

1 The luminous flesh of giants

The courier presses his forehead against layers of glass, argon, high-impact plastic. He watches a gunship traverse the city's middle distance like a hunting wasp, death slung beneath its thorax in a smooth black pod.

Hours earlier, missiles have fallen in a northern suburb; seventy-three dead, the kill as yet unclaimed. But here the mirrored ziggurats down Lázaro Cárdenas flow with the luminous flesh of giants, shunting out the night's barrage of dreams to the waiting avenidas-business as usual, world without end.

The air beyond the window touches each source of light with a faint hepatic corona, a tint of jaundice edging imperceptibly into brownish translucence. Fine dry flakes of fecal snow, billowing in from the sewage flats, have lodged in the lens of night.

Closing his eyes, he centers himself in the background hiss of climate-control. He imagines himself in Tokyo, this room in some new wing of the old Imperial. He sees himself in the streets of Chiyoda-ku, beneath the sighing trains. Red paper lanterns line a narrow lane.

He opens his eyes.

Mexico City is still there.

The eight empty bottles, plastic miniatures, are carefully aligned with the edge of the coffee table: a Japanese vodka, Come Back Salmon, its name more irritating than its lingering aftertaste. On the screen above the console, the ptichka await him, all in a creamy frieze. When he takes up the remote, their high sharp cheekbones twist in the space behind his eyes. Their young men, invariably entering from behind, wear black leather gloves. Slavic faces, calling up unwanted fragments of a childhood: the reek of a black canal, steel racketing steel beneath a swaying train, the high old ceilings of an apartment overlooking a frozen park.

Twenty-eight peripheral images frame the Russians in their earnest coupling; he glimpses figures carried from the smoke-blackened car-deck of an Asian ferry.

He opens another of the little bottles.

Now the ptichka, their heads bobbing like well-oiled machines, swallow their arrogant, self-absorbed boyfriends. The camera angles recall the ardor of Soviet industrial cinema.

His gaze strays to NHK Weather. A low-pressure front is crossing Kansas. Next to it, an eerily calm Islamic downlink ceaselessly reiterates the name of God in a fractal-based calligraphy.

He drinks the vodka.

He watches television.

After midnight, at the intersection of Liverpool and Florencia, he stares out at the Zona Rosa from the back of a white Lada, a nanopore Swiss respirator chafing his freshly shaven chin. And every passing face is masked, mouths and nostrils concealed behind filters. Some, honoring the Day of the Dead, resemble the silver-beaded jaws of grinning sugar-skulls. Whatever form they take, their manufacturers all make the same dubious, obliquely comforting claims about viroids. He's thought to escape the sameness, perhaps discover something of beauty or passing interest, but here there are only masked faces, his fear, the lights.

An ancient American car comes creeping through the turn, out of Avenida Chapultepec, gouts of carbon pulsing from beneath a dangling bumper. A dusty rind of cola-colored resin and shattered mirror seals its every surface; only the windshield is exposed, and this is black and glossy, opaque as a blob of ink, reminding him of the gunship's lethal pod. He feels the fear begin to accrete, seamlessly, senselessly, with absolute conviction, around this carnival ghost, the Cadillac, this oil-burning relic in its spectral robe of smudged mosaic silver. Why is it allowed to add its filth to the already impossible air? Who sits inside, behind the black windshield?

Trembling, he watches the thing pass.

'That car ...' He finds himself leaning forward, compulsively addressing the broad brown neck of the driver, whose massive ear lobes somehow recall reproduction pottery offered on the hotel's shopping channel.

'El coche,' says the driver, who wears no mask, and turning, now seems to notice the courier for the first time. The courier sees the mirrored Cadillac flare, once, and briefly, with the reflected ruby of a nightclub's laser, then gone.

The driver is staring at him.

He tells the driver to return to the hotel.

He comes awake from a dream of metal voices, down the vaulted concourses of some European airport,

distant figures glimpsed in mute rituals of departure.

Darkness. The hiss of climate-control.

The touch of cotton sheets. His telephone beneath the pillow. Sounds of traffic, muted by the gas-filled windows. All tension, his panic, are gone. He remembers the atrium bar. Music. Faces.

He becomes aware of an inner balance, a rare equilibrium. It is all he knows of peace.

And, yes, the glasses are here, tucked beside his telephone. He draws them out, opening the ear pieces with a guilty pleasure that has somehow endured since Prague.

Very nearly a decade he has loved her, though he doesn't

think of it in those terms. But he has never bought another piece of software and the black plastic frames have started to lose their sheen. The label on the cassette is unreadable now, sueded white with his touch in the night. So many rooms like this one.

He has long since come to prefer her in silence. He no longer inserts the yellowing audio beads.

He has learned to provide his own, whispering to her as he fast-forwards through the clumsy titles and up the moonlit ragged hiliscape of a place that is neither Hollywood nor Rio, but some soft-focus digital approximation of both.

She is waiting for him, always, in the white house up the canyon road. The candles. The wine. The jet-beaded dress against the matte perfection of her skin, such whiteness, the black beads drawn smooth and cool as a snake's belly up her tensed thigh.

Far away, beneath cotton sheets, his hands move.

Later, drifting toward sleep of a different texture, the phone beneath his pillow chimes softly and only once.

'Yes?'

'Confirming your reservation to San Francisco,' someone says, either a woman or a machine. He touches a key, recording the flight number, says goodnight, and closes his eyes on the tenuous light sifting from the dark borders of the drapes.

Her white arms enfold him. Her blondness eternal.

He sleeps.

IntenSecure had their wagons detailed every three shifts. They used this big specialty car wash off Colby; twenty coats of hand-rubbed Wet Honey Sienna and you didn't let it get too shabby.

That one November evening the Republic of Desire put an end to his career in armed response, Berry Rydell had arrived there a little early.

He liked the way it smelled inside. They had this pink stuff they put through the power-washers to get the road film off, and the smell reminded him of a summer job he'd had in Knoxville, his last year in school. They'd been putting condos into the shell of this big old Safeway out on Jefferson Davis. The architects wanted the cinder block walls stripped just this one certain way, mostly gray showing through but some old pink Safeway paint left in the little dips and crannies. They were from Memphis and they wore black suits and white cotton shirts. The shirts had obviously cost more than the suits, or at least as much, and they never wore ties or undid the top button. Rydell had figured that that was a way for architects to dress; now he lived in L.A., he knew it was true. He'd overheard one of them explaining to the foreman that what they were doing was exposing the integrity of the material's passage through time. He thought that was probably bullshit, but he sort of liked the sound of it anyway; like what happened to old people on television.

But what it really amounted to was getting most of this

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2 Cruising with gunhead

shitty old paint off thousands and thousands of square feet of equally shitty cinder block, and you did it with an oscillating spray-head on the end of a long stainless handle. If you thought the foreman wasn't looking, you could aim it at another kid, twist out a thirty-foot rooster tail of stinging rainbow, and wash all his sunbioclock off. Rydell and his friends all wore this

Australian stuff that came in serious colors, so you could see where you had and hadn't put it.

Had to get your right distance on it, though, 'cause up close those heads could take the chrome off a bumper. Rydell and Buddy Crigger both got fired for doing that, finally, and then they walked across Jeff Davis to a beer joint and Rydell wound up spending the night with this girl from Key West, the first time he'd ever slept beside a woman.

Now here he was in Los Angeles, driving a six-wheeled Hotspur Hussar with twenty coats of hand-rubbed lacquer. The Hussar was an armored Land Rover that could do a hundred and forty on a straightaway, assuming you could find one open and had the time to accelerate. Hernandez, his shift super, said you couldn't trust an Englishman to build anything much bigger than a hat, not if you wanted it to work when you needed it; he said IntenSecure should've bought Israeli or at least Brazilian, and who needed Ralph Lauren to design a tank anyway?

Rydell didn't know about that, but that paint job was definitely trying too hard. He thought they

probably wanted people to think of those big brown United Parcel trucks, and at the same time they maybe hoped it would look sort of like something you'd see in an Episcopal church. Not too much guilt on the logo. Sort of restrained.

The people who worked in the car wash were mostly Mongolian immigrants, recent ones who had trouble getting better jobs. They did this crazy throat-singing thing while they worked, and he liked to hear that. He couldn't figure out how they did it; sounded like tree-frogs, but like it was two sounds at once.

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Now they were buffing the rows of chromed nubs down the sides. Those had been meant to support electric crowd-control grids and were just chromed for looks. The riot-wagons in Knoxville had been electrified, but with this drip-system that kept them wet, which was a lot nastier.

'Sign here,' said the crew boss, this quiet black kid named Anderson. He was a medical student, days, and he always looked like he was about two nights short of sleep.

Rydell took the pad and the light-pen and signed the signature-plate. Anderson handed Rydell the keys.

'You ought to get you some rest,' Rydell said. Anderson grinned, wanly. Rydell walked over to Gunhead, deactivating the door alarm.

Somebody had written that inside, 'GUNHEAD,' in green marker on the panel above the windshield. The name stuck, but mostly because Sublett liked it. Sublett was Texan, a refugee from some weird trailer-camp video-sect. He said his mother had been getting ready to deed his ass to the church, whatever that meant.

Sublett wasn't too anxious to talk about it, but Rydell had gotten the idea that these people figured video was the Lord's preferred means of communicating, the screen itself a kind of perpetually burning bush. 'He's in the de-tails,' Sublett had said once. 'You gotta watch for Him close.' Whatever form this worship had taken, it was evident that Sublett had absorbed more television than anyone Rydell had ever met, mostly old movies on channels that never ran anything but. Sublett said Gunhead was the name of a robot tank in a Japanese monster movie. Hernandez thought Sublett had written the name on there himself. Sublett denied it. Hernandez said take it off. Sublett ignored him. It was still there, but Rydell knew Sublett was too law-abiding to commit any vandalism, and anyway the ink in the marker might've killed him.

Sublett had had allergies. He went into shock from various

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kinds of cleaners and solvents, so you couldn't get him to come into the car wash at all, ever. The allergies made him light sensitive, too, so he had to wear these mirrored contacts. What with the black IntenSecure uniform and his dry blond hair, the contacts made him look like some kind of Kian-assed Nazi robot. Which could get kind of complicated in the wrong store on Sunset, say three in the morning and all you really wanted was some mineral water and a Coke. But Rydell was always glad to have him on shift, because he was as determinedly nonviolent a rentacop as you were likely to find. And he probably wasn't even crazy. Both of which were definite pluses for Rydell. As Hernandez was fond of pointing out, SoCal had stricter regulations for who could or couldn't be a hairdresser.

Like Rydell, a lot of IntenSecure's response people were former police officers of some kind, some were even ex-LAPD, and if the company's rules about not carrying personal weapons on duty were any indication, his co-workers were expected to turn up packing all manner of hardware. There were metal detectors on the staff-room doors and Hernandez usually had a drawer full of push-daggers, nunchuks, stunguns, knucks, boot-knives, and whatever else the detectors had picked up. Like Friday morning at a South Miami high school. Hernandez gave it all back after the shift, but when they went calling, they were supposed to make do with their Glocks and the chunkers.

The Glocks were standard police issue, at least twenty years old, that IntenSecure bought by the truckload from PDs that could afford to upgrade to caseless ammunition. If you did it by the book, you kept the Glocks in their plastic holsters, and kept the holsters Velcroed to the wagon's central console. When you answered a call, you pulled a holstered pistol off the console and stuck it on the patch provided on your uniform. That was the only time you were supposed to be out of the wagon with a gun on, when you were actually responding.

The chunkers weren't even guns, not legally anyway, but a ten-second burst at close range would chew somebody's face off. They were Israeli riot-control devices, air-powered, that fired one-inch cubes of recycled rubber. They looked like the result of a forced union between a bulipup assault rifle and an industrial staple gun, except they were made out of this bright yellow plastic. When you pulled the trigger, those chunks came out in a solid stream. If you got really good with one, you could shoot around corners; just kind of bounce them off a convenient surface. Up close, they'd eventually cut a sheet of plywood in half, if you kept on shooting, and they left major

bruises out to about thirty yards. The theory was, you didn't always encounter that many armed intruders, and a chunker was a lot less likely to injure the client or the client's property. If you did encounter an armed intruder, you had the Glock. Although the intruder was probably running caseless through a floating breech-not part of the theory. Nor was it part of the theory that seriously tooled-up intruders tended to be tightened on dancer, and were thereby both inhumanly fast and clinically psychotic.

There had been a lot of dancer in Knoxville, and some of it had gotten Rydell suspended. He'd crawled into an apartment where a machinist named Kenneth Turvey was holding his girlfriend, two little kids, and demanding to speak to the president. Turvey was white, skinny, hadn't bathed in a month, and had the Last Supper tattooed on his chest. It was a very fresh tattoo; it hadn't even scabbed over. Through a film of drying blood, Rydell could see that Jesus didn't have any face. Neither did any of the Apostles.

'Damn it,' Turvey said, when he saw Rydell. 'I just wanna speak to the president.' He was sitting cross-legged, naked, on his girlfriend's couch. He had something like a piece of pipe across his lap, all wrapped with tape.

'We're trying to get her for you,' Rydell said. 'We're sorry it's taking so long, hut we have to go through channels.'

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'God damn it,' Turvey said wearily, 'doesn't nobody understand I'm on a mission from God?' He didn't sound particularly angry, just tired and put out. Rydell could see the girlfriend through the open door of the apartment's single bedroom. She was on her back, on the floor, and one of her legs looked broken. He couldn't see her face. She wasn't moving at all. Where were the kids?

'What is that thing you got there?' Rydell asked, indicating the object across Turvey's lap.

'It's a gun,' Turvey said, 'and it's why I gotta talk to the president.'

'Never seen a gun like that,' Rydell allowed. 'What's it shoot?'

'Grapefruit cans,' Turvey said. 'Fulla concrete.'

'No shit?'

'Watch,' Turvey said, and brought the thing to his shoulder. It had a sort of breech, very intricately machined, a trigger-thing like part of a pair of vise-grip pliers, and a couple of flexible tubes. These latter ran down, Rydell saw, to a great big canister of gas, the kind you'd need a hand truck to move, which lay on the floor beside the couch.

There on his knees, on the girlfriend's dusty polyester carpet, he'd watched that muzzle swing past. It was big enough to put your fist down. He watched as Turvey took aim, back through the open bedroom door, at the closet.

'Turvey,' he heard himself say, 'where's the goddamn kids?'

Turvey moved the vise-grip handle and punched a hole the size of a fruit-juice can through the closet door. The kids were in there. They must've screamed, though Rydell couldn't remember hearing it. Rydell's lawyer later argued that he was not only deaf at this point, hut in a state of sonically induced catalepsy. Turvey's invention was only a few decihels short of what you got with a SWAT stun-grenade. But Rydell couldn't remember. He couldn't rememher shooting Kenneth Turvey in

the head, either, or anything else at all until he woke up in the hospital. There was a woman there from Cops in Trouble, which had been Rydell's father's favorite show, but she said she couldn't actually talk to him until she'd spoken with his agent. Rydell said he didn't have one. She said she knew that, but one was going to call him.

Rydell lay there thinking about all the times he and his father had watched Cops in Trouble. 'What kind of trouble we talking here?' he finally asked.

The woman just smiled. 'Whatever, Berry, it'll probably be adequate.'

He squinted up at her. She was sort of good-looking. 'What's your name?'

'Karen Mendelsohn.' She didn't look like she was from Knoxville, or even Memphis.

'You from Cops in Trouble?'

'Yes.'

'What you do for 'em?'

'I'm a lawyer,' she said. Rydell couldn't recall ever actually having met one before, but after that he wound up meeting lots more.

Gunhead's displays were featureless slabs of liquid crystal; they woke when Rydell inserted the key, typed the security code, and ran a basic systems check. The cameras under the rear bumper were his favorites; they made parking really easy; you could see exactly where you were backing up. The downlink from the Death Star wouldn't work while he was still in the car wash, too much steel in the building, but it was Sublett's job to keep track of all that with an ear-bead.

There was a notice posted in the staff room at IntenSecure, telling you it was company policy not to call it that, the Death Star, but everybody did anyway. The LAPD called it that themselves. Officially it was the Southern California (icosynclinal Law Enforcement Satellite.

II

Watching the dashboard screens, Rydell backed carefully out of the building. Gunhead's twin ceramic engines were new enough to still be relatively quiet; Rydell could hear the tires squish over the wet concrete floor.

Sublett was waiting outside, his silver eyes reflecting the red of passing taillights. Behind him, the sun was setting, the sky's colors bespeaking more than the usual cocktail of additives. He stepped back as Rydell reversed past him, anxious to avoid the least droplet of spray from the tires. Rydell was anxious too; he didn't want to have to haul the Texan to Cedars again if his allergies kicked up.

Rydell waited as Sublett pulled on a pair of disposable surgical gloves.

'Howdy,' Sublett said, climbing into his seat. He closed his door and began to remove the gloves, gingerly peeling them into a Ziploc Baggie.

'Don't get any on you,' Rydell said, watching the care with which Sublett treated the gloves.

'Go ahead, laugh,' Sublett said mildly. He took out a pack of hypo-allergenic gum and popped a piece from its bubble. 'How's ol' Gunhead?'

Rydell scanned the displays, satisfied. 'Not too shabby.'

'Hope we don't have to respond to any damn' stealth houses tonight,' Sublett said, chewing.

Stealth houses, so-called, were on Sublett's personal list of bad calls. He said the air in them was toxic. Rydell didn't think it made any sense, but he was tired of arguing about it. Stealth houses were bigger than most regular houses, cost more, and Rydell figured the owners would pay plenty to keep the air clean. Sublett maintained that anybody who built a stealth house was paranoid to begin with, would always keep the place locked up too tight, no air circulation, and you'd get that had toxic buildup.

If there'd been any stealth houses in Knoxville, Rydell hadn't known about them. He thought it was an L.A. thing.

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Sublett, who'd worked for IntenSecure for almost two years, mostly on day patrol in Venice, had been the first person to even mention them to Rydell. When Rydell finally got to answer a call to one, he couldn't believe the place; it just went down and down, dug in beneath something that looked almost, but not quite, like a bombed-out drycleaning plant. And it was all peeled logs inside, white plaster, Turkish carpets, big paintings, slate floors, furniture like he'd never seen before. But it was some kind of tricky call; domestic violence, Rydell figured. Like the husband hit the wife, the wife hit the button, now they were making out it was all just a glitch. But it couldn't really be a glitch, because someone had had to hit the button, and there hadn't been any response to the password call that came back to them three-point-eight seconds later. She must've messed with the phones, Rydell thought, then hit the button. He'd been riding with 'Big George' Kechakmadze that night, and the Georgian (Tbilisi, not Atlanta) hadn't liked it either. 'You see these people, they're subscribers, man; nobody bleeding, you get your ass out, okay?' Big George had said, after. But Rydell kept remembering a tension around the woman's eyes, how she held the collar of the big white robe folded against her throat. Her husband in a matching robe but with thick hairy legs and expensive glasses. There'd been something wrong there but he'd never know what. Not any more than he'd ever understand how their lives really worked, lives that looked like what you saw on tv but weren't.

L.A. was full of mysteries, when you looked at it that way. No bottom to it.

He'd come to like driving through it, though. Not when he had to get anywhere in particular, but just cruising with Gunhead was okay. Now he was turning onto La Cienega and the little green cursor on the clash was doing the same.

'Forbidden Zone,' Sublett said. 'Herve Villechaize, Susan I yrell, Marie-Pascal Elfman, Viva.'

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'Viva?' Rydell asked. 'Viva what?' 'Viva. Actress.'

'When'd they make that?'

'1980.'

'I wasn't born yet.'

'Time on tv's all the same time, Rydell.'

'Man, I thought you were trying to get over your upbringing and all.' Rydell de-mirrored the door-window to better watch a redheaded girl pass him in a pink Daihatsu Sneaker with the top off.

'Anyway, I never saw that one.' It was just that hour of evening when women in cars looked about

as good, in Los Angeles, as anything ever did. The surgeon general was trying to outlaw convertibles; said they contributed to the skin-cancer rate.

'End game. Al Cliver, Moira Chen, George Eastman, Gordon Mitchell. 1985.'

'Well, I was two,' Rydell said, 'but I didn't see that one either.'

Sublett fell silent. Rydell felt sorry for him; the Texan really didn't know any other way to start a conversation, and his folks back home in the trailer-camp would've seen all those films and more.

'Well,' Rydell said, trying to pick up his end, 'I was watching this one old movie last night-' Sublett perked up. 'Which one?'

'Dunno,' Rydell said. 'This guy's in L.A. and he's just met this girl. Then he picks up a pay phone, 'cause it's ringing. Late at night. It's some guy in a missile silo somewhere who knows they've just launched theirs at the Russians. He's trying to phone his dad, or his brother, or something. Says the world's gonna end in short order. Then the guy who answered the phone hears these soldiers come in and shoot the guy. The guy on the phone, I mean.'

Sublett closed his eyes, scanning his inner trivia-banks. 'Yeah? How's it end?'

'Dunno,' Rydell said. 'I went to sleep.'

Sublett opened his eyes. 'Who was in it?'

'Got me.'

Sublett's blank silver eyes widened in disbelief. 'Jesus, Berry, you shouldn't oughta watch tv, not unless you're gonna pay it attention.'

He wasn't in the hospital very long, after he shot Kenneth Turvey; barely two days. His lawyer, Aaron Pursley himself, made the case that they should've kept him in there longer, the better to assess the extent of his post-traumatic shock. But Rydell hated hospitals and anyway he didn't feel too bad; he just couldn't recall exactly what had happened. And he had Karen Mendelsohn to help him out with things, and his new agent, Wellington Ma, to deal with the other people from Cops in Trouble, not one of them as nice as Karen, who had long brown hair. Wellington Ma was Chinese, lived in Los Angeles, and Karen said his father had been in the Big Circle gang-though she advised Rydell not to bring it up.

