

Search Engine

Mary Rosenblum

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One of the most popular and prolific of the new writers of the nineties, Mary Rosenblum made her first sale, to Asimov's Science Fiction, in 1990, and has since become one of its most frequent contributors, with almost thirty sales there to her credit. She has also sold to The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Science Fiction Age, Pulphouse, New Legends, and elsewhere.

*Rosenblum produced some of the most colorful, exciting, and emotionally powerful stories of the nineties, earning her a large and devoted following of readers. Her linked series of "Drylands" stories have proved to be one of Asimov's most popular series, but she has also published memorable stories such as "The Stone Garden," "Synthesis," "Flight," "California Dreamer," "Casting at Pegasus," "Entrada," "Rat," "The Centaur Garden," "Skin Deep," "Songs the Sirens Sing," and many, many others. Her novella "Gas Fish" won the Asimov's Readers Award in 1996, and was a finalist for that year's Nebula Award. Her first novel, *The Drylands*, appeared in 1993 to wide critical acclaim, winning the prestigious Compton Crook Award for Best First Novel. That was followed in short order by her second novel, *Chimera*, and her third, *The Stone Garden*. Her first short story collection, *Synthesis and Other Virtual Realities*, was widely hailed by critics as one of the best collections of 1996. Her most recent books are a trilogy of mystery novels written under the name *Mary Freeman*, and coming up is a new science fiction novel, *Horizons*. A graduate of Clarion West, Mary Rosenblum lives in Portland, Oregon.*

Much ink has been spilled in recent years worrying about the erosion of privacy caused by computers, but as the disquieting story that follows indicates, hold on—you ain't seen nothing yet!

A man's eyelids twitched as the tiny skull and crossbones icon flashed across his retinal screen. Uh-oh. He blinked away the image and scowled at the office door. The feds. "Sit tight and pay attention," he said to the new kid sitting in the chair beside the desk.

"What's up?" New Kid leaned forward. But the door was already opening, the soft whisper as it slid aside a reassurance that this was a high-end operation, that your money was being spent wisely. The real-life, physical office, the expensive woolen carpet and real wood furniture echoed that reassurance. No sleazy, virtual private eye here... you were at the top of the ladder in a hard office.

Not that the suit cared. He took off his shades, slipped 'em into the pocket of his very well made business tunic and fixed icy gray eyes on Aman's face. If he didn't like what he saw, he was too well trained to let it show. "Mr. Boutros." The suit didn't offer his hand, sat down immediately in the chair across from the desk. Cast New Kid a single pointed glance. Jimi. Aman remembered his name at last. Raul's latest, given to him to baby-sit and maybe even train.

"My assistant." Aman put finality in the tone. New Kid stays. He kept his body language relaxed and alpha, waited out the suit's evaluation of his options. Inclined his head at the suit's very slight nod. He had won that round. You won when you could. "How may I help you?"

The suit pulled a small leather case from inside his tunic, slipped a tiny data disk from it. Without a word, Aman extended a port. Clients did not store their files on the net. Not if they were paying Search Engine's fees. The disk clicked into place and Aman's desktop lit up. A man's head and shoulders appeared in the holofield, turning slowly. Medium-dark, about twenty, mixed Euro/African and Hispanic genes, Aman noted. About the same phenotype as New Kid—Jimi—a history of war, rape, and pillage

made flesh. The runner's scalp gleamed naked, implanted with fiberlight gang-sign. Aman read it and sighed, thinking of his fight with Avi over his fiberlights. Tattoo your political incorrectness on your body for the cops, son. Just in case they don't notice you on their own. Stupid move, Avi. That hadn't been the final argument, but it had been damn close. Several data-file icons floated at the bottom of the field. Food preferences, clothing, personal services, sex. Aman nodded because the feds knew what he needed and it would all be here. "Urgency?" he asked.

"High." The suit kept his eyes on the runner's light-scribed profile.

Aman nodded. Jimi was getting tense. He didn't even have to look at him—the kid was radiating. Aman touched the icon bubbles, opening the various files, hoping Jimi would keep his mouth shut. Frowning, because you never wanted the client to think it was going to be easy, he scanned the rough summary of the runner's buying habits. Bingo. He put his credit where his politics were. Not a problem, this one. He was going to stand up and wave to get their attention. "Four days," he said. Start high and bargain. "Plus or minus ten percent."

"Twenty-four hours." The suit's lips barely moved.

Interesting. Why this urgency? Aman shook his head. No kinky sex habits, no drugs, so they'd have to depend on clothes and food. Legal-trade data files took longer. "Three point five," he finally said. "With a failure-exemption clause."

They settled on forty-eight hours with no failure-exemption. "Ten percent bonus if you get him in less." The suit stood. For a moment he looked carefully and thoroughly at Jimi. Storing his image in the bioware overlay his kind had been enhanced with? If he ran into Jimi on the street a hundred years from now he'd remember him. Jimi had damn well better hope it didn't matter.

