

Goddesses
by Linda Nagata

I

In the birthing room of a tiny clinic, in a town in Southern India, holding the hand of another man's wife, Michael Fielding felt chaos rise quietly through the world. Like the gentle flood of an untamed river, it seeped into his life, dissolving the past, laying down the mud that would grow the future.

Jaya's hand tightened on his. Her lips parted, ruby-red jewels set against her cream-coffee skin, their color that of a tailored strain of bacteria cohabiting in her cells.

"Another's starting," she whispered. Exhaustion feathered her words. "Michael ... all the old women lied ... when they promised it would be easier ... the second time."

"You're almost there," he assured her. "You're doing terrific."

Sheo's voice backed him up, speaking from the beige picture frame of the open portal, sitting on the rickety metal table at the head of the bed. It was a voice-only connection, so the portal's screen displayed a generic sequence of abstract art. "Michael's right, my love. You are wonderful."

"Sheo?" Jaya's dark eyes opened. She turned toward Michael, but she wasn't looking at him. Instead, her gaze fixed on the lens of his net visor that concealed his eyes like gray sunglasses. She seemed to search the shades for some trace of her husband. Her expression was captured by tiny cameras on the shades' frame. Processors translated her image to digital code, then shunted it to Sheo's mobile address, across town or across the continent—Michael had lost track of how far Sheo had progressed in his frantic journey to meet his wife.

Jaya should have been home in Bangalore, enjoying the services of the finest hospital in the country. She did not belong in this primitive clinic, where the obstetrician was a face on a monitor, checking on her through a stereoscopic camera that pointed between her legs.

Of course it was Michael's fault. He'd been in-country two weeks, the new district director for Global Shear. It was an assignment he'd coveted, but with only five days' notice before his transfer from the Hong Kong office, he had not been ready for it.

Jaya took pity on him. Claiming her maternity leave might otherwise end in terminal boredom, she took a train to Four Villages, to help Michael find his way through barriers of language and local custom.

He and Jaya had both interned at Global Shear, members of a five-person training team so cohesive that, ten years after the course work ended, four of them still met almost daily on a virtual terrace to exchange the news of their private lives and their careers. When Jaya stepped off the train to embrace Michael on the dusty platform, it was the first time they had ever met in real space ... and it hadn't mattered. If they had grown up in the same house, Michael could not have felt any closer to her.

Now the baby was coming three weeks early.

Everything happened so much faster these days.

Sheo's voice crooned through the portal speaker, calm as a holy man preaching peace and brotherhood.

"You're strong and you're beautiful, Jaya. And you've done this before. Our beautiful Gita—"

Fury heated Jaya's black eyes. "That was six years ago! Now I am old! And you're not here."

"I've got a zip," he explained quickly. "I'm leaving the airport now. I'll be there in just a few more minutes."

"He'll be here," Michael whispered, fervently hoping it was true. With a white cotton cloth, he daubed at the sweat gleaming on Jaya's forehead and cheeks. The clinic's air conditioning had been shut off at midnight. It would not be restored until after dawn, when the sun rose high enough to activate the rooftop solar tiles. Windows had been thrown open to the night. In the distance, a train murmured, base whispers interrupted by rhythmic thumps that went on and on and on until Michael felt the train must surely run all the way to Bangalore.

Jaya's eyes closed. The muscles in her face emerged in severe outline as the contraction climaxed. Michael dipped the cloth in a bowl of water and wiped at her forehead, until she growled at him to leave her alone.

Down between her legs, the midwife, who spoke excellent English, sighed happily. "Ah, he's almost here. Gently now, lady. Push gently, so he doesn't tear you."

"Where are you, Sheo?" Jaya cried. "It's happening now."

"I'm here!" The calmness in Sheo's voice had cracked. "I'm outside."

A screech of dirty brakes and the growl of wet pavement under tires testified to the arrival of his zip. "Get your ass in here, Sheo," Michael growled.

Jaya gasped. From the foot of the bed, the midwife cried, "Here is the head! He's here ... just a little more, a little more ... there!" And Jaya's breath blew out in a long, crying exhalation. "There my lady, now only his body to come, easy, easy."

Sheo stumbled past the curtain, struggling to pull an old set of surgical scrubs over his beige business shirt. A nurse followed after him, her face stern as she fought to grab the gown's danglings ties.

Sheo still wore his own shades, and as he cried out Jaya's name a whistle of feedback snapped out of the portal on the bedside table. Michael leaned over and slapped the thing off. Then the baby was there. The midwife had the child in her hands, but as she gazed at it, her happy expression drained away. Her mouth shrank to a pucker. Her eyes seemed to recede within a mantle of soft, aging flesh. The stern nurse saw the change. She leaned past the midwife's shoulder to look at the child, and her eyes went wide with an ugly surprise.

For a dreadful moment Michael was sure the baby was dead. Then he heard the tiny red thing whimper. He saw its arm move, its little fingers clench in a fierce fist. Was it deformed then? Impossible. Jaya had employed the best obstetric care. If there had been a problem, she would have known.

Sheo crouched at Jaya's side. He whispered to her, he kissed her face. Neither of them had noticed the midwife and her distress, and for that Michael felt thankful. But he had to see the baby.

At his approach, the midwife looked up warily. She pulled the baby close to her breast as if to hide whatever damning evidence she had seen.

"No," Michael said. "Let me see."

She seemed ready to resist, but then she sighed, and held the child out.

The little girl was a mess. White goop filled a sea of wrinkles. There were downy patches of dark hair on her shoulders, and her face was flushed red. Michael grinned. A typical newborn. He turned to Jaya. "She's beautiful. A beautiful little girl."

The doctor on the monitor agreed, and still Michael felt as if a shadow had swum sinuous through this night, drawing all of them a little deeper into the haunted past.

.....

Michael had been warned about the strangeness of this place.

It was not quite three weeks since the wall screen in his Hong Kong office had opened on an image of Karen Hampton, smiling slyly from behind her desk, with the Singapore skyline visible through the window at her back.

She'd asked if he still had a taste for challenges, and he'd risen like a shark on blood scent.

Karen Hampton was in her sixties, and Michael could only think of her as classy. Her skin was fair, her features petite, her manner of dress stiff-Gotham-uppercrust; but when she laughed, Karen Hampton sounded like a trucker bellied up to a bar. She was laughing now. "That's my Michael! Still hungry." Then her face grew stern. No longer the sympathetic mentor shepherding his career, she transformed into the unflappable director of Global Shear Asia. "I want you to be the next site director at Four Villages."

He could not believe what he was hearing. "Karen! Hell yes. You know I've wanted this from the concept stage."

Her gaze didn't soften. "I know, but nevertheless, I'm advising you to think hard about it, Michael. This is not so much a favor as a chance to ruin your career."

Four Villages was a quiet experiment that could change the path of development in impoverished regions throughout the world. Global Shear had won a ten-year contract as civil administrator in the district—and not as a glorified cooperative extension service. They had been hired to overhaul a failed bureaucracy, and to that end, many traditional government functions, from real property inventories to taxation, had been placed in the corporation's hands.

"You aren't going to show a positive balance sheet for at least five years," Karen warned him. "Maybe longer. We have been hired to grow an economy. Within ten years, we must develop four essential aspects of a sustainable trade system: infrastructure, information, financing, and trust. I put trust last not because it is the least important but because it is the most important. Only when trust is firmly established, and our presence here welcomed by a majority of residents, will we begin to see a profit."

Global Shear's contract would be financed partly through the World Bank, but primarily through a carefully defined flat tax, so that the corporation's income would rise with economic activity. In a region of sixteen million people, the profit potential was enormous. So were the challenges, of course, but if the

job was easy, it would have already been done.

"We will be wrecking traditional relationships between farmers, landlords, and business people," Karen warned. "We will be stumbling through issues of religion, caste, and gender. We will be accused of corrupting traditional culture and it will be true. To many, we will be the enemy. But at the same time, if we deal honestly and enthusiastically with everyone, self-interest will convince the majority that we are performing a right and proper job. The poor are the majority here, Michael. Your goal is to change that fact. Your biggest challenge will be your own preconceptions.

"You've worked in Sarajevo, Kurdistan, Rangoon, Hong Kong, but nothing you've experienced will leave you feeling as displaced as you will feel after a few weeks in Four Villages. This project is not about New Delhi. It's definitely not about Bangalore. It's not about the educated, westernized Indians you have worked with in our offices around the world. It's different. Remember that, and you might make it through your first month. It's also utterly human. Remember that as well, and you might outlast your predecessor, who succumbed to culture shock in less than a year."

Karen had warned him, and after two weeks in-country, Michael knew she hadn't exaggerated. If not for Jaya he might have been lost, but even Jaya was a foreigner here. How many evenings had they spent in despairing laughter, trying to decode the bizarre demands of a merchant or a farmer or a local police officer? Or the medical staff in a rural hospital?

In the clinic's dimly-lit hallway, Michael met the stern-faced nurse, pulling fresh sheets from a closet. He approached her, driven by a need to understand. "Why did you look that way, when you saw Jaya's baby? As if something about her frightened you?"

The nurse's face was hard, like well-aged wax. "I don't know what you mean, Mr. Fielding. It's as you said, a beautiful baby girl."

"Please." Michael moved half a step closer. At six foot one, he towered over the nurse. On some level he knew he was using his height to bully her, but he had never had it in him to look away from a bad situation. "You saw something. Please tell me what it was."

The moan of another woman's labor seeped from behind drawn curtains. Anger flashed in the nurse's eyes. "I saw that she is a girl."

"Of course she's a girl, but what's wrong with her?"

"That is enough." The nurse slipped past him with her burden of sheets.

"Wait," Michael pleaded. "I don't understand."

She looked back at him. Had her expression softened? "It is nothing, sir. Just a surprise. Mostly, these women have boys. When they have girls, it is usually a mistake."

"A mistake?"

"I am glad it's not a mistake this time."

.....

Later, Michael walked the dim corridor with Sheo, while the nurses tended to Jaya and changed her gown. "They were shocked you had a daughter."

Sheo's lips pursed in a long sigh, while outside, rain pattered in peaceful rhythm. "The old ways are dying out, but change doesn't happen everywhere at once. This is my second daughter, and I would not wish it any different. But for a family living a traditional life, a daughter is not an asset. For the very poor, she can be a financial disaster. Illiterate, subservient, she is of little use. It will cost her family to raise her, train her, and then they will have to pay another family to take her in."

"The midwife said most ladies here have boys."

"Did she? Well. There is always talk."

"Infanticide?" The word softened, set against the rain.

"It starts much earlier, I think." Sheo shook his head. "But don't talk of these things now, Michael. Not on my daughter's birthday. She's beautiful, isn't she? As beautiful as her mother."

II

One more battle nearly won.

Cody Graham leaned back in the shotgun seat of the two-person ATV, tired but psyched following an afternoon spent roving the thriving grasslands of Project Site 270. "It feels so good to get out of the office!"

She glanced at Ben Whitman, hunched under his Green Stomp cap as he worked the ATV up the slope. The kid was smiling. Enough of a smile that Cody caught a flash of teeth. She congratulated herself. It was the most expressive response she'd managed to wring out of nineteen-year-old Ben. Not that he was unfriendly, or even shy. Just a bit reserved. Nervous, maybe, in the presence of the big-shot boss.

"You've done a great job here," she added, as the ATV ploughed a path through waist-high grasses.

"You keep saying that."

"Oh, and you do a great self-check. Nice, clean toxin smears."

"Oh, thanks. Clean pee. My speciality."

Cody laughed. For six months Ben had been Green Stomp's only full-time employee at 270. Cleanup at the hazardous waste site was nearing completion. Staff activity had been reduced to a daily round of detailed soil assays, with the occasional application of a spray or injection of nutrient-fortified bacteria to areas where microbial activity had declined. The bacteria worked to break down toxic molecules into safe and simple carbon groups—food for less exotic microbes serving as natural decomposers within the soil. An inspection tour of 270 by the federal oversight officer was scheduled in three weeks, so Cody had set up a tour of her own in advance of that, to look for any outstanding problems. She hadn't found any. Green Stomp would close out 270 as a showcase project.

Ben's hands tightened on the wheel as the ATV bounced upslope to the project office: a green-gold, wind-engineered tent anchored to an elevated platform. The graceful tent was a huge step above the ugly

mobile trailers Cody had used eleven years ago when she and her partners tackled their first bioremediation project. Using both natural and genetically-tailored soil bacteria, along with select plants, they had set out to clean a hazardous waste site contaminated with perchloroethylene.

PCE was a common—and carcinogenic—industrial chemical. For many years it was believed that no microbe could break it down to harmless components. Then, in 1997, researchers unveiled a new bacterium found in the sludge of an abandoned sewage plant that could do just that. Genetic tailoring modified the strain to work in dry land environments, and since then thousands of polluted sites had been restored.

"You know," Ben said, his voice strained and his knuckles showing white as he gripped the wheel, "when 270 closes down, I'm going to be out of a job."

Cody's smile broadened. "That's the second reason I came down here. I wanted to talk to you about that."

.....

While Ben prepped his soil samples for mailing to Green Stomp's central lab, Cody laid claim to the administrator's office. With a cup of fresh coffee in hand, she leaned back in the chair, kicking her feet up on the empty desk top. The office looked out on the lush grassland of the project site. She could see the trail taken by the ATV, and—hazed by distance—she could just glimpse the glittering surface of the Missouri River through gaps in the broken levee.

Three years ago Project Site 270 had been farm country—prime farm country, at least when spring flooding was minimal and the levees held. In the spring of '09 the levees gave way. Floodwaters destroyed the freshly-planted crop, at the same time spreading sewage, spilled petroleum products and the hazardous waste from illegal dumping across the fertile land. It had happened many times before, but in '09 a new ingredient was added. Under the pressure of rust and water, several abandoned storage tanks cracked, leaking a grim cocktail of restricted pesticides into the muddy aftermath of the flood. The disaster went undiscovered for weeks, until wildlife started turning up dead.

Cody scowled as a doe emerged from a windbreak of poplars to the north. Animals were reservoirs of fat-soluble pesticides; the stuff concentrated in their tissues as they ate contaminated plants. Fences had been built to keep deer off the project site. Traps had been laid to contain smaller species that could not be fenced out. But no containment system was perfect. "Yo, Ben!" she called. "Looks like you've got a breach in the fence."

He appeared from the direction of the lunch room, a steaming cup of coffee in hand. "That doe again?"

"It's a doe."

He looked out the window. "I think she's getting in at the foot of the bluff by the river. I swear she hangs out there and waits until the motion sensors are switched off."

"Can you remove her today?"

"Sure. Before I go home."

Until the land was certified clean, Green Stomp's contract called for all large wildlife to be expelled.

Cody nodded at a chair on the other side of the desk. "Have a seat, Ben. We need to talk about your future."

"Then I've got one?"

He looked so anxious Cody had to smile. It was scary to be out of a job. Unemployment benefits didn't last long. No one starved, of course. You could crunch government crackers until the next millennium and never run short of nutrients thanks to the new mondo-wheats. But it wasn't fun. "Sit down," Cody urged again, and this time Ben sat, cradling his coffee cup in his hands, staring at the steam that curled up from its black surface.

"Your supervisor speaks highly of you," Cody said. "Six months working alone, and you haven't missed a day or screwed up a sample."

Ben looked up. He pushed his cap back on his head. "She said to talk to you about continuing with the company."

"Good advice. Are you willing to move?"

He frowned over that. Cody suspected he'd spent his whole life here, along the river. "Sure. I guess. Like to where?"

Cody looked up at the ceiling. She pursed her lips. "Say ... to Belize? Or Sierra Leone. Maybe even Siberia?"

A look of despair came over Ben's face. Cody slipped her feet off the desk, immediately sorry. "I'm joking! We're just a little company, strictly North American. The biggest adventure you could expect is the wilds of Pennsylvania."

"I'll take it," Ben said, with painful solemnity. "I'm not the smartest guy around, but I know how to work. I don't get bored. I don't slack."

"I don't hire grunt labor," Cody told him, "for anything more than short term. You'd have to be willing to go back to school. If things work out, Green Stomp could eventually sponsor you for an online degree."

Again he stared at the steaming cup clenched in his white-knuckled hand. "I never did too good in school."

"Want to try again?"

He raised his eyes to look at her. She saw fear there, and hunger. A fierce hunger.

Say yes, she urged him silently.

Ben was a smart kid. That was easy to tell after working with him only one afternoon, but it was equally obvious someone had been carping in his ear all his life that he was basically a dumb shit who would never amount to anything. It was hard to counter that early life influence.

"How much school?" he asked.

Cody grinned wickedly. She had spent her own formative years in a private boarding school, as a charity case on a corporate scholarship, seeing her mother only on rare weekends. Those had been the hardest years of her life, but receiving the scholarship to attend Prescott Academy had also been her biggest break. She bore no sympathy for anyone out to shirk an education. "Oh, ten or fifteen years of college should do it for you, Ben."

His lips twitched in a ghost of a smile. "At entry-level wages?"

"Pay commensurate with experience. Say yes, Ben."

He nodded slowly. "Okay then. Yes."

.....

Cody had made Green Stomp's reputation by tackling the toughest, dirtiest jobs she could find. The harder the challenge, the more she liked it. Kicking apart toxic "nonbiodegradable" molecules was a physical thrill. In her mind, it was the same as kicking down the mental walls that fenced people in. Like the one that said kids from bad neighborhoods couldn't make it in life. Kick. Or the one that said technology must eventually lead to apocalypse, whether through war, engineered disease, overpopulation, or pollution. Kick. Cody had seen a lot of tough problems, but she hadn't seen the end of the world yet. Look hard enough, and problems could provide their own solutions. Green Stomp already held several patents on specialized strains of bacteria recovered from heavily polluted sites.

She tapped her data glove, waking up the portal standing open on the desk. The collapsible monitor had a display the size of an eight-by-twelve-inch piece of paper. It was a quarter inch thick, and when not in use, it could be folded into thirds and slipped into a briefcase. Now it stood open, leaning back on a T-shaped foot. "Hark, link to Jobsite."

The portal opened a cellular connection to Cody's server. Seconds later the screen came to life with an image of Jobsite's bioremediation lobby.

Cody turned the portal around so Ben could see. "Green Stomp gets about a third of our projects through Global Shear. You've heard of them? No? A multinational. We sold them a twenty percent share of Green Stomp in exchange for expansion capital, so they like to drop business in our direction. Plus I interned there, and several execs know and love me." She grinned.

Ben's smile was fleeting as he puzzled over the lobby architecture.

"Anyway," Cody went on, "another third of our projects represent repeat business from satisfied clients. We're grateful for that, of course, but let me tell you a secret. The most interesting jobs come off the public link. Go ahead. Scroll through the list. Check it out."

