

"I don't Edit anymore."

"Why not?"

"You can cut too much."

Wince.

"Eventually, you cut away every part of what you are."

The man on my doorstep looked away. His eyes darted over my shoulder to the top of the great iron door, stretching twenty feet above our heads, and then to the glint of the Pacific through the windows behind me. The architectural perfection of my external life.

"You've done well," he said, stepping into my house.

"Hey!"

"You're too comfortable. That's why you don't Edit."

I just looked at him.

"Help me."

"Get out of my house!"

"You're not on fastforward," he said. "You aren't in the grasping times. Can't you spend a morning?"

"You did this to yourself."

He blinked at me. His eyes went cloudy and faraway. He made a tiny noise, not quite a groan or a whine, but something in-between, something that spoke of a deep war being fought. He balled his fists and closed his eyes.

"But it wasn't that way," he said. "Not . . . not entirely. Ferri . . . Ferri . . ."

"Your wife?"

"Daughter. I'm Paolo Tikaram."

Unbidden, my airscreens flickered to life and supplied details of his life. Mechanical engineer. Founded his own company. Developed some of the tech that had been used in the 21st century mediation systems. Now he was one of the consultants attached to the El Dorado, the as-yet-incomplete and 50-years-late starship that the Quiet Revolution hoped to launch.

He still meant nothing to me. The lunar colonies and Mars terraforming had never attracted my interest—dead-end projects on dead worlds. The El Dorado had a timeframe that I had trouble wrapping my mind around, even with the possibility of the Rejuve tanks.

Paolo saw this. His eyes became moist. He shuffled his feet farther into my house, as if a few more inches might mean the difference between rejection and acceptance.

"I came all the way from Los Angeles."

"Paolo, I can't . . ."

"Afelia." A whisper.

"What?"

"After Afelia, I thought you would understand."

The iron weight of memory collapsed on me. For a moment, I didn't see Paolo or the geometric perfection of my house. For a moment there was nothing more than Afelia's face, on that final day. Her eyes still relatively unclouded, her mind still whole enough to summon tears.

"How . . ."

"Everyone is an open book. With enough money, you can turn it to any page you like."

"I . . . it was . . ."

"But it still hits you."

I said nothing. Nodded.

"You really don't have time for my story?"

I sighed. Shut the door behind him. "You have my morning."

"Good," Paolo said. "I don't know how much longer I can be me."

I got Paolo situated in the sun-room that overlooked the Pacific. He was wearing a flowing Geh suit of great cut and precision, but it hung like an unwanted gift on his thin frame. It was a rare bright day in early December, and the sun cast razor shadows that weren't kind to his sharp features.

Afelia. Perfect Afelia. After my early success, I had traveled, and my travels had taken me surely and easily into the arms of Afelia. I'd met her on an airship over Venice, on one of those terrible days that travelers dread, all rain and mist and landscapes painted in shades of charcoal and grey. No cheery canals reflecting bright Mediterranean sun, just a dead world of ruins standing in the dark sea, new canals being cut farther inland, where the sea had not yet reached.

I'd met her in the lounge, looking down at the ruins of old Venice. She was beautiful in an unconventional way, triangular elfin face with big, expressive eyes and a lithe body. I'd taken a table and was retreating into airscreen media when she spoke:

"It didn't have to be like this."

I looked up. Looked around. There was nobody else nearby. "What?"

"They didn't need to lose Venice."

"Ah."

"All the erosion, the sea . . . we could have shored it with miracle stuff."

"I suppose."

She turned to look at me. And in that moment, I was lost. I said nothing. Neither did she.

"Maybe that's the way it's supposed to be," I said, desperate to fill the silence. "Maybe it's supposed to be lost."

"No," she said. "I'm Afelia Berweiss."

And that was the beginning of the end.

"What took you so long?" Paolo said.

I shook my head. He looked from me to the Pacific to the glass that surrounded us. A gleam came into his eyes, hard and metallic.

He's drifting, I thought.

"I remember a time in Orange . . . ," he began, in a thin, reedy voice.

"It was a woman," I said. "Ferri."

For a moment, pure rage masked his face. His hands dug into the arms of the chair. Then he was back.

"It was her idea. But I agreed to it, so it is really my fault."

Third Criterion: You must accept your own actions. Memories came back. Rejecting half a hundred people whose petty lives of deceit and crime made me ill.

Might as well check for the rest. I called up a long-forgotten construct and sent it to delve into the qualities of Paolo's life. First Criterion: You may be successful, but your success cannot be at the expense of others.

"Once you have accepted profound Editing, you are no longer yourself."

"But Editing helps!"

"When you are very old, the tree of the mind does require pruning. But altering the imbalance of personality should not be part of what an Editor does."

"People get Edited for everything!"

"What did she have you do?"

A sigh. A look of vast fatigue. "She said I was starting to lose my edge. Getting in the way on the El Dorado. Irritating the younger technicians. All the classic signs. We'd just missed our first deadline for launching, and it would take years to purge the Autarch revisions from the system, but I had to tell everyone it would happen soon, that we would launch soon. I was not a pleasant person to be around. She talked me into a rebalancing of Drive and Worth, and the installation of a minor substructure from Francis Eastman"

"The stress-balancing one?"

"Yes! That one."

"That's not a minor substructure. That's a rewriting of the way you handle conflict. One that's not found in any natural mind."

"But I felt so good! It was wonderful to be able to focus, to work, to not overreact when something happened. I was able to do three times my old work and not explode."

"Not for long."

"No. I developed . . . issues."

"Conflict and sex are highly related."

"I know. But one more rebalancing, Ferri said . . ."

"And one more, and one more."

Paolo buried his face in his hands. "Yes," he said. "I whipsawed from the world's worst slave driver to a mild and ineffective manager. With quirks."

"Who's your Editing Manager?" I asked.

"I don't know," Paolo said. "I've never met him."

Genter or Indira, I thought. Maybe even Ayanami. They don't like to see what they create.

He shook his head. He looked around, eyes bright. "I brought my car!" he said. "Let's go for a ride!"

I was losing him.

"Tell me about Ferri," I said.

Snap. "Beautiful Ferri," he said, soft and dreamy. "You've seen her. You must have. Everyone has. The Perfect Life. Analysis. Life of Paul. All those."

"She's an actor?" My airscreens fed me images of her work, none of which I had seen. She was a dark-haired beauty. Unfamiliar.

"Beautiful Ferri," he said. His eyes were more clouded than before. "I have to get back to her!"

He stood up.

"Paolo," I said.

He walked towards the door.

"Stop, Paolo! It's me, Gillam Anderson!"

He kept walking.

"Ferri."

He stopped. Turned to look at me. His face was a mask of pain and confusion. "I can't be myself," he said. "Come with me."

He resumed his walk towards the door.

"Paolo!"

