

Deep Eddy

Bruce Sterling

The Continental gentleman in the next beanbag offered "Zigaretten?"

"What's in it?" Deep Eddy asked. The gray-haired gentleman murmured something: polysyllabic medical German. Eddy's translation program crashed at once.

Eddy gently declined. The gentleman shook a cigarette from the pack, twisted its tip, and huffed at it. A sharp perfume arose, like coffee struck by lightning.

The elderly European brightened swiftly. He flipped open a newspad, tapped through its menu, and began alertly scanning a German business zine.

Deep Eddy killed his translation program, switched spexware, and scanned the man. The gentleman was broadcasting a business bio. His name was Peter Liebling, he was from Bremen, he was ninety years old, he was an official with a European lumber firm. His hobbies were backgammon and collecting antique phone-cards. He looked pretty young for ninety. He probably had some unusual and interesting medical syndromes.

Herr Liebling glanced up, annoyed at Eddy's computer-assisted gaze. Eddy dropped his spex back onto their neck-chain. A practiced gesture, one Deep Eddy used a lot—*hey, didn't mean to stare, pal*. A lot of people were suspicious of spex. Most people had no idea of the profound capacities of spexware. Most people still didn't use spex. Most people were, in a word, losers.

Eddy lurched up within his baby-blue beanbag and gazed out the aircraft window. Chattanooga, Tennessee. Bright white ceramic air-control towers, distant wine-colored office blocks, and a million dark green trees. Tarmac heated gently in the summer morning. Eddy lifted his spex again to check a silent take-off westward by a white-and-red Asian jet. Infrared turbulence gushed from its distant engines. Deep Eddy loved infrared. That deep silent magical whirl of invisible heat, the breath of industry.

People underestimated Chattanooga, Deep Eddy thought with a local boy's pride. Chattanooga had a very high per-capita investment in spexware. In fact Chattanooga ranked third-highest in NAFTA. Number One was San Jose, California (naturally), and Number Two was Madison, Wisconsin.

Eddy had already traveled to both those rival cities, in the service of his Chattanooga users group, to swap some spexware, market a little info, and make a careful study of the local scene. To collect some competitive intelligence. To spy around, not to put too fine a point on it.

Eddy's most recent business trip had been five drunken days at a blowout All-NAFTA spexware conference in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. Eddy had not yet figured out why Ciudad Juarez, a once-dreary maquilladora factory town on the Rio Grande, had gone completely hog-wild for spexing. But even little kids there had spex, brightly speckly throwaway kid-stuff with just a couple dozen meg. There were tottering grannies with spex. Security cops with spex mounted right into their riot helmets. Billboards everywhere that couldn't be read without spex. And thousands of hustling industry zudes with airconditioned jackets and forty or fifty terabytes mounted right at the bridge of the nose. Ciudad Juarez was in the grip of rampant spexmania. Maybe it was all the lithium in their water.

Today, duty called Deep Eddy to Düsseldorf in Europe. Duty did not have to call very hard to get Eddy's attention. The mere whisper of duty was enough to dislodge Deep Eddy, who still lived with his parents,

Bob and Lisa.

He'd gotten some spexmail and a package from the president of the local chapter. *A network obligation; our group credibility depends on you, Eddy. A delivery job. Don't let us down; do whatever it takes. And keep your eyes covered—this one could be dangerous.* Well, danger and Deep Eddy were fast friends. Throwing up tequila and ephedrine through your nose in an alley in Mexico, while wearing a pair of computer-assisted glasses worth as much as a car—now that was dangerous. Most people would be scared to try something like that. Most people couldn't master their own insecurities. Most people were too scared to live.

This would be Deep Eddy's first adult trip to Europe. At the age of nine he'd accompanied Bob and Lisa to Madrid for a Sexual Deliberation conference, but all he remembered from that trip was a boring weekend of bad television and incomprehensible tomato-soaked food. Düsseldorf, however, sounded like real and genuine fun. The trip was probably even worth getting up at 07:15.

Eddy dabbed at his raw eyelids with a saline-soaked wipey. Eddy was getting a first-class case of eyeball-burn off his spex; or maybe it was just sleeplessness. He'd spent a very late and highly frustrating night with his current girlfriend, Djudia. He'd dated her hoping for a hero's farewell, hinting broadly that he might be beaten or killed by sinister European underground networking-mavens, but his presentation hadn't washed at all. Instead of some sustained and attentive frolic, he'd gotten only a somber four-hour lecture about the emotional center in Djudia's life: collecting Japanese glassware.

As his jet gently lifted from the Chattanooga tarmac, Deep Eddy was struck with a sudden, instinctive, gut-level conviction of Djudia's essential counter-productivity. Djudia was just no good for him. Those clear eyes, the tilted nose, the sexy sprinkle of tattoo across her right cheekbone. Lovely flare of her body-heat in darkness. The lank strands of dark hair that turned crisp and wavy halfway down their length. A girl shouldn't have such great hair and so many tats and still be so tightly wrapped. Djudia was no real friend of his at all.

The jet climbed steadily, crossing the shining waters of the Tennessee. Outside Eddy's window, the long ductile wings bent and rippled with dainty, tightly controlled antiturbulence. The cabin itself felt as steady as a Mississippi lumber barge, but the computer-assisted wings, under spex-analysis, resembled a vibrating sawblade. Nerve-racking. *Let this not be the day a whole bunch of Chattanoogaans fall out of the sky*, Eddy thought silently, squirming a bit in the luscious embrace of his beanbag.

He gazed about the cabin at his fellow candidates for swift mass death. Three hundred people or so, the European and NAFTA jet-bourgeoisie; well-groomed, polite. Nobody looked frightened. Sprawling there in their pastel beanbags, chatting, hooking fiber-optics to palmtops and laptops, browsing through newspads, making videophone-calls. Just as if they were at home, or maybe in a very crowded cylindrical hotel lobby, all of them in blank and deliberate ignorance of the fact that they were zipping through midair supported by nothing but plasmajets and computation. Most people were so unaware. One software glitch somewhere, a missed decimal point, and those cleverly ductile wings would tear right the hell off. Sure, it didn't happen often. But it happened sometimes.

Deep Eddy wondered glumly if his own demise would even make the top of the newspad. It'd be in there all right, but probably hyperlinked five or six layers down.

The five-year-old in the beanbag behind Eddy entered a paroxysm of childish fear and glee. "My e-mail, Mom!" the kid chirped with desperate enthusiasm, bouncing up and down. "Mom! Mom, my *e-mail!* Hey Mom, get me my e-mail!"

A stew offered Eddy breakfast. He had a bowl of muesli and half-a-dozen boiled prunes. Then he broke

out his travel card and ordered a mimosa. The booze didn't make him feel any more alert, though, so he ordered two more mimosas. Then he fell asleep.

Customs in Düsseldorf was awash. Summer tourists were pouring into the city like some vast migratory shoal of sardines. The people from outside Europe—from NAFTA, from the Sphere, from the South—were a tiny minority, though, compared to the vast intra-European traffic, who breezed through Customs completely unimpeded.

Uniformed inspectors were spexing the NAFTA and South baggage, presumably for guns or explosives, but their clunky government-issue spex looked a good five years out-of-date. Deep Eddy passed through the Customs chute without incident and had his passchip stamped. Passing out drunk on champagne and orange juice, then snoozing through the entire Atlantic crossing, had clearly been an excellent idea. It was 21:00 local time and Eddy felt quite alert and rested. Clearheaded. Ready for anything. Hungry.

Eddy wandered toward the icons signaling ground transport. A stocky woman in a bulky brown jacket stepped into his path. He stopped short. "Mr. Edward Dertouzas," she said.

"Right," Eddy said, dropping his bag. They stared at one another, spex to spex. "Actually, fraulein, as I'm sure you can see by my on-line bio, my friends call me Eddy. Deep Eddy, mostly."

"I'm not your friend, Mr. Dertouzas. I am your security escort. I'm called Sardelle today." Sardelle stooped and hefted his travel bag. Her head came about to his shoulder.

Deep Eddy's German translator, which he had restored to life, placed a yellow subtitle at the lower rim of his spex. "Sardelle," he noted.

"*Anchovy*'?" "I don't pick the code names," Sardelle told him, irritated. "I have to use what the company gives me." She heaved her way through the crowd, jolting people aside with deft jabs of Eddy's travel bag. Sardelle wore a bulky airconditioned brown trenchcoat, with multipocketed fawn-colored jeans and thicksoled black-and-white cop shoes. A crisp trio of small tattooed triangles outlined Sardelle's right cheek. Her hands, attractively small and dainty, were gloved in black-and-white pinstripe. She looked about thirty. No problem. He liked mature women. Maturity gave depth.

Eddy scanned her for bio data. "Sardelle," the spex read unhelpfully. Absolutely nothing else; no business, no employer, no address, no age, no interests, no hobbies, no personal ads. Europeans were rather weird about privacy. Then again, maybe Sardelle's lack of proper annotation had something to do with her business life.

Eddy looked down at his own hands, twitched bare fingers over a virtual menu in midair, and switched to some rude spexware he'd mail-ordered from Tijuana. Something of a legend in the spexing biz, X-Spex stripped people's clothing off and extrapolated the flesh beneath it in a full-color visual simulation. Sardelle, however, was so decked-out in waistbelts, holsters, and shoulderpads that the Xware was baffled. The simulation looked alarmingly bogus, her breasts and shoulders waggling like drug-addled plasticine.

