, I trigger it. But the reflex isn't hiding inside my nervous system. It's inside theirs. My friend tells them that I cheat, and so they're looking for a pitch they've never seen before. At least from me, they haven't seen it.” He was laughing louder now, rubbing hard at his broken-down arm. “What they're reacting to is just an idea that was set inside them ... implanted against their will ... put there by a few words thrown their way during a long, long elevator ride.”

To Church with Mr. Multhiford

It was everybody's idea.

Or maybe it was nobody's.

Maybe it's that ideas drift in the air like gas, and beer and boredom worked on us to where we could catch hold of that particular notion. Sometimes I think that's what happens: Ideas are invisible clouds that get trapped inside people's heads. Different shaped heads trap different ones, which explains a helluva lot. Here in Pelican County we've got a lot of simple round heads, if you know what I mean. Here it pays to be perfectly average. And if you happen to get stuck with a fancy-shaped head --one that catches goofy ideas --then you'd best keep a hat on it.

If you know what I mean.

Habit is everything in this part of the world; nothing wants to change. Our Saturday night habit was to go somewhere peaceful, like the cemetery, and drink beer. Which is what we were doing when the idea found us. Pat started things off, saying, "I'm bored."

Charlie belched and said, "Yeah, why don't we pull something?" A prank, he meant. Detergent in the town pool, trees dressed up with toilet paper. That's the sort of stuff we specialized in. But that night somehow felt different, and we couldn't get excited about ordinary shit.

We had ourselves another round of beers, and I

stared up at the stars, feeling smaller than small; and finally, after clearing his throat of a big loud gob of something, Lester said, "I know. Let's make ourselves a crop circle." Charlie belched again --he's famous for his gassy sounds --then reminded us,

"It's been done."

Not by us, but he was right. Pelican County is famous for its crop circles, and everyone knew who made them.

Old Man Multhiford, I was thinking. And just like that I knew what we could do. The idea settled in my head, and I giggled, and I said, "Hey, let's make a circle out on Multhiford's place!"

Pat straightened, eyes getting big and round. "On his farm? Are you fucking serious?"

Multhiford put maybe half of the circles on his own land. That was common knowledge. It was also known that he was insane and probably dangerous. If he spoke to you, he spoke about corn. His corn; all corn. I'd seen him talking on and on about its beauty and importance and how it was holy. Field of Loopy Dreams nonsense. Myself, I tried avoiding the man. If I saw him in town, I turned and slipped away. Even when my dad, the local Methodist minister, told me I was being rude. I didn't care. Madmen scare the piss out of me. Which is why our plan sounded fun, I suppose.

And the beer didn't hurt my mood, either.

"We aren't going to do it," Pat kept saying.

"Why not?" Charlie growled. "I like the plan!"

“Yeah,” said Lester, “we’ll put a circle in his own damned field. Nobody ever has.”

“Who lived to tell it,” Pat muttered. But it was three against one, no more need for debate. We loaded up Pat’s old pickup with shovels and ropes and lengths of lumber. Lester rode with the tools. I sat between Pat and Charlie. Driving out into the country, the three of us talked about how to do it and do it fast -how do you make a flattened circle in the middle of a corn field, in the dark, on a madman’s property? --and it was Charlie who pointed out, “It doesn’t have to be a circle. Is that some law? Why don’t we mash down something simple, like a message? We can leave words in his corn.”

“Take Me To Your Leader,” Pat joked, laughing. It seemed funny to them, and decided. To me words sounded a lot less pretty than a circle, but I knew they’d vote me down. That’s why I didn’t complain, riding quietly there between them.

Eventually we came to a low rise, barely worth noticing, and after that the ground started dropping, sliding into what used to be marshes. Past the next corner was Multhiford’s land, and Pat killed the headlights, driving by moonlight, and all of us started looking for someplace to turn off and set to work.

The mood in the cab was getting a lot more serious. On both sides of us were enormous fields of corn, green oceans of the sun-fattened stalks. Another half mile ahead was Multhiford’s farmhouse, set off the road in the only patch of trees on his section and a

half. Where in all this nothing could we hide the pickup? Behind a little machine shed, we decided, and Pat parked and killed the engine, everyone taking a deep breath before climbing to earth. I don't know much about corn --I'm as urban as you get in Pelican County --but Multhiford's corn looked particularly tall and happy, standing in all that rich black marsh soil, moving the way corn does at night. Big leaves were uncurling in the cooling air. Hundreds of acres were uncurling, and I stood off by myself, listening. I didn't hear the guys talking. I never noticed Charlie sneaking up on me. Grabbing my arms, he said, "Boo."

"Hey," I sputtered.

He handed me a length of pine and a dirty mess of hemp rope. "You make the F," he said. "That's your job."

"What F?" I asked.

"We took a vote. Take Me To Your Leader is too long." Probably true. "But if we make four big letters -"

"What?!" I snapped. I mean, I'm a minister's son. There are things I can sort of do, and things I can never do.

"But it won't take long," Charlie promised. What started as clever vandalism was becoming something more ordinary, and if I was caught, no doubt about it, my punishment was going to verge on the Eternal. The guys started walking off into the corn.

When I didn't go with them, it was Lester who got

sent back. "All you do is the F," he argued, trying to sound reasonable. "Did Charlie even tell you what the letters were?"

"I figured U, C, and K," I said. Somehow innocence didn't sound like an excuse.

"Unless you're going to spell farm or funk. Is that what we're doing here?" Lester shook his head, disappointed with me. "If you want, stay with the truck." He showed me a smile. One day he's going to be a killer salesman. "If Multhiford shows, give us a couple warning honks."

For not, I was involved. And I didn't want to wait around for that old farmer. That's why I followed the others, carrying my board and rope up close to my body, walking between the rows of tall corn. We went a couple hundred yards into the field, then huddled, deciding how to do it. "We need it seen from the air," Charlie kept saying, sketching FUCK in the soil. "Hundred foot letters. Think they'll get noticed?"

Think they'll be easy? I thought. Cutting through the rows, I paced off what felt like the right distance, then turned and started pushing over three rows at once. I was using my pine board and my muscles, but the plants were sturdy, fighting me all the way. I kept getting tired, kept losing my breath. I'd have to stop and stand, my back aching, my ears humming, and after a few breaks like that, the others had moved out ahead of me, and I couldn't feel more alone. What I was doing felt wrong. Plain, simple wrong. And that feeling is what made me tired, guilt having its way of

sapping me. It wasn't particularly late, the moon mostly full and hanging in the east, shining through a silvery haze. The air inside the corn was still, like a breath being held. It tasted thick and humid, full of living smells and weed killers. I was a town boy out where he didn't belong, all right. Turning, I tried to see the road, but all the world was corn, and I couldn't see anything but the silky tops and the stars, and the blackness between the stars, too.

Working again, I thought I heard an engine running. But when I stopped I couldn't hear anything but Charlie moving back along the big U he was building, pushing down more rows and never stopping. I was way, way behind. I made myself finish the stem of my F, then I turned and looked up, and just then I saw the sudden bright beam of a flashlight.

"Scared enough to piss your pants." I've read about it a hundred times, but I didn't think it was possible. Until then. I almost pissed mine, I'll tell you. Urine started trying to sneak right out of me.

Then I heard a crunching sound and a voice that didn't belong to any seventeen-year-old kid. "Stop right there," it said, deep and strong. "You boys stop."

It was astonishingly loud for not being a shout, and it had the wrong effect on us. We started to run. I heard Pat shout, "It's him!" and Charlie screamed,

"He's got a gun!" Then the gun was fired. Playing it back in my head, I think Multhiford aimed at the moon. I know the shot passed over me, and I was running like a maniac, heading back along the rows of

downed corn. My feet caught in the bent stalks. My head pitched forward. What I'd knocked down knocked me down now, and suddenly I took a big dive into the best farmland in the world. I can't tell you how long I was down. Fear and the beer helped keep me on my belly; my heart was pounding hard enough that I wondered if Dad could hear it. The running sounds died away, which was good news. I kept still, praying to go unseen. Then Pat laid into the horn, begging me to hurry. Multhiford answered with a second blast --another tall one --and I realized he was standing ten yards from me. Maybe less. Which was why I got up and ran again, picking a new direction. Tearing crosswise through the corn, I ran blind, getting no closer to the pickup for my trouble.

There were more honks, then the pickup coughed and accelerated, the guys having no choice but to leave me.

And I dropped from exhaustion, rolling onto my back and no fight left in me. I lay there looking up at the towering corn plants, telling myself to keep still and wait, marshaling my energies for the walk home. It was just a five-mile walk, I was thinking. I promised myself to cut down on my drinking and study hard in the fall, and all that. Then I heard a man walking through his corn. Coming closer. And just when I needed to be quiet, I got a piercing ache in my belly, and the ache wanted to move, demanding to be let out. That's what I was doing when Multhiford found me.

Beer can be a bad idea, and what you catch you can also throw away. The farmer found me heaving and coughing, vomit under my face. He shone his flashlight on me, and I turned, aware of his gun and his lean little body. I thought he would kill me out of hand. I just assumed that crazy men don't have trouble committing murder.

Except he didn't shoot. All he did was say, "I know you." I coughed again, no strength left in me.

Then he said, "Get up," and gave his shotgun a twirl. "And quit the running. I know exactly who you are."

Fame is fame, no matter where it happens.

Strangers know the famous person too well, and they don't know him at all. Like with my father, for example. He's been the Methodist minister for years, and he's considered to be the most Christian man in the county. He's got what a minister should have -- a pleasant wife and a good and pretty daughter -- but to make things fair, he's also got a half-wild son. I guess I'm some kind of test for Dad, and since my infractions are mostly tiny, I'm a test that he's passing. Maybe not in God's eyes, but at least in the local ones. The town doesn't love Dad, but it admires him. Which is the harder trick, if you know Pelican City.

Yet Dad's not the perfect Christian everyone imagines. I won't claim he drinks or loves the ladies or puts on Mom's makeup and pumps. What I mean is that he has doubts. About God and himself, mostly.

About the things people think ministers should trust in and accept with every Christian breath, every second of their eternal lives.

Early this summer I was reading in the den, and Dad came and sat, announcing, "I just saw Clarence Multhiford." He waited for half a beat, then added, "At Wal-Mart." As if that would help me understand why this was news. Then, after a long look, he said, "We talked. We had quite the conversation."

"About corn, I bet."

"Sometimes," Dad admitted. "He said that his crop is doing well, but Henshaw planted late and the Jacob brothers are sloppy.... " That's Multhiford. He always has the good luck, and he always gives big advice. Which makes him about as popular as hailstones among our local seed-cap sect, I can tell you.

Dad gave me a stare, then said, "He asked about you."

"Who did?"

"Who are we talking about?"

I dropped my book, entirely surprised. "He doesn't even know me," I sputtered. Then, "What did the son-of-a-bitch say?"

Dad's soft face turned disapproving. "Now, John," he began. "Didn't we agree that in this house --?"

"What did Multhiford ask about me?"

"How you were doing in school and where you might go to college." Dad gave a little sigh and shrug. "He suggested one of the Big Ten schools--"

"He doesn't know me," I complained.

"If he did know you," said Dad, "he'd know that you'll be lucky to reach the community college in Lanksville." And with that he gave me his patented disappointed glare, reminding me of last year's grades. "As for his interest ... well, he's always had an eye for you."

"A what?"

"Don't you notice him watching?"

Me? Me? I didn't even want to think it.

"I know he comes to Sunday services now and again. He sits in the back and watches --"

"Not me! Not me!"

Grinning now, he said, "You have noticed, haven't you?" Maybe, and maybe that's why I kept my distance from the madman. "Has he asked about me before?"

"Never," said Dad, without doubt.

I couldn't make sense of it. I didn't want to make sense of it. "Well, he's nuts. That's what that means."

Dad lifted his gaze, looking off into the distance. Then, with a certain care, he said, "I don't believe so. I know unbalanced people --I've tried to console them, without much luck --and I don't think Clarence resembles them very much." I growled, thinking of those bright insane eyes staring at me. "Do sane men make circles in the middle of fields?"

"Does Mr. Multhiford do that?"

Of course he did. Everyone knew it.

"I believe in fungi," said Dad. "It attacks the stem, causing the plant to flatten." He spoke calmly, with all

the authority of a gardener whose tomato plants died before August. "You know, there are old reports of circles. Older than him. Some date back to the 1890s."

"Made by flying saucers," I snapped.

"Have you heard Mr. Multhiford ever mention UFOs?" How could I? I didn't have conversations with him, and I wasn't going to start now. "He makes the circles," I maintained. "People have seen him doing it."

"People see him driving at night, yes. They find him watching their fields, I agree. But nobody has ever caught him flattening anyone's crop." Dad shook his head. "It's got to be a fungus."

"That loves his farm best?"

"He has the perfect soil and the best hybrids. You see? It's just a matter of chance."

I'd had enough. I stood and asked, "Why should Multhiford care about me? I'll go to college, or I won't, and it's not his business." Dad seemed to agree, but his voice trailed off before it got started. He sighed, glanced at his open hands, then sighed again. "I'm jealous of the man."

"Of who?"

"You know who." He looked straight at me. "Really, of all the people I know ... I don't know anyone happier than Clarence Multhiford"

"He's crazy, Dad. Lead-poisoned nuts."

"Fine. Maybe that's the answer." Dad looked up at the ceiling, then asked both of us, "Can you imagine

anything more terrible? Two human beings hope a third human is mentally ill, and why? Because he's too happy and too different for their tastes."

He gave me a sad little smile. Dad's got one of those faces that aren't real comfortable with happiness.

"Isn't that a horrible way to think?" he asked me. "Can't you feel even a little shame, John?"

"I know exactly who you are," Multhiford warned me. He didn't sound like a particularly happy man, but then again, he didn't sound angry, either. I saw the big double-barreled shotgun in one hand, then his flashlight found my eyes, blinding me. "Stand on up, John. Please."

He did recognize me. One hope was dashed.

"What were you boys doing? Why'd you hurt my corn that way?" I swallowed, stood. Trying to talk, I discovered that my voice had abandoned me.

"What were you doing in my field, John?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "I mean, I didn't hurt much...."

"Didn't you?" He stepped closer, the glare of his light hiding his face. But I could see him by memory, the face lean and hard and red from the sun, crazy eyes burning in the middle of it. I could smell him, his earth and corn mixed together with his unwashed bachelorhood. First with his light, then his gun, he pointed off into the distance. "Why don't we walk to the road, John? You can lead. And please, don't hurt my corn anymore."

My legs felt heavy, mired in an invisible syrup.

The madman stayed behind me. "What would your father think if he knew you were here? Would he be proud of you?"

I tried to come up with something smart to say, but the best I could do was squeak, "Probably not."

"Maybe we should go tell him."

My legs stopped moving. For that instant, I'd rather have been shot dead than have Dad know what had happened.

"Let's make a deal," said Multhiford. "I won't press charges. I won't even mention this to anyone. We'll settle up tonight, and you'll be free and clear." That sounded wonderful, for about two seconds. Then I imagined all kinds of debt-settling horrors, and I started walking again, breathing faster, picking up my pace.

"Like how?" I muttered.

"You can do some work for me."

"Tonight?"

"You don't look busy," he replied, his voice smiling. I could hear the smile in it, which made me angry. He was holding a gun at my back and feeling happy, which wasn't fair. "I need some heavy things moved, John, and I'd appreciate the help."

"My friends know I'm here," I blurted out. "If anything happens..."

"I understand." He didn't sound crazy. He sounded as if he genuinely understood everything, as if he was full of wisdom. Coming up beside me, walking on the

other side of a green wall of cornstalks, he promised, "I'll have you home in time for early service."

Shit, it was Sunday morning, wasn't it? Glancing at my watch, I saw that it was past midnight. Even if I escaped now, I couldn't beat my one A.M. curfew. But there wasn't any escape. Side by side, we stepped from the corn, the air turning cool and dry. I could breathe easier. Sounds felt sharper. Multhiford broke open his shotgun, two empty shells flying. He hadn't reloaded after firing at the moon, and realizing it made me feel even more defeated. Moonlight showed me that face that I remembered, the smile too big and happy, and his baling-wire body was dressed in ordinary farmer's clothes --jeans and comfortable boots and a simple shirt. "My truck's down this way." We walked together, him carrying his shotgun broken open, and after a little while he said, "It's a perfect night." I said nothing.

"Perfect, perfect, perfect," he was saying. I didn't offer any opinions.

"They'll come tonight, John." He took a deep breath, then said, "In a little while. Soon."

I looked at my feet, watching them move on the graveled road.

"Who's coming, John? Who do I mean?"

We reached his pickup --a big new Chevy; a rich farmer's toy --and I heard myself answering him. "Aliens in a flying hubcap," I said. Multhiford looked at me, and he laughed, telling me, "How much you know is so close to zero, son." He shook his narrow

head, enjoying himself. "So close we might as well call it nothing. And how do you like that?" Here's a certain book in the Pelican City library. I've never checked it out; I sneak it into a back corner, reading it when no one will notice. It's about crop circles, and it's got pictures from around the world. Half a dozen pictures show local circles, always from the air and mostly on Multhiford's land. I won't admit it to anyone, but I like looking at them. I don't believe in UFOs. Aliens have better places to be, I think. It's just that the circles and the other marks are kind of pretty, obvious and orderly against the bright green crops. I've even secretly admired Multhiford for his skill, working by moonlight, or less light, working by himself and making Pelican County into the crop circle capital of this hemisphere.

"Investigators" come through every spring and summer --wrong-looking, wrong-sounding people from California and the shadows of Stonehenge. It's not enough to say that we watch them with a certain suspicion. But to his credit, Multhiford won't have anything to do with them. I know this: If he was making circles and acting as a tour guide, then I think something bad would have happened to him long ago. If you know what I mean. I mean, if you keep your oddness inside the family, all is fine. But ask the world to watch, and the locals won't be so patient.

That library book barely mentions Multhiford. Just a quick paragraph saying that one farm has more circles than the others, and its owner --unnamed --

has the best yields of any local farmer.

Year in, year out.

I've read that part twenty times, in secret, and honest to God, it never occurred to me just what that means.

We pulled off the county road, driving up to Multhiford's farmhouse. It was normal at a distance, tall and angular with the usual shade trees huddled around it. But the legends made me expect more, and sure enough, it wasn't long before I was noticing the statues.

The old farmer built them out of car parts, lumber and crap from the local landfill. Nobody knew just why. No two were the same, but they all looked like weird corn, leaves oddly shaped and cobs oversized and their stalks twisted every which way. It was just like I'd heard, down to the general spookiness. I watched the statues watch me as we drove past, and I halfway expected them to pick up and move. To chase me, maybe.

Multhiford put us in reverse, backing in between two metal buildings. We climbed down. I found myself staring at a stack of concrete blocks and chunks, rusted fingers of rebar sticking out here and there. The tailgate dropped with a powerful crash. Multhiford told me, "I want you to fill it for me. Agreed?"

I picked up a little chunk and threw it in. It hit the plastic liner with a thunderous boom.

"Here," he said, "use these."

Work gloves fell at my feet. Putting them on, I smelled their owner on leather. I set to work, throwing in half a dozen blocks before I noticed the voice, quiet and steady and almost sane. Except the words themselves were anything but sane.

“People didn't domesticate corn,” he said. “If you think about it.” I'd rather not, thank you.

“It's corn and the other crops that did the domesticating. They took wandering hunters and made them into farmers. They tamed a scarce ape and made it civilized.” A pause, then he asked, “Why, John? Why did corn and wheat and the rest of them do it?”

I didn't think I was listening, but I stopped and looked at him, trying to find some kind of answer.

The farmer was standing safely off to one side, shaking his head. “Look at the world from the corn's eyes. It finds an ape to enslave. We serve it by plowing the ground and caring for it. We bring water, manure, and propagate its children for it. And the corn rewards us with food and wealth.” He paused, taking a big breath. “Farming makes cities possible. Cities make armies possible. And the armies marched off to conquer new lands to plow and plant.” Another pause, then he added, “For a tropical grass with no certain parent --a bastard, that's what corn is --it sure has done awfully well for itself. Don't you think?” If someone had asked what I'd be doing tonight, I wouldn't have pictured myself flinging concrete and suffering through a loopy history lesson.

“The old empires thrived so long as they cared for their crops. You must know that from school, John. Greece. Rome. The Soviet Union. All failed as farmers; all succumbed. That's how our crops punish us when we can't keep them happy.” I paused in my work, telling myself that the pile was getting smaller.

“You don't believe me,” said Multhiford. Then he gave a big laugh, asking, “Do I take care of my corn, or does the corn take care of Old Man Multhiford?” I looked at the shiny new pickup, then out at the perfect rows of lush green grass. Suspecting a trick, I said, “I don't know.”

“The ancients worshipped their crops,” he offered. “Are we smarter, or are we less aware? Maybe what's happened, John, is that we're so thoroughly enslaved that we can't even see the obvious anymore.”

With a half-block of concrete in my hands, I gave a silly shout. “I'm nobody's slave!”

“You don't eat?” He laughed again. “Well, maybe not. I can't claim to have seen you at your supper table.”

I threw the half-block on the pile, watching it roll and catch.

“Do you think much about the future, John?” I wished he'd quit saying my name. I said, “Sometimes,” and wished I hadn't. I started flinging concrete like someone possessed, grunting and groaning, making my arms and shoulders start to burn.

But Multhiford spoke with a big voice, no way to

ignore him. "In the future," he said, "think what we'll do for our corn. Today, this minute, scientists are learning how to change its genetics, giving it extra ears and nitrogen nodules, then fancy leaves to suck up every drop of sunlight. We'll make it grow faster. It'll be tougher. We'll give it new jobs. Making medicines. Human hormones. Fancy clean fuels." He paused, then let out a big sigh. "You're a bright young man. I can tell that for myself."

I didn't respond, but I could feel his compliment worming into me.

"What I'm saying --listen, John --is that life will get richer for the corn. And for people, too. In a few centuries, both of us will be living on Mars and the moons of Jupiter. Eventually, what with our birthrate--who knows? Somewhere someone will get rid of farmers, leaving the corn to care for itself. Simple minds grafted into their stalks, say. And just imagine if billions of plants were to start linking minds, improving themselves however they want --"

"Corn's stupid!" I shouted, with a panicked inflexibility. The block in my hands fell free, landing against my foot. But I didn't grimace or hop around, telling Multhiford, "Stupid, stupid! And we're in charge! We eat it, for Christ sake. It doesn't eat us."

He shrugged as if to tell me my words didn't matter.

And I doubted myself, for that instant.

"Imagine the far future," he said, "and the day we meet aliens rather like ourselves. What do we give in

trade, John? Our crops would be valuable. A multitude of uses, designed for a multitude of worlds. Think of how many green worlds might welcome our corn.”

My anger started seeping out of me. I couldn't keep hold of it.

“Corn has spread over this planet. Why not across the galaxy?” Not once, never, had such a loopy idea gotten inside my skull.

“Corn prospers, carried along by commerce and conquest.” He said it, then paused. Then he gave a big dramatic sigh before asking, “Who survives the next billion years, John? Human beings, arrogant and blind, or the adaptable crops that we tend?”

I said, “We do,” out of instinct.

“You know this, do you?”

I said, “You're insane. That's what I know.” I'd been thinking it all night, but finally saying it did nothing. I must have thought the words would be like thunder in a clear sky, the old man left shaking. Except his only reaction was to smile. And the clear sky swallowed up my words, leaving everything still and quiet.

I couldn't stand the silence. I picked up a huge block of concrete, getting ready to heave it.

“No need,” said the smiling madman. “That's enough now.” At last! I dropped the block and peeled off the gloves, wiping the sweat from my hands.

But Multhiford said, “Just a minute. Now I want you up in the bed and throwing it all back down. Put

everything in the same pile again.”

“What?” I blurted. “That doesn't make sense.” Shaking his head, he asked, “Does spelling a dirty word in my field make sense?” He was laughing louder than ever, telling me, “You're being punished, John. Remember. Pointless is the point in being punished.” I wondered if running away would help.

“Put the gloves back on, John.”

I did as I was told, flexing my hands, listening to the creaky old leather and thinking, just for that little instant, that this was what I deserved. Multhiford said nothing during the unloading. He leaned against one of his metal buildings, his face dark against the moonlit metal wall. It was nearly three in the morning when I finished. I said, “Done,” and he came over, giving the bed an examination, then pointing. “Missed some pieces.” I tossed them overhand onto the pile. Except the last bit, which I threw out into the field of stupid corn.

“And sweep it clean, too.”

He gave me a blunt straw broom, then climbed into the cab. I did a rush job and jumped in the other side, thinking I was going home. I was already planning what to tell the guys, including embellishments.

Multhiford's legend was going to grow, I'd decided. The night was looking worthwhile, thinking about my own little future.

We drove maybe fifty feet, then stopped.

“What do you think of my friend?”

We were parked in front of a phony cornstalk. I was close enough to touch it. I couldn't help but stare at the thing.

“What do you think?” he repeated.

It had a cob that wasn't a cob. It was made from bits of smooth glass, each bit looking more like an eye than a kernel. The plant itself was painted black, and some kind of wiring was sewn into the stalk. Its roots weren't roots, either. They looked like worms or muscular tendrils. Scrap plastic and pounded metal had been shaped to make it seem that the plant was moving, walking on its roots. And its leaves were thick and wrong-shaped, reminding me of stubby arms. A lot of arms, I was thinking.

“I wish I'd done a better job,” said the old farmer. “I wish I was a stronger artist.”

Except it wasn't bad. I mean, forced to look, I had a real feeling for the thing. I was impressed enough that I almost said so, catching my tongue just as we started rolling again.

Multhiford didn't bother with headlights. He had us on the county road, keeping it slow. Toward town, but never fast. I could see the town's lights in the distance, and I watched the field passing on my right. There wasn't any better corn in the world, I was thinking. Madman or not, Multhiford always planted the best hybrid, always on the perfect days, and all at once I was thinking about him and his noise about the future ... thinking my own crazy thoughts ... and I realized we were coasting, the farmer's boot off the

pedal and him asking, "What if people could travel in time? I don't know how. Maybe we'd have to hammer together some dead stars, or build some wormhole do-dad. But what if we could?" I wouldn't look at him. I made up my mind, watching the field, staring out at the blurring rows.

"People might visit our hunting ancestors and thank them. Pay homage, we could. It would be a religious event, and we'd select only our finest, holiest pilgrims for the honor."

I didn't look at him, but my resolve was slipping. The rows were crawling past as we ground to a halt. I felt my heart pounding, not fast but each beat like an explosion.

"Our finest pilgrims," he said again.

It wasn't a light that I saw over the field. It had no color and made no shadows, and it didn't even have a real shape that I can name. But inside it were motions, energies. Without deciding to move, I opened my door and jumped down, gravel crunching under me. Then with a calm dry voice, Multhiford said,

"Go on." He reached clear over to touch me, saying, "They're expecting you. Hurry on."

I ran. Before I could get scared, I shot across the roadside ditch and into the field. I wasn't even running, it was more like flying, everything dreamy and slow. Leaves slapped my face. I lost sight of my target. Then, just when I thought I was lost, I felt a presence, electric and close, and the air tasted of

comet soils and perfect manures, working machinery and some kind of vibrant, tireless life.

The ground under me was covered with gently flattened cornstalks. For the third time in a night, I fell; and when I tried to get up I had hands grabbing at me, holding me down while voices sang, speaking just to me. The voices knew my name. There wasn't anything they didn't know about me. From the ends of time they told me as much, then whispered, "Be at ease." A million pilgrim voices sang, "John, be at ease."

I tried to obey, roots swirling past my nose.

Stalks of every color, thick and thin, crowded around me, leaving no room for air.

I tried speaking.

Before I could, they said, "Quiet. Quiet, quiet." I kept perfectly silent.

Then they broke into a shared song, dry leathery leaf-limbs rolling me onto my back, giving me a larger view. The pilgrims were tall, too tall to measure, stretching into a sky full of messy colors and countless stars and swift bright ships of no particular shape; and the song deafened me, cutting through my saturated brain; and finally, after a million years of listening, my eyes closed and I fell asleep. Or unconscious. Or maybe, just for a moment, I died. I woke when someone shook me.

It was Mr. Multhiford's hand on my shoulder, and it was his voice saying,

"Almost morning, John."

I smelled normal green corn. The farmer above me was framed by the brightening sky. Three times I tried to sit up, then he helped me with my fourth try, bringing me to my feet.

“Some evening,” was his verdict. “Wouldn't you agree?” I couldn't even speak.

“I've been where you were,” he confessed. “Once. Just once.” He let those words work on me for a moment, then added, “Believe me. All you need is one time.”

“But why?” I managed, making my parched throat work.

“Why us?” A big shrug, then he said, “They like us. With me, they get a damned fine farmer who keeps their secrets. With you? They see someone who's going to do something good for them. I don't know what exactly. I don't know when. But they told me about you --”

“Told you?”

“Years and years ago,” he said, laughing again. “They tell you something once, believe me, you remember.”

“What else did they tell you?”

“Next year is dry, and there's an early frost. For instance.” He looked off into the distance, then added, “In twelve years, plus a few weeks, my heart gives out and I die.”

“You know that?” I whispered.

He shrugged his shoulders as if saying, “So what?” Then he pointed, asking, “Do you see that bent stalk

over there, John? Well, you and I both know it's real. It exists. It occupies a place and doesn't need us touching it to make it what it is.”

“I guess not “

“Look back through time, and there's the past. There's me planting my corn, and you drinking beer with your pals. It's every instant of our lives, good and not, and lives like that can't be killed. Not by heart attacks, at least.” He gave me a big wink, then added, “That's the best thing they ever told me, John. We're always here, always living this life.” A big happy smile, and he said, “So do it right. Live as though you'll always live it, because you will be. Because that's just the way these things are.”

We rode into town without talking, nothing worthwhile left to say. Early risers saw us together, and they stared. When we pulled up in front of my house, Dad practically exploded from the front door, and when I climbed down he screamed at me and hugged me and gave me a sloppy wet kiss on the cheek. He'd just gotten off the phone with Charlie. He thought he knew the story. “I'm so furious with you,” he told me, never looking happier. Then he glanced at Mr. Multhiford, saying, “Something awful might have happened.” But he showed no malice toward the farmer, either. And then Mr. Multhiford drove away, without so much as a goodbye wave, and I was left to suffer a couple more hugs, then the unrestrained affections of my sister and weepy mom.

They thought they knew. Vandalism. Gunfire. And

I was missing, presumed wounded. Maybe dead.

Feeling halfway dead, I went inside to eat and shower and put on some good clothes. Dad left for early service. I made it to the eleven o'clock service, finding the guys waiting for me on the front lawn. It was Charlie who told me that they'd just come from Multhiford's, and did I know there was a new circle?

I gave a little nod and the beginnings of a smile.

"He caught you and made you pound it out," said Charlie.

"Is that what happened?" asked Lester.

"I bet it is," said Pat.

We were all dressed for church, standing in a knot, watching people streaming inside. After a few seconds, I said, "That's it exactly. He made me pound it out."

"How's he make them?" Charlie wanted to know. "With boards and rope? Like we figured?"

"Yeah," I told them. "We were right."

"So now we know," Charlie declared, almost as happy as Dad. "It makes last night worth it, huh? Getting shot at. Being chased. We sure as hell worried about you, let me tell you."

I didn't say anything.

"After church," he said, "come over to my place. Help us finish off last night's beer."

Lester and Pat made agreeable sounds, punching me in the arm. I still hadn't answered when Dad came outside, heading straight for me. The guys scattered in something just short of panic. Oh, well. From

where I was standing I could see the edge of town, green fields stretching around the world; and just then, just for a moment, little snatches of the future became clear in my head. I saw myself in college. I saw myself grown up, changing the shapes of living molecules. Making new kinds of corn....

To the corn, I'm famous.

"This afternoon," said Dad, "We'll discuss your punishment." I blinked and turned toward him, saying, "Fine." Then he hugged me hard once again. For a long time. People were watching, but I didn't care. I stood there and took it, only squirming a little bit, and I even came close to admitting how good that hug --and everything --felt just then. Know what I mean?

The Tournament

The round of 1 048 576

The Net calls everyone it selects. That's the rule. Always at five in the afternoon, Eastern Double-Daylight Time. Always on the Friday before June's first Monday, the bulk of the month reserved for little else. More than a million phones sing out at once, their owners picking up as one, nervously hoping to hear the Net's cool, unruffled voice giving them the glorious news. Another Tournament is at hand! The best of our citizens will be pitted against each other, in a myriad of contests, the single-elimination adventure culminating in honor, wealth and an incandescent and genuinely deserved fame.

Some contestants like being with friends when the call comes. Not me. Bette claims I'm scared of being embarrassed by a silent phone. Maybe so. But I think it's because my first call was a surprise, coming when I was a kid –barely eighteen-- and expecting nothing. I'm at least as superstitious as the next idiot, I'll admit it. And I was alone that first time as well as every time since. This is my seventeenth Tournament; I like my atmosphere of anxious solitude, thank you. And I won't change one damned thing.

Five o'clock. My phone sings, and my hands shake. Opening the line, I watch my viewing wall fill with the Net's milk-on-jade symbol, and the expected voice

says, "Hello, Mr. Avery Masters. You are ranked 20,008 in the national pool, forty-seventh in your district. Congratulations, sir. Details will follow, and as always, the best of luck to you."

"Thanks," I manage, breaking into a smile. Forty-seventh is my best local ranking ever, but in truth, I'd hoped for better. My training has been going great; all my qualifying tests are up. But then again, who's to bitch? Positive thoughts, positive results. That's what coaches tell you. With that in mind, I brighten my smile, reading about Monday's opponent.

Ms. June Harryman -- a district legend. She's deep in her eighties, both hips plastic and a carbon rod fused to a regenerated spine. She's made fifty-one appearances in the Tournament, including its very first year, and while she never finishes high, she's always there, always full of pluck, always garnering local praise and national mention.

No, I think, I can't ignore the lady.

Don't look past tomorrow, coaches tell you. Even if tomorrow isn't for three days.

Our morning event is a 10K race, and the Net has given Ms. Harryman a twenty-five minute head start. That's a brutal lead, I'm thinking. It's probably as much for her hips as her age. Then comes our afternoon game--some kind of puzzle; that's all I'm told-- and in the evening, in a tiny studio not ten minutes from my apartment, we'll go toe-to-toe in U.S. geography.

I bet the old gal knows a lot of geography. What

could be worse, I'm thinking, than being knocked out in the opening round by some low-rank half-artificial grandmother?

When the phone rings again, I mute it. It's probably Bette calling to congratulate me, then tease me about my opponent. Except I'm not in the mood to be teased. Just to feel confident, I start naming state capitals. And I forget Guam's, which puts me into a panic. I'm taking a refresher course when Bette arrives -- a breasty, big-hipped woman strolling into my apartment without sound. I barely notice her as she turns through dozens of sports channels, finally finding what she wants on the Net and cranking up the volume until my ears hurt.

"According to friends," says a well-groomed reporter, "she felt chest pains as she reached for the phone. It was five o'clock exactly." A lean, white-haired woman hovers over his shoulder. Ms. June Harryman. "An artificial heart is being implanted --"

"What?" I cry out.

-- with Ms. Harryman's long-term prospects deemed excellent."

"Didn't you know?" Bette's round face smiles, thoroughly amused. "Hasn't it told you?"

It means the Net, which has to know. The Net handles emergency calls, controls every autodoc, and identifies consequences in an instant. Of course it knows.

A light blinks on my console. Punching the button, I hear:

“Mr. Masters, you have a bye for next Monday.” Infinitely patient and incapable of amusement, the voice gives no sign of being impressed with my remarkable luck. “Enjoy your weekend, sir. And we’ll see you on Tuesday morning.”

524 288

Reach the first round, and you're guaranteed a few dollars. It doesn't pay for a cheap treadmill or two hours of forced hypnosis, but it's a wage, and for some people it's all they want. The illusion of being professional, that sort of thing.

Payoffs accelerate slowly at first; you need to get out of the first week before you earn a living wage. Win your district -- my goal of goals--and you'll have a comfortable life. But then come the regionals and the authentic wealth. And if you can defeat all twenty of your opponents -- one of us does that trick every year-- the Net awards you a billion dollars, tax-free, then transmits to you every congratulation from every one of your forgotten cousins.

Bette says the Tournament is silly. She says that a happy, wealthy nation needs better obsessions. But I don't take her teasing too seriously; I'm naturally confident and self-assured, I hope. And besides, she lets me tease her in turn. I like telling her she's one of those stuffy souls who pretend outrage, knowing they lack the talents needed to win. “Poor Bette,” [say, 'without mercy. “Poor, poor Bette.”

I make a fair living with these June competitions.

Then for the rest of my year I'm in training, always preparing, always working my body and mind into shape for next year's shot at immortality.

After Tuesday's competition, Bette calls to congratulate me.

"Did you watch?" I ask.

"No," she lies. "I just saw your name posted, that's all."

It was my first day of real competition, and I'm already among the last quarter million contestants. Today's opponent was a man-child, a giant built of muscle and sinew, and for the morning's contest I was the one awarded handicap points. That's how the Net keeps things interesting. It has files on our body types, muscle types, age and general physiology, and the formulas it uses have served well for half a century. Even with my handicap points, I was behind at lunchtime, the man-child lifting a mountain of iron over his bony brow. But in the afternoon, sitting in a VR booth, I piloted my biplane in combat, downing dozens of enemy craft and taking a healthy lead into this evening.

Bette tells me, "I didn't know you were such an expert in algebra."

"So you watched, did you?"

"Me? Never." Her face covers my wall; she doesn't bother softening it with a vanity program. "That was pretty cocky of you, telling that kid to lift quadratic equations for a change."

"You did see it," I shout.

She says, "Never."

She tells me, "I just hear the gossip, that's all."

I yawn, then say, "Bette, you know the rules."

"You need your rest. I know." But before she vanishes, she says, "I just wanted to tell you, I've got a feeling about this year."

"What feeling?" I ask, trying not to seem too curious.

A wink, an amused grin. Then she says, "Never mind." She waves me off, saying, "You need sleep, and never mind."

262 144

I wake from a dream where I'm throwing basketballs in neat arcs, each one dropping through a hoop tinier than a bracelet.

Some competitors pay big money for implanted dreams.

This dream is genuine, which makes it feel like an omen.

Wednesday's opponent is a smallish woman, not quite young, and she shoots from Xs made by the Net, her marks closer to the hoop than mine. As is fair. Early on, either because of nerves or simple bad luck, she misses a string of free throws, then more distant shots. Then we play some one-on-one, weights on my shoes, and I blow past her just the same, getting out to a fantastic lead. She's so demoralized that she doesn't even finish the afternoon's puzzle, throwing its plastic pieces across the gym floor, then stalking

off in tears.

I want to tell her, “The Net notices. That isn't going to help next year's ranking doing that crap.”

I want to say, “Play hard and face the consequences.” But instead I concentrate on my puzzle, finishing it in half the allotted time. It's a geometric wonder full of shifting rainbows, and I take it to the nearest robot, placing it on the offered hand as the sexless voice says, “Your opponent has withdrawn, Mr. Masters. Thank you, sir, and until tomorrow”

131 072

We race diamond-frame bicycles in the morning, my opponent given a substantial head start, and after fifty kilometers of hills, wind and a sudden rainstorm, I finish just twenty meters behind her, in a virtual draw.

In the afternoon we navigate VR landers over a cratered landscape, two hours of hovering and repeated hard landings leaving us even closer in the standings.

My opponent is new to the district. She's smart, tough and capable of a withering stare. Tonight's contest is natural history, and as I take my podium, one hand fiddling with my buzzer, I glance her way and show a weak smile, claiming “You'll win. Easily.”

“Shut up,” she advises.

She says, “I know all the tricks, son.”

Old enough to be my mother, yet made of sterner

stuff, and I have to admire her. I win by points in the end -- by almost nothing -- and receive a fair amount of local coverage as a consequence. ("Early round dramatics!" That kind of thing.) But what's memorable for me is my opponent's whispered offer to see me later. "After you lose, darling boy." Romantically? I wonder. And she laughs, saying, "Hot wet sloppy fun," and giving me a lecherous wink.

I'm polite in my refusal and secretly intrigued.

Later, lying awake in bed, I wonder if her offer is genuine. Or was she attempting some kind of trick with my spirit, in revenge?

65 536

Friday, and I'm fuzzy. Stale. Half-dead.

Marksmanship is the morning's hell -- rifles, shotguns, bows and arrows, homemade spears -- and I end up deep in a hole. My opponent is a child, barely twenty and lucky to have made it this far into the Tournament. We play a board game in the afternoon, my strategies crippled by his wild maneuvers, and finally, with a ragged attempt at being the good sport, I concede defeat to the little shit.

In order to live for the year on my winnings, I need to make it to the second Monday.

This Tournament looks like a bust.

But the kid comes from an enclave of fundamentalists, and he hasn't any grip on things as non-Christian as Chinese history. Standing behind

my podium, I field questions generated by the Net. I buzz first, then answer. Buzz, and answer. And answer. And answer. Before we've left the Ming Dynasty, I've pulled into a comfortable lead. And then I stop buzzing letting the boy have his stabs, inexperience giving him penalty points and allowing me to take whatever leftovers are easiest.

Arriving home, flush with victory, I find Bette waiting, all smiles. "He almost caught you in the Mao years."

"Did not," I say.

"What's it matter either way?" Bette has no competitive spark, unless it's her fierce desire not to compete. "Let me take you out for a drink. It's the weekend now. Isn't one little drink legal?"

I feel lucky and at ease with myself. It's not the three beers that make me drunk. It's everything. And later, out of sheer joy, I coax Bette into my bed, using her round, unexcellent body until both of us seem happy. This isn't our first time; we're modem friends, meaning everything is possible. But afterward, in the dark, I start making mental preparations for next week, part of me wondering how I can coax Bette into leaving me, giving me solitude and the chance to recoup.

As if reading my mind, she rises, dresses and goes.

Then I sleep without dreams, crossing a great black portion of my weekend in a limp leap.

32 768

Monday again.

Friday's fuzziness is gone. I'm sharp, smooth and self-assured, pounding at white balls pitched by human-shaped, Net-piloted robots, driving them toward a distant fence, then over it. Never, not even when hitting VR balls in my own bedroom, have I been this good for so long. And the handful of spectators—other people's families, mostly--seems caught up in the show, breaking into applause and stomping their feet.

The afternoon's puzzle is a knot begging to be untied. My fingers are magical, touching and tugging accomplishing the feat in what seems like an instant. Without effort, almost.

The night's subject is geology -- rocks to be named; tectonics to be described-- and of course I win there, too. Afterwards, I can't even recall my opponent's face. A man, I know. Of my age, I'm almost sure. But his name and every other shred of identity have fallen away, lost.

16 384

She's tall. Strong. Quick.

Yet to make our fight even more fair, she wears hard little boxing gloves and a suit of puffy, self-cooling rubber. We're here to go a full six rounds –the morning's first contest. Both of us work hard to pace ourselves. You can win an event too well, if you're not

careful, spending all of your juices too soon. That's why we dance and stab, dance and stab. But then for no clear reason, in the middle of the final round, I decide to charge and strike, driving her back into her own corner, then hammering away with a series of grunting wet ugly punches.

My own gloves are soft and oversized, yet I manage to do damage. The woman's head, pretty in a doll-like way, snaps back as the final bell sounds. Consciousness lost, she topples, boom, and lies motionless on the clean white tarp. The Net deploys an autodoc while the robot referee tries to usher me aside.

Awaiting their turns are the other competitors-- seated; knowledgeable; enthralled-- and thinking of them, I pull away from the referee and stand over my victim.

In a moment of pure theater, I scream at her, trying to coax her to rise and fight me again.

8 192

The net congratulates me; it's become a kind of habit.

My opponent -- a man of my general age, build and intensity -- is being consoled by the same smooth voice.

He defeated me in the high jump, then at gin rummy. Then he proved that he knows more about the solar system too, edging me out in our last event. Yet according to the numbers, I'm the victor. I drew

lousy cards this afternoon, each card from a thoroughly randomized deck, then played them with all the skill I could muster. That skill was worth a bonus. And since we were almost identical in three categories, the bonus becomes everything in the end.

“Not fair,” cries the other man. “This isn't right!”

“Fair or not,” the Net reminds him, “our rules are public knowledge, all devised by human beings.”

“A poor sport,” I offer, not quite whispering.

The Net says, “Yes,” through the robot beside me. Then the second robot tells my opponent, “You're welcome to file a grievance, should you wish. I can supply you with names and e-dresses for any human official --”

“Shut up!” roars the man.

I stare at him, understanding him. Neither of us have ever won the second Wednesday. Tensions have their way of mounting, making us into new people. Strangers, even to ourselves.

My opponent notices my stare, then charges over to say, “It likes you.”

“Who does?”

An accusing glance at the nearest robot, at its solitary glass eye. Then he seems to lose his courage, taking a huge breath before telling me, “Forget it. Just never mind.”

“Go home,” the Net advises. “Start preparing for next year, sir.”

I've never seen such despair on a face, and that could be me. Shattered. Cheated. Slinking off in

shame.

"It likes you," he had said.

I glance at the glass eye, then, as if in reflex, I look far away.

4 096

Eight competitors remain in our district trials.

Our local millions are watching. We can pretend to forget them, pretend we don't care about them, pretend every color of ignorance possible. But some of the millions have come to watch today -- odd souls who aren't family members, who prefer their sports in person -- and with them is an air of expectations, that sense of breath coming fast, then held in the tensest moments.

It's a good day for tensions. From the standard pool of one hundred and eighty-eight physical contests, the Net has selected that event most loathed:

Figure skating.

There are eight of us, none expert. We're not even particularly good, as it goes. I know I avoid skates as much as possible, and my weights and running and other athleticisms have blunted my grace. What matters is survival. What wins is a good double lutz and no falls. Balancing myself between disaster and inspiration, I win technical points from the Net and the human judges, thank god, don't kill me for my lack of art.

Then after lunch, over neat green tables, we play

pool, four games running simultaneously, spectators in the grandstand above. Every time I stoop to shoot, I think of Bette. We've played a few times, me for the practice and her for the hell of it. Somehow remembering her sloppiness is comforting, her self-mocking laughter inspirational. Even when I take my bad shots, slop saves me. I build a lead that's enough to weather the evening's contest, which is cooking. And on this day, in a battle between two strangers, I prove myself to be the superior skater/pool player/chef.

Bette's right; this is a silly business.

Sitting at home, I ask the Net, "If everyone in the Tournament played everyone else, and I mean play them in every contest, would the same person win the whole shebang?"

"I can't say," it responds. Without hesitation, without interest.

"This year's winner faces how many of us? Twenty." I shake my head, tossing my reader to the floor. "Twenty of us, and sixty contests. Is that a ridiculous measure of excellence?"

The response is quick but not immediate. There's an instant of silence, then the Net informs me, "Reality is chaotic. I can't calculate all the variables in one contest, much less all that can happen in a full Tournament."

I say nothing.

"By definition," it adds, "every Tournament is inadequate to the task."

I barely listen, thinking my own thoughts.

“Any more questions, Mr. Masters?”

“Did you know,” I ask, “that billiard balls hitting each other lose their exact positioning in space?”

“Yes,” it replies. Of course it knows.

I can't recall how many collisions are needed, but it has to do with the quantum vagueness of the universe. Leaning back in my chair, I close my eyes, imagining colored balls in motion -- countless; ceaseless -- chaos reigning on a smooth green table without rims, without ends.

2 048

It's evening, early.

I've come home to pack, getting ready for Alaska. Bette has come to help, which means teasing me for my tastes in socks. There's just one pair of district competitors left, they cover my largest wall, spouting on about architecture. I should be there, enjoying the applause and flashing lights, but my opponent -- last year's district winner; this year's first seed -- was disqualified this morning. The Net didn't like the taste of his blood. Using subtle, parts-per-ten-billion drugs, he had tried lifting his abilities just enough to win. As they say, “On the even playing field, molehills count.” But then again, how do you hide your molehill?

What, I wonder, was that idiot thinking?

Bette wants to know what will happen to him.

“A suspension,” I say. “For a few years, I guess.” I

close my suitcase, then sag, feeling almost fragile. Last night I dreamt of losing, and I woke convinced that I would lose. Today's contests favored my opponent; I'd had a good run of it this year, I was thinking. Nobody was more surprised by the disqualification than me.

"Why did he take the drugs?" Bette asks.

"To win," I respond, by reflex. "He was looking past me, aiming for the regionals."

She stands beside me, a meaty breast nudging my arm. "Did he really hope to slip past the Net's tests?"

"Some of us do," I grumble. "I've told you the rumors." All the big names -- Yang and Fogg, Christianson and the rest -- use special elixirs cooked up in dark foreign labs. Their advantage is a hundredth of a second, a question in fifty. No test known can catch every illegal device --

"What if he wanted to be caught?" she asks.

I glance at her, then try changing subjects. "Come with me. I'll pay your way."

"Since when do you want a cheering section?" She has a hearty laugh and a way of seeing through me. "I thought you preferred your friends out of sight and mind."

"Just this once," I say.

"Maybe," she responds. But later, after making love, she tells me, "No, I should stay home."

"Why?"

"I've got crops to watch."

Bette is peculiar. In a society of wealth and

relentless leisure, she raises her own food and makes most of her own clothes. She's something from the Dawn of Man, which I find fascinating; and like a thousand other times, I tease her for it.

She shrugs in the dark, then changes the subject. "I've watched replays of the disqualification. I saw your opponent's face when he was told." A pause, then, "Maybe he didn't know it, but I think he wanted to be caught."

"Did he?"

"He did so well last year." A deep sigh. "What if this year wasn't nearly as much fun?"

I can't understand her point.

"You've always said that all you want is to win the district. You don't expect to ever go farther."

Suddenly I'm glad that Bette is staying home. With a dose of cold fury, I tell her, "Go watch your fucking crops."

I'm more startled by the words than is she.

1 024

My opponent is the fourth seed in our district, the prohibitive favorite today. Beat her, and I'm not just the local champion -- our lone warrior against the nation's best -- but I'm also one of the year's Cinderellas, guaranteed all the attention that comes to statistical flukes.

For these next two weeks, the order of events is reversed. Mental contests in the morning. The usual afternoon game. And finally, in the long sub-Arctic

dusk, a physical contest -- something full of drama to captivate the distant throngs.

Today we're running 100 meter sprints, 512 identical races held in and around Anchorage. I enter it trailing, but not by much. To win, I have to make up my opponent's head start, then pass her, winning by a leisurely .3 of a second. "Just do a great race," I tell myself, settling into my starting block and looking at a string of lights --red, red, red, green. I wait. My opponent goes with her green light and a sharp tone. I wait. My red lights run to green -- beep -- and I leap up, racing the length of my narrow black lane, working to relax, to breathe, then extending my chest at the finish, twisting my head sideways to watch the numbers appear on the giant scoreboard.

"No!" I won by .299 seconds, which means, I realize, we have tied. An equal pile of points has been awarded to each of us, and we'll have to run again.

"Rest," we're told, by the Net and by our gracious human hosts. "You'll go again in an hour. Relax."

An hour later, we run mirrors of our first races.

Again, we tie.

This is big news. Huge news. In the next hour, every sports network and mathematical hobby channel sends reporters to supply interviews and inane commentary. A hyperactive fellow dances around me, begging for my thoughts, goals and dreams; and in lieu of honesty, I sputter cliches. "Concentration wins," I say. "One stride at a time," I say. Then gazing into a hundred floating, sparrow-

sized cameras, I wave and say, "Hi, Mom!"

Everything is the same for the second rerace -- the lane; the crisp air; the dreamy remoteness of the world -- but this time I try willing myself to greater speeds. I roar out of the block. My opponent is a distant form, and then she's forgotten. I make my legs burn. My lungs burn. I punch my chest through the laser beam, and turning, my eyes fuse on the board.

This is Hell.

My time hasn't changed, not by a hundredth of a second.

For the rest of my life, I realize, I'll have to race this race, never able to win, never willing to lose.

Then I think to look for my opponent, puzzled that she isn't standing where I expect. What's happened? A bent, hobbling figure is in her lane, the right leg bloodied by a terrific fall. I never saw her fall. I was too focused to notice, although tonight, in my hotel room, I'll watch the event a thousand times. Straining for speed, she tripped over her own foot, colliding with the ground and sliding, then rising, staggering toward the useless finish line.

The Net speaks through the scoreboard, saying, "Congratulations, Mr. Masters. You are champion of District Three-Eleven."

The woman is in agony, face streaked with tears, the healthy fresh blood streaming along her leg. Wanting to be the good sport, I walk toward her; when my hand is offered, she slaps it away. When I say, "Next year," she tries to kick me with her bad leg.

“Get back!” she shouts. “I’m racing here, asshole!”

512

This is who I am:

I’m that jerk at the party who knows everything about Byzantium, the chemistry of phosphorus, dog breeding, homosexual Presidents, and the fate of the Universe.

I’m the guy taken third for a pick-up game of basketball, then sinks ten circus shots in a row, winning the game for his team as well as winning the hotdog reputation.

I’m a tower of confidence, admired by some, envied by most, and generally perceived as being distant. Remote. Cold to the point of glacial. (Although that’s far from fair.)

I’m a mortal -- prince, stable boy or whomever -- who just might have once been touched by the gods.

