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WATCHING LEAR DREAM

AT NIGHT SAMUEL SAT beside his old friend Lear and watched him dream, Lear's dreams manifested in the air above his prone and twisting figure, malformed creatures and almost familiar people and half-living machines that threatened to become fully substantial and take on strange and complicated lives of their own in this world. Samuel, too, had once dreamed dreams like these.

But now he kept watch over his old friend. Kept watch over Lear's dreams. And destroyed those dreams.

Samuel and Lear. They were the last of their kind.

Samuel acted as a gatekeeper, human Cerberus, guarding the natural world from the supernatural. Doing so, he kept Lear alive. Watching over him, preventing the old man's dreams from becoming primed realities loosed and wreaking havoc upon the world, he held back the executioner's axe. As long as Samuel kept Lear's dreams at bay, DivCom allowed Lear to live.

Lear had once been a DivCom hero. So, too, had Samuel, and the other twenty-seven like them. They had dreamed into existence strange and powerful creatures and superhuman beings, incredible living weapons and organic star-jumping ships, and then, in full control of their creations, directed them against the invading forces of an alien civilization that attacked them from somewhere near the heart of the Milky Way. And they had triumphed.

But the others were all dead now, most of them killed during the conflict, others by accident or old age; two by suicide. Only Samuel and Lear remained, and they were no longer needed, the conflict years ended, no other foreseen. They would have been useless even if needed -- Samuel had no more dreams, and Lear had lost all control of his own. Neither was a hero anymore.

For years Samuel kept watch over Lear, fought Lear's dreams, and dispatched every one. For years.

Until the day Lear dreamed Teresa back to life.

DivCom had settled the two of them on a sparsely inhabited world, almost primitive, habitable but lacking exploitable resources. Set them up in a small house several kilometers upstream from a village that straddled a swiftly flowing river which poured over stones and crashed around boulders as it came

out of the dark and craggy mountains. Another hundred and fifty kilometers further downstream, the river -- much wider and slower by that point -- emptied into a vast inland sea. Neither Samuel nor Lear had ever seen the inland sea, and Samuel was certain they never would. He and Lear would live out the rest of their lives in this house, never going much farther than the village. They would die here.

Three people stayed with them at the house, two men and a woman provided by DivCom to cook and clean and garden and maintain the house, to accompany Samuel and Lear on shopping trips into the village -- for food and supplies, books and music, clothing and news capsules B and to go with them on those occasions when Lear felt the need to spend an afternoon or evening or both in the local tavern drinking himself into a stupor.

The day Lear dreamed Teresa back to life, Samuel was down by the river, dozing in the shade of a dense tree. The summer air was still and hot, but in the shade, so close to the river, it was cool. Samuel was half asleep, and he was almost dreaming.

A normal dream, a human dream, one that would never manifest in the air above him, never threaten to come to life. Fragmented and incoherent, the dream images overlaid the thick and leafy branches above him: red and orange flames, a black vehicle on fire in the snow And then he realized Lear was inside the vehicle, screaming through the flames and the black smoke and Samuel knew Lear would be burned alive...

The flames scattered, Lear's face dissolved, then coalesced into Carpentier staring down at him.

"Wake up!" Carpentier was saying. A member of the DivCom contingent, he did most of the cooking and cleaning a bit of gardening. Errand boy.

Samuel blinked, pushed at Carpentier's arm. "Go away," he said. He wanted his dream back, even the awful dream of Lear burning alive. Any dream.

"It's Lear," Carpentier said. "He's dreaming."

"Now?"

"Now." Nodding his head. "He wanted to take a nap." A shrug. "He's an old man."

Then so am I, thought Samuel. Yet it was somehow more true of Lear.

"Hurry!" Carpentier insisted.

But there was no hurry. Samuel got slowly to his feet, brushed leaves from his legs and arms. It was quite possible that Lear's dream creations would fade of their own accord, but even if they didn't, they would need to manifest for several hours before they became difficult to dispatch.

He followed Carpentier back to the house, his head swimming in the heat. Dust puffed up at his feet, and the electric buzz of insect-like creatures oscillated around him like a fan that provided no relief. Samuel walked slowly, eyes half closed, vision bleached, ignoring Carpentier's urgings. He was so tired, of everything.