"Hurry out," she suggested sternly. "I mean hurry up."

"Where we going? To see the Critic?"

"In time," Sardelle said. Eddy followed her through the stomping, shuffling, heaving crowd to a set of travel lockers.

"Do you really need this bag, sir?"

"What?" Eddy said. "Sure I do! It's got all my stuff in it."

"If we take it, I will have to search it carefully," Sardelle informed him patiently. "Let's place your bag in this locker, and you can retrieve it when you leave Europe." She offered him a small gray handbag with the logo of a Berlin luxury hotel. "Here are some standard travel necessities."

"They scanned my bag in Customs," Eddy said. "I'm clean, really. Customs was a walk-through."

Sardelle laughed briefly and sarcastically. "One million people coming to Düsseldorf this weekend," she said. "There will be a Wende here. And you think the Customs searched you properly? Believe me, Edward. You have not been searched properly."

"That sounds a bit menacing," Eddy said.

"A proper search takes a lot of time. Some threats to safety are tiny—things woven into clothing, glued to the skin. . . ." Sardelle shrugged. "I like to have time. I'll pay you to have some time. Do you need money, Edward?"

"No," Eddy said, startled. "I mean, yeah. Sure I need money, who doesn't? But I have a travel card from my people. From CAPCLUG." She glanced up sharply, aiming the spex at him. "Who is Kapklug?"

"Computer-Assisted Perception Civil Liberties Users Group," Eddy said. "Chattanooga Chapter."

"I see. The acronym in English." Sardelle frowned. "I hate all acronyms. . . . Edward, I will pay you forty ecu cash to put your bag into this locker and take this bag instead."

"Sold," Deep Eddy said. "Where's the money?"

Sardelle passed him four wellworn hologram bills. Eddy stuffed the cash in his pocket. Then he opened his own bag and retrieved an elderly hardbound book—*Crowds and Power*, by Elias Canetti. "A little light reading," he said unconvincingly.

"Let me see that book," Sardelle insisted. She leafed through the book rapidly, scanning pages with her pinstriped fingertips, flexing the covers and checking the book's binding, presumably for inserted razors, poisoned needles, or strips of plastic explosive. "You are smuggling data," she concluded sourly, handing it back.

"That's what we live for in CAPCLUG," Eddy told her, peeking at her over his spex and winking. He slipped the book into the gray hotel bag and zipped it. Then he heaved his own bag into the travel locker, slammed the door and removed the numbered key.

"Give me that key," Sardelle said.

"Why?"

"You might return and open the locker. If I keep the key, that security risk is much reduced."

"No way," Eddy frowned. "Forget it."

"Ten ecu," she offered.

"Mmmmph."

"Fifteen."

"Okay, have it your way." Eddy gave her the key. "Don't lose it." Sardelle, unsmiling, put the key into a zippered sleeve pocket. "I never lose things." She opened her wallet.

Eddy nodded, pocketing a hologram ten and five singles. Very attractive currency, the ecu. The ten had a hologram of Rene Descartes, a very deep zude who looked impressively French and rational.

Eddy felt he was doing pretty well by this, so far. In point of fact there wasn't anything in the bag he really needed: his underwear, spare jeans, tickets, business cards, dress shirts, tie, suspenders, spare shoes, toothbrush, aspirin, instant expresso, sewing kit, and earrings. So what? It wasn't as if she'd asked him to give up his spex.

He also had a complete crush on his escort. The name Anchovy suited her—she struck him as a small canned cold fish. Eddy found this perversely attractive. In fact he found her so attractive that he was having a hard time standing still and breathing normally. He really liked the way she carried her stripe-gloved hands, deft and feminine and mysteriously European, but mostly it was her hair. Long, light reddish-brown, and meticulously braided by machine. He loved women's hair when it was machine-braided. They couldn't seem to catch the fashion quite right in NAFTA. Sardelle's hair looked like a rusted mass of museum-quality chain-mail, or maybe some fantastically convoluted railway intersection. Hair that really *meant business*. Not only did Sardelle have not a hair out of place, but any unkemptness was *topologically impossible*. The vision rose unbidden of running his fingers through it in the dark.

"I'm starving," he announced.

"Then we will eat," she said. They headed for the exit.

Electric taxis were trying, without much success, to staunch the spreading hemorrhage of tourists. Sardelle clawed at the air with her pinstriped fingers. Adjusting invisible spex menus. She seemed to be casting the evil eye on a nearby family group of Italians, who reacted with scarcely concealed alarm. "We can walk to a city bus-stop," she told him. "It's quicker."

"Walking's quicker?"

Sardelle took off. He had to hurry to keep up. "Listen to me, Edward. If you follow my security suggestions, we will save time. If I save my time, then you will make money. If you make me work harder I will not be so generous."

"I'm easy," Eddy protested. Her cop-shoes seemed to have some kind of computational cushion built into the soles; she walked as if mounted on springs. "I'm here to meet the Cultural Critic. An audience with him. I have a delivery for him. You know that, right?"

"It's the book?"

Eddy hefted the gray hotel-bag. "Yeah. . . . I'm here in Düsseldorf to deliver an old book to some European intellectual. Actually, to give the book back to him. He, like, lent the book to the CAPCLUG Steering Committee, and it's time to give it back. How tough can that job be?"

"Probably not very tough," Sardelle said calmly. "But strange things happen during a Wende."

Eddy nodded soberly. "Wendes are very interesting phenomena. CAPCLUG is studying Wendes. We might like to throw one some day." "That's not how Wendes happen, Eddy. You don't 'throw' a Wende." Sardelle paused, considering. "A Wende throws you."

"So I gather," Eddy said. "I've been reading his work, you know. The Cultural Critic. It's deep work, I like it."

Sardelle was indifferent. "I'm not one of his partisans. I'm just employed to guard him." She conjured up another menu. "What kind of food do you like? Chinese? Thai? Eritrean?"

"How about German food?"

Sardelle laughed. "We Germans never eat German food. . . . There are very good Japanese cafes in Düsseldorf. Tokyo people fly here for the salmon. And the anchovies. . . ."

"You live here in Düsseldorf, Anchovy?"

"I live everywhere in Europe, Deep Eddy." Her voice fell. "Any city with a screen in front of it. . . . And they all have screens in Europe." "Sounds fun. You want to trade some spexware?"

"No."

"You don't believe in *andwendungsorientierte wissensverarbeitung*?"

She made a face. "How clever of you to learn an appropriate German phrase. Speak English, Eddy. Your accent is truly terrible." "Thank you kindly," Eddy said.

"You can't trade wares with me, Eddy, don't be silly. I would not give my security spexware to civilian Yankee hacker-boys."

"Don't own the copyright, huh?"

"There's that too." She shrugged, and smiled.

They were out of the airport now, walking south. Silent steady flow of electric traffic down Flughafenstrasse. The twilight air smelled of little white roses. They crossed at a traffic light. The German semiotics of ads and street-signs began to press with gentle culture-shock at the surface of Deep Eddy's brain. Garagenhof. Spezialist fur Mobil-Telefon. Burohausern. He put on some character-recognition ware to do translation, but the instant doubling of the words all around him only made him feel schizophrenic.

They took shelter in a lit bus kiosk, along with a pair of heavily tattooed gays toting grocery bags. A video-ad built into the side of the kiosk advertised German-language e-mail editors.

As Sardelle stood patiently, in silence, Eddy examined her closely for the first time. There was something odd and indefinitely European about the line of her nose. "Let's be friends, Sardelle. I'll take off my spex if you take off your spex."

"Maybe later," she said.

Eddy laughed. "You should get to know me. I'm a fun guy." "I already know you."

An overcrowded bus passed. Its riders had festooned the robot bus with banners and mounted a klaxon on its roof, which emitted a cacophony of rapidfire bongo music.

"The Wende people are already hitting the buses," Sardelle noted sourly, shifting on her feet as if trampling grapes. "I hope we can get downtown."

"You've done some snooping on me, huh? Credit records and such? Was it interesting?"

Sardelle frowned. "It's my business to research records. I did nothing illegal. All by the book."

"No offense taken," Eddy said, spreading his hands. "But you must have learned I'm harmless. Let's unwrap a little."

Sardelle sighed. "I learned that you are an unmarried male, age eighteen-to-thirty-five. No steady job. No steady home. No wife, no children. Radical political leanings. Travels often. Your demographics are very high-risk."

"I'm twenty-two, to be exact." Eddy noticed that Sardelle showed no reaction to this announcement, but the two eavesdropping gays seemed quite interested. He smiled nonchalantly. "I'm here to network, that's all. Friend-of-a-friend situation. Actually, I'm pretty sure I share your client's politics. As far as I can figure his politics out."

"Politics don't matter," Sardelle said, bored and impatient. "I'm not concerned with politics. Men in your age group commit 80 percent of all violent crimes."

One of the gays spoke up suddenly, in heavily accented English. "Hey fraulein. We also have 80 percent of the charm!"

"And 90 percent of the fun," said his companion. "It's Wende time, Yankee boy. Come with us and we'll do some crimes." He laughed. "*Das ist sehr nett vohn Ihnen*," Eddy said politely. "But I can't. I'm with nursie."

The first gay made a witty and highly idiomatic reply in German, to the effect, apparently, that he liked boys who wore sunglasses after dark, but Eddy needed more tattoos.

Eddy, having finished reading subtitles in midair, touched the single small black circle on his cheekbone. "Don't you like my solitaire? It's rather sinister in its reticence, don't you think?"