"They really want this guy." Jimi waited for the green light to come on over the door, telling them that the suit hadn't left anything behind that might listen. "The runner's wearing Gaiist sign."

No kidding. Aman knew that scrawl by heart.

"What did he do?"

"How the hell should I know?" Aman touched one of the file icons, closing his eyes as his own bioware downloaded and displayed on his retina. *That* had been the final argument with Avi.

"Oh, so we just do what we're told, I get it." Jimi leaned back, propped a boot up on the corner of the desktop. "Say yessir, no questions asked, huh? Who cares about the reason, as long as there's money?"

"He's government." Aman blinked the display away, ignored Jimi's boot. Why in the name of everyone's gods had Raul hired this wet-from-birth child? Well, he knew *why*. Aman eyed the kid's slender, androgynous build. His boss had a thing for the African/Hispanic phenotype. Once, he'd kept it out of the business. Aman suppressed a sigh, wondering if the kid had figured it out yet. Why Raul had hired him. "How much of the data-dredging that you do is legal?" He watched Jimi think about that. "You think we're that good, huh? That nobody ever busts us? There is always a price, kid, especially for success."

Jimi took his foot off the desktop. "The whole crackdown on the Gaiists is just crap. A bread-and-circus move because the North American Alliance..."

Aman held up a hand. "Good thing you don't write it on *your* head in light," he said mildly. "Just don't talk politics with Raul."

Jimi flushed. "So how come you let him back you down from four days? An Xuyen is already backed up

with the Ferrogers search."

"We won't need Xuyen." Aman nodded at the icons. "Our runner is organic. Vegan. Artisan craft only, in clothes and personal items. You could find him all by yourself in about four hours."

"But if he's buying farm-raised and hand-made?" Jimi frowned. "No universal tags on those."

Aman promised himself a talk with Raul, but it probably wouldn't change anything. Not until he got tired of this one, anyway. "Get real." He got up and crossed to the small nondescript desktop at the back of the office, camouflaged by an expensive Japanese shoji screen. This was the real workspace. Everything else was stage-prop, meant to impress clients. "You sell stuff without a u-tag and you suddenly find you can't get a license, or your E. coli count is too high for an organic permit, or your handspinning operation might possibly be a front for drug smugglers." He laughed. "Everything has a u-tag in it." Which wasn't quite true, but knowledge was power. Jimi didn't have any claim on power yet. Not for free.

"Okay." Jimi shrugged. "I'll see if I can beat your four hours. Start with sex?"

"He's not a buyer. I'll do it."

"How come?" Jimi bristled. "Isn't it too easy for you? If even *I* can do it?"

Aman hesitated, because he wasn't really sure himself. "I just am." He sat down at his workdesk as Jimi stomped out. Brought up his secure field and transferred the files to it. The runner got his sex for free or not at all, so no point in searching that. Food was next on the immediacy list. Aman opened his personal searchware and fed the runner's ID chipprint into it. He wasn't wearing his ID chip any more, or the suit wouldn't have showed up here. Nobody had figured out yet how to make a birth-implanted ID chip really permanent. Although they kept trying. Aman's AI stretched its thousand thousand fingers into the datasphere and started hitting all the retail data pools. Illegal, of course, and retail purchase data was money in the bank, so it was well protected, but if you were willing to pay, you could buy from the people who were better than the people who created the protection. Search Engine, Inc. was willing to pay.

Sure enough, *forsale.data* had the kid's profile. They were the biggest. Most of the retailers fed directly to them. Aman pulled the runner's raw consumables data. *Forsale* profiled, but his AI synthesized a profile to fit the specific operation. Aman waited the thirty seconds while his AI digested the raw dates, amounts, prices of every consumable item the runner had purchased from the first credit he spent at a store to the day he paid to have a back-alley cutter remove his ID chip. Every orange, every stick of gum, every bottle of beer carried an RNA signature and every purchase went into the file that had opened the day the runner was bom and the personal ID chip implanted.

The AI finished. The runner was his son's age. Mid-twenties. He looked younger. Testament to the powers of his vegetarian and organic diet? Aman smiled sourly. Avi would appreciate that. That had been an early fight and a continuing excuse when his son needed one. Aman scanned the grocery profile. It had amazed him, when he first got into this field, how much food reflected each person's life and philosophy. As a child, the runner had eaten a "typical" North American diet with a short list of personal specifics that Aman skipped. He had become a Gaiist at nineteen. The break was clear in the profile, with the sudden and dramatic shift of purchases from animal proteins to fish and then vegetable proteins only. Alcohol purchases flat-lined, although marijuana products tripled, as did wild-harvest hallucinogenic mushrooms. As he expected, the illegal drug purchase history revealed little. The random nature of his purchases suggested that he bought the drugs for someone else or a party event rather than for regular personal consumption. No long-term addictive pattern.