When they reached the house, Carpentier remained outside with the others -- Arturo Langley and Rashida Gamel, both of whom pretended to be occupied with outdoor chores. All three of DivCom's people were afraid of Lear's dreams.

Samuel climbed the creaking wooden steps and stood for a few moments in the shade of the large covered porch, readying himself for what he would have to do inside. The house was quiet, the air surrounding it still and just as quiet except for the electric buzz and the hesitant sounds of the DivCom people moving about. He didn't want to go in. He didn't want to do this anymore. But he opened the door and stepped inside.

Inside the house wasn't much cooler, though he could feel the air moving about him, blown by the small, whirring fans in every room. He walked through the entry and down the hall, then stopped outside Lear's room and listened for sounds of the old man's dreaming. Nothing, really --the whisper of sheets, a faint huff of breath. Samuel entered.

He stopped, unable to move.

He had been prepared for almost anything but this.

Life-size, and almost life-like, she hovered in the air above the bed: Teresa.

Teresa had been Lear's wife. And Samuel had betrayed his old friend with her. Together, Samuel and Teresa had both betrayed him.

She was not yet aware of him. It would be an hour or two, maybe longer, before she became substantial enough. Samuel stood just inside Lear's door, watching her. She was talking to someone inside the dream, Lear probably, and her smile didn't seem a happy one; she looked as if she was about to cry.

She looked so young. No older than the day she had died, perhaps even younger, while Lear and Samuel had of course aged. She was wearing loose tan pants and a white short-sleeved shirt, leather sandals on feet still vague and blurred; long

sandy hair that shimmered around her face. Then she brought her hand up and tugged at her hair in a gesture so painfully familiar it made Samuel's heart ache.

He knew what he should do. He should dispatch her right now, before this all went too far. And if he couldn't bring himself to do that, then he should wake Lear, as dangerous as that could be for both of them, and hope his waking would destroy her. But he did neither.

He left the room, carefully closing the door. As he came out of the house he went over to Carpentier and Rashida; Arturo was off a ways, watching them.

"Stay out of the house," Samuel said. "This is going to be a difficult one."

Rashida opened her mouth, but Samuel cut her off before she could say a word. "Everything will be fine," he said. "I'll be back in a little while, when I'm prepared. Just stay out of the house."

Then he turned away from them and headed back toward the river.

He sat on the grassy riverbank, gazing into the swirling white and silver-blue water. The rapids were strong here, but he didn't think they were unnavigable. He wondered about a boat, a canoe, finding one somewhere nearby, maybe down in the village. Then he could risk the river, the rocks and the whirlpools, the heat and the insects and the DivCom people who would come after him once they realized he had gone, once they realized what he had left behind. He could take the boat all the way to the inland sea, and from there...

It wasn't Teresa. He knew that. A simulacrum, an imperfect, incomplete doppelganger. It was only a thing, unliving and in a way unreal, at least for now.

The last time he had seen Teresa she had been dying...and then dead. He and Lear had both been with her, waiting for her last breath, the last beat of her heart. She had died from a vicious bacterial infection, her pain and mind dulled by analgesics and tropo-opiates. Suffusing her face, though, was an expression that suggested to Samuel a real sense of peace -- she was already gone from this world, and was content with that.

But now she was back.

TWO HOURS LATER he returned to the house. The DivCom contingent was still outside, waiting for him. Carpentier approached, but Samuel glared at the man until he backed away without a word.

Just outside Lear's room Samuel stopped and stared at his hands. They were trembling. He felt the trembling all through his body.

He opened the door. Lear was still asleep. Teresa sat on the edge of the bed, her gaze unfocused, but as Samuel entered the room she turned and looked at him, eyes widening.

"Samuel?" Her voice was warped and distorted, as if she was speaking through metallic water.

He didn't reply. Something about her silently snapped into focus, a solidification, a sharpening of resolution, and she was completely there.

"Samuel?" she said again. This time her voice was almost normal, almost Teresa's.

He still didn't reply. She stood and walked toward him, then reached out and touched his arm with warm dry fingers, and he shivered inside, his chest collapsing in on itself.

"Samuel," she said for the third time, but now there was no question.

Finally his volition returned, along with breath and pulse.

"Yes," he said.

She touched him again and he stepped back.

"Do you know who you are?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. I'm Teresa. Don't you know who you are, Samuel?" And she smiled.

"Do you know what you are?"