He'd lost them; they only looked puzzled.

A bus arrived.

"This will do," Sardelle announced. She fed the bus a ticket-chip and Eddy followed her on board. The bus was crowded, but the crowd seemed gentle; mostly Euro-Japanese out for a night on the town. They took a beanbag together in the back.

It had grown quite dark now. They floated down the street with machine-guided precision and a smooth dreamlike detachment. Eddy felt the spell of travel overcome him; the basic mammalian thrill of a live creature plucked up and dropped like a supersonic ghost on the far side of the planet. Another time, another place: whatever vast set of unlikelihoods had militated against his presence here had been defeated. A Friday night in Düsseldorf, July 13, 2035. The time was 22:10. The very specificity seemed magical.

He glanced at Sardelle again, grinning gleefully, and suddenly saw her for what she was. A burdened female functionary sitting stiffly in the back of a bus.

"Where are we now, exactly?" he said.

"We are on Danzigerstrasse heading south to the Altstadt," Sardelle said. "The old town center."

"Yeah? What's there?"

"Kartoffel. Beer. Schnitzel. Things for you to eat."

The bus stopped and crowd of stomping, shoving rowdies got on. Across the street, a trio of police were struggling with a broken traffic securicam. The cops were wearing full-body pink riot-gear. He'd heard somewhere that all European cop riot-gear was pink. The color was supposed to be calming.

"This isn't much fun for you, Sardelle, is it?"

She shrugged. "We're not the same people, Eddy. I don't know what you are bringing to the Critic, and I don't want to know." She tapped her spex back into place with one gloved finger. "But if you fail in your job, at the very worst, it might mean some grave cultural loss. Am I right?" "I suppose so. Sure."

"But if I fail in *my* job, Eddy, something *real* might *actually* happen." "Wow," Eddy said, stung.

The crush in the bus was getting oppressive. Eddy stood and offered his spot in the beanbag to a tottering old woman in spangled party gear.

Sardelle rose then too, with bad grace, and fought her way up the aisle. Eddy followed, barking his shins on the thicksoled beastie-boots of a sprawling drunk.

Sardelle stopped short to trade elbow-jabs with a Nordic kamikaze in a horned baseball cap, and Eddy stumbled into her headlong. He realized then why people seemed so eager to get out of Sardelle's way; her trench-coat was of woven ceramic and was as rough as sandpaper. He lurched one-handed for a strap. "Well," he puffed at Sardelle, swaying into her spex-to-spex, "if we can't enjoy each other's company, why not get this over with? Let me do my errand. Then I'll get right into your hair." He paused, shocked. "I mean, out of your hair. Sorry."

She hadn't noticed. "You'll do your errand," she said, clinging to her strap. They were so close that he could feel a chill airconditioned breeze whiffing out of her trenchcoat's collar. "But on my terms. My time, my circumstances." She wouldn't meet his eyes; her head darted around as if from grave embarrassment. Eddy realized suddenly that she was methodically scanning the face of every stranger in the bus.

She spared him a quick, distracted smile. "Don't mind me, Eddy. Be a good boy and have fun in Düsseldorf. Just let me do my job, okay?" "Okay then," Eddy muttered. "Really, I'm delighted to be in your hands." He couldn't seem to stop with the double entendres. They rose to his lips like drool from the id.

The glowing grids of Düsseldorf highrises shone outside the bus windows, patchy waffles of mystery. So many human lives behind those windows. People he would never meet, never see. Pity he still couldn't afford proper telephotos.

Eddy cleared his throat. "What's he doing out there right now? The Cultural Critic, I mean."

"Meeting contacts in a safehouse. He will meet a great many people during the Wende. That's his business, you know. You're only one of many that he brought—brought—to this rendezvous." Sardelle paused. "Though in threat potential you do rank among the top five."

The bus made more stops. People piled in headlong, with a thrash and a heave and a jacking of kneecaps. Inside the bus they were all becoming anchovies. A smothered fistfight broke out in the back. A drunken woman tried, with mixed success, to vomit out the window. Sardelle held her position grimly through several stops, then finally fought her way to the door.

The bus pulled to a stop and a sudden rush of massed bodies propelled them out.

They'd arrived by a long suspension bridge over a broad moonsilvered river. The bridge's soaring cables were lit end-to-end with winking party-bulbs. All along the bridge, flea-marketeers sitting cross-legged on glowing mats were doing a brisk trade in tourist junk. Out in the center, busking juggler with smart-gloves flung lit torches in flaming arcs three stories high.

"Jesus, what a beautiful river," Eddy said.

"It's the Rhine. This is Oberkasseler Bridge."

"The Rhine. Of course, of course. I've never seen the Rhine before. Is it safe to drink?"

"Of course. Europe's very civilized."

"I thought so. It even smells good. Let's go drink some of it."

The banks were lined with municipal gardens: grape-musky vineyards, big pale meticulous flowerbeds. Tireless gardening robots had worked them over season by season with surgical trowels. Eddy stooped by the riverbank and scooped up a double-handful of backwash from a passing hydrofoil. He saw his own spex-clad face in the moony puddle of his hands. As Sardelle watched, he sipped a bit and flung the rest out as libation to the spirit of place.

"I'm happy now," he said. "Now I'm really here."

By midnight, he'd had four beers, two schnitzels, and a platter of kartoffels. Kartoffels were fried potato-batter waffles with a side of applesauce. Eddy's morale had soared from the moment he first bit into one.

They sat at a sidewalk cafe-table in the midst of a centuries-old pedestrian street in the Altstadt. The entire street was a single block-long bar, all chairs, umbrellas, and cobbles, peaked-roof townhouses with ivy and windowboxes and ancient copper weathervanes. It had been invaded by an absolute throng of gawking, shuffling, hooting foreigners.

The gentle, kindly, rather bewildered Düsseldorfers were doing their level best to placate their guests and relieve them of any excess cash. A strong pink police presence was keeping good order. He'd seen two zudes in horned baseball-caps briskly hauled into a paddy-wagon—a "Pink Minna"—but the Vikings were pig-drunk and had it coming, and the crowd seemed very good-humored.

"I don't see what the big deal is with these Wendes," Deep Eddy said, polishing his spex on a square of oiled and lint-free polysilk. "This sucker's a walk-through. There's not gonna be any trouble here. Just look how calm and mellow these zudes are."

"There's trouble already," Sardelle said. "It's just not here in Altstadt in front of your nose."

"Yeah?"

"There are big gangs of arsonists across the river tonight. They're barricading in Neuss, toppling cars, and setting them on fire." "How come?"

Sardelle shrugged. "They are anti-car activists. They demand pedestrian rights and more mass transit. . . ." She paused a bit to read the inside of her spex. "Green radicals are storming the Lobbecke Museum. They want all extinct insect specimens surrendered for cloning. . . . Heinrich Heine University is on strike for academic freedom, and someone has glue-bombed the big traffic tunnel beneath the campus. . . . But

this is nothing, not yet. Tomorrow England meets Ireland in the soccer finals at Rhein-Stadium. There will be hell to pay."

"Huh. That sounds pretty bad."

"Yes." She smiled. "So let's enjoy our time here, Eddy. Idleness is sweet. Even on the edge of dirty chaos."

"But none of those events by itself sounds all that threatening or serious."

"Not each thing by itself, Eddy, no. But it all happens all at once. That's what a Wende is like."

"I don't get it," Eddy said. He put his spex back on and lit the menu from within, with a fingersnap. He tapped the spex menu-bar with his right fingertip and light-amplifiers kicked in. The passing crowd, their outlines shimmering slightly from computational effects, seemed to be strolling through an overlit stage-set. "I guess there's trouble coming from all these outsiders," Eddy said, "but the Germans themselves seem so . . . well . . . so good-natured and tidy and civilized. Why do they even have Wendes?"

"It's not something we plan, Eddy. It's just something that happens to us." Sardelle sipped her coffee.

"How could this happen and not be planned?"

"Well, we knew it was coming, of course. Of course we knew that. Word gets around. That's how Wendes start." She straightened her napkin. "You can ask the Critic, when you meet him. He talks a lot about Wendes. He knows as much as anyone, I think."

"Yeah, I've read him," Eddy said. "He says that it's rumor, boosted by electronic and digital media, in a feedback-loop with crowd dynamics and modern mass transportation. A nonlinear networking phenomenon. That much I understand! But then he quotes some zude named Elias Canetti. . . ." Eddy patted the gray bag. "I tried to read Canetti, I really did, but he's twentieth-century, and as boring and stuffy as hell. . . . Anyway, we'd handle things differently in Chattanooga."

"People say that, until they have their first Wende," Sardelle said. "Then it's all different. Once you know a Wende can actually happen to you . . . well, it changes everything."

"We'd take steps to stop it, that's all. Take steps to control it. Can't you people take some steps?"

Sardelle tugged off her pinstriped gloves and set them on the tabletop. She worked her bare fingers gently, blew on her fingertips, and picked a big bready pretzel from the basket. Eddy noticed with surprise that her gloves had big rock-hard knuckles and twitched a little all by themselves.

"There are things you can do, of course," she told him. "Put police and firefighters on overtime. Hire more private security. Disaster control for lights, traffic, power, data. Open the shelters and stock first-aid medicine. And warn the whole population. But when a city tells its people that a Wende is coming, that *guarantees* the Wende will come. . . ." Sardelle sighed. "I've worked Wendes before. But this is a big one. A big, dark one. And it won't be over, it can't be over—not until everyone knows that it's gone, and feels that it's gone."