The portal was keyed to Cody's voice. It didn't know Ben, so instead of speaking to it, he leaned forward, tentatively pressing the manual keys on the frame. "Do you ever get scared?" he asked, as his

gaze flicked over the listings. "Do you ever worry you'll poison yourself?"

Cody leaned back in her chair, feeling her chest pull tight. "It's something you always have to keep in mind."

In fact, she'd already poisoned herself. Somehow, early in her career, she'd screwed up and a toxin had gotten into her blood, into her flesh, into the growing embryo in her womb. She'd been so careful at home: no alcohol, no coffee, no soda, no drugs. It hadn't mattered. When the pregnancy was terminated, Cody felt a chip of her soul flushed out along with her daughter. "These things happen," the doctor had assured her, but Cody needed to know why. She went looking for a causative event—and she found it when a bioassay of her own liver tissue revealed PCP contamination—the prime pollutant on every job site she'd worked the previous two years.

"Didn't you say you grew up on the west coast?" Ben asked, his pale cheeks aglow in the portal's light. "A place called Victoria Glen?"

"Yes."

"Well, guess what? It's on the job list."

Cody turned the portal back around, and frowned.

III

When Michael left the clinic, night still drowned the street, thick and warm, like the spirit of some tropical ocean ghosting in the rain. Inside, Jaya was teaching her newborn to nurse, while Sheo arranged their journey home.

Michael paused on the clinic's veranda, listening to cocks crowing the unseen dawn and the musical patter of rain.

A headlight cruised the street. It hesitated just before the clinic, then it slid into the pull-out. Diffuse light from the clinic windows glinted on the narrow, beetle-shell chassis of a zip, painted pink and looking hardly large enough to hold a man. Powered by hydrogen fuel cells, its engine ran silent, so that its arrival was marked only by tire noise. Rain dashed through the beam of its dim headlight. The aerodynamic canopy rose a few inches. A boy of perhaps twelve or thirteen years peeked out, fixing Michael with a hopeful look.

Michael shook his head slightly. He hated to disappoint such an intrepid entrepreneur, up so early to find the fares that would pay off the loan on his zip, but his feelings were running high and he couldn't think of squeezing himself into the zip's stuffy little shell.

The boy shrugged, closed the canopy, and pulled away.

A cow lowed, and a rat scurried across the street. Michael hesitated, reminded that he was a stranger in this place. Still, he was not alone. His right index finger curled, to tap a point on the palm of his data glove. A green ready light came on in the corner of his shades. "Send voice mail to the Terrace," he whispered. A mike on his earpiece picked up the command. "Start: Jaya and Sheo are the proud parents of a beautiful and impatient little girl ..."

He found himself smiling as he described the birth for their circle of friends. Then he touched his gloved palm again, sending the message to the Terrace.

Warm rain enfolded him as he stepped off the veranda, soaking his hair and transforming his silk shirt into a transparent film. The silk was artificial, spun in a local factory financed by Global Shear. Other grants had gone out to farmers and small business owners all over the district, but could it ever be enough?

Jaya's daughter had been born into a world of nearly eight billion people. A billion of them lived in India alone. Michael tried to imagine the scale of it, but he could not. We are a river, flooding the world. Inevitably remaking it.

A glyph blinked on in the corner of his shades, surrounded by a pink query circle. Michael recognized the symbol of the Terrace and smiled. "Link."

"Michael!" Etsuko's soft, clipped English laughed in his ear. "I guess you are a surrogate father now!"

"That's right, old man," Ryan chipped in, his Australian voice loud and bold. "You do have some images for us? Flash them."

"Archived," Michael said. "Sorry. Sort it out later, okay?"

"First-timer," Ryan chided.

Etsuko asked, "Where are you now?"

"Walking home."

"Walking?" she echoed. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Ah," Ryan scoffed. "He's a company bigwig now, with his own eye in the sky following after him."

Michael groaned. "I keep forgetting about that." Global Shear had assigned him a permanent guard in the form of a mini-drone aircraft with a wingspan the length of his arm. Powered by solar cells and a lightweight battery system that could get it through the night, it tracked his movements, ever-poised to raise an alarm should anything go wrong.

"We're bored in our little cubbies," Ryan said. "Give us the scene."

Bored? If Ryan got bored, it was only on weekends, before the Asian markets opened. During the rest of the week he traded currencies under contract for a large Australian firm.

Etsuko worked in the calmer environment of a California-based multinational specializing in online education. She staffed the East Asian shift, so her workday often began in the warm, hazy afternoons of Santa Barbara.

Michael's day ran well behind theirs—a fact Ryan tended to forget. He tapped his glove, activating the cameras on his shades. Pan left to right: one- and two-story stucco and plastic dwellings loomed out of the darkness, squeezing against the rain-splattered street. A bicycle trundled past, its rider hidden beneath an umbrella, two squawking chickens strapped to the handlebars. From a few blocks away, the screech of wet brakes.

The video feed uploaded over cellular links. On the Terrace, Ryan would seem to be sitting at a patio table in the shade of a pepper tree, sipping java in mild morning sunlight, fenced in by the dense foliage of

a mature garden, or perhaps gazing out over a seascape with a hint of salt tang in the air. Whatever environment was running, half of it had now vanished, replaced by Michael's input.

"God!" Ryan said, and Michael could hear his feet hit the floor. "It's still night there—and it's pouring."

"It's grand, isn't it?" Michael asked. He slicked his hair back, tasting the water on his lips. Precious water, falling like a blessing timed by forgotten gods. Rain had been absent for the two weeks he'd been in-country. As his census teams inventoried the tiny farms surrounding Four Villages, they faced farmers more and more anxious over the success of this season's crop of rice or peanuts, and increasingly unwilling to speak to the officials responsible for confirming their landholdings and setting their taxes. "The rain will help," Michael said firmly. Rain would ease everyone's mood, and in the long run even the most recalcitrant farmers would see that their interests were the same as Global Shear's.

Right?

A stray breeze puffed from an alley, carrying the dilute but distinct scent of an open sewer. Global Shear was responsible for developing infrastructure, overseeing environmental restoration, encouraging private credit, and enhancing agricultural extension services—all popular activities. But they were also the tax collector, and fairness demanded a thorough inventory of the district's landholdings, along with a clarification of boundaries and ownership—all the while smoothing the ruffled feathers of displaced local officials.

(Diplomacy, Karen Hampton would say, is a grim necessity.)

So were creative solutions. More than one company official had lobbied for a policy that would encourage family farms to merge into larger agricultural concerns so they could practice economies of scale, but such schemes didn't take into consideration the dense population.

Michael talked it over with Ryan and Etsuko as he made his way through the waking neighborhoods. "Hand labor still makes sense, for now. Replace the thousands of laborers with machines, and where will the laborers find work?"

At first glance, the sheer numbers of people seemed an intractable problem, but the truth lay deeper. When warfare and ethnic strife were kept at bay, birth rates plummeted. Four Villages was no exception. The town itself was an accident of geography, grown up fast and ugly from the melding of what had once been four separate hamlets. Most of the women here were having only two or three children. . . .

Or was it two or three boys? Michael promised himself he would examine the statistics when he went into the office later in the day.

Lights were coming on in the houses, and the smell of cooking gruel drifted out into the street. "It's more than birth control," Etsuko was saying. "It's education, economic independence, a sense of confidence in the future . . ."

"Sure," Ryan agreed. "That and coveting your neighbor's success."

Michael burst out laughing. There was plenty of inspiration for the ambitious in Four Villages. On every street, affluent homes huddled next to shacks. Electric lights spilled from some windows, while others held the soft gleam of candles. A mixed neighborhood like this was a robust place—in sharp contrast to the cankerous hearts of the original villages, where ancient buildings housed either fundamentalist Hindus or fundamentalist Moslems who still went about life as they had for centuries: in grinding poverty,

practicing and defending their faith in settings that barely tolerated the presence of a Global Shear census taker.

The warm rain slackened as Michael turned onto a muddy lane scarred by zip tires. His residence was third on the right—a large house owned by Global Shear, its white-washed face abutting the street. The house was built around an enclosed courtyard, where a neglected garden faced a long, lingering death.

As Michael approached, the old house detected his presence and a welcoming light switched on. It illuminated the alcove—and a large, bundled object huddled against the heavy double doors.

"Hello," Ryan said. "What's this?"

Etsuko hissed sharply. "Michael, be careful."

He stopped in the middle of the lane, his instincts made wary by antiterrorism training. He tried to see the anonymous object as some cloth-wrapped package stashed by a passing street merchant, perhaps to protect it from the rain. He tried to see it as trash.

Then the bundle stirred, faded cloth sliding aside as a head lifted, turned, and the face of a little girl blinked at him, dark eyes wide with confusion and fear.

"It's a kid," Ryan said. "Christ, look at her face. Somebody's punched her around."

Instead, Michael looked away from the bruises on her cheeks, wanting to believe they were only shadows. Gray mud streaked her black hair. A nose ring glinted silver. Her sari looked as if it had been purple once. Now it was a lifeless gray. Michael guessed her to be no more than thirteen years old.

The girl's right arm slid into view. No rings and no bracelets adorned that arm. It was a fleshless bone covered in light brown skin, so very thin there did not seem to be enough muscle mass even to raise that fragile hand. Nevertheless, she pressed it against the wall. She tried to stand, but her limbs would not be controlled, her balance was absent. Michael had once seen a dog taken by an epileptic seizure. The will to move existed, but it only reached the muscles in fits and starts. It was the same with this girl. After several seconds, she sank back to the alcove's tiled floor. She bowed her head. She pulled her sari up to cover her face while Michael stood in the street, gaping, trying to find some precedent in his world for her sudden appearance, clueless what to do.

He told himself it was a dream. How was he supposed to get into his house?

Etsuko's voice was tense: "Michael, I am searching for a local emergency number."

Ryan: "Haven't you got one on file, mate?"

"Corporate security," Michael said stiffly. "That's all. Etsuko?"

"I am contacting the police."

"Don't," Ryan said. "This isn't the silicon coast. If the cops could help, she would have gone to them."

Michael stared at the girl. For Christ's sake, he was a businessman, not a charity worker, and it had already been a long, sleepless night. Let this be a dream.

The girl tried again to get to her feet. Again, she slid back to the ground.

"Jesus, Michael," Ryan said. "Are you just going to stand there? Mate, you've got to do something."

Michael's conscience screamed the same thing, yet still he didn't move. "What can I do?"

Some dark voice whispered that he could walk away, get breakfast in town, go straight to the office, give the girl a chance to disappear.

"Call corporate security," Etsuko said crisply. "They will help. They will get you inside."

"Bloody hell," Ryan said. "Boosting her to the next street over won't help her."

"He's not Mother Teresa."

"You could try calling a neighbor, mate."

Michael shook his head. "No, I don't think so." Tragedy was too common here. Sympathy wore thin. Just yesterday he had seen motherly Mrs. Shastri brandishing a heavy stick as she chased a beggar out of the lane.

Michael sighed. She was only a little girl. Still, in her presence, he sensed again the ghostly inundation of chaos. "Witnesses," he muttered. "Ryan, Etsuko—record everything, because you're my witnesses. Got it?" He fervently hoped the spy plane was active overhead.

The girl cringed as he approached. It was a tiny gesture, but startling. "Hey," Michael said. "I won't hurt you." He knelt beside her. Gently, he lifted her sari away from her face.

"The dirty bastards," Ryan muttered.

The girl's cheeks were dark with bruises. Her sari was soaked and she was shivering. Next door, Mrs. Shastri shouted at the servant who cooked for the family. Michael tensed. He didn't want the old gossip to see this girl. "Come inside," he said softly.

"That's it, mate," Ryan encouraged him. "It's the right thing to do."

The confused look in the girl's eyes told him she did not understand.

The Shastri dog took that moment to run into the street, a tiny, white-furred terror bouncing on short legs, yapping a fierce challenge. "Watch out, mate!" Ryan cried. "Attack from the rear."

The girl gasped. The rat-dog took encouragement from that. It charged at Michael, its jaws snapping as it darted about, working up the nerve to bite.

Michael didn't think that would take long. Operating in survival mode now, he yelled at the house to open up. The triple bolts slipped in a simultaneous click, then the doors swung back. He launched a kick at the rat-dog. Then he lifted the girl—she weighed so little!—and stumbled with her into the house. As the doors closed, he heard Mrs. Shastri calling sweetly to her little terror.

.....

Ryan was laughing. "Very smooth, mate. You're a hero."
"Shut up."

Soft lights had come on in the house, falling across new carpet, designer furnishings, and walls paneled in rich faux-teak. The air was dry and cool, almost sterile. "Welcome home, Mr. Fielding," the house said in its motherly voice. "You have five messages."

Michael stood just inside the doors, his shoulders heaving, more with panic than exertion. Looking down at the girl, he found she had fainted, gone limp in his arms. Oh, this looked just great, didn't it? Avaricious foreign businessman kidnaps helpless girl. The local tabloids could churn a million hits out of a headline like that. Christ.

"Now you're committed," Etsuko said. "You must take care of her."

"Yeah." Michael carried the girl into the living room, where he laid her down on the western-style couch ... hoping she didn't have lice.

She looked so fragile. Tiny and breakable, as if her bones were thin glass copies of real bones, melting away in the heat of an inner fire. Her skin felt hot and her sari was covered in mud. The drawstring of a heavy cloth pouch was looped around her wrist. Michael slipped the pouch off and teased it open, feeling like a lout for abusing her privacy, feeling stupid for feeling like a lout. After all, he'd brought her into his house at no little risk to himself and she was helpless and he needed to know who she was, where she came from, and who to call. There had to be someone he could call.

He scowled at the contents of the pouch.

"What is it?" Etsuko asked.

"Dirt."

Well, not dirt exactly. More like a dark, loose humus smelling of garden shops and greenhouses.

"If that's her idea of a valuable," Ryan muttered. "She really is in a bad way." Michael closed the pouch, leaving it by the French doors that opened onto the neglected courtyard.

"Michael, I've got to take off for a while," Ryan said. "I've got an appointment that can't wait."

"Sure. Etsuko? I know you have work to do too. The house can record."

"You are sure?" she asked. "I can stay awhile."

"No, it's all right."

The link to the Terrace closed.

Michael looked at the girl. Her sari had fallen away, exposing her shoulders, her arms, her bruised face. Her skin was prickling, purpling in the air-conditioning. Of course—her clothes were soaked. He was

wet, too. The chill air bit at his skin. He headed for the bedroom.

Stripping off his silk shirt, he pitched it into a laundry basket. Then he opened a linen chest at the foot of the bed and pulled out a clean blanket. He used it to cover the girl, who was muttering now, though she didn't wake.

Next, Michael started some tea in the kitchen. The power meter was low, but the sun would be up soon. Even with the rain, the rooftop tiles would quickly recharge the house batteries, so there was no need to conserve. He pulled some leftover samosas out of the refrigerator. He heated some soup.

Sitting on a stool, he watched the soup spin in the microwave. He was thirty-two years old, one of the youngest managers in charge of a major district contract.

So start thinking, doofus.

"Hey," he said softly. "I could call the clinic."

With curled fingers, Michael tapped a trigger point on his data glove. He was tempted to ask for Jaya, but he was not going to bother her, not now. So he asked for the midwife who had seemed so relieved when Jaya had not rejected her baby girl.

After a few minutes a woman's voice came on the line. "Hello?" Suspicion and fear huddled in that one brief word. Her tone didn't change when Michael told her about the girl.

"This is a charity case, sir. You need to call a charity." She gave him the number of an organization.

Michael called the charity. Another woman answered. She listened to his story and blessed him, while Michael begged her to come pick the girl up. He would cover the cost of her care. Just return her to her family. Please?

"Mr. Fielding, given the circumstances in which this girl was found, it's likely she has no family."

"But she must have come from somewhere."

"Surely. But please understand. A girl like this has most likely been cast out of her home for ... infidelity, or sterility. These things happen, even in better neighborhoods."

Michael did not think this girl came from a better neighborhood. "Can you care for her then?"

"Sadly, no. We have no beds left. We would have to tend her on the street. Please understand, her circumstance is not unusual."

The microwave finished. Michael stared at it, fervently wishing the sun would rise, wanting to see light seep through the peach-colored blinds. "What's to become of her?"

"That is in the hands of God."

The woman promised to call around to other agencies. In the meantime, she would send someone over to check on the girl. Michael reminded her he would be more than willing to pay for the girl's care. She thanked him and linked off.

He slipped off his shades and peeled off the data glove. He sat on the stool, trying to visualize where this might go. He could not. He could not see even ten minutes ahead.

At least the soup was warm. He placed the bowl on a tray, along with a spoon, then he zapped the samosas for a few seconds to warm them. They came out soggy, instead of the crisp, fried pastry they had once been, but he put them alongside the soup anyway. Then he carried the whole to the living room, where the girl was sitting up, looking around with a dazed expression. Her eyes went wide when she saw him.

Michael was suddenly conscious of his bare chest, bronzy skin over health club muscles. He suffered a devastating suspicion that he was communicating inaccurate innuendoes. Christ. He set the tray down on the low table fronting the couch, spilling a little of the soup. The girl pulled the blanket up to her chin. "For you," Michael said, his cheeks heating with a despairing flush. Then he hurried to the bedroom and got out a shirt.

When he looked again, the girl was sitting on the floor, holding the soup bowl in her delicate hands, drinking from the rim, her eyes closed, as if she were privileged to taste some nectar of the gods. Michael felt a rush of relief, thinking maybe, maybe he'd gotten it right. Then his gaze fell on the sofa, and he shuddered at what Mrs. Nandy, the cleaning lady, would say about those streaks of gray mud ground into the upholstery.

The house spoke English, but after some exploration of its options menu, Michael discovered it also had personalities schooled in Hindi and Tamil. He activated the Hindi personality, then set about introducing it to the girl. That wasn't easy. She had said nothing so far, and the house needed a voice print as well as a visual image to accurately recognize her.

With two hands, Michael beckoned her away from where she huddled on the floor by the couch. She looked very frightened, but she followed him. When she stood in full view of the tiny cameras mounted in the corners of the room, he held up his palm, asking her to stop, to wait. "Hark," he said. "In Hindi-version, ask her to say hello."

Lilting words spilled forth in the soft voice of the house. The girl hunched, trembling. Her gaze searched the walls.

The house repeated its request. This time she looked at Michael. He nodded encouragement. Hesitantly, she placed her palms together. "Namaste," she whispered.

Michael smiled. "Ask her name."

The house spoke again, and her eyes grew wide with wonder. In a barely discernable voice she said, "Rajban."

"Rajban?" Michael asked.

She nodded. Michael grinned and tapped his chest. "Michael," he told her. Then he bowed. When he looked up, her cheeks were flushed. Her lips toyed with a smile. She started to reach for her sari, to pull it across her face, but when she saw the mud on it she scowled and let it go.

