

"What do you remember?"

"Everything."

"No. The sharp-edged things that press at the surface of your mind."

Eyes closed. "My first rejuvenation."

"Tell me."

"It was like getting in bed with Stalin," she said. "It was like winning the lottery."

"How so?" My airscreens tried to explain Stalin and lotteries to me, but I blinked them away. Rule One: Do not rush in. Learn by context. Learn the totality of the person. Until the stars are ready to become constellations and the names ripe to fall from the sky.

"Because it was new," she said. "Nobody could afford it. Back then, Oversight picked. And they put their finger on me. Still don't know why. I was Beat before there was Beat. I got clubbed in Vietnam protests. The Oversight Overseeing series was not exactly complimentary. I think it was perfectly random. They needed something for their new Art Purity thing, and my name came up. So now I'm here. And my friends are dead."

"Are you angry about that?"

"I'm angry about everything."

"That's not an answer."

A sigh. "No."

"You said it was like sleeping with Stalin."

A long, indecipherable glance. Mina Best still looked reasonably young, like a well-preserved fifty-year-old who had never made her first trip to the tanks. But her eyes were cool and unreadable, as if someone had drawn a veil before her soul.

"You never lived under Oversight."

"No."

"Look it up on your little screens. Stalin. Put a smiling face on him. That's Oversight. But if he was offering to make you young again, no strings attached, wouldn't you take it?"

I smiled noncommittally. Blinked up some random facts about her life on the airscreens. She was an artist, they said. A painter.

I looked at one of the flat, unmoving pictures that hung in her great white cube of a house. Bright teal splashes emerging from a dark black-purple background. It had a crude and unfinished feel to it. I could see where the bristles of her brush had actually left their imprint in the paint. I could see the weave of the canvas underneath in places. It was strange looking at a piece of art that didn't move or change. It just sat there. Imperturbable.

Almost a challenge.

She saw the direction of my gaze. "I know what you're thinking," she said. "But yes, there's a market for it. There's always a market for one-of-a-kind things."

Another lesson. Personal truth is a fantasy, always embellished. Challenge to find the ultimate truth. "I would have thought that nanoreplication could recreate an exact copy."

A snort. "Nanorep doesn't come with a video record and signed bond showing that this was made with my own hands."

"So the value is not from the tactile quality?"

"No. It's because I can't make another one, no matter how hard I try."

"I imagine there would be those who would be happy with a copy."

A sigh. "You don't understand art."

Keep it rolling. "What else do you remember?"

"I remember my mother." This one a deep frown. Very readable. I kept silent and waited.

"Single mom," she said. "Not by choice. Dad was killed by a defective rifle in Basic a couple of years after I was born. 1936. Before Pearl Harbor. Before we even knew we were at war."

Grainy images flashed on the airscreens. I watched ships burning in slow black and white, and the weight of her age hit me. She'd been born in an era when things were in black and white because that was all they could do. That was the limit of their tech. It wasn't art. It wasn't intentional. It was just the way things were. My stomach lurched and skidded.

One hundred sixty-three years old, I thought. I can't do this.

But she was still talking. "Mom got lucky. Started a drugstore in the San Fernando Valley. Everyone thought she was crazy. Too far out from LA. And during the war, we almost did starve. I remember hiding from the bank guys in our little apartment above the store, lights out, barely breathing. But when the war was over and they started building . . . there was a Best Drugs on every major street in the valley by the '50s. My mom had become a businessman. Chasing the money. Maybe that's why I started painting. Because it wasn't business. It was beautiful and useless. She hated it."

Mina laughed, a harsh ratcheting sound. "Mom was out sleeping with the city council and the president of Western Bank," she said. "I was sleeping with a shitty gallery owner on Third Street to get my work shown."

"Are you angry about that?"

"It's too long ago."

"I thought you were angry about everything."

"I am."

"What else do you remember?"

"Everything!" she said, standing up and pacing the room. Little motes of dust swirled in her wake, picked up from the old-time dead carpet, illuminated by the skylights above. "That's the problem. It's a bag of mush! Everything. Nothing! It just keeps getting more and more buried! I don't even remember your name!"

"Gillam," I said. "Gillam Anderson."

"Gillam," she said, as if trying to carve it into the wall of her mind. "New name. I should remember that. That was one of the things I used to be able to do. Remember names."

Time to be honest. "I don't know if I can help," I said.

"Why not?" Immediate. Almost desperate. A look of pleading. "You're an Editor! Edit me!"

"You're my first," I said.

Mina stopped pacing. Looked at me. And in that moment, I could see her seeing my twenty-four years for the first time. I could almost hear the churn of her mind as it wrangled with this new knowledge. She sat on the edge of the couch and looked me in the eye. "You're scared," she said.