"That doesn't make much sense."

"Talking about it won't help, Eddy. You and I, talking about it—we become part of the Wende ourselves, you see? We're here because of the Wende. We met because of the Wende. And we can't leave each other, until the Wende goes away." She shrugged. "Can you go away, Eddy?"

"No Not right now. But I've got stuff to do here."

"So does everybody else."

Eddy grunted and killed another beer. The beer here was truly something special. "It's a Chinese finger-trap," he said, gesturing. "Yes, I know those."

He grinned. "Suppose we both stop pulling? We could walk through it. Leave town. I'll throw the book in the river. Tonight you and I could fly back to Chattanooga. Together."

She laughed. "You wouldn't really do that, though."

"You don't know me after all."

"You spit in the face of your friends? And I lose my job? A high price to pay for one gesture. For a young man's pretense of free will." "I'm not pretending, lady. Try me. I dare you."

"Then you're drunk."

"Well, there's that." He laughed. "But don't joke about liberty. Liberty's the realest thing there is." He stood up and hunted out the bathroom.

On his way back he stopped at a payphone. He gave it fifty centimes and dialed Tennessee. Djulia answered.

"What time is it?" he said.

"Nineteen. Where are you?"

"Düsseldorf."

"Oh." She rubbed her nose. "Sounds like you're in a bar." "Bingo."

"So what's new, Eddy?"

"I know you put a lot of stock in honesty," Eddy said. "So I thought I'd tell you I'm planning an affair. I met this German girl here and frankly, she's irresistible."

Djulia frowned darkly. "You've got a lot of nerve telling me that kind of crap with your spex on."

"Oh yeah," he said. He took them off and stared into the monitor. "Sorry."

"You're drunk, Eddy," Djulia said. "I hate it when you're drunk! You'll say and do anything if you're drunk and on the far end of a phone-line." She rubbed nervously at her newest cheek-tattoo. "Is this one of your weird jokes?"

"Yeah. It is, actually. The chances are eighty to one that she'll turn me down flat." Eddy laughed. "But I'm gonna try anyway. Because you're not letting me live and breathe."

Djulia's face went stiff. "When we're face-to-face, you always abuse my trust. That's why I don't like for us to go past virching."

"Come off it, Djulia."

She was defiant. "If you think you'll be happier with some weirdo virch-whore in Europe, go ahead! I don't know why you can't do that by wire from Chattanooga, anyway."

"This is Europe. We're talking actuality here."

Djulia was shocked. "If you actually touch another woman I never want to see you again." She bit her lip. "Or do wire with you, either. I mean that, Eddy. You know I do."

"Yeah," he said. "I know."

He hung up, got change from the phone, and dialed his parents' house. His father answered.

"Hi, Bob. Lisa around?"

"No," his father said, "it's her night for optic macrame. How's Europe?" "Different."

"Nice to hear from you, Eddy. We're kind of short of money. I can spare you some sustained attention, though."

"I just dumped Djulia."

"Good move, son," his father said briskly. "Fine. Very serious girl, Djulia. Way too strait-laced for you. A kid your age should be dating girls who are absolutely jumping out of their skins."

Eddy nodded.

"You didn't lose your spex, did you?"

Eddy held them up on their neck chain. "Safe and sound."

"Hardly recognized you for a second," his father said. "Ed, you're such a serious-minded kid. Taking on all these responsibilities. On the road so much, spexware day in and day out. Lisa and I network about you all the time. Neither of us did a day's work before we were thirty, and we're all the better for it. You've got to live, son. Got to find yourself. Smell the roses. If you want to stay in Europe a couple of months, forget the algebra courses."

"It's calculus, Bob."

"Whatever."

"Thanks for the good advice, Bob. I know you mean it."

"It's good news about Djulia, son. You know we don't invalidate your feelings, so we never said a goddamn thing to you, but her glassware really sucked. Lisa says she's got no goddamn aesthetics at all. That's a hell of a thing, in a woman."

"That's my mom," Eddy said. "Give Lisa my best." He hung up.

He went back out to the sidewalk table. "Did you eat enough?" Sardelle asked.

"Yeah. It was good."

"Sleepy?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

"Do you have a place to stay, Eddy? Hotel reservations?"

Eddy shrugged. "No. I don't bother, usually. What's the use? It's more fun winging it."

"Good," Sardelle nodded. "It's better to wing. No one can trace us. It's safer."

She found them shelter in a park, where an activist group of artists from Munich had set up a squatter pavilion. As squatter pavilions went, it was quite a nice one, new and in good condition: a giant soap-bubble upholstered in cellophane and polysilk. It covered half an acre with crisp yellow bubblepack flooring. The shelter was illegal and therefore anonymous. Sardelle seemed quite pleased about this.

Once through the zippered airlock, Eddy and Sardelle were forced to examine the artists' multimedia artwork for an entire grueling hour. Worse yet, they were closely quizzed afterward by an expert-system, which bullied them relentlessly with arcane aesthetic dogma.

This ordeal was too high a price for most squatters. The pavilion, though attractive, was only half-full, and many people who had shown up bone-tired were fleeing the art headlong. Deep Eddy, however, almost always aced this sort of thing. Thanks to his slick responses to the computer's quizzing, he won himself quite a nice area, with a blanket, opaquable curtains, and its own light fixtures. Sardelle, by contrast, had been bored and minimal, and had won nothing more advanced than a pillow and a patch of bubblepack among the philistines.

Eddy made good use of a traveling pay-toilet stall, and bought some mints and chilled mineral water from a robot. He settled in cozily as police sirens, and some distant, rather choked-sounding explosions, made the night glamorous.

Sardelle didn't seem anxious to leave. "May I see your hotel bag," she said.

"Sure." He handed it over. Might as well. She'd given it to him in the first place.

He'd thought she was going to examine the book again, but instead she took a small plastic packet from within the bag, and pulled the packet's ripcord. A colorful jumpsuit jumped out, with a chemical hiss and a vague hot stink of catalysis and cheap cologne. The jumpsuit, a one-piece, had comically baggy legs, frilled sleeves, and was printed all over with a festive cut-up of twentieth century naughty seaside postcards.

"Pajamas," Eddy said. "Gosh, how thoughtful."

"You can sleep in this if you want," Sardelle nodded, "but it's daywear. I want you to wear it tomorrow. And I want to buy the clothes you are wearing now, so that I can take them away for safety."

Deep Eddy was wearing a dress shirt, light jacket, American jeans, dappled stockings and Nashville brogues of genuine blue suede. "I can't wear that crap," he protested. "Jesus, I'd look like a total loser."

"Yes," said Sardelle with an enthusiastic nod, "It's very cheap and common. It will make you invisible. Just one more party boy among thousands and thousands. This is very secure dress, for a courier during a Wende."

"You want me to meet the Critic in this get-up?"

Sardelle laughed. "The Cultural Critic is not impressed by taste, Eddy. The eye he uses when he looks at people . . . he sees things other people can't see." She paused, considering. "He *might* be impressed if you showed up dressed in *this*. Not because of what it is, of course. But because it would show that you can understand and manipulate popular taste to your own advantage . . . just as he does."

"You're really being paranoid," Eddy said, nettled. "I'm not an assassin. I'm just some techie zude from Tennessee. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I believe you," she nodded. "You're very convincing. But that has nothing to do with proper security technique. If I take your clothes, there will be less operational risk."

"How much less risk? What do you expect to find in my clothes, anyway?"

"There are many, many things you *might* have done," she said patiently. "The human race is very ingenious. We have invented ways to kill, or hurt, or injure almost anyone, with almost nothing at all." She sighed. "If you don't know about such techniques already, it would only be stupid for me to tell you all about them. So let's be quick and simple, Eddy. It would make me happier to take your clothes away. A hundred ecu."

Eddy shook his head. "This time it's really going to cost you." "Two hundred then," Sardelle said.

"Forget it."

"I can't go higher than two hundred. Unless you let me search your body cavities."

Eddy dropped his spex.

"Body cavities," Sardelle said impatiently. "You're a grown-up man, you must know about this. A great deal can be done with body cavities." Eddy stared at her. "Can't I have some chocolate and roses first?" "It's not chocolate and roses with us," Sardelle said sternly. "Don't talk to me about chocolate and roses. We're not lovers. We are client and bodyguard. It's an ugly business, I know. But it's only business." "Yeah? Well, trading in body cavities is new to me." Deep Eddy rubbed his chin. "As a simple Yankee youngster I find this a little confusing. Maybe we could barter then? Tonight?"

She laughed harshly. "I won't sleep with you, Eddy. I won't sleep at all! You're only being foolish." Sardelle shook her head. Suddenly she lifted a densely braided mass of hair above her right ear. "Look here, Mr. Simple Yankee Youngster. I'll show you my favorite body cavity." There was a fleshcolored plastic duct in the side of her scalp. "It's illegal to have this done in Europe. I had it done in Turkey. This morning I took half a cc through there. I won't sleep until Monday."

"Jesus," Eddy said. He lifted his spex to stare at the small dimpled orifice. "Right through the blood-brain barrier: That must be a hell of , an infection risk."

"I don't do it for fun. It's not like beer and pretzels. It's just that I won't sleep now. Not until the Wende is over." She put her hair back, and sat up with a look of composure. "Then I'll fly somewhere and lie in the sun and be very still. All by myself, Eddy."

"Okay," Eddy said, feeling a weird and muddy sort of pity for her. "You can borrow my clothes and search them."