Michael asked if she wanted more food. She declined. He told her someone was coming to help her. That brought a such a look of fear that he wondered if the house had translated correctly. "Why don't you sit down?" he offered, indicating the couch. Rajban nodded, though she remained standing until he

left the room.

Returning to his bedroom, he took a quick shower, waiting all the while for the house to announce the arrival of the charity worker. No announcement came.

"Link to the office," he instructed the house as he shaved. "Check Rajban's name and image against census records." It wasn't exactly legal to access the records for personal use, but this wasn't exactly personal.

The house started to reply in Hindi. He corrected it impatiently. "English for me," he said. "Hindi for Rajban. Now, continue."

"No identity or residence can be established from available census data," the house informed him.

Michael swore softly. So Rajban was a nonentity, her existence unrecorded by his intrepid census teams. Which meant she was either new in town or a resident of one of the reticent fundamentalist neighborhoods.

"What does my schedule look like?"

"Daily exercise in the corporate gym from seven to eight," the feminine voice recited. "Then a breakfast meeting with Ms. Muthaye Lal of the Southern Banking Alliance from eight-thirty until ten. A staff meeting from ten-fifteen—"

"Can the SBA thing be postponed until tomorrow?"

"Inquiring. Please stand by."

Michael finished shaving. He cleaned the razor, then reached for a toothbrush.

"Ms. Lal is unable to schedule a meeting for tomorrow."

"Damn." He tapped the toothbrush on the counter. "This afternoon, then?"

"Inquiring. Please stand by." The response came quickly this time. "Ms. Lal is unable to schedule a meeting for this afternoon."

Michael sighed. No surprise. Everybody's schedule was full. Well, Ms. Muthaye Lal worked with poor women, through the SBA's community banking program. Perhaps she would have some advice for Rajban.

After Michael dressed, he looked into the living room. Rajban had fallen asleep on the floor beside the couch. He told himself it would be all right if he left for a few hours. The house would take care of her. And if she decided to leave ...

His jaw clenched. That would be the easiest solution for him, wouldn't it? If she just disappeared.

"Call the charity again," he told the house. Again, the woman on the other end of the line promised to send someone by.

He waited an hour. No one came. Rajban still slept. Michael wished he was sleeping too. His eyes felt

gritty, his body stiff. His brain was functioning with all the racing speed of a third-generation computer. He wondered if Jaya was awake.

In the bathroom medicine cabinet there was a box of Synthetic Sleep. Michael didn't often take metabolic drugs, but he'd been up all night, and if he wanted to get through this morning's meetings in coherent condition, he had to do something to convince his body that he'd had at least a few hours of rest. He peeled open the casing on one pill and swallowed it with a glass of water.

"Take care of Rajban," he told the house. "Teach her how you work. And call me if you have any questions, any problems. Okay?"

IV

Rajban woke with a gritty throat. Her muscles ached. Her joints ached. Her heart was beating too fast. "Namaste?" she whispered.

The house informed her the man had gone out.

He had not hurt her. Not yet.

She looked around the room, unsure how she had come to be here, knowing only that it was shameful. Mother-in-Law would never let her come home now.

It was Mother-in-Law who had sent her away.

She padded through the house, not daring to touch anything. She even worried about the carpet under her feet.

Turning a corner, she found the great double doors that had sheltered her last night. Her heart beat even faster. Were the doors locked? She half hoped they were. Out there, the horrible street waited for her. Nothing else. Yet she could not stay here. Hesitantly, her hand touched the latch, just to see if it was locked. She pressed on it—only a little!—and the latch leaped out of her grip, swinging down on its own with multiple clicks. The doors started to open. A razor of light streamed in. Frantically, Rajban threw herself against the doors. She held them, so they stood open only a crack. The day's heat curled over her fingers, while outside, women talked in cultured, confident voices.

Listening to them, Rajban trembled. She did not dare show herself in such company. Leaning forward, she forced the doors to shut again.

Back in the living room, she stood beside another set of doors. These opened onto the courtyard. She stared through their glass panes at a half-dead garden surrounded by high walls. Potted banana trees stood on one side like dry old men. Bare skeletons of dead shrubs jutted between the weeds. Yellow leaves floated on the surface of rain puddles.

There was no one outside, so again Rajban tried the latch. These doors opened as easily as the others. Steamy air flowed over her, laden with the smell of wet soil and unhappy plants. Cautiously, she stepped outside.

A paved path wound between the weeds. She followed it, discovering a servant's door in the back wall,

but it was locked and would not open.

The path brought her back to the house. She crouched in the open doorway, lost, not knowing what to do. Why was she here?

Clean, frigid air from the house mixed with dense, hot, scented air from the sweltering courtyard, like dream mixing with reality. Rajban struggled to separate the two, but they would not untwine. Hugging her knees to her chest, she rocked on her bare feet, seeing again the blinding flash of the morning sun reflected on the metal circles sewn into the hem of her sister-in-law's green sari. She squinted against the glare, and hurried on. Hurry. Her skin felt so hot. Her heart scrabbled like a wild mouse in a glass jar. Her veil kept slipping from her face, but she didn't dare stop to fix it. Sister-in-Law's bare brown heels flashed beneath the swinging hem of her sari. Rajban struggled to keep up, fearful in the presence of so many strangers. In the two years since her marriage she had not left the house of her husband's family. The borders of her life had been fixed by the courtyard garden and the crumbling kitchen where she helped Mother-in-Law prepare the meals.

Last year her husband went away.

In the months since, Rajban had often been sick with fevers and chills that no one else in the family shared. Her work suffered. Now Mother-in-Law was sending her away. "We have found a family in need of skilled hands to keep the house. They are a respectable family. You will serve them well. Gather your things. It is time to go."

There wasn't much to take. An extra sari. A necklace her mother had given her.

Before she left, Rajban slipped into the garden with a cloth bag from the kitchen. Fruit trees and vegetables thrived in boxes and tin cans and glass jars with drainage holes drilled carefully in the bottom. It had not always been so. When she first arrived in the household, the garden had been yellow and unhappy. But Rajban tended the soil as her mother had taught her, on their tiny farm in the country. She dug up patches of the courtyard with a heavy stick, mixing the dirt with chicken droppings and sometimes with nightsoil, but only when no one could see her, for her husband would never take her to bed again if he knew. When it rained, she caught the water that dripped from the rooftop, ladling it out over the dry days that would follow, praying softly as she worked. She turned the soil until it became soft, rich black, and sweet-smelling. One day as she turned it, she found a worm. Life from lifelessness. That day, she knew magic had flowed in to the soil.

A sickly mandarin tree grew in the cracked half of an old water barrel. Rajban teased away several handfuls of surface dirt, then gently she mixed the black soil in. Within days the tree rejoiced in a flush of new green leaves.

Magic.

Rajban mixed the old dirt into her pile. She dug more dirt from the hard floor of the courtyard. She stirred the pile every day, and every few days she repotted another plant. The garden thrived, but it was not enough to keep Mother-in-Law happy, so Rajban was being sent away. Quietly, she filled her cloth bag with handfuls of the magic soil. Then she smoothed the pile so no one would know.

A few minutes after following Sister-in-Law out the door, Rajban could no longer guess the proper way home. Fearfully she watched the step-step of Sister-in-Law's heels, the swing of her sari, the fierce flash of the sun in the decorative metal circles. And then somehow the green sari slipped out of sight.

Rajban wandered alone through the afternoon, not daring to think too hard. Night fell, and fear crawled in with the darkness. Respectable women were not found alone on the street at night.

Her fever saved her from rape. She's dirty, the boy who stole her mother's necklace growled to his companions. A dirty, infected, dying whore.

Now Rajban crouched in the courtyard doorway, shivering on the border between warm and cold, light and shadow, past and future, the dying garden on one side, the rich house on the other. An unexpected fury stirred in her breast and flushed across the palms of her hands.

Am I dying?

The possibility enraged her. She did not want to die. Emphatically not. Not now.

I want a baby, she thought. I want my mother. I want my own garden and a respectable life.

These things she would never have if she let herself die now.

.....

Rajban is fifteen.

V

Michael arrived by zip at the address recorded on his schedule—a European-style restaurant on the ground floor of a well-maintained home. A woman greeted him, speaking lightly accented English. "Welcome, Mr. Fielding. Ms. Lal has just arrived. Won't you come in?"

Air-conditioning enfolded him. He followed the hostess past widely-spaced tables occupied by well-dressed patrons. At a corner table a woman in a traditional sari rose as he approached. His shades caught her ID and whispered it in his ear. "Muthaye Lal, age twenty-seven, employed by Southern Banking Association four years—"

He tapped his glove, ending the recitation.

"Mr. Fielding, so glad you could come."

Coffee was poured, and a waiter brought a first course of papaya, pineapple, and mango. Muthaye tasted it, and smiled. She was not a pretty woman, but her dark eyes were confident as they took Michael's measure. Her enunciation was crisply British. "I will admit to some disappointment, Mr. Fielding, when I learned Global Shear had appointed another foreigner to head this district's office, but your background speaks well for you. Are you familiar with the Southern Banking Association's microeconomics program?"

Michael sipped his coffee, admiring the way criticisms and compliments twined together in her speech like the strands of a rope. Muthaye could have learned her negotiating tactics from Karen Hampton. Michael certainly had.

Rise to all challenges, especially if they've been promptly withdrawn.

He set the coffee down and smiled, choosing to answer the non-question first. "It's Global Shear policy to expand the international experience of our executives. Please don't take it personally. You probably know that seventy percent of our upper-level staff here at Four Villages is Indian."

Amusement danced in Muthaye's eyes. "And that Global Shear employs Indian executives in offices on three continents. Yes, I know, Mr. Fielding. Global Shear is a true multinational, with, I trust, community interests?"

"Of course. Cultural and economic vitality go hand in hand. That's our belief. And the SBA is well-known to us for its community endeavors. While I'm not familiar with the particulars of your microeconomics program, I have studied several others around the world."

Microeconomics had begun in Bangladesh, where a few hundred dollars loaned to a circle of impoverished women could seed a microenterprise that might eventually grow into a thriving business.

"Our program is well established," Muthaye told him. "We have over four thousand women participating in Four Villages alone. Each one of them has developed an independence, a self-reliance their mothers never knew."

Michael nodded. To educate and empower women in underdeveloped areas had long been a key to economic progress. The women's lives were tied up in their children. Selflessness came easier to them than to their men. "Global Shear invests many millions of dollars every year in this cause, throughout the world—and the returns have been impressive."

"Ah. That would be in the form of taxes you collect?"

"A measure of economic vitality."

"And your source of income."

"Doing well by doing good—"

"Benefits everyone. Yes, Mr. Fielding, I do agree. I asked for this meeting to discuss with you yet another opportunity for Global Shear to do well by doing good. I would like you to sponsor a line of debit cards to be used by members of the Southern Banking Association. Most of our deposits are tiny, you understand. A few rupees at a time. The money comes in as coinage, and generally it goes out the same way. If the coinage can be exchanged for debit cards, loss from theft would plummet."

"Is theft such a problem for your women?"

A frown marred her brow. "It's often the husbands, you understand?"

Michael flashed on the image of an irate man confiscating his wife's meager earnings, to spend it on ... ? Drink, perhaps. Or other women. The microeconomic banks had long been convinced that women were the financially responsible members of most marriages, and so most loans were made to women.

Muthaye signaled a waitress for more coffee. "There would, of course, be up-front costs should we institute debit cards. This is the reason we need a sponsor for the program. Our depositors simply do not possess the capital to acquire a debit card through normal routes. The economic scale we deal with is

meaningless to anyone in the middle class, whether they live in India or the United States."

Michael nodded. "We're talking about account activity equivalent to a few dollars a week?"

"Exactly. Of course, with debit cards, tax collection for Global Shear would be simplified. Taxes could be paid directly out of the electronic accounts, so that no time would be lost collecting and counting the rupees owed."

Michael reflected that most of Muthaye's clients would fall far below the threshold income for tax collection. "Do your depositors have the math skills to understand this kind of abstract system?"

"Education is a requirement for permanent membership in the SBA, Mr. Fielding. Also, the math we teach will be supplemented by bar graphs on the debit cards."

"Oh." Graphic cards would cost far more than those with a simple magnetic strip. "Well, I'll be happy to assign a staffer to this project. We'll assess costs, and give you an indication of the possibilities in a few days."

As they continued to discuss details, Michael's thoughts returned to Rajban. He wanted to call the house, to see if she was still there. He felt guilty about leaving her alone.

As the minutes wore on, he felt certain Rajban would take advantage of his absence and leave. He realized now that he didn't want that. For where could she possibly go? Back home, he supposed. It would be better if she went home. Wouldn't it?

"Mr. Fielding?" Sharpness touched Muthaye's voice. "You seem distracted. Did you have another appointment?"

"Ah, no. Just a situation at home. My apologies—"

He felt the vibration of a call coming in, followed by a barely audible, trilling ring. Vibration/trilling, the combination repeating like a European siren. Michael tapped his data glove.

Take a message.

The shades would not accept the command. "Urgent, urgent, urgent!" the stealthy voice whispered back.

Muthaye was looking at him now with an amused expression. Michael apologized again as he took the call. The voice of Mrs. Nandy, his housekeeper, exploded in his ears. "There is a vagrant in the house, Mr. Fielding! It is a woman of shameful kind. I have her in a corner. She is filthy! Vermin-covered! Mr. Fielding, I will call the police!"

"No, no, no!" His voice boomed through the restaurant, causing heads to turn. "Leave her alone. She is a guest. A guest, you understand? I have asked her in—"

"Mr. Fielding! Vermin-covered! Dirty! This is a dirty woman! You cannot mean to have her keep your house—"

"No! Nothing like that. You are my housekeeper. Why don't you take the day off, Mrs. Nandy?" he added, trying hard for a soothing tone. "Visit your grandchildren—"

"They are in school."

"Don't frighten her, Mrs. Nandy."

"She is vermin-covered!"

"Please?" He looked at Muthaye, at her sharp, dark eyes. "Just leave the house, Mrs. Nandy. Take a holiday."

She finally agreed to go, though Michael didn't know if he could believe her. When the call ended, he looked at Muthaye. "My apologies again, but the situation at home—I really need to go." He started to stand. Then he changed his mind. He sat back down. Muthaye worked regularly with poor women just like Rajban.

Briefly, he told her about the girl he had found on his step. Muthaye's expression hardened as he described Rajban. Her lips set in a tight line and anger gleamed in her eyes. "The charity worker will not come," she said, when he had finished.

"What?" Michael spread his hands helplessly. "Twice she told me someone would be over as soon as possible."

"And no doubt that is true, but the possible comes with many restrictions. You are already caring for Rajban. There will always be cases more pressing than hers. Mr. Fielding, you have been very kind to help this girl. Hers is an old story, in a world that often despises its women. My mother suffered a similar fate. She was abandoned by her family, but she became educated. She learned economic independence. She insisted that I be educated, too. She devoted her life to it."

Michael stared at Muthaye, trying to visualize her as a street waif. He could not. "Your mother did a fine job."

"Indeed. Are you going home straightaway?"

The twists and turns in her conversation put Michael on edge. "Yes. I need to check—"

"Good. May I accompany you, Mr. Fielding?"

"Well, yes, of course." He felt relieved at her offer, yet strangely resentful too. Muthaye would take over Rajban's care.

As if to prove it, she announced, "I will call a health aide from the women's league to meet us." She folded her portal and slipped it into her purse. "Ready?"

.....

They found Rajban in the courtyard. She looked up as the French doors clicked open. Her bruised cheeks were flushed, her face shining with sweat. Fear huddled in her dark eyes. To Michael, she looked like an abused little girl. Muthaye crouched by her side. They talked a minute, then Rajban followed her

into the house.

The house announced the arrival of a visitor.

"That will be the health aide," Muthaye told Michael. "Please escort her in."

Michael nodded, wondering when he had lost control of his own house.

The aide was a diminutive woman, yet intense as pepper sauce. With rapid gestures she spread a cloth on the living room floor, then arranged her equipment on it. Muthaye introduced her to Rajban. The three women ignored Michael, so he retreated to his home office. The workload did not stop accumulating just because he was absent.

He linked into the corporate office, downloaded a log of telephone messages, postponed the staff meeting, gave some cursory instructions about the SBA debit card plans. When he returned to the living room, the health aide was just slipping out the front door. Michael looked after her anxiously. "Where is she going? Is she done?"

"Yes, Mr. Fielding." Muthaye leaned forward and patted Rajban's hand. Then, with an unbecoming groan, she clambered to her feet. She seemed older than she had at breakfast, her confidence burned away. "You have been very kind to Rajban. She is deeply grateful."

"I, ah ..."

Muthaye's smile was sad. "What else could you do? I understand, Mr. Fielding—"

"Call me Michael, please."

Muthaye nodded. "I know you didn't look for this burden, Michael, and I know the situation is awkward for you. I would ask though—and I am asking, not Rajban—that she be allowed to stay the night."

"Isn't there—"

"No. All formal shelters will be full. But by tomorrow, I may be able to find a home for her."

"She's sick, isn't she?"

Muthaye nodded. "She won't name her family. She doesn't want to shame them, especially her mother, who was very proud of the marriage she arranged for Rajban. Her parents are destitute, you understand, but women are becoming rare enough that even daughters with no dowry may find husbands. Rajban's husband is the third son—"

"She's married?" Michael interrupted. "But she's just a little girl."

"She's fifteen," Muthaye said. "Child marriage has become fashionable again among certain fundamentalist groups. Rajban has been married two years. She and her husband lived in his mother's house, but her husband was sick. He went away last year and didn't come home. Rajban has never been pregnant, so she believes she is infertile, and so of no value. She has also been frequently sick this past year, and a burden on the family."

Michael felt the sweat of an old terror break out across his brow. "My God. She has AIDS, doesn't she?"

"That would be my guess. No doubt she caught it from her husband. Her family must have suspected the same, so they abandoned her."

"But she can be treated," Michael objected.

No one had to die of AIDS anymore, not if they took control of their lives and lived the medical regimen.

"Given money, given time, yes, the disease can be put into remission," Muthaye agreed. Still, Michael heard resignation in her voice.

"Rajban has no money," he said.

Muthaye nodded. "Rajban has nothing."

VI

For Cody Graham, home was a luxury condo in the foothills above Denver. She caught a train from DIA, arriving home in late evening, at the same time as the dinner for two she had ordered along the way. The food went onto the table while her account was automatically billed. She took a quick shower. When she emerged, she found Wade had arrived. He was pouring Venezuelan spring water into lead-free wine glasses. "Hey," she said, toweling her hair dry. "You remembered."

"Of course I remembered." Wade arched an eyebrow in comic offense as he set the bottle on a tray.

Wade Collin was president and chief stockholder of a small but thriving biotech firm. His company was his life, and he regularly devoted seventy to eighty hours a week ensuring its success. It was an obsession that had brought his marriage to an end. "A good end for both of us," he claimed. "Marriage demands more time than I'll ever be willing to give it."