Her smile faded, but she nodded. "I am one of Lear's dreams." She paused, breathing deeply. "But I am still Teresa."

Samuel shook his head, so slowly it seemed the room was moving from side to side. "No. You are only the Teresa that he imagines you are. Or were. Or the Teresa he wanted you to be."

This time it was her turn to shake her head. "You're wrong, Samuel. I am everything he knows about me, whether he liked it or not. He can't change his own knowledge of me."

"It's not that simple. Besides, there were so many things about you that he could never have known. That only you knew. Or I knew. Things that you can't know about yourself because he never knew them."

"Then help me, Samuel. Help me to become me. Tell me the things that you know, that Lear never knew."

He turned away from her. This was insane. He needed to bring her under control, and dispatch her before it became too difficult. Except that it was already too difficult.

"Samuel. What would you tell me about myself? What would you tell me that Lear doesn't know?"

He was looking across Lear's sleeping body and out the small window, gazing at the fruit trees behind the house. The reddish-orange fruit, in clusters of three or four tiny spheres, was almost ripe. Another few days and the bitterness would be gone and the fruit would be sweet, the thick juice cool and refreshing.

"You were his wife," Samuel said without looking at her. "He was your husband. But I loved you too."

"He knows that, Samuel."

Yes, he thought, of course he does. But there was so much more. He turned back to her. "But what he didn't know was that you loved me as well." He paused, his stomach folding, clutching at itself. "And we betrayed him."

"He knows that, too," she said.

"He knows?"

Teresa nodded. "I know, and so he must know."

Samuel was too stunned to reply. He looked again at Lear, at the closed eyes and open mouth. His old friend.

"Come," Samuel said. He turned and walked out of the room, and Teresa followed.

He led the way to his own room. It seemed so stark and empty to him now. He hesitated for a few moments, then went to the small closet and opened the door.

"You'll have to stay in here until dark," he said. "They'll try to destroy you if they find out you're still..." What word? "...alive," he finished.

"They might not be able to," she said. And there was something hard and defiant

in her voice.

"That's true," he replied. "But they'll try. And they'll kill me, and they'll kill Lear."

She stared at him, as though trying to decide something. "All right," she said, nodding. "And then what?"

"I don't know."

She let out a quiet but harsh laugh and shook her head, but didn't say anything more. They made a place for her to sit in the closet, a nest of his clothing. When she was settled in, he shut the closet door, then walked out of the house and onto the front porch. The three DivCom people were waiting for him.

"It's done," he said.

"Something's wrong." Lear spoke quietly, almost hushed. He looked and sounded confused.

"What?" Samuel asked.

Lear just shook his head. Somehow he looked even older this evening, old and/rail and lost.

They were eating out on the front porch, the sky mottled with bits of dark crimson, remnants of a sunset long gone. Samuel could see the flickering lights of the village downslope in the distance, and he thought about the walk there in the dark he'd never made before, the one he would have to make later this night.

"A dream I had," Lear finally said.

"What dream?" Breath catching.

Lear shook his head again. There was pain now in the pale blue eyes almost hidden beneath furrowed gray brows. "I can't remember. It's... it's..." The old man's mouth trembled and he blinked his eyes. "Gone," he eventually said, a strange grieving in his voice.

No, Samuel thought. But there was nothing he could say.

They remained on the porch, drinking coffee as complete darkness fell and the stars emerged bright and cool, both of the men lost and confused each in his own private way.

He should have been watching Lear. Lear slept again, tossing fitfully in the hot

darkness of his room, more disturbed than usual. But no dreams formed in the air above him, and Samuel returned to his own room.

Teresa was waiting for him, the closet door already open, her eyes aglow in the night. He motioned for silence, and for her to follow him.

Carpentier and Arturo were sleeping, but Rashida was on watch, walking about both inside the house and out. Samuel had her route worked out, and just as Rashida was coming back inside he led Teresa out the back door and around the side of the house, into the small grove of fruit trees. The scent of the fruit hung delicately in the warm night air. The stars provided just enough light for them to make out their footing, and they moved quickly through the trees.

Once they were out of the grove they worked their way across a stretch of rocky ground to the road, which roughly followed the course of the river down to the village.

"Where are you taking me?" Teresa asked.

"There's a village downstream," he told her. "We'll find a room for you, a place to stay for a few days."