"I have to burn the clothes. Two hundred ecu?"

"All right. But I keep these shoes."

"May I look at your teeth for free? It will only take five minutes." "Okay," he muttered. She smiled at him, and touched her spex. A bright purple light emerged from the bridge of her nose.

At 08:00 a police drone attempted to clear the park. It flew overhead, barking robotic threats in five languages. Everyone simply ignored the machine.

Around 08:30 an actual line of human police showed up. In response, a group of the squatters brought out their own bullhorn, an enormous battery-powered sonic assault-unit.

The first earthshaking shriek hit Eddy like an electric prod. He'd been lying peacefully on his bubble-mattress, listening to the doltish yap of the robot chopper. Now he leapt quickly from his crash-padding and wormed his way into the crispy bubblepack cloth of his ridiculous jumpsuit.

Sardelle showed up while he was still tacking the jumpsuit's velcro buttons. She led him outside the pavilion.

The squatter bullhorn was up on an iron tripod pedestal, surrounded by a large group of grease-stained anarchists with helmets, earpads, and studded white batons. Their bullhorn's enormous ululating bellow was reducing everyone's nerves to jelly. It was like the shriek of Medusa.

The cops retreated, and the owners of the bullhorn shut it off, waving their glittering batons in triumph. In the deafened, jittery silence there were scattered shrieks, jeers, and claps, but the ambience in the park had become very bad: aggressive and surreal. Attracted by the apocalyptic shriek, people were milling into the park at a trot, spoiling for any kind of trouble.

They seemed to have little in common, these people; not their dress, not language, certainly nothing like a coherent political cause. They were mostly young men, and most of them looked as if they'd been up all night: red-eyed and peevish. They taunted the retreating cops. A milling gang knifed one of the smaller pavilions, a scarlet one, and it collapsed like a blood-blister under their trampling feet.

Sardelle took Eddy to the edge of the park, where the cops were herding up a crowd-control barricade-line of ambulant robotic pink beanbags. "I want to see this," he protested. His ears were ringing.

"They're going to fight," she told him.

"About what?"

"Anything. Everything," she shouted. "It doesn't matter. They'll knock our teeth out. Don't be stupid." She took him by the elbow and they slipped through a gap in the closing battle-line.

The police had brought up a tracked glue-cannon truck. They now began to threaten the crowd with a pasting. Eddy had never seen a glue-cannon before—except on television. It was quite astonishing how frightening the machine looked, even in pink. It was squat, blind, and nozzled, and sat there buzzing like some kind of wheeled warrior termite.

Suddenly several of the cops standing around the machine began to flinch and duck. Eddy saw a glittering object carom hard off the glue-truck's armored canopy. It flew twenty meters and landed in the grass at his feet. He picked it up. It was a stainless-steel ball-bearing the size of a cow's eyeball.

"Airguns?" he said.

"Slingshots. Don't let one hit you."

"Oh yeah. Great advice, I guess." To the far side of the cops a group of people—some kind of closely organized protestors—were advancing in measured step under a tall two-man banner. It read, in English: *The Only Thing Worse Than Dying Is Outliving Your Culture*. Every man-jack of them, and there were at least sixty, carried a long plastic pike topped with an ominous-looking bulbous sponge. It was clear from the way they maneuvered that they understood military pike-tactics only too well; their phalanx bristled like a hedgehog, and some captain among them was barking distant orders. Worse yet, the

pikemen had neatly outflanked the cops, who now began calling frantically for backup.

A police drone whizzed just above their heads, not the casual lumbering he had seen before, but direct and angry and inhumanly fast. "Run!" Sardelle shouted, taking his hands. "Peppergas . . ."

Eddy glanced behind him as he fled. The chopper, as if cropdusting, was farting a dense maroon fog. The crowd bellowed in shock and rage and, seconds later, that hellish bullhorn kicked in once more.

Sardelle ran with amazing ease and speed. She bounded along as if firecrackers were bursting under her feet. Eddy, years younger and considerably longer in leg, was very hard-put to keep up.

In two minutes they were well out of the park, across a broad street and into a pedestrian network of small shops and restaurants. There she stopped and let him catch his breath.

"Jesus," he puffed, "where can I buy shoes like that?"

"They're made-to-order," she told him calmly. "And you need special training. You can break your ankles, otherwise . . ." She gazed at a nearby bakery. "You want some breakfast now?"

Eddy sampled a chocolate-filled pastry inside the shop, at a dainty, doily-covered table. Two ambulances rushed down the street, and a large group of drum-beating protesters swaggered by, shoving shoppers from the pavement; but otherwise things seemed peaceful. Sardelle sat with arms folded, staring into space. He guessed that she was reading security alerts from the insides of her spex.

"You're not tired, are you?" he said.

"I don't sleep on operations," she said, "but sometimes I like to sit very still." She smiled at him. "You wouldn't understand. . . ."

"Hell no I wouldn't," Eddy said, his mouth full. "All hell's breaking loose over there, and here you are sipping orange juice just as calm as a bump on a pickle. . . . Damn, these croissants, or whatever the hell they are, are really good. Hey! *Herr Ober!* Bring me another couple of those, *ja, danke.* . . ."

"The trouble could follow us anywhere. We're as safe here as any other place. Safer, because we're not in the open."

"Good," Eddy nodded, munching. "That park's a bad scene."

"It's not so bad in the park. It's very bad at the Rhein-Spire, though. The Mahogany Warbirds have seized the rotating restaurant. They're stealing skin."

"What are Warbirds?"

She seemed surprised. "You haven't heard of them? They're from NAFTA. A criminal syndicate. Insurance rackets, protection rackets, they run all the casinos in the Quebec Republic. . . ."

"Okay. So what's stealing skin?"

"It's a new kind of swindle; they take a bit of skin or blood, with your genetics, you see, and a year later they tell you they have a newborn son or daughter of yours held captive, held somewhere secret in the South. . . . Then they try to make you pay, and pay, and pay. . . ."

"You mean they're kidnaping genetics from the people in that restaurant?"

"Yes. Brunch in the Rhein-Spire is very prestigious. The victims are all rich or famous." Suddenly she

laughed, rather bitter, rather cynical. "I'll be busy next year, Eddy, thanks to this. A new job—protecting my clients' skin."

Eddy thought about it. "It's kind of like the rent-a-womb business, huh? But really twisted."

She nodded. "The Warbirds are crazy, they're not even ethnic criminals, they are network interest-group creatures. . . . Crime is so damned ugly, Eddy. If you ever think of doing it, just stop."

Eddy grunted.

"Think of those children," she murmured. "Born from crime. Manufactured to order, for a criminal purpose. This is a strange world, isn't it? It frightens me sometimes."

"Yeah?" Eddy said cheerfully. "Illegitimate son of a millionaire, raised by a high-tech mafia? Sounds kind of weird and romantic to me. I mean, consider the possibilities."

She took off her spex for the first time, to look at him. Her eyes were blue. A very odd and romantic shade of blue. Probably tinted contacts. "Rich people have been having illegitimate kids since the year zero," Eddy said. "The only difference is somebody's mechanized the process." He laughed.

"It's time you met the Cultural Critic," she said. She put the spex back on.

They had to walk a long way. The bus system was now defunct. Apparently the soccer fans made a sport of hitting public buses; they would rip all the beanbags out and kick them through the doors. On his way to meet the Critic, Eddy saw hundreds of soccer fans; the city was swarming with them. The English devotees were very bad news; savage, thick-booted, snarling, stamping, chanting, anonymous young men, in knee-length sandpaper coats, with their hair cropped short and their faces masked or war-painted in the Union Jack. The English soccer hooligans traveled in enormous packs of two and three hundred. They were armed with cheap cellular phones. They'd wrapped the aerials with friction tape to form truncheon handles, so that the high-impact ceramic phone-casing became a nasty club. It was impossible to deny a traveler the ownership of a telephone, so the police were impotent to stop this practice. Practically speaking, there was not much to be done in any case. The English hooligans dominated the streets through sheer force of numbers. Anyone seeing them simply fled headlong.

Except, of course, for the Irish soccer fans. The Irish wore thick elbow-length grappling gloves, some kind of workmen's gauntlets apparently, along with long green-and-white football-scarves. Their scarves had skull-denting weights sewn into pockets at their ends, and the tassels fringed with little skin-ripping wire barbs. The weights were perfectly legitimate rolls of coins, and the wire—well, you could get wire anywhere. The Irish seemed to be outnumbered, but were, if anything, even drunker and more reckless than their rivals. Unlike the English, the Irish louts didn't even use the cellular phones to coordinate their brawling. They just plunged ahead at a dead run, whipping their scarves overhead and screaming about Oliver Cromwell.

The Irish were terrifying. They traveled down streets like a scourge. Anything in their way they knocked over and trampled: knickknack kiosks, propaganda videos, poster-booths, T-shirt tables, people selling canned jumpsuits. Even the postnatal abortion people, who were true fanatics, and the scary, eldritch, black-clad pro-euthanasia groups, would abandon their sidewalk podiums to flee from the Irish kids.

Eddy shuddered to think what the scene must be like at the Rhein-Stadium. "Those are some mean goddamn kids," he told Sardelle, as they emerged from hiding in an alley. "And it's all about *soccer*? Jesus, that seems so pointless."

"If they rioted in their *own* towns, *that* would be pointless," Sardelle said. "Here at the Wende, they can smash each other, and everything else, and tomorrow they will be perfectly safe at home in their own world."