Second Criterion: Editing must be a need, not just a desire.

Damn. Damn. Triple damn. I toggled the airscreens and looked at what the construct had dredged up from the depths of the planetary net. Paolo was clean. So far. As clean as one could get.

I caught him at the car. He didn't look at me as I got in the tiny bubble opposite him.

What am I doing? I wondered, as he started up and shirred down the hill to the remnants of Highway 1.

What else had I to do, anyway?

We drove in silence for a long, long time.

When we first met, Afelia didn't know who I was. Of this I'm certain. You spend enough time in the universe of someone's mind, seeing them through the interViewer, and you know.

The first weeks were perfect. We departed the airship in Edinburgh, on another gloomy day made bright by our growing passions. It was physical, and it was more. I had had my flings, but this was more than that, an intermeshing on a level above flesh, a feeling of being, for the first time, whole.

We toured England in a decrepit autorunner, lands green and emerald and timeless under skies close like blankets. From there, we went to Africa, empty and strange, filled with some of mankind's biological creations. Megalions pursued hunters clad in shining aluminum exoskeletons. Herds of tiny crawling things with too many legs ate the land bare, so others could follow and seed new orchards with biochanged droppings. Sickly yellow trees sang as they grew before our eyes, straining towards sunlight. We met some of the last remnants of the once-proud Maasai, and talked of the future in dreamy terms.

Eventually, she had to return to New York. I followed, hoping to make our days last forever. But as soon as she pushed the tiny dots of airscreens into the corners of her eyes and donned an earbud, she turned to me.

"You're . . . Mina Best . . . Franel . . . Kim Otsuko . . . you're him!"

"Yes."

"You never told me!"

"You never asked."

"You have to Edit me!"

"Afelia, you're not even forty."

"So?"

"You don't need it. You don't even have the haze of middle age."

"But I could do so much more!" she said. She worked for Hatsumo as a conceptualist, dreaming new worlds for others to explore.

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"You'll change your mind."

"No." Knowing even then it was inevitable.

It took us all day to make it down the thin ribbon that was Highway 1. The biocrete hadn't been renewed since the end of Oversight over sixty years before, and it grew patchy and rough in places. Paolo didn't help. He shifted from autodrive to manual at the worst moments—in the middle of a bridge, in the midst of a curve, down a steep grade—so that he could demonstrate just how well he could drive. But when he started claiming that he grew up driving, I had to stop him.

"Paolo, you're ninety-seven. You were born in 2021. You didn't drive."

"Yes, I did. All the time! Oldstyle cars, too . . ."

He stood on the brakes. "You know, I used to fish around here." And we were off on another back road, trying to find an imagined pier.

What did his mind look like? What names would its constellations shout down to him?

"Paolo, can you be yourself?"

Long silence. He gripped the steering wheel tightly, even though the car was autodriving.

"No," he said finally. "Too much effort."

Highway 1 became more substantial as it stretched south. Through the urban sprawl of San Francisco, it became positively shiny and perfect, with discreet little signs to name the businesses and individuals who had adopted it. It lasted until Monterey, and then became a lumpy overgrown thing again.

We ended up on a real pier in Santa Barbara. He drove the little car as close as he could, mumbling to himself. My last efforts to talk to him had been met with the same mumbling, or silence.

I followed him as he walked out onto the pier. The old wooden planks creaked under our weight. The ocean, even on this clear day, looked grey-green and cold. What if he threw himself off?

But he didn't. He came to the end and leaned on the railing, then folded gently to his knees, as if his last reserves of energy had run out.

"Paolo?" I said.

No response.

"Paolo!"

No response.

I felt for a pulse and it was there, strong and sure.

I waited for a time, hoping he would get up and go back to the car. Wondering if I should take him back and have it drive us to his home in Los Angeles.

I was still wondering when the whine of a personal autojet cut through the damp sea air and the pounding of the surf. I looked up to see a tiny one-person bubble flit past us. It landed near the car in a cloud of sand.

The hatch popped open and a woman emerged. Dressed in a tan Rexis overcoat that looked very, very expensive, wearing retro shades that probably doubled as super-efficient airscreens. She walked the short length of the pier with a cold, efficient stride. She stopped and looked at me through the glass barriers of her specs. Her face was a mask, unreadable.

"Who are you?" she said.

"A friend. He took me here and . . . now this."

She nodded. "He safehomed. What he was supposed to do."

"Supposed to do?"

"Ferri!" he said, turning and throwing himself into her arms.

And that must have been when her airscreens fed her my identity.

"You!" she said.

"Yes, me."

"Why are you with Paolo?"

"He asked for my help."

"He's under the care of Dr. Ozaki."

I groaned. One of the worst of the cult of collaborative personality. A superficialist. What do you want to be today? he asked.

"Paolo!" I said.

Mumbling from him.

"Don't talk to him! He needs Editing!"

"Paolo, talk to me! Be yourself!"

"Stop it!" She turned away.

As she turned, Paolo looked my way. And he saw me. Really saw me. It was my chance.

"Paolo, do you want my help? Tell me now!"

He looked at me an instant more, his eyes cloudy and unfocused. I thought all was lost. Then his eyes brightened. "Yes!" he said. "Help me!"

Ferri stopped walking. Turned to face me. I could see she wished me dead.

Paolo lived in the hills above West Los Angeles, on a ranch that had once been

a housing tract. We drove by the empty shells of middle-class paradise from the century before last, caved-in tile roofs and old blacktop streets gone crazed and overgrown, yards host to the detritus of a century's worth of extreme flora engineering, growing wild and yellow-green even in the arid climate.

The main house was a simple geometric, built with angles slightly askew and curved eaves that broke the harsh lines in a calculated manner. Opalescent white, it shimmered in an oasis of more recognizable bioengineered ferns and palms, the new hallmark of Southern California. It was a vision of utopia in the midst of cookie-cutter chaos; I wondered if Paolo had left it that way deliberately.

Paolo's car slid into a discreet little slot in a cylindrical outlying building. Once inside the garage, I could see that Paolo could have chosen much more terrifying means of transport. Several ancient nonautomated cars squatted on the featureless white floor, some sporting chrome grins like maniacal mechanical demons.

Ferri was waiting for him at the house.

"I've called Dr. Ozaki."

"So?"

"So we don't need you anymore."

"Yes, you do."

"I asked you to leave," she said. I could almost imagine the house security systems tracking me.

"Paolo," I said. "You asked for my help. Do you still want it?"

"Yes, yes."

"I have a right to be here."

She frowned and said nothing.

"I need a room," I said. "Private. Away from distractions."

"What are you going to do?"

"A Viewing."

"Why?"

"I need a room. Now."

"Now," Paolo said.