Wellington Ma's business card was a rectangular slice of pink synthetic quartz, laser-engraved with his name, 'The Ma-Mariano Agency,' an address on Beverly Boulevard, and all kinds of numbers and e-mail addresses. It arrived by GlobEx in its own little gray suede envelope while Rydell was still in the hospital.

'Looks like you could cut yourself on it,' Rydell said.

'You could, many no doubt have,' said Karen Mendelsohn, 'and if you put it in your wallet and sit down, it shatters.'

'Then what's the point of it?'

'You're supposed to take very good care of it. You won't get another.'

Rydell never actually did meet Wellington Ma, at least not 'til quite a while later, but Karen would bring in a little briefcase with a pair of eyephones on a wire and Rydell could talk with him iii his office in LA. It was the sharpest tele

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presence rig Rydell had ever used, and it really did look just like he was right there. He could see out the window to where there was this lopsided pyramid the color of a Noxzema jar. He asked Wellington Ma what that was and Ma said it was the old Design Center, but currently it was a discount mall, and Rydell could go there when he came to L.A., which was going to be soon.

Turvey's girlfriend, Jenni-Rae Cline, was bringing an intricately interlocking set of separate actions against Rydell, the Department, the City of Knoxville, and the company in Singapore that owned her apartment building. About twenty million in total.

Rydell, having become a cop in trouble, was glad to find that Cops in Trouble was right there for him. They'd hired Aaron Pursley, for starters, and of course Rydell knew who he was from the show. He had that gray hair, those blue eyes, that nose you could split kindling with, and wore jeans, Tony Lama boots, and plain white oxford-cloth pima cotton cowboy business shirts with Navajo-silver bob-ties. He was famous and he defended cops like Rydell from people like Turvey's girlfriend and her lawyer.

Jenni-Rae Cline's lawyer maintained that Rydell shouldn't have been in her apartment at all, that he'd endangered her life and her children's by so doing, and that he'd killed Kenneth Turvey in the process, Mr. Turvey being described as a skilled craftsman, a steady worker, a loving father-figure for little Rambo and Kelly, a born-again Christian, a recovering addict to 4-Thiobuscaline, and the family's sole means of support.

'Recovering?' Rydell asked Karen Mendelsohn in his room in the airport Executive Suites. She'd

just shown him the fax from Jenni-Rae's lawyer.

'Apparently he'd been to a meeting that very day,' Karen said.

'What did he do there?' Rydell asked, remembering the Last Supper in drying blood.

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'According to our witnesses, he openly horned a tablespoon of his substance of choice, took the podium by force, and delivered a thirty-minute rant on President Milibank's pantyhose and the assumed current state of her genitalia. He then exposed himself, masturbated but did not ejaculate, and left the basement of the First Baptist Church.'

'Jesus,' Rydell said. 'And this was at one of those drug meetings, like A.A.?'

'It was,' Karen Mendelsohn said, 'though apparently Turvey's performance has triggered an unfortunate sequence of relapses. We'll send in a team of counselors, of course, to work with those who were at the meeting.'

'That's nice,' Rydell said.

'Look good in court,' she said, 'in the unlikely event we ever get there.'

'He wasn't "recovering",' Rydell said. 'Hadn't even recovered from the last bunch he jammed up his nose.'

'Apparently true,' she said. 'But he was also a member of Adult Survivors of Satanism, and they are starting to take an interest in this case. Therefore, both Mr. Pursley and Mr. Ma feel it best we coast it but soon, Berry. You and me.'

'But what about the court stuff?'

'You're on suspension from the Department, you haven't been charged with anything yet, and your lawyer's name is Aaron-with-two-a's Pursley. You're out of here, Berry.'

'To L.A.?'

'None other.'

Rydell looked at her. He thought about Los Angeles on television. 'Will I like it?'

'At first,' she said. 'At first, it'll probably like you. I know I do.'

Which was how he wound up going to bed with a lawyer- one who smelled like a million dollars, talked dirty, slid all around, and wore underwear from Milan, which was in Italy.

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'The Kill-Fix. Cyrinda Burdette, Gudrun Weaver, Dean Mitchell, Shinobu Sakamaki. 1997.'

'Never saw it,' Rydebb said, sucking the last of his grande decaf cold capp-with-an-extra-shot from the milky ice at the bottom of his plastic thermos cup.

'Mama saw Cyrinda Burdette. In this mall over by Waco. Got her autograph, too. Kept it up on the set with the prayer-hankies and her hologram of the Reverend Wayne Falbon. She had a prayer-hanky for every damn thing. One for the rent, one to keep the AIDS off, the TB...'

'Yeah? How'd she use 'em?'

'Kept 'em on top of the set,' Sublett explained, and finished the inch of quadruple-distilled water left in the skinny translucent bottle. There was only one place along this part of Sunset sold the stuff, but Rydell didn't mind; it was next to a take-out coffee-bar, and they could park in the lot on the corner. Fellow who ran the lot always seemed kind of glad to see them.

'Prayer-hanky won't keep any AIDS off,' Rydell said. 'Get yourself vaccinated, like anybody else. Get your momma vaccinated, too.' Through the de-mirrored window, Rydell could see a street-shrine to J. D. Shapely, up against the concrete wall that was all that was left of the building that had stood there once. You saw a lot of them in West Hollywood. Somebody had sprayed SHAPELY WAS A COCK-SUCKING FAGGOT in bright pink paint, the letters three feet high, and then a big pink heart. Below that, stuck to the wall, were postcards of Shapely and photographs of people who must've died. God only knew how many millions had. On the pavement at the base of the wall were dead flowers, stubs of candles, other stuff. Something about the postcards gave Rydell the creeps; they made the guy look like a cross between Elvis and some kind of Catholic saint, skinny and with his eyes too big. He turned to Sublett. 'Man, you still haven't got your ass

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vaccinated yet, you got nothin' but stone white-trash ignorance to thank for it.'

Sublett cringed. 'That's worse than a live vaccine, man; that's a whole 'nother disease right there!'

'Sure is,' Rydell said, 'but it doesn't do anything to you. And there's still plenty of the old kind walking around here. They oughta make it compulsory, you ask me.'

Sublett shuddered. 'Reverend Fallon always said-'

'Screw Reverend Fallon,' Rydell said, hitting the ignition. 'Son of a bitch just makes money selling prayer-hankies to people like your momma. You knew that was all bulshit anyway, didn't you, otherwise why'd you come out here?' He put Gunhead into gear and eased over into the Sunset traffic. One thing about driving a Hotspur Hussar, people almost always let you cut in.

Sublett's head seemed to draw down between his high shoulders, giving him the look of a worried, steel-eyed buzzard. 'Ain't all that simple,' he said. 'It's everything I been brought up to be. Can't all be bullshit, can it?'

Rydell, glancing over at him, took pity. 'Naw,' he said, 'I guess it wouldn't have to be, necessarily, all of it, but it's just--'

'What they bring you all up to be, Berry?'

Rydell had to think about it. 'Republican,' he said, finally.

Karen Mendelsohn had seemed like the best of a whole string of things Rydell felt he could get used to just fine. Like flying business-class or having a SoCal MexAmeriBank card from Cops in Trouble.

That first time with her, in the Executive Suites in Knoxville, not having anything with him, he'd tried to show her his certificates of vaccination (required by the Department, else they couldn't get you insured). She'd just laughed and said German nanotech would take care of all of that. Then she showed Rydell this thing through the transparent top of a

'9

gadget like a little battery-powered pressure-cooker. Rydell had heard about them, but he hadn't ever seen one; he'd also heard they cost about as much as a small car. He'd read somewhere how they always had to be kept at body temperature.

It looked like it might be moving a little in there. Pale, sort of jellyfish thing. He asked her if it was true they were alive. She told him it wasn't, exactly, but it was almost, and the rest of it was Bucky balls and subcellular automata. And he wouldn't even know it was there, but no way was she going to put it in in front of him.

She'd gone into the bathroom to do that. When she came back out in that underwear, he got to learn where Milan was. And while it was true he wouldn't have known the thing was there, he did know it was there, but pretty soon he forgot about it, almost.

They chartered a tilt-rotor to Memphis the next morning and got on Air Magellan to LAX. Business-class mostly meant better gizmos in the seatback in front of you, and Rydell's immediate favorite was a telepresence set you could tune to servo-mounted mollies on the outside of the plane. Karen hated to use the little VirtuFax she carried around in her purse, so she'd gotten on to her office in L.A. and had them download her morning's mail into her seatback display. She got down to that fast, talking on the phone, sending faxes, and leaving Rydell to ooh and ah at the views from the mollies.

The seats were bigger than when he used to fly down to Florida to see his father, the food was better, and the drinks were free. Rydell had three or four of those, fell asleep, and didn't wake up until somewhere over Arizona.

The air was funny, at LAX, and the light was different. California was a lot more crowded than he'd expected, and louder. There was a man there from Cops in Trouble, holding up a piece of wrinkled white cardboard that said

2.0

MENDELSON in red marker, only the S was backward. Rydell smiled, introduced himself, and shook hands with him. He seemed to like that; said his name was Sergei. When Karen asked him where the fucking car was, he turned bright red and said it would just take him a minute to get it. Karen said no thanks, they'd walk to the lot with him as soon as their bags turned up, no way was she waiting around in a zoo like this. Sergei nodded. He kept trying to fold up the sign and put it into his jacket pocket, but it was too big. Rydell wondered why she'd suddenly gotten bitchy like that. Tired from the trip, maybe. He winked at Sergei, but that just seemed to make the guy more nervous.

After their bags came, Karen's two black leather ones and the softside blue Samsonite Rydell had bought with his new debit-card, he and Sergei carried them out and across a kind of trafficioop. The air outside was about the same, but hotter. This recording kept saying that the white spaces were for loading and unloading only. There were all kinds of cars jockeying around, babies crying, people leaning on piles of luggage, but Sergei knew where they were going-over to this garage across the way.

Sergei's car was long, black, German, and looked like somebody had just cleaned it all over with warm spit and QTips. When Rydell offered to ride shotgun, Sergei got rattled again and hustled him into the back seat with Karen. Which made her laugh, so Rydell felt better.

As they were pulling out of the garage, Rydell spotted two cops over by these big stainless-steel letters that said METRO. They wore air-conditioned helmets with clear plastic visors. They were poking at an old man with their sticks, though it didn't look like they had them turned on. The old man's jeans were out at the knees and he had big patches of tape on both cheekbones, which



almost always means cancer. He was SO burned, it was hard to tell if he was white or what. A crowd of people was streaming up the stairs behind the old man and the cops, under the METRO sign, and stepping around them.

21

'Welcome to Los Angeles,' she said. 'Be glad you aren't taking the subway.'

They had dinner that night in what Karen said was Hollywood, with Aaron Pursley himself, in a Tex-Mex restaurant on North Flores Street. It was the best Tex-Mex food Rydell had ever had. About a month later, he tried to take Sublett there for his birthday, maybe cheer him up with a down-home meal, but the man out front just wouldn't let them in.

'Full up,' he said.

Rydell could see plenty of empty tables through the window. It was early and there was hardly anybody in there. 'How 'bout those,' Rydell said, pointing at all the empty tables.

'Reserved,' the man said.

Sublett said spicy foods weren't really such a good idea for him anyway.

What he'd come to like best, cruising with Gunhead, was getting back up in the hills and canyons, particularly on a night with a good moon.

Sometimes you saw things up there and couldn't quite be sure you'd seen them or not. One full-moon night Rydell had slung Gunhead around a curve and frozen a naked woman in the headlights, the way a deer'll stop, trembling, on a country road. Just a second she was there, long enough for Rydell to think he'd seen that she either wore silver horns or some kind of hat with an upturned crescent, and that she might've been Japanese, which struck him right then as the weirdest thing about any of it. Then she saw him—he saw her see him—and smiled. Then she was gone.

Sublett had seen her, too, but it only kicked him into some kind of motormouthed ecstasy of religious dread, every horrormovie he'd ever seen tumbling over into Reverend Fallon's rants about witches, devil-worshippers, and the living power of Satan. He'd gone through his week's supply of gum, talking nonstop, until Rydell had finally told him to shut the fuck up.

Because now she was gone, he wanted to think about her. How she'd looked, what she might have been doing there, and how it was she'd vanished. With Sublett sulking in the shotgun seat, Rydell had tried to remember just exactly how it was she'd managed to so perfectly and suddenly not be there. And the funny thing was, he sort of remembered it two ways, which was nothing at all like the way he still didn't really remember shooting Kenneth Turvey, even though he'd heard production assistants and network lawyers go over it so many times he felt like he'd seen it, or at least the Cops in Trouble version (which never aired). One way he remembered it, she'd just sort of gone down the slope beside the road, though whether she was running or floating, he couldn't say. The other way he remembered, she'd jumped—though that was such a poor word for it—up the slope above the other side of the road, somehow clearing all that dust-silvered moonlit vegetation, and just flat-out impossible gone, forty feet if it was five.

And did Japanese women ever have that kind of long curly hair? And hadn't it looked like the shadowed darkness of her bush had been shaved into something like an exclamation point?

He'd wound up buying Sublett four packs of the special gum at an all-night Russian pharmacy on Wilshire, amazed at what the stuff cost him.

He'd seen other things, too, up the canyons, particularly when he'd drawn a shift on deep graveyard. Mostly fires, small ones, where fires couldn't be. And lights in the sky, sometimes, but Sublett was so full of trailer-camp contactee shit that if Rydell saw a light now, driving, he knew better than to mention it.

But sometimes, when he was up there, he'd think about her. He knew he didn't know what she was, and in some funny way he didn't even care if she'd been human or not. But he hadn't ever felt like she was bad, just different.

2.3

So now he just drove, shooting the shit with Sublett, on the night that would turn out to be his very last night on patrol with IntenSecure. No moon, but a rare clear sky with a few stars showing. Five minutes to their first house check, then they'd be swinging back toward Beverly Hills.

They were talking about this chain of Japanese gyms called Body Hammer. Body Hammer didn't offer much in the way of traditional gym culture; in fact they went as far as possible in the opposite direction, catering mostly to kids who liked the idea of being injected with Brazilian fetal tissue and having their skeletons reinforced with what the ads called 'performance materials.'

Sublett said it was the Devil's work.

Rydell said it was a Tokyo franchise operation.

Gunhead said: 'Multiple homicide, hostage-taking in progress, may involve subscriber's minor

children. Benedict Canyon. You have IntenSecure authorization to employ deadly, repeat, deadly force.'

And the dash lit up like an old-time video arcade.

The way it had worked out, Rydell hadn't actually had time to get used to Karen Mendelsohn, business-class seats, or any of that stuff.

Karen lived, umpteen floors up, in Century City II, aka the Blob, which looked sort of like a streamlined, semi-transparent green tit and was the third-tallest structure in the L.A. Basin. When the light was right, you could see almost clear through it, and make out the three giant struts that held it up, each one so big around you could stuff an ordinary skyscraper up it with room to spare. There were elevators up through these tripod-things, and they ran at an angle; Rydell hadn't had time to get used to that either.

The tit had a carefully corroded copper nipple, like one of those Chinese hats, that could've covered a couple of football fields. That was where Karen's apartment was, under there, along with an equally pricey hundred others, a tennis club, bars and restaurants, and a mall you had to pay to join before you could shop there. She was right out on the edge, with big curved windows set into the green wall.

Everything in there was different shades of white, except for her clothes, which were always black, her suitcases, which were black, too, and the big terry robes she liked to wear, which were the color of dry oatmeal.

Karen said it was Aggressive Retro Seventies and she was getting a little tired of it. Rydell saw how she could be, but figured it might not be polite to say so.

The network had gotten him a room in a West Hollywood hotel that looked more like a regular condo-building, but he never did spend much time there. Until the Pooky Bear thing broke in Ohio, he'd mostly been up at Karen's.

The discovery of the first thirty-five Pooky Bear victims pretty much put paid to Rydell's career as a cop in trouble. It hadn't helped that the officers who'd first reached the scene, Sgt. China Valdez and Cpl. Norma Pierce, were easily the two best-looking women on the whole Cincinnati force ('balls-out telegenic,' one of the production assistants had said, though Rydell thought it sounded weird under the circumstances). Then the count began to rise, ultimately going right off any known or established serial-killing scale. Then it was revealed that all the victims were children. Then Sgt. Valdez went post-traumatic in stone bugfuck fashion, walking into a downtown tavern and clipping both kneecaps off a known pedophile- this amazingly repulsive character, nickname of Jellybeans, who had absolutely no connection with the Pooky Bear murders.

Aaron Pursley was already Learning it back to Cincinnati in a plane that had no metal in it whatsoever, Karen had locked the goggles across her eyes and was talking nonstop to at least six people at once, and Rydell was sitting on the edge of her big white bed, starting to get the idea that something had changed.

2.5

When she finally took the goggles off, she just sat there, staring at a white painting on a white wall.

'They got suspects?' Rydell asked.

Karen looked over at him like she'd never seen him before.

'Suspects? They've got confessions already . . .'

It struck Rydell how old she looked right then, and he wondered how old she actually was. She got up and walked out of the room.

She came back five minutes later in a fresh black outfit. 'Pack. I can't have you here now.' Then she was gone, no kiss, no goodbye, and that was that.

He got up, put a television on, and saw the Pooky Bear killers for the first time. All three of them. They looked, he thought, pretty much like everybody else, which is how people who do that kind of shit usually do look on television.

He was sitting there in one of her oatmeal robes when a pair of rentacops let themselves in without knocking. Their uniforms were black and they were wearing the same kind of black high-top SWAT-trainers that Rydell had worn on patrol in Knoxville, the ones with the Kevlar insoles in case somebody snuck up and tried to shoot you in the bottom of the foot.

One of them was eating an apple. The other one had a stun-stick in his hand.

'Hey, pal,' the first one said, around a mouthful of apple, 'we gotta show you out.'

'I had a pair of shoes like that,' Rydell said. 'Made in Portland, Oregon. Two hundred ninety-nine dollars out at Costco.'

The one with the stick grinned. 'You gonna get packing now?'

So Rydell did, picking up anything that wasn't black, white, or oatmeal and tossing it into his blue Samsonite.

The rentacop with the stick watched him, while the other one wandered around, finishing his apple. 'Who you guys with?' Rydell asked. 'IntenSecure,' said the one with the stick. 'Good outfit?' Rydell was zipping up his bag. The man shrugged. 'Outa Singapore,' the other one said, wrapping the core of his apple in a crumpled Kleenex he'd taken from his pants pocket. 'We got all the big buildings, gated communities, like that.' He carefully tucked the apple-core into the breast-pocket of his crisp black uniform shirt, behind the bronze badge. 'You got money for the Metro?' Mr. Stick asked Rydell. 'Sure,' Rydell said, thinking of his debit-card. 'Then you're better off than the majority of assholes we get to escort out of here,' the man said. A day later, the network pulled the plug on his MexAmeriBank card.

Hernandez might be wrong about English SWAT-wagons, Rydell found himself thinking, punching the Hotspur Hussar into six-wheel overdrive and feeling Gunhead suck down on pavement like a twin-engined, three-ton leech. He'd never really stomped on that thing before. Sublett yelped as the crash-harnesses tightened automatically, yanking him up out of his usual slouch. Rydell slung Gunhead up onto a verge covered in dusty ice-plant, doing seventy past a museum-grade Bentley, and on the wrong side at that. Eyeblink of a woman passenger's horrified face, then Sublett must have managed to slap the red plastic plate that activated the strobes and the siren. Straight stretch now. No cars at all. Rydell straddled the centerline and floored it. Sublett was making a weird keening sound that synched eerily with the rising ceramic whine of the twin Kyoceras, and it came to Rydell that the Texan had snapped completely under the pressure of the thing, and was singing in some trailer-camp tongue known only to the benighted followers of the Rev. Fallon.

But, no, when he glanced that way, he saw Suhlctt, lips  
2.7

moving, frantically scanning the client-data as it seethed on the dash-screens, his eyes bugging like the silver contacts might pop right out. But while he read, Rydell saw, he was actually loading his worn-out, secondhand Gbock, his long white fingers moving in the most matter-of-fact way imaginable, as though he were making a sandwich or folding a newspaper.

And that was scary.

'Death Star!' Rydell yelled. It was Sublett's job to keep the bead in his ear at all times, listening for the satellite-relayed, instantly overriding Word of the Real Cops.

Sublett turned, snapping the magazine into his Gbock, his face so pale that it seemed to reflect the colors of the dash-display as readily as did the blank steel rounds of his eyes.

'The help's all dead,' he said, 'an' they got the three kids in the nursery.' He sounded like he was talking about something mildly baffling he was seeing on television, say a badly altered version of some old, favorite film, drastically recast for some obscure ethnic market-niche. 'Say they're gonna kill 'em, Berry.'

'What do the fucking cops say about it?' Rydell shouted, pounding on the padded figure-eight steering wheel in the purest rage of frustration he'd ever felt.

Sublett touched a finger to his right ear. He looked like he was about to scream. 'Down,' he said. Gunhead's right front fender clipped off somebody's circa-1943 fully-galvanized Sears rural-route mailbox, no doubt acquired at great cost on Melrose Avenue.

'They can't be fucking down,' Rydell said, 'they're the police.'