"Oh, I get it," Eddy said. "That makes a lot of sense."

A passing blonde woman in a Muslim hijab slapped a button onto Eddy's sleeve. "Will your lawyer talk to God?" the button demanded aloud, repeatedly, in English. Eddy plucked the device off and stamped on it.

The Cultural Critic was holding court in a safehouse in Stadtmitte. The safehouse was an anonymous twentieth-century four-story dump, flanked by some nicely retrofitted nineteenth-century townhouses. A graffiti gang had hit the block during the night, repainting the street-surface with a sprawling polychrome mural, all big grinning green kitty-cats, fractal spirals, and leaping priapic pink pigs. "Hot Spurt!" one of the pigs suggested eagerly; Eddy skirted its word balloon as they approached the door.

The door bore a small brass plaque reading "E.I.S.—Elektronisches Invasionsabwehr-Systems GmbH." There was an inscribed corporate logo that appeared to be a melting ice-cube.

Sardelle spoke in German to the door video; it opened, and they entered a hall full of pale, drawn adults in suits, armed with fire-extinguishers. Despite their air of nervous resolution and apparent willingness to fight hand-to-hand, Eddy took them for career academics: modestly dressed, ties and scarves slightly askew, odd cheek-tattoos, distracted gazes, too serious. The place smelled bad, like stale cottage-cheese and bookshelf dust. The dirt-smudged walls were festooned with schematics and wiring diagrams, amid a bursting mess of tower-stacked scrawl-labeled cartons—disk archives of some kind. The ceiling and floorboards were festooned with taped-down power-cables and fiber-optic network wiring.

"Hi, everybody!" Eddy said. "How's it going?" The building's defenders looked at him, noted his jumpsuit costume, and reacted with relieved indifference. They began talking in French, obviously resuming some briefly postponed and intensely important discussion.

"Hello," said a German in his thirties, rising to his feet. He had long, thinning, greasy hair and a hollow-cheeked, mushroom-pale face. He wore secretarial half-spex; and behind them he had the shiftiest eyes Eddy had ever seen, eyes that darted, and gloated, and slid around the room. He worked his way through the defenders, and smiled at Eddy, vaguely. "I am your host. Welcome, friend." He extended a hand.

Eddy shook it. He glanced sidelong at Sardelle. Sardelle had gone as stiff as a board and had jammed her gloved hands in her trenchcoat pockets.

"So," Eddy gabbled, snatching his hand back, "thanks a lot for having us over!"

"You'll be wanting to see my famous friend the Cultural Critic," said their host, with a cadaverous smile. "He is upstairs. This is my place. I own it." He gazed around himself, brimming with satisfaction. "It's my Library, you see. I have the honor of hosting the great man for the Wende. He appreciates my work. Unlike so many others." Their host dug into the pocket of his baggy slacks. Eddy, instinctively expecting a drawn knife, was vaguely surprised to see his host hand over an old-fashioned, dogeared business card. Eddy glanced at it. "How are you, Herr Schreck?"

"Life is very exciting today," said Schreck with a smirk. He touched his spex and examined Eddy's on-line bio. "A young American visitor. How charming."

"I'm from NAFTA," Eddy corrected.

"And a civil libertarian. Liberty is the only word that still excites me," Schreck said, with itchy urgency. "I need many more American intimates. Do make use of me. And all my digital services. That card of mine—do call those network addresses and tell your friends. The more, the happier." He turned to Sardelle. "*Kaffee, fraulein? Zigaretten?*"

Sardelle shook her head minimally.

"It's good she's here," Schreck told Eddy. "She can help us to fight. You go upstairs. The great man is waiting for visitors."

"I'm going up with him," Sardelle said.

"Stay here," Schreck urged. "The security threat is to the Library, not to him."

"I'm a bodyguard," Sardelle said frostily. "I guard the body. I don't guard data-havens."

Schreck frowned. "Well, more fool you, then."

Sardelle followed Eddy up the dusty, flower-carpeted stairs. Upstairs to the right was an antique twentieth-century office-door in blond oak and frosted glass. Sardelle knocked; someone called out in French.

She opened the door. Inside the office were two long workbenches covered with elderly desktop computers. The windows were barred and curtained.

The Cultural Critic, wearing spex and a pair of datagloves, sat in a bright pool of sunlight-yellow glare from a trackmounted overhead light. He was pecking daintily with his gloved fingertips at a wafer-thin data-screen of woven cloth.

As Sardelle and Eddy stepped into the office, the Critic wrapped up his screen in a scroll, removed his spex, and unplugged his gloves. He had dark pepper-and-salt tousled hair, a dark wool tie, and a long maroon scarf draped over a beautifully cut ivory jacket.

"You would be Mr. Dertouzas from CAPCLUG," he said.

"Exactly. How are you, sir?"

"Very well." He examined Eddy briefly. "I assume his clothing was your idea, Frederika."

Sardelle nodded once, with a sour look. Eddy smiled at her, delighted to learn her real name.

"Have a seat," the Critic offered. He poured himself more coffee. "I'd offer you a cup of this, but it's been . . . adjusted."

"I brought you your book," Eddy said. He sat, and opened the bag, and offered the item in question.

"Splendid." The Critic reached into his pocket and, to Eddy's surprise, pulled a knife. The Critic opened its blade with one thumbnail. The shining blade was sawtoothed in a fractal fashion; even its serrations had tiny serrated serrations. It was a jack-knife the length of a finger, with a razor-sharp edge on it as long as a man's arm.

Under the knife's irresistible ripping caress, the tough cover of the book parted with a discreet shredding of cloth. The Critic reached into the slit and plucked out a thin, gleaming storage disk. He set the book

down. "Did you read this?"

"That disk?" Eddy ad-libbed. "I assumed it was encrypted." "You assumed correctly, but I meant the book."

"I think it lost something in translation," Eddy said.

The Critic raised his brows. He had dark, heavy brows with a pronounced frown-line between them, over sunken, gray-green eyes. "You have read Canetti in the Italian, Mr. Dertouzas?"

"I meant the translation between centuries," Eddy said, and laughed. "What I read left me with nothing but questions . . . Can you answer them for me, sir?"

The Critic shrugged and turned to a nearby terminal. It was a scholar's workstation, the least dilapidated of the machines in the office. He touched four keys in order; a carousel whirled and spat out a disk. The Critic handed it to Eddy. "You'll find your answers here, to whatever extent I can give them," he said. "My Complete Works. Please take this disk. Reproduce it, give it to whomever you like, as long as you accredit it. The standard scholarly procedure. I'm sure you know the etiquette."

"Thank you very much," Eddy said with dignity, tucking the disk into his bag. "Of course I own your works already, but I'm glad of a fully up-to-date edition."

"I'm told that a copy of my Complete Works will get you a cup of coffee at any cafe in Europe," the Critic mused, slotting the encrypted disk and rapidly tapping keys. "Apparently digital commodification is not entirely a spent force, even in literature. . . ." He examined the screen. "Oh, this is lovely. I knew I would need this data again. And I certainly didn't want it in my house." He smiled.

"What are you going to do with that data?" Eddy said.

"Do you really not know?" the Critic said. "And you from CAPCLUG, a group of such carnivorous curiosity? Well, that's also a strategy, I suppose." He tapped more keys, then leaned back and opened a pack of cigarettes.

"What strategy?"

"New elements, new functions, new solutions—I don't know what 'culture' is, but I know exactly what I'm doing." The Critic drew slowly on a cigarette, his brows knotting.

"And what's that, exactly?"

"You mean, what is the underlying concept?" He waved the cigarette. "I have no 'concept.' The struggle here must not be reduced to a single simple idea. I am building a structure that must not, cannot, be reduced to a single simple idea. I am building a structure that perhaps suggests a concept. . . . If I did more, the system itself would become stronger than the surrounding culture. . . . Any system of rational analysis must live within the strong blind body of mass humanity, Mr. Dertouzas. If we learned anything from the twentieth century, we learned that much, at least." The Critic sighed, a fragrant medicinal mist. "I fight windmills, sir. It's a duty. . . . You often are hurt, but at the same time you become unbelievably happy, because you see that you have both friends and enemies, and that you are capable of fertilizing society with contradictory attitudes."

"What enemies do you mean?" Eddy said.

"Here. Today. Another data-burning. It was necessary to stage a formal resistance."

"This is an evil place," Sardelle—or rather Frederika—burst out. "I had no idea this was today's safe-house. This is anything but safe. Jean-Arthur, you must leave this place at once. You could be killed here!"

"An evil place? Certainly. But there is so much megabyteage devoted to works on goodness, and on doing good—so very little coherent intellectual treatment of the true nature of evil and being evil. . . . Of malice and stupidity and acts of cruelty and darkness. . ." The Critic sighed. "Actually, once you're allowed through the encryption that Herr Schreck so wisely imposes on his holdings, you'll find the data here rather banal. The manuals for committing crime are farfetched and badly written. The schematics for bombs, listening devices, drug labs and so forth, are poorly designed and probably unworkable. The pornography is juvenile and overly anti-erotic. The invasions of privacy are of interest only to voyeurs. Evil is banal—by no means so scarlet as one's instinctive dread would paint it. It's like the sex-life of one's parents—a primal and forbidden topic, and yet, with objectivity, basically integral to their human nature—and of course to your own."

"Who's planning to burn this place?" Eddy said.

"A rival of mine. He calls himself the Moral Referee."