"Most cases are only eighty to a hundred years old," I said. "In their first light mindclutter. I don't . . . I don't know why Clariti sent me. I would think they would have sent someone more experienced in pruning the tree of the mind." Though actually I did know. Jill Ayanami. That last empathy class, the darkened room and the small frightened child. She'd pulled me aside and told me that my one great failing was my brutal honesty. In her own brutally honest way, in this newly reconstituted, brutally honest world, she told me that I could achieve anything I wanted -- except for that one fatal flaw. This was her. Pushing me. Testing me. But why?

From Mina, that same intense look. If she were younger, it might have been desire. In her, it was untranslatable. "Experience is overrated."

"I could Edit out your ability to paint."

Another laugh, long and hard. "So?"

"There's no way to undo an Edit. What's done is done."

That brought a soft smile. "Then we are both artists," she said.

"Mina, you may be one of the oldest people in the world," I said. Seventh, my airscreens reported. I shivered.

"So?"

"So you don't want me. You want someone who has done this before."

"Someone whose experience steers them directly over a cliff."

My airscreens explained the metaphor. "No."

"I want someone who can look at me and see me, not case #736 of day #4560 of his career."

And that was true. There were Editors like that. There were Editors for whom the dance of another mind had become just another piece of feral adware, flickering unseen at the corner of their airscreens.

I can do that, I thought. I could see Mina as an individual.

Grainy black and white images rushed back at me. The rough cries of war from some ancient magnetic soundtrack. All the unfamiliar terms. Drug stores. Lotteries. Stalin. Galleries. There was so much to understand!

I swallowed. I can try, anyway.

"What do you remember?" I asked again.

"I've told you."

"No, not enough."

"Are you going to Edit me?"

"Tell me what you remember."

She told me things about times I couldn't pretend to understand.

I was late for the Viewing. I had to wait half an hour for an autorunner to be free enough to take me up the disintegrating twisty roads to her house, far above Malibu.

She lived in a featureless white cube, all unapologetic ninety-degree angles and hard corners, a dream of the future that had expired before Gehry and Ovit. She'd told me about it before:

"It was something I always wanted," she'd said. "I used to drive past this house late at night in my convertible. It'd be all lit up against the sky, and I'd think, 'That's it, that's what I need. A big beautiful simple seamless palette that would be the perfect counterpoint to my work.' Pretentious, I know. But I had to have it. And eventually, I was doing well enough when the market was doing poorly enough, and I was able to have it."

She opened the door before I knocked.

"You're late," she said.

I'm scared, I knew that meant.

I pushed back the instinctive response and hung my head. Rule Two: There is nothing more terrifying than opening one's mind to another. Reassurance is your reciprocal sacrifice. Always do your utmost to put them at ease.

"I called," I said.

"I don't have time for messages!"

"I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "Come in."

She expected to be awed by my equipment. I've been told that they do. Some of them remember a time when computing still meant racks of equipment and fans whirring away the heat of a hundred or a thousand primitive processors. When I

put the two tiny dots on her temples and the one small disk on her neck, she said, "Is that all?"

"Yes. It will take them a while to connect."

She nodded. I didn't tell her about the nanometer-sized tendrils that were threading their way through her brain. Something even I didn't fully understand, didn't think much about. I didn't even wear a headwire, and this was so much more than that. Just another small-tech thing, remaking us into something that we thought we wanted to be.

"What about you?" she said.

"I'm equipped," I said, pointing at the tiny dots of my airscreens, buried near the corners of my eyes. "I'll be going immersive for the Viewing, so I won't see or hear anything other than your mind."

"Hear?"

"The structure of your mind is translated to visuals and sound that can be perceived and shaped."

"Like Arcadia? A virtual world?"

"No, not really."

"What does it look like?"

I closed my eyes. How would you describe the Sistine Chapel to a Neanderthal?

"It's as if you can see all the stars in the universe," I said. "And they are singing."

"It sounds beautiful."

"It's indescribable," I said. And I had seen only the simulations, and a few tiny minds that they allowed us in training.

She cocked her head to one side, as if hearing something. "My head feels funny," she said.

"It will for a time," I said. Billions of tendrils, burrowing deeper.

"How long?"

"Perhaps twenty minutes."

I expected her to ask more about the mind-visuals, but she was still sitting still and straight on the couch, her hands in fists. Still nervous. She probably hadn't even heard me.

Mina got up and stood in front of one of her paintings, one of the brighter ones with splashes of orange and mauve. It could almost have been a face emerging from some surrealistic jungle.

"I don't know anything about you," she said.

"What do you mean?"

She shook her head, still looking at the painting. "What do you think about

this?" she asked, stepping aside so I could view the entire piece. It was typical of her work, dark and brooding, almost abstract, with splashes of bright color fighting to emerge. Textures of matte and gloss suggested uncharted depths. My airscreens fed me information on the painting, its title, when it was done, but I ignored them.