Sublett tugged the bead from his ear and offered it to Rydell. 'Static's all . . .  
Rydell looked down at his dash-display. Gunhead's cursor was a green spear of destiny, whipping along a paler-green canyon road toward a chaste white circle the size of a ~eddingring. In the window immediately to the right, he could read the vital-signs data on the subscriber's three kids. Their pulse rates were up. In the window below, there was a ~idicubousty peaceful-looking infrared frame of the subscriber's front gate. It looked solid. The read-out said it was locked and armed.

Right then, probably, was when he decided just to go for it.

A week or so later, when it had all been sorted out, Hernandez was basically sympathetic about the whole thing. Not happy, mind you, because it had happened over his shift, but he did say he couldn't much blame Rydell under the circumstances.

IntenSecure had brought in a whole planeload of people from the head office in Singapore, Rydell

had heard, to keep it all out of the media and work out some kind of settlement with the subscribers, the Schonbrunns. He had no idea what that settlement might have finally amounted to, but he was just as happy not to know; there was no such program as KentaCops in Trouble, and the Schonbrunns' front gate alone had probably been worth a couple of dozen of his paychecks. IntenSecure could replace that gate, sure, because they'd installed it in the first place. It had been quite a gate, too, some kind of Japanese fiber-reinforced sheeting, thermoset to concrete, and it sure as hell had managed to get most of that Wet Honey Sienna off Gunhead's front end. Then there was the damage to the house itself, mostly to the living-room windows (which he'd driven through) and the furniture (which he'd driven over). But there had to be something for the Schonbrunns on top of that, Hernandez explained. Something for emotional pain, he said, pumping Rydell a cup of old nasty coffee from the big stainless thermos behind his desk. There was a fridge-magnet on the thermos that said I'M NOT OKAY, YOU'RE NOT OKAY-BUT, hEY, THAT'S OKAY.

It was two weeks since the night in question, tell in the  
2.9

morning, and Rydell was wearing a five-day beard, a fine-weave panama Stetson, a pair of baggy, faded orange trunks, a KNOXVILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT t-shirt that was starting to disintegrate at the shoulder-seams, the black SWAT-trainers from his IntenSecure uniform, and an inflated transparent cast on his left arm. 'Emotional pain,' Rydell said. Hernandez, who was very nearly as wide as his desk, passed Rydell the coffee. 'You way lucky, all I can say.'

'I'm out a job, arm in a cast, I'm "way lucky"?''

'Seriously, man,' Hernandez said, 'you coulda killed yourself. LAPD, they coulda greased your ass down dead. Mr. and Mrs. Schonbrunn, they been very nice about this, considering Mrs. Schonbrunn's embarrassment and everything. Your arm got hassled, hey, I'm sorry . . .' Hernandez shrugged, enormously. 'Anyway, you not fired, man. We just can't let you drive now. You want us put you on gated residential, no problem.'

'No thanks.'

'Retail properties? You wanna work evenings, Encino Fashion Mall?'

'No.'

Hernandez narrowed his eyes. 'You seen the pussy over there?'

'Nope.'

Hernandez sighed. 'Man, what happen with all that shit coming down on you in Nashville?'

'Knoxville. Department came down for permanent suspension. Going in without authorization or proper back-up.'

'And that bitch, one's suing your ass?'

'She and her son got caught sticking up a muffler shop in Johnson City, last I heard . . .' Now it was Rydell's turn to shrug, except it made his shoulder hurt.

'See,' Hernandez said, beaming, 'you lucky.'

In the instant of putting Gunhead through the Schonbrunns

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locked-and-armed Benedict Canyon gate, Rydell had experienced a fleeting awareness of something very high, very puree and quite clinically empty; the doing of the thing, the not-thinking; that weird adrenal exultation and the losing of every more troublesome aspect of self.

And that-he later recalled remembering, as he'd fought the wheel, slashing through a Japanese garden, across a patio, and through a membrane of armored glass that gave way like something in a dream-had been a lot like what he'd felt as he'd drawn his gun and pulled the trigger, emptying Kenneth Turvey's brain-pan, and most copiously, across a seemingly infinite expanse of white-primered wallboard that nobody had ever bothered to paint.

Rydell went over to Cedars to see Sublett.

IntenSecure had sprung for a private cubicle, the better to keep Sublett away from any cruising minions of the media. The Texan was sitting up in bed, chewing gum, and watching a little liquid-crystal disk-player propped on his chest.

'Warlords of the 21st Century,' he said, when Rydell edged in, 'James Wainwright, Annie McEnroe, Michael Beck.'

Rydell grinned. 'When'd they make it?'

'1982..' Sublett muted the audio and looked up. 'But I've seen it a couple times already.'

'I been over at the shop seem' Hernandez, man. He says you don't have to worry any about your job.'

Sublett looked at Rydell with his blank silver eyes. 'How 'bout yours, Berry?'

Rydell's arm started to itch, inside the inflated cast. He bent over and fished a plastic drinking-straw from the little white wastebasket beside the bed. He poked the straw down inside the cast and wiggled it around. It helped some. 'I'm history, over there. They won't let me drive anymore.' Sublett was looking at the straw. 'You shouldn't ought to touch used stuff, not in a hospital.'

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'You don't have nothin' contagious, Sublett. You're one of the cleanest motherfuckers ever lived.'

'But what you gonna do, Berry? You gotta make a living, man.'

Rydell dropped the straw back into the basket. 'Well, I don't know. But I know I don't wanna do gated residential and I know I don't wanna do any malls.'

'What about those hackers, Berry? You figure they'll get the ones set us up?'

'Nope. Too many of 'em. Republic of Desire's been around a while. The Feds have a list of maybe three hundred "affiliates," but there's no way to haul 'em all in and figure out who actually did it. Not unless one of 'em rats on somebody, which they do tend to do on a pretty regular basis.'

'But how come they'd want to do that to us anyway?'

'Hell, Sublett, how should I know?'

'Just mean,' Sublett said.

'Well, that, for sure, and Hernandez says the LAPD told him they figured somebody wanted Mrs. Schonbrunn caught more or less with her pants down.' Neither Sublett nor Rydell had actually seen Mrs. Schonbrunn, because she was, as it turned out, in the nursery. Although her kids weren't, having gone up to Washington State with their daddy to fly over the three newest volcanoes. Nothing that Gunhead had logged that night, since leaving the car wash, had been real. Someone had gotten into the Hotspur Hussar's on-board computer and plugged a bunch of intricately crafted and utterly spurious data into the communications bundle, cutting Rydell and Sublett off from IntenSecure and the Death Star (which hadn't, of course, been down). Rydell figured a few of those good ol' Mongol boys over at the car wash might know a little bit about that.

And maybe, in that instant of weird clarity, with Gunhead's crumpled front end still trying to climb the shredded remains

32.

of a pair of big leather sofas, and with the memory of Kenneth Turvey's death finally real before him, Rydell had come to the conclusion that that high crazy thing, that rush of Going For It, was maybe something that wasn't always quite entirely to be trusted.

'But, man,' Sublett had said, as if to himself, 'they gonna kill those little babies.' And, with that, he'd snapped his harness open and was out of there, Glock in hand, before Rydell could do anything at all. Rydell had had him shut the siren and the strobes off a block away, but surely anybody in the house was now aware that IntenSecure had arrived.

'Responding,' Rydell heard himself say, slapping a holstered Glock onto his uniform and grabbing his chunker, which aside from its rate of fire was probably the best thing for a shoot-out in a nursery full of kids. He kicked the door open and jumped out, his trainers going straight through the inch-thick glass top of a coffee-table. (Needed twelve stitches, but it wasn't deep.) He couldn't see Sublett. He stumbled forward, cradling the yellow bulk of the chunker, vaguely aware that there was something wrong with his arm.

'Freeze, cocksucker!' said the biggest voice in the world, 'LAPD! Drop that shit or we blow your ass away!' Rydell found himself the focus of an abrupt and extraordinarily painful radiance, a light so bright that it fell into his uncomprehending eyes like hot metal. 'You hear me, cocksucker?' Wincing, fingers across his eyes, Rydell turned and saw the bulbous armored nacelles of the descending gunship. The downdraft was flattening everything in the Japanese garden that Gunhead hadn't already taken care of.

Rydell dropped the chunker.

'The pistol, too, asshole!'

Rydeji grasped the Glock's handle between thumb and forefinger, It came away, in its plastic holster, with a tiny hut distinct skritch of Velcro, somehow audible through the drumming of the helicopter's combat-muffled engine.

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He dropped the Glock and raised his arms. Or tried to. The left one was broken.

They found Sublett fifteen feet from Gunhead. His face and hands were swelling like bright pink toy balloons and he seemed to be suffocating, Schonbrunn's Bosnian housekeeper having employed a product that contained xylene and chlorinated hydrocarbons to clean some crayon-marks off a bleached-oak end table.

'What the fuck's wrong with him?' asked one of the cops.

'He's got allergies,' Rydell said through gritted teeth; they'd cuffed his hands behind his back and it hurt like hell. 'You gotta get him to Emergency.'

Sublett opened his eyes, or tried to.

'Berry. . .'

Rydell remembered the name of the movie he'd seen on television. 'Miracle Mile,' he said.

Sublett squinted up at him. 'Never seen it,' Sublett said, and fainted.

Mrs. Schonbrunn had been entertaining her Polish landscape gardener that evening. The cops found her in the nursery. Angered beyond speech, she was cinched quite interestingly up in a couple of thousand dollars worth of English latex, North Beach leather, and a pair of vintage Smith & Wesson handcuffs that someone had paid to have lovingly buffed and redone in black chrome-the gardener evidently having headed for the hills when he heard Rydell parking Gunhead in the living room.

3           Not a nice party

Chevette never stole things, or anyway not from other people, and definitely not when she was pulling tags. Except this one bad Monday when she took this total asshole's sunglasses, but that was because she just didn't like him.

How it was, she was standing up there by this ninth-floor window, just looking out at the bridge, past the gray shells of the big stores, when he'd come up behind her. She'd almost managed to make out Skinner's room, there, high up in the old cables, when the tip of a finger found her bare back. Under Skinner's jacket, under her t-shirt, touching her.

She wore that jacket everywhere, like some kind of armor. She knew that nanopore was the only thing to wear, riding this time of year, but she wore Skinner's old horsehide anyway, with her bar-coded Allied badges on the lapels. The little ball-chains on the zippers swinging as she spun to knock that finger aside.

Bloodshot eyes. A face that looked as though it were about to melt. He had a short little greenish cigar in his mouth but it wasn't lit. He took it out, swirled its wet end in a small glass of clear liquor, then took a long suck on it. Grinning at her around it. Like he knew she didn't belong here, not at a party like this and not in any old hut seriously expensive hotel up Over Geary.

But it had been the last tag of the day, a package for a lawyer, with ~Ienderloin's trash-fires burning so close by, and around them, huddled, all those SO terminally luckless, utterly

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and chemically lost. Faces aglow in the fairy illumination of the tiny glass pipes. Eyes canceled in that terrible and fleeting satisfaction. Shivers, that gave her, always.

Locking and arming her bike in the hollow sound of the Morrisey's underground lot, she'd taken a service elevator to the lobby, where the security grunts tried to brace her for the package, but there was no way. She wouldn't deliver to anyone at all except this one very specific Mr. Garreau in 808, as stated right here on the tag. They ran a scanner across the bar-code on her Allied badge, x-rayed the package, put her through a metal-detector, and waved her into an elevator lined with pink mirrors and trimmed in bank-vault bronze.

So up she'd gone, to eight, to a corridor quiet as the floor of some forest in a dream. She found Mr. Garreau there, his shirt-sleeves white and his tie the color of freshly poured lead. He signed the tab without making eye-contact; package in hand, he'd closed the door's three brass digits in her face. She'd checked her hair in the mirror-polished italic zero. Her tail was sticking up okay, in back, but she wasn't sure they'd got the front right. The spikes were still too long. Wispy, sort of. She headed back down the hail, the hardware jingling on Skinner's jacket, her new SWAT-trainers sinking into freshly vacuumed pile the color of rain-wet terracotta.

But when the elevator doors opened, this Japanese girl fell out. Or near enough, Chevette grabbing her beneath both arms and propping her against the edge of the door.

'Where party?'

'What folks gonna ask you,' Chevette said.

'Floor nine! Big party!'

The girl's eyes were all pupil, her bangs glossy as plastic.

So Chevette, with a real glass wine-glass full of real French wine in one hand, and the smallest sandwich she'd ever seen in the other, came to find herself wondering how long she still had before the hotel's computer noticed she hadn't yet left the premises. Not that they were likely to come looking for her

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here, because someone had obviously put down good money to have this kind of party. Some really private kind, because she could see these people in a darkened bathroom, smoking ice through a blown-glass dolphin, its smooth curves illuminated by the fluttering bluish tongue of an industrial-strength lighter.

Not just one room, either, but lots of them, all connected up. And lots of people, too, the men mostly gotten up in those suits with the four-button jackets, stiff shirts with those choker collars, and no tie but a little jeweled stud. The women wore clothes Chevette had only seen in magazines. Rich people, had to be, and foreign, too. Though maybe rich was foreign enough. She'd managed to get the Japanese girl horizontal on a long green couch, where she was snoring now, and safe enough unless somebody sat on her.

Looking around, Chevette had seen that she wasn't the only underdressed local to have somehow scammed entry. The guy in the bathroom working the big yellow Bic, for starters, but he was an extreme case. Then there were a couple of pretty obvious Tenderloin working-girls, too, but maybe that was no more than the accepted amount of local color for whatever this was supposed to be. But then this asshole's right in her face, grinning his mean-ass drunken grin, and she's got her hand on a little folding-knife, something else she's borrowed from Skinner. It has a hole in the blade that you can press the tip of your thumb into and snap it open, one-handed. That blade's under three inches, broad as a soup spoon, wickedly serrated, and ceramic. Skinner says it's a fractal knife, its actual edge more than twice as long as the blade itself.

'You're not enjoying yourself, I think,' he says. European, but she's not sure which flavor. Not French or German. His jacket's leather, too, hut nothing like Skinner's. Some thin-skinned animal whose hide drapes like heavy silk, the color of

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tobacco. She thinks of the smell of the yellow-spined magazines up in Skinner's room, some so old the pictures are only shades of gray, the way the city looks, sometimes, from the bridge.

'Doing fine 'til you showed up,' Chevette says, thinking it's probably time to go, this guy's bad news.

'Tell me,' he says, looking appraisingly at the jacket and the t-shirt and the bike-pants, 'what services you offer.'

'The fuck's that supposed to mean?'

'Clearly,' he says, pointing at the Tenderloin girls across the room, 'you offer something more interesting,' and he rolls his tongue wetly around the word, 'than these two.'

'Fuck that,' Chevette says, 'I'm a messenger.'

And a funny pause crosses his face, like something's gotten past his drunk, nudged him. Then he throws back his head and laughs like it's the biggest joke in the world. She gets a look at a lot of very white, very expensive-looking teeth. Rich people never have any metal in their teeth, Skinner's told her.

'I say something funny?'

The asshole wipes his eyes. 'But we have something in common, you and I. ~.'

'I doubt it.'

'I am a messenger,' he says, though he looks to Chevette like a moderate hill would put him in line for a pig-valve.

'A courier,' he says, like he's reminding himself.

'So proj on,' she says, and steps around him, but just then the lights go out, the music starts, and it's the intro to Chrome Koran's 'She God's Girlfriend.' Chevette, who has kind of a major thing for Chrome Koran, and cranks them on her bike whenever she needs a boost to proj on, just moves with it now, everybody dancing, even the icers from the bathroom.

With the asshole gone, or anyway forgotten she notices how much better these people look dancing. She finds herself opposite this girl in a leather skirt, little black boots with jingling silver spurs. Chevette grins; the girl grins back.

'You're from the city?' the girl asks, as 'She God's Girl-

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friend' el~, and for a second Chevette thinks she's being asked if she's a municipal messenger. The girl-woman-is older than she'd thought; late twenties maybe, but definitely older than Chevette. Good-looking without looking like it came out of a kit; dark eyes, dark hair cut short. 'San Francisco?'

Chevette nods.

The next tune's older than she is; that black guy who turned white, and then his face fell in, she guesses. She looks down for her drink but they all look alike. Her Japanese doll dances past, bangs swinging, no recognition in her eyes as she sees Chevette.

'Cody can usually find all he needs, in San Francisco,' the woman says, a tiredness behind her voice but at the same time you can tell she thinks it's all pretty funny. German, Chevette thinks by her accent.

'Who?'

The woman raises her eyebrows. 'Our host.' But she's still got her wide easy grin.

'Just sort of walked in . . .

'Could I only say the same!' The woman laughs.

'Why?'

'Then I could walk out again.'

'You don't like it?' Up close, she smells expensive. Chevette's suddenly worried about how she must smell herself, after a day on the bike and no shower. But the woman takes her elbow and leads her aside.

'You don't know Cody?'

'No.' Chevette sees the drunk, the asshole, through the doorway into the next room, where the lights are still on. He's looking right at her. 'And I think maybe I should leave now, okay?'

't, \_l ,i . '

ou uon t nave to. Please. I only envy you the option. 'You German?'

'Padanjan'

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Chevette knows that's part of what used to be Italy. The northern part, she thinks. 'Who's this Cody?'

'Cody likes a party. Cody likes this party. This party's been going on for several years now. When it isn't here, it's in London, Prague, Macau ...' A boy is moving through the crowd with a tray of drinks. He doesn't look to Chevette like he works for the hotel. His stiff white shirt's not so stiff anymore; it's open all the way, wrinkled tails hanging loose, and she sees he has one of those things like a little steel barbell through one nipple. His stiff collar's popped off at the front and sticks up behind his neck like a slipped halo. The woman takes a glass of white wine when he offers the tray. Chevette shakes her head. There's a white saucer on the tray, with pills and what look like twists of dancer.

The boy winks at Chevette and moves on.

'You find this strange?' The woman drinks her wine off and tosses the empty glass over her shoulder. Chevette hears it break.

'Huh?'

'Cody's party.'

'Yeah. I guess. I mean, I just walked in...'

'Where do you live?'

'The bridge.' Watching for the reaction.

The grin widens. 'Really? It looks so ... mysterious. I'd like to go there, but there are no tours, and they say it's dangerous...'

'It's not,' Chevette says, then hesitates. 'Just don't dress up so much, right? But it's not dangerous, not even as much as the neighborhood around here.' Thinking of the ones around the trash-fires. 'Just don't go out on Treasure Island. Don't try to go all the way to Oakland. Stay over on the suspension side.'

'You like it, living there?'

'Shit, yes. I wouldn't live anywhere else.'

The woman smiles. 'You're very lucky then, I think.'

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'Well,' Chevette says, feeling clumsy, 'I gotta go.'

'My name is Maria...'

'Chevette,' offering her hand. Almost like her own other name. Chevette-Marie.

They shake.

'Goodbye, Chevette.'

'You have a nice party, okay?'

'This is not a nice party.'

Settling the wide shoulders of Skinner's jacket, Chevette nods to the woman Maria and begins to



work her way through the crowd. Which is tighter now by several degrees, like maybe this Cody's friends are still arriving. More Japanese here now, she notices, all of them serious suits; their wives or secretaries or whatever are all wearing pearls. But evidently this doesn't prevent them getting into the spirit of the thing. It's gotten noisier, too, as people have gotten more whacked. There's that loud constant burr of party-noise you get when the drinks kick in, and now she wants to be out of there all that much faster.

She finds herself stuck near the door to the bathroom where she'd seen the icers, but it's closed now. A bunch of French people are talking French and laughing and waving their hands around, but Chevette can hear somebody vomiting in there. 'Coming through,' she says to a man with a bowtie and a gray crewcut, and just pushes past him, spilling part of his drink. He says something after her in French.

She feels really claustro now, like she does up in offices sometimes when a receptionist makes her wait to pick something up, and she sees the office people walking back and forth, and wonders whether it all means anything or if they're just walking back and forth. Or maybe the wine's gotten to her, a little, because drinking isn't something she does much, and now she doesn't like the taste of it in the back of her throat.

And suddenly there's her drunk, her Euro with his unlit

4'

cigar, sweaty brow too close to the dull-eyed, vaguely worried face of one of the Tenderloin girls. He's got her backed into a corner. And everyone's jammed so tight, this close to the door and the corridor and freedom, that Chevette finds herself pressed up against his back for a second, not that that interrupts whatever infinitely dreary shit he's laying down for the girl, no, though he does jam his elbow, hard, back into Chevette's ribs to get himself more space. And Chevette, glancing down, sees something sticking out of a pocket in the tobacco-colored leather.

Then it's in her hand, down the front of her bike-pants, she's out the door, and the asshole hasn't even noticed.

In the sudden quiet of the corridor, party sounds receding as she heads for the elevator, she wants to run. She wants to laugh, too, but now she's starting to feel scared.

Walk.

Past the party's build-up of trays, dirty glasses, plates.

Remembering the security grunts in the lobby.

The thing stuck down her pants.

Down a corridor that opens off this one, she sees the doors of a service elevator spread wide now and welcoming. A Central Asian kid with a paint-splattered steel cart stacked up with flat rectangles that are television screens. He gives her a careful look as she edges in beside him. His face is all cheekbones, bright hooded eyes, his hair shaved up high in one of those near-vertical dos all these guys favor. He has a security badge clipped to the front of his clean gray workshirt and a VirtuFax slung around his neck on a red nylon cord.

'Basement,' Chevette says.

His fax buzzes. He raises it, pushes the button, peers into the eyepiece. The thing in her bike-pants starts to feel huge. Then he drops the fax back to his chest, blinks at her, and pushes a button marked B-6. The doors rumble shut and Chevette closes her eyes.