In his mid-fifties, with two grown children, Wade was still a handsome and vigorous man. He and Cody had been friends for years, and lovers for much of that time, brought together by need and by convenience. It was all either of them had time for. It was all they would admit to needing.

He studied her face, and gradually, the humor in his hazel eyes changed to concern. "Cody? Are you getting nervous?"

"No." She sighed, tossing the towel onto the back of the sofa. "It's just been a strange day. I found out that the neighborhood I grew up in has been designated a hazardous site. It's scheduled for remediation."

Wade scowled as he uncovered the dinner plates. "Inauspicious. Will you take it?"

"I don't know. I picked up the download packet, but I haven't looked through it yet." She dropped into one of the chairs. Fear was a fine mesh wound around her heart. "Truth is, I'm not at all sure I want to go back there."

Going back would mean facing again the stuff of vanquished nightmares: summer heat and summer anger and the urine-stink of crank houses, transformed into blazing infernos when their clandestine labs caught fire. And other, more personal things.

"You are getting nervous," Wade accused.

Cody shook out a napkin and grinned, hoping it didn't look too false. "Maybe just a little," she admitted. It had been six years since her horrible first pregnancy. She'd waited all that time, living a medical regimen while the toxin levels in her tissues declined. "I still want my daughter."

"Howling, screaming, smelly brats," Wade warned, sitting down beside her.

"Won't work," Cody assured him.

"Could be a boy."

Nope. Cody wouldn't say so outloud, but she knew it wouldn't be a boy.

She sipped at the Venezuelan water, imagining she could feel the babyjack in her womb. A slight pinching sensation—that's the identity she gave it. She hadn't told Wade it was in there.

Uterine implants were a form of selective birth control developed for couples with inherited genetic disorders. After conception, they screened the embryo's DNA for a suspected defect. If it was found, the implant would release a drug to block the natural production of progesterone and the pregnancy would fail.

Though it appeared nowhere in the company prospectus, the most common "defect" the implants screened for was the sex of the embryo. Cody's babyjack would kick in if it detected a male embryo, causing a spontaneous abortion within several days of conception. That early in her term she might experience a slightly late, slightly heavy menstrual period. Nothing more.

Wade had waived parental rights to any child she might conceive. She had signed documents freeing him of obligation. They had submitted DNA samples to an anonymous testing service, where their chromosomes were sorted across a large series of DNA chips. No major incompatibilities had been found.

"Genetic maps," Cody mused, "health tests, trust funds, legal documents . . . am I neurotic? My mother conceived me in an alley behind a rave club when she was fifteen. He didn't want to use a condom because it was too constricting. They screwed for a week, then she never saw him again."

"So you both learned from her mistake."

"And we've both been overcompensating ever since."

He sighed, his sun-browned hand closing over hers. "You're a good person, Cody. You deserve more than this. You should have had the fairy tale."

She smiled. I did.

She'd had the marriage, the handsome husband, the baby on the way, and it had all blown up in her face. On some level, she'd always known it would. She'd already made it out of the brutal slum of Victoria Glen, and surely that was enough to ask of life? The castle on the hill could wait for the next generation.

VII

Muthaye left the house, promising to return as soon as possible. Michael did not like the sound of that. It reminded him too much of the woman from the charity, but what could he do? He had his own schedule to keep. This afternoon he was due at a publicity event on a local farm, the first to bring in a harvest of genetically engineered rice developed by a Japanese company and distributed by Global Shear.

He took another shower, and another tab of Synthetic Sleep. The pill's chemical cocktail was designed to mimic the metabolic effects of a few hours of rest. His body could not be fooled forever, but he should be okay until the evening.

In the living room, Rajban was crouching on the floor, staring out at the garden. Michael hesitated on his way to the front door. Something in her posture touched a memory in him: for a moment he was immersed again in the half-dark of a city night, and the awful silence that had followed her cold declaration: There's nothing left, Michael. I'm leaving. He felt as if his chest was made of glass, and the glass had shattered.

He shook his head. That was all long ago.

The house spoke in its soothing, feminine voice. "Your car is here." Then it repeated the news in Hindi. Rajban turned, her face an open question. Michael wished he could stay and talk to her. Instead, he put on his shades and he left.

.....

The company car bounced and lurched along a dirt road in dire need of scraping. The driver was forced to dodge bicyclists and zips, an assortment of rusty old cars converted to ethylene, and hundreds of pedestrians. Fifteen miles an hour was a top speed rarely achieved, and Michael was twenty minutes late by the time he arrived at the demonstration farm. No one noticed.

A huge canvas canopy with walls of transparent plastic had been set up in the farmyard. An air conditioner powered by a portable generator blew an arctic chill into its interior while, outside, misters delivered fine sprays of water over the arriving guests. Michael soon found himself in conversation with an Ikeda tech and a reporter from CNN. "It's an ideal grain," the tech was saying. "Requiring less water and fertilizer than any other rice strain, while producing a polishable kernel with a high protein content."

"But," the reporter countered, "your opponents claim it's just this engineered hardiness, this ability to out-compete even the weeds, that makes it a threat to the biosystem."

Michael dove into the debate with practiced ease. "Out-competing the weeds is something of an exaggeration. Ikeda rice is still a domesticated plant, requiring careful farming practices to thrive ..."

Most of the afternoon was like that. The event was a press op, and Michael's job was to soothe the usual fear of genetically engineered food plants. Most wealthier countries forbade the importation or sale of engineered crops, fearing ecological disaster, or the discovery of some previously unknown toxic quality in the new food. At least, those were the reasons most often cited. Michael suspected it was really a fear of shouldering any more responsibility. Already the land, the climate, and even the ecology of the oceans had been transformed by human activity. If the formula of life itself was now to be rewritten, what would be left outside the range of human influence? Not much. Every disaster outside of seismic instability

would then fall squarely at the feet of technology.

For now it didn't matter that Ikeda rice couldn't be sold across international borders. Small farmers could peddle their excess crops to the villagers. Large farms could ship to the cities. Someday though, international markets would need to open.

.....

It was late afternoon when Michael slipped free of the press parade. He took a folding chair and set it up beneath the spreading branches of a banyan tree. He had hardly sat down when a party of young men emerged from the farmhouse. They laughed and teased one another, startling a long-legged bird that had been hunting on the edge of a rice paddy. As the bird took flight, Michael found himself surrounded by six smiling youths, each neatly attired in dress shirts and cotton slacks, sandals on their feet. One of them introduced himself as Kanwal. He offered Michael a banana-mango smoothie obviously rescued from the tent.

"This is my father's farm," he informed Michael proudly. Then he explained that his friends were all from nearby farms.

Michael was halfway through the tall glass when he realized it had been spiked. With vodka? That would neatly counter the Synthetic Sleep.

Kanwal proudly tapped his chest. "I am seventeen this year. I have finished my public schooling. My father wants to buy a truck. He will start a business delivering fruit to the cities." Kanwal rolled his eyes. "He says he is getting too old for farm work. He wants to drive a truck while his sons do the tough work!"

The other boys erupted in laughter. Michael grinned too. "Your old man must think a lot of you."

"Oh, I don't know," Kanwal said. "I think he just wants to hit the road to look for a new wife."

The boys giggled and moaned. "He's old," someone muttered, "but not too old!"

"He wants us to believe it, anyway," Kanwal said. "But I'm seventeen! He should be looking for a wife for me."

"Isn't that your mother's business?" Michael asked.

Kanwal shrugged. "My mother is dead three years. My youngest brother does all the cooking now."

"No sisters?"

Kanwal made a face. "No. Of course not. My old man wanted to get ahead, not raise a servant for another man's family. We are very modern here. We don't believe in dowry. If I had a sister, my father would have to pay her dowry. Still, it makes it hard to find a wife. My father was married when he was fifteen. Look at us. We are sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old. No one has a wife. Hey." He turned to his friends. "Know who's making the most money these days? The marriage broker!"

The boys guffawed again, but Michael frowned. Kanwal noticed, and responded by rubbing Michael's shoulder in a friendly way. "You have a wife?"

Michael shook his head, declining to explain to Kanwal that though he'd been married at twenty-four, it had not lasted two years. There's nothing left, Michael.

Kanwal might have read his mind. "Divorced?" he asked.

Michael scowled. "You watch too much TV."

Kanwal giggled, along with his friends. "American women like to have many husbands and only one son."

"We could use some American women here," one of the boys chimed in from the back of the group.

Michael felt the vodka inside him, dissolving his diplomacy. "Women are not toys. They're people, with their own dreams, their own ambitions."

"Oh yes," Kanwal agreed with a hearty nod. "They are goddesses." The boys all offered confirmation of this.

Kanwal went on, "This farm would be a happier place if we had a woman in the kitchen again. Hey, but no one wants to be a farmer anymore, not even my old man."

Michael sat up a little straighter. This sentiment had not been reported by his census teams. "Why do you say that? This farm has had a profitable year, despite poor weather."

"Oh, we're doing all right," Kanwal agreed. "But do you think it's easy? Laboring all day in the hot sun, and we don't even have a tractor. The water buffalo are still our tractor. It's shameful! I want to move to Bangalore, learn computers, work in an office."

"Ah, Kanwal," one of his friends interrupted. "Everybody wants to work in an office, but it's the farm for us, you know it."

Kanwal gave his friend a dark look. "Not all of us. Every evening I walk all the way to town, just so I can spend half an hour at the home of a link-wallah, exploring the net. Half an hour! That's all he allows, because he has many clients, but half an hour is not enough time to get any real training—maybe if I could print out lessons, but I can't, because I don't have the paper. But I have a plan.

"I can read well. We all can. I've read every book in the two library booths at South Market. Do you know what we're doing? My friends and I? We're putting our money together to buy our own terminal. I have a friend in town who can get an uplink." Kanwal nodded, his dark eyes happy at his inner vision. "There is formal schooling online, from all over the world, and some of it at no cost. You hear how well I speak English? I learn fast. Hey." He looked at his friends again. "Maybe we're better off with no wives yet. No children to care for, right? Make our careers first. It's what the Bangalore families tell their young men." He turned back to Michael. "You have children, mister?"

"No," Michael said, feeling a sudden tightness in his gut. There's nothing left, Michael. I'm leaving.

Kanwal's brows rose in surprise. "No children? Not even from the wife who divorced you?"

"No," Michael repeated firmly, his cheeks heating with more than the torrid afternoon. She had not wanted to try again. I'm leaving.

From the back of the crowd the anonymous heckler spoke. "Hey, Kanwal, waiting a few years for a wife doesn't sound too bad, but I don't think I want to wait that long."

The boys again erupted in laughter, while Michael's cheeks grew even hotter. He was only thirty-two, but to be thirty-two and without children . . . did that make him a failure in their eyes? It was a stunning thought, and one he didn't want to examine too closely.

Quickly he drained his vodka smoothie while Kanwal went right on massaging his shoulder, his dark eyes shining with confidence, and ambition. "That's right, mister. You watch us. In two years, we will all be middle class like you."

VIII

Two in the morning, and sleep wouldn't come. Cody listened to Wade's soft snoring. She could just make out his silhouette in the faint amber glow spilling from the bathroom nightlight. Maybe new life had begun in her womb tonight, maybe not. It would be a few days before she would know.

She got out of bed, feeling a lingering stickiness between her legs. She groped for a nightshirt and pulled it on, then padded into the living room, where the curtains stood open on a sweeping view of Denver's city lights.

She always took on the toughest jobs.

So why was she so damned scared of the project at Victoria Glen? She'd looked over the specs after dinner. They'd been nasty, but Cody had dealt with worse. Kick. Kick! No sweat.

Except she was sweating. Her palms were slick, and the soles of her feet.

So? She'd been scared before. The only thing to do was face it down.

She took a long swallow from the bottle of Venezuelan water, then she got her VR helmet from a closet. Sitting on the sofa, she pulled the helmet on, encasing herself in a safe black vault. Nice, simple environment. She almost felt she could go to sleep.

Almost.

She instructed the wireless system to link with her server, where she'd stored the download of the Victoria Glen site, prepared by a redevelopment company called New Land.

She gazed at a menu, then, "Document three-seven-zero," she whispered. "Go."

The menu faded as a world emerged, creeping in like sunrise over a tired city. New Land had recorded a full sensory walk-through. Cody's helmet translated the digital record, synthesizing sight, sound, temperature, and encoded odors. Her lungs filled with sun-warmed air, brewed over old wood and oil-stained asphalt.

She found herself afloat, a few feet above an empty street. It ran straight, like a canalized river cutting through a landscape of vacant lots and boarded-up houses. A few sparrows popped up and down in brush that sprouted around a chain-link fence. Warning signs glared from the abandoned buildings:

KEEP OUT
HAZARDOUS MATERIALS SITE
DANGER—NO TRESPASSING

It took her a minute to realize this was Victoria Street, and that first house, with its sagging porch cuddled under a steeply sloping roof, that was Randi's house. It had been the upper limit of Cody's permitted territory, and a safe place to run if ever she needed shelter. The house next to it had been a rental, with a fleet of showy cars perpetually drifting in and out of the front yard. Only a rusted hulk was left now, crumbling in the shade of a large tree leaning over a gap-toothed fence from the yard next door.

Looking at the tree, Cody felt hollow inside. Jacaranda, she realized. As a kid she'd never known its name, just enjoyed gathering the purple blossoms that showered from it in the spring. She and Tanya would have pretend weddings and toss the fallen flowers in the air. Where had they learned that? Cody couldn't guess. Neither one of them had ever seen a wedding.

The tree looked so much bigger than she remembered.

Pushing the trackball forward, she went gliding down the street, a ghost returned to haunt the old neighborhood.

She drifted past the fence. She hardly dared to look, but there it was: a tiny block of a house, built close to the ground like a bunker. The roof had gaps in it. Head wounds. The windows were boarded up. It didn't matter. It was all there. All of it, still lurking inside her mind. She closed her eyes, and reality thickened, like flesh on the bones of the past. Little Tanya from down the block was knocking on the door, jump rope in hand. It was a hot summer evening. Cody got her own rope, and they practiced together on the sidewalk, singing seashells, taco bells, easy, ivy, over. No way they were supposed to be outside that late, but mama was still at school and Tanya's big sister was sleeping.

They sang very softly, seashells, taco bells, so Passion wouldn't come charging at them out of his girlfriend's house across the street, screaming dumb-bitches-shut-up. His motorcycle was there, but his fuck-this-fuck-that music wasn't pounding the neighborhood, so she guessed he was asleep.

They were practicing cross-arms when a tanker truck came rumbling into sight from the direction of Randi's house. They stopped jumping to watch it go by. It was a big truck. The tank had been painted gray. It didn't have the name of any gas station on it.

"Look," Tanya said. She pointed at the truck's undercarriage and giggled. "It's peeing."

A stream of liquid ran from beneath the truck, splashing black against the street. Tanya waved at the anonymous bulk of the driver. Across the street, Passion was screaming What the fuck is that noise?

.....

Cody snatched the helmet off. Her heart felt like it had melted into her arteries, a pounding starfish in her chest. Oh no, oh no. She stared at the looming shapes of furniture in the dimly-lit room. She hadn't remembered the truck in years and years. Maybe it had felt too dangerous to remember. Oh God, oh

Jesus. Her palms were sweating.

Just a few seconds after the truck had passed her eyes had started burning. She ran into the house and threw up. Passion was screaming outside, shooting his gun. Cody lay on the broken tiles of the bathroom floor and cried, she felt so sick, until mama came home and moved her into bed. She didn't say anything about the truck and its stinky pee, because she should never have been out on the sidewalk.

Carefully, Cody lay the helmet on the cushion beside her. Wade was snoring softly in the bedroom. The antique clock on the mantle was ticking, ticking.

What had gone into the street that night? And on other nights, what had spilled from the kitchen drug labs? From the ubiquitous activity of auto repair? From the city's fights against rats and roaches? What had trickled through the soil, into the ground water, returning through the faucet of the kitchen sink?

Splash of clear water into a plastic cup held in a little girl's hands; the dry tang of chlorine in her throat.

There had been toxins in her body that killed her daughter. Cody had always assumed it was her fault, that she'd been incautious on a job, that somehow she had poisoned herself; but what if it wasn't so?

Her lips pressed together in a hard line. Any hazardous substance report generated by the cleanup of Victoria Glen would be kept confidential by the redevelopment company. She'd be able to gain access only if she could offer compelling evidence of on-site injury, and that was doubtful. She'd only lived there until she was ten, until Mama got her the scholarship to Prescott Academy. Cody had left for boarding school and never had come back.

So there was only one way to learn what ten years on Victoria Street had done to her. She would have to take on the job herself.

IX

Rajban was up early. Michael found her in the kitchen when he woke, peeking into cabinets with all the stealth and caution of a kid looking for treasure but expecting to find a tiger. "Good morning," Michael said. She jumped, and the cabinet door banged shut. Her hands were already soiled with the gray dirt of the courtyard. Michael sighed. She certainly had an affinity for gardening.

Ignoring her fright, he beckoned to her to come to the sink, where he showed her how to slide her hands under the soap dispenser. The sensor popped a spray of soap onto her palm. She lathered it, carefully imitating Michael's every gesture. Water came from the tap in a tepid spray, like a stolen column of soft rain. Michael dried his hands, Rajban dried hers, then together they made a breakfast of papayas, bread, and yogurt.

.....

After they ate, Rajban disappeared into the garden while Michael readied himself for work. Last of all, he picked up his shades. The Terrace glyph waited for him, surrounded by a pink query circle. He linked through. "Anybody there?"

No one answered. He left the link open, confident someone would check back before long. Next he put a call through to Muthaye, but she didn't pick up either. A moment later, the house announced a visitor at the door.

"Ooh, company," Ryan said, as the line to the Terrace went green.

Etsuko sounded puzzled. "Who is that?"

"No ID," Ryan muttered. "Pupils dilated, skin temperature slightly elevated. He's nervous."

"Or angry," Etsuko said. "Be careful, Michael."

"Hey," Michael said as the house repeated its announcement, this time in Hindi. "Good morning and all that. Back again, huh?"

"Been waiting all morning for your shades to activate," Ryan agreed. "You have to understand—your life is so much more interesting than ours. Now hurry up. Go find out what he wants before my next appointment."

Michael summoned an image of the visitor into his shades. "So I guess it's not Muthaye at the door?"

"No, mate. No such luck. A local gentleman, I should think. Looks a little stiff, if you ask me."

Etsuko snorted. "By your standards, Ryan, anyone could look stiff."

Rajban slipped in through the French doors. Michael sighed to see that her hands were dirty again. Some of the dirt had gotten on her face. Still, she looked at Michael with eyes that were brighter, fuller than they had been only yesterday. Then she looked at the door . . . hoping it was Muthaye too? Come back to visit her as promised.