"It looks like a face emerging from a jungle."

"No. Emotion. What does it make you feel?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"No! First reaction! Tell me what you first thought when you saw it!"

"I was . . ." Looking deep into it, seeing the expression of desperate exhaustion on the face, the shadowy outlines in the depths. "Fear," I said finally. "I was scared."

"Good. Why?"

"Because they're being chased. And they're burning."

"Hmm."

"Am I right?"

"There is no right and wrong. Your parents sheltered you, didn't they?"

"No, not really. . . ."

"Yes, they did."

"No!" I said, standing up. "They were raised in VR. They wanted me to see the world."

"Did you?"

"I didn't spend my time in VR."

"That's not an answer."

Anger, hot and dry like a furnace wind. "They didn't have much money," I said. "They couldn't trade on reputation. We didn't go many places. But everywhere we went was real."

A nod. Silence.

"I've probably walked all of Southern California," I said. "I've been places in Los Angeles that you're still not supposed to go. But every time I went out, they'd warn me. They'd tell me to be careful, it was dangerous. I could fall and cut myself and get an infection. A feral gang could seduce me. I might find an old cache of some awful biostuff. A hundred monsters hid just around the corner."

"They did a good job on you."

"I wasn't allowed to use VR."

"A really good job."

"When I finally saw some old horror linears, I couldn't sleep."

"I'm not surprised."

"For days."

"They do that."

"Your paintings remind me of them."

A sad smile. "My life has not been simple. Or easy."

I remembered some of the things she'd told me. I'd tried to dive into her history after our first meeting, and to put it all in context. But there was so much of it! I could spend the next year learning about World War II. And the Beat movement. Civil Rights. Vietnam protests. The AIDS era. Coming of the Internet. Oversight and the independent communities. Economic collapse and Reconstitution. And her work, reflecting all of that, reflecting all those years. I'd avoided history as much as possible in school. It was a distant drumbeat that meant nothing to me.

But now here it was. Alive. Breathing. And I had to make sense out of it.

I took in a shuddering breath. "I don't know . . ."

She held up a hand. "I'm going to make coffee. Would you like a cup?"

"Tea?"

"Sorry, no."

I shook my head. She disappeared into another part of the house. I could hear a muted rustling as she moved about. Eventually the smell of coffee began to drift into the room, and I wrinkled my nose. Just another example of the chasm that separated us.

My life seemed so small, so meaningless. Even swimming in an immersion tank like my parents seemed a more exotic upbringing. At least they could say they were two of the last of their kind. They'd met in VR and had been married before they'd even come out of the tanks. They were born full-formed into the world. I could imagine them blinking in the harsh light of day for the first time. I had imagined it many times. But I was part of the new old wave. I'd spent most of my time at home with my mother and father. The ancient prototype. Nuclear family. Created by a chance combination of genes with none of the trickery of the geneticists. I was a blank slate. Mina would be better-served by someone with her level of experience. Someone who could understand at least a portion of her grand life.

Yes, but nobody her age worked at Clariti. Nobody her age became an Editor.

How could I do it? How could I take the chance? The most daring thing I had done to date was being inducted into Clariti. And what a perfect excuse that was. My parents loved that I was helping people, real people with real problems. And I loved to dive into the depths of their minds. The ultimate VR.

When she came back into the room, green icons flashed in the corner of my airdcreens. Her connection was complete.

"We're ready," I said.

"Can I?" she asked, raising the coffee cup.

"It won't affect the Viewing."

"Wait!"

"Why?"

"What's your name again?"

"Gillam Anderson."

She gave me a too-big smile. "Anderson. That's right. Normal name."

"That's right," I said.

She nodded and sipped. I toggled into immersive mode and fell out of the world.

My God.

Her mind, spread before me.

Howling like a thousand symphonies. Not constellations, but star-clusters, burning in bright colors, visible and invisible, infrared and ultraviolet and radioactive. Bright and dense, like the deadly center of the galaxy. Green stars blazed from yellow mist that was almost as bright as the stars themselves. Red and purple and white mixed in a haze of snow.

Every star a memory. Every cluster an important node of being.

Their noise was an atonal rage. There was no purity, no thread of frequency or melody or beat. Nothing to guide me. A million synthesized instruments set on random.

Every note an imprint. Every frequency a channel worn deep in the mind.

The Goal: Cut the fog. Reduce the mist. Sharpen the contrast. Tighten the threads of being. The words of Clariti came back to me.

But the fog was thick. The mist was made of stars. There were too many individual points.

In extreme cases, pruning of dark memories may be necessary.

I fought the urge to laugh. There were no dark memories here. They all burned bright with extreme importance. Which ones to prune?