She leans hack against the big quilted pads hung on the

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walls and wishes she were up in Skinner's room, listening to the cables creak. The floor there's a layer of two-by-fours laid on edge; the very top of the hump of the cable, riding its steel saddle, sticks up through the middle, and Skinner says there are 17,464 strands of wire in that cable. Each one is about as thick as a pencil. You can press your ear against it and hear the whole bridge sing, when the wind's just right.

The elevator stops at four for no reason at all. Nobody there when the door opens. Chevette wants to press B-6 again but she makes herself wait for the kid with the fax to do it. He does.

And B-6 is not the garage she so thoroughly wants now, but this maze of hundred-year-old concrete tunnels, floored in cracked asphalt tile, with big old pipes slung in iron brackets along the ceiling. She slips out while he's fiddling with one of the wheels on his cart.

A century's-worth of padlocked walk-in freezers, fifty vacuum cleaners charging themselves at a row of numbered stations, rolls of broadloom stacked like logs. More people in work clothes, some in kitchen whites, but she's trying for tag-pulling attitude and looks, she hopes, like she's making a delivery.

She finds a narrow stairway and climbs. The air is hot and dead. Motion-sensors click the lights for her at the start of each flight. She feels the whole weight of this old building pressing down

on her.

But her bike is there, on B-i, behind a column of nicked concrete.

'Back off,' it says when she's five feet away. Not loud, like a car, but it sounds like it means it.

Under its coat of spray-on imitation rust and an artful bandaging of silver duct-tape, the geometry of the paper-cored, carbonwrapped frame makes Chevette's thighs tremble. She slips her left hand through the recognition-loop behind the seat. There's a little double zik as the particle-brakes let go, then she's up and Of1 it.

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It's never felt better, as she pumps up the oil-stained ramp and out of there.

4 Career opportunities

Rydell's roommate, Kevin Tarkovsky, wore a bone through his nose and worked in a wind-surfing boutique called Just Blow Me.

Monday morning, when Rydell told him he'd quit his job with IntenSecure, Kevin offered to try to find him something in sales, in the beach-culture line.

'You got an okay build, basically,' Kevin said, looking at Rydell's bare chest and shoulders.

Rydell was still wearing the orange trunks he'd worn when he'd gone to see Hernandez. He'd borrowed them from Kevin. He'd just taken his cast off, deflating it and crumpling it into the five-gallon plastic paint bucket that served as a wastebasket. The bucket had a big self-adhesive daisy on the side. 'You could work out a little more regularly. Arid maybe get some tats. Tribal black-work.'

'Kevin, I don't know how to surf, wind-surf, anything. Hardly been in the ocean in my life. Couple of times down Tampa Bay.' It was about ten in the morning. Kevin had the day off work.

'Sales is about providing an experience, Berry. The customer needs information, you provide it. But you give 'em an experience, too,' Kevin tapped his two-inch spindle of smooth white beef-bone by way of illustration. 'Then you sell them a new outfit.'

'But I don't have a tan.'

Kevin was the a)proxlmate color and sheen of a pair of

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mid-brown Cole-Haan loafers that Rydell's aunt had given him for his fifteenth birthday. This had nothing to do with either genetics or exposure to unfiltered sunlight, but was the result of regular injections and a complicated regimen of pills and lotions.

'Well,' Kevin admitted, 'you would need a tan.'

Rydell knew that Kevin didn't wind-surf, and never had, but that he did bring home disks from the shop and play them on a goggle-set, going over the various moves involved, and Rydell had no doubt that Kevin could provide every bit of information a prospective buyer might desire. And that all-important experience; with his cordovan tan, gym-tuned physique, and that bone through his nose, he got a lot of attention. Mainly from women, though it didn't actually seem to do that much for him.

What Kevin sold, primarily, was clothing. Expensive kind that supposedly kept the UV and the pollutants in the water off you. He had two whole cartons full of the stuff, stacked in their room's one closet. Rydell, who currently didn't have much in the way of a wardrobe, was welcome to paw through there and borrow whatever took his fancy. Which wasn't a lot, as it turned out, because wind-surfing gear tended to be Day-Gb, black nanopore, or mirrorflex. A few of the jazzier items had UV-sensitive JUST BLOW ME logos that appeared on days when the ozone was in particularly shabby shape, as Rydell had discovered the last time he'd gone to the farmers market.

He and Kevin were sharing one of two bedrooms in a sixties house in Mar Vista, which meant Sea View but there wasn't any. Someone had rigged up a couple of sheets of drywall down the middle of the room. On Rydell's side, the drywall was covered with those same big self-adhesive daisies and a collection of souvenir bumper-stickers from places like Magic Mountain, Nissan County, I)isneyland, and Skywalker Park. l'here were two other people sharing the house, three if

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you counted the Chinese girl out in the garage (but she had her own bathroom in there).

Rydell had bought a futon with most of his first month's pay from IntenSecure. He'd bought it at this stall in the market; they were cheaper there, and the stall was called Futon Mouth, which Rydell thought was pretty funny. The Futon Mouth girl had explained how you could slip the Metro guy on the platform a twenty, then he'd let you get on the train with the rolled-up futon, which came in a big green plastic sack that reminded Rydebl of a bodybag.

Lately, waiting to take the cast off, he'd spent a lot of time on that futon, staring up at those bumper-stickers. He wondered if whoever had put them there had actually bothered to go to all those places. Hernandez had once offered him work at Nissan County. IntenSecure had the rentacop

franchise there. His parents had honeymooned at Disneyland. Skywalker Park was up in San Francisco; it had been called Golden Gate, before, and he remembered a couple of fairly low-key riots on television when they'd privatized it.

'You on line to any of the job-search nets, Berry?'

Rydell shook his head.

'This one's on me,' Kevin said, passing Rydell the helmet. It wasn't anything like Karen's slick little goggles; just a white plastic rig like kids used for games. 'Put it on. I'll dial for you.'

'Well,' Rydell said, 'this is nice, Kevin, but you don't have to go to all this trouble.'

Kevin touched the bone in his nose. 'Well, there's the rent.'

There was that. Rydelb put the helmet on.

'Now,' Sonya said, just as perky as could be, 'we're showing that you did graduate from this post-secondary training program-'

'Academy,' Rydelb corrected. 'Police.'

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'Yes, Berry, but we're showing that you were then employed for a total of eighteen days, before being placed on suspension.' Sonya looked like a cartoon of a pretty girl. No pores. No texture anywhere. Her teeth were very white and looked like a single unit, something that could be snapped out intact for closer inspection. But not for cleaning, because there was no need; cartoons didn't eat. She had wonderful tits, though; she had the tits Rydell would have drawn for her if he'd been a talented cartoonist.

'Well,' Rydell said, thinking of Turvey, 'I got into some trouble after they assigned me to Patrol.'

Sonya nodded brightly. 'I see, Berry.' Rydell wondered what she did see. Or what the expert system that used her as a hand-puppet could see. Or how it saw. What did someone like Rydell look like to an employment agency's computer system? Not like much, he decided.

'Then you moved to Los Angeles, Berry, and we show ten weeks of employment with the IntenSecure Corporation's residential armed-response branch. Driver with experience of weapons.'

Rydell thought of the rocket-pods slung under the LAPD chopper. Probably they'd had one of those CHAIN guns in there, too. 'Yep,' he agreed.

'And you've resigned your position with IntenSecure.'

'Guess so.'

Sonya beamed at Rydell as though he'd just admitted, shyly, to a congressional appointment or a post-doctoral degree. 'Well, Berry,' she said, 'let me put my thinking cap on for just a second!' She winked, then closed her big cartoon eyes.

Jesus, Rydelb thought. He tried to glance sideways, but Kevin's helmet didn't have any peripherals, so there was nothing there. Just Sonya, the empty rectangle of her desk, sketchy details suggesting an office, and the employment agency's logo behind her on the wall. The logo made her look

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bike the anchorwoman on a channel that only reported very good news.

Sonya opened her eyes. Her smile became incandescent. 'You're from the South,' she said.

'Uh-huh.'

'Plantations, Berry. Magnolias. Tradition. But a certain darkness as well. A Gothic quality. Faulkner.'

Fawk-? 'Huh?'

'Nightmare Folk Art, Berry. Ventura Boulevard, Sherman Oaks.'

Kevin watched as Rydell removed the helmet and wrote an address and telephone number on the back of last week's People. The magazine belonged to Monica, the Chinese girl in the garage; she always got hers printed out so there was never any mention of scandal or disaster, but with a triple helping of celebrity romance, particularly anything to do with the British royal family.

'Something for you, Berry?' Kevin looked hopeful.

'Maybe,' Rydell said. 'This place in Sherman Oaks. I'll call 'em up, check it out.'

Kevin fiddled with his nose-bone. 'I can give you a lift,' he said.

There was a big painting of the Rapture in the window of Nightmare Folk Art. Rydell knew paintings like that from the sides of Christian vans parked beside shopping centers. Lots of bloody car-wrecks and disasters, with all the Saved souls flying up to meet Jesus, whose eyes were a little too bright for comfort. This one was a lot more detailed than the ones he remembered. Each one of those Saved souls had its own individual face, like it actually represented somebody, and a few of them reminded him of famous people. But it still looked like it had been painted by either a

fifteen-year-old or an old lady.

Kevin had let him off at the corner of Sepulveda and he'd

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walked back two blocks, looking for the place, past a crew in wide-brim hardhats who were pouring the foundations for a palm tree. Rydell wondered if Ventura had had real ones before the virus; the replacements were so popular now, people wanted them put in everywhere.

Ventura was one of those Los Angeles streets that just went on forever. He knew he must've driven Gunhead past Nightmare Folk Art more times than he could count, but these streets looked completely different when you walked them. For one thing, you were pretty much alone; for another, you could see how cracked and dusty a lot of the buildings were. Empty spaces behind dirty glass, with a yellowing pile of junk-mail on the floor inside and maybe a puddle of what couldn't be rainwater, so you sort of wondered what it was. You'd pass a couple of those, then a place selling sunglasses for six times the rent Rydell paid for his half of the room in Mar Vista. The sunglasses place would have some kind of rentacop inside, to buzz you in.

Nightmare Folk Art was like that, sandwiched between a dead hair-extension franchise and some kind of failing real estate place that sold insurance on the side. NIGHTMARE FOLK ART-SOUTHERN GOTHIC, the letters hand-painted all lumpy and hairy, like mosquito legs in a cartoon, white on black. But with a couple of expensive cars parked out front: a silver-gray Range Rover, looking like Gunhead dressed up for the prom, and one of those little antique Porsche two-seaters that always looked to Rydell like the wind-up key had fallen off. He gave the Porsche a wide berth; cars like that tended to have hypersensitive anti-theft systems, not to mention hyper-aggressive.

There was a rentacop looking at him through the armored glass of the door; not IntenSecure, but some off brand. Rydell had borrowed a pair of pressed chinos from Kevin. They were a little tight in the waist, hut they beat hell out of the orange trunks. He had on a black IntenSecure uniform-shirt with the

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patches ripped off, his Stetson, and his SWAT shoes. He wasn't sure black really made it with khaki. He pushed the button. The rentacop buzzed him in.

'Got an appointment with Justine Cooper,' he said, taking his sunglasses off.

'With a client,' the rentacop said. He looked about thirty, and like he should've been out on a farm in Kansas or somewhere. Rydell looked over and saw a skinny woman with black hair. She was talking to a fat man who had no hair at all. Trying to sell him something, it looked like.

'I'll wait,' Rydell said.

The farmer didn't answer. State law said he couldn't have a gun, just the industrial-strength stunner he wore in a beat-up plastic holster, but he probably did anyway. One of those little Russian hold-outs that chambered some godawful overheated caliber originally intended for killing the engine blocks of tanks. The Russians, never too safety-minded, had the market in Saturday-night specials.

Rydell looked around. That ol' Rapture was big at Nightmare Folk Art, he decided. Those kind of Christians, his father had always maintained, were just pathetic. There the Millennium had up, come, and gone, no Rapture to speak of, and here they were, still beating that same drum. Sublett and his folks down in their trailer-camp in Texas, watching old movies for Reverend Fallon-at least that had some kind of spin on it.

He tried to sneak a look, see what the lady was trying to sell to the fat man, but she caught his eye and that wasn't good. So he worked his way deeper into the shop, pretending to check out the merchandise. There was a whole section of these nasty-looking spidery wreath-things, behind glass in faded gilt frames. The wreaths looked to Rydell like they were made of frizzy old hair. There were tiny little baby coffins, all corroded, and one of them had been planted with ivy. There were coffee tables made out of what Rydell supposed were

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tombstones, old ones, the lettering worn down so faint you couldn't read it. He paused beside a bedstead welded together from a bunch of those pickaninny jockey-boys it had been against the law to have on your lawn in Knoxville. The jockey-boys had all been freshly-painted with big, red-lipped, watermelon-eating grins. The bed was spread with a hand-stitched quilt patterned like a Confederate flag. When he looked for a price tag, all he found was a yellow SOLD sticker.

'Mr. Rydell? May I call you Berry?' Justine Cooper's jaw was so narrow that it looked like she wouldn't have room for the ordinary complement of teeth in there. Her hair was cut short, a polished brown helmet. She wore a couple of dark, flowing things that Rydell supposed were meant to conceal the fact that she was built more or less like a stick-insect. She didn't sound like she was from anywhere south of anywhere, much, and there was a visible tension strung through her, like wires.

Rydell saw the fat man walk out, pausing on the sidewalk to deactivate the Range Rover's defenses. 'Sure.'

'You're from Knoxville?' He noticed she was breathing deliberately, like she was trying not to hyperventilate.

'That's right.'

'You don't have much of an accent.'

'Well, I wish everybody felt that way.' He smiled, but she didn't smile back.

'Is your family from Knoxville, Mr. Rydell?'

Shit, he thought, go ahead, call me Berry. 'My father was, I guess. My mother's people are from up around Bristol, mostly.'

Justine (Cooper's dark eyes, not showing much white, were looking right at him, but they didn't seem to be registering anything. He guessed she was somewhere in her forties.

'IVIIs. Cooper?'

She gave a violent start, as though he'd goosed her.

'Ms. Cooper, what are those wreath-sort-of-things in those old frames there?' Pointing at them.

'Memorial wreaths. Southwestern Virginia, late nineteenth, early twentieth century.'

Good, Rydell thought, get her talking about the stock. He walked over to the framed wreaths for a closer look. 'Looks like hair,' he said.

'It is,' she said. 'What else would it be?'

'Human hair?'

'Of course.'

'You mean like dead people's hair?' He saw now the minute braiding, the hair twisted up into tiny flowerlike knots. It was lusterless and no particular color.

'Mr. Rydell, I'm afraid that I may have wasted your time.' She moved tentatively in his direction.

'When I spoke with you on the phone, I was under the impression that you might be, well, much more of the South...'

'How do you mean, Ms. Cooper?'

'What we offer people here is a certain vision, Mr. Rydell. A certain darkness as well. A Gothic quality.'

Damn. That talking head in the agency display had been playing this shit back word for word.

'I don't suppose you've read Faulkner?' She raised one hand to brush at something invisible, something hanging in front of her face.

There it was again. 'Nope.'

'No, I didn't think so. I'm hoping to find someone who can help to convey that very darkness, Mr. Rydell. The mind of the South. A fever dream of sensuality.'

Rydell blinked.

'But you don't convey that to me. I'm sorry.' It looked like the invisible cobweb had come back.

Rydell looked at the rentacop, but he didn't seem to be listening to any of this. Hell, he seemed to be asleep.

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'Lady,' Rydell said carefully, 'I think you're crazier than a sack full of assholes.'

Her eyebrows shot up. 'There,' she said.

'There what?'

'Color, Mr. Rydell. Fire. The brooding verbal polychromes of an almost unthinkably advanced decay.'

Rydell had to think about that. He found himself looking at the jockey-boy bed. 'Don't you ever get any black people in here, complaining about stuff like this?'

'On the contrary,' she said, a new edge in her tone, 'we do quite a good business with the more affluent residents of South Central. They, at least, have a sense of irony. I suppose they have to.'

Now he'd have to walk to whatever the nearest station was, take the subway home, and tell Kevin Tarkovsky he hadn't been Southern enough.

The rentacop was letting him out.

'Where exactly you from, Ms. Cooper?' he asked her.

'New Hampshire,' she said.

He was on the sidewalk, the door closing behind him.

'Fucking Yankees,' he said to the Porsche roadster. It was what his father would have said, but he had a hard time now connecting it to anything.

One of those big articulated German cargo-rigs went by, the kind that burned canola oil. Rydell hated those things. The exhaust smelled like fried chicken.

The courier's dreams are made of hot metal, shadows that scream and run, mountains the color of

concrete. They are burying the orphans on a hillside. Plastic coffins, pale blue. Clouds in the sky. The priest's tall hat. They do not see the first shell coming in from the concrete mountains. It punches a hole in everything: the hillside, the sky, a blue coffin, the woman's face. A sound too vast to be any sound at all, but through it, somehow, they hear, arriving only now, the distant festive pop-popping of the mortars, tidy little clouds of smoke rising on the gray mountainside.

He comes upright, alone in the wide bed, trying to scream, and the words are in a language he no longer allows himself to speak.

His head throbs. He drinks flat water from the stainless carafe on the nightstand. The room sways, blurs, comes back into focus. He forces himself from the bed, pads naked to the tall, old-fashioned windows. Fumbles the heavy drapes aside. San Francisco. Dawn like tarnished silver. It is Tuesday. Not Mexico.

In the white bathroom, wincing in the sudden light, scrubbing cold water into his numb face. The dream recedes, but leaves a residue. He shivers, cold tile unpleasant beneath his bare feet. The whores at the party. ~I-his Harwood. I)ecadent. The courier disapproves of decadence. His work brings him into contact with real wealth, genuine power. He meets

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5 Hay problemas

people of substance. Harwood is wealth without substance. He puts out the bathroom light and gingerly returns to his bed, favoring the ache in his head.

With the striped duvet drawn up to his chin, he begins to sort through the previous evening. There are gaps. Overindulgence. He disapproves of overindulgence. Harwood's party. The voice on the phone, instructing him to attend. He'd already had several drinks. He sees a young girl's face. Anger, contempt. Her short dark hair twisted up in spikes.

His eyes feel as if they are too large for their sockets. When he rubs them, bright sick flashes of light surround him. The cold weight of the water moves in his stomach.

He remembers sitting at the broad mahogany desk, drinking. Before the call, before the party. He remembers the two cases open, in front of him, identical. He keeps her in one. The other is for that with which he has been entrusted. Expensive, but then he has no doubt that the information it contains is very valuable. He folds the thing's graphite earpieces and snaps the case shut. Then he touches the case that holds all her mystery, the white house on the hillside, the release she offers. He puts the cases in the pockets of his jacket- But now he tenses, beneath the duvet, his stomach twisted

with a surge of anxiety.

He wore the jacket to that party, much of which he cannot remember.

Ignoring the pounding of his head, he claws his way out of the bed and finds the jacket crumpled on the floor beside a chair.

His heart is pounding.

Here. That which he must deliver. Zipped into the inner pocket. But the outer pockets are empty. She is gone. lie roots through his other clothing. On his hands and knees, a pulsing agony behind his eyes, he peers under the chair. Gone.

But she, at least, can be replaced, he reminds himself, still on his knees, the jacket in his hands. He will find a dealer in that sort of software. Recently, he now admits, he had started to suspect that she was losing resolution.

Thinking this, he is watching his hands unzip the inner pocket, drawing out the case that contains his charge, their property, that which must be delivered. He opens it.

The scuffed black plastic frames, the label on the cassette worn and unreadable, the yellowed translucence of the audio-beads.

He hears a thin high sound emerge from the back of his throat. Very much as he must have done, years ago, when the first shell arrived.

Careful to correctly calculate the thirty-percent tip, Yamazaki paid the fare and struggled out of the cab's spavined rear seat. The driver, who knew that all Japanese were wealthy, sullenly counted the torn, filthy bills, then tossed the three five-dollar coins into a cracked Nissan County thermos-mug taped to the faded dashboard. Yamazaki, who was not wealthy, shouldered his bag, turned, and walked toward the bridge. As ever, it stirred his heart to see it there, morning light aslant through all the intricacy of its secondary construction.

The integrity of its span was rigorous as the modern program itself, yet around this had grown another reality, intent upon its own agenda. This had occurred piecemeal, to no set plan, employing every imaginable technique and material. The result was something amorphous, startlingly organic. At night, illuminated by Christmas bulbs, by recycled neon, by torchlight, it possessed a

queer medieval energy. By day, seen from a distance, it reminded him of the ruin of England's Brighton Pier, as though viewed through some cracked kaleidoscope of vernacular style. Its steel bones, its stranded tendons, were lost within an accretion of dreams: tattoo parlors, gaming arcades, dimly lit stalls stacked with decaying magazines, sellers of fireworks, of cut bait, betting shops, sushi bars, unlicensed pawnbrokers, herbalists, barbers, bars. Dreams of commerce, their locations generally corresponding with the decks that had once carried vehicular traffic; while above them, rising to the very peaks of

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6 The bridge

the cable towers, lifted the intricately suspended barrio, with its unnumbered population and its zones of more private fantasy. He'd first seen it by night, three weeks before. He'd stood in fog, amid sellers of fruit and vegetables, their goods spread out on blankets. He'd stared back into the cavern-mouth, heart pounding. Steam was rising from the pots of soup-vendors, beneath a jagged arc of scavenged neon. Everything ran together, blurring, melting in the fog. Telepresence had only hinted at the magic and singularity of the thing, and he'd walked slowly forward, into the neon maw and all that patchwork carnival of scavenged surfaces, in perfect awe. Fairyland. Rain-silvered plywood, broken marble from the walls of forgotten banks, corrugated plastic, polished brass, sequins, painted canvas, mirrors, chrome gone dull and peeling in the salt air. So many things, too much for his reeling eye, and he'd known that his journey had not been in vain. In all the world, surely, there was no more magnificent a Thomasson.