"Oh yeah, I've heard of him!" Eddy said. "He's here in Düsseldorf too? Jesus."

"He is a charlatan," the Critic sniffed. "Something of an ayatollah figure. A popular demagogue. . . ." He glanced at Eddy. "Yes, yes—of course people do say much the same of me, Mr. Dertouzas, and I'm perfectly aware of that. But I have two doctorates, you know. The Referee is a self-appointed digital Savonarola. Not a scholar at all. An autodidactic philosopher. At best an artist."

"Aren't you an artist?"

"That's the danger. . . ." the Critic nodded. "Once I was only a teacher, then suddenly I felt a sense of mission. . . . I began to understand which works are strongest, which are only decorative. . ." The Critic looked suddenly restless, and puffed at his zigarette again. "In Europe there is too much couture, too little culture. In Europe everything is colored by discourse. There is too much knowledge and too much fear to overthrow that knowledge. . . . In NAFTA you are too naïvely postmodern to suffer from this syndrome. . . . And the Sphere, the Sphere, they are orthogonal to both our concerns. . . . The South, of course, is the planet's last reservoir of authentic humanity, despite every ontological atrocity committed there. . ."

"I'm not following you," Eddy said.

"Take that disk with you. Don't lose it," the Critic said somberly. "I have certain obligations, that's all. I must know why I made certain choices, and be able to defend them, and I must defend them, or risk losing everything. . . . Those choices are already made. I've drawn a line here, established a position. It's my Wende today, you know! My lovely Wende. . . . Through cusp-points like this one, I can make things different for the whole of society." He smiled. "Not better, necessarily—but different, certainly. . . ."

"People are coming," Frederika announced suddenly, standing bolt upright and gesturing at the air. "A lot of people marching in the streets outside . . . there's going to be trouble."

"I knew he would react the moment that data left this building," the Critic said, nodding. "Let trouble come! I will not move!"

"God damn you, I'm being paid to see that you survive!" Frederika said. "The Referee's people burn data-havens. They've done it before, and they'll do it again. Let's get out of here while there's still time!"

"We're all ugly and evil," the Critic announced calmly, settling deeply into his chair and steepling his fingers. "Bad knowledge is still legitimate self-knowledge. Don't pretend otherwise."

"That's no reason to fight them hand-to-hand here in Düsseldorf! We're not tactically prepared to defend this building! Let them burn it! What's one more stupid outlaw and his rat-nest full of garbage?"

The Critic looked at her with pity. "It's not the access that matters. It's the principle."

"Bullseye!" Eddy shouted, recognizing a CAPCLUG slogan. Frederika, biting her lip, leaned over a tabletop and began typing invisibly on a virtual keyboard. "If you call your professional backup," the Critic told her, "they'll only be hurt. This is not really your fight, my dear; you're not committed."

"Fuck you and your politics; if you burn up in here we don't get our bonuses," Frederika shouted.

"No reason he should stay, at least," the Critic said, gesturing to Eddy. "You've done well, Mr. Dertouzas. Thank you very much for your successful errand. It was most helpful." The Critic glanced at the workstation screen, where a program from the disk was still spooling busily, then back at Eddy again. "I suggest you leave this place while you can."

Eddy glanced at Frederika.

"Yes, go!" she said. "You're finished here, I'm not your escort any more. Run, Eddy!"

"No way," Eddy said, folding his arms. "If you're not moving, I'm not moving."

Frederika looked furious. "But you're free to go. You heard him say so."

"So what? Since I'm at liberty, I'm also free to stay," Eddy retorted. "Besides, I'm from Tennessee, NAFTA's Volunteer State."

"There are hundreds of enemies coming," Frederika said, staring into space. "They will overwhelm us and burn this place to the ground. There will be nothing left of both of you and your rotten data but ashes."

"Have faith," the Critic said coolly. "Help will come, as well—from some unlikely quarters. Believe me, I'm doing my very best to maximize the implications of this event. So is my rival, if it comes to that. Thanks to that disk that just arrived, I am wirecasting events here to four hundred of the most volatile network sites in Europe. Yes, the Referee's people may destroy us, but their chances of escaping the consequences are very slim. And if we ourselves die here in flames, it will only lend deeper meaning to our sacrifice."

Eddy gazed at the Critic in honest admiration. "I don't understand a single goddamn word you're saying, but I guess I can recognize a fellow spirit when I meet one. I'm sure CAPCLUG would want me to stay."

"CAPCLUG would want no such thing," the Critic told him soberly. "They would want you to escape, so that they could examine and dissect your experiences in detail. Your American friends are sadly infatuated with the supposed potency of rational, panoptic, digital analysis. Believe me, please—the enormous turbulence in postmodern society is far larger than any single human mind can comprehend, with or without computer-aided perception or the finest computer-assisted frameworks of sociological analysis." The Critic gazed at his workstation, like a herpetologist studying a cobra. "Your CAPCLUG friends will go to their graves never realizing that every vital impulse in human life is entirely pre-rational."

"Well, I'm certainly not leaving here before I figure that out," Eddy said. "I plan to help you fight the good fight, sir."

The Critic shrugged, and smiled. "Thank you for just proving me right, young man. Of course a young American hero is welcome to die in Europe's political struggles. I'd hate to break an old tradition."

Glass shattered. A steaming lump of dry ice flew through the window, skittered across the office floor, and began gently dissolving. Acting entirely on instinct, Eddy dashed forward, grabbed it barehanded, and threw it back out the window.

"Are you okay?" Frederika said.

"Sure," Eddy said, surprised.

"That was a chemical gas bomb," Frederika said. She gazed at him as if expecting him to drop dead on the spot.

"Apparently the chemical frozen into the ice was not very toxic," the Critic surmised.

"I don't think it was a gas bomb at all," Eddy said, gazing out the window. "I think it was just a big chunk of dry ice. You Europeans are completely paranoid."

He saw with astonishment that there was a medieval pageant taking place in the street. The followers of the Moral Referee—there were some three or four hundred of them, well-organized and marching forward in grimly disciplined silence—apparently had a weakness for medieval jerkins, fringed capes, and colored hose. And torches. They were very big on torches.

The entire building shuddered suddenly, and a burglar siren went off. Eddy craned to look. Half-a-dozen men were battering the door with a hand-held hydraulic ram. They wore visored helmets and metal armor, which gleamed in the summer daylight. "We're being attacked by goddamn knights in shining armor," Eddy said. "I can't believe they're doing this in broad daylight!"

"The football game just started," Frederika said. "They have picked the perfect moment. Now they can get away with anything." "Do these window-bars come out?" Eddy said, shaking them. "No. Thank goodness."

"Then hand me some of those data-disks," he demanded. "No, not those shrimpy ones—give me the full thirty-centimeter jobs."

He threw the window up and began pelting the crowd below with flung megabyte. The disks had vicious aerodynamics and were hefty and sharp-edged. He was rewarded with a vicious barrage of bricks, which shattered windows all along the second and third floors.

"They're very angry now," Frederika shouted over the wailing alarm and roar of the crowd below. The three of them crouched under a table. "Yeah," Eddy said. His blood was boiling. He picked up a long, narrow printer, dashed across the room, and launched it between the bars. In reply, half-a-dozen long metal darts—short javelins, really—flew up through the window and imbedded themselves in the office ceiling.

"How'd they get those through Customs?" Eddy shouted. "Must've made them last night." He laughed. "Should I throw 'em back? I can fetch them if I stand on a chair."

"Don't, don't," Frederika shouted. "Control yourself! Don't kill anyone, it's not professional."

"I'm not professional," Eddy said.

"Get down here," Frederika commanded. When he refused, she scrambled from beneath the table and

body-slammed him against the wall. She pinned Eddy's arms, flung herself across him with almost erotic intensity, and hissed into his ear. "Save yourself while you can! This is only a Wende."

"Stop that," Eddy shouted, trying to break her grip. More bricks came through the window, tumbling past their feet.

"If they kill these worthless intellectuals," she muttered hotly, "there will be a thousand more to take their place. But if you don't leave this building right now, you'll die here."

"Christ, I know that," Eddy shouted, finally flinging her backward with a rasp at her sandpaper coat. "Quit being such a loser." "Eddy, listen!" Frederika yelled, knotting her gloved fists. "Let me save your life! You'll owe me later! Go home to your parents in America, and don't worry about the Wende. This is all we ever do—it's all we are really good for."

"Hey, I'm good at this too!" Eddy announced. A brick barked his ankle. In sudden convulsive fury, he upended a table and slammed it against a broken window, as a shield. As bricks thudded against the far side of the table, he shouted defiance. He felt superhuman. Her attempt to talk sense had irritated him enormously.

The door broke in downstairs, with a concussive blast. Screams echoed up the stairs. "That's torn it!" Eddy said.

He snatched up a multiplugged power outlet, dashed across the room, and kicked the office door open. With a shout, he jumped onto the landing, swinging the heavy power-strip over his head.

The Critic's academic cadre were no physical match for the Referee's knights-in-armor; but their fire extinguishers were surprisingly effective weapons. They coated everything in white caustic soda and filled the air with great blinding, billowing wads of flying, freezing droplets. It was clear that the defenders had been practicing.

The sight of the desperate struggle downstairs overwhelmed Eddy. He jumped down the stairs three at a time and flung himself into the midst of the battle. He conked a soda-covered helmet with a vicious overhead swing of his power-strip, then slipped and fell heavily on his back.