A brief, steady purchase rate of an illegal psychotropic, coupled with an increase in food purchase

volume suggested a lover or live-in friend with an addiction problem, however. The sudden drop-off suggested a break up. Or a death. The food purchases declined in parallel. On a whim, because he had time to spare, Aman had his AI correlate the drop off of the drug purchases to the newsmidia database for Northwestern North America, the region where the drug purchases were made. Bingo. A twenty-year-old woman had died within eighteen hours of the last drug purchase. His lover? Dead from an overdose? Aman's eyes narrowed. The cause of death was listed as heart failure, but his AI had flagged it.

"Continue." He waited out the seconds of his AFs contemplation.

Insufficient data, it murmured in its androgynous voice. *Continue?* Aman hesitated because searches like this cost money, and the connection was weak, if there at all. "Continue." No real reason, but he had learned long ago to follow his hunches.

He was the last one out of the office, as usual. The receptionist said good night to him as he crossed the plush reception area, her smile as fresh as it had been just after dawn this morning. As the door locked behind him, she turned off. Real furniture and rugs meant money and position. Real people meant security risks. The night watchman —another holographic metaphor—wished him good night as he crossed the small lobby. Koi swam in the holographic pond surrounded by blooming orchids. Huge vases of flowers —lilies today—graced small tables against the wall. The display company had even included scent with the holos. The fragrance of lilies followed Aman out onto the street. He took a pedal taxi home, grateful that for once, the small wiry woman on the seat wasn't interested in conversation as she leaned on the handlebars and pumped them through the evening crush in the streets.

He couldn't get the suit out of his head tonight. Jimi was right. The Gaiists were harmless, back-to-the-land types. The feds wanted this kid for something other than his politics, although that might be the media reason. Absently, Aman watched the woman's muscular back as she pumped them past street vendors hawking food, toys, and legal drugs, awash in a river of strolling, eating, buying people. He didn't ask "why" much any more. Sweat slicked the driver's tawny skin like oil. Maybe it was because the runner was the same age as Avi and a Gaiist as well. Aman reached over to tap the bell and before the silvery chime had died, the driver had swerved to the curb. She flashed him a grin at the tip as he thumbprinted her reader, then she sped off into the flow of taxis and scooters that clogged the street.

Aman ducked into the little grocery on his block, enjoying the relief of its nearly empty aisles this time of night. He grabbed a plastic basket from the stack by the door and started down the aisles. *You opened the last orange juice today*, the store's major-domo spoke to him in a soft, maternal voice as he strode past the freezer cases. True. The store's major-domo had scanned his ID chip as he entered, then uplinked to smartshopper.net, the inventory control company he subscribed to. It had searched his personal inventory file to see if he needed orange juice and the major-domo had reminded him. He tossed a pouch of frozen juice into his basket. The price displayed on the basket handle, a running total that grew slowly as he added a couple of frozen dinners and a packaged salad. *The Willamette Vineyard's Pinot Gris is on sale this week*. The major-domo here at the wine aisle used a rich, male voice. *Three dollars off*. That was his favorite white. He bought a bottle, and made his way to the checkout gate to thumbprint the total waiting for him on the screen.

"Don't we make it easy?"

Aman looked to up find Jimi lounging at the end of the checkout kiosks.

"You following me?" Aman loaded his groceries into a plastic bag. "Or is this a genuine coincidence?"

"I live about a block from your apartment." Jimi shrugged. "I always shop here." He hefted his own

plastic bag. "Buy you a drink?"

"Sure," Aman said, to atone for not bothering to know where the newbie lived. They sat down at one of the sidewalk tables next to the grocery, an island of stillness in the flowing river of humanity.

"The usual?" the table asked politely. They both said yes, and Aman wondered what Jimi's usual was. And realized Jimi was already drunk. His eyes glittered and a thin film of sweat gleamed on his face.

Not usual behavior. He'd looked over the intoxicant profiles himself when they were considering applicants. Aman sat back as a petite woman set a glass of stout in front of him and a mango margarita in front of Jimi. Aman sipped creamy foam and bitter beer, watched Jimi down a third of his drink in one long swallow. "What's troubling you?"

"You profile all the time?" Jimi set the glass down a little too hard. Orange slurry sloshed over the side, crystals of salt sliding down the curved bowl of the oversized glass. "Does it ever get to you?"

"Does what get to me?"

"That suit owned you." Jimi stared at him. "That's what you told me."

"They just think they do." Aman kept his expression neutral as he sipped more beer. "Think of it as a trade."

"They're gonna crucify that guy, right? Or whack him. No fuss, no muss."

"The government doesn't assassinate people," Aman said mildly.

"Like hell. Not in public, that's for sure."

Well, the indication had been there in Jimi's profile. He had been reading the fringe e-zines for a long time, and had belonged to a couple of political action groups that were on the "yellow" list from the government... not quite in the red zone, but close. But the best profilers came from the fringe. You learned early to evaluate people well, when you had to worry about betrayal.