He entered it now, Tuesday morning, amid a now-familiar stir—the carts of ice and fish, the clatter of a machine that made tortillas—and found his way to a coffee shop whose interior had the texture of an ancient ferry, dark dented varnish over plain heavy wood, as if someone had sawn it, entire, from some tired public vessel. Which was entirely possible, he thought, seating himself at the long counter; toward Oakland, past the haunted island, the wingless carcass of a 747 housed the kitchens of nine Thai restaurants.

The young woman behind the counter wore tattooed bracelets in the form of stylized indigo lizards. He asked for coffee. It arrived in thick heavy porcelain. No two cups here were alike. He took his notebook from his bag, flicked it on, and jotted down a brief description of the cup, of the minute pattern of cracks in its glazed surface, like a white tile mosaic in miniature. Sipping his coffee, he scrolled back to the

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previous day's notes. The man Skinner's mind was remarkably like the bridge. Things had accumulated there, around some armature of original purpose, until a point of crisis had been attained and a new program had emerged. But what was that program?

He had asked Skinner to explain the mode of accretion resulting in the current state of the secondary structure. What were the motivations of a given builder, an individual builder? His notebook had recorded the man's rambling, oblique response, transcribing and translating it.

There was this man, fishing. Snagged his tackle. Hauled up a bicycle. All covered in barnacles. Everybody laughed. Took that bike and he built a place to eat. Clam broth, cold cooked mussels, Mexican beer. Hung that bike over the counter. Just three stools in there and he slung his box out about eight feet, used Super Glue and shackles. Covered the walls inside with postcards. Like shingles. Nights, he'd curl up behind the counter. Just gone, one morning. Broken shackle, some splinters still stuck to the wall of a barber shop. You could look down, see the water between your toes. See, he slung it out too far.

Yamazaki watched steam rise from his coffee, imagining a bicycle covered in barnacles, itself a Thomasson of considerable potency. Skinner had seemed curious about the term, and the notebook had recorded Yamazaki's attempt to explain its origin and the meaning of its current usage.

Thomasson was an American baseball player, very handsome, very powerful. He went to the Yomiuri Giants in 1981, for a large sum of money. Then it was discovered that he could not hit the ball. The writer and artisan Gempei Akasegawa appropriated his name to describe certain useless and inexplicable monuments, pointless yet

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curiously art-like features of the urban landscape. But the term has subsequently taken on other shades of meaning. If you wish, I can access and translate today's definitions in our Gendai Yogo Kisochishiki, that is, The Basic Knowledge of Modern Terms.

But Skinner-gray, unshaven, the whites of his blue eyes yellowed, blotched with broken veins, had merely shrugged. Three of the residents who had previously agreed to be interviewed had cited Skinner as an original, one of the first on the bridge. The location of his room indicated a certain status as well, though Yamazaki wondered how many would have welcomed a chance to build atop one of the cable towers. Before the electric lift had been installed, the climb would have been daunting for anyone. Today, with his bad hip, the old man was in effect an invalid, relying on his neighbors and the girl. They brought him food, water, kept his chemical toilet in operation. The girl, Yamazaki assumed, received shelter in return, though the relationship struck him as deeper somehow, more complex.

But if Skinner was difficult to read because of age, personality, or both, the girl who shared his room was opaque in that ordinary, sullen way Yamazaki associated with young Americans. Though perhaps that was only because he, Yamazaki, was a stranger, Japanese, and one who asked too many questions.

He looked down the counter, taking in the early-morning profiles of the other customers. Americans. The fact that he was actually here, drinking coffee beside these people, still struck a chord of wonder. How extraordinary. He wrote in his notebook, the pen ticking against the screen.

The apartment is in a tall Victorian house, built of wood and very elaborately painted, in a district where the names of streets honor nineteenth-century American

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politicians: Clay, Scott, Pierce, Jackson. This morning, Tuesday, leaving the apartment, I noticed, on the side of the topmost newel, indications of a vanished hinge. I suspect that this must once have supported an infant-gate. Going along Scott in search of a cab, I came upon a sodden postcard, face up on the sidewalk. The narrow features of the martyr Shapely, the AIDS saint, blistered with rain. Very melancholy.

'They shouldn't oughta said that. About Godzilla, I mean.'

Yamazaki found himself blinking up at the earnest face of the girl behind the counter.

'I'm sorry?'

'They shouldn't oughta said that. About Godzilla. They shouldn't oughta laughed. We had our earthquakes here, you didn't laugh at us.'

7 See you do okay

Hernandez followed Rydell into the kitchen of the house in Mar Vista. He wore a sleeveless powder-blue jumpsuit and a pair of those creepy German shower-sandals, the kind with about a thousand little nubs to massage the soles of your feet. Rydell had never seen him out of uniform before and it was kind of a shock. He had these big old tattoos on his upper arms; roman numerals; gang stuff. His feet were brown and compact and sort of bearlike.

It was Tuesday morning. There was nobody else in the house. Kevin was at Just Blow Me, and the others were out doing whatever it was they did. Monica might've been in her place in the garage, but you never saw too much of her anyway.

Rydell got his bag of cornflakes out of the cupboard and carefully unrolled it. About enough for a bowl. He opened the fridge and took out a plastic, snap-top, liter container with a strip of masking-tape across the side. He'd written MILK EXPERIMENT on the masking-tape with a heavy marker.

'What's that?' Hernandez asked.

'Milk.'

'Why's it say "experiment"?''

'So nobody'll drink it. I figured it out in the dorm at the Academy.' He dumped the cornflakes in a bowl, covered them with milk, found a spoon, and carried his breakfast to the kitchen table. The table had a trick leg, so you had to eat without putting your elbows down.

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'How's the arm?'

'Fine.' Rydell forgot about not putting his elbow down. Milk and cornflakes slopped across the scarred white plastic of the tabletop.

'Here.' Hernandez went to the counter and tore off a fat wad of beige paper towels.

'Those are whatsisname's,' Rydell said, 'and he seriously doesn't like us to use them.'

'Towel experiment,' Hernandez said, tossing Rydell the wad.

Rydell blotted up the milk and most of the flakes. He couldn't imagine what Hernandez was doing here, but then he'd never have imagined that Hernandez drove a white Daihatsu Sneaker with an animated hologram of a waterfall on the hood.



'That's a nice car out there,' Rydell said, nodding in the direction of the carport and spooning cornflakes into his mouth.

'My daughter. Rosa's car. Been in the shop, man.'

Rydell chewed, swallowed. 'Brakes or something?'

'The fucking waterfall. Supposed to be these little animals, they come out of the bushes and sort of look at it, the waterfall, you know?' Hernandez leaned back against the counter, flexing his toes into the nubby sandals. 'Some kind of, like, Costa Rican animals, you know? Ecology theme. She's real green. Made us take out what was left of the lawn, put in all these ground-cover things look like gray spiders. But the shop can't get those fucking animals to show, man. We got a warranty and everything, but it's, you know, been a pain in the ass.' He shook his head.

Rydell finished his cornflakes.

'You ever been to Costa Rica, Rydell?'

'No.'

'It's fucking beautiful, mali. Like Switzerland.'

'Never been there.'

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'No, I mean wh2t they do with data. Like the Swiss, what they did with money.'

'You mean the kvens?'

'You got it. Tho~e people smart. No army, navy, air force, just neutral. And they take care of everybody's data.'

'Regardless whatit is.'

'Hey, fucking "A" Smart people. And spend that money on ecology, man.'

Rydell carried the bowl, the spoon, the damp wad of towels, to the sini. He rinsed the bowl and spoon, wiped them with the towels, then stuck the towels as far down as possible behind th rest of the garbage in the bag under the sink. Straightening up, he looked at Hernandez. 'Something I can do for you, sup~r?'

'Other way arou~d.' Hernandez smiled. Somehow it wasn't reassuring. 'I been thinking about you. Your situation. Not good. Not good, nan. You never get to be a cop now. Now you resign, I can't even hire you back on IntenSecure to work gated residential. l4aybe you get on with a regular square-badge outfit, sit it that little pillbox in a liquor store. You wanna do that?'

'No.'

'That's good, 'cause you get your ass killed, doing that. Somebody come inthere, take your little pilibox out, man.'

'Right now I'm l)oking at something in retail sales.'

'No shit? Sales? 'What you sell?'

'Bedsteads made out of cast-iron jockey-boys. These pictures made out of hundred-year-old human hair.'

Hernandez narrwed his eyes and shoved off the counter, headed for the hung room. Rydell thought he might be leaving, hut he wa~ only starting to pace. Rydell had seen him do this a couple ol times in his office at IntenSecure. Now he turned, just as he was about to enter the living room, and paced hack to Rydill.

'You got this had-assed attitude sometimes, man, I dunno.'

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You oughta stop and think maybe I'm trying to help you a little, right?' Back toward the living room again.

'Just tell me what you want, okay?'

Hernandez stopped, turned, sighed. 'Never been up to NoCal, right? San Francisco? Anybody know you up there?'

'No.'

'IntenSecure's licensed in NoCal, too, right? Different state, different laws, whole different attitude, they might as well be a different fucking country, but we've got our shit up there. More office buildings, lot of hotels. Gated residential's not so big up there, not 'til you get out to the edge-cities. Concord, Hacienda Business Center, like that. We got a good piece of that, too.'

'But it's the same company. They won't hire me here, they won't hire me there.'

'Fucking "A." Nobody talking about hiring you. What this is, there's maybe something there for you with a guy. Works freelance. Company has certain kinds of problems, sometime they bring in somebody. But the guy, he's not IntenSecure. Freelance. Office up there, they got that kind of situation now.'

'Wait a second. What are we talking about here? We're talking about freelance armed-response?'

'Guy's a skip-tracer. You know what that is?'

'Finds people when they try to get out from under debt, blow off the rent, like that?'

'Or take off with your kid in a custody case, whatever. But, you know, those kinds of skips, they can mostly be handled through the net, these days. Just keep plugging their stats into DatAmerica, eventually you gonna find 'em. Or even,' he shrugged, 'you can go to the cops.'

'So what a skip-tracer mostly does-' Rydell suggested, remembering one particular episode of Cops in Trouble he'd seen with his father.

'Is keep you from having to go to the cops.'

'Or to a licensed private detective agency.'

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'You got it.' Hernandez was watching him.

Rydell walked past him, into the living room, hearing the German shower-sandals come squishing after him across the kitchen's dull tile floor. Someone had been smoking tobacco in there the night before. He could smell it. It was in violation of the lease. The landlord would give them hell about it. The landlord was a Serb immigrant who drove a fifteen-year-old BMW, wore these weird furry Tyrolean hats, and insisted on being called Wally. Because Wally knew that Rydehl worked for IntenSecure, he'd wanted to show him the flashlight he kept clipped under the dash in his BMW. It was about a foot long and had a button that triggered a big shot of capsicum gas. He'd asked Rydell if Rydell thought it was 'enough.'

Rydell had lied. Had told him that people who did, for instance, a whole lot of dancer, they actually liked a blast or two of good capsicum. Like it cleared their sinuses. Got their juices flowing. They got off on it.

Now Rydell looked down and saw for the first time that the living room carpet in the house in Mar Vista was exactly the same stuff he'd crawled across in Turvey's girlfriend's apartment in Knoxville. Maybe a little cleaner, but the same stuff. He'd never noticed that before.

'Listen, Rydell, you don't want to take this, fine. My day off, I drive over here, you appreciate that? You get tweaked by some hackers, you fall for it, you push the response too hard, I can understand. But it happened, man, it's on your file, and this is the best I can do. But listen up. You do right by the company, maybe that gets back to Singapore.'

'Hernandez. ...'

'My day off...'

'Man, I don't know anything about finding people-'

'You can drive. All they want. Just drive. You drive the tracer, see? He's got his leg hassled, he can't drive. And this is, like, delicate, this thing. Requires some smarts. I told them I thought you could do it, man. I did that. I told them.'

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Monica's copy of People was on the couch, open to a story about Gudrun Weaver, this actress in her forties who'd just found the Lord, courtesy of the Reverend Wayne Fallon, in time to get her picture in People. There was a full-page picture of her on a couch in her living room, gazing raptly at a bank of monitors, each one showing the same old movie.

Rydell saw himself on the futon from Futon Mouth, staring up at those big stick-on flowers and bumper-stickers. 'Is it legal?'

Hernandez slapped his powder-blue thigh. It sounded like a pistol shot. 'Legal? We are talking IntenSecure Corporation here. We are talking major shit. I am trying to help you, man. You think I would ask you to do something fucking illegal?'

'But what's the deal, Hernandez? I just go up there and drive?'

'Fucking "A"! Drive! Mr. Warbaby say drive, you drive.'

'Who?'

'Warbaby. This Lucius Warbaby.'

Rydell picked up Monica's copy of People and found a picture of Gudrun Weaver and the Reverend Wayne Fallon. Gudrun Weaver looked like an actress in her forties. Fallon looked like a possum with hair-implants and a ten-thousand-dollar tuxedo.

'This Warbaby, Berry, he's right on top of this shit. He's a fucking star, man. Otherwise why they hire him? You do this, you learn shit. You still young, man. You can learn shit.'

Rydell tossed the People back onto the couch. 'Who they trying to find?'

'Hotel theft. Somebody took something. We got the security there. Singapore, man, they're in some kind of serious twist about it. All I know.'

Rydell stood in the warm shade of the carport, gazing down into the shimmering depths of the animated waterfall on the hood of Hernandez's daughter's Sneaker, mist rising through green boughs of rain forest. He'd once seen a Harley done up so that everything that wasn't triple-chromed was crawling, fast forward, with life-sized bugs. Scorpions, centipedes, you name it. 'See,' Hernandez said, 'see there, where it blurs? That's supposed to be some kind of fucking

sloth, man. Some lemur, you know? Factory warranty.'

'When do they want me to go?'

'I give you this number.' Hernandez handed Rydell a torn scrap of yellow paper. 'Call them.'

'Thanks.'

'Hey,' Hernandez said, 'I like to see you do okay. I do. I like that.' He touched the Sneaker's hood. 'Look at this shit. Factory fucking warranty.'

Chevette dreamed she was riding Folsom, a stiff sidewind threatening to push her into oncoming. Took a left on Sixth, caught that wind at her back, ran a red at Howard and Mission, a stale green at Market, bopped the brakes and bunnied both sets of tracks.

Coming down in a hard lean, she headed up Nob on Taylor.

'Make it this time,' she said.

Legs pumping, the wind a strong hand in the small of her back, sky clear and beckoning at the top of the hill, she thumbed her chain up onto some huge-ass custom ring, too big for her derailleur, too big to fit any frame at all, and felt the shining teeth catch, her hammering slowing to a steady spin-but then she was losing it.

She stood up and started pounding, screaming, lactic acid slamming through her veins. She was at the crest, lifting off- Colored light slanted into Skinner's room through the tinted pie-wedge panes of the round window. Tuesday morning.

Two of the smaller sections of glass had fallen out; the gaps were stuffed with pieces of rag, throwing shadows on the tattered yellow wall of National Geographics. Skinner was sitting up in bed, wearing an old plaid shirt, blankets and sleeping-bag pulled high up his chest. His bed was an eightpanel oak door up on four rusty Volkswagen hubs, with a slab of foam on top of that.

Chevette slept on the floor, on a narrower piece of foam she rolled up every morning and stuck  
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8 Morning after

behind a long wooden crate full of greasy hand tools. The smell of tool grease worked its way into her sleep, sometimes, but she didn't mind it.

She snaked her arm out into the November chill and snagged a sweater off the seat of a paint-caked wooden stool. She pulled the sweater into her bag and twisted into it, tugging it down over her knees. It hung to her knees when she stood up, the neckband so stretched that she had to keep pushing it back up on her shoulder. Skinner didn't say anything; he hardly ever did, first thing. She rubbed her eyes, went to the ladder bolted to the wall and climbed the five rungs, undoing the catch on the roof-hatch without bothering to look at it. She came up here most mornings now, started her day with the water and then the city. Unless it was raining, or too foggy, and then it was her turn to pump the ancient Coleman, its red-painted tank like a toy submarine. Skinner did that, on good days, but he stayed in bed a lot when it rained. Said it got to his hip.

She climbed out of the square hole and sat on its edge, dangling her bare legs down into the room. Sun struggling to burn off the silvery gray. On hot days it heated the tar on the roof's flat rectangle and you could smell it.

Skinner had showed her pictures of the La Brea pits in National Geographic, big sad animals going down forever, down in L.A. a long time ago. That was what tar was, asphalt, not just something they made in a factory somewhere. He liked to know where things came from.

His jacket, the one she always wore, that had come from D. Lewis, Great Portland Street. That was in London. Skinner liked maps. Some of the National Geographics had maps folded into them, and all the countries were big, single blobs of color from one side to the other. And there hadn't been nearly as many of them. There'd been countries big as anything: Canada, USSR, Brazil. Now there were lots of little ones where those had been. Skinner said America had gone  
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that route without admitting it. Even California had all been one big state, once.

Skinner's roof was eighteen feet by twelve. Somehow it looked smaller than the room below, even though the walls of the room were packed solid with Skinner's stuff. Nothing on the roof but a rusty metal wagon, a kid's toy, with a couple of rolls of faded tarpaper stacked in it.

She looked past three cable-towers to Treasure Island. Smoke rose, there, from a fire on the shore, where the low cantilever, cottoned down in fog, shot off to Oakland. There was a dome-thing, up on the farthest suspension tower, honeycombed into sections like new copper, but Skinner said it was just Mylar, stretched over two-by-twos. They had an plink in that, something that talked to satellites. She thought she'd go and see it one day.

A gray gull slid by, level with her eyes.

The city looked the same as ever, the hills like sleeping animals behind the office towers she knew by their numbers. She ought to be able to see that hotel.

The night before grabbed her by the back of the neck.

She couldn't believe she'd done that, been that stupid. The case she'd pulled out of that dickhead's pocket was hanging up in Skinner's jacket, on the iron hook shaped like an elephant's head. Nothing in it but a pair of sunglasses, expensive-looking but so dark she hadn't even been able to see through them last night. The security grunts in the lobby had scanned her badges when she'd gone in; as far as they knew, she'd never come back down. Their computer would've started looking for her, eventually. If they queried Allied, she'd say she forgot, blew the checkout off, took the service elevator down after she'd pulled her tag at 8o8. No way had she been at any party, and who'd seen her there anyway? The asshole. And maybe he'd figure she'd done him for his glasses. Maybe he'd felt it. Maybe he'd remcmher, when he sobered up. Skinner yelled there was coffee, hut they were out of eggs.

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Chevette shoved off the edge of the hole, swung down and in, catching the top rung. 'Want any, you're gonna get 'em,' Skinner said, looking up from the Coleman. 'Save me coffee.' She pulled on a pair of black cotton leggings and got into her trainers without bothering to lace them. She opened the hatch in the floor and climbed through, still worrying about the asshole, his glasses, her job. Down ten steel rungs off the side of an old crane. The cherry-picker basket waiting where she'd left it when she'd gotten back. Her bike cabled to an upright with a couple of Radio Shack screamers for good measure. She climbed into the waist-high yellow plastic basket and hit the switch. The motor whined and the big-toothed cog on the bottom let her down the slope. Skinner called the cherry-picker his funicular. He hadn't built it, though; a black guy named Fontaine had built it for him, when Skinner had started to have trouble with the climb. Fontaine lived on the Oakland end, with a couple of women and a lot of children. He took care of a lot of the bridge's electrical stuff. He'd show up once in a while in a long tweed overcoat, a toolbag in each hand, and he'd grease the thing and check it. And Chevette had a number to call him at if it ever broke down completely, but that hadn't happened yet.

It shook when it hit the bottom. She climbed out onto the wooden walkway and went along the wall of taut milky plastic, halogen-shadows of plants behind it and the gurgle of hydroponics. Turned the corner and down the stairs to the noise and morning hustle of the bridge. Nigel coming toward her with one of his carts, a new one. Making a delivery.

"Vette," with his big goofy grin. He called her that.

'Seen the egg lady?'

'City side,' he said, meaning S.F. always, Oakland being always only 'Land. 'Good one, huh?' with a gesture of huilder's pride for his cart. Chevette saw the hraised aluminum

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frame, the Taiwan-ese hubs and rims beefed up with fat new spokes. Nigel did work for some of the other riders at Allied, ones who still rode metal. He hadn't liked it when Chevette had gone for a paper frame. Now she bent to run her thumb along a specially smooth braise. 'Good one,' she agreed.

'That Jap shit delaminate on you yet?' 'No way.'

"S gonna. Bunny down too hard, it's glass.'

'Come see you when it does.'

Nigel shook his hair at her. The faded wooden fishing-plug that hung from his left ear rattled and spun. 'Too late then.' He shoved his cart toward Oakland.

Chevette found the egg lady and bought three, twisted up that way in two big dry blades of grass. Magic. You hated to take it apart, it was so perfect, and you could never get it back together or figure out how she did it. The egg lady took the five-piece and dropped it into the little bag around her scrawny lizard neck. She had no teeth at all, her face a nest of wrinkles that centered into that wet slit of a mouth.

Skinner was sitting at the table when she got back. More like a shelf than a table. He was drinking coffee out of a dented steel thermos-mug. If you just came in and saw him like that, it didn't strike you right away how old he was; just big, his hands, shoulders, all his bones, big. Gray hair slicked back from his forehead's lifetime collection of scars, little dents, a couple of black dots like tattoos, where some kind of grit had gotten into a cut.