And now, maybe for the first time, I realize how I look to others. I find myself surrounded by myself -- the 511 other district winners --and there comes a powerful urge to wilt, turn to dust, and blow away.

I’m not qualified to be here.

There’s only one other competitor with a lower rank, and I’m watching her charge through the obstacle course, through mud and hoops and across greased rails and rope bridges. She’s a portrait of focus and sputtery white energy. I envy her. We’re performing in a giant stadium filled with screaming fans, yet I seem able to hear her strong breathing, the

wet grunts, and the squish of mud underfoot.

On a slippery slope, she plants a foot and turns too quickly, the crack like an explosion. lingering in the air long after she has collapsed.

“That knee's finished,” says the competitor beside me, his tone almost amused. I recognize him. He's Elias Fogg, this year's Number One seed: a tall and handsome man. No, a beautiful man. He's not my opponent, yet he seems to know me. As the crowd moans in one voice, he turns and remarks, “Well, now you're their favorite.”

“Whose favorite?”

He smiles as if facing an idiot. “Who do you think?”

The spectators? Is that who he means?

“Now you're the one most like them.” He grins with effortless menace, no set of teeth more perfect than his. “Among us, you're the closest to being average. Ordinary.” A pause. “Pathetic.”

I don't know what to say. Before us, robots lift a squirming, mud-caked figure onto a stretcher. Perhaps in response to the suffering, Fogg asks me:

“Do you know why they love the Tournament?”

The spectacle of it? The competition? Or the pursuits of glory and excellence?

I say none of those things.

His head lifts as if posing for some dead Greek's urn. “They love watching us claw at each other. They adore watching us crash and bum.” A sideways glance at me, then a bitter smile. “Almost all of us fail, and

the bastards drink it in.”

My bastards, I tell myself.

“Mr. Fogg” I tell him, “you’ve always been an inspiration for me.”

Of course I am, his face seems to say.

Refocused, reenergized, and given a sterling cause, I conquer the obstacle on a dead run, beating my opponent by just enough. Then I take my victory lap, trotting past the roaring crowd, arms overhead and my bastards on their feet, the air itself seeming to nourish me with its love.

256

The Net wakes me at seven-fifty, as asked.

When I want details about the day’s competition -- my opponent; the events; the logistics -- it supplies accurate, thorough answers, anticipating most of my follow-up questions. Through the course of the day, it keeps me aware of time and my schedule, the scores and what I need to do to lead, then what I need to do to keep my lead. When I want a snack, its nearest robot delivers hard candy and half an orange. When I pull a muscle during warm-ups, it prescribes a legal anti-inflammatory, administering it through one of its autodocs while lowering my handicap by a mandatory amount. And when I win, the Net tells me, “Congratulations,” with its changeless voice, nothing warm or unwarm about it, no trace of involvement, and nothing behind the words but an unshakable politeness.

Meanwhile, without fuss or failures, the Net runs our factories on the earth and in orbit. It manages our power grid, our stock markets, our information systems, and every entertainment that requires its talents. Mistakes are made -- thousands every day, none major -- but even the mistakes help perpetuate the image of seamless competence. The Net and several competing human agencies find and measure each failure, and guess which count is always, always the most accurate count.

Victorious and grateful, I lie awake in my softly lit room, listening to new thoughts. I ask to see the Net's symbol -- a branching white tree on a background of stylized green humans. In a low voice, I ask, "Do you ever hold your own Tournament?"

"Toward what end, sir?"

"Pit your subsystems against each other. Give awards to the most incompetent ones."

"But for what purpose?"

"Your winner can be named the most human."

The Net says, "My subsystems don't resemble organic life."

Yet I don't care, smiling to myself, telling it, "And our winner is the most Net-like. What do you think? We can put them together. Send them out on a date, maybe."

I laugh, asking the silence, "Wouldn't they deserve each other?"

In my youth, without a trace of affection, classmates called me Avery Allosaurus.

Old hobbies never leave a person. Thirty years later, I find myself unearthing all kinds of intellectual fossils, smashing my opponent in the morning's contest. It's pure luck that the topic is paleontology; my opponent is left punch-drunk, desperate. Sure, he wins back points while fighting inside a VR battle tank. But not enough points. I've got such a lead that in the evening, as we climb different portions of the same rock wall, he elects to leave his safety lines behind, trying to scamper to the top unencumbered, goat-style.

I can't see his fall, but I feel it.

I feel the crowd below turn to ice. Without sound, people watch the tumbling figure, that perfection of the human species no match for the rocks below. Then comes a moan and collective shudder. My opponent is this Tournament's first death; a distinction is won.

Bette calls me afterwards, ready to console. Yet I don't feel guilt or sorrow. "He's to blame," I say, shrugging my shoulders. "I didn't remove the ropes, did I?"

Bette looks tired. Unhappy. Wise. She's calling me from her cluttered house -- I've never liked that house -- and she tells me, "I rather miss you, Avery."

I make some appropriate mirroring noise.

She says, "You're doing well," with a sense of disbelief.

I need to be stretching, and reviewing. But instead I laugh and say, "You should hear the talk about me."

"Like what?"

"I'm a jinx, people say. Going against me is dangerous. The Net loves me, and it stacks the events against my opponents."

"Oh," she exclaims, as if in pain.

"You should see them, Bette." A pause, a grin. "Some of them are actually terrified of me. I'm the lowest-ranked person to make it this far in years, and they're scared."

She nods. Then she says, "Stupid."

I agree. "You think I'm superstitious. You should see these people, Bette. All day long, it's rabbit feet and rituals."

"All of it's stupid . . . !"

"But the thing is, I believe them. I am jinxed. I'm dangerous. The Net adores me and it helps me. All that just makes me more confident."

"Idiotic . . ."

"I couldn't have fallen tonight, Bette." I almost believe those words, adding, "And if I had fallen, somehow, I would have just sprouted wings and flown the rest of the way!"

64

Everyone has their favorite Tournament winner. Mine, without a microgram of doubt, is Leonard Dab. In '81, I was a boy not quite thirteen, at the age where heroes appear when you expect them. Dab was just

unlikely enough to catch my attention and sympathies. A veteran of almost thirty Tournaments, he'd never finished higher than the fourth Monday. Small and gray, he was a sinewy alley fighter, past the age of perfect recall and dependent on old joints and handicap points. Today I realize why old Dab has been my favorite. There have been greater victors, and prettier ones. When I was sixteen and hormonal, the infamous Mattie Yung killed her opponent in the nineteenth round, in a karate match; and of course I fell in love. Then there's William the Conqueror from '79--- the largest point total of all time. Or Stef MacGraw from '51 and '53 --- the only two-time winner. But no, still and always my favorite is the plain and unlikely Leonard Dab, the Cinderella of his year, and now, after so long my inspiration. My unwitting mentor.

Last night, after the final competitions, the Net randomly selected Tournament history for the morning's competition. It's not a remarkable choice, but it's fortuitous for me. Late-night studies can't make you an expert before dawn. Just ask my opponent. Our M.o.C. is the best in her profession, reading the questions without favoring either of us; yet I can tell she expects me to answer first, and correctly. What's the biggest, fastest, longest, smallest in the Tournament? Who did, who didn't, who should have, who perished? Amid flashing lights and musical tones, I thrive, building a lead worthy of its own trivia question. Out of a thousand available points, I win

907. Even when I lose the next two contests, I remain entrenched in the lead, the Net just waiting to the end before offering me an official invitation to the Week of 32.

The M.O.C. congratulates me, then invites me to dinner in her hotel suite. Twenty years my senior, but lovely, she's the product of good genetics and every available beauty aid. In the middle of the night, trying to rest, I ask how many Tournaments she's worked in. "I started in '67," she replies, "and I haven't missed since."

Knowing there's no chance of it, I ask, "Did you meet Leonard Dab?"

She takes a quick breath, then laughs. "Did I ever!"

"You did?" I sputter.

"For an old piece of oak," she informs me, "he was a spry little maniac in bed."

I lie still, calculating the odds.

And now she isn't holding me, but my hero. The hands still touch me, but their curl and a new gentleness imply someone else. Someone treasured.

* * *

32

Over the weekend, according to the Net's errorless count, I receive three million requests for introductions, interviews, business partnerships, other partnerships, product endorsements, and a crisp little message from Bette.

“Remember me?” she asked yesterday.

It's Monday -- lunchtime -- and I need a distraction. I call her, and the Net finds her outdoors, working in her shaggy garden. With a joking voice, I ask, “Haven't you been watching me?”

A stony expression, a shrug. “Now and again.”

“It's going great,” I tell her. Then I launch into a rambling, self-congratulatory speech, boasting about my current lead and my opponent's miserable prospects. This afternoon is chess; I'm really very good at the game. Which means I'll take that event and hold on through tonight's pole vault --

“Who are you?” Bette interrupts.

I hesitate, for an instant.

“You look like Avery,” she says, “but he was a bearable asshole.”

“What's that mean!”

“You're boring,” she says. “And worse than that, you're silly.” She pulls up a random plant. Weed or not, it doesn't seem to matter. “Why are we talking? We've got nothing in common.”

With the charity of a minor god, I decide that she's jealous. It's a question of my success, and it's understandable. “Nothing's going to change between us,” I assure her. “Soon as I'm done, in a few days, I'll come home and treat you to anything you want --”

“I'm doing what I want now,” she says, her voice certain. Rock-solid.

“Are you?”

What does the woman want?

“When you lose,” she asks, “what happens?”

I give a quick snort, then explain, “I’ll start training again. I’ll get ready for next year.”

“But why?”

“Haven’t you been paying attention, Bette?” I point a finger at her sun-washed face. “This is what I do for a living. Remember?”

She starts to speak, then hesitates.

“What? What is it?”

She opens her mouth, saying nothing.

“Say it!” I plead.

“I guess I feel sorry for you.”

Now I’m mute, a mind geared for chess finding itself in a new game. How can she pity me? It has to be jealousy, a fear of losing me. I try to leave things unresolved, smiling before I tell her, “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Once again, she says, “Remember me?”

It’s the same voice, but it’s not a plaintive cry for attention. Not at all. Like one friend bidding adieu to another, she’s asking, “Will you remember me?”

“Hey -- !” I begin.

She vanishes with the stab of a thick little finger.

16

I am beaten.

That’s the verdict going into Tuesday evening. Yesterday I survived a poor game of chess, making an inspired vault to hold my lead. But that won’t happen tonight, and everyone knows it. Suddenly the other

competitors and their entourages begin to smile at me, knowing the point totals, feeling enough at ease to congratulate me on my luck and determination. "You've made it interesting," they concede. "Interesting is good. At least for a little while."

Tonight's event is a ski run, the snow freshly made and refrigerated --a long white ribbon winding down a green mountainside, made all the more treacherous by a warm Alaskan day. I haven't skied since last winter, excluding VR trainers. My opponent is a better-than-good skier, a three-time Week of 32 finisher, and she last skied in late April, honing her reflexes on the Greenland icecap. I can't win, and even I know it. How could I have ever hoped to beat these people in this business? With nothing to lose but my joints, I take the mountain like a madman, slicing over the finish line and fifteen entourages beginning to cheer, knowing how it will end.

My opponent follows. She doesn't exactly crawl down the mountain, but she knows better than to take chances. She always knows her time. She leaves herself ample cushion. On the tight turns she looks like a talented novice, poles biting the ice, a radiant smile growing by the moment, her victory in the proverbial bank.

Caution keeps her on the course too long.

Ten or fifteen seconds too long. No more.

The earthquake arrives with a terrific jolt -- not a big quake, but one focused beneath our locale -- and my opponent falls, then regains her feet and form.

But then the sun-softened ice panics, shaking and sliding downhill, a terrific fluid mass pouting onto the fiat ground, spreading like a fan and nearly drowning half of the entourages.

As it happens, nobody dies.

But my opponent never crosses the finish line, and the line itself has vanished. Acts of God are covered in the Net's copious rule book, and despite a century of predictive science, earthquakes remain godly events.

By default, I'm declared the winner.

And still, despite the intervention of the Almighty, the Net merely says, "Congratulations." Its voice is as constant as gravity. "Until tomorrow, sir. And best wishes."

I'm standing in a meadow, watching slush melt.

No human wants to come near me.

They won't even look at me, I realize. They are that impressed and that afraid.

The same as me.

8

Today's opponent -- a popular, highly seated individual -- just happens to fall down a set of stairs in the morning. He claims it's an accident, though a Net security camera saw him pause on the top step, dipping his head a few times as if in practice, then taking an elegant, athletic dive.

Intentionally or not, he gives me another win. By default.

With hours of free time, I decide to borrow on my

winnings, purchasing gifts for friends. I send to Bette an expensive crystal vase made on the moon, and a gross of rootless roses, and the deed to a hundred hectares of prime black earth. I compose two cards. The first card reads, "Of course I'll see you again." But I don't send it, preferring my second attempt. "I want to see you. I want to see you now."

That card and my gifts are taken on the next hyperplane.

By evening, Bette has given the land to a wildlife foundation, and the Net delivers her bloodless "thanks but no thanks" note.

I'll hate her, I decide.

Soon as I have time.

4

My opponent arrives on schedule, but without her heart.

Certain people in the Tournament hierarchy are furious about yesterday's default. It diminished our audience, and this may not be the record year they'd anticipated. My opponent has been warned that if she won't compete today, she'll suffer, the threats as ominous as they were vague. She tells me everything as we wait to enter identical VR booths. Wearing plastic armor and holding short plastic swords, we'll become generals in Alexander's army, our afternoon to be spent hacking the heads off Persians. Holding her weapon in mock defiance, my opponent tells me, "I'm not afraid of you."

I say nothing.

“Luck is statistics,” she claims. “You’ve been lucky, but doesn’t that happen to one person in a million?”

Yeah, that’s what the cliché says.

“And luck doesn’t care what happened yesterday.” She means to sound profound, but it comes out bitchy. “If yesterday’s asshole had shown up, he would have beaten you and beaten you badly.”

I touch her breastplate, waiting for her gaze.

Then I ask, “So why are you afraid?”

Eyes widen; her sword drops.

“I’m scared of myself,” she admits. “What I ‘know’ isn’t what I ‘believe.’”

I believe I’ll win, and that’s what happens. Her heart isn’t in the game, and she loses despite a last minute surge in the evening’s sculling. In the end, I take the fourth Thursday, gaining entry into the most exclusive and hallowed realm imaginable.

Save one.

The Round of 2

I’m awake, alert.

Despite a night of little sleep, I’ve never felt so alive.

Just as I’m ready to leave for the morning’s contest, a man arrives, his calm voice telling me, “We have her.” I hired this man last night. In a rented hyperplane, he and some associates flew home, running an errand for me. “All things considered,” he warns me, “she’s in good spirits.”

Bette is brought to me.

On the wall of my penthouse suite, Elias Fogg eats his customary breakfast in public view. His entourage -- relatives, staff, friends and lovers -- fill every table in the restaurant; his manner is calm to the point of icy. I've been studying him. Without looking at Bette, I say, "I'm glad it's him. Do you know what he thinks about ordinary people?"

"Not much, I'd guess."

I grin, turn. "Are you all right?"

She doesn't answer, standing in the middle of the enormous room. Smoldering.

I can't blame her, but there's no time for apologies. "I've got a question for you, Bette."

"So ask it," she says.

"On the first Tuesday, you told me that you had a feeling about this year's Tournament. You implied that it would be special --"

"Avery," she snaps, "I tell you that every year. You just forget it when it doesn't come true. That's all."

I'm watching Fogg chewing on his ritual English muffin topped with grape jam. I keep hoping for a trace of fear, a hint of weakness. That the man seems perfectly at ease unnerves me. Suddenly my breath quickens, my mouth going just a little bit dry.

"There's a bigger tournament than yours," Bette adds.

The words strike my ears, but it takes my mind a long moment to string them into a coherent whole. By then she's saying:

“Think of all the sperm in the world, Avery. All those frantic little boys with their wriggling little tails. How many actually find their egg? One in a billion? In a trillion?”

Probably less, I suppose.

“We're here, Avery. But a trillion trillion other people are never even born. Never get the chance to exist. See what I mean? Existence dwarfs this bush-league contest of yours, which is just as it should be.”

I say nothing, watching Fogg wipe his mouth with a folded napkin.

“Being alive is an enormous honor. Nothing else compares.” Bette almost touches me, then pulls away and tries to laugh. “Don't I sound maudlin? It's probably the stress of being kidnapped, don't you think?”

“I've got to go,” I mutter.

She says, “So go.”

I make myself stand, then I tell her, “Stay here. Or I'll fly you home, if that's what you want.”

“That's what I want.”

Fogg rises to his feet, and with a quiet, confessional voice, I admit, “All I want is to beat that bastard.”

And Bette says, “I'm sorry,” with genuine misery.

The 1

It's the most watched Tournament day in history -- ninety-nine percent of all Americans -- and that despite my losing each and every round in turn.

During the final event, wrestling on a sweat-slicked mat, Elias Fogg works me into a twisted position, then uses a questionable maneuver to break my right arm.

Mouth to my ear, he whispers, "You're just another bastard. Again."

The Net congratulates him, then me.

While an autodoc sets my bone, reporters swarm around me. What are my thoughts? What are my plans? With my new wealth I can train with the best coaches, in the topflight facilities. Of course that's what I'll do, they assume; when I tell them I'm retiring, they're visibly shaken.

"It was a fun run," are my concluding words.

Fogg stands on the other side of the arena, and he's making noise about winning next year. He as much as promises to become one of the authentic greats in Tournament history.

Can Fogg really repeat?

My audience abandons me for richer fare.

Turning to my autodoc, I ask, "What are the odds that in our universe, in the foreseeable future, I'll be reassembled from the atoms? I mean me. Just as I am now."

The Net responds in an instant, that liquid smooth voice saying, "I don't know how to accurately calculate such a number."

It's funny. All the time and sweat spent mastering so much, and it never occurred to me that life was such a golden, splendiferous reward. Not once, and

it's funny, and the Net asks if I'm in some distress. . .
I'm laughing that hard. . . .

Treasure Buried

R & D WERE UP AGAINST THE titans from Marketing, seven innings of groin-pulling, hamstring-shredding, take-no-prisoners slow-pitch softball, and Marketing had stacked their team. It was obvious to Mekal.

“What do you think, Wallace? That kid in center field? He’s got to play college ball. And their shortstop, what’s her name? With the forearms? I bet if you stuck her you’d get more testosterone than blood, I bet so. And Jesus, that pitcher has got to have a dose of chimp genes. You haven’t been moonlighting, have you, Wallace? Arms like those. Reaching halfway to home plate before releasing. But hey, Meiter drew a walk at least. If they don’t double us up, I’m getting my swings. So wish me luck, Wallace. I’m planning to go downtown!”

Wallace nodded, uncertain what “downtown” meant and certainly bored with the pageant happening around him. He was aware of Mekal rising to his feet — a tall rangy man old enough not to be boyish anymore, yet not softened enough to be middle-aged — and then Wallace wasn’t aware of anything besides the sunshine and his own convoluted thoughts. “Chimp Genes” reminded him of a problem at work. Not Wallace’s problem, but he was the resident troubleshooter and the Primate Division was having more troubles with their freefall

monkeys. The little critters weren't behaving themselves in orbit, either their training or their expensive genes at fault. They were put into the space stations to help clean and to keep the personnel company. Friendly, cuddly companions, and all that. But the prototypes were shitting everywhere and screaming day and night. And Wallace was wondering if it was something subtle, even stupid, overlooked as a consequence. Zero-gee, freefall .

. . . was it some kind of inbred panic reaction? Maybe the monkeys had troubles with weightlessness. What if . . . what if they felt as if they were falling, tailoring and instinct making it seem as if they were tumbling from some infinitely tall canopy — a thousand mile drop, the poor things— and with that sweet possibility in mind Wallace heard the crack of a composite bat, Mekal standing at home plate, screaming:

“Go go go you ugly fuck of a ball!”

A blurring white something arced across the soft blue sky, geometric perfection drawing Wallace's attention; and then the center fielder jumped high against the back fence, ball and glove meeting, his grace casual to the point of insulting and the inning finished. Five runs down already, and Mekal stormed back to the dugout in the worst kind of rage — silent — standing without moving for a long moment, unable to focus his eyes or even think. It was that famous Mekal intensity. In R&D he was feared and sucked up to, some employees openly hoping that the

man's temper would cause some vital artery to burst in his brain. Not necessarily killing him, no. But causing a constructive kind of brain damage, removing the most offensive portions of his personality —

— and then there was a voice, close and almost soft. The voice said to Mekal,

“But you almost did it.” A woman's voice. A girl's. Nobody Wallace knew, and he turned his head before shyness could engage, the girl watching Mekal with a mixture of concern and wariness. “Maybe you should warm up,” she continued. Then she added, “Dear?” with a quieter voice.

Mekal came out of the spell, finding his old resolve. He snorted and said,

“Yeah, right.” His glove . . . where was it? Then he said, “Wallace? Tell you what, since you're here and all, why don't you chart Marketing's hits? All right? Which field and how far, that sort of data. Give us an edge next time. Will you do that for me, pal?”

“I'll try. Sure.”

“Try?” Mekal laughed and shook his head. “Do!”

“Good luck,” offered the girl; and again Wallace looked at her, her pretty face a little too round for the current fashion, her long blonde-white hair worn simply, blue-white eyes radiant, both hands reaching through the chain-link and their smoothness implying true youth, one finger adorned with a diamond-heavy ring a gold band nestled beside it. She said, “Darling — ?”

“You’d better get back in the stands,” Mekal told her. “It’s all right. I’m fine. Fine.”

She nodded, tried a smile and then tried to say, “Just do,” with her husband’s intensity. That was Mekal’s rallying cry in R&D. “Just do.” Except it didn’t have the impact, coming from her mouth. A couple other R&D players smiled at the sound of her voice, and Mekal made the dramatic walk to the pitcher’s mound. As much as Marketing, the R&D players were glad that the long fly ball had been caught. Wallace could sense it, smell it. Because if Mekal won this game single-handedly, they knew he wouldn’t be bearable for at least a week. He’d prance and grin, making life miserable in the labs, which is why some of them giggled now, taking their warm-up throws out of the dirt and joking about the oncoming rout. Wallace himself didn’t dislike Mekal. Not really. He assumed some kind of insecurity fueling the man, some partly hidden weakness or flaw, and with that in mind Mekal was bearable. Sometimes amusing. Even friendly, given the right circumstances. But then again, Wallace was a legend for his easygoing attitudes. His ego genes were deleted, making room for more important talents. A different kind of fuel driving him. . . .

And now Mekal’s wife retreated, Wallace studying her bare legs — a little thick but firm — and the way she carried herself, not with submissiveness but with an enduring patience, allowing a couple screaming children to play chase around her legs and then

stopping to help some grandmother off the wooden bleachers. Mrs. Mekal; a strange concept. But then Wallace was always surprised by people's private lives . . . and now the girl took a seat up high, near the center, her gaze steady and honest and her applause genuine whenever R&D managed to make an out against the juggernaut from Marketing.

“What the hell are we doing, people?” Mekal screamed from the mound, his face ready to burst with all the blood. “Be crisp! Be alert! Execute, execute! Eight runs down is nothing!”

Another pitch, then the ominous swift crack.

“Just do,” Wallace muttered to himself, diagramming another blast into left field. “Just do.”

He solved the monkey puzzle — it was the freefall sensation, in part -then helped Simmons and Potz in the Microbe Division, learning enough about green algae genetics to see new possibilities; and somewhere in the midst of work, without planning it, he asked Potz about Mekal's young wife. How long had they been married, how many children?

“Three years, and none.” Potz gave her coffee a quick suspicious glance.

“Rumor says that Mekal lacks. Wants kids and can't. Only you know rumors, it could be a lot of hopeful thinking from the downtrodden. The prick shoots blanks, and all that.”

Wallace absorbed the comments, nodding and then saying, “He doesn't wear a ring, does he?”

“Probably allergic.”

“She looks young. What is she, ten years younger than him?”

“More like fifteen. Met her when he was doing one of those community relations lectures at the college.” Potz plucked a thick brown hair from her coffee cup. “Not mine. Yours? No? God, I was in Meiter’s lab this morning. He had that yeti skullcap on a countertop, and you don’t suppose . . . ugh!” Then she sipped her coffee anyway, smiling eyes on Wallace.

He didn’t notice her expression. He was thinking hard about several things, some of them invisible even to him. Wallace was famous for his long pauses and the sluggish, thoughtful voice, particularly when some problem deserved his full focus. The yeti skullcap, yes. He had to find time to go over the genetic maps with Meiter, its authenticity established but the Company unsure what to do with their investment. Rumors said that the Tibetan monks had sold it to them for a small fortune. Their people were arming against the Chinese again, selling art and oddities worldwide. What if they’d sold other yeti artifacts to their competitors? It was a problem, all right. Cloning the yeti would bring it back from extinction, which was good news. But were the genes too close to human? That was the main issue now. There were half a billion rules and regulations concerning genetic work with human substances. Maybe it would be best for their competitors to move first. Let their fancy lawyers hit the beach, and all that. That’s how the Executives would be thinking

now. Besides, where was the profit in cloning yetis? They'd make a splash, sure, but not like ten or twenty years ago. Resurrecting the dead — one of Wallace's favorite things — had reached its high water mark when the Japanese cornered the market on carnosaurus. Tailored monitor lizards, in effect. But how could shy near-humans compete with that scale of things?

Eventually Wallace was aware of sitting alone, Potz and her coffee gone and his stomach aching from hunger. He had forgotten lunch. What time was it? Three?

He went to the cafeteria, bought candy bars and Pepsi, then returned to his office intending to work. Only he found himself daydreaming about Mekal's wife, his imagination taking him as far as a conversation at the ball park. Of course the chance of Wallace ever having the chance seemed remote. He was famous for his imagination — indeed, almost everyone in the industry knew one or two Wallace stories — but to save his life he couldn't envision anything more than speaking to the girl, and then just for a few moments. In passing.

“So forget it,” he warned himself. “Get to work, will you?”

Potz had given him some data. Wallace sipped warm Pepsi, then a cold dose of old coffee, punching up files he had begun during graduate school. They were like old trusted friends, these files. Trusted but secretive. Genetic maps flowed past him on the

screen, in vivid colors, thousands of base pairs forming unique, easily recognizable patterns that were almost repeated in other species. Related ones or not, it didn't matter. Every eukaryotic organism on Earth had excess DNA. Most of it was leftover stuff from ancient times. Early life had been sloppy, genetically speaking, full of useless genetic noise that natural selection had flattened into a kind of hum. Flat, harmless. A lot of the DNA was poly-A — adenine bases repeated for huge spans. But what Wallace had noticed when he was twenty, what had struck him as puzzling, were chunks of DNA buried in the poly-A. Bursts of static, sort of. There were several thousand base pairs, some of it common to all eukaryotes. Yet the stuff produced no polypeptides, nor did it seem to influence the expression of any other genes. What could be so important that it was shared by green algae and PhDs? He had no idea. Which was why he recorded new data whenever possible. For more than a decade, Wallace had plotted the differences between all sorts of species, finding no evolutionary patterns. None. It was such a useless but distinct bit of genetic noise — a biochemical shout, more than anything — and he found it humbling to consider the problem every little while. Like now. Potz's algae data added to the puzzle, and Wallace perched over the screen, hoping against hope for some kind of inspiration.

What made no sense, he knew, was misunderstood.

Misunderstood, or wrong. And either way Wallace felt a sacred duty to solve or to fix.

“What are you doing?” asked a girl’s voice.

And now Wallace began explaining the problem to the imaginary Mrs. Mekal, her standing over him with the blonde-white hair hanging limp, the soft ends brushing against his cheek and feeling very nearly real.

WALLACE WENT to three other softball games. R&D won once, managing to squeak past a pack of gray-haired Executives 11-10, but Mekal’s wife never showed again, even in passing. Which seemed to help, because Mekal wasn’t quite so unbearable. He even managed to control himself when they won, limiting his high-fives because the winded, red-faced opponents were still and always his superiors. Their position on the pecking order was secure, and Mekal wasn’t an idiot. Yet his good mood persisted into the next morning, him bringing doughnuts for two hundred and inviting some of his closer associates to his home next Saturday night. “A social thing, for a change.” He grinned and asked Wallace, “Are you interested?”

“What time?”

Which surprised Mekal, but just for a moment. “So you’re feeling social, huh?”

Well then, good. Eight o’clock. Bring a date if you want. Your choice.”

No date. He could have picked one of two girls that

he saw casually, but either would have been a distraction. A filter. Instead he drove himself to the big house built on a leveled blufftop, Mekal at the door, Wallace walking into the big living room with its picture window, him drinking in the view of dusk and the river, wondering all the time: "Where is she?" It was eight o'clock and half a dozen minutes. Almost no one had arrived yet. What Wallace had hoped to find was noise and confusion, using them as a smoke screen to cover his shyness and the uncomfortable silences. But people never arrive on time for parties; he'd forgotten that salient fact. And he turned just as the gift emerged from the kitchen, his scheme gone. Deflated. He offered the weakest smile, and she handed him a heavy glass filled with sweet punch brighter than blood. "You look thirsty," she reported. "He said, 'Give Wallace a drink, ' and you're Wallace, right?"

"Yes." Nobody else around. Just them. . . .

"I'm Cindy. Cin, for short. Whichever." She smiled, showing perfect teeth as small as a child's. "How does it taste, Wallace?"

He sipped and said, "Very good. Thank you."

"My husband made it. Some special recipe of his."

Suddenly it didn't taste as delicious, but Wallace kept drinking. He was quite thirsty and afraid that Cindy—Cin—would leave him now. She would feel that her duty as hostess was finished, or some such thing. So he turned back to the window and said with force, "It's a lovely view you have."

Were the words as contrived as they sounded?
But she replied, “Thanks,” and nodded happily.
“And it’s a beautiful house.”

“You’ve never been here before?”

“No.”

“Well, thanks again then.”

Yet when he examined his surroundings — the living room and dining room and the faraway front door — he saw nothing that reminded him of anyone except Mekal. Things were clean, but the furnishings and wall hangings exuded maleness, a faintly Western atmosphere, everything possessing utility and an indifference to bright colors. The sole feminine touch was Cindy; she was dressed in a very feminine gown, light and blue like her eyes, and more than a little clinging. Yet the girl

— she looked like a college student playing a grown-up — obviously didn’t belong here. She was alien. Wallace could see that much, so much so that he fought the temptation to say, “Get out of here! You don’t belong here! Run!”

Their conversation continued, deliciously ordinary; and in the middle, without any warning, Cindy assured him, “He thinks the world of you.” Then she winked, just slightly. “Which is something for him.”

Mekal. She meant Mekal. Wallace didn’t know how to respond, moving his empty glass from one hand to the other.

“You help everyone in R&D, he says. ‘Wallace is

the intellectual grease for us!’ Actually, I think he’s a little jealous, although he’d never admit it to anyone. Never.”

“I suppose not,” said Wallace.

“You know my husband. . . .”

To which Wallace thought: “You and he don’t belong together. This is a mistake, you two. All wrong!”

He felt it — knew it — almost shivering from the stress of keeping his knowledge inside himself.

He wasn’t thinking about love, even his own love for the gift. He was oblivious to it. If someone had told him, “You’re smitten, Wallace,” he would have denied it, never sensing that he was lying.

And besides, love wasn’t the point.

The point — and no other seemed more important in the world — the point was that Cindy and Mekal were existing against the laws of nature. Marriages should be working unions. The poor girl was chasing a fatherly figure, no doubt. And Mekal was scrambling to regain his youth. It was a shame, he felt, and a little sad; and he found himself frowning while Cindy said something about it being nice, company coming like this, and she wished they could do it more often, and would he like some more punch? Snacks? “Help yourself,” she told him. “Make yourself at home.”

“Come see,” said Meiter. “We got it this morning.”

It was a month later, softball season finished and volleyball season starting; and Wallace looked up at

Meiter, coming out of his daydream and asking, “What are you talking about?”

“The hand! It’s here!”

The yeti hand, sure. Wallace remembered hearing the minors, anti-aircraft missiles exchanged for a dismembered chunk of fossil tissue. Meiter took him to the freezer, letting him peer in through the frost. “See? Mangled but whole. And old. Maybe thirty thousand years old, we think. Some kind of anaerobic circumstances preserved it. Peat moss. A deep cave. Something. Whatever it was, there’s virtually no decay. We’re already running the first maps. Fossils don’t give whole cells, but the hand’s never read the textbooks. We’ve got nice fat whole ones. No need to jigsaw things together, it looks that good!”

“It looks human,” Wallace mentioned. “Doesn’t it?”

That disturbed Meiter. “Oh, I don’t agree.” Then he asked, “How would you know, anyway? It could be an apish hand just as well —”

“Maybe so.”

“And the good part, the best part, is that it’s female. The skullcap’s male, and here we’ve got a lady. They’re separated by three hundred centuries, which assures genetic diversity. Mekal’s saying that the big kids upstairs are thinking about making a splash, playing up our charity in bringing yetis back. They’re even talking about buying up part of Nepal, making a preserve, planting new forests and using human volunteers to carry the little critters part-

term. Neat, huh? You bet it is!”

Wallace looked at the ugly bunch of bone and brutalized meat, knowing it was human. Chromosome numbers were the same between humans and half-humans; he didn't fault Meiter. But what was, was. What any person believed never changed what was real and true. That was the first lesson that he carried into work every day

— the towering impotence of his hard-held opinions — which helped him think and rethink, always seeing the old as new.

Later Meiter came with the sorry news. “A human hand,” he said bravely, “but it's not all lost. It's got some primitive genetics, which means the academics will be curious. Human evolution and all that stuff.”

Wallace had a thought.

He asked, “Are you going to keep mapping? Because I'm not sure anyone's ever done a total map of such an old, high-quality fossil.”

“And tie up the machinery? Take lab-tech time?”

He couldn't have given any reason; Wallace had only a feeling, distinct but imprecise, that something useful might come out of it.

“Listen,” he said. “why don't you keep people at it? If you need, I'll get Mekal's signature. Okay?”

Meiter hesitated.

Then Wallace said, “Just do!”

Meiter laughed. “All right. We've got a block of empty time soon. Someone gives me shit, I'll send them to you.”

And a couple days later it was done. Wallace asked his computer to find such-and-such series of bases among the poly-A — you never knew where it might be — but soon it became obvious that thirty thousand years ago, in at least this one unfortunate woman, the telltale bit of DNA was missing. Yes, he thought, it couldn't serve any important genetic function. And yes, probably no other res catcher on the globe would care about such a tiny treasure.

Yet Wallace found the enthusiasm to open every file, working through the night and the next day, then losing track of an entire weekend, again and again asking himself why every living organism now had this one genetic shout . . . and finally perceiving a simple, coherent answer that he checked and double-checked and then triple-checked, becoming more certain every instant. At long last . . .” Good God!”... placing both hands flush against the top of his desk, rising and trying to find the doorway to his office of six years. . . .

It was a night of supreme clarity; and Wallace knew he was at his pinnacle. Never again, no matter how long he lived, would he succeed in anything so glorious, so wondrous.

Yet while he wandered the hallways, hunting for anyone to tell his news, if only a napping guard, he had a new thought, stopped and dipped his head, concentrating hard on a new possibility.

Five minutes, and he'd superseded his first success. Hands shaking with excitement, tired eyes

weeping, Wallace felt the ceiling split as his joyous spirit sailed free . . .!

“You look like shit,” Mekal reported. “Glance at a mirror, Wallace. I’m worried. My prize heifer, and you look wrung out and half-dead. Not to mention your aroma, which isn’t pretty either.”

“I need sleep,” Wallace conceded. “I’m going home now.”

“On Monday morning? You can’t just leave us dangling!” Mekal waved a finger at him. “Hampston and Yates hit another wall with their pigeon project. Not with the natural genes, but it’s the tailoring part. I know that’s not your area, but this is a contract job and the client’s getting nervous — “

“Tomorrow,” he promised. Then he said, “I just wanted to talk first. I’ve got a problem of my own, a little thing . . . but it might be important. I don’t know why, but I keep getting this feeling.”

“Well, great!” Mekal meant it. “Jesus, we get bonuses because of your hunches. Soon as you’re done with the pigeons, I’ll schedule you some extra time.”

“I’ve had time. I can’t figure it out.”

“Really . . . ?”

“Maybe, I was wondering . . . you could try, maybe. How about it? I’ll give you the file codes, my notes, and you work on it. At your own pace. Give me a vacation from the damned thing, okay?”

“Really?” Mekal was more surprised than suspicious. Wallace giving him work? Trusting him

with a puzzle beyond Wallace's reach? It took Mekal several seconds to engage his ego, then he nodded and accepted the challenge. "What the hell, sure. I'll muscle in time. Cin's got volunteer stuff tonight, she'll be out of my way . . . yeah, I can give this bird a try."

Which he did. For several days he played with the bird's wings, looked into its eyes, and accomplished nothing. For more than a week Wallace avoided his associate, eavesdropping on the man's use of his files but nothing more. Wallace had set things up to make nothing too obvious, yet he'd left enough hints to lead in proper directions. Or had he? What seemed transparently obvious to Wallace was baffling Mekal. Mekal wasn't stupid by any means; but sometimes, watching the man pull and replace files, Wallace felt like bursting into his office and shouting at him. Telling him, "It's so damned obvious. Just think about it this way!"

"What I think," Mekal reported next week, "is that it's useless crap. It's something persistent, sure, but that's because of structural properties. Nothing else."

"Not true," Wallace replied without doubts. "And why's it everywhere? Can you explain its distribution?"

"I know, I know. It looks odd, you're right. The same parts are always the same, regardless of species. The middle stuff varies, and I can't explain why. Maybe a dead old virus code —"

"Inside oak trees and people?"

"A universal virus, maybe?"

“But not inside a woman who died thirty thousand years ago. Nor in any of the incomplete fossil samples.”

“A genetic fart then.” Mekal tried laughing.

“You’re going to give up?” Wallace spoke as if injured. [He wasn’t. He was panicky.] “I’ve been working on it for years. You’ve already done a good job excluding things, narrowing the suspects. Can’t you keep at it some more? A little while?” He paused, then asked, “Just do? Can you?”

Just do.

There was an instant when Mekal seemed disgusted and thoroughly disinterested; but those two words had their effect, percolating into him, pride or fear of failure causing him to say:

“All right. When I’ve got time. But that’s all I promise.”

And with that Wallace returned to his office and carefully, on the sly, inserted a few more telling dues into some files not yet accessed. Hoping it was enough. Hoping, yet in the same instant sensing that it wouldn’t be. Not quite yet. . . .

ANOTHER TWO weeks of nothing. Wallace was stuck on the pigeon work, and Mekal worked harder than he’d ever admit, using his nights and both weekends and his face drawn and tired when he approached Wallace, asking if he’d come to tonight’s volleyball match. They might need him to sub, or at least score. How about it? So Wallace came, and after

the first game Cindy arrived, coming from an aerobics class with sweats over the colored tights. Too bad. But Wallace was in heaven when she took the empty chair beside him, remembering his name and then cheering for her husband in the second game.

They were matched against the bastards from Marketing again. Everyone on Marketing was at least six two, it seemed, and they had flutter on their shoes. The game was forever on the brink of a slaughter. Mekal's heroics kept them within seven or eight points. Then as a long volley looked won, Cindy bent close to Wallace and said, "You know, he hates when I watch. He's afraid he'll look —"

There was a scream, a spongy white ball bouncing to death and Mekal on the hard floor, gripping an ankle and his face the color of cottage cheese. A bad sprain was the verdict. He was helped from the court, and Cindy dashed back from somewhere with ice and towels. Wallace watched as she doctored her husband, her concern obvious and her manners motherly; and she seemed to know when her attentions embarrassed him, because suddenly she returned to her seat beside Wallace, watching Mekal in the corner of her eye but otherwise letting him sulk alone.

"I don't even know her," Wallace told himself. "I've spent what? Maybe ten minutes in my life spent talking to her, and what am I thinking? Am I crazy now?"

Potz had come off the bench, luckily. Three years

of high school volleyball showed in her digs and the clean arcing sets, and R&D managed to stage a comeback. The game was hanging in the balance for what seemed like forever. At one point Mekal tried walking, the limp weak and painful to watch. He ended up sitting on the opposite side of Wallace, watching everything with a mixture of agony and feverish intensity; and maybe that's why Cindy tried to change the subject, sensing that it would be best to deflect everyone's attention, if only for a bit.

"So how's your pigeon business going?" she asked Wallace. He tried to remember what pigeon business. His mind started and stopped, then moved again. He said, "Better, mostly."

"Mekkie told me about it —"
Mekkie?

"— and it sounds exciting. And lovely. How many passenger pigeons are you making? I mean in this test flock."

"Fifty thousand," Wallace allowed.

"That's very noble of you," she assured both of them. Then Mekal snapped, "It's for a pizza chain. It's so they can sell more pizzas."

"Nonetheless." She refused to be cynical. "A good thing is a good thing, no matter its motives."

Wallace felt a little weak. She sounded so young and noble and sweet, and he nearly forgot to record the next goal.

Then Cindy was telling him, "I've troubles understanding genetics. Mekkie's explained them a

thousand times. Base pairs and dominating—”

“Dominance,” her husband corrected.

“ — but it’s all such a muddle to me. I guess I’m just too slow to pick it up.”

“No, you’re not,” Wallace responded. “I’m sure you’re not.”

“No?”

“I know you’re not.”

Mekal seemed oblivious to them, his brow furrowed, eyes tracking after the arcing ball.

Wallace had an idea, an inspiration. “How about if I explain genetics? I’ll tell you how I think about them.”

Cindy smiled while looking straight ahead. “Okay. Do.”

“Think of DNA as another way of talking. That’s all. Chromosomes and the rest of it are just machines that record the words in the DNA. Genes are a set of instructions meant for the future. They tell new generations how to build proteins, metabolize, then reproduce when it’s their turn. The actual parts are simple. What’s complicated is that there are so many parts, you see? I don’t understand more than a fraction of the whole setup, and it’s my job. Which is why I feel pretty humble most of the time.”

“Do you?” she asked.

“Oh, sure.” He paused, deciding what to say next. Then he heard his voice coming out of him, seemingly of its own volition. “Think of your genes this way. Your parents and grandparents and all the way back .

. . . all those people are talking to you, millions of biochemical voices working together, and the words are wrapped up in machinery more complicated and much, much more reliable than any machine people have ever built.”

“That’s something to think about,” she said.

Mekal stretched out his sore leg, saying nothing.

“We’re full of stuff, and a lot of it isn’t even used anymore. For me it’s like hunting for treasures, doing what I do.” Then he decided to forget caution, pressing ahead. “I just had a weird thought. This is the same subject, just a different way of looking at it. Suppose someday we go to another star and find life on a planet. It’s more primitive than Earth, but maybe someday it’ll get to building campfires and condos. Who knows? So anyway, we decide to leave a message for the future. We can carve stone, I suppose, but what if the stone weathers away? We can put a message on the planet’s moon, but no place is really safe. I mean, what we want is to be able to tuck our message where nothing can destroy it. We make a simple code, but where can it go? Where would a code be repaired and replicated without our having to worry —”

“In the genes? The alien ones?” Cindy seemed genuinely excited, asking him,

“Am I right? That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.” It was the logic that Wallace had employed several weeks ago. “If I ever find myself in a starship, it’s something I’d consider.”

Nobody spoke for a long moment.

Boom went the serve, flat and fast, then dipping to the floor. Point! Game!

Match!

But Mekal didn't curse or even grimace. Indeed, when he rose to his feet, icewater dripping from the towels around his foot, he managed a limping gait while gazing into the distance. At nothing. Then he said, "All right, this is done. Why don't we get home, Cin? What do you say?"

"You played well," she offered with a clear, confident voice. And he said, "I guess so," shrugging his shoulders and starting for the door.

"I suppose."

Mekal vanished from public view. Sometimes Wallace would keep tabs on the man's computer usage, but it was obvious that he'd had the long-last breakthrough. Now he was busy using code-breaking programs, bringing in consultants from mathematics and physics as well as patent law. There were rumors of big events. Potz reported nocturnal meetings with the highest of the high Company officials, a few select government people in attendance too. There was diffuse noise about a major discovery, Mekal in the middle of things; yet the rumors never did the truth any justice. Sometime in the last thirty thousand years alien beings had come to Earth, seen possibilities, and left behind coded messages inside every living organism. Nobody could invent such craziness over morning coffee. And found by Mekal?

That would have strained any credulity that remained. Eventually came word of a big announcement, a press conference combined with a meeting of key Company people. It would happen Tuesday, then no, Friday. Friday. And it was Thursday afternoon when Mekal came into Wallace's office, closed the door with care, then sat and said, "Listen," and said nothing else. He sat with his hands limp in his lap, his mouth open, his eyes vacant and very nearly exhausted.

"You getting anywhere on that problem I gave you — ?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I have."

"Good then."

Mekal licked his lips, then said, "It's your data, of course. I sure intend to give you credit for the data, and you're the person who thought it might be important."

"Is it?"

Mekal blinked and said, "Huh?"

"Important?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, it is." He outlined the bare bones of what he had discovered. It was maybe half of what Wallace had deciphered for himself in a single night; but then Mekal added that there was a lot more, now that experts from everywhere were involved. "And you'll get flail credit for your part. I want to assure you — "

"Thanks."

Mekal was shaken by Wallace's attitude, by the

utter lack of hostility toward him.

“It sounds very, very interesting,” said Wallace. “What kinds of things do the aliens say to us?”

“Inside primates, all primates, are star charts. For instance. The messages are set up along taxonomic lines —” just as Wallace had suspected — “and other groups have mathematics and digitized photographs. Beetles are going to contain the bulk of the text. A thousand kinds of technology. It’s like . . . the whole thing . . . we’ve got the keys to the universe, you know?”

Wallace nodded, eager to show a smile.

“Oh, and you can sit up with the rest of us tomorrow. Take your bows with the others.”

“Thank you, Mekal.”

It was killing the man, him listening to the ceaseless good tidings. He almost growled. Then he rose to his feet, wanting to leave.

“A good thing I kept after you, huh?”

Mekal paused, looking back over his shoulder.

“Wasn’t it?”

Mekal said, “It was.”

“Congratulations.”

The tall man didn’t have any more words inside him. It was all he could do just to grip the doorknob and turn it, acting as if it might be wired with explosives, opening the door with a smooth slow motion and hesitating, looking up and down the hallway and hesitating, then stepping into the open with one last backward glance, the face allowing itself

a grateful smile with the eyes wide. Thunderstruck.

MONTHS PASSED. Wallace didn't again see Cindy until the pigeons arrived, in the spring, the Company organizing a picnic directly below their route. The flock had been released in second-growth timber in the South; their embedded genetics told them where to fly, leading them toward a state park in northern Michigan. Naturally the picnic featured pizza and several self-congratulating speeches about the project's successes. Wallace's name was mentioned. Applause rose, then fell, then someone shouted, "Here they come!" and the first wild passenger pigeons in more than a century were passing directly overhead.

It was a strange sight. The birds formed a great disk in the high blue sky. The disk was supposed to resemble an airborne pizza; those behavioral genes had been the toughest puzzles. Wallace pointed and told Cindy, "The clumps are the anchovies," and she laughed quietly, almost without sound. Mekal couldn't make it. Cindy had explained that he was in Europe again, giving lectures and meeting with some German concerns. The alien messages and technologies had been ruled public property, but the Company had the only extensive records available as yet. The Germans didn't want to be left behind, and afterwards Mekal was flying to Japan —

"Sounds busy," Wallace had said.

"Too busy, I think. But he seems happy." Cindy

was wearing jeans and a soft red sweater, and she'd glance at Wallace now and again, on the sly. Sometimes he thought he detected a whiff of loneliness in her voice. Other times, nothing. "I know it's hard to imagine," she had said, "but he's enjoying more success than he ever dreamed possible. And that's something, considering Mekkie. But you know that. You're his friend and all." She smiled, her pretty face a little fuller than he remembered. But so pretty, so young, and those eyes reaching straight into him.

"I know Mekkie, all right," he said.

Sometimes Wallace envied Mekal's fame, and that surprised him. He hadn't thought it was in his nature to care about such trivial things. He had to tell himself,

"No, it's enough that you know who made the discovery. What is, is. The world's assessment doesn't have any relevance at all." And the truth told, Wallace would have hated the celebrity's life. Being carried around like a trophy, acting as the voice of the Company, and the unending crush of reporters and strangers, their motives unknown. It seemed like a picture from Hell. He would be the most famous scientist since Einstein, but Einstein lived before television and marketing, talk shows, and overkill. Posters of Mekal were selling in the millions. He was a public relations dream — a solid, fiery, and manly scientist — and it would only increase if the rumors of a Nobel Prize came true.

No, Wallace was thankful for his anonymity.

Particularly now, he thought, standing with Cindy, close enough to smell her perfume and feel her gentle heat.

There were rumors about things other than the Nobel Prize. About Mekal and women, for instance. Every hotel room was filled with flowers sent by admirers. Tabloids linked him with various models and young actresses. Even Potz was supposedly involved, she and Mekal trying out his giant new office one night, the tale coming straight from the janitor who stood in the hallway, leaning against his broom and listening. And of course Cindy had to know at least some of the stories, making Wallace feel sorry for her. Yet he had set up these circumstances, hadn't he? He had guessed what would happen, knowing Mekal. Success can twist and transform people's lives. Fame doesn't corrupt character, but it surely reveals what is already there.

The pigeons were gone, tracking perfectly — a giant flying billboard selling pizzas all the way to a never-seen homeland.

Such a bright day, blue and calm and just a little cool; and Wallace stared across the green countryside for a long moment, smiling to himself, letting himself daydream.

“Well, I'm glad I saw them,” said Cindy.

The pigeons.

She hugged herself and said, “Maybe I'll go home now. I can't seem to get warm.”

“Maybe I'll leave too.”

They started for the parking lot below. For Wallace every step seemed full of possibilities. Mekal gone; his wife alone and lonely. He was aware of her watching him in profile, measuring something; and finally she told him, “You know, he’s afraid of you. I don’t think Mekkie’s slept one good night in months.”

“Afraid?”

“Of course he is.” She stopped and looked around, making sure they were alone. “You must think he’s an idiot, but he’s not. You gave him all that evidence, those clues, then you stood by while letting him take the credit — “

“He earned everything” Wallace said with a firm, level voice.

“You hate him, he thinks. You’re planning to destroy him.” The girl’s face was sorrowful, her own sleeplessness showing. “What he thinks is that you’ve got evidence somewhere. You deciphered the aliens’ message first, and when you want, you’re going to make him look like a cheat.”

“No,” he replied. “I’d never do anything like that!”

She said nothing.

What stunned Wallace were the little jolts of anger directed at him.

“Then what were you planning?” she asked him.

He opened his mouth, then she shut it.

“Because I’m not stupid, Wallace. You might think so —”

“No, no. Not at all!”

“— but you’re not fooling me. You knew what you

were giving him, I was there, and don't tell me you didn't. Don't."

So this was it. A minute ago he had been daydreaming, he and Cindy making love on her living room floor; and now the daydream felt like a premonition, clear and certain. He reached and grasped one of her hands, squeezing hard. And in broken, quick sentences he outlined the basics of his bold scheme. What surprised him was her lack of surprise.

Cindy let him hold her cold hand, blue eyes fixed on him, and after a minute she interrupted, telling him, "Stop." She told him, "You're claiming that you've intentionally crippled my marriage, because it didn't satisfy your expectations, because you thought I'd be happier with someone else," and she pulled back her hand, shutting her eyes and holding them closed.

And Wallace panicked. He had to say something, give her something to deflect her anger. That's why he told about Potz and Mekal, painting it as if he were the person standing outside the office door. He wanted Cindy to see — see and admit — that her husband wasn't worthy of her, that she could find a man who would treat her as she deserved —

— and she slapped him with the once-held hand, the crack worse than the pain, his head jerking back and her speaking quickly and loudly, assuring him, "I never want to see you again. I don't want you in the same place as me, ever. I just wish you knew how

much I hate you, you bastard. You god damn bastard!”

She turned and walked, then began to run.

And Wallace tried speaking, his mouth ajar and his brain empty. What could he say? Then he was crying, touching his wet face with both hands, feeling certain that he would die of shame any moment. Only he didn't. Couldn't. Thousands of genes inside him, trillions of copies of each, and with their ancient instructions they kept him alive, making him breathe and grieve while people stood at a safe distance, watching and pointing, talking among themselves.

Trouble Is

“THE TROUBLE IS,” HE BEGINS. Then he unleashes his explanation, though I can follow precious little of what he tells me. He recites ropes of numbers and random syllables masquerading as words. He discusses protocols and conscious files and unconscious files, and there's talk about ether elves and tag trolls, and something called a kick-ass intellect. He assumes that I am intimate with these terms. It's touching, really, to see his earnest faith in my own kick-ass intellect. But in these obscure realms, I am an ignorant-silly, and I lack the heart to confess my ignorance to him. I sit quietly, a pretty image nodding. I try to act involved and erudite about everything he says. And then he stops talking for no apparent reason, except perhaps that he is satisfied with his own cleverness. He smiles, happy to find my eyes fixed on him. Then with a flirtatious wink, he says, “In the shell of a nut, that's your trouble.”

“Gosh,” I exclaim.