"I guess I just thought I was working for the good guys, you know? Some asshole crook, a bad dealer, maybe the jerks who dump their kids on the public. But this..." He emptied his glass. "Another." He banged the glass down on the table.

You have exceeded the legal limit for operating machinery, the table informed him in a sweet, motherly voice. *I will call you a cab if you wish. Just let me know.* A moment later, the server set his fresh margarita down in front of him and whisked away his empty.

"Privacy, what a joke." Jimi stared at his drink, words slurring just a bit. "I bet there's a record of my dumps in some data-base or other."

"Maybe how many times you flush."

"Ha-ha." Jimi looked at him blearily, the booze hitting him hard and fast now. "When d'you stop asking why? Huh? Or did you ever ask?"

"Come on." Aman stood up. "I'll walk you home. You're going to fall down."

"I'm not that drunk," Jimi said, but he stood up. Aman caught him as he swayed. "Guess I am." Jimi laughed loudly enough to make heads turn. "Guess I should get used to it, huh? Like you."

"Let's go." Aman moved him, not all that gently. "Tell me where we're going."

"We?"

"Just give me your damn address."

Jimi recited the number, sulky and childlike again, stumbling and lurching in spite of Aman's steady arm. It was one of the cheap and trendy loft towers that had sprouted as the neighborhood got popular. Jimi was only on the sixth floor, not high enough for a pricey view. Not on his salary. The door unlocked and lights glowed as the unit scanned Jimi's chip and let them in. Music came on, a retro-punk nostalgia band that Aman recognized. A cat padded over and eyed them greenly, its golden fur just *a* bit ratty. It was real, Aman realized with a start. Jimi had paid a hefty fee to keep a flesh-and-blood animal in the unit.

"I got to throw up," Jimi mumbled, his eyes wide. They made it to the tiny bathroom... barely. Afterward, Aman put him to bed on the pull-out couch that served as bed in the single loft room. Jimi passed out as soon as he hit the pillow. Aman left a wastebasket beside the couch and a big glass of water with a couple of old-fashioned aspirin on the low table beside it. The cat stalked him, glaring accusingly, so he rummaged in the cupboards of the tiny kitchenette, found cat food pouches, and emptied one onto a plate. Set it on the floor. The cat stalked over, its tail in the air.

It would be in the database, that Jimi owned a cat. And tonight's bender would be added to his intoxicant profile, the purchase of the margaritas tallied neatly, flagged because this wasn't usual behavior. If his productivity started to fall off, Raul would look at that profile first. He'd find tonight's drunk.

"Hey."

Aman paused at the door, looked back. Jimi had pushed himself up on one elbow, eyes blurry with booze.

"Thanks... fr feeding him. I'm not... a drunk. But you know that, right?"

"Yeah," Aman said. "I know that."

"I knew him. Today. Daren. We were friends. Kids together, y'know? Were you ever a kid? Suit's gonna kill him. You c'd tell." Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes. "How come? You didn't even ask. You didn't even ask me if I knew him."

Damn. He'd never even thought of looking for a connection there. "I'm sorry, Jimi," Aman said gently. But Jimi had passed out again, head hanging over the edge of the sofa. Aman sighed and retraced his steps, settling the kid on the cushions again. Bad break for the kid. He stared down at Jimi's unconscious sprawl on the couch-bed. *Why?* Didn't matter. The suit wouldn't have told them the truth. But Jimi was right. He should have asked. He thought about today's profile of the runner, that break where he had changed what he ate, what he wore, what he spent his money on. You could see the break. What motivated it... that you could only guess at.

What would Avi's profile look like?

No way to know. Avi's break had been a back cutter.

Aman closed the door and listened to the unit lock it behind him.

He carried his groceries the few scant blocks to his own modest condo tower. No music came on with the lights. No cat, just Danish furniture and an antique Afghani carpet knotted by the childhood fingers of women who were long dead now. He put the food away, stuck a meal in the microwave, and thought about pouring himself another beer. But the stout he'd drunk with Jimi buzzed in his blood like

street-grade amphetamine. He smiled crookedly, thinking of his grandfather, a devout man of Islam, and his lectures about the demon's blood, alcohol. It felt like demon's blood tonight. The microwave chimed. Aman set the steaming tray on the counter to cool, sat down cross-legged on the faded wool patterns of crimson and blue, and blinked his bioware open.

His AI had been working on the profile. It presented him with five options. Aman settled down to review the runner's profile first. It wasn't all a matter of data. You could buy a search AI, and if that was all there was to it, Search Engine Inc. wouldn't be in business. Intuition mattered—the ability to look beyond the numbers and sense the person behind them. Aman ran through the purchases, the candy bars, the vid downloads for the lonely times, the gifts that evoked the misty presence of the girlfriend, the hope of love expressed in single, cloned roses, in Belgian chocolate, and tickets in pairs. They came and went, three of them for sure. He worried about his weight, or maybe just his muscles for a while, buying gym time and special foods.