She undid the eggs, the egg lady's magic, and put them in a plastic bowl. Skinner heaved himself up from his creaking chair, wincing as he took the weight with his hip. She handed him the bowl and he swung over to the Coleman. The way he scrambled eggs, he didn't use any butter, just a little water. Said he'd learned it from a cook on a ship. It made good eggs but the pan was hard to clean, and that was Chevette's job. While he broke the eggs, she went to the jacket Of1 its hook, and took that case out.

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You couldn't tell what it was made of, and that meant expensive. Something dark gray, like the lead in a pencil, thin as the shell of one of those eggs, but you could probably drive a truck over it. Like her bike. She'd figured out how you opened it the night before; finger here, thumb there, it opened. No catch or anything, no spring. No trademark, either; no patent numbers. Inside was like black suede, but it gave like foam under your finger.

Those glasses, nested there. Big and black. Like that Orbison in the poster stuck to Skinner's wall, black and white. Skinner said the way to put a poster up forever was use condensed milk for the glue. Kind that came in a can. Nothing much came in cans, anymore, but Chevette knew what he meant, and the weird big-faced guy with the black glasses was laminated solid to the white-painted ply of Skinner's wall.

She pulled them from the black suede, the stuff springing instantly back to a smooth flat surface. They bothered her. Not just that she'd stolen them, but they weighed too much. Way too heavy for what they were, even with the big earpieces. The frames looked as though they'd been carved from slabs of graphite. Maybe they had, she thought; there was graphite around the paper cores in her bike's frame, and it was Asahi Engineering.

Rattle of the spatula as Skinner swirled the eggs. She put them on. Black. Solid black.

'Katharine Hepburn,' Skinner said.

She pulled them off. 'Huh?'

'Big glasses like that.'

She picked up the lighter he kept beside the Coleman, clicked it, held the flame behind one lens. Nothing.

'What're they for, welding?' He put her share of the eggs in an aluminum mess-tray stamped 1951.

Set it down beside a fork and her mug of black coffee.

She put the glasses on the table. 'Can't see through 'em. Just black.' She pulled up the backless maple chair and sat,

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picking up the fork. She ate her eggs. Skinner sat, eating his, looking at her. 'Soviet,' he said, after a swallow from his thermos-mug.

'Huh?'

'How they made sunglasses in the ol' Soviet. Had two factories for sunglasses, one of 'em always made 'em like that. Kept right on puttin' 'em out in the stores, nobody'd buy 'em, buy the ones from the other factory. How the place packed it in.'

'The factory made the black glasses?'

'Soviet Union.'

'They stupid, or what?'

'Not that simple. . . Where'd you get 'em?'

She looked at her coffee. 'Found 'em.' She picked it up and drank.

'You working, today?' He pulled himself up, stuffed the front of his shirt down into his jeans, the rusted buckle on his old leather belt held with twisted paper clips.

'Noon to five.' She picked up the glasses, turning them. They weighed too much for how big they were.

'Gotta get somebody up here, check the fuel cell...'

'Fontaine?'

He didn't answer. She bedded the glasses in black suede, closed the case, got up, took the dishes to the wash-basin. Looked back at the case on the table.

She'd better toss them, she thought.

Rydell took a CalAir tilt-rotor out of Burbank into Tuesday's early evening. The guy in San Francisco had paid for it from the other end; said call him Freddie. No seatback fun on CalAir, and the passengers definitely down-scale. Babies crying. Had a window seat. Down there the spread of lights through the faint glaze of some previous passenger's hair-oil:

the Valley. Turquoise voids of a few surviving pools, lit subsurface. A dull ache in his arm.

He closed his eyes. Saw his father at the kitchen sink of his mobile home in Florida, washing out a glass. At that precise moment the death no doubt already growing in him, established fact, some line crossed. Talking about his brother, Rydell's uncle, three years younger and five years dead, who'd once sent Rydell a t-shirt from Africa. Army stamps on the bubblepack envelope. One of those old-timey bombers, B-5z, and WHEN DIPLOMACY FAILS.

'Is that the Coast Highway, do you think?'

Opened his eyes to the lady leaning across him to peer through the film of hair-oil. Like Mrs. Armbruster in fifth grade; older than his father would be now.

'I don't know,' Rydell said. 'Might be. All just looks like streets to me. I mean,' he added, 'I'm

not from here.'

She smiled at him, settling back into the grip of the narrow seat. Completely like Mrs. Armhruster. Same weird combination of tweed, oxford-cloth, Santa Fe blanket coat. These old ladies with their bouncy thick-soled shoes.

77

9 When diplomacy fails

'None of us are.' Reaching out to pat his khaki knee. 'Not these days.' Kevin had said it was okay to keep the pants.

'Uh-huh,' Rydell said, his hand feeling desperately for the recliner button, the little dimpled steel circle waiting to tilt him back into the semblance of sleep. He closed his eyes.

'I'm on my way to San Francisco to assist in my late husband's transfer to a smaller cryogenic unit,' she said. 'One that offers individual storage modules. The trade magazines call them "boutique operations," grotesque as that may seem.'

Rydell found the button and discovered that CalAir's seats allowed a maximum recline of ten centimeters.

'He's been in cryo, oh, nine years now, but I've never liked to think of his brain tumbling around in there like that. Wrapped in foil. Don't they always make you think of baked potatoes?'

Rydell's eyes opened. He tried to think of something to say.

'Or like tennis shoes in a dryer,' she said. 'I know they're frozen solid, but there's nothing about it that seems like any kind of rest, is there?'

Rydell concentrated on the seatback in front of him. A plastic blank. Gray. Not even a phone.

'These smaller places can't promise anything new in the way of an eventual awakening, of course. But it seems to me that there's an added degree of dignity. I think of it as dignity, in any case.'

Rydell glanced sideways. Found his gaze caught in hers:

hazel eyes, mazed there in the finest web of wrinkles.

'And I certainly won't be there if he's ever thawed, or, well, whatever they might eventually intend to do with them. I don't believe in it. We argued about it constantly. I thought of all those billions dead, the annual toll in all the poor places. 'David,' I said, 'how can you contemplate this when the bulk of humanity lives without air-conditioning?'

Rydell opened his mouth. Closed it.

78

'Myself, I'm a card-carrying member of Cease Upon the Midnight.'

Rydell wasn't sure what 'card-carrying' meant, but Cease Upon the Midnight was mutual self-help euthanasia, and illegal in Tennessee. Though they did it there anyway, and someone on the force had told him that they left milk and cookies out for the ambulance crews. Did it eight or nine at a time, mostly. CUTM. 'Cut 'em,' the paramedics called it. Offered themselves with cocktails of legally prescribed drugs. No muss, no fuss. Tidiest suicides around.

'Excuse me, ma'am,' Rydell said, 'but I've got to try to catch a little sleep here.'

'You go right ahead, young man. You do look rather tired.'

Rydell closed his eyes, put his head back, and stayed that way until he felt the rotors tilting over into descent-mode.

'Tommy Lee Jones,' the black man said. His hair was shaped like an upside-down flowerpot with a spiral path sculpted into the side of it. Sort of like a Shriner's fez, but without the tassel. He was about five feet tall and his triple-oversized shirt made him look nearly as wide. The shirt was lemon-yellow and printed with life-size handguns, in full color, all different kinds. He wore a huge pair of navy blue shorts that came to way below his knees, Raiders socks, sneakers with little red lights embedded in the edges of the soles, and a pair of round mirrored glasses with lenses the size of five-dollar coins.

'You got the wrong guy,' Rydell said.

'No, man, you look like him.'

'Like who?'

'Tommy Lee Jones.'

'Who?'

'Was an actor, man.' For a second Rydell thought this guy had to be with Reverend Fallon. Even had those shades, like Sublett's contacts. 'You Rydell. Ran you on Separated at Birth.'

79

'You Freddie?' Separated at Birth was a police program you used in missing persons cases. You scanned a photo of the person you wanted, got back the names of half a dozen celebrities who looked vaguely like the subject, then went around asking people if they'd seen anybody lately who

reminded them of A, B, C... The weird thing was, it worked better than just showing them a picture of the subject. The instructor at the Academy in Knoxville had told Rydell's class that that was because it tapped into the part of the brain that kept track of celebrities. Rydell had imagined that as some kind of movie-star lobe. Did people really have those? Maybe Sublett had a great big one. But when they'd run the program on Rydell in the Academy, he'd come up a dead ringer for Howie Clacton, the Atlanta pitcher; he'd didn't remember any Tommy Lee Jones. But then he hadn't thought he looked all that much like Howie Clacton, either.

This Freddie extended a very soft hand and Rydell shook it. 'You got luggage?' Freddie asked. 'Just this.' Hefting his Samsonite.

'That's Mr. Warbaby right over there,' Freddie said, nodding in the direction of an exit-gate, where a uniformed chilanga was checking people's seat-stubs before letting them out. Another black man loomed behind her, huge, broad as this Freddie, looking twice his height.

'Big guy.'

'Uh-huh,' Freddie said, 'and best we not keep him waiting. Leg's hurting him today and he just insisted on walking in here from the lot to meet you.'

Rydell took the man in as he approached the gate, handing his stub to the guard. He was enormous, over six feet, but the thing that struck Rydell most was a stillness about him, that and some kind of sorrow in his face. It was a look he'd seen on the face of a black minister his father had taken-to watching, toward the end there. You looked at that minister's face and you felt like he'd seen every sad-ass thing there was,

8o

so maybe you could even believe what he was saying. Or anyway Rydell's father had, maybe, at least a little bit.

'Lucius Warbaby,' taking the biggest hands Rydell had ever seen from the deep pockets of a long olive overcoat stitched from diamond-quilted silk, his voice pitched so far into the bass that it suggested subsonics. Rydell looked at the proffered hand and saw he wore one of those old-fashioned gold knuckle-duster rings, WARBABY across it in diamond-chip sans-serif capitals. Rydell shook it, fingers curled over diamond and bullion. 'Pleased to meet you, Mr. Warbaby.'

Warbaby wore a black Stetson set dead level on his head, the brim turned up all the way around, and glasses with heavy black frames. Clear lenses, windowpane plain. The eyes behind those lenses were Chinese or something; catlike, slanted, a weird goldy brown. He was leaning on one of those adjustable canes you get at the hospital. There was a carbon brace clamped around his left leg, big midnight-blue nylon cushions padding it. Skinny black jeans, brand new and never washed, were tucked into spit-shined Texas dogger boots in three shades of black.

'Juanito says you're a decent driver,' Warbaby said, as though it was about the saddest thing he'd ever heard. Rydell hadn't ever heard anybody call Hernandez that. 'Says you don't know the area up here...'

'That's right.'

'Up-side of that,' Warbaby said, 'is nobody here knows you. Carry the man's bag, Freddie.' Freddie took Rydell's soft-side with obvious reluctance, as though it wasn't something he'd ordinarily care to be seen with.

The hand with the knuckle-duster came down on Rydell's shoulder. Like the ring weighed twenty pounds. 'Juanito tell you anything with regard to what we're doing up here?'

'Said a hotel theft. Said IntenSecure was bringing you in on a kind of contract basis-'

8i

'Theft, yes.' Warbaby looked like he had the moral gravity of the universe pressing down on him and was determined to bear the brunt. 'Something missing. And all more complicated, now.'

'How's that?'

Warbaby sighed. 'Man who's missing it, he's dead now.'

Something else in those eyes. 'Dead hozi?'' Rydell asked, as the weight at last was taken from his shoulder.

'Hom-icide,' Warbaby said, low and doleful but very clear.

'You're wondering about my name,' Warbaby said from the backseat of his black Ford Patriot.

'I'm wondering where to put the key, Mr. Warbaby,' Rydell said, behind the wheel, surveying the option-laden dash. American cars were the only cars in the world that still bothered to~ physically display the instrumentation. Maybe that was why there weren't very many of them. Like those Harleys with chain-drives.

'My grandmother,' Warbaby rumbled, like a tectonic plate giving up and diving for China, 'was Vietnamese. Granddaddy, a Detroit boy. Army man. Brought her home from Saigon, but then he didn't

stick around. My daddy, his son, he changed his name to Warbaby, see? A gesture. Sentiment.'

'Uh-huh,' Rydell said, starting the big Ford and checking out the transmission. Saigon was where rich people went on vacation.

Four-wheel drive. Ceramic armor. Goodyear Streetsweepers you'd need a serious gun to puncture. There was a cardboard air-freshener, shaped like a pine-tree, hanging in front of the heater-vent.

'Now the Lucius part, well, I couldn't tell you.'

'Mr. Warbaby,' Rydell said, looking hack over his shoulder, 'where you want me to drive ~0U to?'

A modem-bleep from the dash.

8z

Freddie, in the plush bucket beside Rydell, whistled. 'Motherfuck,' he said, 'that's nasty.'

Rydell swung back to watch as the fax emerged: a fat man, naked on sheets solid with blood. Pools of it, where the brilliance of the photographer's strobes lay frozen like faint mirages of the sun.

'What's that under his chin?' Rydell asked.

'Cuban necktie,' Freddie said.

'No, man,' Rydell's voice up an octave, 'what is that?'

'Man's tongue,' Freddie said, tearing the image from the slit and passing it back to Warbaby.

Rydell heard the fax rattle in his hand.

'These people,' Warbaby said. 'Terrible.'

Yamazaki sat on a low wooden stool, watching Skinner shave. Skinner sat on the edge of his bed, scraping his face pink

with a disposable razor, rinsing the blade in a dented aluminum basin that he cradled between his thighs.

'The razor is old,' Yamazaki said. 'You do not throw it away?'

Skinner looked at him, over the plastic razor. 'Thing is, Scooter, they just don't get any duller, after a while.' He lathered and shaved his upper lip, then paused. Yamazaki had been 'Kawasaki' for the first several visits. Now he was 'Scooter.' The pale old eyes regarded him neutrally, hooded under reddish lids. Yamazaki sensed Skinner's inward laughter.

'I make you laugh?'

'Not today,' Skinner said, dropping the razor into the basin of water, suds and gray whiskers recoiling in a display of surface tension. 'Not like the other day, watching you chase those turds around.'

Yamazaki had spent one entire morning attempting to diagram the sewage-collection arrangements for the group of dwellings he thought of as comprising Skinner's 'neighborhood.' Widespread use of transparent five-inch hose had made this quite exciting, like some game devised for children, as he'd tried to follow the course of a given boliis of waste from one dwelling down past the next. The hoses swoo~d down through the superstructure in graceful random arcs, bundled like ganglia, to meet helow the lower deck in a

10 The modern dance

thousand-gallon holding tank. When this was full to capacity, Skinner had explained, a mercury-switch in a float-ball triggered a jet-pump, forcing the accumulated sewage into a three-foot pipe that carried it into the municipal system.

He'd made a note to consider this junction as an interface between the bridge's program and the program of the city, but extracting Skinner's story of the bridge was obviously more important. Convinced that Skinner somehow held the key to the bridge's existential meaning, Yamazaki had abandoned his physical survey of secondary construction in order to spend as much time as possible in the old man's company. Each night, in his borrowed apartment, he would send the day's accumulation of material to Osaka University's Department of Sociology.

Today, climbing to the lift that would carry him to Skinner's room, he had met the girl on her way to work, descending, her shoulder through the frame of her bicycle. She was a courier in the city. Was it significant that Skinner shared his dwelling with one who earned her living at the archaic intersection of information and geography? The offices the girl rode between were electronically conterminous-in effect, a single desktop, the map of distances obliterated by the seamless and instantaneous nature of communication. Yet this very seamlessness, which had rendered physical mail an expensive novelty, might as easily be viewed as porosity, and as such created the need for the service the girl provided. Physically transporting bits of information about a grid that consisted of little else, she provided a degree of absolute security in the fluid universe of data. With your memo in the girl's bag, you knew precisely where it was; otherwise, your memo was nowhere, perhaps everywhere, in that instant of transit.

He found her attractive, Skinner's girl, in an odd, foreign way, with her hard white legs and her militant, upthrust tail of dark hair.



85

'Dreamin', Scooter?' Skinner set the basin aside, his hands trembling slightly, and settled his shoulders against musty-looking pillows. The white-painted plywood wall creaked faintly.

'No, Skinner-san. But you promised you would tell me about the first night, when you decided to take the bridge...' His tone was mild, his words deliberately chosen to irritate, to spur his subject to speech. He activated the notebook's recording function.

'We didn't decide anything. I told you that...'

'But somehow it happened.'

'Shit happens. Happened that night. No signals, no leader, no architects. You think it was politics. That particular dance, boy, that's over.'

'But you have said that the people were "ready."'

'But not for anything. That's what you can't seem to get, can you? Like the bridge was here, but I'm not saying it was waiting. See the difference?'

'I think-'

'You think shit.' The notebook sometimes had trouble with Skinner's idioms. In addition, he tended to slur. An expert system in Osaka had suggested he might have sustained a degree of neural damage, perhaps as the result of using street drugs, or of one or more minor strokes. But Yamazaki believed Skinner had simply been too long in proximity to whatever strange attractor had permitted the bridge to become what it had become. 'Nobody,' Skinner said, speaking slowly and deliberately at first, as if for emphasis, 'was using this bridge for anything. After the Little Grande came through, understand?'

Yamazaki nodded, watching the characters of Skinner's translated speech scroll down the notebook. 'Earthquake fucked it good, Scooter. The tunnel on Treasure caved in. Always been unstable there. . . First they were gonna rebuild, they said, bottom up, hut they flat-out

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didn't have the money. So they put chain link, razor-wire, concrete up at both ends. Then the Germans came in, maybe two years later, sold 'em on nanomech, how to build the new tunnel. Be cheap, carry cars and a mag-lev. And nobody believed how fast they could do it, once they got it legislated past the Greens. Sure, those Green biotech lobbies, they made 'em actually grow the sections out in Nevada. Like pumpkins, Scooter. Then they hauled 'em out here under bulk-lifters and sank 'em in the Bay. Hooked 'em up. Little tiny machines crawling around in there, hard as diamonds; tied it all together tight, and bam, there's your tunnel. Bridge just sat there.'

Yamazaki held his breath, expecting Skinner to lose the thread, as he so often had before-often, Yamazaki suspected, deliberately.

'This one woman, she kept saying plant the whole thing with ivy, Virginia creeper . . . Somebody else, they said tear it down before another quake did it for 'em. But there it was. In the cities, lot of people, no place to go. Cardboard towns in the park, if you were lucky, and they'd brought those drip-pipes down from Portland, put 'em around the buildings. Leaks enough water on the ground, you don't want to lay there. That's a mean town, Portland. Invented that there...' He coughed. 'But that one night, people just came. All kinds of stories, after, how it happened. Pissing down rain, too. No body's idea of riot weather.'

Yamazaki imagined the two spans of the deserted bridge in the downpour, the crowds accumulating. He watched as they climbed the wire fences, the barricades, in such numbers that the chain link twisted, fell. They had climbed the towers, then, more than thirty falling to their deaths. But when the dawn came, survivors clung there, news helicopters circling them in the gray light like patient dragonflies. He had seen this many times, watching the tapes in Osaka. But Skinner had been there.

'Maybe a thousand people, this end. Another thousand in

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Oakland. And we just started running. Cops falling back, and what were they protecting, anyway? Mainly the crowd-orders they had, keep people from getting together in the street. They had their choppers up in the rain, shining lights on us. Just made it easier. I had this pair of pointy boots on. Ran up to that 'link, it was maybe fifteen feet tall. Just kicked my toes in there and started climbing. Climb a fence like that easy, boots got a point. Up, man, I was up that thing like I was flying. Coils of razor at the top, but people behind me were pushing up anything; hunks of two-by-four, coats, sleeping-bags. To lay across the wire. And I felt like . . . weightless . . .'

Yamazaki felt that he was somehow close, very close, to the heart of the thing.

'I jumped. Don't know who jumped first, but I just jumped. Out. Hit pavement. People yelling. They'd crashed the barriers on the Oakland side, by then. Those were lower. We could see their lights as they ran out on the cantilever. The police 'copters and these red highway flares some of

the people had. They ran toward Treasure. Nobody out there since the Navy people left ... We ran too. Met up somewhere in the middle and this cheer went up . . .' Skinner's eyes were unfocused, distant. 'After that, they were singing, hymns and shit. Just milling around, singing. Crazy. Me and some others, we were stoked. And we could see the cops, too, coming from both ends. Fuck that.'

Yamazaki swallowed. 'And then?'

'We started climbing. The towers. Rungs they welded on those suckers, see, so painters could get up there. We were climbing. Television had their own 'copters out by then, Scooter. We were making it to world news and we didn't know it. Guess you don't. Wouldn't've give a shit anyway. Just climbing. But that was going out live. Was gonna make it hard for the cops, later. And, man, people were falling off. ~ in front of me had black tape wrapped 'round his shoes, kept the soles on. lape all wet, coming loose, his feet kept slipping. Right in front of my face. His foot kept coming back off the rung and I'd get his heel in my eye, I didn't watch it

Near to the top and both of 'em come off at once.' Skinner fell silent, as if listening to some distant sound. Yamazaki held his breath.

'How you learn to climb, up here,' Skinner said, 'the first thing is, you don't look down. Second thing is, you keep one hand and one foot on the bridge all the time. This guy, he didn't know that. And those shoes of his. He just went off, backward. Never made a sound. Sort of. . . graceful.'

Yamazaki shivered.

'But I kept climbing. Rain had quit, light was coming. Stayed.'

'How did you feel?' Yamazaki asked. Skinner blinked. 'Feel?'

'What did you do then?'

'I saw the city.'