She didn't ask him any more questions, which surprised him, but he was grateful for that. He didn't think he would have had any more answers.

They walked in silence, but her presence enveloped him, as if there was some electrochemical quality to her that charged the air, penetrating his skin. And maybe there was, because of what she was.

As they approached the village, the nearly silent whisper of a breeze and the gurgling of water gave way to the sounds of humanity -- voices, faint music, the rumble of motors and clink of glass, cracking, loud hissing -- and trees and bushes were replaced by low, scattered buildings and vehicles and lights. A few people were out on the streets walking or pedaling wheeled carts and cycles, and occasionally a motorized vehicle went by, engine incredibly quiet.

The first place they tried, an inn, was full for the night, but further on was a tavern where Lear liked to drink. Behind it, facing the river, were several night rooms. Samuel and Teresa went through the crowded, music-filled tavern and into the back office, where they talked to Marissa. There was a room available on the second floor, and Samuel paid for five nights with local money.

The room was surprisingly quiet, and overlooked the river; the moving water flashed up at them, scales of silver and amber and red. There was a floorbed, a table and chairs, private bath, a balcony. Teresa sat on the end of the bed, but

when Samuel walked out onto the balcony, she got up and went with him.

He looked up at the night sky. Besides the stars there was only a tiny, distant moon high in the east, hardly more than a small bright coin in the sky. The only moon this world had. He'd been on worlds with large, almost brilliant moons that, when they were full, lit the night almost like day. He missed that. He missed the roar and the pressure of ships rising from a launch field taking him into space. He missed the sight of a vast, densely populated city at night as he descended over it, the combination of moving and stationary colored lights giving the impression of a living organism pulsing in the dark. He missed so much, but he especially missed the woman whose simulacrum stood beside him now.

She almost smelled like Teresa.

"Stay with me tonight, Samuel."

He turned to her, and her eyes were bright, almost glowing. Maybe they were glowing, some strange effect that resulted from her creation. How could he stay with her She wasn't really Teresa, she wasn't really human.

"Stay with me," she said again.

How could he not? Samuel put his arms around her, feeling his breath catch and his heart hesitate, and pulled her tightly to him.

He slept lightly and fitfully, always at least partially aware of her presence beside him, even as he slept. And for the first time in years he dreamed intensely, dreams so vivid and overwhelming it seemed they would never end.

In the morning they ate breakfast at a small outdoor cafe on the river. Strong hot coffee, fresh rolls and fresh fruit, thick pieces of sweet cheese. The river was quieter in the early morning light, and comforting.

She wasn't Teresa. He knew that now even more than before. But she was close enough. If this went on for long, the differences would become unimportant. No, that wasn't right. The differences were already unimportant; eventually they would cease to exist for him.

"What do we do now?" she asked. She was smiling, as if it didn't matter what he answered. As if she already had something in mind.

"I don't know."

And now she laughed. There was something reckless about her. Teresa, too, had been reckless; it was one of the things that had attracted him to her. If it had

been up to him to take the initiative, their affair would never have begun.

"I'd better get back," he told her. He handed her the rest of his local money. "Get what you need, clothes, food, whatever. If you need more money, I'll get it." It was easier to think about practical matters.

"When will you be back?" she asked.

"It won't be easy. Late afternoon, if I can."

She reached across the table, took his hand in hers, and gently rubbed his fingers while looking directly at him. Those eyes, still glowing even in the light of day. Samuel finally got up, reluctantly pulled his hand away, and left.

No one seemed to have noticed that he'd been gone all night. Rashida asked him where he'd been, and when he said he'd gone into the village for breakfast, that satisfied her.

Lear, apparently, had not dreamed anything new into existence during the night, but he still seemed disturbed and confused. "Walk with me," he said to Samuel.

They walked through the grove of fruit trees, side by side in silence for a while, two old friends with long lives between them. Samuel could already feel the guilt beginning to settle into him, and he knew that, just as before, the guilt would not stop him. Other things might, but not the guilt.

"I feel lost," Lear said. "Something's happened, and I don't know what it is. I feel as if a piece has been carved out of me and devoured." He looked at Samuel and smiled, shaking his head. "I know, I sound like a madman."

Samuel shrugged. He still didn't know what to say to his old friend. There was a wooden bench under the largest of the fruit trees, and Lear led the way to it. He dropped onto the bench with a heavy sigh, and Samuel sat beside him. Lear tipped his head back and gazed up through the leaf- and fruit-filled branches, gazed up at tiny windows of aquamarine sky.