Someone died. Aman noted the payments for flowers, the crematorium, a spike in alcohol purchases for about three months. And then... the break. Curious, Aman opened another file from the download the suit had given him, read the stats. Daren had been a contract birth—the new way for men to have children. Mom had left for a career as an engineer on one of the orbital platforms. Nanny, private school. The flowers had been for Dad, dead at 54 from a brain aneurysm.

He had joined the Gaiists after his father had died.

Unlike Avi, who hadn't waited.

Aman looked again at the five profiles the AI had presented. All featured organic, wild harvest, natural fiber purchasing profiles. Three were still local. One had recently arrived in Montreal, another in the Confederacy of South America, in the state of Brazil. Aman scanned the data. That one. He selected one of the local trio. The purchases clustered northeast of the city in an area that had been upscale suburb once, was a squalid cash-worker settlement now. He was walking. Couldn't use mass transit without a chip and didn't have access to a vehicle, clearly. Naive. Aman let his breath out slowly. Frightened. A little kid with his head under the sofa cushions, thinking he was invisible that way. He wondered sometimes if he could find Avi. It would be a challenge. His son knew how he worked. He knew how to really hide.

Aman had never looked.

On a whim, he called up the AI's flag from his earlier search. It had flagged the woman who had died, who had probably been a live-in friend or lover. This time, the AI presented him with clustered drug overdose deaths during the past five years. A glowing question mark tagged the data, crimson, which meant a continuation would take him into secure and unauthorized data. Pursue it? He almost said no. "All right, Jimi." He touched the blood-colored question mark. "Continue." It vanished. Searching secure government data files was going to cost. He hoped he could come up with a reason for Raul, if he caught it.

His legs wanted to cramp when Aman finally blinked out of his bioware and got stiffly to his feet. The AI hadn't yet finished its search of the DEA data files. The meal tray on the counter was cold and it was well past midnight. He stuck the tray in the tiny fridge and threw himself down on the low couch. Like Jimi, but not drunk on margaritas.

In the morning, he messaged Raul that he wasn't feeling well and asked if he should come in. As expected, Raul told him no way, go get a screen before you come back. You could count on Raul with his paranoia about bioterrorism.

It wasn't entirely a lie. He wasn't feeling well. *Well* covered a lot of turf. The AI had nothing for him on the overdose cluster it had flagged and that bothered him. There wasn't a lot of security that could stop it. He emailed Jimi, telling him to work on the Sauza search on his own and attaching a couple of non-secure files that would give him something he could handle in what would surely be a fuzzy and hungover state of mind. He found the clothes he needed at the back of his closet, an old, worn tunic-shirt and a grease-stained pair of jeans. He put on a pair of scuffed and worn out boots he'd found in a city recycle center years ago, then caught a ped-cab to the light rail and took the northeast run. He paid cash to the wary driver and used it to buy a one-way entry to the light rail. Not that cash hid his movements. He smiled grimly as he found a seat. His ped-cab and light rail use had been recorded by citizen.net, the data company favored by most transportation systems. It would just take someone a few minutes longer to find out where he had gone today.

City ran out abruptly in the Belt, a no-mans-land of abandoned warehouses and the sagging shells of houses inhabited by squatters, the chipless bilge of society. Small patches of cultivation suggested an order to the squalid chaos. As the train rocketed above the sagging roofs and scrubby brush that had taken over, he caught a brief snapshot glimpse of a round-faced girl peering up at him from beneath a towering fountain of rose canes thick with bright pink blossoms. Her shift, surprisingly clean and bright, matched the color of the roses perfectly and she waved suddenly and wildly as the train whisked Aman past. He craned his neck to see her, but the curve of the track hid her instantly.

At his stop, he stepped out with a scant handful of passengers, women mostly and a couple of men, returning from a night of cleaning or doing custom handwork for the upscale clothiers. None of them looked at him as they plodded across the bare and dirty concrete of the platform, but a sense of observation prickled the back of his neck.

Why would anyone be following him? But Aman loitered to examine the melon slices and early apples hawked by a couple of bored boys at the end of the platform. He haggled a bit, then spun around and walked quickly away—which earned him some inventive epithets from the taller of the boys. No sign of a shadow. Aman shrugged and decided on nerves. His AFs lack of follow-up data bothered him more with every passing minute. The rising sun already burned the back of his neck as he stepped off the platform and into the street.

The houses here were old, roofs sagging or covered with cheap plastic siding, textured to look like wood and lapped to shed rain. It was more prosperous than the no-man's-land belt around the city center, but not by much. Vegetables grew in most of the tiny yards, downspouts fed hand-dug cisterns and small, semi-legal stands offered vegetables, home-made fruit drinks, snacks, and various services —much like the street vendors on his block, but out here, the customers came to the vendors and not the other way around.