He began wrestling desperately across the soda-slick floor with a half-blinded knight. The knight clawed his visor up. Beneath the metal mask the knight was, if anything, younger than himself. He looked like a nice kid. He clearly meant well. Eddy hit the kid in the jaw as hard as he could, then began slamming his helmeted head into the floor.

Another knight kicked Eddy in the belly. Eddy fell off his victim, got up, and went for the new attacker. The two of them, wrestling clumsily, were knocked off balance by a sudden concerted rush through the doorway; a dozen Moral raiders slammed through, flinging torches and bottles of flaming gel. Eddy slapped his new opponent across the eyes with his soda-daubed hand, then lurched to his feet and jammed the loose spex back onto his face. He began coughing violently. The air was full of smoke; he was smothering.

He lurched for the door. With the panic strength of a drowning man, he clawed and jostled his way free.

Once outside the data-haven, Eddy realized that he was one of dozens of people daubed head to foot with white foam. Wheezing, coughing, collapsing against the side of the building, he and his fellow refugees resembled veterans of a monster cream-pie fight.

They didn't, and couldn't, recognize him as an enemy. The caustic soda was eating its way into Eddy's

cheap jumpsuit, reducing the bubbled fabric to weeping red rags.

Wiping his lips, ribs heaving, Eddy looked around. The spex had guarded his eyes, but their filth subroutine had crashed badly. The internal screen was frozen. Eddy shook the spex with his foamy hands, fingersnapped at them, whistled aloud. Nothing.

He edged his way along the wall.

At the back of the crowd, a tall gentleman in a medieval episcopal mitre was shouting orders through a bullhorn. Eddy wandered through the crowd until he got closer to the man. He was a tall, lean man, in his late forties, in brocaded vestments, a golden cloak and white gloves.

This was the Moral Referee. Eddy considered jumping this distinguished gentleman and pummeling him, perhaps wrestling his bullhorn away and shouting contradictory orders through it.

But even if he dared to try this, it wouldn't do Eddy much good. The Referee with the bullhorn was shouting in German. Eddy didn't speak German. Without his spex he couldn't read German. He didn't understand Germans or their issues or their history. In point of fact he had no real reason at all to be in Germany.

The Moral Referee noticed Eddy's fixed and calculating gaze. He lowered his bullhorn, leaned down a little from the top of his portable mahogany pulpit, and said something to Eddy in German.

"Sorry," Eddy said, lifting his spex on their neckchain. "Translation program crashed."

The Referee examined him thoughtfully. "Has the acid in that foam damaged your spectacles?" he said, in excellent English.

"Yes sir," Eddy said. "I think I'll have to strip 'em and blow-dry the chips."

The Referee reached within his robe and handed Eddy a monogrammed linen kerchief. "You might try this, young man."

"Thanks a lot," Eddy said. "I appreciate that, really."

"Are you wounded?" the Referee said, with apparently genuine concern.

"No, sir. I mean, not really."

"Then you'd better return to the fight," the Referee said, straightening. "I know we have them on the run. Be of good cheer. Our cause is just." He lifted his bullhorn again and resumed shouting.

The first floor of the building had caught fire. Groups of the Referee's people were hauling linked machines into the street and smashing them to fragments on the pavement. They hadn't managed to knock the bars from the windows, but they had battered some enormous holes through the walls. Eddy watched, polishing his spex.

Well above the street, the wall of the third floor began to disintegrate.

Moral Knights had broken into the office where Eddy had last seen the Cultural Critic. They had hauled their hydraulic ram up the stairs with them. Now its blunt nose was smashing through the brick wall as if it were stale cheese.

Fist-sized chunks of rubble and mortar cascaded to the street, causing the raiders below to billow away. In seconds, the raiders on the third floor had knocked a hole in the wall the size of a manhole cover.

First, they flung down an emergency ladder. Then, office furniture began tumbling out to smash to the pavement below: voice mailboxes, canisters of storage disks, red-spined European law-books, network routers, tape backup-units, color monitors. . . .

A trenchcoat flew out the hole and pinwheeled slowly to earth. Eddy recognized it at once. It was Frederika's sandpaper coat. Even in the midst of shouting chaos, with an evil billowing of combusting plastic now belching from the library's windows, the sight of that fluttering coat hooked Eddy's awareness. There was something in that coat. In its sleeve pocket. The key to his airport locker.

Eddy dashed forward, shoved three knights aside, and grabbed up the coat for himself. He winced and skipped aside as a plummeting office chair smashed to the street, narrowly missing him. He glanced up frantically.

He was just in time to see them throw out Frederika.

The tide was leaving Düsseldorf, and with it all the schooling anchovies of Europe. Eddy sat in the departure lounge balancing eighteen separate pieces of his spex on a velcro lap-table.

"Do you need this?" Frederika asked him.

"Oh yeah," Eddy said, accepting the slim chromed tool. "I dropped my dental pick. Thanks a lot." He placed it carefully into his black travel bag. He'd just spent all his European cash on a deluxe, duty-free German electronics repair kit.

"I'm not going to Chattanooga, now or ever," Frederika told him. "So you might as well forget that. That can't be part of the bargain."

"Change your mind," Eddy suggested. "Forget this Barcelona flight, and come transatlantic with me. We'll have a fine time in Chattanooga. There's some very deep people I want you to meet."

"I don't want anybody to meet," Frederika muttered darkly. "And I don't want you to show me off to your little hackerboy friends." Frederika had taken a hard beating in the riot, while covering the Critic's successful retreat across the rooftop. Her hair had been scorched during the battle, and it had burst from its meticulous braiding like badly overused steel wool. She had a black eye, and her cheek and jaw were scorched and shiny with medicinal gel. Although Eddy had broken her fall, her three-story tumble to the street had sprained her ankle, wrenched her back and barked both knees.

And she had lost her spex.

"You look just fine," Eddy told her. "You're very interesting, that's the point. You're deep! That's the appeal, you see? You're a spook, and a European, and a woman—those are all very deep entities, in my opinion." He smiled.

Eddy's left elbow felt hot and swollen inside his spare shirt; his chest, ribs, and left leg were mottled with enormous bruises. He had a bloodied lump on the back of his head where he'd smashed down into the rubble, catching her.

Altogether, they were not an entirely unusual couple among the departing Wende folk cramming the Düsseldorf airport. As a whole, the crowd seemed to be suffering a massive collective hangover—harsh enough to put many of them into slings and casts. And yet it was amazing how contented, almost smug, many of the vast crowd seemed as they departed their pocket catastrophe. They were wan and pale, yet cheerful, like people recovering from flu.

"I don't feel well enough to be deep," Frederika said, stirring in her beanbag. "But you did save my life, Eddy. I do owe you something." She paused. "It has to be something reasonable."

"Don't worry about it," Eddy told her nobly, rasping at the surface of a tiny circuit-board with a plastic spudger. "I mean, I didn't even break your fall, strictly speaking. Mostly I just kept you from landing on your head."

"You did save my life," she repeated quietly. "That crowd would have killed me in the street if not for you."

"You saved the Critic's life. I imagine that's a bigger deal."

"I was paid to save his life," Frederika said. "Anyway, I didn't save the bastard. I just did my job. He was saved by his own cleverness. He's been through a dozen of these damned things." She stretched cautiously, shifting in her beanbag. "So have I, for that matter. . . . I must be a real fool. I endure a lot to live my precious life. . . ." She took a deep breath. "Barcelona, *yo te quiero*."

"I'm just glad we checked out of that clinic in time to catch our flights," Eddy told her, examining his work with a jeweler's loupe. "Could you believe all those soccer kids in there? They sure were having fun. . . . Why couldn't they be that good-tempered *before* they beat the hell out of each other? Some things are just a mystery, I guess."

"I hope you have learned a good lesson from this," Frederika said. "Sure have," Eddy nodded. He blew dried crud from the point of his spudger, then picked up a chrome pinchclamp and threaded a tiny screw through the earpiece of his spex. "I can see a lot of deep potential in the Wende. It's true that a few dozen people got killed here, but the city must have made an absolute fortune. That's got to look promising for the Chattanooga city council. And a Wende offers a lot of very useful exposure and influence for a cultural networking group like CAPCLUG."

"You've learned nothing at all," she groaned. "I don't know why I hoped it would be different."

"I admit it—in the heat of the action I got a little carried away," Eddy said. "But my only real regret is that you won't come with me to America, Or, if you'd really rather, take me to Barcelona. Either way, the way I see it, you need someone to look after you for a while."

"You're going to rub my sore feet, yes?" Frederika said sourly. "How generous you are."

"I dumped my creep girlfriend. My dad will pick up my tab. I can help you manage better. I can improve your life. I can fix your broken appliances. I'm a nice guy."

"I don't want to be rude," she said, "but after this, the thought of being touched is repulsive." She shook her head, with finality. "I'm sorry, Eddy, but I can't give you what you want."

Eddy sighed, examined the crowd for a while, then repacked the segments of his spex and closed his tool kit. At last he spoke up again. "Do you virch?"

"What?"

"Do you do virtuality?"

She was silent for a long moment, then looked him in the eye. "You don't do anything really strange or sick on the wires, do you, Edward?"

"There's hardly any subjective time-lag if you use high-capacity transatlantic fiber," Eddy said.

"Oh. I see."

"What have you got to lose? If you don't like it, hang up."

Frederika tucked her hair back, examined the departure board for the flight to Barcelona, and looked at the toes of her shoes. "Would this make you happy?"

"No," Eddy said. "But it'd make me a whole lot more of what I already am." •