That did it. She led me to the back of the house, where a little wood-paneled room looked out on a tranquil pond and garden. Real books lined the walls. A framed photo of Paolo on the bridge of the El Dorado had pride of place. Smaller certificates and diplomas surrounded it, like planets orbiting a sun.

"This is his study. If you . . ."

"I don't need your help anymore. Thanks."

She glared at me, but turned and left.

I got Paolo situated in a comfortable chair and sat opposite him. It took only a matter of moments for my aircscreens to display his Editing protocols and interface with his systems. Of course. He would be well wired. I toggled on my headwire and dove into the chaos of his mind.

My God.

The dead universe of a conceptual linear set at the end of time itself. Layered with grey haze and gauzy connections that spread down the light cone like a deformed spiderweb, linking seemingly random memories from spans of twenty years and more. Bright, simplistic colors, like a painting made by a toddler. The yellow of failure overlaid with the red of pain, great clusters of color obscured behind a deliberate haze. Green and blue and orange taken to the front with relevance turned up to maximum, as if to drown the underlying failure.

And the sound. Not a pure tone, not a symphony, not even a badly-tuned orchestra. It was the wail of a thousand banshees, mixed with the mournful cries of wolves. I heard sadness and desperation and exhaustion and pain behind the sheer wall of sound.

This wasn't a commercial persona enhancement. Even those worked with a lighter touch than this.

I activated Insight and the interViewer, but I didn't dare activate the Editor. The moment I touched him they would declare this abomination mine and banish me from their property.

A point of brilliant blue spawned three overlaid memories—one of shopping with Ferri, one of an armored creature that probably existed only in the virtuality of Arcadia, and one of him crying silently on the edge of his bed, thinking of . . . another point of light, with memories overlaid to mush.

I cannot assemble this, Insight said.

I understand.

Another point, this one the hot orange of Drive. It was linked to six discrete memories to the point where it was almost indecipherable. Kids in 2030s clothing playing under a watchful public Eye and a party where oldsters tottered on ancient exoware overlaid with a shout of surprise and backing away together with a window-view from an ancient house overlooking rolling golden California hills together with the view over a stark granite desk . . . meaningless snapshots of his life.

There is severe underlying damage.

Yes, I know.

I recommend that you do not Edit this person.

A query to the Editing logs made me gasp. I heard it as a tiny sound behind the wail of his mind. His Editing had started only two years ago. But he had been Edited so many times! Seven times in the first year. Slowly increasing over the second year, until he was being accessed virtually every week. And the sessions were long, some lasting five, six, ten hours.

He had been butchered. There was not enough of him left to Edit.

I toggled out of immersive mode and came back up to reality. Paolo sat looking at me with sad hooded eyes, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"I'm broken," he said.

"I know."

"Can you fix me?"

There wasn't anything left to fix. He, in a very real sense, was not there anymore.

And yet . . . he had had the determination to drive up and see me. Something was there. If I could review his life, get to know him well enough, maybe I could do something . . .

No! Madness! You cannot know someone that well. It's impossible.

I looked at his tear-stained face. Reached out to touch his hand.

"Yes," I said. "I will."

Eventually, I took Afelia to my house on the Pacific. We dropped out of overcast skies in a two-seat autojet, and she gasped at the size and scope of my land. Inside, she immediately went to the sun-room, dancing like a giddy child, and looked out on the ocean.

"It's wonderful!" she said. "I don't ever want to leave!"

"I don't want you to leave." Softly. Seriously.

She stopped and looked at me, eyes searching. I looked back at her steadily, not willing to take it any farther. Not yet. Though the words stood on the edge of my mouth, and I imagined acceptance danced on her lips as well.

That night, our cries of passion were louder, more intense. Or so I imagined. When we were intertwined in sweaty satiety, she asked me again:

"Edit me."

"No." Laughing.

"I'm serious."

That made me pause and look at her, blue-sculpted and mysterious in the dim glow of night.

"You can make me better."

"You don't need . . ."

"It's not a matter of need," she said. "It's a matter of want."

"Afelia . . ."

But she put her hand to my mouth. "I've installed the network," she said. "I'm ready to go."

To catch a glimpse of Afelia's mind, to really see what she was made of! Just the thought of it made me shiver. We'd shared ourselves in every other way. Why not this?

To see the burning constellation of her mind! To hear the symphony of her thoughts!

A Viewing would not hurt. A Viewing was not Editing.

And yet I still stopped myself. Looked at her. Imagined our lives, stretching out like a beautiful ribbon in time. It wasn't right. There are things love shouldn't see.

But in the end, of course, I dove into the depths of her mind.

"What course of action?"

Dr. Ozaki was a tall, thin man with only the hint of an epicanthic fold. It was a familiar face, seen on many of the Collaborative Personality linears.

"I don't have to tell you."

"No. I am requesting the courtesy of a reply from a colleague."

"I don't have easy answers."

"I would still enjoy hearing them."

"Rule One," I recited. "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."

"You quote me trite rules, twenty years out of date."

"The best rules are timeless, I believe."

A pause. Ozaki paced. "So you plan to learn the totality of this man?"

"As much as I need to."

"But . . ." A pause. A widening of the eyes. He had almost admitted to the watchful house eyes that Paolo was a shell.

Ozaki turned and looked out the window at the faraway ruins. "What if at the core he is unfit?"

"I will use a few minor Edits that are appropriate to his age."

Ozaki shook his head. "What a waste."

"Why?"

"You've been living in your northern paradise for far too long. Look at the city, where the people are. Editing today is their foundation."

"Change is not a foundation."

"Change is part of all life."

"External change. Not self-directed change."

"We must agree to disagree," Ozaki said. "How long do you require?"

"I don't know."

"How long?"

"As long as it takes."

Ozaki made a disgusted noise and left the room. I sat for a while, thinking, How long does it take to recreate a man?

my life for the next month. Ferri shared the house with Paolo, and it was impossible not to run into her several times a day. At best, she ignored me. At worst, she called me a charlatan and demanded to see my results. And I knew that as the weeks piled on, her requests would become more like orders.

My research took me all the usual places: online, to the Found Media archives, where terabytes of dead data on Paolo Tikaram languished, awaiting the invitation to dance and gibber. There were Oversight records dating from 2027, voluntary surveillance linears thereafter, corporate promotional materials, news of his visits to El Dorado and its associated linears, long-dead records of interactives played as a child and teenager and adult, text and photos and linears on half a hundred friends and acquaintances, logs, interrogation records, even the results of some of the most rudimentary persona-mapping I'd ever seen. There were friends to interview online and in the real, relatives ranging from mother (alive) and father (simulated in Arcadia) to second and third cousins, old loves, even a few cellmates from his worst Oversight transgressions. I tried to work through the planetary net as much as possible, but took trips as far as Brazil and Vancouver and Japan to track down those friends and relatives who were more reclusive. I upgraded my construct and named him Second Anderson, after a famous interactive fifty years dead, and sent it out in proxy. I paid the spawning fees to Arcadia and had him launch a hundred instances to make the search more efficient.