He paused at a clean-looking stand built in what had been a parking strip, and bought a glass of vegetable juice, made in front of his eyes in an antique blender. The woman washed the vegetables in a bucket of muddy water before she chopped them into the blender, but he smelled chlorine as he leaned casually on the counter. Safe enough. His vaccinations were up to date, so he took the glass without hesitation and drank the spicy, basil-flavored stuff. He didn't like basil particularly, but she smiled at her. "Has Daren been by today?" He hazarded the runner's real name on the wild chance that he was too naive to have used a fake. "He was supposed to meet me here. Bet he overslept."

Her face relaxed a bit, her smile more genuine. "Of course." She shrugged, relaxing. "Doesn't he always? I usually see him later on. Like noon." And she laughed a familiar and comfortable "we're all friends" laughter.

He was using his real name. Aman sipped some more of the juice, wanting to shake his head. Little kid

with his head under the friendly sofa cushions. A figure emerged from a small, square block of a house nearly invisible beneath a huge tangle of kiwi and kudzu vines and headed their way, walking briskly, his hand-woven, natural-dyed tunic as noticeable as a bright balloon on this street. Loose drawstring pants woven of some tan fiber and the string of carved beads around his neck might as well have been a neon arrow pointing. "Ha, there he is," Aman said, and the woman's glance and smile confirmed his guess. Aman waited until the runner's eyes were starting to sweep his way, then stepped quickly forward. "Daren, it's been forever." He threw his arms around the kid, hugging him like a long-lost brother, doing a quick cheek-kiss that allowed him to hiss into the shocked kid's ear, "*Act like we're old friends and maybe the feds wont get you. Don't blow this.*"

The kid stiffened, panic tensing all his muscles, fear sweat sour in Aman's nostrils. For a few seconds, the kid thought it over. Then his muscles relaxed all at once, so much so that Aman's hands tightened instinctively on his arms. He started to tremble.

"Come on. Let's take a walk," Aman said. "I'm not here to bust you."

"Let me get some juice..."

"No." Aman's thumb dug into the nerve plexus in his shoulder and the kid gasped. "Walk." He twisted the kid around and propelled him down the street, away from the little juice kiosk, his body language suggesting two old friends out strolling, his arm companionably over the kid's shoulder, hiding the kid's tension with his own body, thumb exerting just enough pressure on the nerve to remind the kid to behave. "You are leaving a trail a blind infant could follow," he said conversationally, felt the kid's jerk of reaction.

"I'm not chipped." Angry bravado tone.

"You don't need to be chipped. That just slows the search down a few hours. You went straight from the hack-doc to here, walked through the Belt because you couldn't take the rail, you buy juice at this stand every day, and you bought those pants two blocks up the street, from the lady who sells clothes out of her living room. Want me to tell you what had for dinner last night, too?"

"Oh, Goddess," he breathed.

"Spare me." Aman sighed. "Why do they want you? You blow something up? Plant a virus?"

"Not us. Not the Gaiists." He jerked free of Aman's grip with surprising strength, fists clenched. "That's all a lie. I don't know why they want me. Yeah, they're claiming bioterrorism, but I didn't do it. There wasn't any virus released where they said it happened. How can they *do* that? Just make something up?" His voice had gone shrill. "They have to have proof and they don't have any proof. Because it didn't happen."

He sounded so much like Avi that Aman had to look away. "They just made it all up, huh?" He made his voice harsh, unbelieving.

"I... guess." The kid looked down, his lip trembling. "Yeah, it sounds crazy, huh? I just don't get *why*. Why *me*? I don't even do protests. I just... try to save what's left to save."

"Tell me about your girlfriend."

"Who?" He blinked at Aman, his eyes wet with tears.

"The one who died."

"Oh. Reyna." He looked down, his expression instantly sad. "She really wanted to kick 'em. The drugs. I

tried to help her. She just... she just had so much fear inside. I guess... the drugs were the only thing that really helped the fear. I... I really tried."

"So she killed herself?"

"Oh, no." Daren looked up at him, shocked. "She didn't want to *die*. She just didn't want to be afraid. She did the usual hit that morning. I guess... the guy she bought from—he called himself Skinjack—I guess he didn't cut the stuff right. She ODeD. I... went looking for him." Daren flushed. "I told myself I was going to beat him up. I guess... maybe I wanted to kill him. Because she was getting better. She would have made it." He drew a shaky breath. "He just disappeared. The son of a bitch. I kept looking for him but... he was just gone. Maybe he ODeD, too," he added bitterly. "I sure hope so."

All of a sudden, it clicked into place. The whole picture.

Why.

They had reached an empty lot. Someone was growing grapes in it and as they reached the end of the rows, sudden movement in the shadows caught Aman's eye. Too late. He was so busy sorting it all out, he'd stopped paying attention. The figure stepped out of the leaf shadows, a small, ugly gun in his hand.

"I was right." Jimi's eyes glittered. "Didn't think I was smart enough to track you, huh? I'm stupid, I know, but not that stupid."