I looked up at the universe of her mind. Had I actually told her it looked like the stars at night? Even if every city light were extinguished, even if the atmosphere were stripped away, even if our eyes were made a thousand times more sensitive, we could not see a universe this grand. This was beyond measure.

How can I shape this?

I picked one of the greatest clusters, shining yellow in the memory of defeat. Toggled the interViewer on. Activated Insight. And dove into . . .

Sepia-toned clapboard house. No. That was the color. Inside yellow-white,

stained from smoking. Her mother hiding behind a spindly antique table. A man, lunging at her. Low view. Through bars. In jail?

No, a crib, Insight supplied. That is her mother. That is her father.

I don't understand. She doesn't remember this.

She was an infant.

Why does it burn so brightly?

Because it has shaped her. It is connected.

I followed the connection. Something from our century. I recognized the Oversight pins on the old-style suits. A dinner. A view of a thousand tiny faces, looking up at her. Overlay of feral hunger. Applause. A feeling of giddiness, as if released from bonds. A feeling of seeing bars coming together around her.

Rejuvenation, Insight told me.

Zoom out. Into another point.

Standing in front of a blank canvas, brush in hand. The paint has congealed on the brush. She is crying.

Out. In.

Running from a man in a slippery dark alley.

Out. In.

Shouting at her mother in an old-fashioned store.

Out.

No. None of these are connected! It's all confused!

There is an underlying pattern, Insight said.

Show me, then!

That is beyond my capabilities. It is for you to perceive.

Out farther. The universe of her mind, howling at me. The pressure of its light and sound driving me away.

Out.

Farther. The colors became a single sheet of whiteness.

I can't do this!

Out! Out! Out!

I struggled up out of full immersion.

Mina was sitting there, still looking at me with an expression of faint curiosity. How long had I been immersed? Not long, surely.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said, standing up. I had to hold onto the chair to steady myself.

"You're ill."

"No."

"Is it me?"

I struggled towards the door.

"No," I said.

I didn't care if the autorunner was there or not. I would walk down the hills into Los Angeles myself, just like the old days.

"What's wrong?"

I reached the door. Opened it. Stepped through. "Nothing," I said.

I tried to stop the tears all the way down the hill. I couldn't.

At Clariti, one of the First Lessons was being taught. I stopped at a railing and looked out over the inductees. Poonam was teaching that night, a tiny thin rail of a woman. She spoke softly so that a hush would fall over the room, the students hardly daring to breathe lest they miss her words. Their airscreens and enhancements had been stripped from them, their headwires scrambled, and they sat naked and unconnected and alone. They would go up to their tiny cubicles that evening and struggle with memory, trying to piece together what she had said.

". . . a mind today is a cooperative effort," she was saying. "Sorting the layers of age and experience is a task far beyond what we had ever imagined. We drift by 80. We become indecisive at 100. We're cross-purposed and mindlocked by 120. And we do not yet know the end of rejuvenation.

"You will help shape a mind into something that is clear, focused, and precise, while retaining all the depth and wisdom of age. You will cut through the fog and mist and create things of great beauty. You will be allowed access to the most intimate of places. . . ."

I remembered when I had sat there myself among twenty-three other inductees. Three of us had dropped out the next day. Seventeen more had fallen away over the course of the next year.

"Gillam remembers his past," said a voice behind me. Jill.

I turned. She was wearing the grey coveralls of an inductee herself. To remind her that she was still a work in progress, I remembered. Her eyes were intense and unfocused, as unreadable as Mina's had been. And in that familiar look, I suddenly realized:

"You're as old as she is."

She laughed. "No. I'm off by a couple of decades."

"You've been Edited."

"I'm the ultimate success story," she said softly.

"What does that mean?"

She gestured around at Clariti's halls. "How could I have created all this without being Edited?"

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do."

I shook my head. I knew about the early days of Editing. I knew about self-Edits and auto-Edits and the drooling introverted failures they had created. I knew that Clariti was one of the first orders of Editors, and that their ideas had been widely copied.

"I can't do it," I told her.

"Mina can't paint, you know."

"I guessed as much."

A funny sidewise glance. "You would." She powered up her airscreens and nodded to me. "Recognize this?"

An image had appeared in my peripherals. I blinked it to life. Song of the Blades. Yes, of course. The first Expression Synthesis art. It jaggled at me, haunting all my channels. A distant memory from some art class online, Mona Lisa and television and Immersa and ES and all that. ES was the first big thing of this century, way back in the '20s.

"But that's not hers."

"Something she did under a pseudonym and abandoned."

"Mina did this?"

"That is not all she did."

Another image, very similar to what I had seen in her home. Terrible splashes of amber and yellow on a brown background, like a mob running from the mouth of hell. "Detail in Abstraction. 1970s. ES was not her first movement."

I toggled my airscreens for a quick search of Mina Best and all her pseudonymous art. The small repertoire of her work swelled, connections forming between them . . .