The data flowed like a great wave into Arcadia. I leased more and more space, not seeing the raw numbers anymore. Second Anderson and my summarizing algorithms assured me this was well within their design specs, but I wondered about the sincerity of things. They had no gut. They couldn't know all.

As the data grew, so did my desperation. Even if the summarization worked, could I possibly understand the shorthand? Could I become the conduit to replace the whole of a man without losing myself?

I didn't know.

And every day, the data grew.

Viewing became Editing with the ease of slipping on rain-slick glass. Afelia's mind was simple and beautiful, a tiny cluster of beautiful stars with the voice of a small choir, strong and pure. I'd never spent time with a young mind. I didn't know how beautiful it could be. Embryonic, perhaps, and unformed in many ways, but its depths were black like the deepest velvet. Even the most prominent clusters were unbound by haze. The linkages between memories were simple and pure.

Insight was a revelation. She'd told me of her childhood in wild upstate New York, born to a family that met the strictest definition of traditional. Mother. Father. Both of them of the correct sex and relatively unaugmented, lacking even the permanent buds of airscreens, much less a headwire. Neither

of them over forty when she was born. It was something that had strengthened our bond from the start. My simple nuclear family, bent on giving their child a real upbringing, even at the cost of experience. Hers a step back even farther, home-schooled without even the benefit of airscreens.

And yet those perfect idyllic days of her childhood were linked to failure and frustration, strongly enough to bother me every time I linked in. Every time I viewed the constellation of her mind, that one flaw burned brighter and brighter, until it drowned out all else.

Until one time, when I toggled into the Editing suite and weakened the link. Not enough to make it disappear, but enough to dim the brightness. It was an easy thing to do. A simple thing. A painless thing.

And when she came awake and looked at me, I thought I could see the difference in her eyes.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"No! You did something! I'm free, light as a feather!" She stood up and did a little dance. Like a perfect ballerina in that one tiny moment, and I loved her all the more for it.

I just smiled.

"Do it again!" she cried.

"No," I said. But eventually I did.

Of course.

Paolo had grown up in a tiny house in Venice, within walking distance of the warm Pacific. Somehow, the tiny bungalow, built in the 1940s, had survived almost unaltered to this day. I could have sent a flyeye to scope it and flash the model into Arcadia, but I went myself. There are too many things the camera misses or distorts. I got the permission of the couple who lived there, and did the walkthrough when they were away.

A front porch, simple wood, unaltered except for a coat of peeling paint. Traces of a path leading to the side of the overgrown house. I crawled in, wondering if Paolo had done the same thing as a child.

Under the bushes it was cool and close. There was a dark hole in the house's foundation, a tiny slot through which a child could wriggle. I tried to imagine Paolo concealed under the house. Was he playing a game? Or hiding from bullies?

I walked the house in a daze, knowing the layout had been redone. But perhaps the kitchen window survived. It looked old enough. Did Paolo look through this as a child towards the bright blue Pacific? I didn't know.

When I left the house, Ferri was waiting for me.

"How perfect," she said, resplendent in a Hueser wrap.

"What?"

"You. Here."

"I don't expect you to understand."

"Can't you see we're past this?" She looked at me in a strange, familiar way that left me chilled. Her eyes were direct, honest, clear; so different from before.

"What did you do?"

"I thought I'd see how it was, living on your side."

"You removed your Edits?"

"Yes." Proudly.

"All of them?"

"Well . . ."

I shook my head. Trying to pass as natural, maybe even believing it. It was sad.

"How do you like it?"

"Let's have lunch."

"I don't think so . . ."

"Come on! What a scandal! They'll think you converted me. Me!"

Somehow I doubted that, but it had been a long time since I'd enjoyed a beautiful woman's company.

She had me follow her to a strange little sushi place in old Westwood, where they still served non-genetically-engineered fish on archetypal rice.

"If we are to be primitive, we should go all the way," she said. But I wasn't really listening to her. I was looking at the passersby.

Los Angeles has always been a city full of vanity. But what I was seeing was not a crowd of vain people. I was seeing something very much like a parade, where everything was scripted for the benefit of the onlookers. Women wearing the fur of mammals never found in nature danced artfully around the polychrome middle-class, showing by the cast of their heads and their stance how they felt about such a proletarian invasion of their space. The chromies and the upwardly-mobiles smiled in perfect humor, their faces filled with religious awe. And everyone orbiting around Ferri as if she wore a crown or a halo or both, subtly aware of her position in some higher realm. I watched the show for a time, knowing Ferri was looking at me, weighing, assessing.

"What are you looking at?" she asked suddenly.

"Everyone."

A questioning silence.

"They're robots," I said, finally.

Ferri pointed at a woman with the body of a teenager and the eyes of middle age, who pranced down the street as if buoyed by an invisible current. "That's

an Ayanami Edit," she said.

"How can you tell?"

"And that's an Ozaki," she said, pointing out a slim woman. "And a couple of Gehs—he likes couples—and a Queen Dominatrix, you can always tell. She only works on people who have lots of experience, like growing up in an eco-exempt Swiss Chalet or being raised by Martian renegades on a biomed asteroid. Cheating, really. She works with that meme-seeder Templeton, as if she couldn't do it herself. Probably can't."

"You can tell their Editor just by looking at them?"

Ferri shrugged. "Oh, there's plenty of fakes. Head up to the edges of town and you'll probably see half a hundred fake Gehs for every real one."

"How can you tell?"

"A good eye. Guesswork. And crossfeed doesn't hurt."

"You wear a headwire?"

"So do you," she said. "So do most people. Let's get lunch."

Lunch was surprisingly pleasant. I didn't believe that she'd removed all her Edits for me, or even that she could, but she was bright and lively company, making fun of the waiters (enhance Servility, tie to Drive, cross with a dash of Questionability, and lay it down on a sauce of artificial memes taken from slavery simulations), the overdramatic chefs (plundering the dreams of failed samurai), and the various customers in turn. I felt as if on a stage, watched by many eyes. And I probably was. The crowd turned subtly towards us to track our actions. A hundred dustmote flyeyes probably recorded that lunch for posterity.

"So how's the primitive life?" I asked her.

"I don't know if it's better or just different."

"You may find you like it better." Play along. Why not?

"Like my father will?"

Careful. "He asked me to help him, and I will do my best."

"But no guarantees."

"There never are."

"There are on designer packages. If I want to be happy and carefree, I can be happy and carefree. If I want to be serious and smart, I can be serious and smart. If I want to be a primitive raised out in the wilderness I can be that."

"But it's not you."

"How do you know?"

"Ferri, have you ever done Editing?"

"No."