"Actually, I thought you'd be too hung over." Aman spread his hands carefully. "I think we're on the same side here, and I think we need to get out of here *now*."

"Shut up," Jimi said evenly, stepping closer, icy with threat. "Just shut *up*."

"Jimi?" Daren pushed forward, confused. "Goddess, I haven't seen you... what are you doing?"

"He found you," Jimi said between his teeth. "For the feds. You're not hiding very well, Daren, you idiot. Everything you buy has a damn tag on it. He looked up your buying habits and picked you out of the crowd, just like that. He laughed about how easy it was. You were too easy for him to even give the job to a newbie like me." Jimi's eyes burned into the kid's. "You got to..."

Aman shifted his weight infinitesimally, made a tiny, quick move with his left hand, just enough to catch Jimi's eye. Jimi swung right, eyes tracking, gun muzzle following his eyes. Aman grabbed Jimi's gun hand with his right hand, twisted, heard a snap. With a cry Jimi let go of the gun and Aman snatched it from the air, just as Daren tackled him, grabbing for the weapon. The hissing snap of a gas-powered gunshot ripped the air. Again. Aman tensed, everything happening in slow motion now. No pain. Why no pain? Hot wetness spattered his face and Jimi sprawled backward into the grape leaves, arms and legs jerking. Aman rolled, shrugging Daren off as if he weighed nothing, seeing the suit now, three meters away, aiming at Daren.

Aman fired. It was a wild shot, a crazy shot, the kind you did in sim-training sessions and knew you'd never pull off for real.

The suit went down.

Aman tried to scramble to his feet, but things weren't working right. After a while, Daren hauled him the rest of the way up. White ringed his eyes and he looked ready to pass out from shock.

"He's dead. Jimi. And the other guy." He clung to Aman, as if Aman was supporting him and not the other way around. "Goddess, you're bleeding."

"Enough with Goddess already." Aman watched red drops fall from his fingertips. His left arm was numb, but that wouldn't last.

"Why? What in the... what the *hell* is going on here?" His fingers dug into Aman's arm.

"Thank you." Hell was about right. "We need to get out of here. Do you know the neighborhood?"

"Yes. Sort of. This way." Daren started through the grapes, his arm around Aman. "I'm supposed to meet... a ride. This afternoon. A ride to..." He gave Aman a sideways, worried look. "Another place."

"You're gonna have to learn some things..." Aman had to catch his breath. "Or you're gonna bring the suits right after you." After that he stopped talking. The numbness was wearing off. Once, years and years ago, he had worked as private security, licensed for lethal force, paying his way through school. A burglar shot him one night.

It hurt worse than he remembered, like white-hot spears digging into his shoulder and side with every step. He disconnected himself from his body after a while, let it deal with the pain. He wondered about Jimi's cat. Who would take care of it? Raul would be pissed, he thought dreamily. Not about Jimi. Raul had no trouble finding Jimis in the world. But Aman was a lot better than Raul. Better even than An Xuyen, although Xuyen didn't think so. Raul would be pissed.

He blinked back to the world of hot afternoon and found himself sitting in dim light, his back against something solid.

"Man, you were out on your feet." The kid squatted beside him, streaked with sweat, drying blood, and gray dust, his face gaunt with exhaustion and fear. Daren, not Jimi. Jimi was dead.

"I don't have any first aid stuff, but it doesn't look like you're bleeding too much anymore. Water?" He handed Aman a plastic bottle. "It's okay. It's from a clean spring."

Aman didn't really care, would have drunk from a puddle. The ruins of an old house surrounded them. The front had fallen—or been torn—completely off, but a thick curtain of kudzu vine shrouded the space. Old campfire scars blackened the rotting wooden floor. The Belt, he figured. Edge of it, anyway.

"What happened?" Daren's voice trembled. "Why did he shoot Jimi? Who was he? Who are *you*?"

The water helped. "What sent you to get hacked?" Aman asked.

"Someone searched my apartment." The kid looked away. "I found... a bug in my car. I'm... good at finding those. I... told some of my... friends... and they said go invisible. It didn't matter if I'd done anything or not. They were right." His voice trembled. "I'd never do what they said I did."

"They know you didn't do anything." Aman closed his eyes and leaned back against the broken plasterboard of the ruined wall. Pain thudded through his shoulder with every beat of his heart. "It's the guy who killed your girlfriend."

"Why? I never hurt him. I never even found him..."

"You looked for him," Aman mumbled. "That scared 'em."

The kid's blank silence forced his eyes open.

"I'm guessing the local government is running a little... drug eradication program by eliminating the market," he said heavily. Explaining to a child. "They cut a deal with the street connections and probably

handed them a shipment of... altered... stuff to put into the pipeline. Sudden big drop in users."

"Poisoned?" Daren whispered. "On purpose?"