Yamazaki rode Skinner's lift down to where stairs began, its yellow upright cup like a piece of picnicware discarded by a giant. All around him, now, the rattle of an evening's commerce, and from a darkened doorway came the slap of cards, a woman's laughter, voices raised in Spanish. Sunset pink as wine, through sheets of plastic that snapped like sails in a breeze scented with frying foods, woodsmoke, a sweet oily drift of cannabis. Boys in ragged leather crouched above a game whose counters were painted pebbles.

Yamazaki stopped. He stood very still, one hand on a wooden railing daubed with hyphens of aerosol silver. Skinner's story seemed to radiate out, through the thousand things, the unwashed smiles and the smoke of cooking, like concentric rings of sound from some secret bell, pitched too low for the foreign, wishful ear.

We are come not only past the century's closing, he thought, the millennium's turning, but to the end of something else. Era? Paradigm? Everywhere, the signs of closure.

89

Modernity was ending.

Here, on the bridge, it long since had.

He would walk toward Oakland now, feeling for the new thing's strange heart.

11 Pulling tags

Tuesday, she just wasn't on. Couldn't proj. No focus. Bunny Malatesta, the dispatcher, could feel it, his voice a buzz in her ear.

'Chev, don't take this the wrong way, but you got like the monthlies or something?'

'Fuck off, Bunny.'

'Hey, I just mean you're not your usual ball of fire today. All I mean.'

'Gimme a tag.'

'655 Mo, fifteenth, reception.'

Picked up, made it to 555 Cali, fifty-first floor. Pulled her tag and back down. The day gone gray after morning's promise.

'456 Montgomery, thirty-third, reception, go freight.'

Pausing, her hand in the bike's recognition-loop. 'How come?'

'Says messengers carvin' graffiti in the passenger elevators. Go freight or they'll toss you, be denied access, at which point Allied terminates your employment.'

She remembered seeing Ringer's emblem carved into the inspection plate in one of 456's passenger

elevators. Fucking Ringer. He'd defaced more elevators than anyone in history. Carried around a regular toolkit to do it with.

456 sent her to i EC with a carton wider than she was supposed to accept, hut that was what racks and bungles were for, and why give the cage-drivers the trade? l-unny buzzed

9'

her on her way out and gave her ~o Beale, the cafeteria on the second floor. She guessed that would be a woman's purse, done up in a plastic bag from the kitchen, and she was right. Brown, sort of lizardskin, with a couple of green sprouts stuck in the corners of the bag. Women left their purses, remembered, called up, got the manager to send for a messenger. Good for a tip, usually. Ringer and some of the others would open them up, go through the contents, find drugs sometimes. She wouldn't do that. She thought about the sunglasses.

She couldn't get a run today. There was no routing in effect at Allied, but sometimes you'd get a run by accident; pick up here, drop off there, then something here. But it was rare. When you worked for Allied you rode harder. Her record was sixteen tags in a day; like doing forty at a different company.

She took the purse to Fulton at Masonic, got two flyers after the owner checked to see everything was there.

'Restaurant's supposed to take it to the cops,' Chevette said. 'We don't like to be responsible.' Blank look from the purse-lady, some kind of secretary. Chevette pocketed the fives.

'2.98 Alabama,' Bunny said, as if offering her some pearl of great price. 'Tone those thighs...' Bust her ass out there to get there, then she'd pick up and do it. But she couldn't get on top of it, today.

The asshole's sunglasses...

'For tactical reasons,' the blonde said, 'we do not currently advocate the use of violence or sorcery against private individuals.'

Chevette had just pumped back from Alabama Street, day's last tag. The woman on the little CNN flatscreen over the door to Bunny's pit wore something black and stretchy pulled over her face, three triangular holes cut in it. Blue letters at the bottom of the screen read FIONA X-SPOKESPERSON- SOUTH ISLAND LIBERATION FRONT.

92.

The overlit fluorescent corridor into Allied Messengers smelled of hot styrene, laser printers, abandoned running-shoes, and stale bag lunches, this last tugging Chevette toward memories of some unheated day-care basement in Oregon, winter's colorless light slanting in through high dim windows. But now the street door banged open behind her, a pair of muddy size-eleven neon sneakers came pounding down the stairs, and Samuel Saladin DuPree, his cheeks speckled with crusty gray commas of road-dirt, stood grinning at her, hugely.

'Happy about something, Sammy Sal?'

Allied's best-looking thing on two wheels, no contest whatever, DuPree was six-two of ebon electricity poured over a frame of such elegance and strength that Chevette imagined his bones as polished metal, triple-chromed, a quicksilver armature. Like those old movies with that big guy, the one who went into politics, after he'd got the meat ripped off him. Thinking about Sammy Sal's bones made most girls want him to jump theirs, but not Chevette. He was gay, they were friends, and Chevette wasn't too sure how she felt about all that anyway, lately.

'Fact is,' Sammy Sal said, smearing dirt from his cheek with the back of one long hand, 'I've decided to kill Ringer. And the truth, y'know, it makes you free...'

'Ho,' Chevette said, 'you musta pulled a tag over 456 today.'

'I did, dear, do that thing. All the way up, in a dirty freight elevator. A slow dirty freight elevator. And why?'

"Cause Ringer's 'graved his tag in their brass, Sal, and their rosewood, too?'"

'Eggs-ackly, Chevette, honey.' Sammy Sal undid the blue and white bandanna around his neck and wiped his face with it. 'Therefore, his ass dies screaming.'

and must begin, now, to systematically sabotage the workplace,' Fiona X said, 'or be branded an enemy of the human race.'

93

The door to the dispatch-pit, so thickly stapled with scheds, sub-charts, tattered Muni regs, and faxed complaints that Chevette had no idea what the surface underneath might look like, popped open. Bunny extruded his scarred and unevenly shaven head, turtle-like, blinking in the light of the corridor, and glanced up automatically, his gaze attracted by the tone of Fiona X's sound-bite. His expression blanked at the sight of her mask, the mental channel-zap executed in less time than it had taken him to look her way. 'You,' he said, eyes back on Chevette, 'Chevy. In

here.'

'Wait for me, Sammy Sal,' she said.

Bunny Malatesta had been a San Francisco bike messenger for thirty years. Would be still, if his knees and back hadn't given out on him. He was simultaneously the best and the worst thing about messing for Allied. The best because he had a bike-map of the city hung behind his eyes, better than anything a computer could generate. He knew every building, every door, what the security was like. He had the mess game down, Bunny did, and, better still, he knew the lore, all the history, the stories that made you know you were part of something, however crazy it got, that was worth doing. He was a legend himself, Bunny, having Krypto'd the windshields of some seven police cars in the course of his riding career, a record that still stood. But he was the worst for those same reasons and more, because there wasn't any bulshitting him at all. Any other dispatcher, you could cut yourself a little extra slack. But not Bunny. He just knew.

Chevette followed him in. He closed the door behind her. The goggles he used for dispatching dangled around his neck, one padded eyepiece patched with cellophane tape. There were no windows in the room and Bunny kept the lights off when he was working. Half a dozen color monitors were arranged in a semicircle in front of a black swivel armchair with Bunny's pink rubber Sacro-saver backrest strapped to it like some kind of giant bulging larva.

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Bunny rubbed his lower back with the heels of his hands. 'Disk's killing me,' he said, not particularly to Chevette.

'Oughta let Sammy Sal crack it for you,' she suggested. 'He's real good.'

'It's cracked already, sweetheart. What's wrong with it in the first place. Now tell me what were you doin' over the Morrisey last night. And it better be good.'

'Pulling a tag,' Chevette said, going on automatic, the way she had to if she were going to lie and get away with it. She'd been halfway expecting something like this, but not so soon.

She watched as Bunny took the goggles off, disconnected them, and put them on top of one of the monitors. 'So how come you never checked back out? They call us on it, say you went in to make a delivery, they scanned your badges, you never come back out. Look, I tell 'em, I know she's not there now, guys, 'cause I got her out Alabama Street on a call, okay?' He was watchiag her.

'Hey, Bunny,' Chevette said, 'it was my last tag, my ride was down in the basement, I saw a freight el on its way down, jumped in. I know I'm supposed to clock out at security, but I thought they'd have somebody on the parking exit, you know? I get up the ramp and there's nobody, a car's going out, so I deak under the barrier and I'm in the street. I shoul da gone back around and done the lobby thing?'

'You know it. It's regs.'

'It was late, you know?'

Bunny sat down, wincing, in the chair with the Sacro-saver. He cupped each knee in a big-knuckled hand and stared at her. Very un-Bunny. Like something was really bothering him. Not just security grunts pissing because a mess blew the check-out off. 'How late?'

'Huh?'

'They wanna know when you left.'

'Maybe ten minutes after I went in. Fifteen tops. Basement in there's a rat-maze.'

95

'You went in 6:32:18,' he said. 'They got that when they scanned you. The tag, this lawyer, they talked to him, so they know you delivered.' He still had that look.

'Bunny, what's the deal? Tell 'em I screwed up, is all.'

'You didn't go anywhere else? In the hotel?'

'Uh-uh,' she said, and felt this funny ripple move through her, like she'd crossed some line and couldn't go back. 'I gave the guy his package, Bunny.'

'I don't think they're worrying about the guy's package,' Bunny said.

'So?'

'Lookit, Chev,' he said, 'security guy calls, that's one thing. Sorry, boss, won't let it happen again. But this was somebody up in the company, IntenSecure it's called, and he called up Wilson direct.' Allied's owner. 'So I gotta make nice with Wilson and Mr. Security, I gotta have Grasso cover for me on the board and naturally he screws everything up...'

'Bunny,' she said, 'I'm sorry.'

'Hey. You're sorry, I'm sorry, but there's some big shit rentacop sitting behind a desk and he's putting fucking Wilson through about what precisely did you do after you gave that lawyer his package. About what kind of employee are you exactly, how long you mess for Allied, any criminal record, any drug use, where you live.'

Chevette saw the asshole's black glasses, right where she'd left them. In their case, behind

Skinner's ~ Geographics. She tried to lift them out of there with mind-power. Right up to the tar-smelling roof and off the edge. Put those bastards in the Bay like she should've done this morning. But no, they were there.

'That ain't normal,' Bunny said. 'Know what I mean?'

'You tell 'em where I live, Bunny?'

'Out Of the bridge,' he said, then cracked her a little sliver of grin. 'Not like you got much of an address, is it?' Now he

spun himself around in the chair and began to shut the monitors down.

'Bunny,' she said, 'what'll they do now?'

'Come and find you.' His back to her. 'Here. 'Cause they won't know where else to go. You didn't do anything, did you, Chevy?' The back of his skull showing gray stubble.

Automatic. 'No. No... Thanks, Bunny.'

He grunted in reply, neutral, ending it, and Chevette was back in the corridor, her heart pounding under Skinner's jacket. Up the stairs, out the door, plotting the quickest way home, running red lights in her head, gotta get rid of the glasses, gotta- Sammy Sal had Ringer braced up against a blue recyc bin.

Worry was starting to penetrate Ringer's rudimentary view of things. 'Didn't do nuthin to you, man.'

'Been carvin' your name in elevators again, Ringer.'

'But I din't do nuthin to you!'

'Cause and effect, mofo. We know it's a tough concept for you, but try: you do shit, other shit follows. You go scratching your tag in the clients' fancy elevators, we hassle you, man.' Sammy Sal spread the long brown fingers of his left hand across Ringer's beat-to-shit helmet, palming it like a basketball, and twisted, lifting, the helmet's strap digging into Ringer's chin. 'Din't do nuthin!' Ringer gurgled.

Chevette ducked past them, heading for the bike-rack beneath the mural portrait of Shapely. Someone had shot him in his soulful martyr's eye with a condomful of powder blue paint, blue running all down his hallowed cheek.

'Hey,' Sammy Sal said, 'come here and help me torment this shit-heel.'

She stuck her hand through the recognition-loop and tried to pull her handlebars out of the rack's tangle of molybdenum steel, graphite, and aramid overwrap. The other bikes' alarms all went off at once, a frantic chorus of ear-splitting bleats, basso digital sirennioans, and OUC extended high-volume burst

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of snake-hiss Spanish profanity, cunningly mixed with yelps of animal torment. She swung her bike around, got her toe in the clip, and kicked for the street, almost going over as she mounted. She saw Sammy Sal, out the corner of her eye, drop Ringer.

She saw Sammy Sal straddle his own bike, a pink and black-fleck fat-tube with Fluoro-Rimz that ran off a hubgenerator.

Sammy Sal was coming after her. She'd never wanted company less.

She took off.

Proj. Just proj.

Like her morning dream, but scarier.

12 Eye movement

Rydell looked at these two San Francisco cops, Svobodov and Orlovsky, and decided that working for Warbaby had a chance of being interesting. These guys were the real, the super-heavy thing.

Homicide was colossus, any department anywhere.

And here he'd been in Northern California all of forty-eight minutes and he was sitting at a counter drinking coffee with Homicide. Except they were drinking tea. Hot tea. In glasses. Heavy on the sugar. Rydell was at the far end, on the other side of Freddie, who was drinking milk. Then Warbaby, with his hat still on, then Svobodov, then Orlovsky.

Svobodov was nearly as tall as Warbaby, but it all seemed to be sinew and big knobs of bone. He had long, pale hair, combed straight back from his rocky forehead, eyebrows to match, and skin that was tight and shiny, like he'd stood too long in front of a fire. Orlovsky was thin and dark, with a widow's peak, lots of hair on the backs of his fingers, and those glasses that looked like they'd been sawn in half.

They both had that eye thing, the one that pinned you and held you and sank right in, heavy and inert as lead.

Rydell had had a course in that at the Police Academy, but it hadn't really taken. It was called Eye Movement Desensitization & Response, and was taught by this retired forensic psychologist named Bagley, from Duke University. Bagley's lectures tended to wander off into stories about

serial killers he'd processed at I)uke, auto-erotic strangulation fatalities,

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stuff like that. It sure passed the time between High Profile Felony Stops and Firearms Training System Scenarios. But Rydell was usually kind of rattled after Felony Stops, because the instructors kept asking him to take the part of the felon. And he couldn't figure out why. So he'd have trouble concentrating, in Eye Movement. And if he did manage to pick up anything useful from Bagley, a session of FATSS would usually make him forget it. FATSS was like doing Dream Walls, but with guns, real ones.

When FATSS tallied up your score, it would drag you right down the entrance wounds, your own or the other guy's, and make the call on whether the loser had bled to death or copped to hydrostatic shock. There were people who went into full-blown post-traumatic heeb-jeebs after a couple of sessions on FATSS, but Rydell always came out of it with this shit-eating grin. It wasn't that he was violent, or didn't mind the sight of blood; it was just that it was such a rush. And it wasn't real. So he never had learned to throw that official hoodoo on people with his eyes. But this Lt. Svobodov, he had the talent beaucoup, and his partner, Lt. Orlovsky, had his own version going, nearly as effective and he did it over the sawn-off tops of those glasses. Guy looked sort of like a werewolf anyway, which helped.

Rydell continued to check out the San Francisco Homicide look. Which seemed to be old tan raincoats over black flak vests over white shirts and ties. The shirts were button-down oxfords and the ties were the stripey kind, like you were supposed to belong to a club or something. Cuffs on their trousers and great big pebble-grain wingtips with cleated Vibram soles. About the only people who wore shirts and ties and shoes like that were immigrants, people who wanted it as American as it got. But layering it up with a bullet-proof and a worn-out London Fog, he figured that was some kind of statement. The streamlined plastic butt of an N&K didn't exactly hurt, either, and Rydell could see one pecking out of Svobodov's open flak vest. Couldn't remember the model number, but it looked like the one with the magazine down the top of the barrel. Shot that caseless ammo looked like wax crayons, plastic propellant molded around alloy flechettes like big nails.

'If we knew what you already know, Warbaby, maybe that makes everything more simple.' Svobodov looked around the little diner, took a pack of Marlboros out of his raincoat.

'Illegal in this state, buddy,' the waitress said, pleased at any opportunity to threaten somebody with the law. She had that big kind of hair. This was one of those places you ate at if you worked graveyard at some truly shit-ass industrial job. If your luck held, Rydell figured, you'd get this particular waitress into the bargain.

Svobodov fixed her with a couple of thousand negative volts of Cop Eye, tugged a black plastic badge-holder out of his flak vest, flipped it open in her direction, and let it fall back on its nylon thong, against his chest. Rydell noticed the click when it hit; some kind of back-up armor under the white shirt.

'Those two Mormon boys from Highway Patrol come in here, you show that to them,' she said.

Svobodov put the cigarette between his lips.

Warbaby's fist came up, clutching a lump of gold the size of a hand grenade.

He lit the Russian's cigarette with it.

'Why you have this, Warbaby?' Svobodov said, eyeing the lighter. 'You smoking something?'

'Anything but those Chinese Marlboros, Arkady.' Mournful as ever. 'They're fulla fiberglass.'

'American brand,' Svobodov insisted, 'licensed by maker.'

'Hasn't been a legal cigarette manufactured in this country in six years,' Warbaby said, sounding as sad about that as anything else.

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'Marl-bor-ro,' Svobodov said, taking the cigarette out of his mouth and pointing to the lettering in front of the filter. 'When we were kids, Warbaby, Marlboro, she was money.'

'Arkady,' Warbaby said, as though with enormous patience, 'when we were kids, man, money was money.'

Orlovsky laughed. Svobodov shrugged. 'What you know, Warbaby?' Svobodov said, back to business.

'Mr. Blix has been found dead, at the Morrisey. Murdered.'

'Pro job,' Orlovsky said, making it one word, projob. 'They want we assume some bullshit ethnic angle, see?'

Svobodov squinted at Warbaby. 'We don't know that,' he said.

'The tongue,' Orlovsky said, determined. 'That's color. To throw us off. They think we think Latin Kings.'

Svobodov sucked on his cigarette, blew smoke in the general direction of the waitress. 'What you know, Warbaby?'

'Hans Rutger Blix, forty-three, naturalized Costa Rican.' Warbaby might have been making the opening remarks at a funeral.

'My hairy ass,' Svobodov said, around the Marlboro.

'Warbaby,' Orlovsky said, 'we know you were working on this before this asshole got his throat cut.'

'Asshole,' Warbaby said, like maybe the dead guy had been a close personal friend, a lodge-brother or something. 'Man's dead, is all. That make him an asshole?'

Svobodov sat there, puffing on his Marlboro. Stubbed it out on the plate in front of him, beside his untouched tuna melt. 'Asshole. Believe it.'

Warbaby sighed. 'Man had a jacket, Arkady?'

'You want his jacket,' Svobodov said, 'you tell us what you were supposed to be doing for him. We know he talked to you.'

'We never spoke.'

'Okay,' Svobodov said. 'IntenSecure he talked to. You freelance.'

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'Strictly,' Warbaby said. 'Why did he talk to IntenSecure?' 'Man lost something.' 'What?'

'Something of a personal nature.' Svobodov sighed. 'Lucius. Please.' 'A pair of sunglasses.'

Svobodov and Orlovsky looked at each other, then back to Warbaby. 'IntenSecure brings in Lucius Warbaby because this guy loses his sunglasses?'

'Maybe they were expensive,' Freddie offered, softly. He was studying his reflection in the mirror behind the counter.

Orlovsky put his hairy fingers together and cracked his knuckles.

'He thought he might have lost them at a party,' Warbaby offered, 'someone might even have taken them.'

'What party?' Svobodov shifted on his stool and Rydell heard the hidden armor creak.

'Party at the Morrissey.'

'Whose party?' Orlovsky, over those glasses.

'Mr. Cody Harwood's party,' Warbaby said.

'Harwood,' Svobodov said, 'Harwood...'

'Name "Pavlov" ring a bell?' Freddie said, to no one in particular.

Svobodov grunted. 'Money.'

'None of it in Marlboros, either,' Warbaby said. 'Mr. Blix went down to Mr. Harwood's party, had a few drinks-'

'Had a BA level like they won't need to embalm,' Orlovsky said.

'Had a few drinks. Had this property in the pocket of his jacket. Next morning, it was gone.'

Called security at the Morrissey. They called IntenSecure. IntenSecure called me...'

'His phone is gone,' Svobodov said. 'They took it. Nothing to tie him to anyone. No agenda, notebook, nothing.'

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'Pro job,' Orlovsky intoned.

'The glasses,' Svobodov said. 'What kind of glasses?'

'Sunglasses,' Freddie said.

'We found these.' Svobodov took something from the side pocket of his London Fog. A Ziploc evidence bag. He held it up. Rydell saw shards of black plastic. 'Cheap VR. Ground into the carpet.'

'Do you know what he ran on them?' Warbaby asked.

Now it was Orlovsky's turn for show-and-tell. He produced a second evidence bag, this one from inside his black vest. 'Looked for software, couldn't find it. Then we x-ray him. Somebody shoved this down his throat.' A black rectangle. The stick-on label worn and stained. 'But before they cut him.'

'What is it?' Warbaby asked.

'McDonna,' Svobodov said.

'Huh?' Freddie was leaning across Warbaby to peer at the thing. 'Mc-what?'

'Fuck chip.' It sounded to Rydell like fock cheap, but then he got it. 'McDonna.'

'Wonder if they read it all the way down?' Freddie said, from the rear of the Patriot. He had his feet up on the back of the front passenger seat and the little red lights around the edges of his sneakers were spelling out the lyrics to some song.

'Read what?' Rydell was watching Warbaby and the Russians, who were standing beside one of the least subtle unmarked cars Rydell had ever seen: a primer-gray whale with a cage of graphite

expansion-grating protecting the headlights and radiator. Fine rain was beading up on the Patriot's windshield.