. . . like the connections between the constellations of her mind . . .

When I had it include her entire portfolio based on inferred style, the links grew even more. Mina was at the center of at least three major art movements, one in this century and two before.

A great weight seemed to fall on me. What if I had done the Editing? What if I had destroyed her mind? She might live for centuries. Hers was a soul that could resonate down the strings of time! My stomach clenched.

"Why didn't she take the credit?" I asked, but even before I had finished the question I knew the answer. Because she was not about success. She was the anti-success. She could not see herself as a success.

Oversight had not chosen her at random. It was not winning the lottery.

Jill said nothing. A faint smile.

"How can you know someone who doesn't tell the truth?"

Jill shrugged. "That in itself is knowing them."

"It's not enough!"

Another thin smile. "Only you would believe that. Everyone else would ask her a few questions and charge in."

"That's not what Clariti teaches!"

"It's the reality." Jill came closer to me. "Our First Rule and Second Rule are what we want to be. But we're human. We can never know the totality of someone. It may not even be in their best interest to know them that intimately."

"I . . ."

Jill came even closer and touched my face, lightly, almost like a lover. "Sometimes I think you're the only one who believes the Rules. Which is why I chose you to Edit Mina."

"I can't do it!"

"You can."

I shook my head and backed away from her touch. "Give me something easy," I said. "Like the simulations. Send someone else out to Mina. I can't do this. Not now. Maybe not ever."

She looked at me, unreadable again. "It is your one great failing," she said.

I turned and fled down the hallway, eager for the comfort of my tiny and windowless room.

Days.

I put myself back on the roster of available Editors.

Became weeks.

Waiting, waiting. Sitting in the mess hall over a cooling bowl of soup, trying to understand some tiny part of the world Mina had lived in.

I could imagine the memory of Mina Best shrinking in my own mental universe, still burning bright orange-yellow, but fading. Becoming just another point of light in just another constellation.

Jill expected me to go back.

Eventually, I went to her office. Like every other part of Clariti's converted Westside office building, it was earthquake-gooped and still somewhat lopsided. Unlike many of the rooms, it had a single small window looking inland, over the loops and whorls that rose to the east. Jill was looking out the window when I came in, and pretended not to notice me.

"Have you sent anyone else to her?"

"Who?" she said, not turning. I imagined her wide-eyed, innocent.

"Mina Best."

"Why should you care?"

"Because I do."

Jill finally turned. "Last time I heard, fear was not an other-centered emotion."

"Have you sent anyone else?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Damnit, Jill!"

A pause. That impenetrable look. "No."

"If I could work up to it," I said. "If I could start with simpler cases, like the simulations . . ."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because they're a single brush stroke. She's an entire painting. To use an obvious metaphor."

"That's the problem."

A frown. "You can't master literature by studying a single letter."

"I can't do this!"

Pause. Another look.

"Fine," she said. "View all you want. But you can't Edit."

There was another catch. Jill was with me whenever I went to View. The first was a young-again man, newly out of rejuve, who wanted a mind to more closely match the youth of his body. Jill had assigned the Editing to German Esparza, and German and Jill and I were crammed into the small walk-in room.

We all went into full immersion at the same time.

A beautiful tiny universe, with polite and discrete points of light.

I looked at it for thirty seconds and knew exactly what to do. A minor demisting, tightening of the bonds between some of the yellow and orange stars, sort and order into ascending constellations. Simple. Easy. I didn't even have to know the man. He fell into too many of the standard types I'd seen in simulation.

When we came out, I tried to tell them what I'd do.

"Stop," Jill said. "No suggestions. No Editing, no input at all. Let German do

it."

I watched silently as German muddled his way through a half-effective Editing. I saw so many ways to increase the contrast and tighten the bonds, but Jill was watching me intently. There was nothing I could do.

"You see?" she said softly, when it was all over.

"That was just one case."

A smile. "You think so?"

Second case was another man, an unreconstructed businessman who was losing his edge in making sharp deals. Too much reminiscence, too many sidetracks.

Another simple universe. All Drive. No wisdom. Sharply suppressed defeat gradients. A hardening of the empathic response. It would be an easy, five-minute Edit. German made it a two-hour-long ordeal, even when listening to his Insight.

Jill just looked at me. I didn't meet her gaze.

By the fifth Viewing, I thought Jill was setting me up with the most simplistic cases. But they were all so different on the outside! Actor. Businessman. Housewife. Studio executive. Interactive artist. They all shone with their own unique beauty, but compared to Mina they were almost austere.

By the tenth, I knew Jill wasn't setting me up.