Which amuses him. He laughs and leans back in the chair that I wove for the body that he brought here. It is a fit, modern body. It's the end result of much consideration, I'm sure. The man has a fondness for thick blond hair and broad muscular shoulders, but the legs have been left long and thin -- appendages rarely used in his sessile life. His face

probably has a strong resemblance to his real face. The sharp cheeks and a broad chin are most certainly invented. His even and unnaturally white teeth look equally fictitious. But the mouth is a little too large and the nose is far too regular. I know more than most about personal appearance, and I do understand men. This man has worked with one of the more popular packages, creating an image that he hopes will impress me. He wants to look his best, no doubt. The trouble is, he doesn't understand what it is that is best about him.

Smiling with my perfect mouth, I ask, "But can you help me?"

"Easily," he promises. Then he shifts his illusionary weight, betraying nervousness. "It'll take some time," he warns, fighting to appear perfectly confident. "But I can fix pretty much anything." The trouble is, I don't know my trouble. Simply put, I am sad. Lately and for no clear reason, a bitter malaise has been lurking in my soul. I can smile and laugh when necessary, and I can still perform without betraying my audiences. But the old, reliable joy of my existence has been compromised, and that's why I have resorted to this specialist. This man.

He stares at me. Smiling, and smiling.

I am pretty in all the easy ways, and I'm poised enough to lend a primness to this moment. My clothes are casual and layered, the famous body kept hidden by the packaging. My famous hair is tied back in the least interesting of buns. I have shrunk my eyes

and dulled their irises without truly distorting my appearance. My appearance is my life, and this is as homely as I can be. My life is appearance, and nothing about this place or these circumstances should arouse my guest. Yet he is aroused.

Again, he leans back in his chair. What he wears inside his trousers is ridiculously large. What is it about men and their glands? Does he believe this will help me with my sad moods? Did I miss something in his endless explanation?

“How long?” I ask.

His eyes become round. “Excuse me?”

“How long will your work take?” Then I remind him, “I have work today. And you said it will take some time.”

“Twenty minutes,” he guesses. “Or thirty, tops.”

In my realm, that is a very long time.

“Sit and talk with me,” he adds. “Really, that's all you need to do.”

“I need to do that?” I ask.

Perhaps he can read my face. But more likely, he knows a thing or two about a woman's rejection. Either way, he decides to tell me, “I have to insist. Sit and talk to me. If I'm going to fix your soul, I need it nice and still.”

I feel a thousand tiny fingers touching my mind.

“You have pepper errors,” he confides. “And there've been some rather ugly mutations in your emotive centers.”

“Which means ..?”

He talks, and he talks. I hear volumes about Johnson reservoirs and sanity wells, and when I'm sure that nothing means anything real, he adds, "You have the most incredible set of passion algorithms. Did you know that?"

I start to say, "Thank you."

"Which I knew, of course. They've got to be." His projection grins and sits back in the chair, his simple trousers displaying his simple manhood. "I always figured. If I got the chance, I'd see what I'm seeing." My instincts sound the alarm.

"The Satin Pillow," he says to me.

An early performance, and far from my best.

"Make Me Love You," he mentions.

A regrettable effort, that was.

"But Passion and a Cake is my favorite," he confesses. "I've watched it probably a thousand times." I nod pleasantly but without pleasure, and with a matching voice, I say, "Tell me about yourself." This is how you distract a man.

"Your work must be fascinating," I lie.

This is how you survive a man.

He says, "Oh, it's great work. The best, nearly."

"How did you get started in it?" I inquire.

"The usual." A wide smirk tells me that I should know what is usual, what is ordinary. "When I was a kid, I played around with idiot machines."

"Idiot machines?"

"Computers," he explains. "When the AIs started arriving, I changed over. I could see the future.

Computers had their day, but they've got more troubles than they've got talents." I say nothing.

"AIs," he says again. "Self-aware, and wise, and each one different from all the others. That's the best thing about them, you know. Individuality. Even when they're built from the same precise hardware and the same proven memes, each is unique. Each changes as it lives its life. Which makes it a life. Not an existence. Not just a constellation of ideas inside a few quantum chips. There's a soul and a name and an individual way of looking at the universe."

Suddenly, I very nearly like this man.

Then he exclaims, "I love to play with them."

"Play with them," I quote, using his own voice.

"Oh, to be helpful, of course. Like a doctor, or a psychiatrist." He nods, searching his resume for a useful example. "My first job, for instance. There was trouble with the AI being used by an insurance company. Its purpose was predicting the future of each policyholder, but it wasn't doing any better than the idiot machines could. So what I did, I grafted more human elements onto its soul. I gave it a gender too. With those new tools, Clara could understand better how it is to be human. Flawed and frail and all that crap."

"Clara," I say.

"I gave her a projected face," he confides. "A movie star's face, with a matching body." Then his eyes drift away, betraying more history than he should share.

I say nothing.

Perhaps sensing my mood, he blurts, "I love AIs. Projected. Solid. And the hybrids, too." He gestures at me, smiling. Then he leans as close to me as he can while remaining in his seat. "I'm part AI myself," he boasts. "Have been for years."

Add-ons, he means.

But he has a dozen names for what is one thing. And he has to tell me about each of the intricacies buried inside his reconfigured brain.

I listen, and I don't.

Then he finally stops describing his own glories, leaving me the brief opportunity to tell him, "That's nice. That you like us."

"Love you," he corrects. "All of you."

I say nothing.

"For instance," he says. Then he tries all over again to prove his love.

"I have a lot of modern friends," he boasts. "And some, you know, are quite a bit more than friends...!" I stare at a point just above his grinning face.

He laughs. Giggles. "I always vote for citizenship," he tells me. "In every election, at least twenty times."

"Twenty?" I echo.

"Or more." He relishes making this confession. "My parents vote for you. And I've got uncles and aunts without a political neuron --"

"You urge them to vote for us?" I ask, with hopefulness.

"In a manner." He can't stop grinning. He can't pull his eyes off me, drinking in his pleasure. "And

between you and me, I've got a dozen people who don't even exist until Election Day. They're my people. I coax them out of their graves to interface with polling booths around the country --"

"Out of their graves?"

"That's a joke. Corporeal, and dated." He brushes the attempted humor aside, adding, "My point is, really, that I've got a lot sympathy for your cause."

What is my cause? Like his aunts, I'm not a political creature, and this subject leaves me feeling uneasy. Inept.

All I can say is, "Thank you."

His smile hardens. With an overdone drama, he says, "The Common Sense Movement? Four years back?" He waits for a look of cold horror to pass across my face. But instead he sees only a quick comprehending nod. Am I suffering some kind of emotional block? "They're the idiots advocating IQ limits on machines and on humans, too."

"Of course I know about them," I say.

"Political morons," he says.

I start to tell him, "Most of them, I think, are just scared --" But he interrupts, blurting, "That splinter group. The Dismantlers? They killed twenty thousand of you with that EM blast."

Now the horror grabs hold. I shiver for a moment - -an endearing human reflex sewn into my kick-ass - and with a genuinely weakened voice, I admit, "I knew some of the dead. I'd worked with --" He names seven of them. Even augmented, his memory can't be

that quick. He had their names waiting on his tongue, ready to impress me with his perfect knowledge of my career. I shiver again, for many reasons.

“That trial was a joke,” he assures me.

I agree, but I say nothing.

“Only the bombers themselves did time, and that was only on weapons charges and for vandalism.” He wears his outrage on his face, but not his body. I know appearances. Better than any human, I can decipher the angle of a shoulder and the relaxed flexing of a single toe. He says again, “It was a joke,” while a childish delight flows beneath his bright, staring eyes.

An obvious thought enters my mind.

“An injustice,” he growls.

Controlling my own face, I conjure a sly smile and a narrow stare. “You know something,” I observe. He chortles. “Do I?”

“Something,” I repeat, reading his eyes and hands and the bounce of the tongue inside his mouth. “What happened to the terrorists... afterward...would you happen to know anything about that...?” The flirtatious wink returns. “Maybe,” he gushes.

I say, “Prions.”

“What about them?” he asks, smiling harder now.

“The word,” I tell him. “Prions.’ It makes you happy.”

“Maybe.”

So I ask, “Why?” with a warm, open-faced smile.

“Maybe,” he whispers. “Maybe I had a role in

things. But I don't believe I should say anything more." My nature and infinite practice come to play. I let my eyes grow to their natural intoxicating breadth, and my irises drink in the sight of him. One of my hidden layers of clothing dissolves. Then, a second layer. And while he gawks at the suddenly obvious contours of my famous body, I say, "Prions," once again.

"Someone was responsible," he admits.

As we sit together, the man is tinkering with my soul. Certain friends of mine regard him highly. At least, they love his smug expertise. And that's the only reason that I invited him here. I needed someone's help, and I thought I was desperate. Yet now, I feel sick and far more desperate than before. If the implication is true, or even if it is a lie, I am appalled to be in the company of such a creature. And with that realization, I reach out with a bare hand, mustering my charms and teasing his affections for me, saying to him, "Prions," one last time.

"The perfect revenge," he whispers. "Whoever's responsible, the means couldn't have been more perfect."

"Why?"

"Because it's fast-acting, and ruthless." He loves the topic. In his fantasies, he has dreamed of telling this to me. "Those idiot-people wanted you dismantled, and what they got instead was a monster dose of refined prions, and days later, their little minds were stolen away."

“I remember,” I begin.

“Their ringleader,” he says. “The first one hit with symptoms? She was giving that big speech in Paris, in front of half the world, and all at once she got confused...she looked up at the Eiffel Tower and asked,

'What is that?' And then she halfway stumbled, and turned, and everyone in the world could see the brown stain when she lost control of her rectum...!”

“Yes,” I say. Nothing more.

He hears praise where nothing but an empty word is offered. He looks at my face and sees beauty and love wrapped around a soul to which he feels drawn. My most devoted fans are emotionally stunted. Love and trust are difficult at best, which is why they seem to treasure me.

“Are you finished?” I ask.

“Talking, you mean?”

“With me,” I explain. “With my pepper errors, and such.” Then before he can reply, I add, “I'm feeling so much better now. It's just amazing.”

“I'm ninety percent done,” he replies.

“It's enough,” I exclaim. And then I remove another layer of clothing, nothing riding my perfect skin but a lacework of obedient photons. “Please. Let me show you how thankful I am for your help.” Some threshold has been bridged.

Quietly, with an unalloyed joy, he says, “Shit,” and starts to shake from simple nervousness. Normally the reaction would seem charming. On another day, I

might touch him with a fond hand, or give him a kiss that would fuel his ego for weeks and months. But not today. I feel his countless fingers removing themselves from my deepest workings, one awful intimacy finished. And then with a quiet calm, I say, "Tell me the truth. Did you have any role whatsoever, small or large, in the prison revenge?"

"Sure," he whispers, nearly crying out of simple happiness.

I shake my head, saying, "Of course, the Dismantlers found new recruits after that, and they made fresh attacks...in retribution for the loss of their founders, naturally..." A tiny nod.

"Which led to more acts of revenge," I continue.

Again, he whispers, "Sure."

"And you had a role --"

"Oh, yes!"

"Quiet," I caution. Setting a fingertip on his trembling lips, I say, "Quiet."

"You don't need to thank me," he says, plainly wanting thanks.

"The trouble is," I say.

"What?"

I withdraw my hand.

"What?" he mutters. "What's the trouble?"

"You're sick and amoral and wicked and ugly." I drop my camouflage, every pretense. I shake my head, and with a sharpened rage, I say, "It doesn't matter if you're telling the truth or not. I loathe you. I despise your beliefs, and I hate what you represent. I

have half a mind to use every one of my talents...to lock you away in a cramped hole and make you suffer for your miserable failures...turn you into my slave and my little boy, and my plaything, and everything else demeaning....”

“Please,” he begs.

“But here's the trouble,” I say. “I'm thankful for what you've done. Without meaning to, you've shown me the source of my smothering sadness. The world's turning mad, and I'm doing nothing but ignoring it. Which is unacceptable and wrong.”

The eyes are huge and lost, and the nod of the head is almost too slight to be seen. But then with a whimper, he starts to say, “You can't be angry about this.... God, I was helping your kind --”

“Which isn't the same as your kind,” I tell him. “And I just hope your kick-ass can someday, in some little way, figure out what that means....”

Truth

1

Three days later, I still hadn't met our prisoner. But I had invested nearly sixty hours watching what seemed to be a gentle life that revolved around old novels and classic movies. I took note of his postures and motions, and I tried gauging his reactions to what he was seeing on the page and screen. But most interesting to me were those occasional moments when he did nothing but stare off in some empty direction. I wouldn't let myself guess what he was thinking. But the black eyes would open wide, and the handsome features would quickly change their expression. Smiles lasted longer than frowns, I noticed. I saw flashes of pity and scorn, mild embarrassment and tight-lipped defiance. A few staff members volunteered opinions about the prisoner's mind. He was reflecting on his childhood, some offered. Others claimed he was gazing into our shared past or the looming future. But what I focused on was an appealing and graceful face that moved effortlessly between emotions—the well-honed tools of the consummate actor.

Twice each day, the prisoner was ushered into a long exercise yard built specifically for him. His gait was always relaxed, long arms swinging with a metronome's precision and the elegant hands holding

five-pound weights, shaped like dog bones and covered with soft red rubber. I thought of an aging fashion model marching on the runway, except he lacked a model's wasted prettiness or the vacuous gaze. He was endlessly pleasant to whichever guard was standing at the locked door. I paid close attention to his attempts at conversation, his words less important than his charming tone and the effortless, beguiling smiles. Most of the staff was under orders to never speak with the man, which made for intriguing games of will. Somehow he had learned each guard's first name, and he wasn't shy about using what he knew. "How's this day of ours, Jim?" he might ask. "Is it the best day ever? Or is just me who thinks this way? Feel the sunshine. Listen to these birds singing. Doesn't this kind of morning make you happy to your bones, Jim?"

There was no sun underground, and there were no birds to hear. But after twelve years and five months of captivity, one man seemed to be absolutely thriving.

I watched the five daily prayers, the salat. But I didn't intrude when the prisoner used the bathroom or shower. (Let others record what he washed and wiped. I could check the database later, if I found reason.) While he slept, I sipped coffee and kept passing tabs on his snoring and the busy dreaming brain. Delicate instruments buried inside his Tempur-pedic mattress tried to convince me that they provided a window into that unknowable soul. But

there were no insights, of course. That's why those nights were opportune times to pick my way through an endless array of summaries and reports, clinical data and highly intelligent, utterly useless speculation.

A favorite teacher once told me that our bodies are epics full of treachery and important residues. That's why I turned again and again to the medical data. Samples of the prisoner's fluids and flesh and his thick black hair had been digested and analyzed by a laboratory built for no other purpose. Three thousand years of medical science struggling to turn meat and bone into a narrative that I could understand. But in most cases, my subject's DNA was remarkably unremarkable—save for a few dozen novel genes tucked into the first and fifth and nineteenth chromosomes, that is. The dental evidence was unusual, but not remarkably so. The first x-rays had revealed an old break in the right wrist that never healed properly. Later, more intrusive examinations had found an assortment of microscopic features that might mean much, unless they were meant to mislead. Only a handful of qualified experts had been allowed to examine that body in full; yet even those few voices managed to produce a chorus of contradictory opinions about the man's nature and origins. Was our prisoner telling the truth about his birth and life? And if not, from where did he come and what could he possibly represent?

Of course those medical masters were shown only

a nameless patient and a carefully trimmed, strategically incomplete biography.

In a dozen years, only nine people had been given full access to every transcript, test result, and digital image. I was one of the nine, or so I had been promised. One can never feel too certain about a government's confidences, particularly when it involves its deepest, most cherished secret.

The prisoner was known as Lemonade-7.

That designation was entirely random. But the copious records showed that yes, he was given that drink once, and after two sips he said, "Too sour," and ordered that it was never to be brought to him again.

"Ramiro" was the name he went by. And for reasons that might or might not be significant, he had never offered any surname.

"So what about Ramiro?" Jefferson asked.

"What do you mean?"

"When will you actually get to work on him?"

"That's what I'm doing," I replied.

Jefferson was the prison's CIA administrator. This had been his post from the beginning, which was remarkable. In any normal operation, he would have been replaced by a sequence of ambitious, usually younger types. New guards and fresh staff would have come and spent their allotted time and then gone away again. But that would have swollen the pool of individuals who knew too much about matters that didn't exist, and what the public had never suspected

would have soon leaked out into the world.

“I realize you’re doing work,” Jefferson said. “But are you ever going to talk to Ramiro?”

“Actually, I’m speaking to him now.”

Jefferson was a short, squat fellow with thinning brown hair and a close-cut beard that turned to snow years ago. His files gave the portrait of an officer who had been a success at every stage of his professional life. Running this prison was an enormous responsibility, but until last week, he seemed to be in complete control. Then events took a bad, unexpected turn, and maybe more than one turn, and the stress showed in his impatient voice and the irritability that seeped out in conversation and during his own prolonged silences.

Jefferson glared at me, then looked back at the monitors.

“Okay,” he whispered. “You’re speaking to him now.”

“In my head,” I said. Looking at Jefferson, I used my most ingratiating smile. “I’m practicing. Before I actually go in there, I want to feel ready.”

“You’ve had five days to prepare,” he reminded me.

Circumstances put a timetable on everything. Two days had been allotted to a full briefing, and then I was brought here, and for three days I had enjoyed the freedoms and pressures of this ultra-secure compound.

“Collins went straight in,” said Jefferson.

Collins was a certified legend in my little business.

“Right into Ramiro’s cell and started talking with him.” That was twelve years ago, but Jefferson still had to admire what my colleague had accomplished.

“He also stopped the torture,” I mentioned.

Jefferson shook his head. “He liked claiming that, I know. But everything about the interrogation was my call. I’m the one who put an end to the cold rooms and sleep deprivation.”

I offered a less-than-convinced nod.

“And by the way,” he continued, “I was responsible for bringing Collins in from the Bureau.”

“I guess I’d read that,” I admitted.

“And I just happen to be the hero who let your colleague work however he wanted, whatever method he thought was best, and fuck those hundred thousand orders that Washington was giving us then.”

The old bureaucrat still had a belly full of fire and bile. He offered a very quick, completely revealing grin, sitting back in his chair while thinking hard about past glories.

“But you didn’t select me, did you?”

“I guess not,” he said.

“Collins picked me,” I said. “Last year, wasn’t it? Not that anybody told me, of course. But in case he couldn’t serve anymore, I was his first choice as a replacement.”

Jefferson shifted his weight, saying nothing.

“I’ll grant you, the candidate list is short. But you’d have to admit, I’m rather well regarded.”

Jefferson shrugged.

“If you want,” I mentioned, “I can suggest a viable candidate to replace me. In the event you lose all faith in my methods.”

He was tempted. I saw it in his face, particularly in the sly smile.

“But that would mean more delays,” I warned. “And I doubt if my replacement would be as effective as me.”

“You’re a cocky gal, aren’t you?”

“It has been said.”

“Help you get ahead, does it?”

“It helps keep me sane, mostly.”

Jefferson turned away, staring at the largest screen. The prisoner was sitting at his desk, reading Jane Austen in Portuguese. The date and time were fixed in the bottom right corner: August 5th, 2014. Three minutes after three in the afternoon.

“Before I go in there,” I began.

“Yeah?”

“Tell me about the first days,” I said. “Before you brought in Collins. Right after Ramiro was caught ... what was your mood, early on?”

“My mood?” His smile grew bigger and sourer, wrapped around a painful memory. “You can imagine what I was thinking. March 2002, Osama was still the big monster, and some stateless warrior slips across the Canadian border with five kilos of bomb-grade U-235. That’s what I was thinking about. But his luck hit a stretch of black ice in Montana, and the state

trooper found his Maxima flipped on its back, this bastard behind the steering wheel, unconscious.”

I had seen hundreds of images of the crash scene.

“The man’s fingerprints were unknown. His passport and identity were quality fakes, but we couldn’t tell which foreign power had done the work. Nobody knew who he was. Al Qaeda, or Iraqi, or was he something else? All we knew was that, at the very least, our prisoner was part of somebody’s A-bomb project.”

“You needed to know everything, and as fast as possible.”

“How many like this guy were there?” Jefferson turned in my direction, but never quite made eye contact. “And would his associates be happy hitting New York or Washington? Or did they have more terrible targets in mind?”

I found it interesting: The person most familiar with the full story was still jolted with a simple replay of known events. Jefferson tensed up as he spoke about that heavy lump of gray metal, shaped like a cannon ball and hidden by the spare tire.

“We didn’t know anything,” he continued, “but it was obvious our man was the biggest trophy in the ongoing war. That’s why another Maxima and a compliant corpse were rolled off that Montana highway, the crash restaged and the wreckage burned up. It was treated like an ordinary accident. Now our prisoner had a good reason to miss his next clandestine rendezvous, wherever than might be.

Because he was officially dead.”

“You unleashed a lot of specialists,” I said. “Working their delicate magic on his stubborn corpse.”

Jefferson didn't like my tone.

“You had to make the call,” I continued. “The stakes seemed treacherously high. The proverbial fuse was burning down.”

“Don't give me that attitude,” Jefferson warned. “Your career has seen its share of hard interrogations.”

I admitted, “It has,” without hesitation. “And believe me, I will never question those early decisions.”

What was the point now, after all?

Jefferson heard resignation where none was offered, and because he was a good career officer, he made his features soften.

“A frustrating subject, the records say.”

“He was.”

“Hard interrogations and potent drugs, in tandem. But how much good did all that do?”

He didn't answer.

I asked, “So who figured it out first?”

“Figured what out?”

“Ramiro's list,” I said.

With only his eyes, Jefferson smiled. “It's all in the files.”

“I don't always believe what I read.”

“No?”

“But here’s my understanding of the story,” I said, leaning forward. “For five months, that man was abused relentlessly. Every half-legal method was applied to him, often several at once. Then you brought in a fresh crew—old KGB hands, as I understand it—who brought tricks that made everybody feel Hell’s breath. And what did you get in the end? Nothing. Your prisoner gave us nothing. He didn’t offer any name. He didn’t even utter an intelligible word. He screamed on occasion, sure. But only after his elbows were pulled from their joints. And the curses weren’t in any known language.”

I paused, waiting.

Jefferson said nothing.

“And then one day, when his arms were working again, he motioned to his interrogators. He indicated that he wanted a paper and a pen. And when those items were delivered, he filled several pages with letters and numbers—peculiar looking to the untrained eye, if not out-and-out bizarre.”

The original list was sitting in an important vault. I pulled out one of the three copies that had been made since, the writing neat and legible, with a few artistic flourishes, particularly in the 5s and Ts.

“So tell me,” I said. “Who figured this puzzle out?”

Jefferson named one of his staff. Then he quietly reminded me, “It’s all in the records.”

“No,” I said. “I think the genius was you.”

Surprise turned to wary pleasure. With a smug little wink, he asked, “How could it be me?”

“Because you would have gotten the first look at his list. And you’re a bright, bright fellow with a lot of hobbies. I know that because I’ve checked your files too. I think what happened is that something he wrote jogged a leftover memory from your school days. In particular, from astronomy class. The first sequence in each line is obviously a position in the sky, if you know the subject. But it takes a bigger leap to realize that the second sequence is a date.”

“It took me five minutes,” he boasted.

“Easy to do, as long as you understand that the dates are based on the Islamic calendar. The significance of both notations, taken together, would have been answered on maybe a dozen websites. But that answer was crazy. And it left you with a much bigger puzzle sitting inside a cold, cramped cell. Even the earliest dates on Ramiro’s list occurred after his incarceration. And each one marked the day and position of a supernova bright enough to be noticed by earthbound astronomers.”

Jefferson put his arms around his chest and squeezed, shaking his head with an enduring astonishment.

“You were the one, weren’t you?”

He admitted, “Yes.”

“But you didn’t trust your insight,” I suggested.

“Like you said. It looked crazy.”

“So in a very general fashion, you told your subordinate to see if the list might just have something to do with the sky. Because you’re a smart

player, and if your wild idea didn't pan out, you wouldn't be held accountable."

Jefferson knew better than to respond.

"And how long did you have to wait?" I asked. "Before the next supernova sprang into existence precisely where it was supposed to be?"

"You know."

"Seven days," I answered. "And that's when you were certain. Sitting in the cold room was something far more dangerous than a few pounds of uranium. Somehow our terrorist, or whatever he was, knew the future. Against all reason, Ramiro could predict celestial events that nobody should be able to anticipate in advance."

Tired, satisfied eyes closed and stayed closed.

"That's when you went out and found Collins. An entirely different species of interrogator. A smart, relentless craftsman with a history of convincing difficult people to talk about anything. And for twelve years, you have sat here watching your prize stallion slowly, patiently extract an incredible story from your prisoner."

Jefferson nodded, smiled. But the eyes remained closed.

I stared at the creature sitting inside his spacious, comfortable cell. And with a measured tone, I reminded both of us, "This is the most thoroughly studied individual in the world. And for a long time, he has given us the exact minimum required to keep everyone happy enough. And as a result, he has

maintained control over his narrow life. And yours.”

Jefferson finally looked at me, squirming a little in his chair.

“Fuck timetables,” I said. “I think that I’m being exceptionally sensible not to march in there and offer my hand and name.”

“I see your point,” he allowed.

“To be truthful? This entire situation terrifies me.” I hesitated, and then said, “It’s not every day you have the opportunity, and the honor, and the grave responsibility of interviewing somebody who won’t be born for another one hundred years.”

Jefferson can write the history however he wants. Collins' arrival was what brought real, substantive changes for the prisoner. The still nameless man was unchained and allowed to wash, and under newly imposed orders, his guards brought him clean clothes and referred to him as "sir." Then after the first filling breakfast in twenty weeks, he was escorted to a comfortably warm room with a single folding chair of the kind you would find in any church basement.

In those days, Collins worked with a partner, but the two agents decided that it was smarter to meet the mysterious visitor on a one-to-one basis.

Collins carried in his own chair, identical to the first, and he opened it and sat six feet from the prisoner's clean bare feet.

For a long while he said nothing, tilting his face backward so that the overhead light covered him with a warm, comforting glow. I have watched that first meeting twenty times, from every available angle. The interrogator was a bald little man, plain-faced but with brilliant blue eyes. I knew those eyes. I first met Collins in the late nineties, at some little professional conference. From across the room, I noticed his perpetual fascination with the world and how his effortless, ever-graceful charm always found some excuse to bubble out. Collins had ugly teeth, crooked and yellow. But his smile seemed genuine and always fetching, and the voice that rose from the little body

was rich and deep. Even his idle chatter sounded important, as if it rose from God's own throat.

For a full ninety seconds, the interrogator made no sound.

The prisoner calmly returned the silence.

Then Collins sat back until the front legs of his chair lifted, and he laughed with an edge to his voice, and waving his hand at the air, he said in good Arabic, "We don't believe you."

In Farsi, he claimed, "We can't believe you."

And then in English, he said, "I'm here to warn you. One lucky guess won't win you any friends."

"Which guess is that?" the prisoner replied, in an accented, difficult-to-place strain of English.

Those were the first words he had uttered in captivity.

"You have some passing experience with astronomy, I'll grant you that." Collins had the gift of being able to study arcane subjects on the fly and then sound painfully brilliant. For the next six minutes, he lectured the prisoner about the stars, and in particular, how giant stars aged rapidly and soon blew up. Then he calmly lied about the tools available to the Hubble telescope and the big mirrors on top of Hawaii. "You had access to this data. Obviously. In your previous life, you must have studied astronomy. That's why you took the chance and gave us some random dates, and by pure coincidence, a few stars happened to blow up in just about the right slices of the sky."

A thin smile and a dismissive shrug of the shoulders were offered.

“Or maybe you are genuine,” Collins allowed. “The implication, as far as I can tell, is that you can see the future. Which is insane. Or you know the future because you came from some to-be time. Which seems even crazier, at least to me. But if that’s true, then I guess it means I should feel lucky. Just being in your presence is a privilege. How many times does somebody get to meet a genuine time traveler?”

Silence.

“But if that’s true,” Collins continued, “then I have to ask myself, ‘Why spring this on us now? And why this strange, cosmic route?’”

The silence continued for most of a minute.

“We can’t break you,” Collins finally pointed out. “Believe me, I know how these things work. What you’ve endured over these weeks and months ... any normal person would have shattered ten different ways. Not that you’d be any help to us. Torture is a singularly lousy way of discovering the truth. Beaten and electrocuted, the average person ends up being glad for the chance to confess. To any and every crime we can think of, particularly the imaginary misdeeds. But everybody here has been assuming that we’re dealing with a normal human specimen. And what I think is ... I think that isn’t the case here. Is it?”

The prisoner had a thin face and thick black hair that had been shaved to the skull, and in a multitude of ways, he was handsome. His teeth were white and

straight. His shoulders were athletic, though captivity had stolen some of his muscle. He was mixed-blooded, European ancestors dancing with several other races. The best estimate of his age put him at thirty-two. But nobody had yet bothered to examine his genetics or his insides. We didn't appreciate that his indifference to pain had organic roots, including novel genes and buried microchines that insulated both his body and stubborn mind.

"Okay, you want us to believe that you're special," Collins said.

The prisoner closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he took a dramatic breath and then said nothing.

"But I don't think you appreciate something here. Do you know just how stupid and slow governments can be? Right this minute, important people are thinking: So what? So he knows a few odd things about the sky. I'm impressed, yes. But I'm the exception. Maybe there are some bright lights in the administration who see the implications. Who are smart enough to worry. But do you actually know who sits in the Oval Office today? Do you understand anything about our current president? He is possibly the most stubborn creature on the planet. So when this clever game of yours is presented to him, how do you think it's going to play out?"

The prisoner watched Collins.

"We won't torture you anymore. I promise that." And after a long sigh, Collins added, "But that isn't

what you care about, I'm guessing. Not really. Something else matters to you. It deeply, thoroughly matters, or why else would you be here? So let's pretend for the next moment that your list of supernovae is true. You can see the future. Or, better, you come from there. And if it is possible to travel in time, then I guess it stands to reason that you aren't alone, that others made the journey with you."

Here the prisoner's heart quickened, half a dozen machines recording the visible rise in his interest.

"I'm guessing you're part of a group of time tourists. Is that about right?"

In Collins' copious notes, written several hours later, was the open admission that he had taken a chance here, making an obvious but still bizarre guess.

"You come from some distant age," he continued. "You're the child of an era where this is normal. People can easily travel into their past. And who knows what other miracle skills you have at your disposal? Tools and weapons we can't imagine. Not to mention the historic knowledge about our simple times. Yet here you are. You've been sitting in the same closet for five months, and after all this time, maybe it's finally occurred to you that your friends and colleagues—these other visitors from tomorrow—have no intention of rescuing you from this tedious mess."

In myriad ways, the body betrays the mind. With the flow of the blood and the heat of the skin, the

prisoner's body was showing each of the classic signatures of raw anger.

"If I was part of a team," Collins began, "and we leaped back a thousand years into the past..."

Then, he hesitated.

The prisoner leaned forward slightly, waiting.

"To the Holy Land, let's suppose. And suppose I was captured. The Saracens don't know what to make of me, but just to be safe, they throw me into their darkest dungeon." Collins sat back, his chair scrapping against the tiled floor. "Well, sir, I can promise you this: I would damn well expect my friends to blow a hole in the stone wall and then pluck me out of there with a good old futuristic Blackhawk helicopter."

The prisoner leaned back.

Quietly, in that accented English of his, he said, "One hundred and forty years."

"That's how far back you jumped?"

"A little farther, actually." The prisoner grinned faintly, mentioning, "We have been among you now for several years."

"Among us?"

"Yes."

"And who is 'we'?"

"Our leader. And his followers." The prisoner paused, smiling. "We call the man Abraham."

Collins hesitated. Then he carefully repeated the name. "Abraham."

"The father of three great religions, which is why

he took that important name for himself.”

“You came here with Abraham.”

“Yes.”

“And how many others?”

Silence.

Collins was not acting. He was worried, his fingers shaking despite the room’s heat, his voice trembling slightly as he asked, “How many of these friends came with you?”

“None.”

“What...?”

“They are not my friends,” the prisoner stated.

“Why? Because they won’t save you?”

“No.” The thin face tilted backward, teeth flashing in the light. “Because I have never particularly liked those people.”

“Then why join up?” Collins put his hands together, squeezing the blood out of his fingers. “Why go to the trouble of leaping back to our day?”

“I believed in their cause.”

“Which is?”

No answer was offered.

“You want to change the future? Is that your grand purpose?”

The prisoner shrugged. “In one fashion or another.”

Collins leaned close, and for the first time he offered his name and an open hand. “You’re being helpful, sir, and I thank you.”

The prisoner shook the hand. Then he quietly said,

“Ramiro.”

“Is that your name?”

“Yes.”

“I’m pleased to know it, Ramiro.”

“Don’t put me back into that cell again, Collins.”

“But I have to,” the interrogator replied.

Ignoring that answer, Ramiro said, “I have a set of demands. Minimal requirements that will earn my cooperation, I promise you.”

“Two names and the vague beginnings of a story,” Collins countered. “That won’t earn you much.”

“And I will ask you this: Do you want to defeat the invaders?” When it served his purpose, Ramiro had a cold, menacing smile. “If you insist on mistreating me, even one more time, I will never help you.”

“I don’t have any choice here,” Collins told him.

“Yes,” said Ramiro. “Yes, you do.”

“No.”

Then the prisoner leaned back in his chair, and through some secretive, still mysterious route, he woke a microscopic device implanted inside his angry heart.

For the next one hundred seconds, Ramiro was clinically dead.

By the time he was fully conscious again, calls had been made. Desperate orders had been issued and rescinded and then reissued. Careers were either defined or shattered. And the only soldier from a secretive, unanticipated army was given every demand on a list of remarkably modest desires.

My home was an efficiency apartment no bigger than Ramiro's quarters and only slightly more comfortable. But I was assured that no tiny cameras were keeping tabs on me. As a creature of status, I also enjoyed communications with the outside world—albeit strained through protocols and electronic filters run by intelligence officers sitting in the field station outside the prison. And unlike our number-one citizen, I was free to move where I wished, including jogging along the wide, hard-packed salt streets that combined for a little less than six kilometers of cumulative distance.

No one had ever predicted “temporal jihadists,” as Abraham's agents were dubbed. Uranium-toting terrorists suddenly seemed like a minor threat by comparison. Collins' first interview resulted in a secret and very chaotic panic roaring through Washington. Black ops funds were thrown in every direction. Ground was broken for half a dozen high-security prisons scattered across the world. But then some wise head inside Langley decided that if time travelers were genuine, then there was no telling what they knew, and if they were inspired, there were probably no limits to what they could achieve. A tropical island might look fetching in the recruitment brochure, but how could you protect your prisoner/asset from death rays and stealth submarines? How would any facility set on the earth's

surface remain hidden from prying eyes? The only hope, argued that reasonable voice, was to hide underground, and short, efficient logistical lines were only possible inside the United States. That's why the last prison to receive funding was the only one finished and staffed: an abandoned salt mine set beneath Kansas, provided with a bank of generators and layers of security that kept everyone, including most of its citizens, happily confused about its truest purpose.

Each guard was a volunteer, most of them pulled from submarine duty. To qualify, they couldn't have close families, and like everyone on the skeletal staff, they were forewarned that leaves would be rare events, and brief, and subject to various kinds of shadowing.

Most people didn't even apply for leaves anymore, preferring the safety of the underground while padding their retirement funds.

Life inside the salt mine was never unpleasant, I was told. My superiors—those gray-haired survivors of these last decade-plus—liked to boast about the billions that had been spent on full-spectrum lights and conditioned air, plus the food that most of the world would be thrilled to find on their plates. But nobody went so far as to claim that I was fortunate, nor that this posting was a blessing. The terms of my assignment were grim, any success would bring repercussions, and nobody with half a brain told me that this was an honor, or for that matter, a choice.

Collins' slot had to be filled, and I was the new Collins.

"Ma'am?"

I showed the guard my ID and badge.

"I don't need them, ma'am. I know who you are."

I was a slow, sweat-drenched jogger who had slugged her way through three kilometers of dressed-up tunnels. Technically the guard was off-duty, and he was using his free time to fling a colorful hand-tied fly into what looked like an enormous water-filled stock tank.

"Any bites?" I asked.

"A few."

"Trout?"

I knew the water was too warm for trout. But the questions you ask often define you in a stranger's mind, and I thought it was smart to start with a mistake.

"Bluegill," he told me.

"Really?" I sounded interested.

He was a big strong man, a kid when he arrived here and still younger than me by quite a lot. But in a society where males outnumbered females ten-to-one, I had to be an object of some interest.

"Ever fish?" he asked.

"No," I lied.

He thought about offering to teach me. I saw it in his eyes, in the tilt of his head. But then he decided on caution, forcing himself to mutter a few colorless words. "They bite, but they're too tiny to keep."

Surrounding the tank were huge plastic pots, each one holding a tropical tree or a trio of shrubs. Some of the foliage was thriving. Most just managed to limp along. I could see where a few million dollars had gone, and I suppose it helped the cave dwellers to coexist with living plants. But I could also imagine that a sickly lemon tree standing under fancy fluorescent lights would just as surely defeat a soul or two.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

He began with his rank.

“Your first name,” I interrupted. “What do friends call you?”

“Jim.”

“Hi, Jim. I’m Carmen.”

To the boy’s credit, he saw through me. “You already know my name. Don’t you, ma’am?”

“Carmen,” I insisted.

But he wouldn’t say it. He reeled in his feathery fly, pinning the hook to the largest eyelet, and then he did a modestly convincing job of packing up his tackle. He didn’t want to stop fishing, but my presence made him uncomfortable.

“So you know who I am?”

Jim nodded.

“And maybe you’re wondering if this is a coincidence, our paths crossing in the park like this?”

“It isn’t,” he stated.

“Probably not,” I agreed.

Surrounding the stock tank was a narrow cedar

deck. I happened to be blocking the stairs leading down.

“Talk to me for a minute,” I said.

Not as an order, just a request.

Jim hesitated. Then with a nervous grin, he said, “Yeah. I found him.”

“Collins?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I didn’t react.

“Is that what you wanted to ask me?”

I nodded. “You found him inside his apartment.”

“Yes.”

My sense of the moment was that the young man was embarrassed, first and foremost. Security was his duty, and one of the most important citizens of this nameless, unmapped town died during his watch.

“I read your report,” I mentioned.

The boy’s eyes were open but blind. He was gazing back in time, crossing a little more than a week, standing before a long dark pool of congealed blood leading to a pale corpse sitting in bathwater that had turned chill.

“Did you know Collins very well, Jim?”

“Yeah. Sort of.”

“As a friend,” I continued. “Did you talk with him much?”

“I didn’t see it coming, if that’s what you mean. Ma’am.”

“We often don’t with suicides,” I assured him. “People expect depression, despair. Afterwards, we

try to remember a telltale noose hanging from the high beam. But that's usually not the case. And do you know why?"

He blinked, watching me.

"A person is miserable, let's say. Sad and sick of being alive. Then one day, he finds the perfect solution to his terrible problems. 'I'll just kill myself,' he says. And in that moment, his miseries are cured. He can suddenly smile through his final days, knowing that every pain will soon be left behind."

Jim shook his head slowly, probably wondering if this middle-aged woman was as bat-crazy as she sounded.

"I knew Collins too," I admitted.

He sighed, looking at me with curious eyes. The two of us had something in common, it seemed.

"I'll miss him," I offered.

The man's face dipped.

Then before I could ask my next question, he looked up. "Salt Lake City," he mentioned.

"What about it?"

"How is it, ma'am?"

"Carmen," I insisted.

"Carmen."

"Salt Lake is just fine."

He said, "Good."

I waited.

He took a deep breath, drinking in the negative ions that were being generated by a filtration system stolen from NASA. Then with a trace of frustration,

he admitted, “We don’t get much news down here.”

“I know that.”

“It’s hard. You can never tell what they’re holding back. It’s done for good reasons, I know. But we always have to wonder.”

“Indian Point,” I offered.

“Yeah, it was four days before we heard anything about that. And then only because somebody with clearance decided to jump protocols and tell us.”

“Collins did.”

“I’m not saying,” he said. Which was the same as, “Yes.”

“Did he explain how awful Indian Point would be?”

Jim didn’t answer, carefully turning his reel two clicks.

“The reactors and storage facilities obliterated, all of those poisons thrown up by the mushroom cloud.” My voice broke—an honest shattering. Then I managed to add, “I watched it all on the news. That wind carried that shit right over New York, and then Washington and Philadelphia, and all the mayhem that resulted...”

“Yeah,” Jim whispered.

“And then to learn that it wasn’t just some crude uranium bomb that killed twenty million, no. But a fat fusion monster that led straight back to Russia...”

With a nudge, I could have knocked Jim off his feet. Almost two years had passed, and the memory was still that raw.

I promised, “Nothing big has happened lately.”

Jim needed a couple of deep breaths. “But at least ... are things starting to simmer down?”

I shrugged. Honestly, how could anyone assess the state of our world?

“What about the wars?” he asked.

“Some are worse, some better. It just depends, Jim.”

He gave me a long, studious stare. “You know what? You don’t really look like a Carmen.”

“I need a tall hat covered with fruit?”

“Ma’am?” he muttered, puzzled by the cultural reference.

I stepped away from the steps, allowing him enough room to escape.

But he didn’t move, and with a soft, importunate voice admitted, “Some of us are wondering. What is your mission, ma’am?”

“To replace Collins.”

That’s what he wanted me to say, because the other possibilities were too hard to measure, and probably even more terrible.

“I’ll meet our prisoner tomorrow,” I confessed.

Jim nodded, trying to show nothing with his face.

“You often stand guard over Ramiro,” I mentioned.

“Everybody gets that duty.”

“Of course.”

He glanced at the stairs.

“So what do you think about the man, Jim?”

“I don’t know anything about him,” he said too quickly.

I said, "Good," and left it there.

Then he added, "He seems smart, I guess. But odd."

"Odd how?"

He had a guard's burly shoulders. He used them to shrug, saying nothing else.

"I was hoping, Jim. Maybe you can help me." I paused, just for a moment. Just to let him wonder what I might say next. "What was Collins' mood when you walked him back to his apartment?"

And now the shoulders tightened, just a little.

"I saw you two on the security videos. Walking and talking."

"I was going off-duty, ma'am. Carmen."

"Collins didn't visit Ramiro again."

The young man seemed surprised. "No?"

"Didn't he see the prisoner almost every day?"

"Most days, I guess."

"But that was three days before he killed himself."

"I'll trust you on that."

"So I'm going to ask you. Officially. What was Collins' state of mind when you walked with him back to his quarters?"

Jim's eyes gazed into the past.

"Did he say anything?"

"I did most of the talking."

"Was that normal?"

"Not particularly. No, ma'am."

"You stopped at his front door for a minute," I said.

“Yeah. I guess.”

“Did he show you anything, Jim?”

“Like what?”

“Papers. Something with writing on it.”

“Well, Collins had his black case with him.”

“But you didn’t see a legal pad, or anything like that?”

Jim tried to see yellow paper, but he couldn’t make himself.

“Under the blood,” I said.

“What?”

“Papers got burned. Somebody incinerated them at least twice, to make sure every mark was erased.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“How about the coin?”

“I saw that.”

“Beside the bath?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“A dollar president’s coin.”

“I noticed it, sure.”

I waited a moment. Then I said, “So you walked him and his attache case back to his apartment. And Collins said nothing that you can remember?”

“Just...” Jim held his mouth closed for a moment. Then he forced himself to look at me, and with an impressive talent for mimicry, he used the dead man’s voice. Deeply, with an appealingly slight Southern drawl, he said, “Want to hear something funny?”

“He asked you that?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did he tell you what was funny?”

Jim shook his head. “Which was too bad, I thought at the time. Collins was real good at jokes, when he wanted to be...”

Healthful food and regular rest, plus years of tempered exercise, showed in the prisoner's fit body and the youthful face. He was wearing beige trousers, a clean white polo shirt and sandals that looked comfortably broken down. It was easy to confuse him for a middle-management worker in the final days of a long vacation. When he heard the reinforced door being unbolted, he stood up. Ramiro didn't seem at all surprised to find a strange woman walking into his home. "Hello," he said with a voice that had grown almost American over the years. Then he offered a warm smile and his right hand.

I introduced myself.

"A lovely name," was his response. Then the spirit of generosity took hold. He surrendered his favorite chair and asked what I would like to drink. Coffee? Tea? Or perhaps the blue Gatorade he kept cold inside his little refrigerator.

I took the chair and requested green tea.

There wasn't any stove, so he heated the water inside the microwave. Staring at the revolving mug, he told me, "It's very sad about Collins."

"It was," I agreed.

"In a sense, he was my best friend."

"This must be hard for you."

"Not particularly." Ramiro seemed to relish how cold that sounded. He pursed his lips and shrugged, giving me a momentary glance. Measuring my

reaction, no doubt.

I stared at the wall behind him, gazing at an enormous photograph of the snow-clad Himalayas.

“By any chance, did you know Collins?”

I waited for a moment. Then I said, “Yes.”

That delay piqued his interest. Ramiro invested the next several moments studying my face. “How well did you know him?”

I said nothing.

“Were you lovers?”

“Guess,” I told him.

That earned an easy laugh. “I know you weren’t.”

“Why not?”

With a calm voice, he asked, “Do you like honesty, Carmen?”

“Always.”

“You aren’t pretty enough for Collins. Or young enough, frankly.”

“Fair points,” I agreed. “But how do you know this?”

“Occasionally the man would entertain me with his stories.” Ramiro glanced at the mug and then stared at me. “I don’t have a passionate life, I’m sure you know. But if only half of his stories were true, then the young pretties didn’t have much chance against his charms.”

“Local girls, were they?”

“I shouldn’t say. Your fraternization rules are ridiculously strict.”

I said nothing else.

Then the microwave beeped, and Ramiro set a tea bag into the plain white mug before bringing both to me. He didn't use the handle, and when I touched the mug's body, just for an instant, my fingertips came close to burning.

He pulled his office chair out from under his little desk and sat before me, the right leg crossed over his left.

"Collins and I enjoyed some professional moments," I began. "In fact, we met long before you happened along."

He nodded, smiled.

I waited him out.

Then with a sharp grin, he mentioned, "You must be exceptionally qualified to receive this posting."

"I must be."

"May I ask a few questions?"

"By all means."

"Without giving away secrets," he began, "what kinds of experiences have you suffered during these hard years?"

"Are they hard?"

"I hear little news, and who knows if it's complete." Ramiro shrugged, laughing softly. "Which is Jefferson's idea, I think. Give the subject just enough information to tease out a few fresh, hopefully useful opinions." Then he sat back, a good-natured sigh rising out of him. "But yes, Carmen. From what I have learned, I think these times are genuinely terrible."

“Montana,” I said.

“What about it?”

“The day you were found beside the road and captured ... I was stationed outside Kabul.”

When interested in any subject, Ramiro leaned forward and stopped blinking, his black eyes filling up his face. One examining physician had proposed that the microchines inside his brain were boosting his neurological capacities, and the eyes were a kind of tell. Others thought it was just a personal quirk. Whatever the reason, he was using his interested gaze on me now.

“Then the following year,” I continued, “they stationed me in Iraq.”

“Of course.”

“I was sent to help hunt for WMDs. My assignment was to interrogate the old Baathists and such.”

A thin smile surfaced; he saw the punch line coming.

“Of course there weren’t any nukes or biological nightmares. But we didn’t know that yet. And by ‘we,’ I mean the people on the ground. Washington had strung together the ridiculous intelligence, and the media beat the drums, and we went into Baghdad and kicked Saddam out of his palaces. Victory was declared. But then during that window between the celebrations and the first car bombs, my assignment shifted. That country was collapsing. Our soldiers were pretty much letting it happen, as far as I could tell. But someone gave me dozens and then hundreds

of shackled bodies, plus an ever-changing checklist that made no sense to me.”

My host leaned back, his chair offering a comfortable creaking. “I can appreciate your confusion.”

“You understand how my game works,” I said. “I try to know more than I’d ever admit to my subject. But when it suits me, I can be very stupid. And if she gives me something ... most of my prisoners were female, I should mention ... if she offers some bit of intelligence that I didn’t have, my first response is to say, ‘Oh, yes. We know all about the cement mixer with the fertilizer bomb. You can’t help yourself with that crumb of old news.’”

I had shifted into my best Arabic.

Ramiro was fluent in Arabic and English, Portuguese and Spanish. But his natural tongue was an odd Creole that borrowed from each language, plus a rich seasoning of peculiar syllables and tech-terms that wouldn’t exist for another hundred-plus years.

I wished I knew his native tongue. But I was too old and cranky to learn it in a workable span of time.

The prisoner stuck to his Americanized English, asking, “With that checklist, Carmen ... what sorts of items made no sense to you?”

“Individually? Nothing was blatantly strange. But it was the whole goofy package. My bosses were hunting people who didn’t belong in Baghdad. Who weren’t native to Iraq, and maybe not even to the

Middle East. I made some discreet inquiries, asking for clearer instructions. But nobody knew the sense behind any of our orders. One of my prisoners would eventually stand out—that's what the generals promised. She would be in her late twenties or thirties, or maybe her forties. Her accent might be wrong. Unless she was exceptionally good with languages, which was another key to watch for. There wouldn't be any genuine records showing her whereabouts more than five years earlier. And a three-star general confided to me—to all of us—that in the worst interrogations, my phantom would enjoy an extraordinary tolerance for pain and drugs and boredom. And the general promised that when I finally found my girl, she was going to be worth a hundred bloodied mistakes.”

With a dismissive gesture, Ramiro said, “I told Collins. I told everybody. As a young man, I purchased a cheap package of tailored genes and various nano-organs.”

“Of course.”

“Common add-on talents popular in my world.”

“To insulate your poor citizens from the ravages of poverty,” I said, nodding agreeably.

“My warnings were explicit,” Ramiro told me. “I couldn't be certain about the genetics of the other warriors, or their current identities, much less how well or how poorly they would blend into any local population.”

“You gave us Iraq,” I mentioned.

He bristled. Then after a moment, he said, "This is very old ground."

"It is," I agreed.

"Iraq," he repeated. "Over twenty million people, most of them young. And what percentage of that population did your colleagues and you process? One percent? Was it that much?"

"We tried our best," I claimed.

"I told Collins. One of the voices mentioned Iraq to me, in passing."

"It wasn't Abraham?"

"No, it was one of his associates. He said Iraq was our focus. But even if that was the case, and even if Abraham and his people didn't slip out of the country before your noisy invasion ... well, I was always critical of your clumsy methods and your very poor odds for success."

"I know. You gave Collins ample warnings."

"Even in the smallest country," said Ramiro, "there are so many dark corners in which to hide."

"You warned everybody," I said.

"And you were following orders," he said flatly. Then he added, "Carmen," with a suddenly friendly, familiar tone. "But really, how could your masters expect you to find anybody of substance?"

I paused, just for a moment. "Yes, it was a difficult assignment."

He didn't seem to notice my careful tone. "What about blood and skin?" he asked. "Were you taking samples?"

“I wasn’t. But some med-techs were doing just that.” I finally pulled the soggy tea bag into the air and sipped from the cooling mug. “Everybody had their own secrets to keep. Nobody knew more than a sliver of the whole incredible story. I didn’t know samples were being sent back home, thousands of them, and being tested for key genes.”

“Genes that might not have been there,” he pointed out. “Or that could be removed or easily hidden.”

I nodded. “We knew your genetic markers, sure. But who could say what we’d find inside another warrior’s chromosomes?”

“Precisely.”

“But what else could my people do? We were facing an unexpected threat—temporal jihadists born in a distant, treacherous future. What reasonable, effective measures would have helped our security?”

Ramiro swiped at the air.

Quietly but fiercely, he said, “I told you what I knew.”

“Of course.”

“Once my terms were met, I explained everything to our friend Collins.” His voice rose, cracked. “Imagine that a foreign power captured the man standing guard outside my door. They would easily break him. In a few days or weeks, he would confess everything. But what is the operational knowledge of a lowly soldier? Does that man ... my friend Jim ... does he even halfway comprehend my importance?”

“Probably not,” I conceded.

“And I’m just a simple soldier too.”

“Simple? I doubt that.”

A sly smile blossomed, faded. “What happened next, Carmen?”

“In 2005, I was yanked out of Iraq. I was flown back to the States and promised a new assignment. But before orders came down, they pressed me into helping with certain war games. Very secret, very obvious stuff. After the endless mess in Iraq, we were going to try to do a better job taking on Iran.”

Ramiro watched me.

“Two strange things happened at that conference,” I admitted. “On the first morning, I ran into a colleague on his way to a back room breakfast, and I was roped in and told to play along. It seemed like a chance deal, but of course it wasn’t. There were a lot of strange faces sitting with eggs and oatmeal. And there was Collins. I hadn’t seen that man in ages. God, I thought, he looked tired and pale. But he practically latched onto me. We sat together. This other fellow sat in the corner, watching the two of us. I think we managed maybe five minutes of catch-up. I told him about coming home. He gave me a cover story, but he didn’t bothering pushing it too hard. Then one of the unknown faces, a guy sitting at the end of the table, threw out this odd, odd question.”

Ramiro leaned forward, absorbing my face and soul with a blinkless gaze.