"Do you know there's no going back?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's no UNDO button. There's no 'just kidding' switch. Edits are permanent. Your mind is forever changed."

"Then how can I undo all I did?"

"I don't think you can."

"But I did."

It is very possible you don't remember who you really were, I thought. I found the thought infinitely sad. Every true individual, lost under a sea of designer identities. This wasn't what Editing was supposed to be! My eyes brimmed with tears and I wiped them away, angry at being forced to feel emotion for this thing.

"Someone guessed at who you were, and made you into that guess."

"I'm not a guess," she said. Softly. Sadly. Not angry. Not very Ferri at all.

"Ferri, you're not much more than a robot."

She began, very softly, to cry. I blinked at her, completely surprised, and reached out to touch her hand. She jerked it away. "No!" Now everyone was looking at us openly.

"I'm sorry."

"No you're not!" she said. "I did this for you! To understand you!"

"Why?"

"For Paolo, you idiot! You don't think I want to see my father happy again?" She stood up and stomped out the door.

I sat for a moment, the center of attention, wondering how I could feel so right and so wrong at one instant in time.

When I got back to the house, Ferri was in her father's study, drinking.

"Ferri," I said.

"I don't want to hear you say anything. Anything."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

And in some ways, she was right. I did want to hurt her. I wanted to make her pay for all the pain I'd seen Paolo go through since I had entered his house. He had relatively lucid days that he spent corresponding with the El Dorado, and could sometimes hold himself together long enough to have meaningful conversation with me, but that was not how he spent the majority of his time. Several times per week, Security had to pull him back to the house from the gate or the outlying foothills.

"You're right."

She whirled, sloshing Laphroaig in my general direction. "You hate me."

"I want to help your father."

"So do I!" she cried. "But I don't know what to do. Ozaki said that a simple repatterning will take care of him, but now we can't even do that, with him wanting you and you doing all your research!"

"I'm getting close."

She went to the bar and poured me a drink. Glass. Scotch. Lots of it. Handed it to me and clinked her glass against it.

"To helping Paolo," she said.

I could drink to that. I raised the glass and the scotch was warm and peaty and good. I tossed it back and she filled the glass again.

"What's wrong with him?"

I shrugged. She could Edit herself back into belligerence and have me for slander against Ozaki.

"Okay, forget I asked. Change the subject. What did you do before Paolo?"

"You know. I was an Editor . . ."

"No, in that big freehold! What did you do, all those years? Your last recorded Edit is in 2109."

I smiled, somewhat sadly, imagining myself wandering around that lonely and empty place for the last nine years. I took another drink. What had I done? Sank lower into my pit of despair. Grew colder and greyer and less human.

"Girlfriends? Wives? Contracts?" Ferri asked, playfully.

I shook my head. "No. None of that."

"Guys?"

"Not that, either."

"Any virtual little Miss Andersons running around? You do have a headwire."

"No." Had my life really been that empty? Another drink.

"Just you alone?"

"Yes."

"How boring."

"Yes."

"Refill?"

"Yes."

She sloshed more Laphroaig into my glass. I was feeling it, and it was warm and good. Like a comfortable blanket, little-used but still familiar.

"How come you never asked me about my father?" Ferri asked.

"Because . . . well . . ."

"Because I was an ill-tempered bitch?"

"Well, yes, that."

She laughed. "I know you're interviewing everyone else. Would you like to hear my story?"

I nodded.

"Or would you rather have your software do it?"

"No," I said. "I don't want to admit, but I am enjoying your company."

"Surprise surprise," she said, and touched my hand. She was warm and soft and very, very female. It had been too long. Far too long. "Ask away."

"I'll be recording," I said, toggling the aircscreens into two-ways.

"Record away."

"Tell me what you remember," I said.

"What?"

"The big things," I said. An old phrase came back. "The sharp-edged things that press at the surface of your mind."

"Very poetic," she said. "But I know what you're saying. Let me tell you about going to the El Dorado the first time. Of course, it was still the Reagan then. Derelict. Paolo was one of the guys who got the Meritists all charged up about the whole thing. He took me up there and gave a speech about how all children like me should get a chance to not just see the stars, but go to them. I saw myself alone in this big spooky ship and started crying in the middle of the ship. I don't think it helped him any."

"It didn't seem to hurt." I did a quick crosscheck and the memory was verified, there was even a video of it.

Had she reverted? As far as she could?

"Tell me more," I said.

She told me things that only a child could know. What he liked for breakfast, what he got her for Christmas (and when he forgot a gift that she had especially asked for, that was very clear), the fact that she had never known who her mother was, and later found that it was a Womb With a View, shuttling back and forth between El Dorado and home. Stories about the past, things he used to tell her about Oversight, the disappearances and the Independent Communities and the Three Options and the Twelve Days in May, of course, all mixed up like a child would tell it. It checked out within memory margins with some of my other sources. Some conflicted, but it was usually with a less reliable source.

Had she reverted? Dare I use her as a source?

She filled the glasses again and stretched out on her father's couch. She really was a very beautiful woman. She raised her hands above her head and clean, perfect skin showed on her midriff where her top rode up. Such a familiar thing. Did all women do that?

I took another drink and sat next to her on her father's chair. I was getting very, very drunk. She was still talking about her childhood, some of her earliest memories of a small house in the Valley with a pink tile roof. I listened to her wind down. She sounded completely sincere, completely true.

"What am I missing?" I asked. "What haven't you told me?"

She looked up at me, eyes large and mysterious. "The Editing. Why."

I nodded.

"Because he hated me."

"He told you this?"

She shook her head. "I was never good enough. I wasn't born with his mind. I tried and tried, but I just couldn't fit things together in my head the way he wanted them. I went from science and math to literature and humanities, but nothing really interested me. To him, I was spoiled, the idle daughter of the working rich."

"He told you this?"

She rose up off the couch and put her face close to mine. "It wasn't what he said!" she yelled. "It was what he did!"

I couldn't stop myself. I reached out, cupped the back of her head, and pushed her lips to mine. For a moment she tried to pull away, then relaxed and started to return the kiss. Her lips were warm, full, velvet. It seemed to last an eternity.

When we broke, she looked at me with confused, darting eyes.

"What are we doing?" I asked.

"This," she said, taking my hand.

I followed her through the house, to her cool bed. I knew it wasn't love, but I was willing to settle for happiness. Or even a little hope.

The next week was a surreal journey. Thoughts of Ferri were always in my mind, a pleasant haze that made my work recede into the distance. She and I went to see their old neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley, but little remained of the tiny house. She followed me on a couple of in-person interviews and hung discreetly out of sight as I went through the ritual of question and answer. We piloted our autojets through a brief downpour, emerging to a beautiful rainbow that seemed to end on her father's land. We shared her bed. We shared small glances and shivery surreptitious touches.

"What happens when you're done and he hates me again?" she asked.