I found a Mina Best retrospective in a small gallery in San Diego. Hired an autorunner myself from my small store of cash and stepped into another world. At first, the paintings were dull and impenetrable, dark unmoving things that smelled of oil and dust. The gallery was small and hot. The clientele shuffled around me, mouthing phrases that I could never pretend to understand, wearing strange tight clothes and seeming to cluster together in groups that excluded me every way I turned. The paintings became darker and more disturbing, and I wanted nothing more than to leave. But I made myself go through the exhibit again.

Back to the beginning, closest to the sunlight that filtered in from the front.

The painting had changed.

Not in any physical way. But where dark stick figures had cavorted against unnatural green flames before, a background oasis presented itself, calm and cool and perfect.

The title, Refreshment, suddenly made sense.

I stopped, open-mouthed, willing the earlier terrible scene to reappear. But no matter how I focused, no matter how I squinted, it remained out of reach.

The gallery owner (or greeter, I didn't know) noticed. She slid up next to me and said, "You see it, don't you?"

I didn't even look at her. "Yes," I said. "Yes."

"The promise in the middle of chaos. That's the center of all Best's work."

I darted a look at the second painting. Yes.

I stepped around to the third. Yes yes.

I turned to see the woman smiling at me. "So few really see," she said. "They talk and talk, but they don't see." And suddenly I was standing in the light with this perfect beautiful woman, and all the dark-clad patrons were the outcasts. In another day and time, I would have asked her out for a cup of tea, just to admire her bright green eyes and slim form. I felt buoyant and unbelievably alive.

"I do," I said, "I see."

Back at Clariti, I immersed myself in Mina Best's work. Because it was her work that mattered. Not just what she lived through. By the time I found the photo of Mina and Jill dancing together, I wasn't surprised. I had seen that face half a dozen times, smiling at me from the secret depths of Mina Best's canvases.

And by the time that Jill summoned me back to her office, I knew what she was going to ask. I even thought I knew why she was going to ask it.

The next day was foggy. The mist pressed in close on Mina's stark white house, softening its harsh edges. I shivered in the damp as I stepped out of the autorunner and made my way up the steps.

Once again, she opened the door before I had a chance to knock.

"You're back," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Remember my name?"

"No."

"Gillam Anderson."

"Ah. Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me that you and Jill were friends?"

"I. Um."

"Did Jill send me here on purpose?"

"Now?"

"No, originally."

Mina swallowed. Held up a hand. Motioned me in and made me sit.

"Jill and I have a very complex history," she said, sitting opposite me.

"I've seen her. In your work."

"We've had times when I hoped that the universe would stop and the moment would last forever. And there were times when I wanted to rip the flesh from her bones."

"And you didn't think to tell me this? You didn't remember?"

Mina shrugged. A lopsided smile. Silence.

"Why would she send me to you?"

The smile grew. "Consider her fame if a fresh student of hers was able to save the career of one of the oldest artists in the world."

"But . . ."

Mina held up a hand. "And consider how convenient it would be if that same student ended my suffering in a most final way."

I shook my head. "She doesn't care?"

"No."

"What about me?"

A shrug. An eloquent shrug. One that said, It doesn't matter. You'll never understand. Not for another hundred years or so anyway. Not until so many experiences have piled upon each other, layered into a sedimentary sandwich, hardened and changed under pressure into something different, something terrible. On one hand, you bask in Clariti's fame for a short time. On the other, you're a failure, but that's okay, because you're young. You can start again.

To balance on a knife-edge . . . suddenly I knew the meaning of the old expression, a meaning that no amount of airscreen graphics could ever communicate.

"I won't do it."

"That's your choice."

"You don't care?"

"Yes. Very much so. I would like to have the focus to paint again. I would like to be able to remember what I did the day before, without confusing it with a day from forty years past. Or a hundred years past. But you've become . . . real for me."

"What's my name?"

"Gillam Anderson."

I sighed. Looked down at the floor. Up at the alien paintings, brooding on the stark white walls. "Can I do it?"

"I don't know."

"Then why would you let me try?"

"Because it's better than the alternative," Mina said softly.

Balancing. Knife-edge. Not a vector of healing. Not even a weapon of destruction. Less than that. I saw the universe of the mind folding up before me, darkening, fading away.

"No," I said finally. "I can't."

Mina nodded, not looking at me. "I understand," she said. "I expected you to say that. But can I show you one thing, before you go?"

"What?"

"Just a painting."

I smiled. "You can always show me that."

She led me to a room in the back of the house where a huge translucent skylight spilled the cold grey light of the day on a worktable and a curious wood frame that was covered with a cloth (easel, my airscreens supplied). The room smelled of oils and strange and complex organic molecules. The worktable was cluttered with colored powders. A boomerang-shaped piece of wood (palette) was heaped and smeared with dried paint.