"I miss her," Lear said.

"Who?"

"Teresa. I still miss her after all these years." He lowered his gaze and looked off in the direction of the river, though they couldn't see it from here. "I've been thinking about her a lot."

Which was no surprise to Samuel. But he didn't say anything.

"Do you miss her?" Lear asked, turning to look at him.

Samuel wondered if guilt could appear on his face or in his eyes; would Lear even recognize it if it did?

"Sometimes," he said.

Lear nodded. He continued to stare at Samuel, as though waiting for him to say something, or perhaps trying to come to some decision. But Samuel said nothing, and eventually Lear just shook his head and looked away.

"I want to be alone," Lear said.

Samuel got up, feeling somehow even guiltier than ever, and walked away, leaving his old friend behind.

As he neared the village, Samuel had to fight the urge to break into a run. He was a young man again, heart and mind battling each other, love and betrayal rekindled, and somehow he didn't care that she wasn't really Teresa, that she was an organic dream creation of the man he was betraying once again. And he couldn't believe he was doing this.

When he arrived at the room, she wasn't there, and panic kicked in. He hurried into the tavern, but she wasn't there, either. Frantic, he ran out into the street, gaze jumping back and forth, whipping about in all directions, but there was still no sign of her anywhere.

He leaned against a wall and closed his eyes, forced himself to calm down and relax. She had to be somewhere nearby. The village wasn't that big, and she could take care of herself, probably better than he could. He opened his eyes and set off down the street, searching for her.

HE FOUND HER across the river at the village airfield. She was sitting in the makeshift open air terminal, watching a small jumper plane preparing for takeoff. He sat beside her, and she took his hand in hers; her skin was warm and dry and her touch was almost electric.

"Let's go away," she said, not looking at him, still watching the plane. "We can take a jumper to Aleron City and the space port, then we get a ship off this world and start over again somewhere. Without Lear, without the DivCom people." She turned to him, eyes sparkling with her smile. "Just the two of us, Samuel."

He started to ask her if she was serious, but he knew she was. So he just shook his head, a strange fear growing inside him.

"I can't," he said. "They won't let me leave this place. They certainly won't let me leave this world."

"We'll find a way." Spoken with absolute certainty.

"It's not that simple."

"It is," she said. "If you want it. We'll find a way."

"What about Lear? They'll kill him."

"No, they won't." But there wasn't the certainty in her voice this time, and she looked away from him. "They'll figure out something else. Drugs, maybe, to keep him from dreaming. Something like that."

Samuel shook his head.

"There's no other way," she said. "You have to realize that. How long will it be before they discover what's happened? Before someone finds out about me?" She turned back to him. "I love you, Samuel, and if you love me...." But she left it unfinished.

He looked into her eyes, deep into those dark and shining eyes, and had no answer for her.

He spent the days with Teresa, and the nights with Lear.

Leading two lives again, as he had so many years ago, and knowing that this time it couldn't go on for very long before something disastrous occurred. But knowing that didn't change a thing.

"Teresa is alive!" Lear staggered up the steps of the front porch, flushed and out of breath. He held onto the railing for support and said, "She's alive."

Samuel didn't respond. Fear caught his breath. Could Lear really have seen her?

Still breathing hard, his gray hair wild about his head, Lear pushed away from the railing and sat across the table from Samuel. Sweat rolled from his forehead, but his eyes glittered with life and madness. He picked up Samuel's iced drink, brought it to his mouth, and drained the entire glass. He set the glass down, dug out some ice and pressed it against his face.

"She was in the village," he finally said. "I saw her."

"It couldn't be," Samuel said. "Someone who looked like Teresa, that's all."

Teresa's dead."

"No." Lear shook his head, adamant.

"We saw her die, remember? We were there."

"No," Lear said again. "I called out her name and she turned, and when she saw me her face lit up and she said my name. She knew me." He paused, confusion distorting his expression. "Then she suddenly seemed frightened, and she ran off into the crowds. I tried to follow, but I lost her."

"You're imagining things, my old friend." Samuel leaned forward and looked steadily into Lear's eyes. "We both lost her years ago." And immediately regretted saying it, knowing it was exactly the wrong thing to say.