"Nasty, huh? Election coming up. Numbers count. And who looks twice at an OD in a confirmed user?" Aman kept seeing Jimi's childlike curl on the couch, the cat regarding him patiently. Couldn't make it go away. "Maybe they thought you had proof. Maybe they figured you'd guess and tell your... friends. They might make it public." He started to shrug... sucked in a quick breath. Mistake. Waited for the world to steady again. "I should have guessed... the suit would know about Jimi. Would be tailing him." That was why the long look in the office. Memory impression so the suit could spot him in a crowd. "I figured it out just too late." His fault, Jimi's death. "How soon are your people going to pick you up?"

"Soon. I think." The kid was staring at the ground, looked up suddenly. "How come you came after me? To arrest me?"

"Listen." Aman pushed himself straighter, gritted his teeth until the pain eased a bit. "I told you you're leaving a trail like a neon sign. You listen hard. You got to think about what you buy... food, clothes, toothpaste, okay?" He stared into the kid's uncomprehending face, willing him to get it. "It's all tagged, even if they say it's not. Don't doubt it. I'm telling you truth here, okay?"

The kid closed his mouth, nodded.

"You don't buy exactly the opposite—that's a trail we can follow, too—but you buy random. Maybe vegan stuff this time, maybe a pair of synth-leather pants off the rack at a big chain next purchase. Something you'd never spend cash on. Not even before you become a Gaiist, got it? You think about what you really want to buy. The food. The clothes. The snacks, toys, services. And you only buy them every fifth purchase, then every fourth, then every seventh. Got it? Random. You do that, buy stuff you don't want, randomly, and without a chip, you won't make a clear track. You'll be so far down on the profile that the searcher won't take you seriously.

"I've been buying in the Belt," the kid protested.

"Doesn't matter." He had explained why to Jimi. Couldn't do it again. Didn't have the strength. Let his eyes droop closed.

"Hey." The kid's voice came to him from a long way away. "I got to know. How come you came after me? To tell me how to hide from you? You really want me to believe that?"

"I don't care if you do or not." Aman struggled to open his eyes, stared into the blurry green light filtering through the kudzu curtain. "I'm... not sure how come I followed you." Maybe because he hadn't asked why and Jimi had. Maybe because Avi had been right and the job had changed him after all.

"But why? You a closet Gaiist?"

Aman wanted to laugh at that, but he didn't. It would hurt too much.

Voices filtered through nightmares full of teeth. People talking. No more green light, so it must be almost dark. Or maybe he was dying. Hard to tell. Footsteps scuffed and the kid's face swam into view, Jimi's at first, morphing into the other kid... Daren. He tried to say the name but his mouth was too dry.

"We're gonna drop you at an emergency clinic." Daren leaned close, his eyes anxious. "But... well, I thought maybe... you want to go with us? I mean... they're going to find out you killed that fed guy, right? You'll go to prison."

Yes, they would find out. But he knew how it worked. They'd hold the evidence and the case open. No

reason to risk pointing some investigative reporter toward the little dope deal they'd been covering up. They'd have expectations, and he'd meet them, and Jimi's death would turn out to have been another nasty little killing in the Belt. He could adopt Jimi's cat. No harm done. Just between us.

"I'll come with you," he croaked. "You could use some help with your invisibility. And I have the track to the proof you need... about that drug deal. Make the election interesting." Wasn't pleading. Not that. Trade.

"You can't come chipped." A woman looked over Daren's shoulder, Hispanic, ice cold, with an air that said she was in charge. "And we got to go *now*."

"I know." At least the chip was in his good shoulder.

She did it, using a tiny laser scalpel with a deft sureness that suggested med school or even an MD. And it hurt, but not a lot compared to the glowing coals of pain in his left arm and then they were loading him into the back of a vehicle and it was fully dark outside.

He was invisible. Right now. He no longer existed in the electronic reality of the city. If he made it back to his apartment, it wouldn't let him in. The corner store wouldn't take his card or even cash. He felt naked. No, he felt as if he no longer existed. Death wasn't as complete as this. Wondered if Avi had felt like that at first. I probably could have found him, he thought. If I'd had the guts to try.

"I'm glad you're coming with us." Daren sat beside him as the truck or whatever it was rocked and bucked over broken pavement toward the nearest clear street. "Lea says you probably won't die."

"I'm thrilled."

"Maybe we can use the drug stuff to influence the election, get someone honest elected."

He was as bad as Jimi, Aman thought. But... why not hope?

"You'll like the head of our order," Daren said thoughtfully. "He's not a whole lot older than me, but he's great. Really brilliant and he cares about every person in the order. *She* really matters to him... the Earth, I mean. Avi will really welcome you."

Avi.

Aman closed his eyes.

"Hey, you okay?" Daren had him by the shoulders. "Don't die now, not after all this." He sounded panicky.

"I won't," Aman whispered. He managed a tiny laugh that didn't hurt too bad.

Maybe it hadn't been the final fight after all.

Could almost make him believe in Avi's Goddess. Almost.

"Your head of the order sucks at hiding," he whispered. And fainted.