"He won't hate you."

"That's an easy answer."

"Ferri, you may have been . . . oversensitive to it. You said he never actually said anything to you."

She looked up at me, suddenly insecure and afraid. I held her for a moment, but I knew she was waiting for me to say something. Time for the truth.

"I don't know if I can bring him back," I said. "Not all the way."

"How bad is he?"

"He's torn apart," I said. Paolo had some lucid days when he would work with some of the younger engineers on the El Dorado, but most days he sat staring at walls in his study, or maniacally seeking release in interactives.

She held me tighter and sobbed a little.

"I have to rebuild him, almost from the ground up. I'm working on a model based on deep research into his life. But it's not done. I don't know if it will ever be done."

"Have you ever done this before?"

"No. These are uncharted spaces."

I held her for a long, long time. Eventually we ended up in her bed. When it was over, I looked down at her quiet face, wearing a tiny sleep-smile.

What was she? Was she playing some terrible game with hidden rules? Or had she reverted like she said? If so, how far had she gone?

If only I could View her! I'd started to ask her a dozen times. But each time, I stopped myself. I knew the question was the beginning of the end. Of trust. Of us. Of everything.

The next morning, we came down for another late breakfast. Paolo was lucid enough to say hello and even ask me how things were progressing. I told him about some of the challenges, and admitted that I would never have a complete model of him.

"Anything is better than this."

"You don't want to jump without looking."

"Maybe I do," he said sadly, and turned away, muttering to himself. Ferri followed him out, probably to make sure he was staying away from the garage. When she came back, she gave me a long-suffering smile that I remembered from so many people who have borne someone on their backs for so long they think the weight is their own, and that they will never be light and free ever again.

And that was when she did it. She looked at me through her hands, holding them as if they traced the outside of a rectangular frame. Not like in the old-time linears. A very unique gesture, something that was charming and memorable.

"You will be my savior," she said, through the frame of her hands.

Something in my mind stopped.

I swear the ground moved. The sun grew dim. And her voice became distant and faraway.

She was.

She was.

She was Afelia.

That was her gesture, her quirk. I'd seen her do it a hundred times, a thousand times. Even after all these years, I could still see her perfect face, framed in that askew rectangle of her slim hands.

"What's wrong?" Ferri said. She saw it. Oh yes, she saw it. She had slipped. She'd gone a bit too far.

"You stole her!" I yelled.

"Who?" She looked around. Frightened. Genuinely confused.

"Afelia!"

Sudden fright glazed her eyes. Her gaze darted quickly from side to side, trying to avoid mine.

"You never de-Edited! You stole Afelia and laid her on your shriveled soul! You're a monster!"

Ferri's eyes dropped to the floor. She knew. She knew, and she did it anyway! She'd taken those years of pain and hurt and smeared them in my face. I wanted to pick up the table and throw it through the window. I wanted to beat her until she hurt as bad as I did. I could feel my fists clenching, my eyes searching . . .

"It was only a tiny bit," she said, in a very small voice.

"Vampire! Monster!"

"It was just records. Extrapolations. It wasn't her mind."

I let out an inarticulate cry.

Ferri stood up straighter. Her eyes flared, suddenly angry. Words poured out of her in a high-pressure torrent. "I only did it because I liked you! You were the first one who asked questions, the first one who wouldn't do anything I wanted!"

"The first what?"

"Editor! Damn it, Gillam, I still like you. And we could make it more!"

"No." A sudden thought. "Not unless you give me a View."

Ferri shook her head. "Can't you accept me for what I am?"

"A monster, patched together from pieces of other people's minds?"

"It was there for the taking." Ferri's voice was low, dangerous. She looked at me with eyes of fire and pain, and stomped out of the room.

I stood there, trying to get my emotions under control. I wanted to chase her down and tell her I was sorry, that I didn't mean it. I wanted to rip out her throat.

Eventually, my breathing slowed and my heart became less of a hammer-blow in my throat. By the time Paolo poked his head into the room and asked if I was all right, I was able to shake my head and laugh a little.

Nothing had changed. It was back to the status quo. Me and Paolo, sharing the house with someone who hated us.

At least there was one life I could save from his little monster.

When I started Editing Afelia, it was only on special occasions: her birthday, the time when she sold that one linear concept to Disney, on the spur of the moment, after one very special evening. We were together for almost a year before I Edited her for the third time.

But after the third Edit, she was called into her manager's office for turning in low-quality work. Twice. Which wasn't like her. I asked her about it, but she said it was nothing to worry about. That wasn't like her, either. I poked around a bit and changed a couple of minor things, including a very slight tweak of Drive. When she came up, she said she felt better, but her smile didn't reach her eyes.

From then, Editing became monthly, then weekly. I couldn't achieve a balance that kept her productive at work and yet not manic and overzealous. Her core Drive was so deeply crosslinked that I couldn't untangle it. Sometimes the swings were wide, sometimes they were subtle. But it was never perfect. And the fear in her eyes when she was manic and near to losing her job spurred me to keep working at it. Editing. More and more.

In one of those quiet times, when I was trying to recapture the lively and alert and engaged Afelia, she looked up at me and said, "Give me an overlay."

"What?"

"An overlay. Something from John K, or Disney."

"Afelia, I'm chasing it down . . ."

"It's not enough!" she cried. "I can't wait! I have to get back on track!"

"If I install an overlay, you won't even be you anymore."

"I don't care!"

"I do. Afelia, I can fix—"

"Why can't I be put back the way I was?"

Because there's no going back, I thought. "I can't do it."

"You have to."

"Afelia."

"If you don't, I'll leave."

The argument swirled round and round for what seemed like hours, purposeless

and deadlocked. I promised to go back and learn more about Editing, but she told me she didn't have the time. I said that I'd start an intensive session right then, it didn't matter how many hours it took with the interviewer, I would make it work, but she wanted guarantees I couldn't give.

In the end, very late that night, I agreed to what she asked for. We sat down in front of the Vista and scrolled through the available overlays. I sat behind her and held her tight, knowing that I was losing her, that this was one of her last moments as herself, as Afelia. I felt nauseous and lightheaded. I wanted to scream and stomp around the room.

She picked something that seemed mild enough. The description made it seem almost like an intelligent autobalancer, not adding any significant memory or personality structures and making only small changes to the underlying configuration.

I went in for the install. It wasn't necessary, but I wanted to look out over the simple beauty of her mind again. It sang to me in a strong, clear voice like a choir. I would have cried if I could.

Install overlay, I subvocalized.

It was as if the universe of her mind had aged ten billion years in a day. Whole star clusters winked out. New ones sprang into view, their colors bright and primary and unnatural. Links fell out without counting. Her light-cone shrunk in intensity, and the voice of her mind took on a harsh, artificial edge.

Abort! I yelled.