"Say," Ryan said. "Maybe she knows the guy."

"Right." After all, someone had to be looking for Rajban, regardless of what Muthaye said. A brother, perhaps? Someone who cared. Michael slipped the shades off and handed them to Rajban, motioning that she should put them on. Tentatively, she obeyed. For several seconds she stared at the scene, while her mouth twisted in a small hard knot. Then she yanked the shades off, shoved them into Michael's hands, and ran for the courtyard.

Ryan said, "Women react that way to me too, from time to time."

No one laughed.

Michael stared after Rajban, dread gnawing like a rat at his chest. Despite Muthaye's words, he had envisioned only a happy reunion for her. What would his role become, if her family demanded her back, and she refused to go?

Stop guessing.

He slipped the shades back on and went to the front door. "Hark. Open it."

The stranger in the alcove was tall and lean, like a slice taken off a fuller man, then smoked until it

hardened. His black hair was neatly cut and combed. His dark eyes were stern. They remained fixed on Michael through a slow, formal bow. "Namaste."

"Namaste," Michael murmured, feeling the hair on the back of his neck rise. There was something about this man that set him on edge. The intense stare, perhaps. The unsmiling face. The stiffness of his carriage. Smoked and hardened.

"I am Mr. Gharia," the stranger said, in lilting but well-pronounced English. "And you, I have been told, are Mr. Fielding. I have come to inquire about the woman."

Michael felt stubbornness descend into his spine, a quiet, steely resistance learned from the heroes of a hundred old cowboy movies. "Have you?"

Vaguely, he was aware of Etsuko muttering, "Gharia? Which Gharia? There are dozens in the census, approximate height and age ..."

Mr. Gharia apparently had a stubbornness of his own. He raised his chin, and though his head came barely to Michael's shoulder, he seemed tall. "It is improper for this woman to be residing within your house."

Michael had never taken well to instructions on propriety. Remembering the look of fear and distaste on Rajban's face as she fled to the courtyard, he ventured a guess, and dressed it up as certainty, "This is not your woman."

Mr. Gharia looked taken aback at this discourteous response; perhaps a little confused, but by his reply Michael knew that his guess had been correct. "I am a friend of the family, sir."

When Michael didn't respond to this, Gharia's tone rose. "Sir, a widow deserves respect. This woman must be returned immediately to her family."

A widow. So her husband was dead. Muthaye had said he'd left home a full year ago. Michael had assumed he'd gone for treatment, yet now he was dead. Did Rajban know? Had anyone bothered to tell her? Thinking about it, Michael felt an anger as cool, as austere, as shadows under desert rock. "This woman has no family."

"Sir, you are mistaken."

"The family that she had cast her out like useless rubbish."

"I have come to inquire about her, to be sure she is the woman being sought."

"She is not that woman," Michael said. "She is a different woman altogether."

"Sir—"

"You would not have me put her on display, would you? Now sir, good day." He stepped back, allowing the door to close.

Gharia saw what he was about. "It doesn't matter who she is!" he said quickly. "Any Hindu woman must be shamed to be kept as a whore. It is intolerable! It—" The door sealed, cutting off Gharia's tirade with the abruptness of a toggled switch.

"Christ," Michael muttered.

"Nice show," Ryan agreed, but his voice was somber. "Michael, this isn't a game you want to play. Etsuko's IDed this Gharia fellow. He's a religious activist—"

Michael's palm sliced through the air. "I don't care who he is! The Indian constitution promises equal rights for women."

"It's a piece of paper, Michael." Etsuko's voice was softly sad. "In a far-off city. Women like Rajban are subject to an older law."

"Not anymore. Muthaye said she would come up with a shelter for Rajban by today. If the bastards can't find her, they can't hurt her."

But if they did find her? Rajban was already a woman ruined, simply by being inside Michael's house.

He jumped as the lights flashed, and a soft alarm bonged through the residence. Locks clicked. The air-conditioning system huffed into silence. "Perimeter intrusion," the house informed him. "Michael Fielding, you will remain secured inside this residence pending arrival of Global Shear security. Arrival estimated at three minutes fifty seconds." It was the same feminine voice the house always used, yet it didn't sound like the house anymore.

"Where is Rajban?" Michael shouted.

"Identify the person in question?"

This was definitely not his house. "Rajban. A girl. She's been ... she's stayed here for a day or so—"

Ryan's voice cut in: "The courtyard, Michael."

Michael dashed for the courtyard doors. His hand hit the latch, but it would not move. He tried to force it, but the door held.

Through the glass, he saw Rajban crouched on the path beside a freshly worked bed of earth, the little hoe in one hand. She gazed up at the courtyard wall. Michael looked, to see Gharia leaning over the top. It was eight feet of smooth concrete, but somehow he had climbed it, and from the Shastri courtyard, too. Now he leaned on his chest, the breast of his shirt smudged with dirt, his dark brows pulled together in an angry scowl. Michael had only a glimpse of him, before he dropped away out of sight.

Again Michael tried the latch, slamming it with all his weight while the house instructed him to "Stay away from all doors and windows. Retreat at once to the interior—"

"Who the hell am I talking to?" Michael interrupted.

"Easy," Ryan muttered. "Cool under fire, boy. You know the chant."

The house answered at the same time: "This is Security Chief Sankar. Mr. Fielding, please step away from the door. You must remove yourself from this exposed position immediately—"

Rajban had seen him. She was running toward him now. She threw herself on the door latch, while Michael tried again to force it from the inside. It would not budge. Rajban stared at him through the glass,

her dark eyes wide, confusion and terror swimming in her unshed tears.

"Sankar!" Michael shouted. "Unlock this door. Let her inside now—"

"Mr. Fielding, please remain calm. The door will not open until the situation is secure. Be assured, we will be on-site momentarily."

Michael bit his lip, swearing silently to himself. "Is Gharia still out there, then? He's after this girl, you know. Not me."

"Negative, sir. Raman Gharia has fled the scene. He is presently being tracked by a vigil craft—"

The drone aircraft that watched the house. Of course. The security AI must have seen Gharia climbing the Shastri wall....

"Well, if Gharia's gone, then you can open the door. Sankar?"

A helicopter swept in, no more than fifty feet above the wall. Rajban looked up at it, and screamed. Michael could not hear her through the sound-proofed glass, but he could see the terror on her face. She pressed herself against the door, covering her head with the new sari Muthaye had given her while her clothing licked and shuddered in the rotor wash. First one man, then a second, descended from the helicopter, sliding down a cable to land in the courtyard garden.

"This probably qualifies as overkill," Ryan muttered.

"Sankar!" Michael shouted. "What the hell are you doing?"

No answer.

The helicopter pulled away. The two men on the ground were anonymous in their helmets and shimmering gray coveralls. The first one pulled a weapon from a thigh holster and trained it on Rajban. The second sprinted toward the wall where Gharia had appeared. Crashing through the half-dead plants, he launched himself at the concrete face, and to Michael's amazement, he actually reached the top, pulling himself up to gaze over the side, in a weird echo of Gharia's own posture. He stayed there only long enough to drop something over the wall—oh, Mrs. Shastri was going to love this—then he slipped back down into the garden, landing in a crouch. A weapon had appeared in his hands, too.

"Net gun," Ryan said. "Launches a sticky entangler. Nonlethal, unless it scares you to death. Michael, I had no idea you were this well protected."

"They're bored," Michael growled.

"Do say."

"Explosives negative," Sankar informed him, through the voice of the house.

Now both net guns were trained on Rajban.

"Leave her alone," Michael warned. "Sankar, I swear—"

"Situation clear," Sankar announced.

The man by the wall stood up, sliding his weapon back into its holster. The other did the same. He slipped his visor up, revealing a delighted grin. Michael recognized Sankar's handsome face. "Quite an adventure, eh, Mr. Fielding?"

The door lock clicked. Michael slammed the latch down, yanking the door open, so that Rajban half fell into the living room. He started to reach for her, to help her up, but she scuttled away with a little moan of terror. He turned to Sankar, ready to vent his fury, but he found the security chief praising his man for a job well done.

"Absolutely by the book!" Sankar was saying in a suitably masculine voice, quite a jolt after the feminine voice of the house. With his gaze, Sankar took in Michael, too. "Mr. Fielding. This has turned out to be a minor incident, but we had no way of knowing that when the perimeter alarm sounded. It is essential that you remain inside in such situations, away from doors and windows. If explosives had come over the wall—"

"Then Rajban would have been killed," Michael said softly. "All I asked was that you unlock the door to let her in."

Rajban had gone to hide behind the sofa. Michael could hear her softly weeping. Sankar frowned at the noise, as if it did not fit into any scenario he had ever practiced. "This woman, she is not the housekeeper registered in our security files. Have you changed employees?"

"No. She's not an employee. She's a guest."

"A guest? All guests should be registered, Mr. Fielding. Without a profile, we have no way of discriminating friend from enemy." He said this matter-of-factly, without a hint of judgment. Well, Sankar was a modern man, educated in California, Michael recalled. What the boss did was the boss's business, no doubt.

Michael sighed, letting the edge of his anger slip away. "You're right," he conceded. Global Shear security protocol was strict and effective. "So take her profile now. She's a waif, just a little girl, without home or family. And that's all she is, Mr. Sankar. I want you to put that in your profile too."

X

Rajban plunged her hoe into the hard earth of the garden bed, prying up chunks of clay. Grief sat in her stomach like heavy black mud, but it was not grief for her husband. It was for herself. Now she was widowed. She had no home. She would have no sons. Brother-in-Law had sent her away.

So why had Gharia come after her?

She hacked at the earth, and thought about it. Gharia had been a frequent guest at Brother-in-Law's table, where they discussed the foreign issue, and the influence of nonbelievers. At times they would grow very angry, but when the talk lapsed, Gharia's eyes often found their rest on Rajban's backside as she worked in the kitchen with Mother-in-Law.

Mother-in-Law would notice the direction of Gharia's gaze, and her words to Rajban would be angry.

Rajban remembered these things as she crumbled each chunk of clay in her hands. She picked up the hoe again and dug deeper. The soil here was bad. There were no worms in it. No tiny bugs. It looked as sterile as the soil in Brother-in-Law's courtyard. Even the weeds were yellow.

No matter.

She would use the magic soil. With love and prayers, its influence could be worked into the ground.

A winged shadow drifted slowly over Rajban's hands. She paused in her work, squinting against the noon sun. There! She spied it again: A tiny plane the color of the sky. It was very hard to see, yet if she looked long enough, she could always find it floating above the house.

The door latch clicked. "Rajban?"

Rajban smiled shyly when she saw the kind woman, Muthaye, looking out between the glass doors. "Namaste," she murmured softly. "You came back."

"Namaste," Muthaye echoed. "Will you come inside? The sun is high, and it is very hot."

Rajban obeyed. She stood on stiff legs, taking a moment to brush the soil from her sari. Inside, she was startled to discover other women. They were four, sitting in a half-circle on the carpet. They were not fine women, like Muthaye. Their saris were worn and their faces lined. All of them were older than Rajban. She felt sure they were all mothers, and she felt ashamed.

Twice in her first year of marriage she had thought herself pregnant, but her hopes were shattered by a late, painful, and heavy flow of blood—as if a baby had been started and then had died.

Rajban remembered the midwife who had come to visit on the day she arrived in her husband's household. This midwife had not looked like the village health aides Rajban had seen at her father's farm. This one was young and finely dressed, and she wore an eye veil, like Michael. "She will make your womb healthy," Mother-in-Law declared. "So healthy you will bear only sons." Rajban had bit her lips to keep from wailing in pain as cold, gloved hands groped inside her. She had not felt healthy afterwards. Her abdomen and her crotch had ached for days—and she had never conceived a baby. Or maybe ... she had conceived only girls?

Muthaye had joined the circle of women. Now she smiled at Rajban. "Please won't you sit?" She patted a spot at her side that would close the circle. Rajban did as she was asked, though she would have been happier to disappear into the kitchen. She sat with her hands folded neatly in her lap while Muthaye told a story that did not sound like it could be true.

"My mother was an illiterate country woman," Muthaye began. Her gaze sought Rajban. "That means she was like you. She could not read or write or speak any language but the one she was born to. At fourteen she was married to a young man only a little more educated than she, the third son of a cruel and selfish family. It was a great struggle for my grandfather to gather the large dowry demanded by her husband's family. Still, he paid it, though he was forced to mortgage his land. Several months later there came a terrible storm. The land was flooded, the household of my mother's husband was destroyed, and along with many others in the village, he died of disease. When afterwards my mother gave birth to a daughter, she was driven out of the family. She returned to her father's house, but he refused to receive her, so she went without food and shelter, and her baby girl died.

"My mother became angry.

"She remembered that in the year of her marriage, she had met an agent from the women's cooperative. She went to that agent now, and was given a job sewing embroidered scarves. She earned enough to

feed herself, but she wanted more. With the help of the women's cooperative, she taught herself to read. She received a small loan—only two hundred dollars—but it was enough to buy books and start her own lending library. When the loan was paid back she took out another, and eventually she started a school just for girls. In time she married again—"

There was a murmur of surprise from the circle.

"—the son of a longtime member of the women's cooperative. No dowry was paid—"

Again, a whisper of astonishment arose from the gathered women.

"—for dowry is evil and illegal. She still runs her school, and through it she has earned more money for her family than she might have ever brought as dowry. She is middle-class, Rajban. Yet when she was fifteen, she was just like you."

Rajban stared down at the lines of dirt that lay across her palms, knowing it wasn't true. "She had a baby."

Muthaye's tone became more strict: "It is not unexpected that a husband dying of AIDS gave you his disease instead of a child. That does not mean you will never have a child—or another husband."

"My brother-in-law will not allow it."

"You do not belong to him anymore."

Rajban considered this. She turned it over and over in her mind, wondering if it was true. At the same time, she listened to the other women talk about themselves. These women were all learning to read. Three of them had businesses. One made sandals. Another drove a zip. The last cleaned houses. The fourth member of their group was building a fruit stand. All of them had started their businesses with small loans from Muthaye.

"Not from me," Muthaye corrected. "These are loans from the Southern Banking Association."

The loans were for a few hundred dollars at a time, enough to buy the tools and supplies that would let them work. Together, the women ensured that each one of them made their weekly payments. If any failed to do so, all would lose their credit. This was the "microcredit program" administered by Muthaye. Three of the women in this lending circle had been involved for several years, one for only a few months.

"A lending circle should have five women," Muthaye explained. "The fifth lady of this group has moved away to join her son in Bangalore, so there is a place for you here. I have told you the story of my mother. This can be your story too."

Rajban bowed her head. Her heart fluttered, like a bird, seeking to escape its cage for the peaceful serenity of the sun-seared sky. She stared at her hands and whispered, "I don't know how."

One of the older women patted her mud-stained hand. She asked if Rajban could sew or cook. If she could keep a house clean or carry a heavy weight. Rajban didn't know how to answer. Her mother had raised her to do the things women do. All these things she had done, but surely no one would pay her to do them?

"Is there anything you are so good at?" Muthaye asked. "Is there a kind of work that blossoms like a

flower in your hands?"

Rajban caught her breath. She glanced out at the garden. "I have a bag of magic soil that makes a garden strong and happy."

This brought a shower of laughter from the women. But why? Hadn't Rajban believed all their tales? And yet they laughed. Their kindly faces had all become the face of her Mother-in-law, laughing, laughing, and endlessly scolding her, Stupid girl!

She felt a touch on her hand, and the vision vanished, but even Muthaye's warm eyes could not chase away the pain.

"Magic is the comfort of old-fashioned women," Muthaye told her. "A modern woman has no need of it. Think on what we've talked about. Think of a business you might like to do. Think hard, for you must be settled before the AIDS treatment can begin."

XI

Word of the morning's misadventures got around quickly. It was still early when Michael stepped from a zip into the shade of the portico at Global Shear's district headquarters. The five-story office cube was newly built, situated halfway up a shallow, rocky rise dividing two of the original villages. A temple occupied the high ground, while a pig farmer kept his animals in a dusty pen on one side of the landscaped grounds. Laborers' shacks made up the rest of the neighborhood.

A nervous community relations officer greeted Michael even before he entered the building. "Shall we issue a public statement, Mr. Fielding?"

"Not unless someone asks."

"There have been several inquiries about the helicopter."

"Then state the truth. Intruder alarms went off and security responded. Play it down, though, and add that we're reviewing our procedures to see if our response might be tempered in the future."

"Yes sir."

Glass doors slipped open, and Michael stepped into the air-conditioned paradise of the public lobby. The receptionist looked up, and smiled. "An exciting morning, Mr. Fielding! That helicopter raid must have shaken the dust off anyone still doubting our diligence."

"So I hear."

He met more compliments on the elevator ride to the fifth floor, but the tenor changed when he entered his corner office, where Karen Hampton waited for him, her image resident in an active wall screen. "A most interesting report appeared in my queue this morning. Talk to me, Michael. What the hell is going on?"

Michael sat down in the chair behind his desk, swiveling to face her. Nothing to do but tell the truth. He explained the situation, but she did not look relieved.

"Michael. I can't believe you've involved yourself with this girl. Do I have to remind you that trust is the most important asset we are building in Four Villages? I don't give a damn how innocent your actions are, stop for a minute and ask yourself how this must look to those people whom you are there to serve—not to exploit. If you can't find her a shelter, then buy her one. For the sake of your reputation and the company's good name, rent this young woman her own house and then stay far away from her."

"What if Gharia comes after her?"

"This isn't our business—"

"Karen, it might be. I've checked the census figures, and there's a growing imbalance in the sex ratio here. There are far fewer young women than men. Rajban may be a widow, and she may be ill, but Gharia's not exactly a kid. She could still be the best prospect he has."

"If that's so, why did her family get rid of her instead of marrying her off?"

"I don't know. Maybe they didn't want to pay a dowry. Maybe they don't give a damn. Maybe they're strict Hindus and don't believe in remarriage for women."

"Listen to yourself! There are cultural complexities here that you haven't begun to grasp. This is not why you're in Four Villages."

"We're here to build a stable, diverse, and functional economy, and that can't exist where there is slavery. I won't send Rajban back into slavery."

"I'm not asking you to do that. Just get her out of your house. I want you in this job, Michael. I really do. Show me my confidence is not misplaced."

.....

Michael called in the personnel officer, and she promised to hunt around for an available residence, though she wasn't hopeful. "There are very few rentals in town, and most landlords will deal only with a certain class of clientele. I might be able to obtain a room, or perhaps a shanty, but that would almost certainly bring about the eviction of a current resident."

"We don't want that. Do what you can."

The day failed to improve. Near noon, Michael looked up from his desk to see Pallava Sen, his second in command, coming through the open doorway, a half-page of neon yellow paper in his hand. "Michael, we have a problem."