Lear's expression darkened. He stood slowly, gaze never leaving Samuel. "Still the same," he said. "You can't stand it. You never had her to lose. She was mine. She's alive, 'old friend.' And you won't have her this time, either."

He turned away and hobbled down the porch steps, back into the heat and the sun, leaving Samuel alone and afraid.

"Why did you answer him?" Samuel asked.

They were sitting at the table inside her room, drinking coffee, watching and listening to the afternoon thundershower that did little to ease the day's heat.

"It was an automatic response," she answered, not looking at him. "My name being called out like that, I just reacted."

"No," he said. "You can't get away with that. He told me that you saw him, then called out his name."

Her head came around fast and she glared at him with angry defiance. "He's my husband."

"He's not...." But then Samuel stopped. What was the point? It didn't matter what he said to her, she would do and say and think as she wanted. And she refused to believe that she wasn't as much Teresa as the real Teresa had been.

"He's old," Samuel said, "and his mind doesn't work right anymore, but he'll figure it out."

"Figure what out?" she asked, still defiant, daring him to say it.

"What you are."

And then a smile appeared, joining the defiance. "And what am I, Samuel?" When he didn't answer, she got up and went to him, took his hands in hers and pulled him to his feet, then led him to the bed. "Who am I, Samuel?"

"Teresa," he whispered, and wrapped his arms around her, breathing deeply of her scent which only intensified as he felt her lips on his neck and cheek, her hands gripping his shoulder and back. "Teresa."

Samuel sat out on the balcony, gaze only vaguely focused on the water rushing past below him, the swirl and spray almost hypnotic. Teresa was asleep in the room, and he thought he could feel that electric buzz of her presence even out here.

I'm losing control, he thought to himself. And then almost laughed aloud at the absurdity. He'd never really had any control over what was happening now. Not one bit since Lear had dreamed her back to life.

He looked into the room through the open doorway. Teresa, sprawled naked on top of the bed, seemed perfectly at ease, unconcerned about a thing. She would leave soon. With or without him, she would leave.

He returned his gaze to the river. The heat from the sun overhead baked all energy from his limbs. Which was, he thought, as it should be. There was nothing he could do but wait for it to happen.

He sat on the porch in the afternoon heat, a strip of sun on his bare ankles, almost burning his skin. He was drinking iced coffee and reading, and he was waiting for Lear to return from the village. He set the book down and gazed along the path that led to the road, but there were no signs of Lear.

Rashida Gamel came out of the house and stood next to the table, looking down on Samuel.

"I don't like this," she said.

"What?"

"Lear's excursions into the village. Something's going on, and I don't like it. Especially since he always insists on going alone."

Samuel shook his head. "But you always send Carpentier or Arturo to follow him, don't you? You know where he goes, what he does. He's not trying to 'escape,' is he?"

"We don't know what he's doing. He seems to be searching for something. Or someone."

"Ask him," Samuel suggested.

"I have. He doesn't answer."

Samuel smiled, though he was certain that would annoy her. "He's an old man," he said. As if that would somehow explain it all.

Rashida frowned at him, but didn't say anything more. Something caught her attention and she looked toward the road. Samuel followed her gaze and saw Lear shuffling along the roadway, looking tired and dejected. Lear turned up the path, dust kicking up from his feet, and walked toward them. When he reached the porch he climbed the steps without once looking at Rashida or Samuel, then went into the house.

Rashida remained on the porch until Arturo appeared on the road. As he came up the path he looked at Rashida and shrugged, shaking his head. Then he, too, climbed the porch steps and went inside.

"I don't like it," Rashida said once again. Then she turned and followed the others into the house.

HALF AN HOUR later, Samuel was on the road to the village, and so preoccupied he hardly noticed his surroundings. Rashida worried him. Her suspicions would probably never be allayed, and he suspected it wouldn't be long before she had Arturo or Carpentier following him as well. And Lear worried him, with his foul moods and his own suspicions, his daily trips into the village searching for Teresa. Samuel had warned her, but he didn't trust her to be careful. Right now everything worried him, particularly since it seemed there was nothing he could do about any of it.

Dark, heavy clouds scudded in overhead, bringing with them a damp and electric feel to the air. There was a silent, generalized flash sheeting across the clouds, then a few seconds later came a crash of thunder that rumbled quickly away. A few seconds more, and the rain started.