Install is nearly complete. Complete.

No! No! No! I looked out over the new wasteland of her mind.

I brought myself up out of immersive mode. It was a grey dawn over the Pacific. The house was quiet and still. I reached out and touched Afelia's hand and her eyes fluttered open.

She looked at me. And through me. When she smiled, it was like something you'd see from an old-time politician. Her eyes had a bright and unnatural cast.

I squeezed her hand. "Afelia?"

"Yes," she said, taking her hand out of mine.

"Are you all right?"

She looked around the house and back at me, as if seeing them for the first time. "Thank you," she said, after a time.

"Afelia?"

"Yes?" Attentive. Polite. Engaged, no.

"I . . ."

She sat there with a small smile and said nothing.

"I think . . ."

Nothing.

"Never mind."

That day, we orbited each other like two similarly charged particles, never touching, never connecting, always driving each other away. She did some work and seemed better at dinner, chatting about a new concept for Disney. She worked late into the night, until I had given up distracting her and gone to bed. Eventually I slept.

The next morning, she was gone.

I never saw her again.

Thoughts of Ferri kept resonating through my mind the rest of that day. I was glad to see the monster gone, but fleeting ideas of some imaginary perfect future with her kept clanging through my thoughts. I tried to continue my research, but I was too distracted to do much real work.

I was nearing the end of the information trail, though. The model of what Paolo had been was growing asymptotically towards some approximation of himself in Arcadia. But how close was the model to reality? Fifteen percent? Seventy? Ninety? I didn't know. I had no dreams about Paolo's model being Edward's Vision, the Door Through to permanent residence in Arcadia, but maybe this was something that the true wizards of Arcadia would point back to as a milestone along the way. It was a more ambitious Editing job than anyone had ever attempted, as far as I knew.

I was able to have a reasonable conversation with Paolo over dinner. It was the longest I'd seen him hold himself together since his initial trip up to my home. Which made it all the more amazing. What effort of will had it taken to make it up the coast? I couldn't imagine.

"She likes you," Paolo said, over a good Australian port.

"Who?"

"Ferri."

"Oh."

"She really does."

I sighed. "I don't know if she knows what she likes. I don't even know if she knows who she is, or if there's any of her left anymore."

"She's not bad, not evil."

"That's not you saying that."

A sad look. "Maybe not."

I had a hard time going to sleep that night. I tossed and turned in my now-unfamiliar room, overwhelmed by thoughts of Ferri. Was it possible she had done exactly what she said, and used models of Afelia simply as a way to make me feel comfortable, as an expression of what she felt for me?

No. I couldn't believe that.

I lay awake, listening for the sound of her autojet landing, or a door

closing, or even her voice. But the house was relentlessly silent, and eventually I dropped off into a troubled sleep.

When I woke, the house seemed to have closed in on itself, as if some great storm hovered nearby. I didn't know how near until I went down to the dining room and saw Ferri there, and Dr. Ozaki at her side. Paolo sat at the table with them, tearing into his breakfast and smiling broadly. When I walked in, they all looked at me. Ferri with a catlike gleam of triumph, Ozaki with contempt and a tiny bit of pity, and Paolo with a hard, focused, unseeing gaze.

"Is this him?" Paolo asked. His voice was loud and direct, nothing like the confused, retiring Paolo I'd known.

"Yes, father," Ferri said.

Paolo looked me up and down. "Thanks for your help," he said, "but I don't need you anymore."

"What did you do!" I cried.

Ferri smiled. "What we should have done a long time ago. Complete wipe and repattern."

No. They couldn't have. It was impossible, nobody was wiped and repatterned anymore. But Ozaki's eyes darted down to the ground, and I knew it was true.

"You can't do this! He's under my care! He asked for me."

"How can someone who's incompetent ask for you?" Ferri said. She nodded and a flyeye image appeared in my airscreens: she and I, talking about Paolo. "He's torn apart," I said. "I have to rebuild him, almost from the ground up. I'm working on a model based on deep research into his life. But it's not done. I don't know if it will ever be done."

Ferri circled me as I was stunned with memory. "What other choice did we have? You gave us the key. I just turned it."

I killed him, I thought. It was my fault. One simple statement, there for all to see. Enough to get him declared incompetent. Which put Ferri in control of his destiny.

"How . . . how could you do this to him?"

"Because I love him!" she screamed. "I wanted him back."

I looked at Paolo, still eating breakfast as if nothing was happening.

"It's not him," I said.

"It's enough for me," Ferri said softly.

"He's a machine. There's nothing left!"

"You don't understand."

"I don't need to hear this," Paolo said. "Thank you for your help. Please bill me for any of your time to date. But please consider your contract terminated. I'd like you off my property before noon, if that is convenient for you."

I looked into his eyes and saw nothing, blackness, the abyss of infinity. He didn't know me. There was nothing left of what he had been.

"Paolo," I said.

"Yes? You need more time?"

"No."

He stood up and threw his napkin on the plate. "Then please excuse me. Security will be programmed to exclude you at midday. Be off the property before then."

He turned and left. I watched him walk down the hall, a powerful and purposeful and totally alien stride. As calculated and synthetic as a plastic fruit. Once again, I felt tears welling.

"Goodbye," Ferri said, taking Ozaki's arm.

"Goodbye," I said softly, after they had left.

It was over.

I went back to my house on the coast. Nothing had changed. The mists still swirled about the cliffs in the morning, the sun-room was just as perfect and delightful, it was as quiet and peaceful as it had been.

Paolo was gone.

Or was he? Could I imagine rebuilding Paolo even now, from the model I held in Arcadia?

No. It was stupid to even think about it. Paolo was gone, Ferri was lost, I was home, and this was my universe. And even if I thought I could rebuild him, the Third Rule was: You are a guest who does not go where you are not invited. If there are second thoughts, you do not Edit. Even if you think it in the client's best interest, you do not force yourself on them.

But he'd wanted my help. He'd managed to hold onto a fragmentary personality for hours. Long enough to reach me and cry for help. Longer by far than he'd been able to after he'd found me. Surely that showed the true compass of his desires.

Ferri would have me hung if I tried.

Did it matter?

I probably couldn't do it, not with the model I had.

Did it matter?

I had Infinitee deliver a long-term support capsule with all the options. I would be spending a lot of time in Arcadia. Enough time to become a man I had never really known.

Why are you doing this? I wondered.

Because it's what I need to do.

Reality shattered and broke into a million tiny fragments.

For the next two months, I lived in Infinitee.

Models, infinite and dense. Extrapolations. Interpolations. A trillion tiny facts dredged up by Constructs, fed to super-powerful simulations, trial-fitted to the template of Paolo, cross-checked and changed and repurposed and made consistent. I lost my body in the blur of Weaving, more than Editing or Overlay-creation or Meming or Persona Artistry. Weaving was what it was, the creation of a coherent-reasonably coherent-realistically incoherent-believable tale of personality, making it hang together, and knowing it in its totality. There were minutes, hours, days where self was lost. The boundaries fell away, and I stood over the Blue and looked past the edges of Arcadia.