Once again, I was overwhelmed by the distance that separated us. This was where she created her art. The totality of it. Just a few rude pigments, wood, and cloth. No interpretation processors or mediation engines. No nanotendrils mind-direct connections. None of the tricks of Virtuality, of Arcadia. Not even any of the relatively crude techniques that enhanced the impact of the linears. Paint. Brush. Canvas.

She let me look for a time, seemingly bemused. I could almost imagine a connection between us at that moment, like she could understand, at the core of her being, what I was feeling.

"I think you may recognize this," she said, and pulled the cloth away.

My God.

Her mind, spread out on the canvas. By necessity simpler, flatter, the points larger and coarser. But the black held depths, and the depths hid even more detail, fickle and hard to discern. She'd used gloss and matte, reflection and shadow in ways that I would never have imagined possible. It was beautiful. It was enchanting. I could fall into its depths.

"How . . . ?" was all I could say.

"There are other Editing firms besides Clariti."

"You . . . oh, no, you didn't Edit yourself . . ."

"No. Only Viewed."

I looked from her to the painting. Back again. Then something about the painting caught my attention and I focused back on it.

She had Edited the painting.

Colors were subtly sharper. Groups were more intimately linked. The background noise and hash were reduced, the areas that had become complete static cleared away. I stared deep into the work, not believing what I was seeing. She had put her own suggestions into her work!

But . . . that was too close a tie between defeat and triumph. I pointed that out, touching the great rough canvas and smearing some of the still-wet paint.

"It's OK," she said.

"And this is too great a reduction in the intensity of desire," I said, pointing at another area.

She nodded.

"This could be self-reinforcing," I said, pointing at a loop.

"Yes," she said.

I could do this. I could make this work.

"Are you ready?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said softly. The expression behind the veil of her eyes might have been joy.

We went back to the other room. I planted the receptors again, and dived into the howling chaos of her mind.

Lessons came back to me. On the scales of personality, you will take care not to alter the tilt. Balance is not balance. Personality is unbalanced. It is the artful unbalancing that is key.

I cleared through the mists first. A simple contrast enhancement. A bit of work with the interViewer and Insight, a small sampling of memories to ensure that nothing important was dimmed.

The rest of the suns shone even more brightly against the dark velvet of her mind. A billion pieces of junk jewelry, thrown down on acid-etched darkness. With the contrast enhancement, the howl of her mind had taken on a more pure tone, a tone that could almost have been the deep harmonics of Drive.

Color. Green of Drive. Blue of modesty. Sprinkled with the yellows of defeat. The whites of triumph were dim and widely scattered. But it was not Mina to appreciate her triumphs. This was not a spectrum analysis. This was not curve-shaping.

Hard work with the interViewer. The dim memories shone brighter than the brightest of ten average people. Picking and choosing the ones to suppress depended on proximity to main memory-clusters and what each of the memories actually was. I sorted through a hundred, two hundred, three hundred, puzzling over the blurred images of an incomprehensible past, relying more on instinct than on analysis.

The clusters shone even brighter, more distinct against the darkening background. Good. Good. New ones appeared, previously hidden in the haze of past memories. Invisible linkages became visible. A great yellow thread wove through her mind, like the sweeping spiral arm of a galaxy. I sampled a memory from near its beginning.

Mina and Jill. Dance floor. The blurred vision of alcoholic haze. The overwhelming thrum of bass. Everything sweat and skin and movement, the higher levels disconnected from the base mind.

This appears to be incoherent, Insight said. Deletable.

But I saw the look in Mina's eyes.

No, I told it.

OK.

A sampling from another memory along the channel. The red rage, overlaying broken nails and the smell of blood. Terrible harmonics that stretched up and down the audible spectrum. Ripples that affected a thousand other memories. One to isolate and delink, but preserve.

A hundred other memories like that along the channel. I worked with each, not altering its overall spectrum or thickness, but seeking some disconnect from Drive. Drive was closely linked with her art, even though her art did not exist in any one cluster or any group of memories. It was the light-pressure of the entire universe, the tone and beat of the whole symphony. And Drive couldn't be about just her, or any other person.

How do you know? I asked myself. That's nothing that Clariti taught you.

Perhaps Clariti does not know it all, I thought.

And turned back to the grueling process of Editing.

When I came back up, the house was dark. Night had fallen, and the lights were not smart enough to turn on by themselves. My mouth was dry, and my head pounded. I felt weak and dizzy.

"Lights?" I croaked. Nothing.

"Mina?" I said. Again nothing. She was not even a charcoal outline in the darkness. Just a feeling of warmth in front of me, the almost subliminal knowledge that there was another human body in the room.

I stumbled over furniture looking for a mechanical switch. I found it near the front door and snapped it on. Warm yellow light flooded the entryway, spilling into the living area. It put Mina's face in sharp relief. Her eyes were open and bright. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

"Mina?" I asked, rushing over and kneeling in front of her.

She didn't look at me. Didn't move. Didn't respond.