Leaning back in his chair, Michael slipped off his shades, laying them carefully on the desk. "How bad a problem?"

Pallava rolled his eyes, as if casting a quick prayer up to the gods. With his portly figure and balding head, he looked like a youthful version of the little buddhas sold in Japanese tourist markets. "Not so bad at the moment, but with significant potential to get much worse."

"Wonderful."

Pallava handed him the yellow paper. "These have appeared all over the town. They are being read aloud, too, so the illiterate will be informed."

Michael scowled at the notice. It was written in Hindi.

Pallava settled into the guest chair, a grim smile on his face. "It is written as a news report, by the Traditional Council of Elders. You've heard of them?"

"No."

"Neither has anyone else. They do not say whose elders they are, but they do tell us some interesting things. Here"—he leaned forward, pointing at the headline—"they say that Global Shear has poisoned the people of this district."

Michael had been so fully set to hear how he had kidnapped and raped a good Hindu woman, that it took him a moment to shift modes. "... Poisoned?"

"The argument follows. It says that independent testing of well water throughout the district has revealed severe pesticide contamination. The wells have been regularly tested, and for many years they have produced only clean, unpolluted water. Now they are suddenly contaminated? The only plausible explanation is that the groundwater was deliberately poisoned."

"That's ridiculous."

"Oh, there's more." He leaned back, lacing his fingers together in a nervous, unsettled bridge. "The notice does not name specific chemicals, but it claims those present will suppress the birth rate of the district's women, and in many cases will cause monstrous birth defects leading to early miscarriage. This may be one reason so few girls have been born this past year. Girls are weaker than boys. They die more easily."

He said this last in a deadpan voice that made Michael's eyes narrow. "The notice says that?" he asked cautiously. "Or is that your interpretation?"

Pallava's face hardened. In the same low, flat voice, he answered, "I would not say that. I have a wife who, I am proud to say, is stronger and smarter than I am. I have two brilliant daughters, a sister, a mother, a grandmother. We are not all that way, Michael."

Michael felt his cheeks heat. "I know. I'm sorry."

Pallava shrugged. "You understand the implication? That Global Shear is using cheap birth control?"

Michael nodded.

"The article is also circulating as an Internet message."

"Christ."

"And Shiva. It has not, mercifully, appeared yet on cable TV."

"We need to dispatch crews to field-sample some wells."

"I have already sent them."

"Good. Get me the results as soon as possible." He drummed his desk. "Better test some crop samples too. The harvest is just coming in on the demonstration farm. Check that, especially. Dammit! We have to counter these accusations today—and on cable TV, too."

.....

It was an hour later when Pallava Sen walked back into Michael's office, collapsing once more into the visitor's chair. Global Shear had used paper, Internet, cable TV, messengers, and paid gossip-mongers to vehemently deny the allegations of the Traditional Elders, and to announce their intention to immediately investigate the condition of the well water.

Pallava didn't speak right away. He frowned, his brow wrinkling in lines that made him look old.

"How bad is it now?" Michael asked.

Pallava's sigh was long and heartfelt. "Mega-bad. Giga-bad. It seems the slander was at least partly right. We've fast-tested a sample of wells from across the district and everyone of them shows extensive pesticide contamination." He shook his head. "This is not something that could have happened overnight, not even if it was deliberately done, which I don't believe. We are looking at the results of years—probably decades—of seepage into the water table. It's quite obvious the water quality reports we've been using have been falsified. Deliberately falsified."

Michael breathed slowly, trying to calm the fierce pounding of his heart. Don't panic, but don't hide from the truth either. The first thing to do is get a handle on the problem. "Let's be specific here. We're talking drinking water?"

"Drinking, agricultural." Pallava spread his hands helplessly. "It's all the same thing, and judging from the spot samples, we have to assume there is pesticide contamination in every well in the district." His hands laced together as he stared at a spot beyond Michael's shoulder. "The Ikeda rice crop is contaminated too. The sample we tested came out so bad the stuff can't be legally used even for animal feed."

"Christ."

"And Shiva too."

No pesticides had been used on the Ikeda rice. That was, after all, a major benefit of genetically engineered crops—natural insect and disease resistance could be spliced in—but Ikeda rice had not been designed to flush itself free of chemical contamination.

No more assumptions, Michael swore. "Tell me now if Global Shear had anything to do with developing the phony reports."

Pallava straightened, his eyes wide with surprise. He had been in on the operation here from the opening day. "No! No, of course not. Global Shear had nothing to do with preparing the reports. Water quality

monitoring has been a government function. Our mistake was relying on the test results we received."

"Why would anybody want to fake these reports?"

Pallava shrugged. "There are many possible reasons. The wells were a government project. To find fault with them would not be patriotic. To find them dirty must mean the money spent to build them was wasted, or that those who built them didn't do sufficient background work, or that more money would be needed to clean the water, and where is that supposed to come from? And will those who built the wells be punished? Those who built the wells also report on their functions, so you see, it's not so hard to understand how it could happen. It's not the first time."

"And still, it's our mistake for trusting the data without testing it."

"Yes. Ultimately, it will come back to that."

.....

"Michael?"

It was Jaya's voice, issuing from the shades he'd left lying on the desk. She spoke softly, as if he were a sleeping child and she reluctant to wake him. Her priority link let her open a line at any time.

Michael grabbed the shades and slipped them on. "Jaya! How are you? How's the baby?" He transferred the link to his portal screen, and Jaya's image replaced the document he'd been working on. She was as lovely as any magazine model and, not for the first time, Michael thought of Sheo with a twinge of envy.

"We're all fine," Jaya assured him. Then she hesitated. "Michael, I've been talking to Ryan."

He grunted, sinking back into his chair. "You've heard about Rajban, then."

"Yes. I think it's sweet, what you're trying to do for her." Jaya touched her ruby-red lips. What a perfect alliance she had made with the colorful, symbiotic bacteria living in her cells—yet most people, upon hearing the source of the color, would respond in revulsion: Yuck. I would never do that.

It took practice to keep the mind open to new possibilities.

"Sheo told me about the reaction of the nurses to Ela's birth," Jaya said. "I didn't notice, really. They were very kind to me. The older woman, though, was concerned that I have a son next time. She told me she had been trained in these things."

Michael scowled. "What things?"

"That's what I asked. It seems there is a uterine implant on the market, which can be used to selectively abort female embryos. It isn't legal, but the nurse was quite casual about it. She offered to set me up with one before I left the hospital, for a small fee of course. Sheo thought you might like to know this."

Michael grimaced. "Sheo was right."

A uterine implant was better than infanticide—Michael even found himself admiring the ingenuity of such a device—but what of the imbalance it would generate? He remembered Gharia, and the look of wrath on his face. "How long do you suppose this has been going on?"

Jaya shrugged. "In one form or another, for hundreds of years."

"Though it's gotten easier now."

"Yes."

But who would bear the cost?

Tensions in Four Villages were not readily visible, yet Michael had sensed them anyway, in the whispering of the nurses on the maternity ward, in the heat of Rajban's fever, in Kanwal's cheerful lament over dowry and women and net access. The people here were experiencing a strange, sideways tearing of their culture, like raw cotton being combed apart, the pieces on their way to a new order, while still clinging helplessly to the old.

"This fellow Gharia is supposed to be a religious activist," Michael said. "I'm starting to wonder if it's only coincidence that this attack on Global Shear followed so closely on his visit this morning."

"Rajban is just one little girl," Jaya reminded him.

True, but a fuse was small compared to the explosives it ignited.

Jaya might have read his mind. "Michael, please be careful. These things have a way of getting out of hand."

XII

After a day spent researching a bid on the Victoria Glen project, Cody found she could not sleep. So at 3 A.M. she pulled on her VR helmet and joined her mother on a stroll in the Paris sunshine. That is, Annette strolled, through tourist crowds along a riverwalk, beneath a grove of ancient trees. Cody felt as if she were floating, a balloon gliding at her mother's side.

"Of all the uses of VR, I like this best," Cody said. "Being able to step out of the awful three A.M. hour, when everything's so dark and cold and hopeless—step right out into gorgeous sunshine. It's like slipping free of your fate, flipping a finger at the cosmos. Ha!"

Annette laughed. Cody was looking out of her shades, and so she couldn't see her mother's face, but she could feel her presence. It was a strange, tickling feeling, as if she might see her after all if she turned just a little bit more...

Cody had not lived with her mother since leaving Victoria Glen for boarding school, and still Annette had been an indefatigable presence in her life, through phone calls and e-mail and brief visits several times a year as they both worked toward their degrees. It had been so hard. Cody felt scared even now when she remembered the loneliness, the resentment she had felt for so many years living on the charity of a corporate scholarship, in a private school where almost everyone else had money and a home and a real family. But even at her worst moments, Cody had never doubted Annette's love.

Now Annette was forty-nine, a data analyst on vacation in Paris with her husband of many years. She had helped him raise his son and one of their own. "Doing it right this time," she'd joked with Cody. It had only hurt a little.

"So, girl. You've been up to something, haven't you? Hurry up and tell me before Jim gets back."

"Up to something?" Cody echoed, disquiet stirring near her heart.

"Something's put you in a mood," Annette said. Up ahead, Jim was waiting by a flower stand. Annette waved to him. "Are you working yourself up for a fight?"

"Oh." Cody had promised herself she would not mention Victoria Glen. Her mother didn't like to think about those days. She didn't even like to acknowledge that time had ever been real. And still, Cody found herself confessing. "I went back to Victoria Glen—"

"Cody!"

"In VR," she added, hoping to appease her mother's scathing tone. "I'm bidding on a job there. I spent all day developing the proposal. I guess I'm wound a little tight."

"Why there, Cody?" Annette sighed. "I know you're doing well. You're not desperate for the job. Are you?"

"No."

"Then why go back there?"

"I don't know. Or ... maybe I do know. I—"

Annette stepped into a bookstore, leaving Jim waiting beside the flowers. Cody watched her hands touch the spines of a row of English-language guidebooks. They were strong, long-fingered hands, golden as teak, each nail painted in milk-chocolate-brown. "Cody, do you know the greatest difference between you and me?"

Cody laughed. It was the only reaction she could think of. "Oh, you're smarter than I am."

"No. I'm more ruthless. I have never let the past own me. If I don't like it, I cut it out. I throw it away. It's not an easy thing to do, but it's needful. I don't think about Victoria Glen, and I don't muse over the boy who was your father, and I don't apologize to anybody for letting Prescott Academy take you away. Holding on to all that would have made my soul so heavy I couldn't get up in the morning. I have to live lightly. I have to do all that I can with what I have in my hands right now." She looked up at the bookstore door. Jim had just come in.

Annette's voice grew softer. "Brace yourself for a mother lecture," she warned. "Cody, you need to learn to live lightly too. You don't have anything to make up for. Let the past go. Let it slip away, and find your joy here, today."

.....

But what if the past is looking for you? Rising in your life like a flooding river, climbing past your ankles, past your knees and your thighs, flowing into your secret places, nesting in your womb?

.....

Cody let the link close, plunging herself back into the darkness of her VR helmet. Not absolutely dark. A call-waiting light glowed amber in the corner of her vision.

When had that come on?

She tapped her glove, calling up a link ID.

Confirmed identity: Michael Fielding.

"Oh God." She felt as if a heat lance had plunged through her, diving in a beam between heart and stomach and out the middle of her back. Michael. "Why now, baby?" she whispered. All the lines of force that guided her life seemed to be intersecting tonight.

She laid her palm against her flat belly. Was there a baby there? Still a single cell, moving toward her womb, and the judgment she had built-in. She'd blamed herself for the loss of that first pregnancy, but had it been her fault? Or had she been poisoned oh so long ago, in Victoria Glen?

She bowed her head, laughing, crying—some strange mix of the two, her guts feeling like jelly. "Baby, why are you calling tonight?"

Easy to find out.

She wiped her eyes on the hem of her shirt. She drew a deep breath to steady herself. Where did he live now, anyway? Hong Kong, wasn't it? She'd gotten a card from him last Christmas.

Her finger curled. She tapped her data glove.

Link.

Just like that, he was there, his head and shoulders drifting in an ill-defined space only an arm's reach in front of her. He looked surprised to see her. "Cody?"

She smiled. "Come on, baby, I don't look that old."

He blushed. Bless him. "Old? Not at all. Hey, it's been a while. And I know it's an outrageous hour. I meant to leave a message, but then I thought I'd query your status, and you were awake—"

"How are you, Michael?" she asked. He had always talked too much when he was nervous.

"Oh, I'm good. The job, though ... I've got a situation here. I'm working in southern India. Did I tell you that?"

"No."

That flushed him further. A rosy blush heated his bronze complexion. He looked down at his desk a moment, then grinned. "I sound like I've got a few too many crosslinks in the old wetware, don't I?"

"It happens to the best of us."

It was on her lips to tell him what she'd remembered in the VR last night, yet she couldn't do it. It had been her decision to end their marriage. In the long, dark months after the abortion she had watched their union rot, until she could kick it over with one cold clutch of words: There's nothing left. I'm leaving.

How could she tell him now, "Oops. Sorry. I made a mistake"?

"How's your schedule?" he asked. "Are you busy right now?"

"At three A.M.?"

His brows rose over a crooked smile. "Well, yeah. Sorry. I wouldn't be bothering you, but we've just stumbled over a critical groundwater problem—and a possible political stew, to make things exciting." Quickly, he explained the details. "I called you first. You're the best. And, basically, you're a pushover."

Don't smile at me like that, she thought. And breathe, girl.

Thank God this wasn't a full-sensory link. She didn't want to smell him, or feel the heat off his body. That smile was like a light shining into her soul...

She asked, "Are you looking for a professional reference?"

"If you think that's what I need. I was wondering, though, if you could handle it?"

"An operation that size?" She shook her head, uncomfortable with the idea. "Green Stomp has only done domestic work. It would take time for us to hire the extra personnel and mobilize." And besides, there's another job I need to do. "You'd be better off with a local outfit. I could ask around for recommendations."

He nodded, but he looked tense and unhappy. "I really need a favor, Cody. Could you do a VR consultation now? I mean right now. This afternoon ... oh hell. This morning, where you are. I need a specialist to survey the wells. I need solid answers for the people who live here. It's a bad situation, and it could get out of hand so easily, especially ..."

She didn't like the awkward guilt lurking in his eyes. "What, Michael?"

He told her about Rajban. Cody listened, unable to completely suppress a dark spear of suspicion, of jealousy, but when he finished, she shook her head at her own tumbled existence, knowing she had thrown away something precious for all the wrong reasons. It was all she could do not to cry.

XIII

Cody's workday had been Michael's night. While he slept, she studied the test results from the sample wells. While he dreamed, she ordered select strains of genetically engineered bacteria from New Delhi, along with case upon case of the nutrient broth that would stimulate them to rapidly reproduce. Near 3

A.M. the frozen vials and sealed boxes arrived in Four Villages, after a quick trip on a southbound jet. When Michael called into the office first thing in the morning, Pallava Sen reported that everything was in place to run a demonstration treatment on a well at Kanwal's farm.

"Great! I'll be there in half an hour." It was already eight o'clock.

It was a vibrant morning. Rajban was in the courtyard, working at the soil with the little hoe she'd found. The ground around her was wet, and the air steamy. The eastern sky had turned itself into a fluffy Christian postcard. Columns of light from the hidden sun poured down between tearing rain clouds, like radiance leaking from the face of God. In a patch of blue sky between the towering cumulus, two tiny white cloud scraps drifted on the edge of visibility. Angels, Michael thought. They looked like angels, gliding in slow raptor circles on the threshold of heaven.

Was this how myths got started?

Rajban looked up at him as he approached. He pantomimed eating food. She smiled tolerantly, then went back to her work. Michael frowned, troubled at her lack of appetite. Then Cody's glyph winked on in the corner of his shades and he forgot to worry. He tapped a full link. "Good morning!" It felt so right to be working with Cody again.

"Or good night," Cody answered, her voice husky and tired. "I'm going to catch a few hours' sleep before the demo.... Is that your waif? She looks like a little girl."

"She is a little girl. And she hasn't been eating much. Muthaye was here yesterday, but she didn't leave any messages. I'm a little concerned, Cody. It's past time her AIDS treatment was started."

Rajban's work had slowed; Michael guessed she was listening to him. What did she imagine he talked about? He shook his head. She looked so lost, a little girl caught on an island in the midst of a rising river, her spot of land steadily shrinking around her.

"She hides inside her work," Michael mused. "Just like we do."

The house pre-empted any reply. "Mr. Fielding, please step inside immediately." The french doors swung open as the injunction was repeated in Hindi. Rajban scrambled to her feet. "Air surveillance has identified the intruder Raman Gharia approaching the premises," the house explained. "Please return immediately to the safety of the interior."

"Michael, what is it?" Cody asked.

"A local troublemaker, that's all." He beckoned to Rajban.

They went inside, and the doors swung shut behind them.

"Hark, give me a street view," Michael said.

A window opened in his shades. He looked out on the lane, and saw Gharia approaching in the company of a portly older man with salt-and-pepper hair neatly combed about a face so dignified it was almost comical, as if he were possessed by dignity, as if it held him together, so that if he ever let it go his body would crumble to helpless dust. A Traditional Elder? Michael wondered.

A link came in from Sankar. "Security forces are on their way, Mr. Fielding. Please stay inside."

"Sankar, I trust you won't be sending helicopter shock troops this time?"

"Uh, no sir. As per our discussion, we will be striving for an appropriate response."

"Thank you." In their discussion, he had also insisted he have voice override on any house functions. He wasn't going to be locked up again.

The house announced visitors. "A Mr. Gharia and Mr. Rao to see you, Mr. Fielding." Michael glanced at Rajban. Her chest fluttered in short little pants. Her eyes were wide.

"Hark. Ask her if she knows this Mr. Rao."

The house translated his question to Hindi. Rajban closed her eyes, and nodded.

Michael strode toward the door.

"Michael, what are you doing?" Cody's voice was sharp and high, reminding him of another time. It's all gone. Can't you see that?

"Mr. Fielding," Sankar objected. "Perhaps you have not seen my report. These two men are deeply involved—"

"I only want to have a civil discussion with them." And learn what it would take to get them to leave Rajban alone. "Hark, open the door."

The door swung open to reveal Gharia and Rao, shoulder to shoulder in the alcove. Gharia looked up in surprise, then, "Namaste," he muttered. Rao echoed it, and introduced himself. Michael was unsurprised to learn that this was Rajban's brother-in-law, the head of the household, the one who had rejected her after her husband died.

"You look at me with anger," Rao said, his voice deep, his dignity so heavy it seemed to suck the heat out of the air, "when I am the one who has been shamed. Return the woman you hold, pay a dowry for her shame, and I will not involve the police."

Behind his back, Michael could hear the house whispering a string of Hindi as it translated Rao's words for Rajban. He drew himself up a little straighter. "She is not my prisoner."