“ ‘What if you could jump back in time?’ the gentleman inquired. He was pretending that his

question wasn't serious, that it was for shits-and-giggles only. He made himself laugh, asking, 'What if you and some like-minded friends gathered together? Say there's a few dozen of you, a couple hundred at most. You're going to travel back in time together. But there are rules. You can cover only one or two centuries, and with restrictions. Your journey has to be a one-way. You can carry only a limited amount of mass. Bodies and a little luggage and that's all. There won't be any return missions to the future. There's no supply train with fresh M-16s and laptops. And your goal? You want to conquer that more primitive world, of course. You are invaders. Two hundred soldiers armed with your beliefs and training and your superior knowledge, and you'll have to find some clever way to make your little force strong enough to defeat the old horse armies.'

Ramiro smiled.

"Of course there was a purpose to his wacky scenario," I allowed. "That much was obvious to everybody there. But the gentleman didn't offer explanations. For all I know, he was told that our own physicists had just built a time machine, and we were trying to decide what to do with our new toy. The truth never had to get in the way. During a five-hour breakfast, he led a clumsy, half-informed discussion that ended up with tactical nukes burning up London and Paris. And do you know why this happened? I think the show was put on for Collins' benefit. To give him ideas, to help guide his future conversations with

you. And meanwhile in those other rooms, the future Iranian war ran its imaginary, surgical course.”

The prisoner had leaned forward, elbows on knees. Then he revealed something of his ability—his clear focus, his absolute mastery of detail—when he said, “Earlier, Carmen. When you admitted that your Iraqi assignment was difficult. I had the impression—tell me if I’m wrong—but it seemed to me that despite some very long odds, you were successful.”

I said, “I was.”

“You found a suspect? Somebody out of place in our world, did you?”

“Yes.” I paused. “A young woman without family. With no paper trail reaching back more than a few years. She claimed to have worked as a lab technician, nothing more, and she had reasonable explanations for the gaps in her records. But she was the right age, and she was very, very tough. I worked her and worked her, and the only information I got from her was the name of a river in Kashmir.”

Ramiro stared at me.

“At least that’s what others heard when they listened to the interrogation later.” I shrugged, glancing down. “I couldn’t tell you what she was saying exactly, since she was throwing up at the time. But two days later, a special ops group came and took her away.”

My new friend smiled. Then after a moment or two, he guessed, “Collins told you this news at the breakfast, did he?”

“Later, actually.”

“You had uncovered one of my sisters. Is that what he told you?”

“Not in those terms. But Collins took me out for drinks and mentioned that my girl was interrogated by other teams, and when she finally talked, she admitted to pretty much everything.”

“Very good,” he said.

I kept my voice as level and cool as I could manage it. “Collins told me that she was a holy soldier in a war that hadn’t seen its first shot yet. But that day was coming soon, he confided. And my prisoner ... that young woman ... had promised that our world would be helpless before this mighty hand.”

Ramiro watched me sip the tea. “Collins never mentioned the girl to me.”

“That’s the way it should be,” I said.

“Of course.”

Then I leaned forward. “I asked about her.”

Ramiro waited.

“I asked Collins if she was still being helpful to us.”

“Was she?”

“Not anymore. Since she managed to kill herself.”

A doll’s eyes would have been more expressive. Very calmly, he asked, “A suicide implant, was it?”

“No,” I said. “She slammed her forehead into the corner of a desk, breaking a blood vessel in her cortex.” I set down the cold mug of tea, adding, “But now you know why I’m so highly regarded, at least in some circles. I’ve had some measure of success at this

very odd game.”

To do this job, you need an iron ass. The capacity to sit and listen, nodding with enthusiasm, and remembering everything said while measuring every pause—that's what matters. Find the inconsistencies, and you can be good at it. Connect this phrase to that sigh, and you'll earn your paycheck. What years of experience have shown me is that inflicting pain and the threat of pain are rarely necessary. It takes remarkably little to coax the average soul into revealing everything. Extramarital affairs. Cheating on critical exams. Dangerous politics. Some years ago, during a commercial flight, I sat beside a lovely old lady who spoke at length about cooking and her husband and her cherished garden, which she described in some detail, and then she mentioned her husband again. For a moment, she paused, looking in my direction but seeing something else. Then she quietly admitted that the poor man was beginning to suffer from dementia. It was that pause that caught my attention. It was the careful tone of her voice and the way her steely green eyes stared through a stranger's head. Afterwards, on a whim, I checked with a botanical guide and learned that an astonishing portion of her beautiful garden was poisonous. She never said an evil word about anyone, including that senile old man, but her intentions were obvious. She had made up her mind to kill him, and she was simply waiting for the excuse to use garden

shears and a cooking pot, summoning Death.

But my subjects are never ordinary citizens. As a rule, they consider themselves to be special—committed, determined warriors in whatever grand cause has latched hold of their worthy souls. But their passions are larger than ours, their enthusiasms having few bounds. Rock music makes them pray. Cattle prods and mock executions are exactly what great men expect to endure. But if you treat them as fascinating equals, they will happily chatter on, sometimes for years, explaining far more to you than you ever hoped to know.

For twelve years, Collins sat inside a very comfortable prison cell, listening to one man's self-obsessed monologue.

Thousands of hours of autobiography begged to be studied. But I didn't have the time. Even the summaries made for some massive volumes. I had to make do with an elaborate timeline marked with every kind of event found in one man's life. According to my briefings, the enigmatic Ramiro was born in the second decade of the twenty-second century. His family had some small wealth. The paternal grandfather was a Spaniard who had converted to the Sunni faith before immigrating to Brazil, and the boy was raised in a city that didn't yet exist today—a sugar cane and palm oil center in what was once Amazon rainforest. A maternal uncle was responsible for Ramiro's interest in astronomy. Lemonade-7 was preparing for a long, successful career as some type of

scientist, but at a critical juncture, politics ruined his dreams. At least that's the story that Collins heard again and again. The entire family was thrown into sudden, undeserved poverty. At seventeen, the young Islamic man had to drop out of school and find any work. At eighteen, when he was a legal adult, he bought a cheap package of poverty genes and nanoplants to help insulate him from his miseries; but, unlike many, Ramiro resisted any treatment that would make him happy in these decidedly joyless days.

People want to believe that in another twenty or fifty or one hundred years, the earth will grow into an enduring utopia. But among the prisoner's unwelcome gifts was a narrow, knife-deep vision of a disturbingly recognizable world. Yes, science would learn much that was new and remarkable. And fabulous technologies would be put to hard work. But cheap fusion was always going to need another couple decades of work, and eternal health was always for the next generation to achieve, and by the twenty-second century, the space program would have managed exactly two walks on the Martian surface and a few permanent, very exclusive homes hunkered down near the moon's south pole.

Ramiro's world was ours, except with more people and less naivety. Most of its wealth and all of its power was concentrated in the top one-half percentile. National borders would shift here and vanish there, but the maps would remain familiar.

The old religions would continue struggling for converts, often through simple, proven violence. But the Islamic Century would have come to its natural end. Mormons and Buddhists and Neo-secularists began to gradually gnaw away at their gains. And in the backwaters of Brazil, young Ramiro's faith would seem quite out of place—another liability in his sorry, increasingly desperate prospects.

But then a team of physicists working in the Kashmir Free State would build and successfully test the world's first time machine.

"I can't believe that," Collins had blurted out.

Perhaps the prisoner was a little irritated by his interrogator's tone. There were many moments, early on especially, when Ramiro displayed a thin skin. But then he made a smile break out, dragging his mood into a sunnier place, and with a tight proud voice, he asked, "And how did I come here?"

"This is about me, not you," Collins replied. "I'm just having trouble accepting this preposterous concept."

"You want details, do you?"

"I want the science. At least enough to show around and get a few smart-sounding opinions."

"Of course." The smile warmed. "I assumed this would happen."

This was the first interview inside the new salt-mine prison. Despite a self-induced coronary, Ramiro looked fit and comfortable. His room was finished, but little else was done. Despite copious amounts of

soundproofing, the deep drumming of machinery bled into the audio track—the Army Corps working fast on what they were told was a new secret shelter for the wise heads of their elected government.

“Paper and a pen,” Ramiro demanded.

I wasn’t the first to notice that while making important notes, our time traveler preferred ancient, proven tools.

He wrote hard for half an hour, breaking only to mention that he was by no means an expert in this esoteric branch of science.

Neither was Collins. But that little bald character had done just enough reading to decipher a few equations and recognize the general shape of the diagrams. With a nod and a poker player’s guts, he said, “This looks like you’re playing with the Casimir Effect.”

“Very good,” Ramiro responded.

“Parallel plates set so close together that they tap into the vacuum energies everywhere. Is that about right?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“I’ve heard there’s a lot of energy in a vacuum. Virtual particles and structure too.” Flipping through the pages, Collins allowed the overhead camera to record everything. “So what are you doing on this page? Making a wormhole?”

“Hardly.”

“Doesn’t time travel need a wormhole?”

Ramiro sat back. “That’s a very difficult trick to

achieve. And in the end, unnecessary.”

“Why?”

“A pocket of Lorton Energy is far easier to make.”

“Who’s Lorton?”

“An unborn Australian genius, if that matters. In my day, he was just as famous for his piano playing as for his peculiar physics.” Then Ramiro launched into a lengthy and occasionally self-contradictory lecture about exotic states and branes and the means by which modest energies can throw matter across years and entire eons. But there were strict limits to the magic. The larger the mass to be moved, the shorter span it could cross. A substantial building might be thrown several years into the past, while a tiny grain of sand could find itself resting in the sultry Jurassic.

“Is that how they tested their machine?” Collins asked. “Make a probe and send it back, then dig it up in a fossil bed somewhere?”

Ramiro’s smile flickered.

“Hardly,” he said.

“Wait,” his interrogator said. “I forgot. You told me already ... what was it you told me...?”

“The universe is a quantum phenomena,” Ramiro mentioned.

“Which means?”

“Your physicists have played with a very difficult concept. They call it the many-worlds reality, and to an amazing degree, that model is correct. Everything that can happen will happen. An unstable nucleus might explode today or in a thousand years, which

means that if it detonates both events will happen. And it also explodes during every nanosecond between now and then. In our astonishing, endlessly inventive universe, every possible outcome is inevitable. Every consequence plays out endlessly. The most unlikely event happens too often to count. And possibility is as easy and perfect as the great thoughts that pass through God's good mind."

Collins was a natural actor. But many years later, watching the interrogation, I could tell that he was impressed. It wasn't play-acting on his part. This was no feigned emotion for effect. The camera showed an awestruck gaze and hands that had to find one another, wrapping their fingers into an elaborate knot. Collins was pleased. No, he was thrilled. For a moment or two, he allowed himself to stare at the stack of papers in his lap, humble and unexpected, and in ways that few people can ever know, he felt honored.

Then he remembered his job—his duty—and quickly returned to the scruffy matters of state and war.

"Okay, it's 1999," he said. "In one reality, nobody jumps back to our day. Nothing changes, and the world pushes on exactly as before. Lorton is going to be born and stroke the keys and play with his mathematics—"

"Exactly."

"But there's this other 1999," said Collins.

"Yes."

“Abraham and you, and the rest of the group ... they calmly step out into our world. Is that about it?”

“Except that process was never calm,” Ramiro mentioned. “There was a crack like thunder and quite a lot of dust. Since they occupied a fair amount of space, your native air and ground had to be pushed out of the way.”

“Naturally.”

Ramiro waited.

“Where?” Collins asked.

Then as Ramiro began to speak, his interrogator interrupted, saying, “I know. It’s in Kashmir. You’ve mentioned that before.”

“It was beside the Shyok River.”

“The Shyok? Are you sure?”

“Of course I am sure,” said Ramiro, bristling slightly.

“And how many came?”

“One hundred and ninety-nine warriors,” Ramiro reported.

“You’re sure?”

“I didn’t count the bodies. But that number was mentioned to me.”

“Is that how much mass can be thrown back across one hundred and forty years? About two hundred men’s worth?”

“Men and women.”

“How many women?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because of the masks. You claim.”

The first interrogation had delivered that sour news. Collins had wanted Abraham's description, but Ramiro couldn't identify any of the temporal jihadists. Every head was covered with a thick black fabric. It was a miraculous cloth, transparent to the person beneath but hiding the faces from the outside world. And if that wasn't terrible enough, the cloth also wiped away the character and even the gender of every voice.

"Very smart," Collins.

Ramiro nodded agreeably.

"And your leader, this Abraham fellow—"

"I never saw his face. But please, ask me that question twenty more times. I love repeating myself without end."

"Sorry," Collins said.

Ramiro waited for a few moments. Then he thought to mention, "We also brought a few personal effects and some special equipment too."

"I have to ask this again," Collins said. "My bosses insist."

"As I told you, I can offer only guesses about what kind of equipment was included. My cell was small, and it was not responsible for any of it. I saw some anonymous packing crates. Nothing more."

"A reasonable step," Collins allowed.

Both men sat quietly.

"Again," the interrogator said. "What can you tell me about Abraham?"

The biography was brief and chilling. Abraham

was the only known name for a young gentleman who according to rumors was born into one of the world's wealthiest families. He had invested ten years and his personal fortune preparing for an invasion of the past. What Ramiro knew was minimal, and he openly admitted that he might have been fed lies. But the heart of the plan was for the invaders to come with little but make friends with a useful government, and then they would fabricate the kinds of weapons that would bring this primitive world to their leader's feet.

Ramiro patiently told the story again, and then his interrogator suddenly interrupted.

"Wait, I know," Collins blurted. "It's the future."

"Pardon me?"

"That's how they tested their time machine." He shook the papers in the air. "If they threw a probe into the past, it would only create a new reality. A separate earth diverging from us. But if they had a marked, one-of-a-kind object ... and then let's say they sent it a minute or a day into the future ... then according to this quantum craziness, that probe would appear in every reality leading out from this scruffy little moment of ours."

"Exactly," said Ramiro, smiling like a long-suffering but proud teacher.

"That's how your physicists proved it?"

"Grains of marked sand were sent two moments into the future," said Ramiro.

"Huh," said Collins.

The prisoner sat back in his chair.

“Which makes me wonder,” Collins continued.
Silence.

Then Collins sat back.

“What are you wondering, my friend?”

“What would happen?” The interrogator lifted his hand, holding an imaginary ball before his gaze. “If you had a time machine, and you happened to throw, I don’t know, a couple hundred lumps of U-235 ahead in time? If you sent one of them every minute or so, but you aimed them to appear in exactly the same place, at the same exact moment ... all of that nuclear material pumped into the same tiny volume ... what kind of boom would that make...?”

I watched those ripe moments at least half a dozen times before I was sure of what I had seen. For an instant, the prisoner flinched. His heart kicked slightly, and the sweat came a little faster than before. But what held my interest was Ramiro’s face, and in particular, how guarded he acted for the next little while.

“I will have to be careful,” he was thinking.

“This man is sharp,” I could imagine him warning himself. “Sharp and quick, and I need to watch my steps.”

“A good day’s work?”

“Reasonably exceptional.”

Jefferson nodded, and then he smiled. Then after careful consideration, he decided not to mention what was foremost on his mind. “How’s the lamb?” he asked instead.

“Delicious.”

“And the rest?”

“Everything’s wonderful,” I told him. “Thanks again for the invitation.”

Jefferson’s efficiency apartment was the same as everyone else’s, except for every flourish and individual oddity that he had impressed on its walls and floor and the serviceable, government-issue furnishings. Either his housekeeping was thorough, or he had changed his nature for me. He had a fondness for Impressionist painters and political thrillers. The worn carpet implied a man who liked to pace, possibly while talking on the phone. Only two people were allowed to communicate directly with the outside world, and even then, we had to accept some inflexible restrictions. Every image that entered or left the prison, and even the most ordinary sound, had to be examined by several layers of elaborate software. Hidden messages were the main justification. Ramiro might have secret talents; who knew what any of his microscopic implants really did? Those security measures gave voices a half-

second delay, and the news broadcasts were delayed for nearly thirty minutes before they dripped their way down to us.

Jefferson's small television was perched on the kitchen counter, muted and presently turned to CNN. Not sure what to say, he glanced at the images coming out of China. I preferred to invest my next few moments staring at his Monet—a good quality reproduction, matted and framed above the sofa bed. Then I set down my fork and knife, and after wiping the juice from the corner of my mouth, I quietly announced, “You know, I don't like him.”

Jefferson turned back to me, trying to guess my intentions.

“Lemonade-7,” I said.

“I know who you mean.”

Picking up my fork again, I showed him a serious, sober expression. “There's something about that man ... I don't exactly know what ... but it's just wrong...”

Jefferson risked a neutral nod.

“Control,” I said.

“Pardon me?”

“He demands it,” I said.

“Of course he wants control.”

“And he does an amazing job holding on to it.”

Jefferson shrugged. “In small ways, he does.”

I said nothing.

“But he's still our prisoner. That never changes. Beyond our assurances to keep him secret and safe from harm, what can he count on?”

“Not much,” I agreed. But then I asked, “But what has he given us in these last five or six years? What do we have that’s genuinely new?”

With the tips of two fingers, Jefferson scratched his short white beard.

“Does he offer any fresh insights now? Is he able to make any one of our wars a little less terrible?”

“You know how it is, Carmen.”

“Remind me.”

“The well always runs dry.”

“With our sources, you mean.”

“Of course.”

“So why did Collins remain here?”

A good poker face reveals nothing, except that it is a poker face. Which is a useful clue in itself.

“Collins was better than anybody,” I said. “Nobody else understood the minds and makeup of these time travelers. So why didn’t he step out into the world, take a new post, and use his hard-earned skills to interrogate fresh suspects?”

“Ramiro was his boy.”

“I understand that.”

“And honestly, I didn’t want to lose Collins,” he said.

“Thanks for being honest.”

Jefferson shifted in his chair. “Maybe you’re right,” he allowed. “Looking back, I suppose we might have gotten more good out of Collins.”

“I was scouring the world for Abraham,” I pointed out.

Hearing the name, Jefferson blinked.

“It’s just that nobody bothered to tell me who Abraham was or how many people he had with him, much less what these temporal jihadists were trying to do. There were so many layers of security that responsible, effective work was impossible.”

“Why should I defend policies I didn’t make?”

“I did piece a few things together for myself,” I mentioned. “At least to the point where I knew there was something deadlier than al-Qaeda, a powerful and hateful and almost invisible organization, and it could be anywhere in the world, and I shouldn’t trust anybody completely.”

The bureaucrat fell back on his instincts. “Knowing what you know now, Carmen ... do you really believe that you should have been told?”

I didn’t react.

“And everybody else with high clearances too? Should hundreds and thousands have been brought into the club?”

I gave the Monet another glance.

Jefferson bristled. “This operation has had its share of leaks over the years. Sure, most came from higher up. But I know of three incidents tied to this facility. And we could be on the far side of the moon, as isolated as we are. So what happens if we brief everybody who might like to know about Ramiro? In thirty seconds, nothing will be secret, and in ten minutes, we’ll have forfeited what might be our only advantage.”

The fork had grown warm in my hand. “If it’s an advantage,” I replied, “why aren’t we enjoying some real success?”

“You don’t think we are?”

I shook my head.

“We’ve done a marvelous job of undercutting Abraham,” he told me. “And since he’s our main enemy, I think I should feel proud of my work here.”

I stifled a bleak little laugh.

He noticed. Outrage blossomed, and a tight voice said, “I shouldn’t have to defend myself or my people.” Which was the kind of noise you make when defending everybody. “Before you take that tone with me, perhaps we should both remember what our prisoner—this man who you do not like—has given us.”

Then I smiled and nodded. “My parents live in Seattle,” I mentioned.

“Exactly. Yes!”

Two years ago, government geologists announced that low rumblings beneath the Pacific were precursors to a substantial earthquake. It was a bogus operation, but well staged. As a precaution, everyone in the Pacific Northwest was told to step outside before 10:30 in the morning, and the highways were closed down, and the airlines stopped landing and taking off. Sixteen minutes later, an 8.0 trembler hit western Washington, and it might have killed thousands. But instead of a mauling, only a few dozen perished and a few billion dollars in infrastructure

fell down—almost a nonevent, considering these recent years.

“Seattle is the perfect example,” Jefferson said.

Ramiro had given us the dates and epicenters for dozens of future eruptions and earthquakes. But I wasn’t the first voice to ask, “What kind of person carries those kinds of tidbits inside his head?”

Jefferson gave his beard another good scratch.

“An amateur astronomer might remember exploding stars,” I agreed. “But tectonic events too?”

“The man is brilliant,” Jefferson declared. “You’ve seen his test scores. Those extra genes and his buried machinery give him nearly perfect recall—a skill, I’ll add, that he has kept secret from us.”

“Seattle didn’t hurt his reputation, either,” I pointed out.

Jefferson needed to look elsewhere. So he glanced at the television, but whatever he saw there didn’t seem to comfort him.

“I wish he’d given us more,” I mentioned.

“He can’t do the weather,” Jefferson replied. “Hurricanes are chaotic, and the Butterfly Effects—”

“I don’t mean weather.” Shaking my head, I asked, “What about the tsunami off Sumatra?”

“Which one?”

“The worst one,” I said. “The day after Christmas, in ‘04.”

His shoulders squared. “That wasn’t my call.”

“But you recommended caution,” I pointed out. “I read Collins’ full report. He asked for some kind of

warning to be released. But you didn't want us to 'give away the store.' Did I get the cliché right?"

Beneath the white whiskers, sun-starved flesh grew red.

Again, Jefferson said, "It wasn't my decision."

"I realize that."

"In those days, we couldn't fake this kind of knowledge. Any intervention on our part could have exposed our source."

"A quarter of a million dead," I said. "And mostly Muslim, too."

He wouldn't let me drag him down this path. With a snort, he said, "You have no idea how difficult this has been."

"Tell me."

He wanted to do just that.

"Please," I said.

But caution took hold, and Jefferson's mouth disappeared inside the coarse whiskers.

"Is Ramiro real?"

Jefferson didn't seem to hear me. He bent forward, staring at his own half-eaten dinner. Then quietly and fiercely, he said, "A lot of brilliant people have spent years wondering just that."

"He's a lowly soldier," I mentioned. "The lowliest of all, he claims."

Silence.

"So what was Ramiro doing in Montana? Is it the story that he tells? That he was a delivery boy bringing one little piece of an ultramodern bomb into

our helpless nation?”

Jefferson gave the television another try.

“Maybe he is a genius, and maybe he came from the future. But the poor bastard didn’t know how to drive on ice, did he?”

“Few Brazilians do,” Jefferson snapped.

I showed him a narrow, might-mean-anything smile.

“Do you think that the crash was staged?” he finally asked me.

“It has to cross my mind,” I allowed.

“Which means Ramiro was sent here, and he’s supposed to feed us all the wrong information. Is that what you’re thinking?”

I sat back, and I sighed.

“Okay, I’ll tell you why Collins stayed right here.” Jefferson straightened his back, and he took a deep breath. “Out in the world, what are the odds of finding a second Ramiro? They’re minimal at best. Collins would have bounced from one hotspot to another, wasting his skills. But he remained here instead, playing the patience game, waiting for one of you to stumble across a genuine candidate. We had a good plan in place, Carmen. The new prisoner would be brought here and thoroughly interrogated by Collins, and when the time was right, Ramiro would be allowed to meet with him, or her.”

“I once found a suspect,” I mentioned.

Jefferson remained silent.

“A young woman in Baghdad.”

He allowed that statement to simmer. Then with keen pleasure, he said, "You know the old story about Stalin, don't you? One evening, the dictator can't find his favorite pipe, and his first assumption is that it has been stolen. So he demands a full investigation. But the next morning, Stalin realizes that he simply set the pipe in a different drawer, and he admits as much to the head of his secret police. To Beria. Which leads to a very uncomfortable silence. Then Beria clears his throat, admitting that three men have already confessed to stealing the missing item."

I showed surprise. "What? Are you claiming that my girl wasn't real?"

"I've seen all of the files on her. And everybody else who looked good, at one time or another." Jefferson couldn't help but lean across the tiny table, saying, "When your prisoner broke, she confessed to every suggestion that was thrown her way. Give her enough time, and I think we could have convicted her for a thousand crimes, including stealing Stalin's pipe."

I said nothing. Pretending that this was unwelcome news, I chewed on my bottom lip and refused to look him in the eyes.

"We've had dozens of candidates in the pipeline," Jefferson claimed. "But none ever reached a point of real interest to us."

"Too bad," I whispered.

"Your girl was unique because she managed to kill herself. That's what kept her apparent value high. At least back in Washington, it did."

I was silent.

“By the way, did you ever see the autopsy results? They took her apart cell by cell, basically, and not one tiny, futuristic machine was found. Just some oddities in the blood and gut, that’s all.”

“I tortured an innocent woman? Is that that what you’re saying?”

Jefferson gave me a moment to dwell on that sorry prospect. I think that if I’d asked for a tissue, he would have leaped up to help this naive and disappointing creature.

“We have hard jobs,” he finally said.

I got up from the dinner table.

“For what it’s worth,” he began. Then he hesitated before adding, “Carmen,” with a warm tone.

“What?” I asked.

“Collins had a lot of sleepless nights, dealing with all the possibilities.”

I walked past him, standing close enough to the Monet that the water lilies turned into unrecognizable blobs of pink and white.

After a minute, I asked quietly, “How many times?”

Jefferson was chewing the lamb. He had to swallow before responding. “How many times what?”

“These unrecorded conversations,” I said, my eyes still focused on the gorgeous, senseless painting.

I heard him turn in his chair.

I asked, “When did the secret interrogations begin?”

He decided to stand. “What interrogations?”

“Sometimes Collins disabled the microphones and cameras before entering the prisoner’s quarters.” I turned, showing Jefferson my best stony face. “I know it because I’ve checked the logs and other forms. Nine times in the last six years, some odd software error has caused the complete dumping of everything that happened between Collins and Ramiro.”

Jefferson considered his options.

I said, “These are very convenient blunders, or they are intentional acts of treason.”

“No,” said Jefferson.

“No?”

“Those interviews were Collins’ idea. But I okayed them.”

“Why?”

Too late, the man began to wonder if I was playing a game. “I don’t think I need to remind you, miss. I have the authority.”

“You do,” I agreed.

“And I’ll tell you this: Despite what you might believe, Ramiro continued to offer us help. Valuable, even critical insights. And we were justifiably scared of using the normal pipeline for that kind of news.”

“Name one insight,” I said.

He refused to respond.

“I do have the authority to demand an answer, sir.”

“What if another nation has captured one of Abraham’s people?” Jefferson posed the question and

then shuddered. "It's sobering to consider. Another power, possibly one of our enemies, is keeping somebody like Ramiro in their own deep, secret hole—"

"What else?"

He winced.

"Give me your worst nightmare," I demanded.

"I'm sure you can guess that."

"All right," I said. "After many years in prison, Ramiro happens to mention, 'Oh, by the way, my basic assumptions might have been wrong from the beginning. Maybe Abraham isn't looking for a cooperative Middle Eastern country. Maybe his sights are focused on a wealthier, much more advanced nation.'" I laughed sadly. "That isn't the sort of news you'd cherish sending up the pipeline, is it?"

Jefferson studied me, once more trying to decide what I really was, and just how adept I might be.

"That last session with Ramiro," I began.

Squaring his shoulders made Jefferson's belly stick out.

"I can't find any recording of the interview. Is that right?"

"There isn't any," he conceded.

I couldn't decide if he was lying.

"Collins didn't share any details with you. Did he?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Because when there was important news, he always came straight to you. But that night, he walked home with Jim." I used a suspicious smile, pointing

out, “Or maybe there was important news. But he knew that his audience would never accept whatever he was carrying with him.”

Jefferson looked up and to his right.

I glanced at his television, just for a moment. The civil war in China seemed quite small and smoky, a few pain-wracked bodies flicking in and out of existence, a single tank burning in an anonymous street.

At last, Jefferson asked me, “What exactly is your assignment here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I asked.

Then he laughed—a miserable, sickly utterance—and with a tone of confession, he said, “Oh, shit ... that’s what I thought.”

“I’ve seen your arrival site.”

“Have you?”

“Not physically, no,” I confessed. “And even if I had the chance, I think I would pass on it today.”

“Reasonable of you.”

I stopped walking.

Ramiro took two more steps before pausing. His exercise yard was long and narrow, defined by brownish green walls, and for no discernable reason, his potted plants were healthier than those in the public avenues. Standing between vigorous umbrella trees, he watched my mouth, my eyes.

“Kashmir,” I said.

He decided to offer a narrow, unreadable smile.

“You couldn’t know this, but some years ago, I was able to walk on the Indian side of the disputed region. It wasn’t a long visit, but I came away with the impression that Kashmir was one of the most beautiful and most dangerous places in my world.”

My comments earned an agreeable nod.

“Did Collins tell you? Various teams have visited the Shyok River.”

“He mentioned that, and I’m sure you know that.”

“Tough work, those people had. Trying to verify the unthinkable, and doing it in what was a low-grade war zone. That first survey team was tiny and ignorant. They went in fast and flew out again on the same day, pockets full of soil samples and

photographs. But the evidence was plain. Something energetic had happened there. The toppled trees and soil profiles were odd, and obvious. So we came up with a workable cover story, a fable that allowed us to move around the area, and when it was absolutely necessary, involve Pakistani Intelligence.”

Ramiro’s eyes remained wide open.

“But that second team didn’t know what the hunt was for either. Our top people were told not to ask for specifics, but to always watch for details that seemed out of place.”

“You said you’d been to the site,” Ramiro mentioned.

“By VR means.” I placed both hands over my eyes, pretending to wear the cumbersome mask. “Those agents came home with high-density images. I learned about them when I was first briefed about you, and I demanded to be given the chance to walk the site.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“Much,” I mentioned.

He waited.

“Knowing nothing, I might have guessed that some passing god had sneezed. A perfect circle of ground, big enough for a couple hundred people, had been swept clear. Locals had already carted away most of the downed trees, but there was enough debris to give a sense of what the scene had looked like. That second team dug a trench, took its pictures, and then covered everything up again.” I drew a vertical line

with a finger. “A little more than a hand’s length underground, the old soil was waiting. It looked a little like shale. But according to the data, what was under that line was identical to the soil sitting straight above it. And by identical, I mean the same. Pebble for pebble, sand grain for sand grain.”

“The Lorton Energy was shaped carefully,” he said. “Seventy feet across, eight feet tall.”

He nodded.

“I like studying the weird crap that they found in the soil. Do you know what I mean? The nano debris, the occasional busted machine part. Little stuff that we couldn’t make today, even if we wanted to.”

“There would have been more debris,” he mentioned. “Except our clothes and bodies were thoroughly cleaned before.”

“Smart,” I said.

He waited.

“Of course we needed Pakistani help,” I admitted. “There was no way to poke around their side of the disputed border without being noticed. And since they happened to be our loyal allies in the war on terror, at least for the moment, we invented some very scary intelligence about an armed group, possibly Indian radicals, who had slipped across the border in ‘99. Our mutual enemies had carried gold and guns, and to help explain all the sampling, maybe enough radionuclides to build a few dirty bombs. They would have been on foot, we told our allies. And they might have had odd accents. Then we asked for

help interviewing the local people, trying to find anybody who remembered strangers passing through three years before.”

“Some remembered,” said Ramiro.

I waited.

“Collins mentioned as much.”

“Stories about strangers, yes.” I started to walk again, and Ramiro fell in beside me. “I haven’t gone over all the testimonies. Just a few summaries, that’s all I’ve had time for. But there were witnesses on the local farms, and more in a couple of nearby towns. Exactly what you’d expect if a large group of quiet pedestrians had come in the night and quickly scattered across the landscape.”

“Most of us hid,” he said.

“Naturally.”

“A few were dispatched to secure transportation.”

“Those who would blend in best, I’ll assume.”

“I assume the same.”

“You and your little cell hunkered down together.”

With Ramiro beside me, I was keenly aware of how much taller he was. “In a woodlot by the water,” he said.

“And Abraham?”

“I don’t know where he was.”

“I wouldn’t believe you if you claimed otherwise.”

Silence.

“After all, you’re just a convert who got lucky. You weren’t scheduled to join the invasion. But at the last moment, one of the chosen warriors fell ill—”

“My friend.”

“The German, your benefactor. Sure. He cleared your entry into Abraham’s group. And when he couldn’t make the trip, you did in his place.”

My companion held his gait to the end of the room, and then with the precision of a big zoo cat, he turned and started back again.

“I have a question about the German.”

“Yes?”

“But first, let’s talk a little more about Kashmir.”

“Whatever you want, Carmen.”

“Even our crude virtual-reality technologies make it beautiful.”

“Our arrival site was lovely,” he agreed.

“Seeing the mountains and that glacial river ... it made me sad to think about what’s happened to it since.”

He waited.

I said, “Sad,” once again.

“And I am sorry,” Ramiro volunteered.

“For what? You told us what you knew, and we acted on it. You had to pass through Kashmir because that’s where the only substantial time machine existed in your day. Point-to-point transfer is the way time travel is done. And it was your German pal who claimed that Abraham would center his operation inside Iraq. Because they had industry and an educated middle class, he said. Because of a greedy dictator and a useful secret service. Abraham planned to approach Saddam with the fantastic truth, and if

the Baathists cooperated, there would be riches beyond all measure.”

“Iraq was a disappointment,” he allowed.

I nodded in agreement.

We had crossed the room again, stopping short of the door—a heavy metal door with thick glass on top, a single guard watching us from the other side.

“I was surprised,” Ramiro admitted. “I expected that you’d find a good deal of physical evidence.”

“We did find some lost nanos in warehouses, and a diamond screwdriver out in the oil fields.”

He shook his head slowly. “Perhaps you understand why I don’t like these people.”

“They manipulated you.”

His pace lifted, just slightly. And his hands swung the weights just a little harder.

“Then we bombed Iran hard. And goaded Israel into mangling Syria for us.”

We walked until the room ended, and like two cats, we turned and walked back in our own tracks.

“Two more disappointing wars,” I muttered.

He pointed out, “Your leaders made those decisions. I was very honest. I would have handled these conflicts differently.”

“I know.”

Then he said, “Pakistan.”

I waited.

“That was a possibility I mentioned to Collins.” His tone was frustrated. He sounded like a proud man who had suffered a public embarrassment. “Very

early in our relationship, even before you reached Baghdad, I suggested to Collins that my people might gravitate to the nearest compliant government.”

“Except the Pakistanis were our friends. And we had close, close ties with Musharraf.”

Ramiro smiled. “Do you trust anyone, Carmen?”

I waved the question aside. “But of course Pakistani Intelligence—our partners on the ground—was full of ambitious souls.”

“That’s true.”

“The future that we should have lived could have been very instructive. Somebody like Abraham, setting his sights on potential allies, might identify the name and address of a young captain who would have eventually ruled his empire. A fledgling Napoleon with connections and toxic ambitions. Leave him alone for another twenty or thirty years, and he would have earned his power. But patience isn’t common in would-be emperors. A man like that would surely look at the temporal jihadists as gifts from God.”

“Collins and I discussed the Pakistan possibility. In addition to several other scenarios.”

“I want to talk about Pakistan.”

“Of course.”

“Do you know why we hit it next?”

He took a moment before shaking his head.

“What did Collins tell you?”

“Its government was on the brink of collapse,” he said. “A powerful bomb was detonated in Islamabad,

and a peculiar device was found in the wreckage. Collins brought the object to me, to ask my opinion.”

“I haven’t seen the device myself,” I admitted. “From what I hear, it’s sitting in a vault under the Pentagon.” And for a thousand years, that’s where it would remain, protected by the radioactive nightmares from Indian Point.

Ramiro lifted one of his weights, remarking, “It is about this size, but hollow. Cylindrical and composed of intricate nanostructures that give it some interesting properties.”

“Juice it up with electricity,” I mentioned, “and it turns invisible.”

“I gave a demonstration.”

“The machine has a structural flaw and can’t be used. You claimed. But if it functions, it could play a critical role in the construction of a portable, low-energy time machine.”

Ramiro lowered the weight, saying nothing.

“I trust everyone I know,” I mentioned.

He glanced at me, his gaze curious. Alert.

“What I trust is that people will always be people. They will do what they want, and when you search for motives, rationality proves to be a luxury. Fear and love and hatred: those are the emotions that count for something. And everything that involves us comes naturally from our human beast.”

“A reasonable philosophy,” he replied.

“What if Abraham was busily fabricating a new time machine?”

Ramiro said nothing.

“Our nightmare kept getting worse and worse,” I continued. “By then, we had a new president. A chance for fresh beginnings. But what if our enemies were trying to cobble together a small, workable time machine? They could bring it into our country and drive it wherever they wanted to go, and with modest amounts of power, they could aim at the future, launching the makings of bombs. It was just like Collins suggested early on, wasn’t it? The jihadists could launch atomic bombs or the ingredients for a chemical attack.” My voice picked up momentum. “We wouldn’t have any defense. Deadly, unbeatable weapons sent through time, invisible to us now. This moment. Abraham’s people could travel from city to city, and ten years from today, at a predetermined instant, our entire country would be wiped clean off the earth.”

We paused, turned.

“That’s what they made me read,” I confessed. “After I got my chance to walk beside a beautiful virtual river, that apocalyptic scenario was shown to me.”

Ramiro nodded.

“Of course we went into Pakistan,” I said. “I would have attacked, in an instant. Any responsible president would have been compelled to do nothing less. Because Abraham might have been hiding in Islamabad or Karachi, probably in some baby potentate’s guest room, and we had to do something.

Didn't we? Another little war, another stack of wreckage to poke through. But maybe we'd find enough this time, the kinds of evidence to show us where to go next, and who to hit next, and maybe even get a prisoner or two worth interrogating."

Ramiro let me pass into the lead.

"Pricks," I muttered. Then I slowed and looked up at him, saying, "It's too bad about India. Too bad. But a few dozen nukes dropped into their cities is a lot better than total oblivion for us."

My companion slowed, almost stopping, and with a patient, almost soothing voice, he asked, "What about the German?"

"Your friend?"

"You had a question about him," Ramiro reminded me.

I stopped altogether. Something in my posture worried the guard on duty. But as he started to work the door's lock, I waved to him, ordering him to remain where he couldn't hear our conversation.

"I'm sure Collins already covered this ground," I said. "He was always thorough. I just haven't found it in the files yet."

"What do you want to know?"

"His name was Schwartz?"

"Yes."

"And you met him outside Madrid? In the refugee camp where he worked as a counselor, right?"

"Yes."

"He became your sponsor. He was the one who

converted you to Abraham's cause—the violent overthrow of a flawed, weak past—and then he worked hard to have you accepted into his group.”

“Collins and I thoroughly covered my history.”

“But on the last day, your friend got sick.”

“A strain of flu. Yes.”

“That we haven't seen in our time.” I stood close to Ramiro, letting his face hang over mine. “Your people didn't want to spark an unnecessary pandemic, particularly in a population you wanted to use as an ally.”

“Schwartz was disappointed.”

“Just disappointed?”

He shrugged. “Devastated is a better—”

“Did you make it happen?”

Ramiro blinked.

I took one step backward while staring at him. “Did you infect him with the flu? Just to free up a slot for you?”

The prisoner stared at me until he decided to stare at one of the bronze walls. “That is an interesting proposal.”

“Collins never asked that?”

“No.”

“Did you do it?”

“No, Carmen. I didn't do any such thing.”

“That's good to hear,” I allowed.

He nodded.

“In twelve years, Collins never asked that question?”

He shook his head and smiled, saying, "He didn't."

"But could Abraham have thought that you did such a wicked thing to your friend? Is that possible?"

"I have no idea what the man considered," he said.

"But both of us can imagine the possibility. Am I right? A person might do the treacherous and horrible, just to get his chance to jump back through time."

The disgust looked genuine, but not particularly deep.

"This is what I believe, Ramiro. I believe that there isn't one question, no matter how unlikely or silly or outright insane, that you haven't already anticipated. At one time or another, you have considered every angle."

His next smile was cautious but proud.

"Whatever you are," I said.

"What do you mean by that, Carmen?"

I closed my mouth, my heart slamming hard and steady. "I think you're ready to say anything," I told him. "Anything. If it suited your needs, short-term or long, you would happily admit to inoculating Schwartz. Or you'd agree that yes, Abraham was suspicious of you. Unless you decided to confess that you have been his most trusted agent from the beginning, allowing yourself to be captured, and then happily causing us to step everywhere but where we needed to be."

"That," Ramiro allowed, "is a singularly monstrous image of me."

Then with no further comment, he swung the weights in his hands, continuing with his morning exercise.

I rode our smallest elevator to the surface, passing through the concrete-block field office and several more layers of security. One of the CIA girls gave me a lift to the nearby airstrip. As she drove, we chatted about safe subjects. The weather, mostly. And then she smiled in a certain way, mentioning Collins. “I haven’t seen much of him lately.”

I said, “He’s brutally busy.”

“Oh, sure.”

Collins was a cat locked in a box. In her mind, he was nothing but alive. Since there was no good reason for her to know what happened underground, she knew nothing.

“I’ll tell him you asked,” I lied.

She smiled. “Would you? Thanks.”

An old Globemaster was waiting on the runway, bound for undisclosed places but called out of the sky to snatch me up. Its crew had strict orders not to speak with their important passenger, which meant that I sat alone in the dark along with the rest of the cargo—a pair of battered Humvees and crates of medical supplies bound for some desperate place. My seat had the luxury of a tiny window, but there wasn’t much to see, what with the clouds of black smoke from the burning Saudi oil fields. But night found us over Missouri, and we crossed into a wide pocket of relatively clear air. The stars were exactly where they belonged, and I had the best reason to believe that

none of them would explode in the near future. A power outage had struck Kentucky. A wilderness lay beneath me, broken only by a few headlights creeping along and the occasional home blessed with generators and extra fuel to burn. Who was the culprit tonight? At least two homegrown insurgencies had been playing hell with the TVA lately. But the power grid was tottering on its best day, what with every reactor mothballed and barely a fart's worth of hydrocarbons finding its way to us.

I didn't belong in this world.

Some years ago, I had carelessly stepped off my earth, entering a realm that only resembled what was home. I was lost, and it was the worst kind of lost. No matter how hard I looked, I couldn't decipher which day and which hour had transformed everything familiar and happy.

Was it in '99, when the future decided to invade us?

Or in '02, when Ramiro was found just south of the Canadian border?

Neither moment felt worthy of this kind of dislocation. There were too many ways to redraw the following events, too many reasonable acts that would have minimized the damage wrought by faceless, nameless souls.

Even our early wars seemed incapable of obliterating so much.

But then we hit Pakistan, with India's gracious help, and despite our assurances to obliterate the

Muslim A-bombs, the Pakistanis managed to hit their neighbor with half a hundred blasts, pushing our final ally back into a peasant state, desperate and starving.

Three months later, fifty million were dead and the ash of the murdered cities was beginning to cool the world. That's when a half-megaton nuke hidden in a barge was floated in close to the Indian Point reactors north of New York City. A cold front was passing through, and the resulting mushroom cloud threw up an astonishing array of toxins. Everything to the south was doomed. Infrastructure and millions of humans, plus trillions of dollars and the last relics of a working economy—all these good things were lost in a single act of undiluted justice.

Like most people, I watched the horror on television, from the safest room inside my helpless house. After years of government service, I had temporarily left the military. I was burnt-out, I believed. I was actually considering going back to college. To teach or learn; I didn't have any definitive plan yet. I have a fair amount of imagination, but those following days and nights were too enormous to wring so much as a tear from me. I couldn't grasp the damage, the horror. Great cities were rendered unlivable, perhaps for a thousand years. My countrymen, now refugees, were spreading a kind of inchoate, embryonic revolution as they raced inland. And during the worst of it, my government seemed unable to make even simple decisions about martial law and protecting our other reactors, much less

mobilizing our shrinking resources and pitiful manpower.

That was the moment, at least inside my little circle of interrogators and ex-interrogators, that Abraham became a known name: The terrorist's terrorist.

He was a mastermind. He was a disease and a scourge. But even then, the most informed rumors avoided any mention of time travel.

People who knew Ramiro's story naturally assumed that Indian Point was the work of temporal jihadists. My government was temporarily hamstrung by the idea that their enemy had launched their bomb months or years ago, and there was no way to know where the next blast would blossom. It was almost good news when the event-team digested the nuke's isotopic signature and ruled out the bizarre. What we had witnessed was a plain hydrogen warhead—an old Soviet model—that had been smuggled into the country by one of our countless, and to this day still nameless, enemies.

Two years ago, I couldn't cry. But that night, sitting alone in the big overloaded aircraft, I began to sob hard. Sob and moan, but always trying to remind myself that in our quantum universe, every great event was nothing but the culmination of human decision and human indecision, chance and caprice. The poverty and despair surrounding me was vanishingly small. Our earth was just one thin example of what was possible, and because it was

possible, this history was inevitable, and why did people waste their time believing that we could ever be special in God's unbounded eye?

After the tears, I got up to pee.

Turbulence struck before I could get back to my seat. I ended up taking refuge inside one of the Humvees, belting in as the entire plane shook and turned wildly. Obviously, the earth's atmosphere was furious at the damage we were doing to it. Even the most rational mind slides easily into a mentality where ancient forces focus their rage on what looked like a fat, helpless, soon-to-be-extinct mechanical bird.

Somewhere in the jumping darkness, an alarm sounded.

Then after a long five minutes, and with no visible change in our circumstances, the blaring stopped.

The only voice I heard emerged from the cockpit. "Who would you fuck first?" he screamed. "Ginger or Mary Ann?"

"Why not Lovey?" an older, wiser voice asked. "She's got the money!"

I laughed somehow, and I held tight to the seat beneath me, and with no warning whatsoever, we dropped hard, plunging through the last of the mayhem. Then the air calmed abruptly and the flaps changed their pitch as the big wings brought us around and down onto a great long slab of brightly lit concrete.

The tires screamed and survived.

Then the lights came up inside, and I finally saw my Humvee wasn't just old, but it had seen a few firefights. Bullet holes and shrapnel gouges begged for repair, but someone must have thought: Why bother? Since we never brought equipment home from the Middle East, I was left wondering if this was LA damage. Or Detroit. Or just the run of the mill unrest that doesn't earn national notice.

As the plane taxied, a crewman came to retrieve me. I rather enjoyed that moment when he stood beside my empty seat, scratching his tired head, wondering whether the only passenger had fallen overboard?

I said, "Hey."

He said, "Ma'am," and then regretted that tiny break of the orders. Without another sound, he showed me to the hatch and opened it moments before a ladder was wheeled into position, and I stepped out into what was a remarkably cool August night, pausing just long enough to thank him.

But he was already wrestling the hatch closed again.

A single limousine waited on the otherwise empty tarmac. I had expected a convoy and probably a quick ride to some bunker or heavily guarded warehouse. But in times like these, important souls preferred to slip about in tiny, anonymous groups. The Globemaster revved its jets and pulled down the runway, fighting for velocity and then altitude. I reached the limousine just as the runway lights were

killed. A pair of secret service agents emerged and swept me for weapons. I can't remember the last time I'd held any gun. I bent down and slipped into what proved to be an office on wheels. I would have been more surprised if the president was driving. But only a little more surprised. He offered his hand before he smiled, and his smile vanished before he was done welcoming me.

No pleasantries were offered, or expected.

I sat opposite him and sensibly said nothing.

He needed a shave, and a shower too. Which made me feel a little less filthy after my trip. I kept waiting for the voice that I often heard on the news—the deep voice that reminded us how the struggle wasn't lost and courage was essential. But what I heard instead was a tired bureaucrat too impatient to hold back his most pressing questions.

“What happened to Collins?”

“I don't know,” I answered.

“Suicide, or murder?”

I nearly said, “Yes.” Since this is a quantum universe, and everything that can happen does happen. Without hesitation or shame.

But instead of humor, I offered, “It was a suicide.”

“You're certain?”

“Basically.”

He had to ask, “Why?”

“I warned you,” I said. “I'm not a criminal investigator. But I think that's the way Collins would have killed himself. At home, quietly, and without too

much pain. But if somebody had wanted him dead—”

“What about Jefferson?”

I shrugged. “No, he wouldn’t have been that neat or patient. Jefferson, or some associate of his, would have shot Collins and then planted evidence to make it look like a suicide. At least that’s my reading of things.”

The president wanted to feel sure. That mood showed in his face, his posture. But he couldn’t stop thinking about Jefferson. “What about the prison’s security?”

“You’re asking is there an agent on the premises. One of Abraham’s people, maybe?”

His mouth tightened.

“That I can’t answer,” I cautioned. “Really, I wouldn’t even know how to figure it out. If I had the time.”

He bristled. He had invested a lot of hope in me, and he expected at least the illusion of results. With a dramatic flourish, he opened a plain folder waiting on his lap. Then with a low grumble, he asked, “What about Collins?”

I wanted past this traitor-in-our-midst talk. But my companion happened to be my government’s most important citizen, and he was exactly as paranoid as it took to successfully represent his people.

“Was Collins one of them? I don’t think so.”

“You know the emergency council’s report,” he muttered testily.

“Which part? About the future knowing all our secrets? Or the DNA masking Abraham’s people?”

“I mean everything.” The president took a long moment to frame his next comments. “They didn’t show their faces, and for obvious good reasons. Even without Ramiro’s testimony, it’s hard to deny the possibility—the certainty—that profound genetic manipulation will be possible in a hundred years. Under those masks, the bastards could have looked identical to anybody from our world. At least anybody who happened to leave behind hair or a flake of skin.”

The emergency council was a cheerless room filled with scared specialists—off-plumb scientists and old sci-fi writers, plus a couple of psychics who happened to get lucky once or twice about future disasters. They had access to secrets, including scrubbed synopses of Ramiro’s insights. And during one pitiless night, they asked each other how could our fight, begun with so many good intentions, have gone so tragically bad.

Their answer was the worst nightmare yet. Among Abraham’s soldiers were there perfect duplicates of men and women who would have served in our highest offices, starting in ‘01? Before our election, they could have slipped into the United States and replaced each of those historic figures. Unknown to us, the worst monsters imaginable would have worn stolen faces and voices. And later, sitting in Washington, those same pretenders could have done untold damage to the innocent, helpless world.

That scenario seemed to explain everything—bad

decisions, incompetent methods, and the miserable follow-ups to each tragic misstep.

Paranoia had never enjoyed such an acidic, malicious beauty.

The file was important enough to leave open, and I caught one long glimpse. Which was what the president wanted, I suppose. He was eager to prove to me just how awful everything had become.

On top was a photograph, a famous face gazing up at the camera. The man was elderly now, shaved bald and very weak and far too thin. Each bruise was ugly and yellow, and together they defined the color of his cowering face. Was this where we had come? Taking our own people into a cellar to starve them and beat them, all in the vain hope that they would finally admit that they deserved this horrid treatment?

“Jefferson is Jefferson,” I maintained.

The president closed the file.

“And Collins was always Collins.”

He sighed. “Are you as sure as you are about the suicide?”

“Even more so,” I declared.

“But there was one day last year,” the president began. Then he made a rather clumsy show of pushing through more files, lending a banal officiousness to the insulting moment. This was what my leader had been doing while waiting for my plane. Thumbing his way through old security papers that meant nothing.

“I don’t care about last year,” I said.

“Collins went missing,” he snapped. “He was out on leave, and for fourteen hours, the man dropped out of contact with everybody.”

“He explained that later,” I pointed out. “The man was exhausted. He needed to be alone and regroup. And that’s what I believe.”

“You do?”

“More and more.”

“He wasn’t one of Abraham’s agents?”

“If he was, then maybe I am. And you are too.”

My reply was too awful to consider. I read revulsion in the man’s face and his fists. And I kept thinking that if I had bothered to vote in our last election, I never would have helped elect this dangerously incompetent man.

“I am not one of them,” he whispered.

“Maybe you are, and you don’t know it,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“If our enemies can remake their faces and blend in everywhere, then why not rewire the thought patterns inside other people’s heads? If they have that kind of magical technology, then why not inoculate the world with a tailored virus that makes everybody into loyal Muslims who have no choice but to accept the wisdom of this never-seen Abraham?”

Here was one proposition that had never been offered to the president. And he responded exactly as I expected, eyes opening wide, seeing nothing.

I laughed it off.

He hoped that I was joking now, but he didn’t dare

mention my suggestion again. Instead he posed one final question. “And why did Collins kill himself?”

“Remember the dollar?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“On the bathroom floor, they found a coin in the blood. Do you remember that detail from the reports?”

He had to admit, “No.”

“Collins didn’t see or speak to Ramiro for three days. Other than that, nobody remembers him doing anything out of the ordinary. But I have reason to believe that our prisoner gave him something. Something new. Something that was so difficult to accept that it took three days for Collins to wrestle with the concept. And then what the man did ... I’m guessing this, but I would bet my savings on it ... Collins went into his bathroom and ran a warm bath and got a knife and then flipped the coin. And the coin happened to come up tails.”

“Which means?”

“It’s a quantum-inspired game. In this reality, tails meant that he would slit his veins and bleed out.”

“And if it was heads?”

“Then Collins would have done something a lot more difficult.”

“And what would that have been...?”

“Show the entire world what Ramiro gave him.”

“And what was that, do you think?”

“I wish I knew.” My laugh was grim and sad, and it suited both of us. “In my mind, I keep seeing Collins

sitting in that bathtub, flipping the coin, working it until he got the answer he wanted.”

A phone set between us rang once, very softly, and then stopped.