Sudden visions of the worst nightmares from the early days of Editing came clawing up through my mind. The drooling idiots. The megalomaniacs. The one-dimensional fools.

No, no, no!

"Mina, please," I said, my breath catching in my throat.

Her eyes stuttered to life. She looked at me.

Really looked at me.

And for the first time, I could see what she was thinking, as if her eyes were of the clearest glass. It was wonder. It was joy. She was overwhelmed by simply sitting in her home, looking at the vague outlines in the dark. When the light had exploded onto the scene, it had been another new experience, almost indescribable in its beauty.

"Gillam," she said.

"I thought . . . I was worried. . . ."

"I don't think I'll forget your name again."

I laughed. "I'm not worried about that."

"I am." She looked around the house, as if seeing it for the first time.

"Do you know where you are?" I asked. "Did I remove too much?"

She laughed. "I'm in no danger from Alzheimer's," she said. My airscreens discreetly explained what she meant. "I feel wonderful."

"Do you think you can paint?"

"Give me a big enough canvas," she said. "I'll paint the world."

Was she too positive? Had I tilted the scale of her personality?

No. You would be giddy, too. I thought. Consider the before and after.

Before. After. The painting.

I stood up and went back to her studio, without even asking. I heard her padding along behind me. I could almost imagine her bemused grin as I scrabbled for the light-switch and turned it on.

The painting had changed.

It had lost its depth. Where there were once infinite depths, flat splotches of color lay on a charcoal-gray muddle. Shades that had leapt off the canvas had faded and dulled. The nodes and clusters were inaccurate sketches, not even approximations. There was no way a painting could represent the complexity of even a simple mind.

"It was different," I said. "The painting . . . it had more detail. You painted in the Edits. What happened?"

Mina smiled. "You saw what you wanted to see."

"No," I said. It wasn't possible. It couldn't change that much. It couldn't. She'd switched the painting on me.

"Your mind plays tricks on you," she said. "Trust me."

"I don't believe it," I said.

"You're tired. The light's different. Believe it."

I walked up to the painting. Touched it. It was a rough, artless thing now.

"It was my guide," I said.

She shook her head. A small sad smile.

"It had Edits in it! You painted in Edits!"

"Gillam, I don't even know what the colors mean."

"But you agreed! I said that it was too great a cut in desire. . . ."

But she hadn't agreed with me, had she? Not really.

"It was what you needed to see."

I gripped the edge of the worktable. So I had just Edited one of the world's most influential artists, guided only by my imagination?

Perhaps you can do it. Perhaps you have more talent than you think.

No.

Perhaps your great weakness isn't your honesty. Perhaps your great weakness is giving up before you've tried. Perhaps your greatest weakness is simple fear.

No!

"I have to go," I said.

I stumbled through the house, not waiting for Mina to follow. When I opened the front door, though, she put a hand on my shoulder. I turned and she hugged me tightly. It was like being embraced by a bundle of sticks.

"You can stay," she said.

"No," I said. "I have too many things to figure out."

A look from her. Not disappointment. Acceptance.

She sighed. "Wait."

I said nothing. Did nothing. Just stood there. She watched me for a moment to see if I would leave, then disappeared into the house. When she returned, she was carrying the painting.

"No," I said.

"Yes," she said.

And she was right, I thought, looking at the flat thing again. Maybe I did need this to remind me. Maybe I did need something that didn't move, didn't dance, that just sat there looking back at me, imperturbable. Almost a challenge.

I turned to leave. Then I turned back.

"What was she?" I asked. "Jill. Before Clariti?"

"She was a musician," Mina said. "Aya's Words. Rock."

I shook my head.

"Before your time," Mina said, and laughed.

"What happened? Why did she change?"

"She discovered Editing."

"And took it too far? Changed her pattern?"

"She Edited herself."

I winced. The self-reinforcing spirals, the overwhelming desire to change and change and change . . . it never ended well.

Mina nodded. "Yes. All in all, she's one of the luckier ones."

But what is she? I wondered. What is she, really?

I took the canvas with numb fingers and stepped out the door. It swung shut behind me with a soft and final thud.

I spent enough time at Clariti to clean out my little cell. It was dark and quiet. Classes had ended. The big mess hall was empty and echoing. The few people in the hall walked by me without seeing, their eyes masked by the dance of airscreen data.

I didn't see Jill, and that was okay. Because at that moment, I didn't know if I could face her. I didn't know if I could face her, ever again.

I called an autorunner and went outside to wait for it. The mist had burned off, and a thin crescent moon shone down on me. It was simple and real and good. I knew where I was going. To a small town up the coast. One of the few places my parents had been able to afford to go. A place away from the hustle of the city and the ant-farm that was Clariti. A place that was quiet. A place, perhaps, where I could begin to be me.