The house uttered a brief line in Hindi. Rao waited for it to finish, then: "She is my brother's widow. Perhaps you don't understand what that means, Mr. Fielding. You are a foreigner, and your modern culture holds little respect for a woman's dignity. Upon my brother's death, I was prepared to allow his wife to live in my household for the rest of her life, despite the burden this would place on me. Rajban rejected my generosity. She desired to marry again. My wife also counseled this would be best, but I am an old man, and I believe in the old ways. A widow should be given respect!" He sighed. "Sometimes, though, a woman will not have respect. The immorality of the world infected this woman. Carnal desire drove her into the street."

Michael felt his body grow hard with a barely contained fury. "That's not how she told the story." Rajban hadn't even known her husband was dead until Gharia's visit.

Gharia glared at him. Michael watched his hands.

Rao alone remained unruffled, glued together by dignity. "I am learning we must all bend with the times," he announced. "I have found a new husband for Rajban. If you will pay the dowry and the medical expenses of her rehabilitation as the penalty of your shame, I will allow this marriage to go forward."

"What an evil old mercenary," Cody growled, while Michael traded stares with Gharia. It was quite obvious who the intended husband was to be. "Tell him to shove off, Michael. She's just a little girl."

Rao could not hear her, and so he continued laying out his terms. "If you do not pay the dowry, I will return the woman to my household. With the help of my wife and son, we may yet protect her from the weakness of the flesh, for as long as she is living."

"Which won't be long," Cody said savagely, "when Rao refuses to buy treatment for her AIDS."

"She's staying here," Michael said.

"Then I will summon the police."

"She's staying here! It's what she wants."

"Have you asked her that?" Gharia demanded. "No woman wants to be a childless whore."

"You dirty son of a—"

Michael broke off, startled by a wash of cold air at his back. He turned to see Rajban, her face veiled by the hem of the sari Muthaye had given her. Her eyes were wide and frightened as she squeezed past Michael. "Rajban, wait!" She slipped past Rao too, out of the alcove and into the street. Michael stared after her in astonishment, but Rao, he didn't even look at her. She might have been a shadow.

"Jesus, Michael!" Cody shouted. "Don't let her go."

Rao nodded in satisfaction. "I will send a servant with the bride price."

Gharia was smiling. His gaze slid past Michael on a film of oily satisfaction. As if to himself, he murmured, "Every woman desires respect."

"Michael, stop her!"

"Rajban! Don't go." She would not understand his words, but surely she would ken the meaning?

Rajban looked at him, with doubt in her eyes, and fear, and a deep sadness that seemed to resonate through millennia of suffering.

"Rajban, please stay."

Her gaze fell, and docilely she turned to follow Rao, who had not even bothered to look behind him.

"Michael! Damn you. Go after her. Stop her."

"Cody, she's made her own decision. I can't grab her and force her back into the house."

"For God's sake, Michael, why not? For once in your life, go out and grab somebody. Stop her. Don't let her make the decision that will wreck her life. Michael, she's hurting so badly, she's in no condition to decide." To his astonishment, he could hear her weeping. "Cody?" Her glyph winked out, as she cut the link.

XIV

Something had changed in the house, though Michael couldn't decide exactly what. All the furniture remained in place; the lighting was just the same. Mrs. Nandy had not been by, so the mud stains remained on the couch, and Rajban's bag of soil—half empty now—still sat by the glass doors. Maybe the house was colder.

He sent a call to Cody, but she didn't answer, and he declined to leave a message on the server.

So Rajban had left! So what? Why did Cody have to act like it was the end of the world? Rajban had chosen to leave. She had walked freely out the door.

Michael wished she had not, but wishing couldn't change the decision she had made.

He wondered what her reasoning had been. Perhaps she preferred whatever small life Rao might offer her to the strangeness she had glimpsed here. Illiteracy was a barrier that kept her from a knowledge of the wider world. Access to information was another hurdle. So she had returned to the life she knew. It was probably as simple as that. Rao's messenger arrived at the door after only a few minutes. Michael listened to the price he quoted, then he put a call through to his bank, adjusted the worth on a cash card, and handed it over, letting the house record the transaction. He had promised to pay for Rajban's AIDS treatment, after all. And she was better off with her family, wasn't she?

He told himself it had all been a misunderstanding.

.....

On the long walk back to the house of her brother-in-law, Rajban could feel the sickness growing inside her. It was a debilitating weakness, a pollution in her muscles, dirt in her joints. By the time she reached the house she was dazed and exhausted, with a thirst that made her tongue swell. As she crossed the threshold behind the men, Mother-in-Law glared, first at Gharia, then at Rajban. She asked Rao if it had been agreed that a dowry should be paid. Rao shrugged. He sat at a table, ignoring everyone, even Gharia, who stood by looking confused and a little angry. "We wait," Rao said.

Inside the house the air was very still, a puddle of heat trapped under the ancient, seeping walls. Mother-in-law turned on Rajban. "No water. No!" she said, cutting her off from the plastic cube with its spigot, that sat upon hollow concrete blocks and held the day's supply of water. "Out! You have work. There is work, you stupid girl."

Rajban felt dizzy by the swirling motion of Mother-in-Law's hands. She stumbled back a step.

"Won't you let her drink?" Gharia asked softly.

Rajban cast him a resentful glance. Oh yes. He had an interest in her now. Or he imagined he did. Michael's house had told her what was said on the doorstep. She blushed in shame again, remembering the words Rao had spoken.

He had painted her with those words. He had painted her past. Dirty whore. Her polluted body testified to it. And why else would all this have happened to her? What Rao said had felt just like the truth. Michael would not want to look at her now that he knew, and Muthaye could never come to visit her again—but Rao had offered her sanctuary.

Of course there would be no dowry. She thought it strange that Gharia didn't understand this. Rao scowled at him. Then he scowled at Mother-in-Law, standing guard by the water cube. "Women's business," he growled.

"Get out!" the old woman screeched at Rajban, now that she was sure she had permission. "No one has done your work for you, foolish girl." Under the assault of her flailing hands, Rajban stumbled into the courtyard. She looked around. The courtyard seemed strange, as if she had dreamed this place and the life she had lived here.

Heat steamed from the moist ground. The plants were wilted in their containers. She shared their thirst, and, using the dirty wash water stored in a small barrel by the door, she set out to allay it.

.....

Michael took a zip to the office to find Pallava Sen waiting for him in the lobby. "Good morning, Michael! Our bioremediation consultant called a few minutes ago to say she will not be able to attend today." "Cody called?" Michael's voice cracked with the force of his surprise.

"Yes. Of course I've been consulting with her throughout the night, so I'll have no problem directing the media gig."

They matched strides through the security sensors. Armored doors opened for them. An elevator stood waiting on the other side. "Be assured, everything is in place," Pallava continued, as the doors closed and the elevator rose. "We have technicians from New Delhi to handle the bacterial cultures. Several media teams are already at the airport, and within a few hours an international task force will be here to examine the complaints against us, and our countercharges of fraud against the local water commission."

They stepped out into the carpeted hallway on the top floor, greeted by the scent of fresh coffee. "When will the water purification units be here?" Michael asked.

"The first shipment is due to arrive within the hour. They'll be set up in stations throughout the district. People will be able to withdraw five gallons at a time—enough for drinking, anyway."

"Excellent." At least people could start drinking clean water now, today, for the first time since ...

He sighed. Probably for the first time ever.

Someone had left a steaming cup of coffee on the desk. "Pallava, thank you. I know you've been up most of the night with this situation. It sounds as if you have things well under control." Then, because he couldn't help himself, he added, "When you talked to Cody just now, did she ... sound all right?"

Pallava frowned, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "She sounded tired, but then she has worked through the night as well. There's no need to worry, Michael. Let her rest. I can handle the gig."

"That's not what I meant. Pallava, I know you can do it. I want you to handle the press conference, too. It's your scene now."

.....

Rajban crouched in the shade just outside the kitchen door, patting dirty water on her cheeks and breast. Inside, Gharia and Rao were talking heatedly. Gharia was saying, "Fielding will pay. You'll see. He wants the woman to have medicine so that—"

Gharia broke off in mid-sentence. Startled, Rajban glanced over her shoulder to see if someone had spied her, resting in the shade. No one looked out the door. Instead, she heard a stranger speaking from inside the house, crowing about the cleverness of Rao's demands. This was the messenger sent to collect the dowry.

"Give the money to my son," Mother-in-Law interrupted, her old voice tight and frightened, as if she feared a rebuke for her boldness, but couldn't help herself nonetheless.

Rajban peeked around the edge of the doorway, to see Rao still seated at the table, Gharia still standing. Both he and the messenger stared hungrily at the cash card Rao twirled in his hands. Then Rao's long fingers closed over the card, hiding it from sight. His face was fleshy, and yet it was the hardest face Rajban had ever seen. "You may both go now." Gharia looked confused. "We need to discuss the finances, the wedding, and—"

"There will be no wedding," Rao announced. "My brother's widow must be subjected to no further shame."

Rajban slipped back behind the wall. The garden looked so queer, as if she had never seen it quite so clearly before. Inside, Gharia's voice was rising in indignant anger, but Rajban did not listen to the words, knowing that nothing he might say could change her fate.

.....

Pallava Sen had hardly left when Muthaye's glyph winked on in the corner of Michael's shades. He tapped his glove, transferring the call to a wall screen. Muthaye snapped into existence. She stood in Michael's living room, her stern face framed by a printed sari, which she had pulled over her head like a scarf. In her hand, she held Rajban's half-empty bag of soil. Michael's gaze caught on it. "Rajban has gone."

Muthaye's lips pursed petulantly. "I am at the house, Michael. I can see that. Where has she gone?"

Michael felt inexplicably guilty as he made his explanation. He did not feel any better as he watched Muthaye's expression darken. Her eyes rolled up, beseeching the heavens for patience, perhaps. Then she spoke: "Mr. Fielding, I would be interested to someday engage you in a discussion of free will. What does it really mean? You tell me that Rajban chose to leave with this Rao character, her brother-in-law who treated her as less than human even as you looked on. Mr. Fielding, can you tell me why she freely chose to go with him?"

Michael scowled, feeling unfairly impeached, by Muthaye and by Cody, too. "I suppose she felt torn from her roots. Most people are, by nature, afraid of change."

Muthaye's scowl deepened. "Rajban did not suffer a failure of nerve, Mr. Fielding."

"I didn't say—"

"No, of course. You wouldn't say such a thing. You are a kind person, Michael, and obviously you've done well in life. It's only natural that you believe opportunity is omnipresent, that we all rise or sink according to our talents and our drive—but the world is more complex than that. Talent is meaningless when we are schooled in the belief that change is wrong, when we are taught that we are worthy of nothing more than the ironbound existence fate has given us. Believe me, Rajban has been well-schooled in her worthlessness. She knows that she lives at the sufferance of her husband's family. Obedience and acceptance have been drilled into her from babyhood. To expect her to freely decide to defy her brother-in-law would be like expecting a drug addict to freely decide to stay sober at a crack party. There is no difference.

"And it is partly my fault, too, for I laughed yesterday when she suggested this soil had a magic." Muthaye lifted the stained cloth bag. "Perhaps it does. I have talked to a horticultural specialist and he is intrigued. He tells me there may be valuable microorganisms in this dirt. I will have it tested, and I will not laugh at naïve optimism ever again."

"Muthaye—"

She raised her palm. "Michael, I apologize for lecturing you, but you must begin to see that to dream is itself a learned skill."

Stop her! For once in your life ...

Michael sighed. "I gave Rao money to pay for the AIDS treatment." That was something, at least.

Although from the way Muthaye glared at him, it might have been worse than nothing. He scowled, irritated now. "Was that wrong too?"

"There will be no treatment."

Michael felt his patience snap. Really, he'd had enough. "You don't know that. She was to be married again—"

"Did Gharia pay the dowry?"

"No, but it was understood—"

"I expect none of you understood the same thing. You each heard only what you could tolerate. Understand this, Michael. Rajban is the childless wife of a dead man. Rao can gain nothing by letting her marry. He will refuse her the AIDS treatment and keep the money for himself. Mark my words: If we do not find Rajban and get her out of her brother-in-law's house, then she will die there, most likely in a matter of days."

.....

Cody linked into the Terrace on a full sensory connection. The private VR chat room had been designed as a flagstoned California patio, embedded in a garden of pepper trees and azaleas. Everyone had a personal animation stored on the server, an active, three-dimensional image of themselves that reflected their habitual postures and gestures, so they would seem to be present even when they weren't fully linked through a VR suit.

Cody's image looked a good deal younger than it ought to—a sharp reminder of how many years had gone by since she'd visited the Terrace. The last time had been during those nebulous months between the abortion and the divorce. Not the best of days, and returning now made her feel a bit queasy.

Still, she had come with a purpose. She set about it, sending a glyph to Etsuko, Ryan, and Jaya, asking them to come if they could—and within a minute, they were all represented. Etsuko was involved in a meeting, so she sent only a passive image of herself to record the chat: an alabaster statue dressed in formal kimono. Her flirtatious eyes and the cant of her head as she looked down from a pedestal gave an impression of sharp and regal attention.

Ryan and Jaya were able to interact in real time. Their images lounged in the French patio chairs behind steaming cups of coffee. Jaya had a half-smile on her face. Ryan looked uncertain. He and Michael were very close, Cody knew, and questions of loyalty were probably stirring in his mind.

She drew a deep breath. "Thank you for coming. Jaya, Michael told me about your newest daughter. Congratulations."

"That was an adventure!" Jaya said. "I don't know what I would have done without Michael. He's a wonderful man."

Cody felt herself stiffen. "He is a good man, but he made a mistake this morning when he let Rajban return to her husband's family."

"The girl who's been staying with him?" Ryan asked. "But that's good, isn't it?"

"No," Michael said.

Cody turned, to find Michael's image standing a few steps to the side.

"Cody's right. I made a mistake. I didn't want to believe this was an abusive situation."

"I'm afraid for her," Cody said. "Michael, we need to find her as soon as we can. I came here to ask the

Terrace for help. I know I have not been part of this group for many years, but I still trust you all more than anyone, and you're already familiar with Rajban. Will you help? I've rented two drone planes. I know you're busy, but if you could rotate shifts every few minutes, the three of you might be able to guide one plane, while I inhabit the other. We don't know where she lives, but we know some things about her."

Michael said, "I'm opening up the Global Shear census data. That'll speed things up. When we do find her, Muthaye and I will go after her on the ground."

Inside the house there were oranges on the table, and clean water, and sweetened tea, but no one invited Rajban in. She stole a half-ripe orange off one of the trees. Its rind was swirled with green and the flesh was grimly tart, but she ate it anyway, her back to the house. She wondered at herself. She had never stolen fruit before. In truth, she did not feel like the same person.

The orange peels went into her heap of magic soil.

Muthaye had laughed at the idea that it might be magic.

Rajban picked up a damp clump. It was soft and warm, and smelled of fertility. If magic had a smell, this would be it; yet Muthaye had laughed at the idea.

Rajban rocked back and forth, thinking about it, and about Muthaye's mother and her dead baby girl. It was better the baby had died. A girl without a father would only know hardship, and still it must have been a terribly painful thing. For a moment, she held the baby in her arms, acutely aware of its soft breath and warm skin, its milky smell. When she thought about it dying, grief pushed behind her eyes.

Muthaye's mother had married again ... and had another daughter. Not a son, but the school she owned earned money, so perhaps she could afford a daughter.

She was just like you, Rajban.

What did that mean? Rajban did not feel at all like the same person. There was an anger inside her that had never been there before. It felt like a seed planted under her heart, and it was swelling, filling with all the possibilities she had seen or heard of in the last two days.

Her fists clenched as the seed sprouted in a burst of growth, rooting deep down in her gut and flowering in her brain, thriving on the magic soil of new ideas.

.....

Cody was a point of awareness gliding over the alleys and lanes of Four Villages. Linked to the GS census, the town became a terrain of information. Addresses flashed past, accompanied by statistics on each building and the families that owned them—occupation, education, income, propensity for paying taxes. At the same time the drone's guidance program spun a tiny camera lense, recording the people in the streets, sending their images to the GS census, where a search function matched them against information on file, spitting back identifications in less than a second.

No way this search could be legal. There had to be privacy strictures on the use of the GS census data.

What did privacy mean anymore?

It didn't matter. Not now. Cody only wanted to find the combination of bits that would mean Rajban.

Rajban was a nonentity. She did not appear anywhere in the census—and that was a clue in itself.

Some heads of households refused to answer the census questions, forcing the field agent to guess at their names and family members. Michael had used that fact in his search parameters. It was likely such a house was in a fundamentalist neighborhood and that it had an intensely cultivated private courtyard, where a young wife could be hidden from an agent's prying eyes ... but not from the eyes of a drone aircraft.

The plane was powered by micropumps that adjusted its internal air pressure, allowing it to sink and rise and glide through the heated air. The pumps were powered by solar cells on the plane's dorsal surface, backed up by tiny batteries built into its frame. It could stay aloft for months, maybe for years. Its only drawback was that it was slow.

Cody's fingernails had dug crescent impressions in her data glove by the time the drone cruised over the first household on Michael's list. A woman was hanging laundry in the shade, but she was older than Rajban, with two children playing near her feet. At the next house the courtyard was empty, and the garden it contained was yellow and sickly. Cody tapped her glove, sending the plane on.

Recorded names and faces slid past her, until finally, the camera picked out a familiar face. "Gharia." The GS census confirmed her guess.

Cody ordered the drone lower. It hovered over the street as Gharia stumbled along, head down, each sandaled foot ramming into the mud like a crutch, while chickens scurried to get out of his way and children ran indoors, or behind their mothers until he passed. Rage and helplessness were twisted into his posture. Cody's heart rate tripled, knowing something terrible had happened.

The drone's shadow was a cross in the mud. Gharia saw it and pulled up short. He looked up, while Cody let the plane sink lower.

She had expected to hate him, but now, seeing the pain and confusion in his eyes, she could feel only a desperate empathy. The old ways were dissolving everywhere. Her own tangled expectations neatly echoed his.

Then Gharia crouched. Still staring at the plane, he groped blindly, clawing a fistful of mud from the street. Cody's eyes widened as he jumped to his feet and flung the mud at the plane. Just a little extra weight could upset the plane's delicate balance. She started to order it up, but the guidance AI responded first, activating micropumps that forced air out of the fuselage. The plane shot out of reach, and Gharia became a little man.

He threw his head back. He opened his mouth in a scream she could not hear. His shoulders heaved as he looked around for some object upon which to vent his rage. He found it in the white cart of a water station being set up at the end of the street. The startled technician stumbled back several steps as Gharia attacked the cart, rocking it, kicking at it, but it was too heavy to turn over. Even the plastic frame would be very hard to dent.