He was on the outskirts of the village, and he broke into a halting trot, hugging the few scattered buildings, stopping for a few moments whenever there was complete shelter and catching his breath before plunging back into the rain. He found it all strangely exhilarating.

He was soaking wet by the time he reached the tavern, where he finally slowed to a walk as he went around back. As he climbed the stairs to the second floor, the

rain let up a little, became a drizzle washing across his face; he stopped outside Teresa's door and, tilting his head back, opened his mouth to the water.

He was still standing like that when Teresa opened the door. She smiled. "Look at you," she said. Then she took his arm and gently pulled him inside.

In the bathroom, he took off all his clothes and hung them in the shower, then dried off with towels, wrapping one around his waist like a skirt. He looked at himself in the mirror, suddenly dismayed. I'm an old man, too. The hair on his chest was almost completely white, coarse and kinked; the outline of his ribcage was distinct; and the skin under his neck was beginning to sag. Deep lines fanned out from his eyes.

What did she see in him? He had no idea.

When he came out of the bathroom, Teresa had coffee ready, made in a small steamer she'd bought. She handed a cup to him and said, "We need to talk."

An ache mushroomed in his chest, then dropped into his gut, but he nodded. They went out onto the balcony, which was sheltered from the rain, and sat facing each other. Samuel drank from his coffee, then set it under the chair.

"What is it?" he asked her.

Teresa shook her head. "The same thing, Samuel. We can't keep this going. Lear coming into the village every day looking for me. You coming later, for just a few hours, then going back to keep watch over his dreams. It's time, Samuel."

He didn't answer. He knew she was right, but he still didn't know what to do. The choice was simple enough.

"I'm leaving," she said. "I have to, Samuel. I can't stay here any longer. Not in this town, not on this world. This isn't the life I want, the life I need. And I can't risk it any longer, that DivCom will find out about me. You said it before, they'll try to destroy me if they know." She paused. "So I'm leaving. I want you with me, Samuel. But if you choose to stay, I'll go without you."

He knew she wasn't bluffing, and he knew she was right to go. The risks were growing every day, and there was little they could do about them.

"What are you going to do, Samuel?"

Thunder cracked and rumbled, but he hadn't seen the lightning. The rain intensified again, becoming a darker, louder curtain between the balcony and the river.

"I don't know," he finally said.

"You have to decide," she told him. "Today. Before you leave." She drank slowly from her coffee, as though savoring it. "I won't be here tomorrow."

A simple choice. Go with Teresa, or stay with Lear.

What would DivCom do if he went? As long as they didn't know about Teresa, they might just let him go. But what would they do to Lear?

Samuel looked out through the pouring rain at the river gone almost completely gray, only hints of pale blue occasionally winking up at him from the water.

What did he owe Lear? What did he owe to this woman, this Teresa simulacrum who only existed because of what he hadn't done? And what did he owe to himself?

The front door opened and Lear staggered into the room. His hair was wet and wild about his head and his eyes were just as wild, shifting crazily from side to side until he saw Teresa and Samuel out on the balcony. Samuel stared at Lear through the open doorway as if the old man were an apparition, not quite believing Lear had found them, and yet not quite surprised either.

Lear slowly crossed the room and stopped in the doorway, looking back and forth between Teresa and Samuel. Teresa set her coffee at her feet and stood, gazing steadily at Lear. Samuel remained seated -- not out of paralysis, but more out of a strange inertia, as though all of this no longer had much to do with him. This was between Lear and Teresa now.

"I knew you were alive," Lear said.

"Yes," Teresa replied. "I'm alive."

"All this time..." Lear shook his head as he spoke, and Samuel wondered what Lear meant--did he really think Teresa had been alive all these years? "All this time," Lear continued, "you were with him."

"Yes."

"Just like before."

"Yes."

Lear turned to Samuel. "I knew before," he said. "I knew, but I loved you almost as much as I loved her, and so I said...nothing. I let it go on, even though it was tearing me up inside. I let it go on because...because...." He shook his

head again, then reared it backward, letting out a loud, chopped laugh. He lowered his head and gazed out at the river. "Because I was a fool."

No one said anything for a long time. A faint flash washed across the gray-black clouds, and it was several seconds before a quiet rumble reached them.

"Storm's moving on," Lear said. Then he looked at Teresa. "I won't be a fool this time," he told her.