Algorithms grew dense and complex, shortcuts became almost self-aware, compression schemes became smarter and more efficient. Personality inference was within my grasp. I pulled more resources from Arcadia. More. More. I had the funds. I could imagine the whole of Arcadia slowing slightly as it processed my totality, my thoughts. I imagined it spinning towards overload. More. More. Just a little more.

A momentary thought, an echo from long ago: But it is impossible to know the totality of a person.

Uproarious laughter. Edging into insanity.

Something like a cry of pain. Something like an infinity of suns.

I was the model.

We cracked open Infinitee and squinted out upon the world. We knew where we were going. We knew what we had to do.

The bedsores were still healing when we limped up the road to our house. It was night, but we didn't need the darkness. The security callouts were the last test, an easy one. We knew exactly what they were.

Gillam, Gillam, Gillam, we thought. Hang on to that. We were only a small part of Paolo. The rest was in Arcadia, Woven, waiting impatiently for a body. But Gillam kept slipping, and he had to stay. We needed his skills for what would happen next.

Airscreens showed flyeye views of our house, flickering in our vision like dark wings. Paolo was in his media room, playing some simplistic interactive on a Vista. Ferri was not in the house. The garage showed her autojet gone.

We opened the front door silently and slid through the house like oil. Security was all ours now, from voice challenge to antipersonnel weapons. Paolo's airscreens showed him nothing but our lies. He played on, oblivious.

When we stepped into the media room, we felt a strange doubling, as if viewing ourself through a funhouse mirror of the soul. Paolo called to us, drew us, and I had to hold to Gillam as he tried to slip away.

"Paolo," we said. "This is for you."

Paolo jumped and started to whirl, but before he had half-turned, we were in the constellation of his mind, bright primary colors and childlike voices raised in a shout. It was the pattern a first-year Editor would imagine to be the perfect model, discrete clusters of colors, direct links, an almost total

absence of mist and noise. The mind of a machine.

Is there any of me left? we wondered. Our model depended on there being some deep-pattern traces left by the wipe. We toggled the interViewer and Insight and went down deep into the dark.

Synthetic, Insight said.

Synthetic, synthetic, synthetic, it said again.

Fifteen minutes. Half an hour. An hour.

Synthetic, synthetic, synthetic.

Is there anything left?

I cannot tell.

Another hour. We sped down dark channels, deep on the edge of his mind's light-cone. Everything kept coming back synthetic. Every part of his mind bore a trademark.

Then, a very old memory of the house in Venice. Different color. Different trees. But the same house. POV of a young child looking out on the street, where another boy about his age was being pulled along behind an impatient mother. Embryonic feelings of confusion and concern.

There is something here, Insight whispered.

Can you help us trace it?

Yes.

Another hour. Two. The small traces grew slowly into a shadowy picture of being, an outline of the man Paolo was to become. But it was thin, like an old-time wireframe, and its edges were fuzzy and indistinct.

Would it be enough? It would have to be.

We opened a link to Arcadia and brought in the Weave. And for a long, long time, what was left of Gillam ceased to exist. He was a conduit, a tube. It was an instant. And an eternity.

Paolo?

Paolo.

No, you're not Paolo!

Yes, I am.

Was there another?

There still is. Look for him.

Searching. No. Nothing.

Look.

Nothing.

Look.

I am.

Gillam?

I felt a tiny tug. Yes, here!

Gillam?

Snap! Yes. Paolo?

Yes.

Let's put the final polish on these constellations, shall we?

Please.

I toggled the interViewer and Insight on. And for a long time there was nothing but me and the universe, singing a complex tune.

Dawn slashed across my eyes. I blinked into its brilliance and raised a hand. Around me, dark shapes hovered and danced. I felt rough hands lift me up.

"What did you do?" Ferri's voice, behind me.

I tried to turn, but the hands held me. I blinked away the blobs of sunlight. I was being held by two big Security guys dressed in bright orange. They turned me around to face Ferri, who was kneeling in front of the crumpled figure of Paolo.

"What did you do?" she screamed again. Tears had cut golden channels down her cheeks in the warm dawn light. Her eyes were red and well-worn from crying. "What did you do to him?"

"I brought him back," I said.

Ferri shook her head wildly. "From what? There's nothing left."

I looked down. How did I explain? How did I describe the Weaving?

"Why isn't he awake?" she cried.

"Ferri, sometimes . . ."

"You hurt him! You killed him!"

"It takes time to integrate after a deep Edit," I said. And this was more than a deep Edit.

An uncomprehending look. She grabbed Paolo's shoulders and shook him. "Father! Daddy!"

He didn't move. She shook him harder.

"I'll see you hang," Ferri said. "I don't care what I have to pay for your trial. I'll see your end."

A groan from Paolo. Ferri looked startled and let him drop.

Paolo sat up in his chair and turned around to look at me. For a second he looked scared and confused, then dropped me a conspiratorial wink.

"That's quite enough, beautiful Ferri," Paolo said.

"Daddy?"

Paolo stood up. "Let him go," he told Security.

"Sir . . ."

"No!" Ferri cried. "He broke into your house! He invaded your mind!"

"I don't care about that now."

"I do. And I'll prosecute," Ferri said.

I looked at Paolo, looked deep and long. His eyes were expressive and honest, bright with intelligence well-honed by time. "Are you OK?" I asked.

"I'm fine."

Was he? Was he really himself, or just another shell? I had to think the former. I had to. Or else what had I done? I looked at him a while longer. The expression fit the lines of his face. The personality fit what I knew about (us) him.

He turned back to Ferri. "Daughter, won't you let this poor man be?" His words were kind, but his tone was stern.

She glanced at me. The rage and hate and pain were all back, intense, fiery, all-consuming.

"No. He did something to you." She circled him, frowning suspiciously. "Is it you? Is Paolo in there at all? Is this something that he created?"

I swallowed. If she could convince the court it wasn't really Paolo, I could hang. Literally.

Paolo saw it too. "I can't stop this. We can only hope she comes to her senses."

"I know what I'm doing!"

"Why'd you do this?" Paolo asked me. "You knew how it would end."

"Because I had to."

In the end, Security took us both away. I could see the next months spread before me, trying to describe the Weaving to the court. Trying to describe the techniques that had leapfrogged Editing. Trying to get them to comprehend. And then trying to prove that Paolo was Paolo, and his testimony could be trusted.

As they led me out of the room, I looked back at Ferri. Was that sadness that I saw? Was that a softening of the armor? Was that the Ferri I had known for a few short weeks?

I had done the best I could.

It would have to be enough