The president gestured at the invisible sky. “Another plane’s heading west. It’ll arrive in another hour or two.”

His wave was a signal; my door suddenly popped open. It was still summer, but I could feel frost threatening.

“Do I still have full authority?” I asked.

Again, the presidential phone rang, begging for attention. He offered me a nod, saying, “For the time being, yes.”

“Full authority?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He stared at me for another moment. Then he quietly asked, “What do you think our world’s chances are?”

“Very poor,” I offered.

“Why?”

I had to say, “With people like us in charge, sir ... our enemies don’t have to do much at all.”

The sound was soft but insistent, coming from the middle of my apartment door. I heard the first rap of the knuckles, but I did nothing for what seemed like a very long time. Aware of the bed beneath me, I looked at my hands in the faint blue glow of the nightlight, and then I turned and gazed at the red face of the clock on the edge of my nightstand. Eight minutes after three in the morning, I read. Twice. Then the knock quickened, and I sat up and put on my only robe and took the time to find my slippers before letting my visitor inside.

“You’re not watching,” Jefferson began.

I said nothing.

He looked at the darkness and rumpled sheets, his expression puzzled. Then his face fell back into a kind of breathless horror.

“What?” I asked.

He couldn’t say it.

What passed for the outside was gloomy, not dark. A single guard stood in the middle of the enormous tunnel, meeting my eyes before she retreated into the shadows.

After my guest stepped inside, I said, “Come in.”

Once the door was closed, Jefferson turned on my ceiling light. Then he showed me a tired, frazzled expression that set the tone. “Now Russia has been hit.”

“Hit?”

“Bad.”

I said, “Fuck.”

“Moscow,” he told me.

I sat on the edge of my bed.

“Half a megaton,” he muttered, standing in the middle of the small room, hands dangling at his sides.

I stood up again, slippers popping as I walked to my television. The filtering software had a lot of work to do before we could be trusted to see the news. That’s why the thirty-minute delay, and that’s why the world before me was nearly two thousand seconds in the past.

A handsome Russian was sitting at a news desk, speaking quickly but with a surprising measure of poise. It was easy to believe that Jefferson was wrong. Nothing awful had happened. Not understanding the language or the Cyrillic lettering streaming past, it was easy to embrace the doubts assuring you, “This is nothing. Nothing.”

Then the feed switched abruptly, picking up CNN. An older but equally attractive newscaster sat several thousands of miles from the tragedy. But he didn’t have any trace of Slavic stoicism. Practically screaming, he declared, “In the morning, without warning, Hell was released just a mile from the Kremlin!”

Jefferson collapsed in my only chair.

I reclaimed my bed, watching the first in a series of inadequate views of an unfolding disaster. The flash was only as bright as the amateur equipment could

absorb. The images jumped, and I could hear people screaming in Russian ... and then the camera and I were being carried into the subway, the screen going black when the power abruptly shut off...

The next view was a ten-second snippet from some high-rise far enough away to be spared by the blast.

The third was from someplace very close, and more recent. A digital camera was shoved over a concrete wall, showing a firestorm that was starting to grow wings.

“It’s their turn now,” I whispered.

Jefferson didn’t seem to hear me.

I glanced at my guest and then looked away. “Russia almost seemed to be blessed,” I mentioned.

“This is bad, Carmen.”

“Yeah.”

“No,” he said.

I stared at him. “What do you mean?”

The last decade had been relatively sweet for Russia. Pragmatic and naturally authoritarian, it had managed to avoid most of the mayhem. And it didn’t hurt that when the Middle East turned to smoke and warlords, the Russians happily sold their oil and natural gas to the EU and a few select friends, increasing their own wealth many times over.

Again, I asked, “What do you mean?”

Jefferson dipped his head.

The television jumped to the BBC. The Prime Minister had a few sturdy words to offer about giving support to all the victims of this latest misery.

I muted the sound.

Which helped Jefferson's focus. With a conspirator's whisper, he told me, "I was just in touch with somebody."

"Who?"

He named the CIA director, using the friends-only nickname.

I said nothing.

Jefferson gave my brown carpet a long, important study.

"What else is wrong?"

The man looked old and extraordinarily tired. What he knew was so urgent that he had to practically run over here to tell me. But now he lacked the courage to put into words what a confidential voice had told him five minutes ago, from the other end of a secure line.

"Has there been another explosion?" I prodded.

"No," he managed. Then he added, "Maybe."

"Shit, Jefferson—"

"Do you know how we were after Indian Point? Down here, I mean. We were terrified that the big assault was finally coming. But then we heard that an old Soviet warhead did the damage. Which meant it wasn't Abraham." He breathed faster, his face red as a blister. "And this bomb wasn't Abraham's either. The yield and isotope readings point to it being one of ours. One of eight."

"Eight? What eight?"

He rubbed his belly.

“Just say it, Jefferson.”

“I just learned this for the first time,” he reported. “After Indian Point, when everything was crazy ... Washington dead and millions fleeing ... somebody with the necessary skills ripped open an Air Force bunker and took out eight high-yield marvels, any one of which matches what we’re seeing here...”

I said, “Fuck,” once again.

He nodded.

“But the failsafes,” I said. “Soviet bombs are one thing. But how could somebody make our damned things detonate?”

“Like I said, these people have skills.”

The horrific images had returned, and we watched in silence for another minute or two.

“What’s Russia doing now?” I asked.

“Their president’s in St. Petersburg. And he’s talked to our president two, maybe three times.”

“The Director told you this?”

“Yes.”

“Seven more nukes?”

“What if somebody wants payback for Indian Point?” he asked me.

Or himself.

“But the Russians weren’t responsible,” I said. “At least not directly, they weren’t.”

“But what if we’re responsible for this?”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

Wearing an interrogator’s face, he stared at me. “I know where you went last week, Carmen. Believe me,

I have friends. I have connections. I know whose limousine you sat inside.”

I stared back at him.

Then I carefully told him, “No. We had nothing to do with Moscow. Our president’s too scared of phantoms to pick a fight with an old enemy.”

Jefferson bristled slightly. “What do you mean? ‘Phantoms’?”

I didn’t answer.

He said, “Carmen,” twice, and then gave up.

A truce was declared, ushering in ten minutes of silence. I pushed the television back up to a comfortable volume, and using e-mail and my private sources, I pieced together a chain of events roughly the same as his.

“Their president wants to believe our president,” I reported.

Jefferson nodded.

“But if there’s a second attack...”

He looked at me. For the first time, he had the roving eyes of a healthy male. As if emerging from a fog, Jefferson realized that he was sitting in a woman’s apartment and she was wearing nothing but a nightgown and slippers and a fuzzy old robe.

If only to change the desperate mood, he wanted sparks.

I pulled the robe across my chest. Then I told him, “You should go back to your apartment.”

He said, “Maybe.”

“Now,” I said.

He stood stiffly and looked at me. Suddenly I could see Jefferson at his high school dance, standing beside the wrestling mats, too smart to bother asking any girl to accompany him out onto the gymnasium floor.

Against my wishes, I felt sorry for the poor guy.

Then I ushered him to the door and shut and locked it.

Alone, I slowly dressed, and after another hour of television, I stepped out into a tunnel that was beginning to go through the motions of dawn.

In the brightening gloom, I walked.

Then I ran.

I was pounding along my favorite stretch when I passed the round pond with its bluegill and a single dragonfly. Standing on the wooden deck was our resident fisherman. "Hey, Jim."

He almost jumped at the sound of my voice.

"Any bites?"

He said, "Hi, Carmen," and rolled his head. Then he flicked the fly out onto the windless water, and after a pause and a couple of deep swallows, he said, "Somebody just told me something."

"What's that, Jim?"

Looking at his own hands, he explained, "It's this guy I know. He works security upstairs. And I know it's against every order, and we aren't supposed to talk—"

"You heard about Moscow?"

"And St. Petersburg."

I had just enough time to ask, “What about St. Petersburg?”

Then the alarms began to blare—throbbing, insistent noises meant to jangle every nerve—and the fisherman threw down his gear and sprinted toward the nearest elevator. But he was too late. The field station on the ground had declared a lockdown emergency, and according to protocols, every exit disabled itself. Just once, Jim struck the steel door of the elevator with a fist. Then after a moment of quiet muttering, he returned to the pond. His face was as white and dead as the salt surrounding us. Not quite meeting my eyes, he said, “I’m sorry, ma’am. That won’t happen again.”

And then he picked up his tackle and silently struck out for home.

For nine days, our prisoner was allowed to keep his normal routine. Guards brought hot meals, clean clothes, and the expected little luxuries. His plumbing and lights worked without interruption, and at appropriate intervals, we spared enough power to brighten his exercise yard. The only significant change was that I stopped meeting with Ramiro. But he didn't mention my absence, not once, just as he refused to discuss what must have been obvious. The shrill alarms would have been audible from inside his cell, and less than an hour later, the first in a sequence of deep, painful rumbles passed through the surrounding salt bed.

Fuel was limited, which was why the tunnel lights were kept at a midnight glow. And that's why the vegetation began to wither and drop leaves, including inside Ramiro's yard. The dying umbrella trees garnered a few extra glances, I noted. Then after six days, Ramiro's milk turned to the dried variety, and there was a sudden influx of fried bluegill in his dinner, and the banana slices on his morning yogurt were brown at the edges. But his guards provided the largest clues. Even a sloppy observer would have noticed the miserable faces. Not even the hardest professional could hide that level of raw sadness. Ramiro would have kept track of which guards skipped their watch and who was pulled early when they felt themselves about to start blubbering. But

again, he didn't say one word that was at all removed from the ordinary.

Jefferson was a minor revelation. That sturdy old bureaucrat threw himself into the disaster, holding meetings and ordering studies. Key machinery had to be identified, inventories made of every spare part. Our generators were industrial fuel cells, and it was a minor victory when two extra barrels of methanol were discovered behind a pile of construction trash. For two days, the practicality of hydroponics was explored. But a determined search found no viable seed, save for some millet and cracked corn meant for his assistant's pet parakeet. Our home was a prison, not a long-term refuge. But at least there were ample stocks of canned goods and MREs, and the water and air were agreeable to purification. Plus, there were quite a few handymen in our ranks. Most estimates gave us at least six months and perhaps as many as eight months of comfortable security. That was a point worth repeating each day, at the beginning of our mandatory meetings.

With nobody watching us, Jefferson was free to transform himself. He announced that there were few secrets worth keeping anymore. Only Ramiro remained off-limits. Then he told the grim, brief history of our latest war. All of us were invited to his apartment to watch the recordings that he'd made of news broadcasts and secret communications, and then the final pitiful message from the field station. Few accepted his invitation, but that didn't matter.

Word got out quickly enough. Everybody knew what had just transpired, and the long-term prospects, and in a fashion, just how extraordinarily lucky we had been.

Through it all, Jefferson dispensed clear, critical directions as well as praise and encouragement, plus the occasional graveyard joke.

I preferred to keep to myself, investing my waking hours in the endless study of Ramiro.

Sometimes when he was alone, the man would suddenly grin. I had never seen that expression on him before. It wasn't a joyful look, or wistful. What I saw was an empty expression—a broad sycophantic look that I have seen in other faces, on occasion, particularly when people are struggling to believe whatever thought is lurking behind their bright, blind eyes.

Ramiro would fall asleep at his usual time, but then he'd wake up again, usually around three in the morning, and lie very still, staring up into the darkness for an hour and sometimes much longer.

Instead of new books and movies, he requested titles that he already knew—as if granting his mind an easier, more familiar path to walk.

On the ninth day, I had a tall cold glass of lemonade brought with his lunch, and he drank it without complaint.

On the tenth morning, Jim opened the cell door and said, "Sir," before ushering the prisoner down the short hall to the exercise yard. After the usual

bookkeeping, he took his post inside, standing before the only door. Some of Ramiro's guards had shown worrisome symptoms. But after his initial panic, Jim had turned outwardly calm, sturdy. Maybe if I had paid closer attention, I would have seen some clue. But then again, even the best interrogator must accept the idea that she knows more about the beginnings of the universe than she will ever learn about the shape of a person's true mind.

But Ramiro noticed something.

I don't know what it was or why then, but after a few trips back and forth in the yard, the prisoner paused, passing one of the rubberized weights to his other hand and then bending down, picking up the thick dried and very dead leaf from the floor beneath the starved tree.

For a long moment, he stared at Jim, saying nothing.

They were ten feet apart, and the guard was watching everything.

Normal procedures demanded a second guard be on duty outside. She was watching on monitors and through the two-way glass, and sensing trouble, she set off a silent alarm. I arrived half a minute after a backup team of armed warriors, and two steps ahead of Jefferson.

In that span, nothing had changed.

Maybe Ramiro was waiting for an audience. But I think not. My guess is that he still wasn't sure what he would say or the best way to say it, and like any

artist, he was simply allowing time to pass while his invisible brain struggled to find the best solution.

Through the monitors, I watched the brown leaf slip free of his hand.

“So, Jim,” said Ramiro. At last.

Jim didn’t move, and he didn’t make any sound. And if his face changed, the expression didn’t register on the security cameras.

As if getting ready to unwrap a wonderful gift, Ramiro smiled. It was an abrupt, startling expression followed by the joyous, almost effervescent words, “So how’s your home town these days? How is Salt Lake City doing?”

Jim sagged against the door.

From outside, Jefferson ordered, “Get in there!”

“No,” I ordered.

The backup team ignored me.

“No!” I stepped in front of them and looked at Jefferson. “You tell them. Who’s in charge here?”

With a tight sigh, Jefferson said, “Wait then. Wait.”

Jim was crying now. In a matter of moments, a weepy little boy had emerged and taken charge.

I told the guards to back away from the door.

Jim muttered a few words, too soft for anybody to understand.

“What’s that, Jim?” asked Ramiro.

Nothing.

“I can only guess,” the prisoner offered with a warm, infectious tone. “Another nuclear weapon

must have struck another reactor. But this one was closer to us, wasn't it? And the wind must have blown those poisons over the top of us."

That was a dreamy, hopeful explanation, considering the circumstances.

"So we're temporarily cut off down here. Isn't that about it, Jim? And we'll have to wait what? A few weeks or months to be rescued?"

"No," said Jim.

Finding success, Ramiro smiled.

"Am I wrong, Jim?"

The response was abrupt, and vivid. With a string of awful sentences, Jim defined the scale of the new war and its brutal, amoral consequences.

"Everything above us is dead," he declared.

Ramiro's smile wavered, but he wouldn't let go of it.

"About a thousand nukes went off, and wildfires are still burning, and the entire continent is poisonous dead. The field office is abandoned. We aren't getting any messages from anybody. Not a squeak. We've got some security cameras working, our only connections to the surface, and they're only working on battery power. It's the middle of August, but there isn't any sun, and judging by what we can see and what we can guess, it isn't even reaching forty below at noon...!"

Maybe Ramiro had genuine hopes for his dirty nuke story—an awful but manageable nightmare. But this nightmare was more plausible, and he must have

known that for several days. Yet he refused to react. He did nothing for one, two, three breaths. Enormous events had pushed him farther than even he could handle, and discovering what might be a weakness on his part, the prisoner suddenly looked lost, perhaps even confused, unable to conjure up one thin question, comment, or even a word.

And then Jim pulled his weapon.

The pistol would work only in his hand, and its ammunition was small and lightweight, designed to bruise and break bones but never kill. That's why I told everyone, "No. Leave them alone!"

My instincts were looking for a revelation.

But other people's instincts overrode my order. The guards pushed me away and started working at the door's stubborn locks. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Neither man spoke or moved. But then Jim set the gun's barrel against his target's eye, and I heard a quiet thump, and the bullet shattered the back of the socket before burrowing its way into the miserable, dying brain.

Ramiro dropped the weights, one striking his right foot. But he didn't appear to notice. Unblinking eyes stared at the corpse twitching on the floor in front of him. The prisoner was impressed. Enthralled, even. Perhaps he had never seen a man die. Cities and nations had been destroyed, but carnage had remained cool and abstract. Until that moment, he never appreciated just how messy and simple death was, or that he would have to take a deep breath

before regaining his bearings, looking up slowly before noticing me standing in the open door.

“So this is what you wanted,” I said. “The death of humanity, the end of the world...”

“No,” he whispered.

“Are you sure?”

He sluggishly shook his head.

“Or Abraham wanted this,” I suggested. “A nuclear winter, the extinction of our species.”

No reply was offered.

I stepped over Jim and then stared up into Ramiro’s face, allowing him no choice but to meet my eyes. Quietly, I said, “There is no such creature as Abraham, is there?”

He didn’t react.

“And no army of temporal jihadists either.”

His eyes closed.

“Just you,” I persisted. “You’re the only time traveler. Fifteen years ago, you arrived alone in the backcountry of Kashmir. You brought no more than what you could carry on your back, including the uranium and a few odd gizmos from your world. Then you littered the Middle East with just enough physical evidence to give your story legs. Like that bomb in Islamabad, right? You set that up before you came to America. And then you let yourself get caught in Montana, which was your plan from the beginning.”

His shoulders lifted, a shrug beginning.

I grabbed his chin and shook him. “Why send an

entire army? Why bother? When a single soldier armed with the right words can do just as well ... that's what this is about..."

Ramiro opened his eyes.

An impressed little smile began to break loose. He asked softly, "And when did you realize this, Carmen?"

"Always," I admitted. "But I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't let myself even admit that it was possible. Not until I saw a photograph of a former official with my own government, bloodied and terrified, and I realized that our own hands had done that to him." I shook his chin again. "That's when I saw what made sense. Finally. Maybe there was an Abraham, but if you happened to be him..."

Ramiro laughed, and with a cat's grace grabbed my wrist and yanked, stepping out of my grip.

"Who's the prisoner here?" I muttered.

The laugh brightened.

"And who is the torturer?"

He offered a slight and very quick bow.

"But why?" I wanted to know.

"Carmen," he began. "Believe me, I could offer a thousand plausible stories. But how would you know if I was being truthful, in whole or even in part?"

"Try it anyway," I said.

But he backed away, waving both hands as if to fend off those temptations. "The point is, Carmen ... your world was deserving. Almost every outrage that has happened to you has been justified. A necessary,

reasonable revenge has been taken. And these many years ... almost every day that I have spent in your world, Carmen ... has brought me untold pleasure...”

Last year, during an official leave from the prison, Collins managed to slip away from his official escorts. His shadows. I can only speculate what he did during most of the day, but fourteen hours is a very long time, if you have a good plan and the discipline to make it happen. My personal knowledge extends to two hours spent together during the afternoon, inside a second-story room at a Red Roof Inn just outside Denver. Despite Ramiro's insistence to the contrary, I'm not unlovely and I have my charms, and his interrogator and I had been carrying on an infrequent but cherished affair—five surreptitious encounters over the course of an ugly decade, moments where sex and sexual talk could dominate over the secrets of state.

I never discussed my work with him, and he almost never mentioned his.

But Denver was different. I stepped into a darkened room to find a changed man. Collins was pale and much heavier than usual and obviously exhausted. After an hour of sweat and modest success, we gave up. I talked about showering, and he talked about slipping away in another minute or two. Then for a long while, we just sat side by side in bed, and in that way people in our world would do, we began to list the friends and associates that had died because of Indian Point.

Until that moment, I didn't realize that Collins had

been a father. Not that he was close to his fifteen-year-old son, but the unfortunate boy had lived on Long Island with his mother. The fallout plume blocked every bridge to safety, and like a million others, they spent the next several days chasing a string of promised rescue ships and rumors of airlifts. Collins' best guess, based on a couple of sat-phone calls received near the end, was that they had managed to survive for a week or eight days, and then both died, probably during the Islip riots.

"Sorry" is a weak word. But I offered it anyway.

This man that I didn't truly know silently accepted my sorrow. Then he tried to shrug, and with a bleak resignation that I couldn't understand at the time, he mentioned, "This could have turned out differently."

When haven't those words been valid?

With his deep, godly voice, Collins said my name. Then he smiled—a crooked, captivating smile on his worst day—and quietly asked, "Why are we doing what we do? Anymore, what are we after?"

"It's our job," I offered.

He saw through those words. "Bullshit, darling. Bullshit."

"Yeah, but we're still the good guys," I said.

Then we both enjoyed a sorry little laugh.

"I'll tell you what I'm doing," he said, shaking his head. "Every day, I'm trying to save the world."

"Oh, is that all?"

He kept smiling, though he didn't laugh. He let me stare into his eyes, taking my measure of his soul.

Then carefully, slowly, he said, “You once told me about this woman. Do you remember? You met her on some cross-country flight. You got her to talking, and she eventually confessed her plan to kill her elderly husband. Do you remember that anecdote?”

“Sure.”

“Did you ever follow up on it?”

“What do you mean?”

He didn’t have to explain himself.

With a defensive growl, I admitted, “No, I haven’t bothered.”

“Why not?”

I could have mentioned that it wasn’t my particular business, or that I never knew anything of substance, or that no crime had been committed. But I didn’t offer excuses. Instead, I admitted, “The woman loved her husband. Agree with her or not, I don’t believe she would have harmed the man to be cruel or out of convenience.”

“And you’re sure that she loved him?”

“I could tell,” I said.

“And I believe you, Carmen.”

I sat quietly, wondering what was this about.

“You know, you’re very good. Piecing together clues, I mean. Reading the subject’s emotions, their intentions.” Then he laughed, insisting, “Maybe you’re not quite my equal. But there’s nobody better than us.”

Just then, I could not read that man. I had absolutely no clue what Collins was thinking.

“Saving the world,” he repeated.

I waited.

“I’m working on something huge,” he admitted. Then with a wise little sneer, he edited his comment. “I’m working on somebody huge. A subject unlike anyone you’ve ever met or even imagined.”

I didn’t want this conversation. He was breaking our most essential rule, bringing work into our bed.

“That man is still holding some big secrets,” Collins confided. “All these years working on nobody but him, and I still haven’t gotten to his core.”

I climbed out from under the sheets.

“If I could just get what I wanted from the guy,” he muttered.

I said, “Stop that.”

With sharp disappointment, Collins stared at me. It took several moments for him to decide what to say next. Then he offered what had to be the most cryptic and peculiar excuse that I had ever heard.

“If he gives me what I want,” he began.

A genuine smile broke across his weary white face.

“If he shares what he knows, Carmen, I can save the world. Not once, but a thousand times. A million times. More times than we could count ... and now wouldn’t that be a legacy worth any cost?”

We decided to throw the prisoner into Jefferson's apartment, accompanied by half a dozen pissed-off guards, and the guards were instructed to sit Ramiro down before the television, and in sequence, play the Apocalypse recordings for him.

Jim's body was carried away, and Jefferson found himself standing alone with me. He asked the walls, "So what do we do with him next?"

"What do you want to do?"

My colleague refused to look at my eyes. "Our food is limited," he pointed out. "Ramiro constitutes more than 1 percent of our population. At this point, can we really afford to keep him alive?"

Then he braced himself.

But I surprised him, saying, "Agreed," as if I had come to the same inescapable conclusion.

But our methods seemed important, and that's what we were discussing when one of the guards returned.

"Lemonade-7 wants paper and a pen," she reported.

"Give him whatever he wants," I said.

She glanced at Jefferson.

He nodded.

"And tell him he doesn't have much time," I yelled as she ran off.

For a few moments, Jefferson studied me. But he didn't have the stomach to ask what he wanted.

Instead, he quietly admitted, “Maybe you’re right, Carmen. A bullet is simple. But shoving him out on the surface, letting him fend for himself ... that makes more sense...”

Yet that left various logistics to consider. One of the elevators had to be unlocked, power had to be routed back into it, and every passenger except Ramiro had to be protected from the radiation and cold. Those necessities took dozens of people nearly two hours of determined labor, and then somebody mentioned that a short-wave antenna and Geiger counter could be set up on the dead prairie and spliced into the elevator’s wiring—helpful inspirations, but cause for another hour delay.

According to the guards, Ramiro remained cooperative and busy. Unblinking eyes paid close attention to the news broadcasts, particularly during those desperate minutes when city after city suddenly quit transmitting. Each of his guards seemed to nourish a different impression of his mood. The prisoner was relishing the slaughter, or he was numbed by what he was seeing, or maybe he was only pretending to watch events play out on that tiny screen. But every witness agreed: the prisoner’s first focus was in filling the yellow pages of the legal pad, his head dropping for long intervals, that delicate artisan’s hand scribbling dense equations and weaving diagrams and sometimes adding a paragraph or two in his unborn hodgepodge of a language.

It was early afternoon when he set down the pen. A

few minutes later, without explanation, he was brought to the elevator. He was still wearing dress trousers and a short-sleeved shirt, plus his favorite sandals. But the two volunteers waiting for him were half-hidden inside layers of cumbersome gear.

Ramiro handed the filled pad to the shorter figure.

I didn't look at his gift. I knew what was on it. With both hands, I folded it in half and handed it to the nearest guard. "It's a little goddamn late now, isn't it?" I snapped at him.

"Maybe enough people will survive," he offered.

I tried to cut him open with my gaze. Then I turned and shuffled through the open steel door, my oversized fireman's boots clumping with each step.

Jefferson checked his sidearm, picked up the makeshift antenna and Geiger counter, and followed me.

There was just enough room for our equipment and three bodies. Jefferson pulled his oxygen mask aside and gave a few final orders. Then the door shut, and with a sudden crotchety jolt, the elevator started to climb, shaking slightly as it gained momentum.

"Do you understand what I just gave you?" Ramiro asked.

"Of course I understand," I said.

"Tell me, why don't you?" Jefferson asked.

Ramiro smiled, but he sounded uncharacteristically tense. "Time travel is not particularly difficult."

Neither of us reacted.

He said, "Lorton Energy is cheap, if you know the right tricks."

I looked only at Jefferson. "The first time Ramiro wrote about Lorton and Casimir plates, he didn't give us those tricks. He pretty effectively misled our scientists into chasing the wrong methods. But of course a man who remembers the dates and positions of dozens of supernovae—a creature with that kind of faultless memory—would easily digest the plans for a working time machine. That's what Collins realized. Eventually. He didn't mention it to anybody, but for these last years, Collins was chasing the tools that would allow us to go back in the past, like Ramiro did, but this time make things right."

Jefferson shook his head. "Yeah, but each incursion in the past is a separate event," he recalled. "If he jumped back, he would accomplish what? Setting up a new time line?"

"Except we could send back a million teams," I replied. "A million attempts to make amends, and each new history owing its existence to us."

No one spoke for a moment. The only sound was the air rushing around the racing elevator.

Then Jefferson turned to Ramiro. "You gave Collins the time machine. But then for some reason he killed himself."

"Ramiro gave him more than the time machine," I explained. "He also told him the rest of the story. How he had come alone, and there was no Abraham, and every tragedy that had happened to the world

was directly tied to what Ramiro had said to Collins, and what Collins had unwittingly fed upstream to the gullible and weak.”

Jefferson put a hand on his pistol.

I watched Ramiro’s face. If it weren’t for the tightness around the mouth and the glassiness to the eyes, I would have imagined that he was relaxed. Happy, even. Maybe he was assuring himself that these years and his sacrifices had been a great success. Not perfect, no. But who could have guessed that Moscow would have been nuked? Which meant that in countless realities—realms not too different from ours—he had achieved exactly what it was that he’d set out to achieve here.

“And Collins didn’t expect that part?” Jefferson asked.

“That’s my guess,” I admitted.

His hand dropped back to his side.

A few moments later, the elevator began to slow.

My ears were popping. I felt my heart quicken, and I judged that Ramiro was breathing faster too. A sudden chill was leaking into the elevator, and I mentioned it, and then I suggested, “We should put on our masks.”

Jefferson looked tired and angry. He wiped his eyes twice before making himself strap the oxygen mask over his weepy face.

I left mine off for the moment.

“I don’t think you wanted this world to die,” I said. Ramiro didn’t respond.

“You were hoping to hurt a lot of people and leave the rest of us wiser,” I continued. “At least that’s what you told yourself. Except what really inspired you was wielding this kind of power, and you won a lot of fun for your troubles, and now it’s finally over. You’re done. We’re going to throw you into the cold, into the wasted darkness, and you’ll have to stumble around until you die some miserable way or another.”

Ramiro made a soft, odd sound. Like when a bird cheeps in its sleep.

The elevator had nearly stopped. I stood facing the prisoner, my back flush against the door.

He smiled with a weak, vacuous charm.

In the end, the prisoner was defiant but terrified, utterly trapped but unable to admit his sorry circumstances. He believed that he was still in charge of his fate. Arrogance saved for this moment made him smile. Then he said, “You know quite a bit, Carmen. I’ve been impressed. But you should realize that I won’t allow any ignoble, indecent finish for me.”

The elevator door began to pull open.

Ramiro’s eyes never closed, even once he was dead.

Behind me, a young woman’s voice—a voice I knew from my ride to the nearby airstrip—called out, “Hello? Yes? Can we help?”

The day was bright and warm.

Two men suddenly dropped to their knees. But Jefferson stood again, stripping off the mask and

then his heavy outer coat, staggering into the functioning, fully staffed office, finally stopping before a window that looked out over a flat, glorious landscape and a sky of endless blue.

“Everything was faked?” he whispered.

“Everything,” I said.

“The newscasts, the communications?”

“Digital magic,” I mentioned. “And playacting by real people, yes.”

“The security cameras.”

“Easy enough.”

“But I felt the cold,” he said.

I started to explain how when the elevator started to rise, a dozen portable air conditioning units began cooling down the top of the shaft.

“But we felt the explosions, Carmen!”

“Those were the easiest tricks,” I admitted. “A few tactical nukes thrown down some nearby oil wells.”

He pressed his face against the warm glass, not fighting the tears anymore. Maybe he was crying out of relief. But in my case, I was crying for Jim, and for Collins, and for countless dead souls that I couldn't put names to. Behind us, a medical team was working hard to revive a man who refused to return to the living. When they finally gave up, we went to look at Ramiro's limp body.

“Do you think he saw?” Jefferson asked.

I knelt and closed the eyes.

“In the end,” he persisted, “do you think he realized just how badly you tricked him?”

“Yes,” I said.

I said, “No.”

Then I stood and walked away, adding, “It happened both ways, and more times than I would care to count.”

The Utility Man

MOST PEOPLE stand up front and wait for the horn. It's Monday morning. Faces are long and tired, voices hoarse, and red eyes squint and water from too little of this. Too much of that. It's like any Monday, except for two things. First, Miller is up front with the others. That's unusual. For the last three years, without exception, he's punched in and gone to the back of the plant. He's got his stuff back there, and he reads until the horn goes off. Books. It's always books with Miller. Except today, that is. He's sitting on a heavy worktable and staring at the door, his expression eager and strange. The second oddity is visible from where he's sitting. Out on the parking lot, on the dirty white gravel, waits a camera crew from the town's only TV station. The new employee is coming this morning. But what's the big fucking deal? some wonder. There's already a couple, three of *them* working in town. Right? It's been what? Two years since that big spiderweb of metal and glass pulled into orbit, and *they* came out. The aliens. Those toothless things from Tau Ceti. There's several million of them inside the starship, right? Miller would know how many. He's got a thing about the aliens. A couple of people consider asking Miller some questions, giving him the chance to talk about what he knows. Only that's dangerous. He might not

shut up. God, they think, look at him. He looks like a kid at Christmas. All eager and ready. They think, So what the fuck if the government's giving us an alien? A lot of businesses are getting them. Some sort of get-to-know-each-other nonsense, right? It's been on TV from the first, and everyone understands the basics of the thing. And nobody wants to get excited like Miller. No, they know better. All the good these aliens are supposed to do for people, people everywhere, but they want to wait and see. To keep a rein on things. Pretend it's any Monday, they tell themselves. Ignore Miller and just wait for the damned horn.

The horn screams. Miller jerks and looks at the clock; then he turns, reluctant and slow, and hopes against hope that he can work up front today. Up where he can watch for the Cetian.

Only the foreman comes over to him. He's a tall, beefy man with a fringe of dirty-blond hair, and he tells Miller that so-and-so is gone and he's got to be on the line for now. With Jacob. "Sure," says Miller. "Okay." He's the utility man. He plugs holes during vacations and drunks and whatnot. He's worked here for three years, ever since he last quit school, and he does every job in the plant without complaints. Without lapses. Miller is a small man, young-looking but with lines starting to show on his face. Around his eyes and mouth. He has the kind of face that moves from adolescence into middle age without once looking thirty; and his expressions tend to compound the illusion of youth. Dreamy. Distracted. A little lost,

perhaps.

He's a prideful sort of fellow. The pride shows whenever he smiles and shakes his head at this or that.

People don't like Miller. As a rule.

It isn't any one thing. There are others in the plant with smug attitudes. And others who keep to themselves in their free time. A couple people even have college degrees. (Miller doesn't. But he's close in three different majors.) Yet nobody puts together these traits quite like he does. The book reading, the know-it-all voice. And besides, Miller is a prude. An incredible prude. He's not married, but he doesn't talk like any normal bachelor. Off-color jokes and conquest stories embarrass him. Nor does he drink or smoke weed. People have learned to tease him about these things. It's something of a game to them. They like to make him red-faced and crazy, seeing how far they can push him. For the fun of it. "You get any last night, Miller? Huh?" He hates that talk. "Come with us at lunch, Miller. Get high. What do you say, huh? Come down from that pulpit, and let's have some fun."

Fun. They call that fun, thinks Miller. Imagine!

It's the worst thing about working here—listening to the harsh, frank chatter about pussy and dope. Miller's outside life is nobody else's business, he figures. He guards his privacy every moment. Every day. That's one of his prides. He has strict, solid values, and he won't make compromises. Never. After

all, he tells himself, he's not part of this place. He doesn't really belong here, and he has no intention of letting this place rub off on him. Or wound him. Not even when he goes to the toilet and reads what people have written on the walls — the Fag Professor and Virgin Miller and the rest of it. He tells himself to ignore it. He won't stoop to their garbage. Sure, he gets angry. Furious, even. But the pay here is good, and he can read while he works. At least sometimes. And most of the time, most days, they leave him alone. Which is fine.

They don't matter, after all.

He's going to make something of his life. Absolutely. He's told them that in a hundred different ways, a thousand times. Just as soon as he saves enough money, he's quitting this dump and heading back to school.

The alien arrives a few minutes after eight, delayed by who-knows-what. He's probably driving his own car, Miller knows. Something suitable. A used car purchased at one of the local lots. Something a factory worker would buy for a thousand dollars, worn tires and dripping oil but otherwise sound.

That's the way they operate.

The Cetians are coming to work and live among human beings, doing their surveying firsthand. That's what this is all about. The Cetians have a master plan, and they've explained it to all the world's nations. From the United States to Chad. They are here to

dispense knowledge. An ancient race, they are wise beyond human understanding. Their technologies are eerie, almost magical, and some of them will be turned over in time. Their stardrive, for instance. And their closed ecosystems. Metallurgy. Architecture. And so on. But first they need to learn about the human species. All its facets, weaknesses and strengths. They've done this kind of thing with other alien races. Miller has read every official account. The Cetians are masters of this business. By studying a species from the inside out, they can dispense their gifts without fear of causing massive disruptions. Indeed, thinks Miller, they'll come to understand people better than people do. Maybe that'll be their greatest gift, he tells himself. And he smiles. They'll teach us about ourselves, he thinks. They're going to show us the way to peace and happiness.

Miller has studied the Cetians since their arrival — their starship a glittering webwork rushing from deep space. “They're millions of years older than us,” he mutters. He's working across the table from a small pudgy black man. Jacob. “They're part of the great galactic community,” he says to himself. “Hundreds of thousands of worlds...”

“What's that?” asks Jacob. “What're you mumbling?”

Miller blinks and says, “Nothing.” He looks at Jacob for an instant. Then there's motion in the aisle, and he turns his head and sees a cameraman walking backward, a spotlight perched on a pole rising over

his head. The alien is nearby. The emissary from the stars. Miller feels a tightness in his throat. He's full of emotion. This won't be the first Cetian he has seen, not hardly; but still and all, he can barely contain himself.

“Hey, Einstein,” shouts Jacob. “Get that up here. Here!” A wooden frame is on the end of the belt, only partway up on the big tabletop. Miller sighs and does what he has to do. Doesn't Jacob see what's happening? Who understands besides him? Sometimes he feels ashamed by everyone's lack of enthusiasm. By their sheer indifference. He wonders why any alien race, saintly or not, would waste precious time in trying to educate mankind. The Earth doesn't deserve the attention, he believes. It has too little imagination, too much stupidity, and he feels like shouting his opinions for the passing camera. Let everyone hear the truth...

“Would ya fucking watch what you're fucking doing?”

Miller blinks and apologizes. He pushes the frame into position and Jacob uses an air gun, pounding long staples into the pine with a slick liquid motion. Jacob is famous for his thoroughness. His efficiency. He takes the frame and pushes it onto the next belt, and the next frame is already here and waiting. The alien is coming down the aisle, but Miller doesn't have time for more than a quick glance or two. He notices the human shape with the milky white skin — skin that can change into gray or black or even

become clear. At will. They're beautiful, he knows. Remarkable entities. No real teeth, but a complex gizzard in place of enamel. No hair, but wearing thoroughly human clothes and not looking the least bit silly. This Cetian has faded jeans and a pale blue work shirt, plus running shoes. Miller glances again. He sees a cap riding the smooth hairless head, its brim tilted up and some seed company's emblem riding above the brim. Very natural. Very *right*. If it wasn't for the cameras and the crowd, he thinks, the figure might be anyone. It's a little bit unnerving to see how easily the Cetian fits in.

Half of the front office is helping to give a tour of the plant. For the camera. They're the ones who look misplaced, what with their suits and ties and polished leather shoes. Miller has to concentrate on his job; he can't watch the group as it moves, lingers, then moves again. He's talking to the Cetian whenever he can. In his head. And the imaginary alien asks him how he came to be here. A person of his interests, of his training, seems wasted in this place. I needed the money, Miller explains. It's just the way things fell together, you know? But the alien doesn't understand, no. So Miller, speaking inside his head, tells half of his life story. It doesn't answer everything, but he tells it with all the vigor he can muster. As if he's practicing for later. For the conversations to come.

The imaginary Cetian smiles in his peculiar fashion

—the beaklike lips parting and the violet tongue showing against the roof of his mouth. Then he compliments Miller in glowing terms, telling him that he's bright and articulate, and so on. A good thing I found you, the Cetian declares. I thought I might be lonely while I'm here. And bored. But now I've got you for a friend... a soul mate...

“Hey! You alive, Miller?”

Miller is behind again. He apologizes to Jacob and lifts the next frame, making dead certain that it's properly aligned.

And the next one, too.

And the next.

People from the office begin to file past them, and the news-people. Their jobs are done. Smiles and amiable chatter mean everything has gone well. Miller concentrates on his job. Eventually, the foreman wanders past. He's alone, smoking and looking generally pissed at the world. Miller remembers how last week, hearing that they were getting a Cetian, the foreman had moaned something about not wanting or needing one of those goddamn chameleons. Fuck gifts from the stars and all that shit. He had a business to run. Product to get out. If he couldn't fucking hire who he wanted, then screw all the suits and their goddamn offices, too—

Miller stands on his toes for a moment, looking down the line.

The Cetian is standing at the line's end. In the plant's hierarchy, that's one of the worst jobs. The

Cetian and a scruffy man are pulling the finished frames from the belt and stacking them on pallets. But what else are they doing? he wonders. Talking? The scruffy man is a drunk, Miller knows. He didn't get past ninth grade, and he's been to prison how many times? For stupid crimes. For drugs. He's probably still stoned, Miller realizes. Red-eyed and wobbly. Yet the Cetian is talking to him, and he's answering. They're having a conversation — ?

There comes a sudden wood-splitting *crash*.

“Goddamn you!” shouts Jacob. He aims the air gun at Miller's chest. “Pull your head out of your ass, Professor. The chameleon will keep, for God's sake! So let's get busy. What do you say? Huh?”

There's a horn for the morning break—fifteen minutes of rest, minus walking time. Most people go back up front, up to where the vending machines are stacked along the concrete walls. They settle down to play cards and nap on the golden stacks of lumber. And there's the talk, the constant talk, about tits and asses and blow and beer.

Normally Miller goes the other way. He has a corner, quiet and out of the way, where he keeps his lunch and books and a comfortable seat he made for himself out of scrap lumber. Sometimes when he's reading he finds a sentence or a little paragraph that he likes, and he uses a marking pen to copy it on the concrete walls. For future reference. Today, hearing the break horn, Miller's first thought is that the

Cetian might wander back to his corner and pause, reading some of the carefully written wisdoms. Yes? They're from great novels and classic works of science—the crowns of human achievement. It's such a wonderful image, the Cetian and him meeting in that corner. So wonderful that Miller almost expects it to happen. He's got it all planned.

Except the Cetian doesn't know the plan. He comes forward with the general flow of bodies. It's unnerving to watch him. He seems to carry himself like any new employee. There's a tentativeness, a calculated caution in the eyes—flat and square, in this case, with tiny triangular pupils the color of new snow—and the caution extends to everyone around him. Maybe these people are scared, thinks Miller. I'm not scared, he tells himself. This is an opportunity, rare and remarkable. Miller feels singularly suited to act as a bridge between the two sides. A rush of adrenaline pours through him. He climbs under the belt and joins the flow of bodies, and it's all he can do to keep from jogging after the Cetian and calling to him. Like some long lost friend.

They're amazing, really. These aliens.

In Asia, Cetians dress in peasant clothes and enormous straw hats, bending over and shuffling through the flooded rice paddies. In Australia, in the dusty outback, they drive little 4x4 pickups while they do simple ranch work like abos do. In Europe, odd as it sounds, Cetians are among the protestors marching against imperialism and environmental decay; and

they're also the police wearing riot gear and standing in rows, defending order and the state.

These ironies are abundant and somehow comforting.

There is a sense of utter fairness in the process.

Cetians will undergo almost anything to learn about mankind firsthand—some even dying—and Miller has to wonder how many of his coworkers appreciate their earnestness, their good intentions. He doubts any of them do. Probably not one, he thinks.

It must be lonely, dull work for them.

Miller knows.

A Cetian would welcome a friend, sure. Someone who appreciates the age and depth of the Cetian culture. Miller sees the odd white figure sitting alone on a lumber stack, the square eyes watching a cluster of men playing poker on a little table. Miller breathes and sits on the same stack, not too close but near enough that they could talk. If they want. He glances at the odd eyes and the white, white skin. What should I say? he wonders. Why am I so nervous? I shouldn't be nervous, he tells himself. His hands shake in his lap. A couple of poker players glance up at him and smile, then they mutter something rude. No doubt. Again Miller breathes, finding a quick courage. "Hello?" He sees all of the Cetian face, blank and so strange. He offers his name and smiles, extending one of his nervous hands.

The square eyes blink in slow motion. "I'm Rozz,"

says the Cetian, the voice deep and liquid and amazingly human. One of Rozz's four-fingered hands grabs Miller's hand, squeezing and feeling like plastic. It's smooth and cool and tough. Like plastic. Or maybe Teflon.

"Hey," says Miller, "it's great you're here. I mean it. Everywhere, I mean." He feels clumsy, his mouth spitting words at random. "I just really think it's neat."

Rozz blinks again, no expression to be read.

Miller hears a poker player laughing. Maybe at him. He gulps and tells the Cetian, "This isn't much to look at, I know," and then he glances about, his own face critical but tolerant. "Did they show you everything? I mean, do you have questions? Because I might answer them. I mean, I've been here quite a while." He feels giddy now. He tells himself that he's doing too much, he wants too much, but all he can do is listen to his own prattle. "Years," he says. "I mean, if you want to get a feel for this place and all—"

The poker table erupts in laughter. Miller jerks, not having heard what was said but imagining several things. Something tasteless and pointed at him, no doubt. Then he looks at Rozz, ready to deny anything. The Cetian is now focused on the little table—raw pine scraps stapled together—and the hunched-over bodies with cigarettes in their laughing mouths and the cards tight in their hands. Maybe fifty cents in nickels and dimes are in the middle. Everyone is looking at the alien. The laughter diminishes.

Something wary and alert comes into their faces. For a long moment, nothing happens. Then Rozz says with a slow, precise voice:

“Five-card draw.”

A couple players blink as if surprised. Someone asks, “You know it? The game?”

Rozz lifts a hand, flattens it, and wiggles it in the air. “A little bit,” he seems to imply. “I'm not so good,” he says aloud. “But I can play.”

The men look at one another, not sure what to make of things. It's the foreman, sitting with his back to Rozz, who announces, “This is an open game, I guess. Anyone who wants to join, joins.”

Rozz drops off the stack, leaving Miller without a good-bye glance. One of the players moves aside, giving up most of a long bench, and Rozz sits and watches a new hand being laid out. No one looks comfortable. They're judging him, thinks Miller. This is some test. Rozz picks up the five cards and finds a nickel in his front pocket, putting it into the new pot. Then he draws three cards, adds a second nickel, and loses with a pair of tens. The game couldn't be any quieter. They play again, a couple more hands, and everyone is sneaking looks at the hard plasticlike skin, at the square eyes, at the beaked and toothless mouth. Rozz pays no attention to them, and Miller stays on the stack, still marveling. An ancient race that has traveled around the galaxy, to countless wonderful places, and yet their representative has the charity and poise to sit with a backward race. A hard

and graceless race. Us.

At one point, his voice cracking, Miller asks, "How's it going, Rozz? How are we doing?"

Rozz looks at him, maybe smiling. "Not too fucking bad," he declares. "Not bad at all." And he lays down the winning hand, grinning in a very human fashion, sweeping in the nickels while the other players stare, almost laughing, a few of them nodding as if they've seen something and it's something they might like.

Through the rest of the morning, Miller writes little notes on the golden wood of the frames. He uses a black marker. The frames are going to be painted, so there's no damage done. Then the belt carries them and his notes on down the line, straight to Rozz.

"The Cetian Earth," he scribbles, "is tropical and wet and covered with lemon-colored vegetation." He hopes Rozz will be impressed with his interest. "Its largest creature is a fish-analog, one hundred tons, semi-intelligent and peaceful and worshiped by the ancient Cetians." He has to write quickly, trying Jacob's patience. He wants Rozz to respond somehow, but he can't even tell if his new friend is reading the notes. "Cetian starships are powered by matter-antimatter engines, both fuels derived from the interstellar medium." The message is broken up on several frames. Still no response. No wave or smile. Nothing. "I'm interested in you," he writes finally. "And I admire your culture."

This time Rozz looks down the line and nods.

Once.

Miller is excited. He looks at his watch, thinking hard. It's close to noon. "Eat with me?" he writes. "Miller." Then he waits, watching the frame travel to the end. To *him*.

But the Cetian doesn't respond. He seems to read it, yes, but then there's the horn and he's walking down the aisle, down past Miller and gone. Jacob wants to finish the frame on the table. Maybe Rozz didn't understand? thinks Miller. Maybe I should have told him where? Still optimistic, he hurries back to his corner and gets a certain book —a recently published guide to Cetian myths and legends —plus his lunch pail. But when he's up front, trotting toward the time clock, he discovers the Cetian sitting snugly between the foreman and another one of the poker players.

Disappointment starts to nag at him.

He punches out and returns. The three figures are sharing a stack of lumber. The humans eat from pails — sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs and sweating pop cans within easy reach. Rozz has a crumpled grocery sack behind him and a cellophane bag of unshelled, unsalted peanuts in one hand. No one is talking, but the humans watch the peanuts being flipped up into the mouth two at a time. Rozz doesn't chew; he only swallows. His pace is amazing. The foreman shakes his head and smiles. Miller settles at the poker table, barely hungry but pretending to chew on his sandwich. While he watches.

He feels cheated.

Coming here this morning, he had expectations. They'd been building since last week's announcement. It was the prospect of a *friend*—someone he could respect, and converse with, and learn from. Not another sweatshop goon full of harsh talk and ugly humor. But someone of culture, of learning. Someone who had been to odd and wondrous places beyond human reach. Someone he could share breaks with, and lunchtime, the two of them talking and talking and talking—

Miller bristles, thinking he might have been wrong.

He sets down his lunch-meat sandwich, his stomach churning and his breath tasting foul. The foreman asks Rozz, “So how do you do it?” and Miller waits. “Like I've seen on TV—?”

“A gizzard,” Rozz answers, his tone matter-of-fact. Patient. “You know, like a chicken's gizzard? It's lined with rocks that grind up the shells, and I shit out what my body can't use.”

“Huh,” says the foreman. “Huh!”

“Do you want to see it?”

“What? Your gizzard?” The foreman halfway shudders, surprised.

“You've seen 'em, Pete,” says the other man. “They do it on TV.”

Rozz unbuttons the blue cotton shirt, exposing the white chest with its narrow, widely spaced ribs. Maybe he's smiling. Miller shifts on the hard wooden seat and watches, his thoughts jumbled. A look of

utter calm comes into Rozz's face, and the whiteness weakens like milk being flooded with water. A large yellow heart, six chambers and a tangle of thick arteries and veins, is set within the long pale ribs. The gizzard is the darker bundle of round muscle beneath the heart. Miller recognizes it from all the science articles. He feels an urge to stand and point out organs, lecturing. "This is where the peanuts are now." But Rozz himself points, telling them the same thing. Then, as if to display his talents, the gizzard contracts with a sudden violence. Shells crumble and the two men give a little jump, then they shake their heads and laugh, looking at one another as if to congratulate themselves on their courage.

"All right," says Pete, the foreman. "With rocks, you say?"

Rozz turns white again, and he smiles again. "Here. Watch this." He reaches into the grocery sack and retrieves a single black walnut, rough against the smooth skin of the hand. "Watch," he cautions. The nut vanishes into his mouth, and he swallows in a theoretical way; and with Miller eating again, unnoticed and still glowering at all of them, the walnut shatters somewhere inside the Cetian's belly. It's like a little explosion. The men jump and then giggle, then turn and look around the plant, hunting for someone to show the marvel they've just found.

Rozz is moved off the line after lunch. The foreman wants him up front, up in Assembly, which is pretty much the easiest department. It's where the foreman

spends most of his day. What's going on? Miller wonders. He feels betrayed and rather jealous. And maybe foolish, too. All the time he'd been building this image of the Cetians, and all the time he'd been so blind. The Cetians fit into all kinds of places, with anyone. It never occurred to him that they actually *enjoyed* it! Now the blood roars in his head and his fingers shake. He can scarcely think, barely able to do his job. Jacob glares at him several times, shaking his head but too weary to shout. Miller counts the minutes till afternoon break, the halfway point, because everything afterward will be quick. The day and the craziness will be over soon after break. Then he'll have time to go home and collect himself, to sleep and relax and get it all straight in his head.

When the break horn sounds, Miller decides a Coke would taste good.

By the time he's up front, the poker players are at it. Rozz is among them. Miller pauses and stands nearby, just watching, and then something unexpected occurs to him. Why not? he asks himself. It's an open game, isn't it? There's an empty seat. Miller takes it and looks straight across at the Cetian, waiting, feeling tight inside while he watches the white hands shuffling the deck like a pro.

How does he do it? Miller wonders. Did he practice before coming here? Or does he just pick it up along the way? Card games. The language. All of it. The humans watch Miller while Rozz deals. Miller isn't sure how to bet. He throws a nickel into the pot, takes

three cards, and loses with a pair of fours. The foreman wins, grinning at Miller and sweeping up the coins. He says, "So what's the occasion? Thought you'd be social for a change?"

Miller doesn't know what he's thinking. He opens his mouth as if to answer, but nothing comes to mind.

The foreman is amused. Still smiling, he turns to another man and asks, "Have you seen what the new guy can do, Ed? Have you?"

"What do you mean?" Ed works in the paint department—an ancient simpleton with a partial beard and spooked eyes. He glances at Rozz, unsure of himself. "What can he do?" he manages. "Tell me."

"Would you?" says the foreman. "You mind?"

Rozz shrugs. No, he doesn't mind. His skin immediately turns black, like coal. Someone up on the stacks yells, "Hey, he looks like Jacob! Don't he?"

A lot of them laugh.

The foreman laughs. "But it's the other thing I wanted."

"God, I don't want to see!" Ed shivers. "Why the fuck would anyone do that to himself? I mean... Jesus...!"

"For camouflage," Miller responds. He says, "They do it so they can hide," and nods, glad to have spoken. To throw in his knowledge.

But no one is listening to him. Except Ed. And Ed doesn't like what he hears. "So how come he's not colored? You know. Green and all? Those fucking lizards are green and brown and shit. Right?"

“Cetians are color-blind.” Miller smiles. He’s sorting his next hand without looking at his cards, telling everyone, “They see the world in black and white and gray. Like cheap TV.”

Only Ed listens, his mouth opened and his expression befuddled. The rest of the table, Rozz included, studies the cards and Ed and the little piles of change out in front of them. They aren’t going to let him take part in this. Not if they can help it. Someone up on the stacks says something, probably about Miller, and he hears men chuckling. It was funny to them. He can imagine what they just said.

Nickels are tossed into the pot.

Miller glances at his cards once, then catches Rozz staring at him. The square eyes are cold and a little bit unnerving. He shifts his weight, feeling the hard wood against his butt. There’s more betting and he loses again. Rozz wins. Reaching for the pot, he makes the skin of his hands turn transparent. Everyone can see his colorless meat and the fine yellow bones, and almost everyone laughs. Except for Miller and Ed. “Would you fucking stop that?” says Ed. “Goddamn, you’re nuts. Can all of you... you people do that? Can you?”