"You will always be a fool," Teresa said. And Samuel thought she was as mad as Lear.

"No," Lear responded. "Not this time." Then he cocked his head, staring as if he'd just noticed something about her for the first time.

Samuel grew suddenly afraid, and the fear shivered through him.

"I know what you are," Lear eventually said. He turned to Samuel. "You let her live."

Samuel didn't reply. He tried to stand, but now found himself unable to move. Everything was out of his control.

Turning back to Teresa, Lear said, "I won't let this happen again."

"You don't have any choice," she told him, that defiance in her voice, dating him.

"This time you're wrong," he said.

And then Samuel knew what Lear was going to do. The fear notched up inside him and he abruptly stood, knocking over his chair and kicking his coffee over the edge of the balcony. But it was too late.

Teresa, too, seemed to realize what Lear was going to do, and she stepped back, but there was nowhere for her to go.

Lear lunged and wrapped his arms around her. They crashed against the balcony railing, and for a moment Samuel thought the two of them were going over, but Lear managed to pull back from the railing while maintaining his hold on Teresa. She struggled in his arms, twisting and squirming, but he was too strong. If anything, Lear tightened his hold on her.

A glow appeared between Teresa and Lear, shimmering wherever their bodies made contact. As Samuel stepped forward, sparks began to arc out from the glow with

tiny crackling sounds. He reached out to grab Lear, intending to pull him away from her, but he was knocked backward by a tremendous jolt, like energy fields explosively repelling each other.

He lost consciousness. Probably only for a few seconds. When he came to, he was on his back, staring up at the overhang that sheltered the balcony from the worst of the storm; scattered raindrops blew in across his face.

He raised his head and saw Teresa still struggling, still without success. The glow intensified and the sparking increased. Lear held on, mouth open and teeth bared, his eyes almost luminescent within the shimmering glow that now surrounded the two of them.

Suddenly Teresa stopped struggling. She hung limply in Lear's arms, and turned to Samuel. She had that expression on her face once again, the one from the earlier time she was dying -- acceptance and peace, a readiness to leave this world.

But Samuel wasn't ready for her to leave. He struggled to his feet and watched in a shattering grief as she turned back to Lear and embraced him. She screamed once, and burst into a cascading shower of sparks, like a human fireworks display. Lear, too, screamed, and arms flailing he fell backward into the room.

Silence. Silence and smoke and the stench of burned flesh.

She was gone.

No, not silence. There was still the rain, spattering on the overhang, hissing into the river.

Samuel looked over at the spot Where they had struggled, searching for signs of her -- a piece of charred clothing, or a sandal, a ring, something...anything. But there was nothing, and he thought he could feel his heart coming apart.

When he finally could move again, he stepped into the room and looked down at Lear. The old man's flesh was singed in several places, but he had managed to pull himself to his hands and knees. He looked up at Samuel for a moment, then leaned back on his haunches, buried his face in his hands and began to sob.

Samuel walked past him without a word, went into the bathroom and put on his cold, damp clothes. Then he came out, crossed the room without looking at Lear, and stepped outside. The rain was lighter now, warm and misting, creating a hushed quiet in the air. He pulled the door closed behind him, then started down the stairs.

The canoe drifted near the middle of the river, the slow, wide current taking him toward the inland sea. The sun was low in the western sky to his left, but the day was still hot. Samuel held the wide-bladed oar across his knees and watched the makeshift piers slip past him on his right as he continued to drift downstream. There was a town here at the mouth of the river, but he wouldn't stop; he needed to go farther.

Would he have gone with her? He still didn't know the answer to that question, and suspected he never would, but he was content with that, and he didn't think a lot about it anymore. He didn't think much about Lear, either, and what DivCom might have done to him. The old man was either still alive, or he wasn't. It didn't concern Samuel anymore.

The canoe bobbed in the water as the river met the gentle swells of the inland sea. Directly ahead of him, as far as he could see, was a vast expanse of water, tiny wavelets flashing golden orange and red reflections of the sun into his eyes. Another world, another life, it seemed, was out there for him. There were, he understood, small towns and villages scattered all along the shores of the sea. One of them would be the right place for him, the right place to stop.

As he drifted past the spit of land that marked the boundary of river and sea, he saw a few boats out in the water, others pulled up on the beach, and people on shore, some apparently watching him. He dug his oar into the water and headed east, away from the setting sun.