After a minute of frantic effort, Gharia gave up. Chin held high, he walked away through a crowd of

bemused spectators, as if nothing had happened.

Cody touched her belly, wondering if there was life growing in there, and if it was a boy or a girl—if it would die, or live.

What difference is there, between me and this unhappy man?

Both of them had let antique expectations twist the balance of their lives.

.....

A winged shadow passed over the courtyard. Rajban looked up from where she crouched in the shade of the mandarin tree. Her hands left off their work of pulling tiny weed seedlings from the mossy soil. Squinting against the glare, she searched the sky. There. It was the little airplane that had flown over Michael's house, blue like the sky and very hard to see. More like a thought than any solid thing. She reached to touch the necklace her mother had given her, before remembering it was gone. The life she'd lived before was fading, and she was not the same person anymore.

When she first came to her husband's house this thriving mandarin tree had been ill. The soil in which it was rooted had been unclean, until she tended it, until she prayed the magic into existence. A worm had hatched from the barren dirt, and the mandarin tree had been reborn, no longer the same tree as before.

Rajban felt that way: as if she had been fed some potent magic that opened her eyes to undreamed possibilities. Perhaps Muthaye's mother had felt this way too?

Rajban rose unsteadily to her feet. The heat of her fever was like a slow funeral fire, made worse because she had been allowed no water. Her mouth felt like ashes. No matter. Like Muthaye's mother, she was ready to step away from this empty round of life.

.....

Michael waited with Muthaye in the cramped passenger seat of an air-conditioned zip. The driver had parked his vehicle between two market stalls set up under a spreading banyan tree. Young men lounged in the shade, eating flavored ice. Michael idly watched three tiny screens playing at once in his shades. Two were the feeds from the searching drones. The third was the bioremediation demonstration out at Kanwal's farm.

There was Kanwal, hungrily watching Pallava explain the activity of the technicians gathered around the well. Kanwal's ambitions were an energy, waiting to be shaped.

"Michael!"

Cody's tense voice startled him. His gaze swept the other two screens, and he caught sight of Rajban, gazing upward, her golden face washed in the harsh light of the noon sun.

"Michael, we've found her."

He whooped in triumph. "She looks all right!"

Muthaye squeezed his arm. "Why is she outside at noon? It's so terribly hot. Look at her cheeks. Look how flushed they are. We must hurry." She leaned forward, to tell the address to the driver of the zip.

The driver's eyes widened. Then he laughed in good humor. "I no go there. Too many of the politics there. Don't like any new way. Throw mud my zip."

Muthaye sighed. "He's right. It's a bad neighborhood. Michael, you won't be welcome there."

"If it's that kind of neighborhood, you won't be welcome either. You'll be as foreign as me."

A ghost of a smile turned her lips. "Maybe not quite so, but—"

"I can't send a security team in, you understand? This isn't company business, and I've already stretched my authority by using the census. But I can go after her myself."

"We can both go after her," Muthaye said. She used a cash card to pay the driver. "I only hope she is willing to leave."

.....

The silent drone floated above the courtyard. From this post, Cody looked down and saw that something had changed. Rajban had moved out of the shade of the little potted tree. She stood in the sunshine now, her back straight, no sign of timidity in her posture. Her gaze was fixed on the house. She seemed in possession of herself and it made her a different person. The timorous girl from Michael's garden was gone.

Cody swallowed against a dry throat. Clearly, Rajban intended something. Cody feared what it might be. A woman who has been cornered and condemned all her life should not protest, but Rajban's obedience had been corrupted—by the whisperings of Muthaye, by her glimpse of a different life.

Cody felt as if she watched herself, ready to burst in the close confines of Victoria Glen. She wanted to cry out to Rajban, tell her to wait, not to take any risks ... but the plane had no audio.

Rajban stepped toward the house with a clean, determined stride.

Cody ordered the drone to follow. The micropumps labored and the plane sank, but with excruciating slowness. It was only halfway down when Rajban disappeared inside.

.....

Muthaye hid her face with her sari. She walked a step behind Michael but no one was fooled. Change had risen in a slow flood over Four Villages, dissolving so many of the old ways, but here was an island. The people of Rao's neighborhood had resisted the waters, throwing up walls of hoary tradition to turn the flood away. It was as if history had run backward here. Girls received less schooling every year, they were married at younger and younger ages, they bore more children ... or at least they bore more sons. The sex selection implant was an aspect of modernity that had worked its way inside the fundamentalist quarter. It was a breach in the walls that must ultimately bring them tumbling down ... but not on this day.

Michael walked at a fast, deliberate pace, following the directions whispered to him by Jaya as she watched from the second drone aircraft. He felt the stares of unemployed men, and of hordes of boys munching on sweets and flavored ice. Tension curled around him like a bow wave.

A link came in from his chief of security. "Mr. Fielding, I don't like this at all. Let me send some people in."

"No," Michael muttered, keeping his voice low, trying not to move his lips. "Sankar, you send your people in here, you're going to touch off a riot. You know it."

The brand of fundamentalism didn't matter, and it didn't even need a religious affiliation. Michael had encountered the same irrational situation as a boy when he'd gotten off the bus at the wrong stop, finding himself in a housing project where the presence of a prosperous mixed-race kid was felt like a slap against the hip-hop culture.

Fundamentalism was so frightening because it taught the mind to not think. Such belief systems cramped people's horizons, sabotaging rational thought while virulently opposing all competitive ideas.

Michael heard Muthaye gasp. He turned, just as a clump of mud hit him in the cheek. A pack of boys hanging out at the entrance of a TV theater erupted in wild laughter. "Keep walking," Muthaye muttered through gritted teeth. Mud had splashed across her face. Her sari was dirtied. More clumps came flying after them. Michael wanted to take her arm, but that would only make things worse. Boys jeered. They made kissy noises at Muthaye. A few massaged their crotches as she passed.

Jaya was watching over them from the drone. "Turn here," she said, her voice tight. "There is hardly anyone in the alley to your left. All right, now go right—walk faster, some of the boys are following you—keep going, keep going. Turn again! Left. There. Now you're out of their sight."

"How much farther?" Muthaye whispered into the open line. Michael glanced back over his shoulder, but the boys were not in sight.

.....

Mother-in-Law looked up as Rajban stepped across the threshold. Surprise and anger mingled in her wrinkled face as she scurried to guard the water cube. Rao pretended not to notice. Women's business.

Rajban drew a deep breath. The little airplane had been a sign, pure as the searing sky, that the time had

come to follow Muthaye's mother into another life. So, without looking at Mother-in-Law again, she walked past her. She kept her face calm, but inside her soul was trembling. Rajban passed the table. She approached the door. Only then did Rao admit her existence. "Stop." His voice ever stern. "Get back to your work."

Her insides felt soft and hot as she told herself she did not hear him. She took another step, then another, the concrete floor warm and hard against her toes.

"I said stop."

The doorway was only five steps away now, a blazing rectangle, like a portal to another existence. Rajban walked toward it, her steps made light by the tumbling rhythm of her heart.

Rao stepped in front of her, and the light from the doorway went out.

Rajban made no effort to slip around him. Instead she reached for her sari and pulled it farther over her head, so that it partly concealed her face. Then she stood motionless, in silent protest.

.....

At last.

The drone dropped to the level of the doorway. Through the cameras, Cody gazed into the house—and could not believe what she was seeing.

Rajban was walking out. She was heading straight for the door. Cody watched her pass the flustered old woman, and the table where Rao sat. It seemed certain she would reach the door, when abruptly, Rao rose to his feet. In two steps he stood in front of Rajban, blocking her exodus. Rajban stopped.

For several seconds nothing more happened. Rajban stood in calm serenity, refusing to yield or to struggle. It had the flavor of a Gandhian protest, an appeal to the soul of the oppressor. Rao did not seem to like the taste of guilt. Outrage convulsed across his face. Then Cody saw a decision congeal.

Warmth fled her gut. What could she do? She was half a world away.

"Michael," she whispered. "It would be good if you were here now."

"Two or three more minutes," Jaya said. "That's all."

It was too much.

Cody ordered the drone forward. The autopilot guided it through the door, its wingtips whispering scant millimeters from the frame.

She could not defend Rajban, but she could let Rao know that Rajban was no longer alone.

Rajban kept her head down, knowing what would happen, but so much had changed inside her she could not turn back. Her heart beat faster, and still the expected blow failed to arrive.

Cautiously, she raised her eyes—to encounter a sheen of unexpected blue. The little airplane! It hovered at her shoulder like a dream image, so out of place did it seem in the hot, cloistered room. Brother-in-Law stared at it as if he faced his conscience.

The tiny plane had summoned Rajban with its color like the searing sky. Wordlessly, it now advised her: Time to go.

So she straightened her shoulders and stepped to the side, circling Rao until the doorway stood before her again. She walked toward it, through it, on unsteady legs, out into the mud of the street. The little airplane cruised past her, floating slowly back up into the blue. Brother-in-Law started shouting ... at Mother-in-Law? Rajban didn't stay to find out. She stumbled away from the house, not caring where her feet might take her.

"Rajban!"

She turned, startled to hear her name. "Michael?"

The street was crowded with women moving in small, protective groups. Hard-eyed men lounged beside the shop fronts across the street, watching the women, or haggling over the price of goods, or sipping sweetened teas. Flies buzzed above the steaming mud.

"Rajban."

Michael emerged from the crowd, with Muthaye close behind him. She called out Rajban's name, then, "Namaste."

"Namaste," Rajban whispered.

Muthaye took her arm. Above her veil, her eyes were furious. "Come with us?"

Rajban nodded. Some of the men around them had begun to mutter. Some of the women stopped to stare. Muthaye ignored them. She stepped down the street, her head held high, and after they'd walked for a few minutes, she tossed back her sari and let the sunlight fall upon her face.

XV

Cody relinquished control of the drone, leaving it to return like a homing pigeon to the rental office. She lifted off her VR helmet to find herself seated in her darkened living room, the lights of Denver and its suburbs gleaming beyond the window. She felt so scared she thought she might throw up.

There was a ticking bomb inside her.

She imagined a fertilized egg descending through one of her fallopian tubes, its single cell dividing again and again as it grew into a tiny bundle of cells that would become implanted against the wall of her womb. With a few hormonal triggers this nascent life form would change her physiology, so that her body would serve its growth. Quite a heady power for an unthinking cluster of cells, but as it reordered its environment, it would begin to shed evidence of its identity. Very early in gestation the uterine implant would classify it desirable or undesirable, and would act accordingly.

Cody laid her hand against her lower abdomen. She imagined she could feel him inside her, a bundle of cells with the potential to become a little boy. She remembered Gharia standing in the street, looking up at her with utter confusion, with helpless rage. He had tried too hard to hold onto the past and the world had gotten away from him.

Live lightly.

She felt as if she could hardly breathe. Her shoulders heaved as she struggled to satisfy her lungs. Air in, air out, but none of it absorbed. She felt as if she might drown, trapped in the close confines of her apartment. So she found her shades and called a cab.

.....

If we are lucky, life shows us what we need to see.

Cody snorted. It was one of the many inspirational aphorisms drilled into her at Prescott Academy. And how had that particular pearl of wisdom concluded? Ah, yes:

If we are brave, we dare to look.

Cody was not feeling terribly brave right now, and that was why she was running away. The cab took her to the airport, and from there an air taxi took her north. Upon landing, she picked up a rental car, arriving at Project 270 just before dawn.

An ocean of cold air had settled over the land. Though she wore boots and blue jeans, a thermal shirt and a heavy jacket, she still felt the bite of the coming winter as she stumbled through the darkness. A flash of her company badge soothed the security system. Ben would not be by for two or three hours, so she made her way alone to the upper gate, where she found the card slot by feel. The gate unlatched and she slipped inside.

The sky was a grand sweep of glittering stars, and in their light she could just make out the slope of the land. A few house lights gleamed far, far away across the river. Leaving the ATV in the garage, she set out down the long slope of the meadow, stumbling over clumps of sod and seedling trees. The meadow grasses were heavy with dew, and when their seed heads brushed her thighs they shed freezing jackets of water onto her jeans, so that in less than a minute she was soaked through. She kept walking, listening to her socks squish, until she reached the bluff above the river bank.

The sky was turning pearly, and already birds were stirring in a lazy warm-up song. At the foot of the bluff, a doe hurried along the narrow beach, while the river itself grumbled in a slow, muddy exhalation that went on and on and on, a sigh lasting forever. Cody shivered in the cold. Can't run any farther.

It was time to discover what she had done, get the truth of it.

So many chronic problems came from not facing the truth.

She slipped her shades out of her jacket pocket and put them on. They were smart enough to know when they were being used. A menu appeared against the backdrop of the river. Tapping her data glove,

she swiftly dropped the highlight down to "U." Only one listing appeared under that letter: UTERINE IMPLANT.

"Upload status report," she whispered. "And display."

Even then, fear held her back. She let her gaze fix on the river, its surface silvery in the rising light. Steam curled over it, phantom tendrils possessed of an alien motion, curling, stretching, writhing in a slow agony lovely to watch.

Lines of white type overlay the prospect. For several seconds Cody pretended not to see them. Then she drew a deep breath, and forced her gaze to fix on the words:

Status: No pregnancy detected.

Action: None.

She stared at the report for several seconds before she could make sense of it.

No baby. That made it easy ... didn't it?

Her body did not feel the same. Somehow it had become hollow, forlorn. She stared at the water, wondering how something that had never existed could have felt so real.

The doe gave up its stroll on the beach to climb the embankment, stirring ahead of it a flight of blackbirds that spun away, trilling and peeping, noisy leaves tumbled on a ghostly wind. Cody remembered the painful confusion on Gharia's face as he stood in the street, looking up at her. She had seen herself in his eyes, asking, why?

A figment of mist curled apart and she laughed softly, at herself and at the strained script she had tried to write for her life.

Gharia had wanted a scripted life, too, except half the cast had vanished.

It was the same all over the world. Virtually every culture encouraged loyalty to social roles ... but why was it done that way? Because there was some innate human need to eliminate chance? Or because it saved conflict, and therefore the energy of the group? Even as it wasted intellect and human potential...

The world was evolving. Energy was abundant now, and maybe, the time had come to let the old ways go, and to nurture a social structure that would unlock the spectrum of potential in everyone.

Starting here, Cody thought. She looked again at the menu, where UTERINE IMPLANT remained highlighted. "Shut it down," she whispered.

The letters thinned, indicating an inactive status.

Cody started to slip off the shades, but she was stopped by the sudden appearance of Michael's glyph within an urgent red circle, meaning Please please please talk to me NOW.

Her throat had begun to ache in the cold air, but she tapped her data glove anyway, accepting the link. Michael's glyph expanded until it became his image. He stood in the open air beyond the bluff, remote from her, though she could see every detail of his face. "Michael? Has something happened to Rajban?"

"Rajban's all right." He squinted at her. "I can't see you."

"I just have shades."

His scowl was ferocious. "Then I borrowed this VR suit for nothing." She waited for him to get over it. After a moment his body relaxed. He turned, to look down at the silvery path of the river. "We did the right thing, Cody. Rajban is set now, in a house with two other women. She'll probably do garden work. You know the bag of soil she carried? Turns out to be a natural bioremediation culture, a community of microorganisms fine-tuned for the pollutants particular to the soil around Four Villages. Muthaye thinks it might be possible for Rajban to sell live cultures, or at least to use it to enhance her own business."

"That's good. I'm glad." She felt a fresh flush of wonder at the adaptiveness, the insistence of life. She toed a clod of exposed soil on the bluff. Contamination had been rampant in this land, too, but it had been chased away, broken down in a series of simple steps by microorganisms too small to be seen. The scars of the past were being erased.

"Where are you?" Michael asked. "It's beautiful here."

"At a project site. It is pretty, but it's also very cold. I should head back to the car."

He stiffened. "If you're thinking of running away from me again, Cody, I might have some objection to that. It's been suggested to me that I give in too easily to other people's choices ... when I know those choices are bad."

Her fingers drummed nervously against her thigh. A Canada goose paddled into sight, leaving a V wake unfurling behind it. "I really said that, didn't I?"

"Cody, I never wanted you to leave. You chose to go. Rajban chose to go. Should I have forced either one of you to stay?"

The goose had been joined by another. Cody's hands felt like insensate slabs of ice.

"I don't know."

"If we each can't be free to decide for ourselves—"

"I have used the same uterine implant you discovered in Four Villages, only it was my choice, and I wanted a daughter." She said it very quickly, the words tumbling over one another. "I've shut it off now, and ... I'm not pregnant."

He stared at her. His stunned expression might have been funny if she didn't feel so scared. "Say something, Michael."

"I ... wish I was there with you."

She closed her eyes, feeling some of the chill go out of the dawn.

XVI

Michael finished the day in his office, facing Karen Hampton on the wall screen. Outside, the sun was a red globule embedded in brown haze. Its rays cast an aging glow across his desk as he leaned forward—tense, eager, and a little scared—the same way he'd felt on his first flight out of the U.S.

He knew it was likely Karen would fire him. He didn't want it to happen, but that wasn't the source of his fear. He had done only what was needful, because trust comes first. So it wasn't Karen he feared. It was himself. He had lost some of his tolerance for the foibles and foolishness of human culture. He had learned to say no. It was a terrible, necessary weapon, and that he possessed it left him elated and afraid.

Karen stared at him for several seconds with eyes that might have been made of glass. "You have a unique conception of the responsibilities of a regional director."

Michael nodded. "It's been a unique day."

He watched the lines of her mouth harden. "Michael, you're in Four Villages because I felt it was an ideal setting for your creativity, your energy, and your ambition, but you seem to have forgotten your purpose. You are there to grow an economy, not to rescue damsels in distress."

Michael no longer saw a clear distinction between the two. "Damsels are part of the economy, Karen. Everyone matters and you know it. The more inclusive the system is, the more we all benefit."

"How does offending a significant segment of the population expand the system?"

"Because doing anything else would break it. You said it yourself. Trust comes first. If people can't trust us to support them in their enterprises, then we've lost. If we come to be known as cowards, then we fail. I'm not here to fail."

Four Villages was a microcosm of the world and it faced formidable problems—poverty, overpopulation, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and, perhaps worst of all, the poison of old ideas—but none of these challenges was insurmountable. Michael swore it to himself. Nothing was insurmountable. Terrible mistakes would be made, that was inevitable, but the worst mistake would be to pull back, to give up, to give in to the dead past.

"It's fear of change that's holding us back."

Change was coming anyway. The old world was being washed away, and soon there would be no paths left to follow. Then everyone would need to find their own way, like fishes or sleek eels, tracking ever-shifting currents, trailing elusive scents, nosing into the new possibilities of undreamed of futures.

Karen shook her head. "I love your thinking, Michael, but the hard fact is, this project is floundering."

Michael smiled, as the sun's last gleam finally vanished from the horizon. "No, Karen. It's just learning to swim."

The End