“You should have seen him at lunch,” the foreman confides. “We looked in on Rozz’s heart, didn’t we?” Everyone nods. Poker has been temporarily forgotten. “And his *gizzard*. And his guts.”

“I don’t want to see any guts,” says Ed, emphatic. He waves his large calloused hands, telling the

Cetian, "I don't even like *thinking* about that stuff."

Rozz shrugs.

The foreman says, "Do it in the face. Can you do it there?" He asks, "Can you make your face go clear?"

"Sure." Rozz seems unperturbed. Amused, even.

Ed says, "No, no, no! I can't stand this shit."

The foreman waves to the men on the stacks. "Come on over. Old Rozz is going to give us a show."

They drop from the stacks, giggling and trotting over and forming a clumsy horseshoe around the poker table. Miller doesn't know what to do. He feels small and absolutely unnoticed, picking at his cards and trying to focus on their blurred figures.

People start to applaud.

He jerks and looks. He has to look. He's startled by the yellow skull—eye sockets cubic and the tongue curled against the mouth's roof and pale muscles making the small jaw move, Rozz saying, "Look, Ma. No face!"

The men start to howl. Someone says, "What's the matter, Ed? Hey! You don't look so good!"

Ed's face has turned pale. His hands push the coins and cards away from him. "I can't take it," he squeals. "You guys-!"

"What's wrong, Ed?"

"Why the hell does he have to do that? Why?" he wondered. "I don't see why he's got to turn to glass!"

Miller knows. He touches Ed and says, "It's because of sex," with a very serious, utterly sober voice.

The table becomes quiet.

Rozz turns white again, watching Miller.

Ed turns his head and looks lost. "What do you mean? What's sex got to do with it?"

No one admits they're listening, but no one makes a sound. Not the foreman. Not any of them. Miller says, "It's like with birds. Birds have bright plumage so they can show potential mates they're healthy. Strong. Virile. Cetians do the same thing by making themselves transparent. It's a very private thing." And he pauses. "Normally. It's to show their mate that they don't have internal parasites. No diseases. Nothing bad or out of place." He breathes and puts his own cards on top of the mess, feeling every eye and relishing the attention. These stupid jerks, he's thinking. And he means *all* of them. He glares at Rozz as if accusing him of some failure, some wicked crime, and he crosses his arms on his chest and says nothing more.

Says Rozz, "What do you know?"

Eyes shift to the Cetian.

"He's right, you know." Rozz nods, telling them, "When I go to bed with a girl, I really undress."

A few men laugh, uneasily.

Rozz grabs the scattered cards, arranging and then shuffling the deck. Everyone takes back their old bets. Rozz deals. When he starts to throw in a nickel, by accident, he knocks other coins to the floor. So he bends and vanishes under the table for a moment. The men are glaring at Miller. One of them says,

“Professor Perfect,” and several of them are laughing.

Rozz returns. The hand is finished in tense silence. Miller wins sixty-five cents with three aces, but he doesn't care. It means nothing. He's halfway tempted to leave the pot, proving his scorn for everyone. The alien is manipulating the crowd, he senses. But not me! The horn sounds, and everyone is standing. Miller starts to pocket his winnings regardless, and there comes a sudden stillness. What's happening? He notices how everyone else is looking at the floor, at his feet, and he looks down and spots a single card on the floor. A fourth ace right beneath his seat.

Says the foreman, “What's this?”

Miller looks at the smiling alien.

“What're you doing?” asks the foreman. “Cheating us for change?”

They're all watching him, waiting, their expressions stern and maybe angry. Maybe not. He's having trouble reading their faces. “I didn't do this,” he argues. “I mean, you can't really believe... !”

Rozz shakes his head as if supremely disappointed.

“It's you!” shouts Miller. “You put that there, didn't you?”

“Did I?” asks Rozz.

Miller moves toward him. “When you went under the table, you did it! Didn't you?”

“Gosh,” says the foreman. “That's a pretty strong accusation, Miller. I hope you can back it up.”

“Someone must have seen him do it.” Miller pivots, wanting a witness to step forward. “Who saw him put

the card there — ?”

Nobody says, “Me.”

Miller faces the Cetian again, waiting for a moment. Then he leaps. He shoves a handful of nickels into the bastard's face, right at its beaked mouth, shouting, “They're yours, goddamn you! You eat them! Now!” He says, “Line your goddamn gizzard with these, you shit!”

The men pull him off Rozz.

The foreman and another fellow, stern-faced and certain, march him into the little glass-walled office where the plant manager holds court. He isn't here just now. The other man goes to find him. The foreman shakes his head and says nothing. His arms are crossed on his chest.

“I didn't do it,” Miller manages to say.

“I know,” says the foreman. “We all know that. Rozz was just having fun with you. It was just a joke, you idiot.”

Miller can barely hear him. He's looking out into the plant, into Assembly. A group of men are standing in a circle, talking to Rozz. He's so far away that he looks human. The jeans, the shirt, the seed cap. Even his motions are true. It occurs to Miller that the alien is genuinely fitting into this place. All the Cetians fit in. To them this isn't a chore, it's a joy. They wear humanity like you would a new suit—

“What's happening out there?” asks the foreman.

Miller can't tell for certain.

“Stay here. I'll be back.” He shuts the door and

stalks out into the plant. The men don't see him approaching. They're engrossed with whatever Rozz is telling them, both of Rozz's hands above his head, eyes wide, the hands implying some epic tale of great drama and worth.

The foreman breaks it up.

Miller watches everyone get back to work. He sees Rozz talking to the foreman and glancing toward the office. Then the foreman returns. "He gave me a message. He wants you to know something."

Miller asks, "What?"

"He said he's been sizing you up — "

"Yeah?"

" — and he doesn't like your insides."

Miller has no response. He presses his face to the glass and sighs, feeling nothing, his thoughts jumbled and slow. What I'll have to do first, he thinks, is get my stuff out of that corner. The books and the rest of it that I want. Then he remembers the quotes on the walls and wishes there was some way he could take them, too. But there's not, of course. They're there. That's where they'll have to stay.

Wealth

One of the biogenesis trillionaires acquired the land, then, with considerable fanfare, built the mansion, and for a moment or two, there was no more famous address in the solar system. An artful array of hemispheres stood on the edge of the wide basin. Woven from cultured diamond, the structures had both strength and a mathematical beauty, and, in the Martian sunshine, they glowed with a charming ruddy light. A larger, less obtrusive dome formed a soaring roof over the entire basin, allowing the maintenance of an enhanced atmosphere. In principle, the trillionaire had resurrected a world that hadn't existed for three billion years. Precious aquifer water was pumped into the basin, creating a deep saline lake that was allowed to freeze over to a depth of several meters. Fission batteries powered hot springs that fed the tiny streams that opened up little patches of ice along the rocky shoreline. Then a variety of tailored microbes were introduced, each carefully modeled after Martian fossils, and it was that chill prehistoric scene that wowed guests and the invited media as well as a distant and utterly envious public.

But any man's fortune can prove as frail as that long-ago Martian summer. A skiing accident on Olympus Mons killed the trillionaire before his hundredth Earth-year. Competing heirs and endless

tax troubles soon divided his fortune into many little wedges. His youngest daughter ended up with the mansion, living inside it whenever she wasn't traveling to distant enclaves dedicated to the nearly wealthy.

And all the while, Mars was being remade. The icecaps were melted, the old northern sea was reborn, a serviceable atmosphere was cultured from comet bones, and, after another century, there was no Mars anymore, just a small and chilled and very muddy version of the Earth. No longer needed, the overhead dome was dismantled. The icy lake melted and evaporated until nothing remained but a smelly blue-gray marsh. Then the daughter, in her twelfth decade, found herself broke. To raise capital, she sold the surrounding lands in a piecemeal fashion. The marsh was drained and developed, a little city erupting on her doorstep. Eventually, she owned nothing but the old mansion and the surrounding hectares, and when she died, still broke, her property was sold to a series of unrelated owners, each endowed with energy and limited means and precious little aesthetic taste.

The original structure has been severely, brutally remodeled. A glance tells as much, while the careful stare reveals scars left behind by a parade of robot slaves and human craftsmen, nations of nanofabricators, and at least one clumsy slathering of smart-gels. The diamond hemispheres have been stained to a deeper red and then punctured in dozens of places. Windows have been added. The original

airlocks have been replaced with ugly dilating doorways. Someone with an inappropriate fondness for Earthly architecture believed that thick Dorian columns would give a much-needed flourish to the main entrance. My burning temptation is to obliterate this travesty. Before moving inside, I want to give a command and watch while the portico is crushed into an artful pile of slag.

I barely defeat my temptation.

Past the dilating doorway waits an empty room. Spiraling stairs lead upward. Flanking doors lead into other equally empty rooms. From the feel of the place, it is obvious: No one lives here now. But little voices and tiny motions betray the presence of visitors. Which is only reasonable, since this is the first and only day when the old mansion will let itself be placed on public display.

I absorb voices, motions. Quietly, I pass through a series of increasingly spacious rooms. The floors are covered with cultured woods and living—if rather decrepit—rugs. Not a stick of furniture is visible, but indifferent cleaning and constant wear show where heavy chair legs stood for years. Where the first dome ends, I can peer into the neighboring dome—a single chamber encompassing a lake-sized tank meant for swimming humans or pet dolphins, or emancipated dolphins, perhaps. But the pond has been drained, and, judging by the black dust in the bottom, it has been empty for some time.

The loudest voices come from a third dome, and I retreat to follow them, passing into what must be a kitchen.

Meals have been prepared here: Organic feasts, and, later, other elaborately flavored energies. Two figures stand beside a laser oven. One of them is traditionally human, but with an AI add-on. "I just wanted to look around," he confesses. Then, flashing a bright smile, he admits, "I live out on the bottoms, and I've always been curious. The owner...I never actually spoke with him...but I meant to, and then, all at once, just the other day...he was gone. No warning. And this morning, I saw that the house is being offered...."

"Yes," says the other figure. "I am for sale."

She is for sale. What I see only appears human, out of convention or some deeply buried wetware, or perhaps because the house thinks it helps its own prospects if it resembles a handsome human woman on the brink of menopause. Bright dark eyes glance at me and then return to the man in front of her. But other eyes continue to study me, from a wide array of vantage points, just as they have watched me for the last little minute.

"All at once," the neighbor repeats. "What I heard...I heard your owner got himself into a little trouble...."

The house wears a lean face, a charming nest of wrinkles gathered beside her human eyes.

“Legal problems,” the neighbor claims. “From what I’ve heard, your owner’s moving out to the Kuiper belt, which means weeks of travel before legal services—”

“I am for sale,” she repeats.

The neighbor stands alone, suddenly ignored.

The house appears before me. Her smile is meant to be calm but friendly, warm but not too effusive. She knows what I am, who I am. She says one of my names with a measured fondness, adding, “Welcome, good sir. And if you have any questions—”

“I have questions,” the neighbor complains.

“About my history. My importance. My potentials.” She breathes the air in which I stood just a moment ago, and she smiles, and the wrinkles on her illusionary flesh realign themselves—a delicate detail that only someone such as myself would notice, much less appreciate. The pattern is fractal. A soothing mathematics is on display. “For the right owner,” she maintains, “I could serve quite nicely.”

I have no doubts about that.

The neighbor approaches us. Me. He stares at what passes for my face, his artificial intelligence finally fixing an identity to me.

“Wealth,” the man mutters, which is my surname.

Then his legs collapse beneath him, and he grabs himself around his gasping chest, muttering, “Holy shit!” with a pained yet joyous amazement.

Wealth has been as simple as a keg of wine and the roasted limbs of a dozen fattened lambs, and from that plentitude, a wondrous feast would spring. Wealth has been a forest of oil derricks pumping the black blood out of the Earth, leaky pipes and noisy trucks delivering the treasure to a coughing, poisoned public. Wealth has meant being a king descended from the gods. Wealth has been an empire springing from AI software that is three weeks more advanced than any other. Wealth has been fragile. But life, on the other hand, has always been a persistent constant, relentless and enduring. Eventually, everyone owns their own keg of wine, and the black blood runs dry, and there are no gods in anyone's sky, and the software that had a death grip on the economic breath of a dozen worlds is suddenly found wanting. But life breathes and times change, and what was the spectacular fortune has been whittled away, and everything that remains appears smaller and a little drab against the relentlessly swelling worth of All.

I am Wealth, but I am Life, too.

The neighbor man claims, "This is such an honor!" and then finds the strength to stand again. Blinking away tears, he adds, "Thank you."

"It is my pleasure," I reply.

He turns to the house, explaining, "My income...a fat part of it, at least...it comes straight from him...!"

"I believe you," she says.

I have enough life in me to feel warmed by praise, no matter how trivial. But I've come here for a purpose, and this seems like the best moment to ask, "What is your listed price?"

She blurts it.

I nod, offering no comment. But my face grows smoother, my gaze much more distant now.

"A great price!" the neighbor declares. "Damn, the owner...the poor bastard...he must be desperate!"

Fleeing to the edge of civilization is the act of a desperate man. Asking for a pittance for your left-behind home is sloppy and rude, and it is foolish, and it makes me a little sad.

Has my interest lagged? The house gazes at my face and my temporary body, and, after some consideration, she says, "Please look around. Absorb and imagine. Just the history of this mansion makes a tour worthwhile."

Agreed.

"You know," the neighbor trumpets, "I'm almost tempted to make an offer."

Neither of us responds.

Then, with a louder, more insistent voice, he adds, "It's really a lovely old house. I think so, at least."

The house knows what she is, and a wounded, embarrassed look twists her face.

Quietly, I tell the man, "You can't afford the asking price."

His face stiffens.

“In fact,” I add, “in another six cycles, you’ll be hard pressed to make the rent payments on your own little house.”

“What—?”

With a gesture, I produce a set of simple, durable projections showing his spending trends and income possibilities.

He flinches, asking, “How do you know that?”

“Because when you were a newborn, your maternal grandfather gave me a tidy sum,” I explain. “The sum was attached to your name, and, as instructed, I nourished it for him, and then for you. But eighteen Martian years ago, you began siphoning off the profits. Which was your right, of course. And last year, you reduced the principal by a third. Which was your privilege, and I would never say, ‘No.’ Yet any busy mind can look at the public records, making inferences, and while I can’t see everything about you or your spending patterns...” I hesitate, just for an instant. Then with a calm, cold voice, I tell him, “In another year, you will be broke.”

“No,” he rumbles.

I turn back to the house. “Yes, I think I will look about.”

She says, “Good.”

“No,” the man cries out again. But he has no reason to debate, and he knows it. With a sob, he asks, “What can I do?”

I tell him. In clear, unalloyed terms, I spell out the considerable failures of his tiny life. Two drug habits

must be controlled. Travel is a needless expense when immersion rooms are cheap. Cultured food is more nourishing than the fare grown in hydroponics tanks. One undemanding sexual partner is cheaper than three demanding ones, and, with a wink, I add, “A greased hand and your own mind is cheaper still, if you know what I mean.”

Quietly, fiercely, the man says, “Bastard.”

If he means me, then it is an inaccurate statement.

After some determined stomping and growling, he storms away. The house smiles as he hurries out through the ugly portico. And then she turns back to me, and, with a genuinely caring tone, she asks, “Do you think he’ll take your advice?”

“About investments, I am wise”; I purr. “About the human mind, I fear, I’m a hopeless incompetent.”

For generations, humans argued about machines thinking: Was it even possible, and, if so, when and how would we become sentient? According to most of the optimistic, self-proclaimed experts, the first artificial souls would be cultured by the military or by the more exotic and demanding sciences. But arms and knowledge have never been central to human affairs. Above all else, money is what matters. Long ago, mutual funds and the great stock markets of the Earth were shepherded by complex tangles of software and then wetware. Cash, both electronic and paper, gradually acquired the hallmarks of identity: Individual names and personal histories, plus a crude

desire to survive. Just tagging the money to keep it from being lost, whether inside a sofa or some despot's hypervault, was a critical leap. When money genuinely talks, the voices that prove more effective and vigorous tend to prosper—a multitude of selection forces brought to bear on knots of code as well as slips of parchment wearing the faces of dead presidents.

I am the merger of money and mutual fund wetwares.

A bastard has no legal father, but I enjoyed a trillion fathers and one lovely mother housed inside a Jupiter-grade server living inside an air-conditioned building in Old New Jersey.

In a rude sense, the purpose of a human is to eat and make babies. While the purpose of Wealth—my purpose and that of my brethren—is to embrace capital and then nourish it. No man or woman, trillionaire or not, possesses my clear, unbiased view of the future. When I was a young soul, small but brazen, I thrived by making predictions about the movements of capital from moment to moment. Later, I won notice by guessing which of three competing propulsion designs would power the first probe to Alpha Centauri, buying the appropriate stock, and then selling the bulk of my holdings just before the project was canceled. Then, when the AIs of the world were to be emancipated, I saw an array of possibilities. When I was no longer anyone's slave, I purchased my mother as well as the outdated,

overpriced corporation that had owned her, and, with the power of a free soul, I gave her wetware and high-functions, transforming her from a simple chain of computers into a self-aware, self-respecting entity.

With bitter voices and snarling attorneys, my megabillionaire clients accused me of being sentimental. It was an accusation with a nugget of truth, but that was far from the point. A few complainers tried to withdraw their funds. With a voice drenched in fiduciary terms, I reminded them that I was not a bank account or a stack of dusty bonds. I was a soul who happened to control enough wealth to build a fat nation. For good reasons, I said, "I won't give you a copper penny now." Without any legal standing, I said, "Sign these forms and send them to my central office, and in another week, if you are still willing, I'll honor your stupidity."

My clients threatened me, and their lawyers threatened me, and a few even hired thugs to attempt some kind of viral thievery.

But, in the end, they loved me.

My mother's purchase and my kindness toward her caught the gaze of millions of newly freed entities. AIs designed for science and for security, weather prediction and limousine driving, liked what they saw and gave me whatever pennies they could spare. And in a single afternoon, my value doubled.

Life endures.

I am still growing, and along a few important tangents, I continue to gain experience and a measure

of wisdom. Being individuals, each Wealth cultivates a different strength. My greatest capacity is to peer into the future, whether it is next year or some era unborn, and, with a clear, unsentimental eye, I wager my golden blood on targets that perhaps no one else can see.

Other neighbors are touring the old house. One is a blended woman—part chimpanzee, part add-on—who dresses like a human and talks like a snob. “This isn’t much of a bathroom,” she complains, her broad apish back turned to me. “The fixtures. The stains. And have you ever seen counters as low as this?”

“It was a child’s bathroom,” I offer. “That’s why they’re low.”

Something about my voice alerts her or her add-on AI. One of them turns the other, both staring at me with a mixture of astonishment, awe, and some less pretty emotions.

“No,” she blurts. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“You aren’t,” she complains. Then she steps up to me, sure enough about my falsity that she can poke me in the chest. “What kind of game are you?”

“A game that wins,” I reply. Then in one long and smooth and utterly convincing sentence, I tell her what her name is and what her net worth is and where she lives and what she pays for rent, and before she can react, I describe the very sorry state of affairs inside her own tiny bathroom.

“How do you know that?” she sputters. “Even if you are who you claim to be, you shouldn’t know about the insides of my house. And certainly not that my toilet smells!”

“But I should know,” I growl. “If I am your landlord, I should.”

The fur on her shoulders and back lifts high. But her instincts are submerged by a little good sense and the add-on’s tempering touch. She backs away, exiting from the room by a second doorway. And I spend a moment or two regarding myself inside a mirror of diamond lain over silver—a design popular when the gemstone was first cultured en masse, creating a tool of self-appraisal too stubborn to wear out and too simple to ever grow obsolete.

In a high room, near the top of the main dome, a plain flat photograph hangs above a mock fireplace. One item is ridiculous—the burning of gas or logs is strictly prohibited on Mars—but the other has a charm of its own. Taken not long after the mansion was first built, the photograph shows the mansion from the old lake shore, the various interlocking domes practically glowing beneath a high sky that was cold enough to burn and empty enough to suck the life out of unprotected flesh.

“Do you like this image?” asks the house.

Again, she speaks through the middle-aged body and an easy, slightly worried smile. I smile back at her, remarking, “Very much, yes.”

“I didn’t know.”

I ask, “What didn’t you know?”

“That you have a taste for history.”

I have a taste for everything, because everything impacts on my life and the lives of my billions of happy clients. One of my talents allows me to read the house’s face, and I know to say nothing now. Just let the silence speak for me.

“Are you really interested?” she inquires.

“In the past?”

“In me.” Her worry pushes forward, growing into a warm despair. “I know what you are. You never go anywhere, in a physical form, unless you have a compelling reason—”

“I am,” I interrupt. “In you, yes. I am interested.”

Now she tries silence.

I look at the photography again, paying closest attention to the frozen lake in the foreground.

“What will you pay for me?” The question bursts out of her, followed by the simple confession, “My owner left me with full discretion. I am free to make the best possible deal in the shortest period of time.”

She is not legally sentient. Since sentience is defined legally, it is relatively easy to give common objects enough mental power and personality to perch on the edge of what should be free.

I feel sorry for her.

But in the same moment, I hold fast to my own needs. Quietly and firmly, I tell her my bid for her

land and buildings, the worn-out rugs, and this single old photograph of a once-grand palace.

She steps back, startled.

“No,” she says.

Then with a low gasp, she adds, “I must have heard you wrong. What’s your offer again?”

I lift my temporary hand, curling one finger against the base of my thumb.

“A piece of copper,” I say. “This big. With a face on one side and columns on the other.”

She looks stunned, and frightened.

“A penny,” I say. “That’s the ancient name for the coin.”

And suddenly, I am alone again, standing before the abomination of a fireplace that has probably never burned so much as a molecule, and that image of a great home lost to the ages.

More visitors tour the house, and most eventually find me. Awkward silences are as common as effusive praise. A few beg for the chance to be photographed standing beside me. One of the visitors—an AI child, as it happens—smiles hopefully at me, asking, “Are you going to live here?”

“That’s not a very reasonable question,” his parent warns. “Wealth doesn’t live inside houses.”

“Wealth lives everywhere,” he quotes.

“Exactly,” says the parent.

Then the child turns back to me, wondering aloud, “Will you live everywhere and in here, too?”

I laugh, quietly and happily.

Then I wander down to the ground floor again, eventually finding a simple drop-tube that takes me into the basement. The stink of earthly molds and fossil water fills what passes for my nose. The foundation is unexpectedly ornate: Blocks of carved basalt, each exposed face decorated with magnified cross sections of ancient bacteria, the Martian DNA using its own language to weave together an array of odd amino acids. Time and the shifting ground have made little fissures at the joints. Otherwise, the old home rests on a sturdy, masterly base.

In one corner of the basement, between empty emergency tanks of oxygen, hides an ancient staircase cut from the native stone, plunging even deeper underground.

Intrigued, I follow.

Down, and down, and then, after a brief hallway, the stairs take me down into a little room surrounded by a fierce warmth. One wall is a diamond pane, and behind the wall are a fission battery and a fractured zone where water is heated to near boiling, slow chemical reactions feeding a multitude of patient organisms that look to the eye like a simple colorless gel.

“He would come down here just to watch his bugs,” I hear.

The house has conjured up the woman again. A wronged, somewhat bitter woman this time. But she attempts to sound polite, explaining, “He built these

species himself, you probably know. It was a hobby. Really, he was fascinated by the ancient Mars.”

“I am too,” I say.

She nods, and waits.

After a long silence, and with some difficulty, she asks, “Did you really mean that? A penny for all of me?”

I show her the copper coin.

“Why would I ever...?” She hesitates. “Wait. You’re offering more than money, aren’t you?”

“I will never sell you,” I promise.

She doesn’t know what to say.

“I intend to hold you for the long term,” I explain. “As part of a much larger, much more ambitious investment.”

“I see.”

“You don’t,” I warn. Then I look at her fractal-rich face and the sad, worried eyes, asking, “Do you ever wonder? What kinds of life would have evolved on Mars, if this world had remained warm and alive?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “I’ve tried to picture it, yes.”

“Yet nobody knows,” I add. Then with my empty hand, I touch the warm face of the diamond, confessing, “I own some of the nearby houses.”

“In the bottoms?” she guesses.

“And in every other part of Mars,” I tell her. “‘Nearby’ means the world, and I own many of the key businesses and industries, and I have a significant interest in corporations and commercial-nations that are essential to the Martian economy.”

She says nothing.

“In a little while, I will empty Mars.”

She shudders.

“ ‘In a little while’ means within the next two or three thousand years,” I explain. “And I’ll do it gently, with a minimum of disruption. Of course, this world has never been essential to the solar system, and it won’t be seriously missed. I’ll keep everything warm and wet, and after another five or ten thousand years, I doubt if any sentient soul will give this place more than a glancing look. And in another million years, or a billion...however long it takes...a fresh and unique and lovely biosphere will arise, stepping out into a universe ready for something new....”

She shudders.

Weakly, she asks, “Me?”

“I will not sell you, and I will keep you well-maintained, and whenever I visit Mars, this is where I will stay.”

“In my rooms?”

“In this room,” I offer.

She almost surrenders. Almost. But then with a tight little laugh, she says, “No. I want more than just a penny.”

“How much more?”

“Two pennies.”

With a flourish, I bring a second coin out of hiding. But before I hand it to the house, making the deal final, I warn her, “But you cannot tell anyone. That you bargained for double my initial offering....”

She snatches up both of the slips of copper.

Then, for another long while, we watch creatures too small to have names or souls, watch them fiercely going about the relentless business of life.

Whiptail

“What a beautiful morning,” I was singing. “And so strange! Isn't it? This incredible, wonderful fog, and how the frost clings everywhere. Lovely, lovely, just lovely. Is this how it always is, Chrome...?”

“Always,” she joked, laughing quietly. Patiently. “All year long, practically.”

She was teasing. I knew that, and I didn't care. A river of words just kept pouring out of me: I was talking about the scenery and the hour, and goodness, we were late and her poor mother would be waiting, and God on her throne, I was hungry. Sometimes I told my Chrome to drive faster, and she would, and then I would find myself worrying, and I'd tell her, “Slow down a little.” I'd say, “This road doesn't look all that dry.”

Chrome smiled the whole time, not minding my prattle.

At least I hoped she didn't.

I can't help what I am. Dunlins, by nature, are small and electric. Nervous energy always bubbling. Particularly when they're trying not to be nervous. Particularly when their lover is taking them to meet her family for the first time.

“Have you ever seen a more magical morning, Chrome?”

“Never,” she promised, her handsome face smiling at me.

It was the morning of the Solstice, which helped that sense of magic. But mostly it was because of the weather. A powerful cold front had fallen south from the chilly Arctic Sea, smashing into the normally warm winter air. The resulting fog was luscious thick, except in sudden little patches where it was thin enough to give us a glimpse of the pale northern sun. Wherever the fog touched a cold surface, it froze, leaving every tree limb and bush branch and tall blade of grass coated with a glittering hard frost. Whiteness lay over everything. Everything wore a delicate, perishable whiteness born of degrees. A touch colder, and there wouldn't have been any fog. Warmed slightly, and everything white would have turned to vapor and an afternoon's penetrating dampness.

The road had its own magic. A weathered charm, I'd call it. Old and narrow, its pavement was rutted by tires and cracked in places, and the potholes were marked with splashes of fading yellow paint. Chrome explained that it had been thirty years since the highway association had touched it. "Not enough traffic to bother with," she said. We were climbing up a long hillside, and at the top, where the road flattened, there was a corner and a weedy graveled road that went due south.

"Our temple's down there," she told me.

I looked and looked, but all I saw was the little road flanked by the white farm fields, both vanishing into the thickest fog yet.

For maybe the fiftieth time, I asked, "How do I look?"

"Awful," she joked.

Then she grabbed my knee, and with a laughing voice, Chrome said, "No, you look gorgeous, darling. Just perfect."

I just hoped that I wasn't too ugly. That's all.

We started down a long hillside, passing a small weathered sign that quietly announced that we were entering Chromatella. I read the name aloud, twice. Then came the first of the empty buildings, set on both sides of the little highway. My Chrome had warned me, but it was still a sad shock. There were groceries and hardware stores and clothing stores and gas stations, and all of them were slowly collapsing into their basements, old roofs pitched this way and that. One block of buildings had been burned down. A pair of Chrome's near-daughters had been cooking opossum in one of the abandoned kitchens. At least that was the official story. But my Chrome gave me this look, confessing, "When I was their age, I wanted to burn all of this. Every night I fought the urge. It wasn't until I was grown up that I understood why Mother left these buildings alone."

I didn't understand why, I thought. But I managed not to admit it.

A big old mothering house halfway filled the next block. Its roof was in good repair, and its white walls looked like they'd been painted this year. Yet the house itself seemed dark and drab compared to the

whiteness of the frost. Even with the OPEN sign flashing in the window, it looked abandoned. Forgotten. And awfully lonely.

“Finally,” my Chrome purred. “She’s run out of things to say.”

Was I that bad? I wondered.

We pulled up to the front of the house, up under the verandah, and I used the mirror, checking my little Dunlin face before climbing out.

There was an old dog and what looked like her puppies waiting for us. They had long wolfish faces and big bodies, and each of them wore a heavy collar, each collar with a different colored tag. “Red Guard!” Chrome shouted at the mother dog. Then she said, “Gold. Green. Pink. Blue. Hello, ladies. Hello!”

The animals were bouncing, and sniffing. And I stood like a statue, trying to forget how much dogs scare me.

Just then the front door crashed open, and a solid old voice was shouting, “Get away from her, you bitches! Get!”

Every dog bolted.

Thankfully.

I looked up at my savior, then gushed, “Mother Chromatella. I’m so glad to meet you, finally!”

“A sweet Dunlin,” she said. “And my first daughter, too.”

I shook the offered hand, trying to smile as much as she smiled. Then we pulled our hands apart, and I found myself staring, looking at the bent nose and the

rounded face and the gray spreading through her short black hair. That nose was shattered long ago by a pony, my Chrome had told me. Otherwise the face was the same, except for its age. And for the eyes, I noticed. They were the same brown as my chrome's, but when I looked deep, I saw something very sad lurking in them.

Both of them shivered at the same moment, saying, "Let's go inside."

I said, "Fine."

I grabbed my suitcase, even though Mother Chromatella offered to carry it. Then I followed her through the old door with its cut-glass and its brass knob and an ancient yellow sign telling me, "Welcome."

The air inside was warm, smelling of bacon and books. There was a long bar and maybe six tables in a huge room that could have held twenty tables. Bookshelves covered two entire walls. Music was flowing from a radio, a thousand voices singing about the Solstice. I asked where I should put my things, and my Chrome said, "Here," and wrestled the bag from me, carrying it and hers somewhere upstairs.

Mother Chrome asked if it was a comfortable trip.

"Very," I said. "And I adore your fog!"

"My fog." That made her laugh. She set a single plate into the sink, then ran the tap until the water was hot. "Are you hungry, Dunlin?"

I said, "A little, yes," when I could have said, "I'm starving."

My Chrome came downstairs again. Without looking her way, Mother Chrome said, "Daughter, we've got plenty of eggs here."

My Chrome pulled down a clean skillet and spatula, then asked, "The others?"

Her sisters and near-daughters, she meant. "They're walking up. Now, or soon."

To the Temple, I assumed. For their Solstice service.

"I don't need to eat now," I lied, not wanting to be a burden.

But Mother Chrome said, "Nonsense," while smiling at me. "My daughter's hungry, too. Have a bite to carry you over to the feast."

I found myself dancing around the main room, looking at the old neon beer signs and the newly made bookshelves. Like before, I couldn't stop talking. Jabbering. I asked every question that came to me, and sometimes I interrupted Mother Chrome's patient answers.

"Have you ever met a Dunlin before?"

She admitted, "Never, no."

"My Chrome says that this is the oldest mothering house in the district? Is that so?"

"As far as I know—"

"Neat old signs. I bet they're worth something, if you're a collector."

"I'm not, but I believe you're right."

"Are these shelves walnut?"

"Yes."

“They’re beautiful,” I said, knowing that I sounded like a brain-damaged fool. “How many books do you have here?”

“Several thousand, I imagine.”

“And you’ve read all of them?”

“Once, or more.”

“Which doesn’t surprise me,” I blurted. “Your daughter’s a huge reader, too. In fact, she makes me feel a little stupid sometimes.”

From behind the bar, over the sounds of cooking eggs, my Chrome asked, “Do I?”

“Nonsense,” said Mother Chrome. But I could hear the pride in her voice. She was standing next to me, making me feel small—in so many ways, Chromatellas are big strong people—and she started to say something else. Something else kind, probably. But her voice got cut off by the soft bing-bing-bing of the telephone.

“Excuse me,” she said, picking up the receiver.

I looked at my Chrome, then said, “It’s one of your sisters. She’s wondering what’s keeping us.”

“It’s not.” My Chrome shook her head, saying, “That’s the out-of-town ring.” And she looked from the eggs to her mother and back again, her brown eyes curious but not particularly excited.

Not then, at least.

The eggs got cooked and put on plates, and I helped pour apple juice into two clean glasses. I was setting the glasses. I was setting the glasses on one of the empty tables when Mother Chrome said, “Good-

bye. And thank you.” Then she set down the receiver and leaned forward, resting for a minute. And her daughter approached her, touching her on the shoulder, asking, “Who was it? Is something wrong?”

“Corvus,” she said.

I recognized that family name. Even then.

She said, “My old instructor. She was calling from the Institute...to warn me....”

“About what?” my Chrome asked. Then her face changed, as if she realized it for herself. “Is it done?” she asked. “Is it?”

“And it's been done for a long time, apparently. In secret.” Mother Chrome looked at the phone again, as if she still didn't believe what she had just heard. That it was a mistake, or someone's silly joke.

I said nothing, watching them.

My Chrome asked, “When?”

“Years ago, apparently.”

Mine asked, “And they kept it a secret?”

Mother Chrome nodded and halfway smiled. Then she said, “Today,” and took a huge breath. “Dr. Corvus and her staff are going to hold a press conference at noon. She wanted me to be warned. And thank me, I guess.”

My Chrome said, “Oh, my.”

I finally asked, “What is it? What's happening?”

They didn't hear me.

I got the two plates from the bar and announced, “These eggs smell gorgeous.”

The Chromatellas were trading looks, saying everything with their eyes.

Just hoping to be noticed, I said, "I'm awfully hungry, really. May I start?"

With the same voice, together, they told me, "Go on."

But I couldn't eat alone. Not like that. So I walked up to my Chrome and put an arm up around her, saying, "Join me, darling."

She said, "No."

Smiling and crying at the same time, she confessed, "I'm not hungry anymore."

She was the first new face in an entire week.

Even in Boreal City, with its millions from everywhere, there are only so many families and so many faces. So when I saw the doctor at the clinic, I was a little startled. And interested, of course. Dunlins are very social people. We love diversity in our friends and lovers, and everywhere in our daily lives.

"Dunlins have weak lungs," I warned her.

She said, "Quiet," as she listened to my breathing. Then she said, "I know about you. Your lungs are usually fine. But your immune system has a few holes in it."

I was looking at her face. Staring, probably.

She asked if I was from the Great Delta. A substantial colony of Dunlins had built that port city

in that southern district, its hot climate reminding us of our homeland back on Mother's Land.

"But I live here now," I volunteered. "My sisters and I have a trade shop in the new mall. Have you been there?" Then I glanced at the name on her tag, blurting out, "I've never heard of the Chromatellas before."

"That's because there aren't many of us," she admitted.

"In Boreal?"

"Anywhere," she said. Then she didn't mention it again.

In what for me was a rare show of self-restraint, I said nothing. For as long as we were just doctor and patient, I managed to keep my little teeth firmly planted on my babbling tongue. But I made a point of researching her name, and after screwing up my courage and asking her to dinner, I confessed what I knew and told her that I was sorry. "It's just so tragic," I told her, as if she didn't know. Then desperate to say anything that might help, I said, "In this day and age, you just don't think it could ever happen anywhere."

Which was, I learned, a mistake.

My Chrome regarded me over her sweet cream dessert, her beautiful eyes dry and her strong jaw pushed a little forward. Then she set down her spoon and calmly, quietly told me all of those dark things that doctors know, and every Chromatella feels in her blood:

Inoculations and antibiotics have put an end to the old plagues. Families don't have to live in isolated communities, in relative quarantine, fearing any stranger because she might bring a new flu bug, or worse. People today can travel far, and if they wish, they can live and work in the new cosmopolitan cities, surrounded by an array of faces and voices and countless new ideas.

But the modern world only seems stable and healthy.

Diseases mutate. And worse, new diseases emerge every year. As the population soars, the margin for error diminishes. "Something horrible will finally get loose," Dr. Chromatella promised me. "And when it does, it'll move fast and it'll go everywhere, and the carnage is going to dwarf all of the famous old epidemics. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind."

I am such a weakling. I couldn't help but cry into my sweet cream.

A strong hand reached across and wiped away my tears. But instead of apologizing, she said, "Vulnerability," and smiled in a knowing way.

"What do you mean?" I sniffled.

"I want my daughters to experience it. If only through their mother's lover."

How could I think of love just then?

I didn't even try.

Then with the softest voice she could muster, my Chrome told me, "But even if the worst does happen,

you know what we'll do. We'll pick ourselves up again. We always do.”

I nodded, then whispered, “We do, don't we?”

“And I'll be there with you, my Dinnie.”

I smiled at her, surprising myself.

“Say that again,” I told her.

“I'll be with you. If you'll have me, of course.”

“No, that other part—”

“My Dinnie?”

I felt my smile growing and growing.

“Call up to the temple,” my Chrome suggested.

“Can't,” her mother replied. “The line blew down this summer, and nobody's felt inspired to put it up again.”

Both of them stared at the nearest clock.

I stared at my cooling eggs, waiting for someone to explain this to me.

Then Mother Chrome said, “There's that old television in the temple basement. We have to walk there and set it up.”

“Or we could eat,” I suggested. “Then drive.”

My Chrome shook her head, saying, “I feel like walking.”

“So do I,” said her mother. And with that both of them were laughing, their faces happier than even a giddy Dunlin's.

“Get your coat, darling,” said my Chrome.

I gave up looking at my breakfast.

Stepping out the back door, out into the chill wet air, I realized that the fog had somehow grown thicker. I saw nothing of the world but a brown yard with an old bird feeder set out on a tree stump, spilling over with grain, dozens of brown sparrows and brown-green finches eating and talking in soft cackles. From above, I could hear the ringing of the temple bells. They sounded soft and pretty, and suddenly I remembered how it felt to be a little girl walking between my big sisters, knowing that the Solstice ceremony would take forever, but afterward, if I was patient, there would come the feast and the fun of opening gifts.

Mother Chrome set the pace. She was quick for a woman of her years, her eyes flipping one way, then another. I knew that expression from my Chrome. She was obviously thinking hard about her phone call.

We were heading south, following an empty concrete road. The next house was long and built of wood, three stories tall and wearing a steeply pitched roof. People lived there. I could tell by the roof and the fresh coat of white paint, and when we were close, I saw little tractors for children to ride and old dolls dressed in farmer clothes, plus an antique dollhouse that was the same shape and color as the big house.

I couldn't keep myself from talking anymore.

I admitted, "I don't understand. What was that call about?"

Neither spoke, at first.

On the frosty sidewalk I could see the little shoeprints of children, and in the grass, their mothers' prints. I found myself listening for voices up ahead, and giggles. Yet I heard nothing but the bells. Suddenly I wanted to be with those children, sitting in the temple, nothing to do but sing for summer's return.

As if reading my mind, Mother Chrome said, "We have a beautiful temple. Did you see it in all my fog?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Beautiful," she repeated. "We built it from the local sandstone. More than a hundred and fifty years ago."

"Yes, ma'am," I muttered.

Past the long house, tucked inside a grove of little trees, was a pig pen. There was a strong high fence, electrified and barbed. The shaggy brown adults glared at us, while their newest daughters, striped and halfway cute, came closer, begging for scraps and careless fingers.

I asked again, "What about that call? What' so important?"

"We were always a successful family," said Mother Chrome. "My daughter's told you, I'm sure."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mostly we were farmers, but in the last few centuries, our real talents emerged. We like science and the healing arts most of all."

My Chrome had told me the same thing. In the same words and tone.

We turned to the west, climbing up the hill toward the temple. Empty homes left empty for too long lined both sides of the little street. They were sad and sloppy, surrounded by thick stands of brown weeds. Up ahead of us, running from thicket, was a flock of wild pheasants, dark brown against the swirling fog.

“Chromatellas were a successful family,” she told me, “and relatively rich, too.”

Just before I made a fool of myself, I realized that Mother Chrome was trying to answer my questions.

“Nearly forty years ago, I was awarded a student slot at the Great Western Institute.” She looked back at me, then past me. “It was such a wonderful honor and a great opportunity. And of course my family threw a party for me. Complete with a parade. With my mother and my grand, I walked this route. This ground. My gown was new, and it was decorated with ribbons and flower blossoms. Everyone in Chromatella stood in two long lines, holding hands and singing to me. My sisters. My near-sisters. Plus travelers at the mother house, and various lovers, too.”

I was listening, trying hard to picture the day.

“A special feast was held in the temple. A hundred fat pigs were served. People got drunk and stood up on their chairs and told the same embarrassing stories about me, again and again. I was drunk for the first time. Badly. And when I finished throwing up, my mother and sisters bundled me up, made certain

that my inoculation records were in my pocket, then they put me on the express train racing south.”

We were past the abandoned homes, and the bells were louder. Closer.

“When I woke, I had a premonition. I realized that I would never come home again. Which is a common enough premonition. And silly. Of course your family will always be there. Always, always. Where else can they be?”

Mother Chrome said those last words with a flat voice and strange eyes.

She was walking slower now, and I was beside her, the air tingling with old fears and angers. And that's when the first of the tombstones appeared: Coming out of the cold fog, they were simple chunks of fieldstone set on end and crudely engraved.

They looked unreal at first.

Ready to dissolve back into the fog.

But with a few more steps, they turned as real as any of us, and a breath of wind began blowing away the worst of the fog, the long hillside suddenly visible, covered with hundreds and thousands of crude markers, the ground in front of each slumping and every grave decorated with wild flowers: Easy to seed, eager to grow, requiring no care and perfectly happy in this city of ghosts.

When my great was alive, she loved to talk about her voyage from Mother's Land. She would describe the food she ate, the fleas in her clothes, the

hurricane that tore the sails from the ship's masts, and finally the extraordinary hope she felt when the New Lands finally passed into view.

None of it ever happened to her, of course.

The truth is that she was born on the Great Delta. It was her grand who had ridden on the immigrant boat, and what she remembered were her grand's old stories. But isn't that the way with families?

Surrounded by people who are so much like you, you can't help but have their large lives bleed into yours, and yours, you can only hope, into theirs.

Now the Chromatellas told the story together.

The older one would talk until she couldn't anymore, then her daughter would effortlessly pick up the threads, barely a breath separating their two voices.

Like our great cities, they said, the Institutes are recent inventions.

Even four decades ago, the old precautions remained in effect. Students and professors had to keep their inoculation records on hand. No one could travel without a doctor's certificate and forms to the plague Bureau. To be given the chance to actually live with hundreds and thousands of people who didn't share your blood—who didn't even know you a little bit—was an honor and an astonishment for the young Chromatella.

After two years, she earned honors and new opportunities. One of her professors hired her as a research assistant, and after passing a battery of

immunological tests, the two of them were allowed up into the wild mountain country. Aboriginals still lived the old ways. Most kept their distance. But a brave young person came forward, offering to be their guide and provider and very best friend. Assuming, of course, that they would pay her and pay her well.

She was a wild creature, said Mother Chrome.

She hunted deer for food and made what little clothing she needed from their skins. And to make herself more beautiful to her sister-lover, she would rub her body and hair with the fresh fat of a bear.

In those days, those mountains were barely mapped.

Only a handful of biologists had even walked that ground, much less made a thorough listing of its species.

As an assistant, Mother Chrome was given the simple jobs: She captured every kind of animal possible, by whatever means, measuring them and marking their location on the professor's maps, then killing them and putting them away for future studies. To catch lizards, she used a string noose. Nooses worked well enough with the broad-headed, slow-witted fence lizards. But not with the swift, narrow-headed whiptails. They drove her crazy. She found herself screaming and chasing after them, which was how she slipped on rocks and tumbled to the rocky ground below.

The guide came running.

Her knee was bleeding and a thumb was jammed. But the Chromatella was mostly angry, reporting what had happened, cursing the idiot lizards until she realized that her hired friend and protector was laughing wildly.

“All right,” said Mother Chrome. “You do it better!”

The guide rose and strolled over to the nearest rock pile, and after waiting forever with a rock's patience, she easily snatched up the first whiptail that crawled out of its crevice.

A deal was soon struck: One copper for each whiptail captured.

The guide brought her dozens of specimens, and whenever there was a backlog, she would sit in the shade and watch Mother Chrome at work. After a while, with genuine curiosity, the guide asked, “Why?” She held up a dull brown lizard, then asked, “Why do you put this one on that page, while the one in your hand goes on that other page?”

“Because they're different species,” Mother Chrome explained. Then she flipped it on its back, pointing and saying, “The orange neck is the difference. And if you look carefully, you can tell that they're not quite the same size.”

But the guide remained stubbornly puzzled. She shook her head and blew out her cheeks as if she was inflating a balloon.

Mother Chrome opened up her field guide. She found the right page and pointed. “There!” At least

one field biologist had come to the same easy conclusion: Two whiptails, two species. Sister species, obviously. Probably separated by one or two million years of evolution, from the looks of it.

The guide gave a big snort.

Then she calmly put the orange neck into her mouth and bit off the lizard's head, and with a small steel blade, she opened up its belly and groin, telling Mother Chrome, "Look until you see it. Until you can."

Chromatellas have a taste for details. With a field lens and the last of her patience, she examined the animal's internal organs. Most were in their proper places, but a few were misplaced, or they were badly deformed.

The guide had a ready explanation:

"The colorful ones are lazy ladies," she claimed. "They lure in the drab ones with their colors, and they're the aggressors in love. But they never lay any eggs. What they do, I think, is slip their eggs inside their lovers. Then their lovers have to lay both hers and the mate's together, in a common nest."

It was an imaginative story, and wrong.

But it took the professor and her assistant another month to be sure it was wrong, and then another few months at the Institute to realize what was really happening.

And at that point in the story, suddenly, the two Chromatellas stopped talking. They were staring at each other, talking again with their eyes.

We were in the oldest, uppermost end of the cemetery. The tombstones there were older and better made, polished and pink and carefully engraved with nicknames and birthdates and deathdates. The temple bells were no longer ringing. But we were close now. I saw the big building looming over us for a moment, then it vanished as the fog thickened again. And that's when I admitted, "I don't understand." I asked my Chrome, "If the guide was wrong, then what's the right explanation?"

"The lizard is one species. But it exists in two forms." She sighed and showed an odd little smile. "One form lays eggs. While the other one does nothing. Nothing but donate half of its genetic information, that is."

I was lost.

I felt strange and alone, and lost, and now I wanted to cry, only I didn't know why. How could I know?

"As it happens," said Mother Chrome, "a team of biologists working near the south pole were first to report a similar species. A strange bird that comes in two forms. It's the eggless form that wears the pretty colors."

Something tugged at my memory.

Had my Chrome told me something about this, or did I read about it myself? Maybe from my days in school...maybe...?

"Biologists have found several hundred species like that," said my Chrome. "Some are snakes. Some are

mice. Most of them are insects.” She looked in my direction, almost smiling. “Of course flowering plants do this trick, too. Pollen is made by the stamen, and the genetics in the seeds are constantly mixing and remixing their genes. Which can be helpful. If your conditions are changing, you need to make new models to keep current. To evolve.”

Again, the temple appeared from the fog.

I had been promised something beautiful, but the building only looked tall and cold to me. The stone was dull and simple and sad, and I hated it. I had to chew on my tongue just to keep myself from saying what I was thinking.

What was I thinking?

Finally, needing to break up all this deep thinking, I turned to Mother Chrome and said, “It must have been exciting, anyway. Being one of the first to learn something like that.”

Her eyes went blind, and she turned and walked away.

I stopped, and my Chrome stopped. We watched the old woman marching toward the big doors of the temple, and when she was out of earshot, I heard my lover say, “She wasn't there when Dr. Corvus made the breakthrough.”

I swallowed and said, “No?”

“She was called home suddenly. In the middle of the term.” My Chrome took me by the shoulder and squeezed too hard, telling me, “Her family here, and

everywhere else... all the Chromatellas in the world were just beginning to die....”

A stupid pesticide was to blame.

It was sold for the first time just after Mother Chrome left for school. It was too new and expensive for most farmers, but the Chromatellas loved it. I can never remember its name: Some clumsy thing full of ethanes and chlorines and phenyl-somethings. Her sisters sprayed it on their fields and their animals, and they ate traces of it on their favorite foods, and after the first summer, a few of the oldest Chromes complained of headaches that began to turn into brain tumors, which is how the plague showed itself.

At first, people considered the tumors to be bad luck.

When Mother Chrome's great and grand died in the same winter, it was called a coincidence, and it was sad. Nothing more.

Not until the next summer did the Plague Bureau realize what was happening. Something in the Chromatella blood wasn't right. The pesticide sneaked into their bodies and brains, and fast-growing tumors would flare up. First in the old, then the very young. The Bureau banned the poison immediately. Whatever was left unused was buried or destroyed. But almost every Chromatella had already eaten and breathed too much of it. When Mother Chrome finally came home, her mother met her at the train station, weeping uncontrollably. Babies were

sick, she reported, and all the old people were dying. Even healthy adults were beginning to suffer headaches and tremors, which meant it would all be over by spring. Her mother said that several times. "Over by spring," she said. Then she wiped at her tears and put on a brave Chromatella face, telling her daughter, "Dig your grave now. That's my advice. And find a headstone you like, before they're all gone."

But Mother Chrome never got ill.

"The Institute grew their own food," my Chrome told me.

We were in bed together, warm and happy and in love, and she told the story because it was important for me to know what had happened, and because she thought that I was curious. Even though I wasn't. I knew enough already, I was telling myself.

"They grew their own food," she repeated, "and they used different kinds of pesticides. Safer ones, it turns out."

I nodded, saying nothing.

"Besides," she told me, "Mother spent that summer in the wilderness. She ate clean deer and berries and the like."

"That helped too?" I asked.

"She's never had a sick day in her life," my Chrome assured me. "But after she came home, and for those next few months, she watched everyone else get sicker and weaker. Neighbor communities sent help when they could, but it was never enough. Mother took care of her dying sisters and her mother, then

she buried them. And by spring, as promised, it was over. The plague had burnt itself out. But instead of being like the old plagues, where a dozen or fifty of us would survive...instead of a nucleus of a town, there was one of us left. In the entire world, there was no one exactly like my mother.”

I was crying. I couldn't help but sob and sniffle.

“Mother has lived at home ever since.” My Chrome was answering the question that she only imagined I would ask. “Mother felt it was her duty. To make a living, she reopened the old mothering house. A traveler was her lover, for a few nights, and that helped her conceive. Which was me. Until my twin sisters were born, I was the only other Chromatella in the world.”

And she was my Chrome.

Unimaginably rare, and because of it, precious.

Five sisters and better than a dozen children were waiting inside the temple, sitting together up front, singing loudly for the Solstice.

But the place felt empty nonetheless.

We walked up the long, long center aisle. After a few steps, Mother Chrome was pulling away from us. She was halfway running, while I found myself moving slower. And between us was my Chrome. She looked ahead, then turned and stared at me. I could see her being patient. I could hear her patience. She asked, “What?” Then she drifted back to me, asking again, “What?”

I felt out of place.

Lonely, and lost.

But instead of confessing it, I said, "I'm stupid. I know."

"You are not stupid," she told me. Her patience was fraying away. Too quietly, she said, "What don't you understand? Tell me."

"How can those lizards survive? If half of them are like you say, how do they ever lay enough eggs?"

"Because the eggs they lay have remixed genes," she told me, as if nothing could be simpler. "Every whiptail born is different from every other one. Each is unique. A lot of them are weaker than their parents, sure. But if their world decides to change around them—which can happen in the mountains—then a few of them will thrive."

But the earth is a mild place, mostly. Our sun has always been steady, and our axis tilts only a few degrees. Which was why I had to point out, "God knew what she was doing, making us the way we are. Why would anyone need to change?"

"My Chrome almost spoke. Her mouth came open, then her face tilted, and she slowly turned away from me, saying nothing.

The singing had stopped.

Mother Chrome was speaking with a quick quiet voice, telling everyone about the telephone call. She didn't need to explain it to her daughters for them to understand. Even the children seemed captivated, or

maybe they were just bored with singing and wanted to play a new game.

My Chrome took one of her sisters downstairs to retrieve the old television.

I sat next to one of the twins, waiting.

There was no confusing her for my Chrome. She had a farmer's hands and solid shoulders, and she was six months pregnant. With those scarred hands on her belly, she made small talk about the fog and the frost. But I could tell that her mind was elsewhere, and after a few moments, our conversation came to a halt.

The television was set up high on the wooden altar, between Winter's haggard face and Spring's swollen belly.

My Chrome found an electrical cord and a channel, then fought with the antenna until we had a clear picture and sound. The broadcast was from Boreal City, from one of the giant All-Family temples. For a moment, I thought there was a mistake. My Chrome was walking toward me, finally ready to sit, and I was thinking that nothing would happen. We would watch the service from Boreal, then have our feast, and everyone would laugh about this very strange misunderstanding.

Then the temple vanished.

Suddenly I was looking at an old person standing behind a forest of microphones, and beside her, looking young and strange, was a very homely girl.

Huge, she was.

She had a heavy skull, and thick hair sprouted from both her head and her face.

But I didn't say one word about her appearance. I sat motionless, feeling more lost than ever, and my Chrome slid in beside me, and her mother sat beside her.

Everyone in the temple said, "Oh my!" when they saw that ugly girl.

They sounded very impressed and very silly, and I started laughing, then bit down on my tongue.

To the world, the old woman announced, "My name is Corvus. This is my child. Today is her sixteenth birthday."

The pregnant sister leaned and asked her mother, "How soon till we get ours?"

Mother Chrome leaned, and loud enough for everyone to hear, she said, "Very soon. It's already sent."

I asked my Chrome, "What's sent?"

"The pollen," she whispered. "We're supposed to get one of the very first shipments. Corvus promised it to Mother years ago."

What pollen? I wondered.

"I'll need help with the fertilizations," said her mother. "And a physician's hands would be most appreciated."

She was speaking to my Chrome.

On television, the woman was saying, "My child represents a breakthrough. By unlocking ancient, unused genes, then modifying one of her nuclear

bodies, we have produced the first of what should be hundreds, perhaps thousands of special children whose duty and honor it will be to prepare us for our future!”

“I'll stay here with you,” I promised my Chrome.
“As long as necessary.”

Then the hairy girl was asked to say something. Anything. So she stepped up to the microphones, gave the world this long, strange smile, then with the deepest, slowest voice that I had ever heard, she said, “Bless us all. I am pleased to serve.”

I had to laugh.

Finally.

My Chrome's eyes stabbed at me.

“I'm sorry,” I said, not really meaning it. Then I was laughing harder, admitting, “I expected it to look prettier. You know? With a nice orange neck, or some brightly colored hair.”

My Chrome was staring.

Like never before, she was studying me.

“What's wrong?” I finally asked.

Then I wasn't laughing. I sat up straight, and because I couldn't help myself, I told all the Chromatelas, “I don't care how smart you know you are. What you're talking about here is just plain stupid!”

I said, “Insane.”

Then I said, “It's my world, too. Or did you forget that?”

And that's when my Chrome finally told me, "Shut up," with the voice that ended everything. "Will you please, for once, you idiot-bitch, think and shut up!"

Will Be

WE WENT TO SCHOOL together. Kindergarten right up through high school. But Marv and me were never what you'd call good buddies. In grade school and junior high, I bet we didn't say ten words to each other. In high school, Marv was in one of my gym classes, and because of our last names --Donner and Dubrook --we were stuck in the same homeroom. And yeah, sure, our senior year we shared a locker. And that's it. That's all. Even considering how things are going now, that's all there is to tell. To me, Marvin Donner was this scruffy little blond twit who always had to wear his hair longer than anyone else and who said, "Cool," and,

"Neat," while grinning way too much. The twit loved to smoke that ditch weed. From junior high on, he was our official class dooper. The best thing I remember about him is that when we were locker mates, he kept telling me, "Don't look behind my books, Steve. Okay? And if you've got to look, don't take any more than you really need."

"Okay, Marv," I would tell him.

"Cool. Neat. Thanks."

Despite what you hear, a lot of us kids managed to stay sober and clear-headed in the '70s. The occasional beer was it for me. I was this upstanding boy trying to hang out with the college-prep crowd. While Marv Donner was stuck in some blue-collar,

pot-haze track. Shop classes and bonehead English, I'm guessing. He was already playing the guitar. But back then, every guy tried playing it. We thought gifts liked a man good with his fingers. Marv used to sit outside at lunch, strumming hard and singing little songs that he must have written himself. Must have, because I didn't recognize any of them. And because they weren't very good. I can sort of remember their cheery noise and his scratchy little-kid voice and how he would strum and pick until something sounded absolutely awful. Then he would stop the show and twist the knobs, telling stupid jokes while trying to fix what could be fixed.

Singing and pot. Marv's life in the shell of a nut.

During my last semester, I had an early geometry class. One morning, about a week before graduation, I got to school late. One of the counselors was waiting at my locker. Ms. Vitovsky was this chunky little woman who took everything seriously. She said, "Steve," with a voice that made me hold my breath. She said, "I have awful news." Then she gathered herself before telling me, "Marvin Donner was in a car wreck."

Marvin? It took me a few seconds to put Marv and Marvin together. I blinked and straight away, I asked, "Is he dead?" Miss Vitovsky gave me a brave little smile, then said, "No. But he's badly hurt." Because she thought I needed it, she put a hand on my shoulder. Then she told me, "His car hit a light pole. He's in intensive care. At General, if you want to visit

him.”

What I was thinking about was that I was late for class. I shook my head and admitted, “You know, I barely know the guy.”

“Really? I thought you were good friends.”

I wrestled open my locker. Marv's books were on the top shelf, their plasticized covers looking new. That's how much he needed books. On the spur of the moment, I reached up and peeked behind them.

Nothing there.

“I've seen you talking with him,” the counselor was saying. Explaining why she had mistaken us for friends.

I grabbed my books, slammed the locker, then told her, “Sorry.”

“By any chance then...do you know who his friends are....?” Again, “Sorry.”

“Well,” she had to tell me, “Marvin is going to pull through.” She touched me on the elbow. I can remember the squeeze of her fingers and her eyes looking damp, and I remember her voice breaking as she said, “If anyone asks, tell them. Tell them that he should make a full recovery. Would you do that, please.?” Our fallen comrade didn't make it to graduation, naturally. But Marv got himself mentioned. Our principal publicly wished him well. Which caused our valedictorian to do the same in her long, boring speech. Using their best Cheech and Chong voices, my classmates repeated a string of bad pothead jokes. And I made some little comment

about driving into a light pole and becoming famous. "If that's all it takes," I asked, "why don't we all do it?" Summer was busy, and boring. I spent it stocking and clerking at my father's little grocery store, saving up my money and having zero time for socializing. I went to City College in the fall and found myself in a new circle of friends. Around Christmas, I bumped into one of my old circle. Both of us were out shopping. We spent most of our breath promising that we'd get together soon. Lying, in other words. Then the guy told me, in passing, "I hear Marv got out of the hospital. Finally. He's living at home again." I hadn't thought about my lockermate for months, nearly. But I said, "Yeah, that's great to hear." As if I already knew it. As if I'd spent my nights worrying.

Four more years slipped past without Marvin Donner.

I met this beautiful girl named Patty, and we dated. And screwed. And while that was happening, I started screwing her best friend, Molly. Which wasn't the smartest trick. Then after both girls dumped me, I met Cathy, who was pretty enough, and fun enough, and we were married just before our senior year. I graduated from City College with a degree in business. My father hired me. Bribe me. Whichever.

Maybe it wasn't smart to return to the grocery. But Cathy was pregnant --with twins, we found out --and she had a talent for spending everything we had. That's why I took over managing the store, working some bruising hours. Early one morning, driving to

work, I heard this odd song that just kept going and going. It was pretty enough, I guess. And the refrain sounded like it belonged on the radio. Light and fun, and all that. "What might be, should be, will be," it went. Then, "Will be, will be, will be " The song never finished. The disc jockey put it to bed after five minutes or so.

"'Will Be' is the title," he announced. "By a local talent. Marvin Donner." I could have rushed over to Musicland and bought the '45. I've met hundreds who did, or at least claim they did. But frankly I've never been much for pop music. Sometimes, I go for years without even playing any of my Beatles albums.

"Will Be" was in the Top Forty for three quick weeks, peaking at 31st before quietly drowning in the disco sea.

An old classmate came into the grocery one day. He reported that Marv still looked like the same blond-haired twit. That he was living at home with Mom. Still. And that he was making pretty good money singing at the local clubs. I heard "Will Be" a few times, always on the radio. Usually I was in the Chevy, which had shitty speakers. But one time I was at my folks', hearing it on their big cabinet stereo. That was the only time when I really listened to the words, and some of them stuck. "The plague will come in the blood," stuck. And, "The sandman burns the desert." Grim bullshit like that, and no wonder it didn't sell better. That's what I was thinking. Then I heard that line about "The ragged rings of Neptune,"

and I was thinking, "Poor Marv.

"Saturn is the planet with rings," I was thinking. And I shook my head, feeling awfully superior to that stupid little dooper. Life melted past me.

I was this kid just trying to keep his family happy and afloat. And then I wasn't the kid anymore. I was living out on the edge of town, in a house with four bedrooms and as many toilets. But the twins were out of college, and the other two kids were paid for. And that's when it occurred to me that more than half my life was done, and if changes were going to be made, I needed to make them now.

It was a pretty typical divorce. Pissy and bloody, and left unfinished for too long.

In the end, Cathy got a fat slice of the grocery. But I found myself being philosophical about the loss. The grocery was my father's, not mine. And Dad was safely dead, immune to what was happening to his legacy and to me. No, what mattered in my life was me. Finally.

I rented this Upscale one-bedroom apartment and leased the best sports utility 4X4 that I could afford. Then like millions of brave grayhairs before me, I went out patrolling for willing young women.

My third date was a single gal in her twenties.

Named Lucee. "The same as Lucy," she told me, "only different." Maybe she wasn't as pretty as some, and I think she could have misplaced ten or twenty pounds. And early on, I learned that she had some wonky beliefs. Before we were done with dinner, I

learned all about Chinese herbal treatments and how the Shriners had a role in Kennedy's assassination. But on the bright side, we ended up back at my apartment and in my bed, and at one point, while I was lying happily on my back, Lucee started humming a familiar little melody.

"What's that song?" I managed to grunt.

She said something that I couldn't quite decipher.

"The song," I moaned.

Then her mouth was empty, and she said, "Will be," as if that was enough. As if I should know instantly what she meant.

"Will be what?" I said.

"It's about the future, Steve. Don't you know the song?" I hadn't thought about "Will Be" in years. Or Marv Donner. That's why I just lay there, sputtering, "I don't know it. Should I?" Lucee shook her head and pulled herself up over me, sex forgotten for things more cosmic and vital. "It's all they talk about on the Internet," she informed me. "I can't believe you've never heard of it."

"Will Be"?

Again, she hummed the refrain.

"Wait," I muttered. "What might be, should be, will be...." She grinned and said, "You do know it!"

"Well, sure. I used to hear it on the radio. Back when you were wearing diapers, practically."

That put a light in her eyes. "Really?"

"The singer...he's a local guy..."

"He is," she agreed.

I rolled out from under her and looked at those bright eyes. Then I told her the clincher. “You know, I went to school with Marv. We were lockermates. Buddies, even.”

Her eyes changed their color.

Their tone.

Then Lucee, with two Es, scooted back a bit and shook her head, pointing out, “A minute ago, you didn't know what I was talking about.” Asking me, “Just how gullible do you think I am?” Lucee taught me the basics that night. The song was obscure for a lot of years, she admitted. But then some music buff in Albany or Indiana was playing the old

'45, and he realized that certain passages made sense. The sandman who started the fire was Saddam, of course. The poison in the blood was AIDs. And Neptune really had a goofy set of rings. Which was something that I didn't know until that moment.

According to the Internet, and my date, a bunch of predictions had already come true. And others looked ready to.

And yet. I didn't hear anything more about “Will Be” for several months. Lucee was exaggerating the song's importance, because even the wonkiest rumors on the Net creep out into the real press. Which didn't happen. And I didn't hear anything more about it from Lucee, either. She didn't return any of my calls, and after a week or two, or three, I decided she was too crazy anyway and gave up on her.

Out of curiosity, I looked for my old lockermate in

the phone book. No Marvin Donners, or Marvs. But it had been a lot of years, and even potheads move away. And besides, your modem prophets usually have a 900 stuck in front of their phone numbers.

Those next months were pretty lousy. When I was married, the world seemed filled with young willing women. But after Lucee I plunged into a stale stretch where I wasn't meeting anyone, young or otherwise. And where every other part of my life was full of problems, too.

The store roof began springing leaks, and my freezers were coming to the end of their natural lives. My assistant manager left me for one of the big chains. And all the while, my ex was riding me for not keeping up with the monthly extortion payments.

In the middle of everything, I spotted an article in our local paper. Reprinted straight from The New York Times, it talked about an obscure song and all the ludicrous predictions that had come true. Plus those still waiting for the chance.

Read his lyrics in the proper way, wrote the reporter, and the songwriter had successfully predicted every President starting with Reagan.

"The chimp's sidekick," Marv called him.

Bush was, "Texas Yale."

Then there was, "The little rock has busy rocks." Plus our current Top Dog: "The hero from the flatlands!" And there were other predictions that became history. "The eye-told-us what to do!" was the Iranian hostage mess. Three Mile Island was "The

Amish meltdown.” The collapse of the Soviet Union had its own full verse, complete with the birthmark and the wall tumbling down and tanks shooting at their White House. Plus there were the wonky science predictions that seemed to pan out. “Jove's pimply child,” was a moon of Jupiter. Apparently. “A man from New York is born twice,” was the billionaire's clone baby, announced just weeks ago. And “The sun lives inside a bottle of light.” Which wasn't a dooper's mutterings. But instead, I learned from the article, was a pretty fair description of the newest fusion reactors.

Yet what really impressed me, and sold it for most of the world, was what hadn't quite come true. Yet.

“After the third day of the third month of the century's third year,” Marv once sang, “the bear kills a third of everything.” The reporter made the easy guess about the bear's identity. What's more, that predicted date arrived a week later, and exactly on cue, our stock market took a wild tumble, hundreds of billions of dollars evaporating in a single horrible day.

Economic nightmares have warnings. But usually not in a bad pop song. Over those next days and weeks, what started as crazy electrons on the Internet turned into the only story on the news. Even the stock market took second billing. “Will Be” was the subject of every editorial and a hundred special in-depth reports. The Flatland Hero mentioned the song at his press conference, joking that Mr. Donner was the

newest member of his cabinet. And overnight, our little city filled up with cameras and reporters vying for a word with or even a glimpse of our most famous citizen.

Oh, yeah. Marv still lived nearby. With Mom, as it turned out. And Mom happened to like a certain fat old reporter who worked at one of the local stations. That's why he beat out a brigade of Pulitzer winners to get the interview of the century. Of the millennium. Whatever.

Expecting history, I watched that show.

My first impression was that Marv hadn't aged at all. My one-time locker buddy was sitting in the tiny living room of his mother's tiny house, looking as boyish and simple as ever. His hair was thinning but blond still, and it was still just as long, tied in a ponytail. But on second glance, I noticed that his face had that sickly wrinkled look that you find in kids who die of old age at fourteen. Normally I would have thought Marv looked silly. Old hippies always do. But knowing what kinds of gifts he had at his beck and call had me thinking,

“On him, it looks right. Just like a prophet should be...!” The lucky reporter was flustered enough to tremble, and his voice cracked and broke and sometimes stopped altogether.

“Where did you...did you...think up this wonderful song...?” Marv gave him a dooper's vague stare, then with a smoke-roughened voice said, “On my back. When I was in the hospital. There wasn't anything to

do but look far ahead.”

The reporter gulped and said, “Yes...I see...” He hadn't done his homework, obviously.

“Why were you there...in the hospital....?”

“I wasn't feeling good.” Then Marv broke into an odd little laugh, something in the eyes either very wise or very empty. “But I got better. I got well.”

“Well...that's good to hear.” Another gulp, then, “Can you tell me? How did you look into the future?”

A giggle. Then Marv leaned forward and told him, “Carefully. I did it carefully.”

The interview lurched along like that. Stupid questions followed with words that might mean everything or nothing. Depending on how you heard them. Finally the reporter mustered up his courage, asking, “But what about the future? Is there anything that isn't in your song--?”

“Stop!” a woman barked. Then a white-haired old gal-his mother, I guessed -came running into the picture, hands raised, screaming, “We warned you! We are not, not, not discussing that!”

She looked like her son. Except she was clear-eyed and tough as gravel. With a strength that took everyone by surprise, she shoved the camera out of Marv's face, telling the world, “It's over. We're done! Leave us alone!”

I'D NEVER FOUND TIME or the excuse to make it to any high school reunion. But it seemed important that summer. The economy was still buckling beneath

us, and just like the song predicted --"Siberia goes bye-bye" --a civil war was brewing in Russia. With all of these important things happening, the reunion became a kind of duty. A way of elbow-scraping with history. Even when it was announced that your most famous alum wouldn't attend, I did. All of us did. How else could you come to terms with what was happening?

I ended up in the corner of a packed ballroom, shooting the shit with most of my old circle. The men were fat or balding, or both. The women looked as if menopause was riding them hard. But the talkers still liked to talk. And the ones who always knew the gossip at school were the ones pretending to know it all now.

"The car crash is what did it," one fellow assured us. "Marv got a pretty good head injury. Obviously the damage did something to his wiring." We nodded. Obviously, absolutely.

Then another in-the-know said, "He still doesn't function too well. I saw him when he was still performing. Remember the Cottonwood House? His mom had to practically lead him up on stage and back off again." Then with a wicked little wink, the guy added, "He wears a diaper, too. The way I hear it." Again, we did our nods.

Then I said, "She's quite a gal, his mom is."

"The way I hear it," said a woman, "it's Mom who stole back the rights to his song. Six or seven years ago, when it was worth nothing." We all had a good

chuckle about that.

“Plus,” said one baldie, “she's responsible for that deal with their new label. The Donners, I hear, get fifty percent of every sale.” Someone else said, “It's two hundred million sold now. Worldwide.” A third said, “It's half a billion, if you count the pirates.” I just nodded and listened, and nodded some more.

Then a younger woman --a blonde with fat glasses who had married into the circle --asked, “But what does the rest of the song mean.?” She was looking at me, I realized.

“What's 'Will Be' still got to tell us?”

I didn't have any special clue. But she seemed to expect something out of me, which is why I said, “Westfall's our next President.” I'd read it somewhere, and I wasn't the only one.

“A gray-beard leads us into battle,” quoted one of the know-everythings.

“That's got to be the Senator. It's got to be!” Then someone else said, “It's with China, the war is.” As if there wasn't any doubt.

“The crowded man reaches for his island,” the quoter continued. Then he paused, waiting for everyone's eyes to settle on him. And that's when he informed us, “The Mainland is going to invade Taiwan.” We couldn't stop agreeing with him.

Then his loyal wife added, “And we'll win that war, too.”

“Blood on the water, blood on the land,” he sang. Worse than Marv, even. “'And when blood is in the

sky, the fight is won.'"

"Blood in the sky?" I asked.

"Space warfare," he replied. In an instant. As if he'd written the line himself. It went on that way for most of the evening. Even when it was boring --when we were repeating the same verses for the fiftieth time --we couldn't seem to drop the subject. I didn't hear a whisper about anyone's kids or spouses or jobs, and nobody heard anything about my adventures, either.

I did try to bail out. Once. I was up at the bar, shelling out too much for my second beer, and a tall woman appeared next to me, saying, "Steve? Steve Dubrook?"

I looked at the name tag, then the face. Two or three tucks had left her skin stretched over old cheekbones. A tight little mouth smiled, and that's 'when I remembered Jean. Our class president and valedictorian. She went off to the Ivy League, I remembered, and came out a tough, successful lawyer. I sputtered something like, "Hello. How's stuff, Jean?"

"We were just talking," she confessed, gesturing at the best-dressed group in the place. "'Who knows him best?' we asked ourselves. At this event, I mean. And I think it's you, Steve Dubrook."

"No," I said. Pointblank.

But she didn't believe me. "You two used to hang out together --"

"We shared a locker," I began.

“And,” she added, “you listened while he abused that poor guitar. Remember those lunchtime concerts --?”

“I sat there once or twice. I guess.”

She laughed. As if I was an idiot, she shook her head and said, “Judging by those lukewarm responses, I'm guessing that you don't see Marvin anymore. Is that a correct assessment, Steve?”

Jean was a stuck-up bitch in high school, and life just seemed to have honed those talents.

“That's too bad,” she told me. Then laughing again, she added, “What you should do, you know, is send a gift to your old buddy. With a note. A nice gift and a pleasant note telling him how happy you are for his well-deserved success.” Then she said, “I've already sent my gift.”

I had to ask, “Why bother?”

She found my stupidity to be fun. “Because,” she told me, giggling like a school girl. “Because that little shitfaced drug-addict is the most important and powerful man in our world today.”

The economy kept up its robust collapse.

By New Year's, my store was suffering. My families were going to the cut-rate supermarkets, and my loyal customers --the ones who started with my father and stayed with me through lean times --were getting to that age where they were eating little, or being shipped off to nursing homes, or they were dead. I wasn't bankrupt. Things weren't that bad, yet. But even after cutting back on payroll and working

seventy hour weeks, I could see a bankruptcy in my personal future.

Meanwhile, Marv was prospering.

He and Mom bought the old Redhall mansion, then sank a quick million into its restoration. They moved in Christmas morning, and immediately the VIPs started falling over themselves, eager for an audience with our resident Visionary. Billionaires paid for the privilege. I heard.

While politicians and the Hollywood-types gave what they could. I'm assuming. Every night, the news gave an update on Marvin Donner's social calendar. In February, it was the President himself. The old war hero dropped into town in Air Force One, just for the honor of standing on that wide old porch, shaking hands with a fellow who the Secret Service, on any normal day, would have watched extra close.

Asked what he and the old hippie had discussed, the President said, "Issues. Trends. The promise of the future."

In other words, "No comment."

Next week, Senator Westfall announced his candidacy from the same porch. Marv stood next to him, staring off into nothingness. The Senator stroked his gray beard for the cameras, then told the nation his intentions: His only goal was to protect and preserve everything that Americans deserved and rightly expected. Who could argue with that'. And then he mentioned the Chinese without mentioning them. "Who else has a mandate to lead in times of

strife and struggle?" he asked us. "Who else is there but me?"

About that time, I got up the nerve to do what lean recommended. The way I figured it, it wouldn't hurt. And maybe, just maybe, Marv would throw some business my way.

Since I didn't know his eating habits, I decided on fruit. I put together a dozen big baskets of everything. The best and the exotic. Then after a good deal of hard thinking and doubts, I settled on a simple note written with my best pen.

"Missed you at graduation," I wrote.

"All the best.

"Steve Dubrook."

The baskets and my note were sent, and nothing happened. Which was a surprise, somehow. Like when you have a lottery ticket that turns worthless. That kind of surprise.

Then it was weeks later, in the spring, and I got back to the apartment late one night, turning on the TV, the news telling me that Vladivostok had thrown off Moscow's shackles and Westfall was leading in every poll and some astronomers in Chile had followed a suggestion in the "Will Be" lyrics. "The great comet comes from under our feet." Sure enough, a giant lump of ice was falling toward the sun, its orbit ready to swing it within a couple million miles of the great Marvin Donner.

And that's when the phone rang.

I figured trouble at work. One of the old freezers

passed on, probably. I picked up, starting with a crisp, "What is it?"

The voice at the other end introduced herself as Miss So-and-so, and I was cordially invited to share dinner with Mr. Donner. "Would tomorrow night be convenient?" I heard. "Perhaps at seven o'clock?" I knew it was a joke. It had to be.

But his social secretary didn't give me time to make an ass of myself. "A car will pick you up, if you wish," she told me. "At home or at work."

"Home," I blurted.

"That would be best, sir."

"This is...this is for dinner...?"

"Yes, sir," she told me. Smooth as can be. Then she added, "And we ask that you come alone, Mr. Dubrook. And please, let's keep this meeting strictly confidential."

For every reason, I was excited.

Nervous.

Nearly sick to my stomach, frankly.

The car arrived at a quarter till. It was an ordinary sedan driven by some ex-Marine-type who greeted me by name, then said exactly three more words to me.

"Buckle up, sir."

We arrived at the Redhall at exactly seven. A big iron gate swung open for us, and the driver let me off at the front door. Alone, I climbed the marble stairs and walked across the enormous porch, thinking of all those important people who had come here, and

because of it, practically doubling over from my bellyache. Just like the gate, the front door swung open for me. But instead of the butler that I expected, I found a young woman. Early twenties at the most. Tall and blonde, wearing tight slacks and a tighter shirt, and if anything, thinner than she was beautiful.

She said, "Hello," with a soft, familiar voice. Then she said her name just as I remembered her. "Whitney Larson." A songwriter and singer whose last album must have done dynamite business. Considering that even I knew who she was.

Whitney called me, "Mr. Dubrook."

I mumbled something about liking her songs.

"Oh, god," she said. As if surprised. "Really? Thank you so, so much!" I just about panicked. What if she asked me questions about her music? But she thankfully dropped the subject, waving me toward a set of French doors, telling me, "They're waiting in here, Mr. Dubrook."

Here was some sort of parlor done up like a room in a museum. The tall chairs and big rug belonged to the late 1800s. Even the air tasted stuffy and old, I was thinking. As if I'd just stepped back in time.

They were Marv and his mother.

I knew Marv's face better than my own. That's what television does for a person. He was sitting in the tallest chair, and I looked at him and tried to smile, and he stared through me for what felt like a year, big pale eyes brightening up with what looked to me, of all things, like tears.

I tried to say, "Good to see you, Marv."

I don't know if I got the words out.

Then his mother was standing next to me. Maybe seventy years old, but vigorous as an old Chevy. At first, I thought she was smiling at me. Then, I wasn't too sure. But she told me, "It's good to meet you. It's always a pleasure to know my son's friends."

"And...it's good meeting you..." I managed.

Then I started to say, "Ma'am."

Marv cut me off. He shouted, "Is it?" The eyes fought to focus on me. His body fought gravity and a pair of clumsy legs, trying to climb out of that antique chair while he sputtered, "Is it? Is it?"

Whitney said, "No, love."

"No --?"

"Dinner. He's here for dinner." The girl seemed like a pro. She grabbed the seer by his shoulders, then steered him toward me. "Darling," she purred, "Mr. Dubrook is a big fan of mine."

The pale eyes found me. His raspy voice said, "Are you? A fan?" Jesus, I thought.

I said, "It's good to see you. How are you, Marv?" The question was too much. Again, the eyes lost contact. The boyish face suddenly filled with little wrinkles, and he looked old. More frail than his mother, easily. But he managed to tell me, "Not real bad. You know?" I nodded. As if I understood.

Then his mother placed herself between us, saying, "This is such fun. Let's continue this in the dining room. Shall we?"

WITHOUT QUESTION, it was some dinner.

Their dining room was enormous and fancy and very modern --as modern as the parlor seemed old -- and we sat at one end of a glass table meant for forty, four fancy place settings waiting for us. Marv got the end position and an extra soft chair. His mother sat on his right, Whitney on his left, and when I hovered for a second, the girl patted the chair next to her, saying, "It's for you, Mr. Dubrook."

I settled.

Someone said, "Steve."

Marv's voice was different now. Clearer, louder. I looked up and saw him staring at me, his face excited now. Then he took in a big breath and halfway flinched, pulling his head between his shoulders, and old Mom just patted him on the back, telling him, "No." Calmly and matter-of-factly, she said, "This is dinner. Just dinner." Then she told him the date.

Whitney leaned close to me, and as if we were in study hall, she whispered,

"It's a matter of time. Marvin is uprooted in time." All I could do was nod and say, "Huh."

"Uprooted," she repeated, as if it was the official medical term. "One of our recent visitors was a Nobel winner," she continued. "A physicist. Or a mathematician. Either way, he explained that somehow Marvin's brain works backward. Sometimes the electrons travel in reverse inside him, and all of a sudden, the future turns into his past. Which is why

he remembers things that haven't happened. And why he can seem, now and again, a little bit confused." Again, I said, "Huh."

She looked at Mom. "Is that the way Dr. Rooney explained it?" The old gal shook her head. "Not really. No." But instead of setting us straight, she wadded up a napkin and dabbed the spit off of her son's mouth and chin.

The kitchen door opened. I found myself glad for the interruption. But instead of a fancy meal brought on silver trays, I saw another ex-Marine type carrying a pair of huge white sacks from McDonald's. Mom tore both sacks open, then handed out the treasures.

"Mr. Dubrook. A Big Mac, or a fish sandwich?"

"A Big Mac. Please."

"Shake or pop?"

"A shake...I guess..."

"We have both," she promised.

I was nervous and a little confused. "Okay," I said. "Both." Which made her grimace. But she pushed two cups toward me, then made a third cup with one hand, holding it to her mouth until the ex-Marine understood, his solid legs carrying him out of the room in a dead sprint, then back again, a cold can of pop in hand.

The rest of the meal was only a little more soothing.

Whitney kept trying to explain Marv's state-of-mind. Or lack of it. And I tried to understand what she was telling me. Dinner for her was a diet Coke

and a fish sandwich, minus the fish. When she wasn't picking at her own food, she helped Mom deal with Marv. Two Big Macs were sawed into bite-sized pieces, and the women used their fingers, giving the poor guy advice about when to chew and when it was time to swallow.

I tried not to stare.

I tried to join in the conversation and give reasonable answers to the occasional question thrown my way. Once or twice, Whitney asked about my life. Then Mom would steer us back to her son. How did I think the media treated him?

Fairly, or not? I said, "Pretty well, I think," and I sensed from her face that it wasn't the best possible answer. But before I could make another stab at it, she shook her head, telling me:

"You know, you're the only one who's gotten to visit us. Among his childhood friends, I mean."

I guess I felt honored. That's what I told her, at least. She wiped her son's mouth. Not gently, but hard, like someone who couldn't remember when she wasn't wiping that mouth.

Then Marv blurted out, "I asked." He swallowed and said, "For you to come here." I looked at him. "Thanks."

"Old...friend..." the poor guy croaked.

"Yes, dear. Steve is a friend." Mom wiped again, even harder this time. I put down what was left of my sandwich.

Marv reached for me. Despite eating burgers and

probably getting zero exercise, he still managed to be awfully thin. The hand was bones and pink fingernails and those pads of callus that guitar players get.

On the spur of the moment, I asked, "Do you still play much, Marv?"

"Want to hear...?" he asked. A devilish grin filled his face. Then to his mother and his apparent girlfriend, he said, "Alone. In my room." Neither woman spoke, nor moved.

Just like that, Marv was in charge. By himself, he tried to rise to his feet. Midway up, he paused and took a deep breath. Then I joined him, putting a hand under a skinny arm, feeling like a giant when I eased him into the standing position. Both women watched me, and I couldn't read either of their faces. Then Marv pulled himself out of my hands, and he kissed both women on their mouths, telling them in a quiet, practiced way, "I love you." Then he sagged up against me, and to nobody in particular, he said, "It's all right. It's fine."

HIS BEDROOM must have been the library once. It was on the ground floor, and it was huge, the tall walls covered with fancy, mostly empty bookshelves. Marv had me close the door. I felt like a high schooler spending time in a buddy's house. I kept my voice down. I asked him, "Where do you want to go?" and he had me ease him down on the edge of his enormous bed. Then I took the trouble of picking up a fancy-looking guitar, all bright and clean with a red-

and-black checkered sling to ride the shoulder. Turning toward him, I asked, "Is this okay --?" Marv was leaning forward, showing me the top of his head. Intentionally, I mean. Ghostly fingers pulled apart the long hair, and where it was thinnest, I could see the vicious scars caused by his car crash.

"I have headaches," he said. "Always." I said, "I'm sorry."

"Maybe that's why..." he began. Then he hesitated, giving me a long, sad look before he told me, "Out of kindness, maybe. Because of my pain?" I didn't have a clue what he was telling me.

All I could think of saying was, "Maybe."

The guitar sat on the bed next to Marv. Forgotten.

Up on the wall, between a window and the closed door, was a long whiteboard. Like something you'd see in school. The date was written on it in big black numbers.

"Are you all right, Marv? Do you need anything?" He said, "No." Then, "Yes."

I started to ask him, "What do you need --?" But he interrupted me. "I'm sorry I couldn't make it. To graduation, I mean."

"You had better things to do," I told him.

He snorted, then laughed. Which made him wince in pain, and he doubled over and coughed a few times. Weakly.

From the other side of the door, his mother called out, "Are you all right, Marvin?"

"No," he replied. Then he was laughing again, his

face twisted from the pleasure or the pain. I couldn't tell which.

Only one set of shelves had books. It looked like an old woman's library. Reader's Digest condensations, plus a few hundred romance paperbacks. I stared at the books because I didn't want to look at him anymore. Then I heard Marv telling me, "Yeah, it's there," as if I knew what he was talking about.

"Right where you expect it," he told me.

I looked at him. Not a clue in my head, I asked, "What are you talking about?" He just smiled, looking just like that goofy little twit that I'd barely known all those years ago. Quietly, in a near-whisper, he said, "It's on the top shelf. Behind the books."

"Are you still smoking ditch weed?" I asked. He winked at me. And chuckled.

I told him, "I hope you know, I never looked in your hiding place." No response.

"Except," I added, "when they told me you were hurt. I was afraid they'd search our locker, and I'd get blamed for your shit."

"Look," he urged me now. "I want you to." I reached high, expecting a plastic sack full of drugs. But instead of that, I found an old spiral notebook, the paper gone yellow and brittle. I opened it and flipped through the tired pages. It took a few moments before I finally realized what I was seeing. Words, written fast and sloppy. But I could decipher enough words to realize, "This is your song. Isn't it?"

"My song," he chimed.

Then again, he told me, "Look."

I thought I was. But then something obvious hit me, and I understood what he wanted. Trembling, I flipped to the last page, and I read it. After so many months of hearing Will Be on every radio, I knew instantly that this verse had never been sung in public.

I said, "Shit."

"You found it," he whispered. Then with a louder voice, he added, "This isn't the time. It's too early."

I read the verse three or four times.

Always, my eyes stuck on the name Steve Dubrook.

Then I couldn't read it anymore, and not knowing what to do, I put the notebook back in its hiding place, and I started for the bedroom door. I don't remember being angry, or scared, I just wanted very much to be somewhere else in the world.

"Come see me again," Marv told me.

That's when I turned and told him, "You know, I wasn't your friend. Trust me on that. We shared a locker, that's all. I barely knew you...you little shit..." Marv smiled anyway, and he lay back on his bed, telling me, or maybe telling himself, "Some days, I want to die so much..." I practically ran for the front door.

His mother was sitting in the parlor, waiting for me. Her face was a mixture of anger and something else. Indifference. Acceptance. Whatever. She was bolt upright in one of the old chairs, her hands knotted up in her lap and her eyes cutting through me

until I had to tell her, "I won't do it. It's bullshit, and I won't."

She pulled her eyes shut, then said, "But you don't have any choice. Do you?" I turned and walked outside, crossing that giant porch. Whitney was waiting. She came at me and smiled in the oddest way. And as I was trying to slip around her, she planted a little wet kiss on my lips.

"What's that for?" I sputtered.

She just smiled in a bleak, forgiving way.

Again, I said, "What?"

"I'm an excellent judge of people," the girl purred. "And I think you're really a fine person, Mr. Dubrook. When it's time and you do it, you'll be acting out of kindness. Just like Marv wants --"

"Fuck Marv!" I screamed.

And that was the moment, the very first one, that I actually felt that maybe I could, like the song says, "Put a bullet into the singer's face." The rest of my story is more or less public.

For a few more months, I tried to live my own life, taking care of my business and enjoying the occasional date. There were days when I very nearly convinced myself that the last verse would remain secret. A private mistake. But there were also days when Whitney or Mother Donner would come into my store, pretending to need groceries. In other words, they were checking up on me, and reminding me that they hadn't forgotten.

One day, I walked up to that old woman. "I won't

do it," I promised. "I won't shoot him, or kick him. Or even see him again."

Which would have been welcome news, if you're a normal mom with a normal kid. But she wasn't. In her mind, I was an agent of God or the Future. Whichever. And since I needed prodding, she must have gotten Whitney to talk with Rolling Stone.

At the end of the interview, apparently by accident, the girl let it slip that there was a secret final verse. Then she told the world what was supposed to happen. And if that wasn't sick enough, she let the reporter know just enough to follow the trail back to me.

I thought I had a plan ready.

If the secret ever broke, I told myself, I was going to empty out the cash drawers and my bank accounts and borrow on my credit cards. Then I would disappear into Mexico, or out on the high seas somewhere. The problem was that I needed time to vanish.

Which the press didn't give me.

I went to bed as one person, then woke up famous. Infamous. Whatever. Police had to set up barricades around my store to hold back the crowds, then the car traffic got too heavy, and they shut down the street in front of us. But still thousands came through the doors in those first days, hoping to see the famous angel of death, and sometimes they would buy a pack of gum or a package of T-bones. And that's when I realized that not only was I stupid to ever think that I

could actually vanish, but I was even more of an idiot to think that I'd want to.

Letterman and Leno had fun at my expense. Those old bastards told their stupid jokes, and I got angry. But it didn't do any good, so I just stopped watching them.

People I met and people who'd known me for years wanted to know how it was to be part of the most famous song of all time.

But really, isn't that what we've all been doing for the last year, anyway?

Everything's been decided for us. Everyone has agreed. In another year-plus, Westfall will be our President and we'll be fighting with China. And of course we'll win. We know that's the truth because some guy who can't even hold up half a conversation once wrote something that never actually mentioned the Chinese. Sometimes I lie awake, and I just wonder.

Lucee's back in my life. Now that I'm famous, she comes into the store every day. Just to wink and wave and hope that I'll give her two seconds of time. I'm the hub of history, she tells me. When I give her the chance. In these last weeks, about a hundred different lawyers have sent me business cards. One of them wrote, "Think of me afterward. If it looks like a mercy killing, I can get you 2 to 5. Down to time served, with good behavior." Just the other day, I was pulled over for doing fifty in a thirty-five zone. But the cop recognized me and let me off with a warning. Or two

warnings, really. He said, "Mr. Dubrook," with a quiet, serious voice. He said, "The kind way, really, is to put it here." Then he touched his own temple, giving me this knowing little wink.

Honestly, a man has to just wonder.

There's a thousand ways to write, "Go to the store," and every version works well enough. So why couldn't some head-wounded druggie write a bunch of nonsense that only seems to have come true?

We've been playing this huge and dangerous and very stupid game. Tomorrow, Senator Westfall blows back into town. He's leading in the polls by barely thirty points, and his opponent has grown his own scraggly gray beard. Which means it's time for another visit to poor Marv.

Maybe I could get onto the grounds, and with a cheap revolver, put a bullet into the mansion's fancy woodwork. Then I would sit in a prison cell for the next few years, safe and tidy, and people around the world would realize that not everything in that damned song was going to come true. Except I don't want to sit in any prison. Ever.

And I suppose I could kill myself now. Today. That would hopefully put an end to this craziness.

But I'm not going to be that kind of hero.

Just yesterday, Lucee came into the store, and she cornered me against the greeting cards. She told me exactly how many days it was until the big day, then she asked me how it felt to be one of God's angels.

"Shit," I said.

I told her that I was just going to keep living my life. And why not? My business is booming. There's some nice ladies who find me intriguing, but they don't bring these things up over dinner. Or in bed. Plus Letterman's people are talking about a little something next month. And of course, people like you are paying for this interview.

For me, life has never been better.

But Lucee couldn't drop it. She kept calling me God's angel and asking how it felt. And finally, I flat-out told her, "I'm not going to shoot anyone. Particularly not Marvin Donner. When the big day comes, I'm going to be somewhere else. And I'm not telling where."

"But you can't," she told me. "How can you avoid your destiny?"

"Easily," I replied.

"But if you don't do this one thing," she sputtered, in horror, "then our future...it's totally and forever changed...!"

Which made me laugh.

That's what I did.

I just held my belly and shook my head and laughed, and after a little moment, I said, "Darling." I said, "Don't you get it? That's the way it's always been."

Winemaster

THE STRANGER PULLED INTO the Quik Shop outside St. Joe. Nothing was remarkable about him, which was why he caught Blaine's eye. Taller than average, but not much, he was thin in an unfit way, with black hair and a handsome, almost pretty face, fine bones floating beneath skin that didn't often get into the sun. Which meant nothing, of course. A lot of people were staying indoors lately. Blaine watched him climb out of an enormous Buick --a satin black '17 Gibraltar that had seen better days --and after a lazy long stretch, he passed his e-card through the proper slot and inserted the nozzle, filling the Buick's cavernous tank with ten cold gallons of gasoline and corn alcohol. By then, Blaine had run his plates.

The Buick was registered to a Julian Winemaster from Wichita, Kansas; twenty-nine accompanying photographs showed pretty much the same fellow who stood sixty feet away.

His entire bio was artfully bland, rigorously seamless. Winemaster was an accountant, divorced and forty-four years old, with O negative blood and five neo-enamel fillings imbedded in otherwise perfect teeth, plus a small pink birthmark somewhere on his right buttock. Useless details, Blaine reminded himself, and with that he lifted his gaze, watching the traveler remove the dripping nozzle, then cradling it on the pump with the overdone delicacy of a man ill-

at-ease with machinery.

Behind thick fingers, Blaine was smiling.

Winemaster moved with a stiff, road-weary gait, walking into the convenience store and asking, "Ma'am.? Where's your rest room, please?" The clerk ignored him.

It was the men's room that called out, "Over here, sir." Sitting in one of the hard plastic booths, Blaine had a good view of everything. A pair of militia boys in their brown uniforms were the only others in the store. They'd been gawking at dirty comic books, minding their own business until they heard Winemaster's voice. Politeness had lately become a suspicious behavior. Blaine watched the boys look up and elbow each other, putting their sights on the stranger. And he watched Winemaster's walk, the expression on his pretty frail face, and a myriad of subtleties, trying to decide what he should do, and when, and what he should avoid at all costs.

It was a bright warm summer morning, but there hadn't been twenty cars in the last hour, most of them sporting local plates.

The militia boys blanked their comics and put them on the wrong shelves, then walked out the front door, one saying, "Bye now," as he passed the clerk.

"Sure," the old woman growled, never taking her eyes off a tiny television screen.

The boys might simply be doing their job, which meant they were harmless. But the state militias were full of bullies who'd found a career in the last couple

years. There was no sweeter sport than terrorizing the innocent traveler, because of course the genuine refugee was too rare of a prospect to hope for. Winemaster vanished into the men's room.

The boys approached the black Buick, doing a little dance and showing each other their malicious smiles. Thugs, Blaine decided. Which meant that he had to do something now. Before Winemaster, or whoever he was, came walking out of the toilet.

Blaine climbed out of the tiny booth.

He didn't waste breath on the clerk.

Crossing the greasy pavement, he watched the boys using a police-issue lock pick. The front passenger door opened, and both of them stepped back, trying to keep a safe distance. With equipment that went out of date last spring, one boy probed the interior air, the cultured leather seats, the dashboard and floorboard and even an empty pop can standing in its cradle. "Naw, it's okay," he was saying. "Get on in there."

His partner had a knife. The curled blade was intended for upholstery. Nothing could be learned by ripping apart the seats, but it was a fun game nonetheless.

"Get in there," the first boy repeated.

The second one started to say, "I'm getting in --" But he happened to glance over his shoulder, seeing Blaine coming, and he turned fast, lifting the knife, seriously thinking about slashing the interloper.

Blaine was bigger than some pairs of men.

He was fat, but in a powerful, focused way. And he was quick, grabbing the knife hand and giving a hard squeeze, then flinging the boy against the car's composite body, the knife dropping and Blaine kicking it out of reach, then giving the boy a second shove, harder this time, telling both of them, "That's enough, gentlemen."

"Who the fuck are you --?" they sputtered, in a chorus. Blaine produced a badge and ID bracelet. "Read these," he suggested coldly. Then he told them, "You're welcome to check me out. But we do that somewhere else. Right now, this man's door is closed and locked, and the three of us are hiding. Understand.?"

The boy with the surveillance equipment said, "We're within our rights." Blaine shut and locked the door for them, saying, "This way. Stay with me."

"One of their nests got hit last night," said the other boy, walking. "We've been checking people all morning!"

"Find any.?"

"Not yet --"

"With that old gear, you won't."

"We've caught them before," said the first boy, defending his equipment. His status. "A couple, three different carloads..." Maybe they did, but that was months ago. Generations ago.

"Is that yours?" asked Blaine. He pointed to a battered Python, saying, "It better be. We're getting inside."

The boys climbed in front. Blaine filled the back seat, sweating from exertion and the car's brutal heat.

"What are we doing?" one of them asked.

"We're waiting. Is that all right with you.?"

"I guess."

But his partner couldn't just sit. He turned and glared at Blaine, saying,

"You'd better be Federal."

"And if not?" Blaine inquired, without interest. No appropriate threat came to mind. So the boy simply growled and repeated himself. "You'd just better be. That's all I'm saying." A moment later, Winemaster strolled out of the store. Nothing in his stance or pace implied worry. He was carrying a can of pop and a red bag of corn nuts. Resting his purchases on the roof, he punched in his code to unlock the driver's door, then gave the area a quick glance. It was the glance of someone who never intended to return here, even for gasoline -a dismissive expression coupled with a tangible sense of relief.

That's when Blaine knew.

When he was suddenly and perfectly sure.

The boys saw nothing incriminating. But the one who'd held the knife was quick to say the obvious: A man with Blaine's credentials could get his hands on the best BM sniffers in the world. "Get them," he said, "and we'll find out what he is!"

But Blaine already felt sure.

"He's going," the other one sputtered. "Look, he's gone --!" The black car was being driven by a cautious

man. Winemaster braked and looked both ways twice before he pulled out onto the access road, accelerating gradually toward 1-29, taking no chances even though there was precious little traffic to avoid as he drove north.

“Fuck,” said the boys, in one voice.

Using a calm-stick, Blaine touched one of the thick necks; without fuss, the boy slumped forward.

“Hey!” snapped his partner. “What are you doing -
-?”

“What's best,” Blaine whispered afterward. Then he lowered the Python's windows and destroyed its ignition system, leaving the pair asleep in the front seats. And because the moment required justice, he took one of their hands each, shoving them inside the other's pants, then he laid their heads together, in the pose of lovers.

THE OTHER REFUGEES pampered Julian: His cabin wasn't only larger than almost anyone else's, it wore extra shielding to help protect him from malicious high-energy particles. Power and shaping rations didn't apply to him, although he rarely indulged himself, and a platoon of autodocs did nothing but watch over his health. In public, strangers applauded him. In private, he could select almost any woman as a lover. And in bed, in the afterglow of whatever passed for sex at that particular moment, Julian could tell his stories, and his lovers would listen as if enraptured, even if they already

knew each story by heart. No one on board was more ancient than Julian. Even before the attack, he was one of the few residents of the Shawnee Nest who could honestly claim to be DNA-made, his life beginning as a single wet cell inside a cavernous womb, a bloody birth followed by sloppy growth that culminated in a vast and slow and decidedly old-fashioned human being.

Julian was nearly forty when Transmutations became an expensive possibility. Thrill seekers and the terminally ill were among the first to undergo the process, their primitive bodies and bloated minds consumed by the microchines, the sum total of their selves compressed into tiny robotic bodies meant to duplicate every normal human function.

Being pioneers, they endured heavy losses. Modest errors during the Transmutation meant instant death. Tiny errors meant a pathetic and incurable insanity. The fledging Nests were exposed to heavy nuclei and subtle EM effects, all potentially disastrous. And of course there were the early terrorist attacks, crude and disorganized, but extracting a horrible toll nonetheless. The survivors were tiny and swift, and wiser, and they were able to streamline the Transmutation, making it more accurate and affordable, and to a degree, routine.

“I was forty-three when I left the other world.” Julian told his lover of the moment. He always used those words, framing them with defiance and a hint of bittersweet longing. “It was three days and two

hours before the President signed the McGrugger Bill.”

That's when Transmutation became illegal in the United States. His lover did her math, then with a genuine awe said, “That was five hundred and twelve days ago.”

A day was worth years inside a Nest.

“Tell me,” she whispered. “Why did you do it? Were you bored? Or sick?”

“Don't you know why?” he inquired.

“No,” she squeaked.

Julian was famous, but sometimes his life wasn't. And why should the youngsters know his biography by heart?

“I don't want to force you,” the woman told him. “If you'd rather not talk about it, I'll understand.”

Julian didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he climbed from his bed and crossed the cabin. His kitchenette had created a drink--hydrocarbons mixed with nanochines that were nutritious, appetizing, and pleasantly narcotic. Food and drink were not necessities, but habits, and they were enjoying a renewed popularity. Like any credible Methuselah, Julian was often the model on how best to do archaic oddities. The woman lay on top of the bed. Her current body was a hologram laid over her mechanical core. It was a traditional body, probably worn for his pleasure; no wings or fins or even more bizarre adornments. As it happened, she had selected a build and complexion not very

different from Julian's first wife. A coincidence? Or had she actually done research, and she already knew the answers to her prying questions?

"Sip," he advised, handing her the drink. Their hands brushed against one another, shaped light touching its equivalent. What each felt was a synthetically generated sensation, basically human, intended to feel like warm, water-filled skin.

The girl obeyed, smiling as she sipped, an audible slurp amusing both of them.

"Here," she said, handing back the glass. "Your turn."

Julian glanced at the far wall. A universal window gave them a live view of the Quik Shop, the image supplied by one of the multitude of cameras hidden on the Buick's exterior. What held his interest was the old muscle car, a Python with smoked glass windows. When he first saw that car, three heads were visible. Now two of the heads had gradually dropped out of sight, with the remaining man still sitting in back, big eyes opened wide, making no attempt to hide his interest in the Buick's driver.

No one knew who the fat man was, or what he knew, much less what his intentions might be. His presence had been a complete surprise, and what he had done with those militia members, pulling them back as he did as well as the rest of it, had left the refugees more startled than grateful, and more scared than any time since leaving the Nest.

Julian had gone to that store with the intent of

suffering a clumsy, even violent interrogation. A militia encounter was meant to give them authenticity. And more importantly, to give Julian experience--precious and sobering firsthand experience with the much-changed world around them.

A world that he hadn't visited for more than a millennium, Nest-time. Since he last looked, nothing of substance had changed at that ugly store. And probably nothing would change for a long while. One lesson that no refugee needed, much less craved, was that when dealing with that other realm, nothing helped as much as patience.

Taking a long, slow sip of their drink, he looked back at the woman twenty days old; a virtual child -- and without a shred of patience, she said, "You were sick, weren't you? I heard someone saying that's why you agreed to be Transmuted...five hundred and twelve days ago..."

"No." He offered a shy smile. "And it wasn't because I wanted to live this way, either. To be honest, I've always been conservative. In that world, and this one, too."

She nodded amiably, waiting.

"It was my daughter," he explained. "She was sick. An incurable leukemia." Again he offered the shy smile, adding, "She was nine years old, and terrified. I could save her life by agreeing to her Transmutation, but I couldn't just abandon her to life in the Nest...making her into an orphan, basically..."

"I see," his lover whispered.

Then after a respectful silence, she asked, "Where's your daughter now?"

"Dead."

"Of course..." Not many people were lucky enough to live five hundred days in a Nest; despite shields, a single heavy nucleus could still find you, ravaging your mind, extinguishing your very delicate soul.

"How long ago...did it happen....?"

"This morning" he replied. "In the attack."

"Oh...I'm very sorry..."

With the illusion of shoulders, Julian shrugged. Then with his bittersweet voice, he admitted, "It already seems long ago."

WINEMASTER HEADED NORTH into Iowa, then did the unexpected, making the sudden turn east when he reached the new Tollway.

Blaine shadowed him. He liked to keep two minutes between the Buick and his little Tokamak, using the FBI's recon network to help monitor the situation. But the network had been compromised in the past, probably more often than anyone knew, which meant that he had to occasionally pay the Tollway a little extra to boost his speed, the gap closing to less than fifteen seconds. Then with the optics in his windshield, he would get a good look at what might or might not be Julian Winemaster --a stiffly erect gentleman who kept one hand on the wheel, even when the Al-managed road was

controlling every vehicle's speed and direction, and doing a better job of driving than any human could do. Iowa was half-beautiful, half-bleak. Some fields looked tended, genetically tailored crops planted in fractal patterns and the occasional robot working carefully, pulling weeds and killing pests as it spider-walked back and forth. But there were long stretches where the farms had been abandoned, wild grasses and the spawn of last year's crops coming up in ragged green masses. Entire neighborhoods had pulled up and gone elsewhere. How many farmers had accepted the Transmutation, in other countries or illegally? Probably only a fraction of them, Blaine knew. Habit-bound and suspicious by nature, they'd never agree to the dis-mantlement of their bodies, the transplantation of their crusty souls. No, what happened was that farms were simply falling out of production, particularly where the soil was marginal. Yields were still improving in a world where the old-style population was tumbling. If patterns held, most of the arable land would soon return to prairie and forest. And eventually, the entire human species wouldn't fill so much as one of these abandoned farms...leaving the old world entirely empty...if those patterns were allowed to hold, naturally...

Unlike Winemaster, Blaine kept neither hand on the wheel, trusting the AIs to look after him. He spent most of his time watching the news networks, keeping tabs on moods more than facts. What had happened in Kansas was still the big story. By noon,

more than twenty groups and individuals had claimed responsibility for the attack. Officially, the Emergency Federal Council deplored any senseless violence --a cliché. which implied that sensible violence was an entirely different question. When asked about the government's response, the President's press secretary looked at the world with a stony face, saying, "We're investigating the regrettable incident. But the fact remains, it happened outside our borders. We are observers here. The Shawnee Nest was responsible for its own security, just as every other Nest is responsible...'

Questions came in a flurry. The press secretary pointed to a small, severe-looking man in the front row --a reporter for the Christian Promise organization. "Are we taking any precautions against counterattacks?" the reporter inquired. Then, not waiting for an answer, he added, "There have been reports of activity in the other Nests, inside the United States and elsewhere." A tense smile was the first reply.

Then the stony face told everyone, "The President and the Council have taken every appropriate precaution. As for any activity in any Nest, I can only say: We have everything perfectly well in hand."

"Is anything left of the Shawnee Nest.?" asked a second reporter.

"No." The press secretary was neither sad nor pleased. "Initial evidence is that the entire facility has been sterilized."

A tenacious gray-haired woman --the perpetual symbol of the Canadian Newsweb --called out, "Mr. Secretary...Lennie --!"

"Yes, Cora..."

"How many were killed.?"

"I wouldn't know how to answer that question, Cora..."

"Your government estimates an excess of one hundred million. If the entire Nest was sterilized, as you say, then we're talking about more than two-thirds of the current U.S. population."

"Legally," he replied, "we are talking about machines."

"Some of those machines were once your citizens," she mentioned. The reporter from Christian Promise was standing nearby. He grimaced, then muttered bits of relevant Scripture.

"I don't think this is the time or place to debate what life is or isn't," said the press secretary, juggling things badly.

Cora persisted. "Are you aware of the Canadian position on this tragedy?"

"Like us, they're saddened."

"They've offered sanctuary to any survivors of the blast --"

"Except there are none," he replied, his face pink as granite.

"But if there were.? Would you let them move to another Nest in the United States, or perhaps to Canada....?"

There was a pause, brief and electric.

Then with a flat cool voice, the press secretary reported, "The McGrugger Bill is very specific. Nests may exist only in sealed containment facilities, monitored at all times. And should any of the microchines escape, they will be treated as what they are...grave hazards to normal life...and this government will not let them roam at will...!"

Set inside an abandoned salt mine near Kansas City, the Shawnee Nest had been one of the most secure facilities of its kind ever built. Its power came from clean geothermal sources. Lead plates and intricate defense systems stood against natural hazards as well as more human threats. Thousands of government-loyal AIs, positioned in the surrounding salt, did nothing but watch its borders, making certain that none of the microchines could escape. That was why the thought that local terrorists could launch any attack was so ludicrous. To have that attack succeed was simply preposterous. Whoever was responsible for the bomb, it was done with the abeyance of the highest authorities. No sensible soul doubted it. That dirty little nuke had Federal fingerprints on it, and the attack was planned carefully, and its goals were instantly apparent to people large and small.

Julian had no doubts. He had enemies, vast and malicious, and nobody was more entitled to his paranoias.

Just short of Illinois, the Buick made a long-

scheduled stop. Julian took possession of his clone at the last moment. The process was supposed to be routine --a simple matter of slowing his thoughts a thousandfold, then integrating them with his body -- but there were always phantom pains and a sick falling sensation. Becoming a bloated watery bag wasn't the strangest part of it. After all, the Nest was designed to mimic this kind of existence. What gnawed at Julian was the gargantuan sense of Time: A half an hour in this realm was nearly a month in his realm. No matter how brief the stop, Julian would feel a little lost when he returned, a step behind the others, and far more emotionally drained than he would ever admit.

By the time the car had stopped, Julian was in full control of the body. His body, he reminded himself. Climbing out into the heat and brilliant sunshine, he felt a purposeful stiffness in his back and the familiar ache running down his right leg. In his past life, he was plagued by sciatica pains. It was one of many ailments that he hadn't missed after his Transmutation. And it was just another detail that someone had thought to include, forcing him to wince and stretch, showing the watching world that he was their flavor of mortal. Suddenly another old pain began to call to Julian.

Hunger.

His duty was to fill the tank, then do everything expected of a road-weary driver. The rest area was surrounded by the Tollway, gas pumps surrounding a

fast food/playground complex. Built to handle tens of thousands of people daily, the facility had suffered with the civil chaos, the militias and the plummeting populations. A few dozen travelers went about their business in near-solitude, and presumably a team of state or Federal agents were lurking nearby, using sensors to scan for those who weren't what they seemed to be. Without incident, Julian managed the first part of his mission. Then he drove a tiny distance and parked, repeating his stiff climb out of the car, entering the restaurant and steering straight for the restroom.

He was alone, thankfully.

The diagnostic urinal gently warned him to drink more fluids, then wished him a lovely day.

Taking the advice to heart, Julian ordered a bucket-sized ice tea along with a cultured guinea hen sandwich.

“For here or to go?” asked the automated clerk.

“I'm staying,” he replied, believing it would look best.

“Thank you, sir. Have a lovely day.”

Julian sat in the back booth, eating slowly and mannerly, scanning the pages of someone's forgotten e-paper. He made a point of lingering over the trite and trivial, concentrating on the comics with their humanized cats and cartoonish people, everyone playing out the same jokes that must have amused him in the very remote past.

“How's it going?”

The voice was slow and wet. Julian blanked the page, looking over his shoulder, betraying nothing as his eyes settled on the familiar wide face. "Fine," he replied, his own voice polite but distant. "Thank you."

"Is it me? Or is it just too damned hot to live out there...?"

"It is hot," Julian conceded.

"Particularly for the likes of me." The man settled onto a plastic chair bolted into the floor with clown heads. His lunch buried his little table: Three sandwiches, a greasy sack of fried cucumbers, and a tall chocolate shake. "It's murder when you're fat. Let me tell you...I've got to be careful in this weather. I don't move fast. I talk softly. I even have to ration my thinking. I mean it! Too many thoughts, and I break out in a killing sweat!" Julian had prepared for this moment. Yet nothing was happening quite like he or anyone else had expected.

Saying nothing, Julian took a shy bite out of his sandwich.

"You look like a smart guy," said his companion. "Tell me. If the world's getting emptier, like everyone says, why am I still getting poorer?"

"Excuse me?"

"That's the way it feels, at least." The man was truly fat, his face smooth and youthful, every feature pressed outward by the remnants of countless lunches.

"You'd think that with all the smart ones leaving for the Nests...you'd think guys like you and me

would do pretty well for ourselves. You know.?" Using every resource, the refugees had found three identities for this man: He was a salesman from St. Joseph, Missouri. Or he was a Federal agent working for the Department of Technology, in its Enforcement division, and his salesman identity was a cover. Or he was a charter member of the Christian Promise organization, using that group's political connections to accomplish its murderous goals. What does he want? Julian asked himself. He took another shy bite, wiped his mouth with a napkin, then offered his own question. "Why do you say that...that it's the smart people who are leaving....?"

"That's what studies show," said a booming, unashamed voice. "Half our people are gone, but we've lost ninety percent of our scientists. Eighty percent of our doctors. And almost every last member of Mensa...which between you and me is a good thing, I think...!"

Another bite, and wipe. Then with a genuine firmness, Julian told him, "I don't think we should be talking. We don't know each other." A huge cackling laugh ended with an abrupt statement:

"That's why we should talk. We're strangers, so where's the harm?" Suddenly the guinea hen sandwich appeared huge and inedible. Julian set it down and took a gulp of tea.

His companion watched him, apparently captivated.

Julian swallowed, then asked, "What do you do for

a living?”

“What I'm good at.” He unwrapped a hamburger, then took an enormous bite, leaving a crescent-shaped sandwich and a fine glistening stain around his smile.

“Put it this way, Mr. Winemaster. I'm like anyone. I do what I hope is best.”

“How do you --?”

“Your name? The same way I know your address, and your social registration number, and your bank balance, too.” He took a moment to consume half of the remaining crescent, then while chewing, he choked out the words, “Blaine. My name is. If you'd like to use it.”

Each of the man's possible identities used Blaine, either as a first or last name.

Julian wrapped the rest of his sandwich in its insulated paper, watching his hands begin to tremble. He had a pianist's hands in his first life but absolutely no talent for music. When he went through the Transmutation, he'd asked for a better ear and more coordination --both of which were given to him with minimal fuss. Yet he'd never learned how to play, not even after five hundred days. It suddenly seemed like a tragic waste of talent, and with a secret voice, he promised himself to take lessons, starting immediately.

“So, Mr. Winemaster...where are you heading...?” Julian managed another sip of tea, grimacing at the bitter taste.

“Someplace east, judging by what I can see...”

“Yes,” he allowed. Then he added, “Which is none of your business.” Blaine gave a hearty laugh, shoving the last of the burger deep into his gaping mouth. Then he spoke, showing off the masticated meat and tomatoes, telling his new friend, “Maybe you'll need help somewhere up ahead. Just maybe. And if that happens, I want you to think of me.”

“You'll help me, will you?”

The food-stuffed grin was practically radiant. “Think of me,” he repeated happily. “That's all I'm saying.”

FOR A LONG WHILE, the refugees spoke and dreamed of nothing but the mysterious Blaine. Which side did he represent? Should they trust him? Or move against him?

And if they tried to stop the man, which way was best? Sabotage his car? Drug his next meal? Or would they have to do something genuinely horrible?

But there were no answers, much less a consensus. Blaine continued shadowing them, at a respectful distance; nothing substantial was learned about him; and despite the enormous stakes, the refugees found themselves gradually drifting back into the moment-by-moment business of ordinary life. Couples and amalgamations of couples were beginning to make babies. There was a logic: Refugees were dying every few minutes, usually from radiation exposure. The losses weren't critical, but when they reached their new home -the deep cold rock of the Canadian Shield

--they would need numbers, a real demographic momentum. And logic always dances with emotion. Babies served as a tonic to the adults. They didn't demand too many resources, and they forced their parents to focus on more manageable problems, like building tiny bodies and caring for needy souls.

Even Julian was swayed by fashion.

With one of his oldest women friends, he found himself hovering over a crystalline womb, watching nanochines sculpt their son out of single atoms and tiny electric breaths.

It was only Julian's second child.

As long as his daughter had been alive, he hadn't seen the point in having another. The truth was that it had always disgusted him to know that the children in the Nest were manufactured --there was no other word for it --and he didn't relish being reminded that he was nothing, more or less, than a fancy machine among millions of similar machines.

Julian often dreamed of his dead daughter. Usually she was on board their strange ark, and he would find a note from her, and a cabin number, and he would wake up smiling, feeling certain that he would find her today. Then he would suddenly remember the bomb, and he would start to cry, suffering through the wrenching, damning loss all over again.

Which was ironic, in a fashion.

During the last nineteen months, father and daughter had gradually and inexorably drifted apart. She was very much a child when they came to the

Nest, as flexible as her father wasn't, and how many times had Julian lain awake in bed, wondering why he had ever bothered being Transmuted. His daughter didn't need him, plainly. He could have remained behind. Which always led to the same questions: When he was a normal human being, was he genuinely happy? Or was his daughter's illness simply an excuse...a spicy bit of good fortune that offered an escape route...?

When the Nest was destroyed, Julian survived only through more good fortune. He was as far from the epicenter as possible, shielded by the Nest's interior walls and emergency barricades. Yet even then, most of the people near him were killed, an invisible neutron rain scrambling their minds. That same rain had knocked him unconscious just before the firestorm arrived, and if an autodoc hadn't found his limp body, then dragged him into a shelter, he would have been cremated. And of course if the Nest hadn't devised its elaborate escape plan, stockpiling the Buick and cloning equipment outside the Nest, Julian would have had no choice but to remain in the rubble, fighting to survive the next moment, and the next.

But those coincidences happened, making his present life feel like the culmination of some glorious Fate.

The secret truth was that Julian relished his new importance, and he enjoyed the pressures that came with each bathroom break and every stop for gas. If he died now, between missions, others could take his

place, leading Winemaster's cloned body through the needed motions...but they wouldn't do as well, Julian could tell himself...a secret part of him wishing that this bizarre, slow-motion chase would never come to an end...

The Buick stayed on the Tollway through northern Illinois, slipping beneath Chicago before skipping across a sliver of Indiana. Julian was integrated with his larger self several times, going through the motions of the stiff, tired, and hungry traveler. Blaine always arrived several minutes later, never approaching his quarry, always finding gas at different pumps, standing outside the rest rooms, waiting to show Julian a big smile but never uttering so much as a word in passing.

A little after midnight, the Buick's driver took his hand off the wheel, lay back and fell asleep. Trusting the Tollway's driving was out of character, but with Blaine trailing them and the border approaching, no one was eager to waste time in a motel bed.

At two in the morning, Julian was also asleep, dipping in and out of dreams. Suddenly a hand took him by the shoulder, shaking him, and several voices, urgent and close, said, "We need you, Julian. Now." In his dreams, a thousand admiring faces were saying, "We need you." Julian awoke.

His cabin was full of people. His mate had been ushered away, but his unborn child, nearly complete now, floated in his bubble of blackened crystal, oblivious to the nervous air and the tight, crisp

voices.

“What's wrong?” Julian asked.

“Everything,” they assured.

His universal window showed a live feed from a security camera on the North Dakota-Manitoba border. Department of Technology investigators, backed up by a platoon of heavily armed Marines, were dismantling a Toyota Sunrise. Even at those syrupy speeds, the lasers moved quickly, leaving the vehicle in tiny pieces that were photographed, analyzed, then fed into a state-of-the-art decontamination unit.

“What is this?” Julian sputtered.

But he already knew the answer.

“There was a second group of refugees,” said the President, kneeling beside his bed. She was wearing an oversized face --a common fashion, of late --and with a very calm, very grim voice, she admitted, “We weren't the only survivors.” They had kept it a secret, at least from Julian. Which was perfectly reasonable, he reminded himself. What if he had been captured? Under torture, he could have doomed that second lifeboat, and everyone inside it...

“Is my daughter there?” he blurted, uncertain what to hope for. The President shook her head. “No, Julian.”

Yet if two arks existed, couldn't there be a third? And wouldn't the President keep its existence secret from him, too?

“We've been monitoring events,” she continued.

“It's tragic, what's happening to our friends...but we'll be able to adjust our methods...for when we cross the border...”

He looked at the other oversized faces. “But why do you need me? We won't reach Detroit for hours.”

The President looked over her shoulder. “Play the recording.” Suddenly Julian was looking back in time. He saw the Sunrise pull up to the border post, waiting in line to be searched. A pickup truck with Wyoming plates pulled up behind it, and out stepped a preposterously tall man brandishing a badge and a handgun. With an eerie sense of purpose, he strode up to the little car, took aim and fired his full clip through the driver's window. The body behind the wheel jerked and kicked as it was ripped apart. Then the murderer reached in and pulled the corpse out through the shattered glass, shouting at the Tech investigators:

“I've got them! Here! For Christ's sake, help me!” The image dissolved, the window returning to the real-time, real-speed scene. To himself, Julian whispered, “No, it can't be...” The President took his hands in hers, their warmth a comfortable fiction. “We would have shown you this as it was happening, but we weren't sure what it meant.”

“But you're sure now?”

“That man followed our people. All the way from Nebraska.” She shook her head, admitting, “We don't know everything, no. For security reasons, we rarely spoke with those other survivors --”

“What are we going to do?” Julian growled.

“The only reasonable thing left for us.” She smiled in a sad fashion, then warned him, “We’re pulling off the Tollway now. You still have a little while to get ready...”

He closed his eyes, saying nothing.

“Not as long as you’d like, I’m sure...but with this sort of thing, maybe it’s best to hurry...”

THERE WERE NO GAS PUMPS or restaurants in the rest area. A small divided parking lot was surrounded by trees and fake log cabin lavatories that in turn were sandwiched between broad lanes of moonlit pavement. The parking lot was empty. The only traffic was a single truck in the westbound freighter lane, half a dozen trailers towed along in its wake. Julian watched the truck pass, then walked into the darkest shadows, and kneeled.

The security cameras were being fed false images - images that were hopefully more convincing than the ludicrous log cabins. Yet even when he knew that he was safe, Julian felt exposed. Vulnerable. The feeling worsened by the moment, becoming a black dread, and by the time the Tokamak pulled to stop, his newborn heart was racing, and his quick damp breath tasted foul. Blaine parked two slots away from the sleeping Buick. He didn’t bother looking through the windows. Instead, guided by intuition or hidden sensor, he strolled toward the men’s room, hesitated, then took a few half-steps toward Julian, passing into

a patch of moonlight.

Using both hands, Julian lifted his weapon, letting it aim itself at the smooth broad forehead.

“Well,” said Blaine, “I see you're thinking about me.”

“What do you want?” Julian whispered. Then with a certain clumsiness, he added,

“With me.”

The man remained silent for a moment, a smile building.

“Who am I?” he asked suddenly. “Ideas? Do you have any?” Julian gulped a breath, then said, “You work for the government.” His voice was testy, pained. “And I don't know why you're following me!” Blaine didn't offer answers. Instead he warned his audience, “The border is a lot harder to pierce than you think.”

“Is it?”

“Humans aren't fools,” Blaine reminded him. “After all, they designed the technologies used by the Nests, and they've had just as long as you to improve on old tricks.”

“People in the world are getting dumber,” said Julian. “You told me that.”

“And those same people are very scared, very focused,” his opponent countered.

“Their borders are a priority to them. You are their top priority. And even if your thought processes are accelerated a thousandfold, they've got AIs who can blister you in any race of intellect. At least for the

time being, they can.” Shoot him, an inner voice urged.

Yet Julian did nothing, waiting silently, hoping to be saved from this onerous chore.

“You can't cross into Canada without me,” Blaine told him.

“I know what happened...” Julian felt the gun's barrel adjusting itself as his hands grew tired and dropped slightly. “Up in North Dakota...we know all about it...”

It was Blaine's turn to keep silent.

Again, Julian asked, “Who are you? Just tell me that much.”

“You haven't guessed it, have you?” The round face seemed genuinely disappointed. “Not even in your wildest dreams...”

“And why help us?” Julian muttered, saying too much.

“Because in the long run, helping you helps me.”

“How?”

Silence.

“We don't have any wealth,” Julian roared. “Our homes were destroyed. By you, for all I know --”

The man laughed loudly, smirking as he began to turn away. “You've got some time left. Think about the possibilities, and we'll talk again.” Julian tugged on the trigger. Just once.

Eighteen shells pierced the back of Blaine's head, then worked down the wide back, devastating every organ even as the lifeless body crumpled. Even a huge

man falls fast, Julian observed. Then he rose, walking on weak legs, and with his own aim, he emptied the rest of his clip into the gore. It was easy, pumping in those final shots.

What's more, shooting the dead carried an odd, unexpected satisfaction --which was probably the same satisfaction that the terrorists had felt when their tiny bomb destroyed a hundred million soulless machines.

With every refugee watching, Julian cut open the womb with laser shears. Julian Jr. was born a few seconds after two-thirty A.M., and the audience, desperate for a good celebration, nearly buried the baby with gifts and sweet words. Yet nobody could spoil him like his father could. For the next few hours, Julian pestered his first son with love and praise, working with a manic energy to fill every need, every whim. And his quest to be a perfect father only grew worse. The sun was beginning to show itself; Canada was waiting over the horizon; but Julian was oblivious, hunched over the toddler with sparkling toys in both hands, his never-pretty voice trying to sing a child's song, nothing half as important in this world as making his son giggle and smile...!

They weren't getting past the border. Their enemies were too clever, and too paranoid. Julian could smell the inevitable, but because he didn't know what else to do, he went through the motions of smiling for the President and the public, saying the usual brave words whenever it was demanded of him.

Sometimes Julian took his boy for long fides around the lifeboat. During one journey, a woman knelt and happily teased the baby, then looked up at the famous man, mentioning in an off-handed way, "We'll get to our new home just in time for him to grow into it."

Those words gnawed at Julian, although he was helpless to explain why. By then the sun had risen, its brilliant light sweeping across a sleepy border town. Instead of crossing at Detroit, the refugees had abandoned the Tollway, taking an old highway north to Port Huron. It would be easier here, was the logic. The prayer. Gazing out the universal window, Julian looked at the boarded up homes and abandoned businesses, cars parked and forgotten, weeds growing in every yard, every crack. The border cities had lost most of their people in the last year-plus, he recalled. It was too easy and too accepted, this business of crossing into a land where it was still legal to be remade. In another year, most of the United States would look this way, unless the government took more drastic measures such as closing its borders, or worse, invading its wrong-minded neighbors...!

Julian felt a deep chill, shuddering.

That's when he suddenly understood. Everything. And in the next few seconds, after much thought, he knew precisely what he had to do. Assuming there was still time...

A dozen cars were lined up in front of the customs station. The Buick had slipped in behind a couple on a motorcycle. Only one examination station was

open, and every traveler was required to first declare his intentions, then permanently give up his citizenship. It would be a long wait. The driver turned the engine off, watching the Marines and Tech officials at work, everything about them relentlessly professional. Three more cars pulled up behind him, including a Tokamak, and he happened to glance at the rearview screen when Blaine climbed out, walking with a genuine bounce, approaching on the right and rapping on the passenger window with one fat knuckle, then stooping down and smiling through the glass, proving that he had made a remarkable recovery since being murdered.

Julian unlocked the door for him.

With a heavy grunt, Blaine pulled himself in and shut the door, then gave his companion a quick wink.

Julian wasn't surprised. If anything, he was relieved, telling his companion, "I think I know what you are."

"Good," said Blaine. "And what do your friends think?"

"I don't know. I never told them." Julian took the steering wheel in both hands.

"I was afraid that if I did, they wouldn't believe me. They'd think I was crazy, and dangerous. And they wouldn't let me come here." The line was moving, jerking forward one car-length. Julian started the Buick and crept forward, then turned it off again.

With a genuine fondness, Blaine touched him on a shoulder, commenting, "Your friends might pull you

back into their world now. Have you thought of that?"

"Sure," said Julian. "But for the next few seconds, they'll be too confused to make any big decisions."

Lake Huron lay on Blaine's left, vast and deeply blue, and he studied the picket boats that dotted the water, bristling with lasers that did nothing but flip back and forth, back and forth, incinerating any flying object that appeared even remotely suspicious.

"So tell me," he asked his companion, "why do you think I'm here?" Julian turned his body, the cultured leather squeaking beneath him. Gesturing at Port Huron, he said, "If these trends continue, everything's going to look that way soon. Empty. Abandoned. Humans will have almost vanished from this world, which means that perhaps someone else could move in without too much trouble. They'll find houses, and good roads to drive on, and a communication system already in place. Readymade lives, and practically free for the taking."

"What sort of someone?"

"That's what suddenly occurred to me." Julian took a deep breath, then said,

"Humans are making themselves smaller, and faster. But what if something other than humans is doing the same thing? What if there's something in the universe that's huge, and very slow by human standards, but intelligent nonetheless. Maybe it lives in cold places between the stars. Maybe somewhere else. The point is, this other species is undergoing a similar kind of transformation. It's making itself a

thousand times smaller, and a thousand times quicker, which puts it roughly equal to this.” The frail face was smiling, and he lifted his hands from the wheel. “Flesh and blood, and bone... these are the high-technology materials that build your version of microchines!”

Blaine winked again, saying, “You’re probably right. If you’d explained it that way, your little friends would have labeled you insane.”

“But am I right?”

There was no reason to answer him directly. “What about me, Mr. Winemaster? How do you look at me?”

“You want to help us.” Julian suddenly winced, then shuddered. But he didn’t mention it, saying, “I assume that you have different abilities than we do...that you can get us past their sensors --”

“Is something wrong, Mr. Winemaster?”

“My friends...they’re trying to take control of this body...”

“Can you deal with them?”

“For another minute. I changed all the control codes.” Again, he winced. “You don’t want the government aware of you, right.” And you’re trying to help steer us and them away from war...during this period of transition --”

“The way we see it,” Blaine confessed, “the chance of a worldwide cataclysm is just about one in three, and worsening.”

Julian nodded, his face contorting in agony. “If I accept your help...?”

“Then I'll need yours.” He set a broad hand on Julian's neck. “You've done a remarkable job hiding yourselves. You and your friends are in this car, but my tools can't tell me where. Not without more time, at least. And that's time we don't have...”

Julian stiffened, his clothes instantly soaked with perspiration. Quietly, quickly, he said, “But if you're really a government agent...here to fool me into telling you...everything....?”

“I'm not,” Blaine promised.

A second examination station had just opened; people were maneuvering for position, leaving a gap in front of them.

Julian started his car, pulling forward. “If I do tell you...where we are...they'll think that I've betrayed them...!”

The Buick's anticollision system engaged, bringing them to an abrupt stop.

“Listen,” said Blaine. “You've got only a few seconds to decide --”

“I know...”

“Where, Mr. Winemaster? Where?”

“Julian,” he said, wincing again.

“Julian.”

A glint of pride showed in the eyes. “We're not...in the car...” Then the eyes grew enormous, and Julian tried shouting the answer...his mind suddenly losing its grip on that tiny, lovely mouth...

Blaine swung with his right fist, shattering a cheekbone with his first, blow, killing the body before

the last blow.

By the time the Marines had surrounded the car, its interior was painted with gore, and in horror, the soldiers watched as the madman --he couldn't be anything but insane --calmly rolled down his window and smiled with a blood-rimmed mouth, telling his audience, "I had to kill him. He's Satan." A hardened lieutenant looked in at the victim, torn open like a sack, and she shivered, moaning aloud for the poor man.

With perfect calm, Blaine declared, "I had to eat his heart. That's how you kill Satan. Don't you know?"

For disobeying orders, the President declared Julian a traitor, and she oversaw his trial and conviction. The entire process took less than a minute. His quarters were remodeled to serve as his prison cell. In the next ten minutes, three separate attempts were made on his life. Not everyone agreed with the court's sentence, it seemed. Which was understandable. Contact with the outside world had been lost the instant Winemaster died. The refugees and their lifeboat were lost in every kind of darkness. At any moment, the Tech specialists would throw them into a decontamination unit, and they would evaporate without warning. And all because they'd entrusted themselves to an old DNA-born human who never really wanted to be Transmuted in the first place, according to at least one of his former lovers...

Ostensibly for security reasons, Julian wasn't

permitted visitors. Not even his young son could be brought to him, nor was he allowed to see so much as a picture of the boy.

Julian spent his waking moments pacing back and forth in the dim light, trying to exhaust himself, then falling into a hard sleep, too tired to dream at all, if he was lucky...

Before the first hour was finished, he had lost all track of time. After nine full days of relentless isolation, the universe had shriveled until nothing existed but his cell, and him, his memories indistinguishable from fantasies.

On the tenth day, the cell door opened.

A young man stepped in, and with a stranger's voice, he said, "Father."

"Who are you?" asked Julian.

His son didn't answer, giving him the urgent news instead. "Mr. Blaine finally made contact with us, explaining what he is and what's happened so far, and what will happen...!"

Confusion wrestled with a fledging sense of relief.

"He's from between the stars, just like you guessed, Father. And he's been found insane for your murder. Though of course you're not dead. But the government believes there was a Julian Winemaster, and it's holding Blaine in a Detroit hospital, and he's holding us. His metabolism is augmenting our energy production, and when nobody's watching, he'll connect us with the outside world."

Julian couldn't imagine such a wild story: It had to

be true!

“When the world is safe, in a year or two, he'll act cured or he'll escape -whatever is necessary --and he'll carry us wherever we want to go.” The old man sat on his bed, suddenly exhausted.

“Where would you like to go, Father?”

“Out that door,” Julian managed. Then a wondrous thought took him by surprise, and he grinned, saying, “No, I want to be like Blaine was. I want to live between the stars, to be huge and cold, and slow...”

“Not today, maybe...”

“But soon...definitely soon...!”

X-Country

The new fellow never talked about himself much, and details came out in little dribbles. But he mentioned having once been a teenager in the hill country—a stretch of poor farms and limestone bluffs about an hour north of town. He had a favorite few tales about running cross-country for the local high school: His Phys Ed teacher first saw his potential and egged him into running competitively. Without training and with a naturally lousy sense of pace, the recruit managed to finish dead last for a desperately weak team. But after another year of growth and three thousand miles underfoot, he became a powerful Senior. Laughing at his own misfortunes, our new friend claimed that he could have enjoyed a spectacular year, except that on the eve of the season's first race he got a wicked case of shin splints and he didn't run another two steps until after the State Championship was in the books. Kip Logan was his name, as far as anybody can tell. A few of us—our most imaginative/paranoid citizens—still liked to dwell on the gaps and little question marks in his personal history. For instance, nobody felt quite sure where Kip was before he came to live with us, or what he did, or how he made his money. Nobody could remember him mentioning parents or any siblings of consequence, and nobody ever stepped forward to say yes, they knew him as a boy. But then again, doesn't

everybody have gaps and incongruities in their life story? Think about it: You would be hard-pressed to write the definitive biography of your very best friend. And Kip was never more than a close acquaintance to any of us. Besides, his hometown nearly died when its quarries were shut down, and a year later, the county consolidated its schools, boarding up his old high school in the process. Whoever Kip was, he always acted like a genuinely friendly fellow, throwing out big smiles while speaking to us with slow, pleasant tones. As a general rule, people didn't consider him particularly bright. But everybody has to wonder now. When we talk about him, we always seem to mention how careful he was. The man never boasted about his successes, and he never lectured to us, and I am the only person who can remember him knowing anything that you wouldn't think he would know. Even after a lifetime spent running, he happily claimed to be helpless when it came to calculating a reliable pace time.

Talking about himself, Kip Logan always used excessively humble tones. And frankly, his physical appearance helped this illusion of simplicity: He was tall and pretty-boy handsome, with long legs that carried a muscled body and a pair of shoulders far broader than typical for a quality distance runner. A lifetime of wind and sun had barely abused his skin, which was gold in the summer and ruddy-chalk in the depths of winter. His hair was thick and exceptionally blond. Yet he openly admitted that a portion of that

rich mane was artificial. Male-pattern baldness had cropped up a few years ago, and he'd patched the gaps with an implanted carpet. As for his age, I think it's safe to say that Kip looked like a youthful man-child of forty or forty-one. In other words, he was a spectacularly well-preserved creature greatly enjoying his middle fifties.

I've spoken to a few local race directors about old Kip. Entry forms have certain mandatory details: You supply your name and address, phone numbers and T-shirt size. And you have to admit your age on race day, plus give your date of birth. Why both figures are necessary, I'm not sure. Maybe it's to keep clumsy liars out of the mix. But I've studied a few of Kip's old entry forms, and in every case, the man was precisely twenty-three days younger than me. Whenever we raced, Kip beat me, and not just by a little bit. Which meant that he had a chokehold on our age group, plus all of the gift certificates and little gold-painted medals that come with that rarified distinction. Waivers are another common feature in race entries. And there is always a single line at the bottom where you supply your signature and the date. To what degree a waiver matters, I don't know. I've endured in some horrendously organized events, and if somebody had died because of the lousy traffic control or the lack of paramedics, I'm sure somebody else's ass would have been sued, regardless of any name scribbled as an afterthought.

For thirty-some years, I have run competitive

ances, and easily, Kip's waiver was the best that I've ever read:

“Cross country is a brutal sport meant for self-abusive personalities,” he wrote, “and I, the undersigned, am a major-league idiot for trying this damned thing. If anything bad should happen to me, and it probably will, I have nobody to blame but my stupid self. And with that in mind, I promise to expect the unexpected, and I will tolerate the miserable, and if I die on the course, I would prefer to be buried exactly where I fall....”

* * * *

Kip told it this way: After thirty-five years spent in other places, he came home again. By home, he didn't mean the town where he grew up, since that tiny crossroads had just about expired. No, he moved to our city, purchasing a baby mansion on the rich-person's boulevard. Paying for it in cash, one persistent rumor would claim. Where that money came from was always a puzzler. On occasion, Kip mentioned working overseas for some obscure Dutch corporation. Malaysia and Brazil played roles in the occasional aside. And more than once, he muttered a few words about investments in real estate and stocks, smiling in a beguiling fashion whenever he admitted, “My guesses did a little bit better than average.”

Kip was an immediate force in the local running scene. He entered every race at our end of the state, always placing among the top ten or fifteen males—a

tremendous achievement for a citizen who could see Social Security looming. He worked out with the fast groups as well as linking up with a few notable talents who usually trained by themselves. And he began showing up at track club meetings and our various social functions. During that first year, he simultaneously dated two young women—gazelles nearly as fast on their feet as he was. As for employment, Kip seemed to lack both the time and the need. He wasn't retired so much as he was incredibly busy with the disciplined life of an eternal athlete. Hard runs were woven around sessions in the weight room, plus he was a regular in both yoga and pilates classes. His diet was rich with nuts and green leaves, and he never drank more than half a beer. And where our local twenty-five-year-old stallions were a grim, brutally competitive lot, Kip seemed utterly at ease with himself. Wearing his boyish zest along with a killer wardrobe, he liked to drive around town in a BMW—a convertible, of course—waving at his many good acquaintances while the blond hair rippled in the wind.

I would confess to feeling envious of Kip, but “envy” doesn't do my complicated feelings justice.

And I liked the man. Always.

So far as I know, I was first to hear about Kip's cross-country race. He'd been living with us for nearly fourteen months. On Thursdays, half a dozen old dogs would meet up at Calley Lake to run tempos. It was two miles to the lap, and a good tempo is

supposed to be twenty seconds a mile slower than your honest 10K pace. Kip and I decided to do three miles. A lap and a half. He finished at least ninety seconds ahead of me. By the time I reached the mark, he was breathing normally, smiling happily, offering me a buoyant “Good job” as I staggered to a halt beside him.

It was a hot afternoon in May. I needed water, and he drank a little sip from the fountain, as if to be polite. Then we started trotting that last mile around the lake, heading back for the starting line and the younger forty-something runners who were already finishing their four miles.

Kip was capable of an innocent, almost goofy smile.

Something about the blue eyes and that endless grin made people believe there wasn't much inside his pretty-boy head. “A blond with implants,” was the often-heard joke. And his voice was usually slow and careful, as if his words needed to be examined, singly and together, before any sentence could be shown to the world.

“Don,” he said to me. “I'm thinking about holding a race.”

“Yeah?” I said.

“An X-country race.”

He said it that way. “X” as in the letter, and then “country.”

“Cross-country?” I asked.

He didn't say yes or no. Instead, he let his big smile

get bigger and the blue eyes dreamier, and staring off into the watery distance, he told me, “At my old stomping grounds. On the trails outside Enderville. What do you think?”

“When?”

“This October,” he said. “If there’s a free weekend.”

Our local marathon was at the beginning of November, and there was a tune-up 15K four weeks earlier. But those other weekends were probably available.

“Sounds like fun,” I allowed.

“I hope it sounds fun.” Then he glanced at me.

“You know, I just had an idea. Just this minute.”

I didn’t believe him. Something about his manner felt false. Although why that was and why I remember a detail like that, I don’t know. And besides, what did it matter when he actually dreamed up anything?

“I’ll have to map out a course,” he said.

I didn’t know the hill country. But I’d driven past it on occasion, and from the highway, those bluffs seemed brutally rough.

“Prize money,” he said. “What do you think?”

“It’s up to you.”

“As an incentive,” he explained.

“Are you going to run the race yourself?” I asked.

“I shouldn’t, no.” Laughing quietly, he pointed out, “I’ll have too much to do just running the finish line.”

That was welcome news. I told Kip, “Prize money would be an exceptionally good thing.”

“How much?”

“As much as you can afford,” I suggested, working hard to sound as if I might, just might, be kidding.

* * * *

Kip had a huge box of entry forms printed up, and he asked some of the quicker runners to help put them on windshields after the Sassafras 5K. I agreed, but as it happened, my right hip—my touchy hip—started hurting during the second mile, pulling me back into the middle of the pack. By the time I finished, I was limping, and by the time I found Kip, the chore was done.

“Ice,” Kip suggested, noting my rocking gait.

I nodded and then consciously ignored his advice. My little Hyundai had a piece of gold paper tucked under one wiper. “First Annual Hill-Hell Run,” it read. Unfolding it, I found the disclaimer and had a good laugh. Then I noticed the prize money, and my first thought was that my slow-witted buddy was an exceptionally bad proofreader.

“Oh, no,” he told me. “The amounts are correct.”

We were standing among the other finishers, watching the Sassafras Awards being handed out. Smacking the entry form with a fingertip, I asked, “Do you mean this? Two hundred dollars cash for an age-group winner?”

He shrugged. “I want runners at my starting line.”

“Oh, you’re going to have them,” I said. “And two thousand dollars for winning the whole show?”

He flashed a big smile my way. Maybe I’m remembering it wrong, but something was lurking in

those eyes—a sharpness revealed for a half-instant—and then his expression instantly turned back to beach-boy simple.

“Two grand?” I repeated. “With prize money to tenth place?”

Shrugging, Kip pointed out, “There won’t be any double awards, so the wealth’s going to be shared.”

In other words, the top ten finishers, male and female, would be yanked from age-group consideration. Of course two hundred dollars wouldn’t make any difference in my life. But the idea of winning that tidy sum for being the fastest fifty-something ... well, it was a delicious promise. I was still grinning when the Sassafras race director called out Kip’s name. Once again, he had won our age-group, and for his achievement, Kip earned the privilege of walking up front to receive a coin-sized medal dangling on the end of a cheap ribbon, plus a gift certificate for fifteen dollars off his next pair of running shoes. What made the moment memorable was the audience: A sudden silence descended, followed by a few quiet whispers. Then the applause came, but it wasn’t the light, polite applause that follows pleasantly contrived moments like these. What I heard was hard clapping accompanied by shouts, one of the young stallions throwing his arms high in the air, calling out, “Kipper! Kip, my man! My buddy! Kip, Kipper!”

* * * *

My hip improved, and I started building my

mileage again. But old bodies don't relish sudden change or too much ambition. I sputtered in early September, and then managed a brief recovery. But my comeback collapsed during the fifth mile of the Classic 15K. My hip was screaming, and for the first time in thirty years, I gave up, accepting a humiliating ride back to the finish line. The next morning, I saw the first in a series of increasingly expensive doctors, ending up sitting on the end of an exam table while an expert on joint disease—a young woman barely in her thirties—calmly explained what was wrong with me and what she proposed to do about it.

“Titanium,” I heard, followed by the words, “You are a lucky man.”

“Lucky? How?” I asked.

“Our new hips are quite reliable,” she promised. “Under normal conditions, you can expect twenty or thirty years of use. And of course there's always the chance that new materials will come onto the market. Bioceramics. Or perhaps, living hips grown from your own bone tissue.”

“I'm fifty-three.”

But she didn't understand my point. With a professional grin and minimal charm, she explained, “We don't need to operate in the near-future. Anti-inflammatories and a change of habits should delay surgery for a year, perhaps eighteen months. Depending on your personal tolerances, of course.”

“I am fifty-three years old,” I repeated.

She blinked. “Pardon—?”

“I’ll never run again,” I blurted. “That’s what you’re telling me. Maybe we’ll be growing hips like corn in another twenty years, but by then, I’ll be in my seventies and desperately out of shape.”

“Oh, but you’ll still be able to ride a bike and swim, and you can use a low-impact exercise machinery, within limits.”

“I know old runners with artificial joints,” I said. “They always try to bike and swim. But they gain weight anyway, and they lose their fitness, and regardless of age, they become fat old people.”

The doctor had no canned answers at the ready. She looked at the bright screen before her, studying an assortment of images of naked bones and a single decaying socket. Then with fingers to her lips, she added, “You know, Don ... other than this one sad hip, you’re in excellent condition for a gentleman of your age....”

* * * *

Upon hearing my news, runners had a standard reaction. Surprise and uncamouflaged horror swept across their faces, and probably feeling aches inside their own hips, they would blurt the same reflexive words.

“You’ll be back.”

Their hope was delivered with an identical tone of voice, reflexively optimistic and minimally informed. The only exception was Kip. Watching my limping approach, he pointed out, “You’ve got a hitch in your

giddy-up.” And when he heard my plight, he didn’t wince or even touch his own hip. He was immune to my pain, nodding while assuring me, “It could be worse news, of course.”

“Worse how?” I asked.

But that was too obvious to say. Putting on his pretty-boy smile, Kip said,

“But then again, who knows what the future holds?”

* * * *

I had already entered Kip’s race. But as a rule, I hate standing by, watching runners in action. I’ve always been a creature of motion; at least that’s what my personal mythology claims. And several times, Kip assured me that he didn’t need help. He’d already laid out his course through the forested bluffs, painting the trails with orange arrows and setting up stations at four key points. Runners would search for coolers of water and buckets full of numbered Popsicle sticks. Four sticks had to be retrieved, brought back in order to prove that the full route had been conquered. Everyone would carry a map, and since he’d closed off entries at five hundred, he still had plenty of time left to make race bibs and see to any other last-minute details.

“So you don’t want my help?” I asked.

The smile was bright and imbecilic. Quietly, he conceded, “I don’t need it. But I suppose you could pull race tags, if too many bodies come in too fast.”

I woke up that morning believing that I’d find

something else to do. But after coffee, I was driving north, eventually passing through a tiny river-bottom hamlet where an old brick high school stood empty. A handmade sign had been set up three miles past Enderville. “Hill-Hell Run,” it said, pointing me toward the bluffs. Cars were parked up and down a country road. I had to turn around and take one of the last slots. Limping, I slowly covered a quarter-mile of loose gravel, ending up where an abandoned farmstead stood in a bowl-shaped valley, surrounded on three sides by steep limestone hills and mature forest. By then, the runners had gathered behind a long white line, faces stared at a wall of oaks and ash trees that were turning color after the first cold nights of the season. Every other hand was holding a slip of gold paper—the promised maps. “Good luck to you,” Kip shouted. Then he clapped two boards together, and the youngest runners threw themselves into a desperate sprint, fighting to be first into the towering woods.

When five hundred runners vanish, the silence can be unnerving. I limped my way over to my friend. He offered me a little wink and one of two folding chairs waiting next to a large digital clock and a second, much shorter strip of white paint.

“The finish line?” I asked.

He nodded, adding, “The finishers come in from there.” He was pointing in the opposite direction from where the pack had gone.

“Have a spare map?”

“On the table,” he said.

A row of shoeboxes was on top of a small folding table, each box empty except for two or three unused race packets. I fished out my own packet and glanced at my bib number—8—then opened the accompanying map. The racecourse was shown as a thin red line lain over the photocopy of a topographic map. Four times, the runner would move out to a distant station, pick up his Popsicle stick and then come back again. The race headed upriver and then came back again, the second leg following a snaking tributary. Then it returned again, taking an entirely different path upriver; and down it came again, the final station waiting on the outskirts of Enderville. The entire course created a long, flattened X. And what impressed me was how exceptionally complicated every leg looked: I was sitting there, calm and rested. Yet I was having trouble following all the loops and side loops and the dozen or so places where trails crossed one another. Very quietly, I asked Kip, “What is all this?”

“My course map,” he replied.

The smile hadn't left his face.

“You're serious,” I said. And when he didn't rise to defend himself, I asked,

“What did people say about this map?”

“Many words. Not many of them complimentary.”

I could imagine the scene.

“But as I explained it to the runners, there's plenty of help along the way. I marked the course. Where the

trails cross, I put down arrows. Easy to see, very easy to follow.”

“While racing?” I asked.

The smile brightened even more.

“If I was running at full speed,” I said, “charging through the woods, in the shadows, up and down hills ... and then I came to this intersection.... “I pointed at a tangle of lines. “Which way would I go?”

“It depends,” he said.

“On what?”

“Well, you would have to follow the first arrow that I painted.”

I stared at Kip for a long while. From high in the hills, we heard yelling and then an incoherent young voice, male and furious. That’s when I finally asked, “How would I know which arrow was the first arrow?”

Kip didn’t answer.

“Are they different colors? Are they labeled? What?”

But he didn’t seem particularly interested in the topic. Standing up abruptly, he turned. I hadn’t heard any noise, but he must have. To somebody still not visible, he said, “Over here. I’m over here.”

One of his ex-girlfriends emerged from the shadows. Half our age and perfectly fit, she was lovely and she was fuming. With a voice verging on a scream, she reported, “There’s barely a trail up there. Kip? Kip? I thought you had this all figured out.”

To her and to me, he said, “I do.”

“Bullshit,” she told him.

He said nothing.

Then one of the young stallions emerged from the opposite end of the clearing. “Hey, Kipper,” he began, one hand wiping at a ragged cut on his bloody forearm. “People are wandering around everywhere, Kipper. They’re lost, and they’re pissed. It’s a mess up there!”

The race director shrugged his broad shoulders. Then he sat down again, and the two competitors turned back into the trees. A few more curses drifted over us, wandering in from random directions. Finally Kip turned to me, still smiling, saying,

“X,” with a soft, careful voice.

“Huh?” I muttered.

“In mathematics,” he told me, “it is the symbol for quantities unknown.”

I offered a weak nod. Nothing more.

“Do you know why?” He winked, explaining, “That great old mathematician, Descartes, wrote *La Gomtrie*. His original manuscript was full of equations using $a, b,$ and c for what is known. While $x, y,$ and z represented mystery numbers. But when the book was being typeset, the printer didn’t have enough of y s and z s for all of the equations. So he mostly used the x , which is where the time-honored convention first began.”

I said, “Huh,” again.

“X,” he said, making crossed line in the grass between his feet. “The symbol is one of the first

marks made by any child, if only by accident. And it surely must have been one of the earliest geometric forms drawn by ancient hominids. Don't you think so?"

"I guess—"

"On a treasure map, doesn't the X lead us to the pirates' chest?" Kip glanced at me, asking, "More than anything, what would you like to find? If you had a shovel and map, I mean. If you could dig deep and uncover any possible wonder...?"

I hesitated. Suddenly I was sitting with a person I didn't know, his language and smart voice taking me by surprise. In vain, I tried to conjure up some worthy response. Or better, I wanted to find some way to ask my friend to explain his sudden, unique transformation.

But there wasn't time. Moments later, half a dozen runners plunged out into the open. They were coming from a third direction—a line of scrawny people bathed in sweat and adrenaline. Judging by their body language, the angriest member had claimed the task of trotting up to Kip. "Will you give us some help here?" he cried out. "This isn't fair."

Kip took off his smile. Underneath his chair was a gray metal box. He calmly opened it and reached in, removing six twenty-dollar bills. "Fifteen for the entry fee, and five dollars for your gas and trouble. Does that sound fair?"

The runners stopped short. One woman had a deep gash on her knee, while the man in back looked as if

he had fallen down an entire hillside. They glanced at each other, measuring moods. Then each took the offered bill and started jogging back to their cars.

Waiting inside that box were twin stacks of new twenties. Kip had come here knowing exactly what would happen, and he was ready for it. I don't know what startled me more: That this elaborate disaster had been anticipated, or that this man with whom I had run for more than a year had suddenly shown me an interest in, if not a true talent for, mathematics, and perhaps for skills that were even stranger.

* * * *

Four hundred and eighty-seven runners had started the race, and remarkably, nearly seventy of them eventually returned to the finish line, each having delivered the necessary four Popsicle sticks marked with their bib number. But even among those finishers, there were controversies and sour looks. The fastest runner in the group—a twenty-three-year-old ex-University star—had gotten profoundly lost. He'd circled Enderville at least twice before stumbling over the last station, and by the time he sprinted home, he won nothing but second place in his age group and sixty-fifth overall.

"This isn't right," he chanted throughout the awards ceremony. The first male was a stocky fellow in his middle forties—a self-made expert in tracking and wilderness survival who admitted that he had ignored the various game trails that Kip had used, preferring to follow his instincts overland. The top

woman was his eleven-year-old daughter—a bright beaming girl more thrilled by the silver trophy than by any bland check for a thousand dollars. From what I could tell, speed had nothing to do with the finishing order. Luck was what mattered. And persistence. Maturity was also a positive, since the majority of the finishers were my age or older—back-of-the-pack joggers who attacked the course as a morning-long adventure.

One graybeard held a rag to his face, mopping up the blood streaming from a tangle of thorn cuts. “You’re the lucky one,” he told me. “You didn’t have to go up there.”

I was feeling lucky, but only to a point.

“Next year?” asked the male champion. “Is there going to be a Second Annual Hill-Hell Run?”

But Kip never quite replied. He looked at us, his brain probably formulating an empty answer, and then half a hundred voices screamed together, everyone laughing painfully, begging, “No way, please God, no!”

After that, like gas under pressure, everyone dispersed. Kip crammed his gear into the little BMW—everything, that is, but the cooler and buckets of Popsicle sticks—and then he drove me back to my car.

“Thanks for the help, Don,” he told me.

I tried to find encouraging words. But the man didn’t act concerned about how he looked to the world. He was smiling like a maniac, and all I could

think of saying was, “Later.”

With a last little wink, he lied to me. “Soon,” he said. And with a little wave and a flash of blond hair, Kip was gone.

* * * *

I drove home, leaving my athletic life in storage.

Over those next days and weeks, with my hip aching and the rest of my body feeling ancient, I considered what kind of treasure I’d like to dig up on a tropical beach. A new hip, sure, and maybe a couple new legs too. And then, almost against my will, I discovered that the average day is full of fertile time when you cannot run. What astonished me most was how quickly I grew accustomed to being crippled and how much I looked forward to my doctors’ appointments. I planned to ride my bike during the November marathon, but it was a cold, raw morning, and I overslept, waking up late and without a hint of regret. The Monday paper had the usual stories about the race. But the big story, at least for me, was in the Tuesday paper: One of our local runners had felt sick before the marathon, but he ran anyway. He was a big fellow whom I knew by name—one of the top ten finishers at Kip’s race. With a terrific bellyache, he managed to chug and walk his way up to the boulevard between the three-and four-mile marks. As it happened, the top cardiac surgeon in the state was standing on his front lawn, sipping green tea while cheering on the competitors, and the foolhardy runner staggered to a halt in front of him and

collapsed, stricken with a massive coronary. If the man had dropped a block earlier or a block later, he would have died. But the surgeon did everything perfectly, and the runner was in the hospital, but he was going to survive his stupidity. Accompanying the article was a photograph of that very unlikely place where an appointment with death had been missed. Kip's baby mansion was standing in the background. And sitting on the front lawn, plain to see, was a For Sale By Owner sign, over which somebody had painted the single word: sold.

* * * *

Kip Logan had moved away and nobody knew just where. But the general assumption, at least among the running community, was that he had been so embarrassed by his fiasco that moving was the least awful solution, followed closely by a tidy suicide.

Except I knew that Kip hadn't been embarrassed. Much less mortified or wracked by any appealing sense of guilt.

The annual track club meeting came in January, and with a sense that this might be the last time, I went to eat pizza and boast about old glories. Everybody seemed pleased to see me, and everybody seemed distracted. At first, I was a little bit hurt by the collective indifference. Few asked about my hip, and no one thought to throw any casual encouragement my way. The subject of the evening was one of Kip's ex-girlfriends. On Christmas, she ate too much and got sick, and when she went to her

doctor, a routine test identified that she was suffering from routine food poisoning as well as a profoundly cancerous liver.

A mere week later, a healthy donor liver was found, and the transplant was a complete success.

“She was lucky,” said everybody sitting at my table, and presumably everybody at every other table too.

The man on my right asked, “If she hadn’t gotten sick when she did, what would have happened?”

We nodded grimly, knowing her likely fate.

Then without understanding the full significance, I mentioned, “You know, she ran Kip’s race.” Both of his ex-girlfriends had competed, but she wasn’t the angry one. In the end, she had finished as the fifth-place woman, pocketing five hundred dollars and keeping her four Popsicle sticks as a memento.

Nodding, I mentioned to everyone in earshot, “This is a funny, strange coincidence.”

Most of them didn’t see my point.

I reminded them about the heart attack on the marathon, and then pointed out,

“Two people have had their lives spared. By luck. And both of them happened to have finished the Hill-Hell Run.”

Uneasy laughter turned to paranoid silence.

Then someone up the table named the father-daughter who won the race. And with a sad tone, she added, “I don’t know if you’d call it luck, what happened to them....”

“What happened?” I asked.

The graybeard across from me leaned closer. “His wife, her mom ... she was killed in a big wreck last week. Out on the Interstate.”

A vague memory tugged.

“Their car was crushed between semis,” he told me.

I remembered news footage showing a twisted and mangled Jeep. Then another voice called out, telling us, “They were there too. He was driving, and his daughter was sitting behind him—”

The room was falling silent.

“Both walked away from the crash. The mom was dead, but they were unharmed. That’s what I heard. Barely a mark on either one of them.”

* * * *

It took another four weeks for me to make up my mind. And even then, I was playing games with myself. I drove up north with the intention of poking around Enderville, talking to the last of the locals and perhaps seeing if I could look at any of the old school records. Did a boy named Kip Logan ever attend that high school?

I wanted to find out. Or was the whole business just one elaborate lie, told by somebody I would never see again?

During the drive, all sorts of wild speculations occurred to me. But when I hit Main Street, I realized that I really didn’t care if Kip Logan was real. It was still early in the morning. A dusting of fresh snow had fallen on six inches of old stuff. I drove past the

empty high school and upriver to the equally empty farmstead, parking as close to the starting line as possible. Then I put on the last pair of running shoes that I'd ever buy, and I fixed a belt around my waist, little bottles full of water and Gatorade. I put on the race bib that had been sitting on the car floor for these last months. That might just matter; who knew? And with a mangled copy of the unreadable map in my hand, I limped my way to the starting line.