'That porn they found down the guy's esophagus.' If Warbaby always sounded sad, Freddie always sounded relaxed. But Warbaby sounded like he really was sad, and Freddie's kind of relaxed sounded like he was just the opposite.

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'Lotta code in a program like that. Hide all sorta good:es in the wallpaper, y'know? Running fractal to get the skin te:ture, say, you could mix in a lot of text...'

'You into computer stuff, Freddie?'

'I'm Mr. Warbaby's technical consultant.'

'What do you think they're talking about?'

Freddie reached up and touched one of his sneakers. The red words vanished. 'They're having the real conversation now.'

'What's that?'

'The deal conversation. We want what they got on Blix, the dead guy.'

'Yeah? So what we got?'

"We"?' Freddie whistled. 'You just drivin'.' He pulled his feet back and sat up. 'But it ain't exactly clas~ified:

IntenSecure and DatAmerica more or less the same thing.'

'No shit.' Svobodov seemed to be doing most o~ the talking. 'What's that mean?'

'Means we tight with a bigger data-base than the pDlice. Next time ol' Rubadub needs him a look-see, he'll be glad he did us a favor. But tonight, man, tonight it just burrs his Russian ass.'

Rydell remembered the time he'd gone over to 'Big George' Kechakmadze's house for a barbecue and the man had tried to sign him up for the National Rifle Association. 'You get a lot of Russians on the force, up here?'

'Up here? All over.'

'Kinda funny how many of those guys go into police work.'

'Think about it, man. Had 'em a whole police state, over there. Maybe they just got a feel for it.'

Svobodov and Orlovsky climbed into the gray whale. Warbahy walked to the Patriot, using his alloy cane. The police car rcse up about six inches on hydraulics and began to moan and s~iiver, rain dancing on its long hood as Orlovsky revved the engine.

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'Jesus,' Rydell said, 'they don't care who sees 'em comin', do they?'

'They want you see 'em coming,' Freddie said, obscurely, as Warbaby opened the right rear passenger door and began the process of edging his stiff-legged bulk into the back seat.

'Take off,' Warbaby said, slamming the door. 'Protocol. We leave first.'

'Not that way,' Freddie said. 'That'll get us Candlestick Park. That way.'

'Yes,' said Warbaby, 'we have business downtown.' Sad about it.

Downtown San Francisco was really something. With everything hemmed in by hills, built up and down other hills, it gave Rydell a sense of, well, he wasn't sure. Being somewhere. Somewhere in particular. Not that he was sure he liked being there. Maybe it just felt so much the opposite of L.A. and that feeling like you were cut loose in a grid of light that just spilled out to the edge of everything. Up here he felt like he'd come in from somewhere, these old buildings all around and close together, nothing more modern than that one big spikey one with the truss-thing on it (and he knew that one was old, too). Co~ damp air, steam billowing from grates in the pavement. People on the streets, too, and not just the usual kind; people with jobs and clothes. Kind of like Knoxville, he tried to tell himself, but it wouldn't stick. Another strange place.

'No, man, a left, a left' Freddie thumping on the back of his seat. And another city-grid to learn. He checked the cursor on the Patriot's dash-map, looking for a left that would get them to this hotel, the Morrisey.

'Don't bang on Mr. Rydell's seat,' Warbaby said, a sixfoot scroll of fax bunched in his hands, 'he's driving.' It had come in on their way here. Rydell figured it was the jacket on Blix, the guy who'd gotten his throat cut.

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'Fassbinder,' Freddie said. 'You ever hear of this Rainer Fassbinder?'

'I'm not in a joking mood, Freddie,' Warbaby said. 'No joke. I ran Separated at Birth on this Blix, man,

scanned this stiff-shot the Russian sent you before? Says he looks like Rainer Fassbinder. And that's when he's dead, with his throat cut. This Fassbinder, he musta been pretty rough-looking,



huh?'

Warbaby sighed. 'Freddie...'

'Well, German, anyway. Clicked with the nationality-'

'Mr. Blix was not German, Freddie. Says here Mr. Blix wasn't even Mr. Blix. Now let me read. Rydell needs quiet, in order to adjust to driving in the city.'

Freddie grunted, then Rydell heard his fingers clicking over the little computer he carried everywhere.

Rydell took the left he thought he was looking for. Combat zone. Ruins. Fires in steel cans. Hunched dark figures, faces vampire white.

'Don't brake,' Warbaby said. 'Or accelerate.'

Something came spinning, end over end, out of the crow-shouldered coven, splat against the windshield; clung, then fell away, leaving a smudge of filthy yellow. Hadn't it been gray and bloody, like a loop of intestine?

Red at the intersection.

'Run the light,' Warbaby instructed. Rydell did, amid horns of protest. The yellow stuff still there.

'Pull over. No. Right up on the sidewalk. Yes.' The Patriot's Goodyear Streetsweepers bouncing up and over the jagged curb. 'In the glove compartment.'

A light came on as Rydell opened it. Windex, a roll of gray paper towels, and a box of throwaway surgical gloves.

'Go on,' Warbaby said. 'Nobody bother us.'

Rydell pulled a glove on, took the Windex and the towels, got out. 'I)on't get any on you,' he said, thinking of Sublett. He gave the yellow smear a good shot of Windex, wadded tip

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three of the towels in his gloved hand, wiped until the glass was clean. He skinned the glove down around the wet wad, the way they'd shown him in the Academy, but then he didn't know what to do with it.

'Just toss it,' Warbaby said from inside. Rydell did. Then he walked back from the car, five paces, and threw up. Wiped his mouth with a clean towel. He got back in, shut the door, locked it, put the Windex and the towels in the glove compartment.

'You gonna gargle with that, Rydell?'

'Shut up, Freddie,' Warbaby said. The Patriot's suspension creaked as Warbaby leaned forward.

'Leavings from a slaughterhouse, most likely.' he said. 'But it's good you know to take precautions.' He settled back. 'Had us a group here once called Sword of the Pig. You ever hear of that?'

'No,' Rydell said, 'I never did.'

'They'd steal fire-extinguishers out of buildings. Re-charge them with blood. Blood from a slaughterhouse. But they let it out, you understand, that this blood, well, it was human. Then they'd go after the Jesus people, when they marched, with those same extinguishers. .

'Jesus,' Rydell said.

'Exactly,' Warbaby said.

'You see that door, there?' Freddie said.

'What door?' The lobby of the Morrisey made Rydell want to whisper, like being in church or a funeral home. The carpet was so soft, it made him want to lie down and go to sleep.

'That black one,' Freddie said.

Rydell saw a black-lacquered rectangle, perfectly plain, not even a knob. Now that he thought about it, it didn't match anything else in sight. The rest of the place was polished wood, frosted bronze, panels of carved glass. If Freddie hadn't told him it was a door, exactly, he would have taken it for art or something, some kind of painting. 'Yeah? What about it?'

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'That's a restaurant,' Freddie said, 'and it's so expensive, you can't even go in there.'

'Well,' Rydell said, 'there's lots of those.'

'No, man,' Freddie insisted, 'I mean even if you were rich, had money out your ass, you could not go in there. Like it's private. Japanese thing.'

They were standing around by the security desk while Warbaby talked to somebody on a house phone. The three guys on duty at the desk wore IntenSecure uniforms, but really fancy ones, with bronze logo-buttons on their peaked caps.

Rydell had parked the Patriot in an underground garage, floors down in the roots of the place. He hadn't seen anything like that before: teams of people in chef's whites putting together a hundred plates of some skinny kind of salad, little Sanyo vacuum-cleaners bleeping along in pastel herds,

all this back-stage stuff you'd never guess was there if you were just standing here in the lobby. The Executive Suites, where he'd stayed in Knoxville with Karen Mendelsohn, had had these Korean robot bugs that cleaned up when you weren't looking. They'd even had a special one that ate dust off the wallscreen, but Karen hadn't been impressed. It just meant the)' couldn't afford people, she said.

Rydell watched as Warbaby turned, handing the phone to one of the guys in the peaked caps. Warbaby gestured for Freddie and Rydell. Leaned on his cane as they walked toward him.

'They'll take us up now,' he said. The cap Warbaby had handed the phone to came out from behind the counter. He saw Rydell was wearing an IntenSecure shirt with the patches ripped off, but he didn't say anything. Rydell wondered when he was going to have a chance to buy some clothes, and where he should go to do it. He looked at Freddie's shirt, thinking Freddie probably wasn't the guy to ask.

T09

'This way, sir,' the cap said to Warbaby. Freddie and Rydell followed Warbaby across the lobby. Rydell saw how he jabbed his cane, hard, into the carpeting, the brace on his leg ticking like a slow clock.

Sometimes, when she rode hard, when she could really proj, Chevette got free of everything: the city, her body, even time. That was the messenger's high, she knew, and though it felt like freedom, it was really the melding-with, the clicking-in, that did it. The bike between her legs was like some hyperevolved alien tail she'd somehow extruded, as though over patient centuries; a sweet and intricate bone-machine, grown Lexan-armored tires, near-frictionless bearings, and gas-filled shocks. She was entirely part of the city then, one wild-ass little dot of energy and matter, and she made her thousand choices, instant to instant, according to how the traffic flowed, how rain glinted on the streetcar tracks, how a secretary's mahogany hair fell like grace itself, exhausted, to the shoulders of her loden coat.

And she was starting to get that now, in spite of everything; if she just let go, quit thinking, let her mind sink down into the machinery of bone and gear-ring and carbon-wound Japanese paper... But Sammy Sal swerved in beside her, bass pumping from his bike's bone-conduction beatbox. She had to bunny the curb to keep from going over on a BART grate. Her tires left black streaks as the particle-brakes caught, Sammy Sal braking in tandem, his Fluoro-Rimz strohing, fading.

'Something eating you, little honey?' His hand on her arm, rough and angry. 'Like maybe some wonder product makes you smarter, faster? Huh?'

III

13 Tweaking

'Let me go.'

'No way. I got you this job. You're gonna blow it, I'm gonna know why.' He slammed his other palm on the black foam around his bars, killing the music.

'Please, Sammy, I gotta get up to Skinner's-'

He let go of her arm. 'Why?'

She started to cough, caught it, took three deep breaths. 'You ever steal anything, Sammy Sal? I mean, when you were working?'

Sammy Sal looked at her. 'No,' he said, finally, 'but I been known to fuck the clients.'

Chevette shivered. 'Not me.'

'No,' Sammy Sal said, 'but you don't pull tags all the places I do. 'Sides, you a girl.'

'But I stole something last night. From this guy's pocket, up at this party at the Hotel Morrissey.'

Sammy Sal licked his lips. 'How come you had your hand in his pocket? He somebody you know?'

'He was some asshole,' Chevette said.

'Oh. Him. Think I met him.'

'Gave me a hard time. It was sticking out of his pocket.' 'You sure it was his pocket this hard time sticking out of?' 'Sammy Sal,' she said, 'this is serious. I'm scared shitless.' He was looking at her, close. 'That it? You scared? Stole some shit, you scared?'

'Bunny says some security guys called up Allied, even called up Wilson and everything. Looking for me.'

'Shit,' Sammy Sal said, still studying her, 'I thought you high, on dancer. Thought Bunny found out. Come after you, gonna chew your little bitch ear off. You just scared?'

She looked at him. 'That's right.'

'Well,' he said, digging his fingers into the black foam, 'what you scared of?'

'Scared they'll come up to Skinner's and find 'em.'

'Find what?'

I 12.

'These glasses.'

'Spy, baby? Shot? Looking, like Alice 'n' all?' He drummed his fingers on the black foam.

'These black glasses. Like sunglasses, but you can't see through 'em.'

Sammy Sal tilted his beautiful head to one side. 'What's that mean?'

'They're just black.'

'Sunglasses?'

'Yeah. But just black.'

'Huh,' he said, 'you had been fucking the clients, but only just the cute ones, like me, you'd know what those are. Tell you don't have that many upscale boyfriends, pardon me. You date you some architects, some brain-surgeons, you'd know what those are.' His hand came up, forefinger flicking the corroded ball-chain that dangled from the zip.tab at the neck of Skinner's jacket.

'Those VL glasses. Virtual light.'

She'd heard of it, but she wasn't sure what it was. 'They expensive, Sammy Sal?'

'Shit, yes. 'Bout as much as a Japanese car. Not all that much more, though. Got these little EMP-drivers around the lenses, work your optic nerves direct. Friend of mine, he'd bring a pair home from the office where he worked. Landscape architects. Put 'em on, you go out walking, everything looks normal, but every plant you see, every tree, there's this little label hanging there, what its name is, Latin under that. . .'

'But they're solid black.'

'Not if you turn 'em on, they aren't. Turn 'em on, they don't even look like sunglasses. Just make you look, I dunno, serious.' He grinned at her. 'You look too damn' serious anyway. That your problem.'

She shivered. 'Come back up to Skinner's with me, Sammy. Okay?'

'I'on't like heights, much,' he said. 'That little box blow right off the top of that hridge, one night.'

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'Please, Sammy? This thing's got me tweaking. Be okay, riding with you, but I stop and I start thinking about it, I'm scared I'm gonna freeze up. What'll I do? Maybe I get there and it's the cops? What'll Skinner say, the cops come up there? Maybe I go in to work tomorrow and Bunny cans me. What'll I do?'

Sammy Sal gave her the look he'd given her the night she'd asked him to get her on at Allied. Then he grinned. Mean and funny. All those sharp white teeth. 'Keep it between your legs, then. Come on, you try to keep up.'

He bonged off the curb, his Fluoro-Rimz flaring neonwhite when he came down pumping. He must have thumbed Play then, because she caught the bass throbbing as she came after him through the traffic.

14 Loveless

'You want another beer, honey?'

The woman behind the bar had an intricate black tracery along either side of her shaven skull, down to what Yamazaki took to be her natural hairline. The tattoo's style combined Celtic knots and cartoon lightning-bolts. Her hair, above it, was like the pelt of some nocturnal animal that had fed on peroxide and Vaseline. Her left ear had been randomly pierced, perhaps a dozen times, by a single length of fine steel wire. Ordinarily Yamazaki found this sort of display quite interesting, but now he was lost in composition, his notebook open before him.

'No,' he said, 'thank you.'

'Don't wanna get fucked up, or what?' Her tone perfectly cheerful. He looked up from the notebook. She was waiting.

'Yes?'

'You wanna sit here, you gotta buy something.'

'Beer, please.'

'Same?'

'Yes, please.'

She opened a bottle of Mexican beer, fragments of ice sliding down the side as she put it down on the bar in front of him, and moved on to the customer to his left. Yamazaki returned to his notebook.

Skinner has tried repeatedly to convey that there is no agenda here whatever, no underlying structure. Only the

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bones, the bridge, the Thomasson itself. When the Little Grande came, it was not Godzilla. Indeed, there is no precisely equivalent myth in this place and culture (though this is perhaps not

equally true of Los Angeles). The Bomb, so long awaited, is gone. In its place came these plagues, the slowest of cataclysms. But when Godzilla came at last to Tokyo, we were foundering in denial and profound despair. In all truth, we welcomed the most appalling destruction. Sensing, even as we mourned our dead, that we were again presented with the most astonishing of opportunities.

'That's real nice,' the man to his left said, placing his left hand on Yamazaki's notebook. 'That's gotta be Japanese, it's so nice.' Yamazaki looked up, smiling uncertainly, into eyes of a most peculiar emptiness. Bright, focused, yet somehow flat. 'From Japan, yes,' Yamazaki said. The hand withdrew slowly, caressingly, from his notebook. 'Loveless,' the man said. 'I'm sorry?' 'Loveless. My name.' 'Yamazaki.'

The eyes, very pale and wide-set, were the eyes of something watching from beneath still water. 'Yeah. Figured it was something like that.' An easy smile, pointed with archaic gold. 'Yes? Like?' 'Something Japanese. Something 'zaki, something 'zuki. Some shit like that.' The smile growing somehow sharper. 'Drink up your Corona there, Mr. Yamazuki.' The stranger's hand, closing hard around his wrist. 'Gettin' warm, huh?'

15 In 1015

There was a product called Kil'Z that Rydell had gotten to know at the Academy. It smelled, but faintly, of some ancient hair-tonic, flowery and cool, and you used it in situations where considerable bodily fluids had been spilled. It was an anti-viral agent, capable of nuking HIV's i through ~, Crimean-Congo, Mokola fever, Tarzana Dengue, and the Kansas City flu. He smelled it now, as the IntenSecure man used a blackanodyzed passkey to open the door into 1015. 'We'll be sure to lock it up when we go,' Warbaby said, touching the brim of his hat with his index finger. The IntenSecure man hesitated, then said, 'Yessir. Anything else you want?' 'No,' Warbaby said, and went into the room, Freddie on his heels. Rydell decided the thing for him to do was follow them in. He did, closing the door in the IntenSecure man's face. Dark. The curtains drawn. Smell of Kil'Z. The lights came on. Freddie's hand on the switch. Warbaby staring at a lighter patch of the brick-colored carpet, the place where the bed must've been. Rydell glanced around. Old-fashioned, expensive-looking. Clubby, sort of. The walls covered in some kind of shiny, white-and-green striped stuff like silk. Polished wooden furniture. Chairs upholstered mossy green. A big brass lamp with a dark green shade. A faded old picture in a fat gilt frame. Rydell went over for a closer look. A horse pulling a

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kind of two-wheeled wagon-thing, just a little seat there, with a bearded man in a hat like Abe Lincoln. 'Currier & Ives,' it said. Rydell wondered which one was the horse. Then he saw a round, brownish-purple splotch of dried blood on the glass. It had crackled up, the way mud does in a summer creek bed, but tiny. Hadn't had any of that Kil'Z on it, either, by the look of it. He stepped back.

Freddie, in his big shorts and the shirt with the pictures of pistols, had settled into one of the green chairs and was opening his laptop. Rydell watched him reel out a little black cable and pop it into the jack beside the telephone. He wondered if Freddie's legs got cold, wearing shorts up here in November. He'd noticed that some black people were so far into fashion, they'd wear clothes like there wasn't any such thing as weather.

Warbaby just stared at the place where the bed had been, looking sad as ever. 'Well?' he said.

'I'm gettin' it, I'm gettin' it,' Freddie said, twiddling a little ball on his laptop.

Warbaby grunted. Watching him, it looked to Rydell as though the lenses of his black-framed glasses winked black for a second. Trick of the light. Then Rydell got this funny feeling, because Warbaby just looked right through him, his traveling gaze fixed on some moving something so keenly that Rydell himself was turning to look-at nothing.

He looked back at Warbaby. Warbaby's cane came up, pointing at the space where the bed would have been, then swung back down to the carpet. Warbaby sighed.

'Want the site-data from SFPD now?' Freddie asked.

Warbaby grunted. His eyes were darting from side to side. Rydell thought of tv documentaries about voodoo, the priests' eyes rolling when the gods got into them.

Freddie twirled the trackball under his finger. 'Prints, hair, skin-flakes . . . You know what a hotel room is.'

Rydell couldn't stand it. He stepped in front of Warbaby and looked him in the eye. 'What the hell you doing?'

l i8

Warbaby saw him. Gave him a slow sad smile and removed his glasses. Took a big, navy blue silk handkerchief from the side pocket of his long coat and polished the glasses. He handed them to Rydell. 'Put them on.'

Rydell looked down at the glasses and saw that the lenses were black now.

'Go on,' Warbaby said.

Rydell noticed the weight as he slid them on. Pitch black. Then there was a stutter of soft fuzzy ball-lightning, like what you saw when you rubbed your eyes in the dark, and he was looking at Warbaby. Just behind Warbaby, hung on some invisible wall, were words, numbers, bright yellow. They came into focus as he looked at them, somehow losing Warbaby, and he saw that they were forensic stats.

'Or,' Freddie said, 'you can just be here now-'

And the bed was back, sodden with blood, the man's soft, heavy corpse splayed out like a frog. That thing beneath his chin, blue-black, bulbous.

Rydell's stomach heaved, bile rose in his throat, and then a naked woman rolled up from another bed, in a different room, her hair like silver in some impossible moonlight- Rydell yanked the glasses off. Freddie lay back in the chair, shaking with silent laughter, his laptop across his knees. 'Man,' he managed, 'you oughta seen the look you had! Put parta the guy's porno on there from Arkady's evidence report...'

'Freddie,' Warbaby said, 'are you all that anxious to be looking for work?'

'Nossir, Mr. Warbaby.'

'I can be hard, Freddie. You know that.'

'Yessir.' Freddie sounded worried now.

'A man died in this room. Someone bent over him on this bed,' he gestured at the bed that wasn't there, 'cut him a new smile, and pulled his tongue out through it. That isn't a casual homicide. You don't learn those kinds of tricks with anatomy from watching television, Freddie.' He held out his hand to

"9

Rydell. Rydell gave him the glasses. Their lenses were black again.

Freddie swallowed. 'Yessir, Mr. Warbaby. Sorry.'

'How'd you do that?' Rydell asked.

Warbaby wiped the glasses again and put them back on. They were clear now. 'There are drivers in the frames and lenses. They affect the nerves directly.'

'It's a virtual light display,' Freddie said, eager to change the subject. 'Anything can be digitized, you can see it there.'

'Telepresence,' Rydell said.

'Naw,' Freddie said, 'that's light. That's photons coming out and hitting on your eye. This doesn't work like that. Mr. Warbaby walks around and looks at stuff, he can see the data-feed at the same time. You put those glasses on a man doesn't have eyes, optic nerve's okay, he can see the input. That's why they built the first ones. For blind people.'

Rydell went to the drapes, pulled them apart, looked down into some night street in this other city. People walking there, a few.

'Freddie,' Warbaby said, 'flip me that Washington girl off the decrypted IntenSecure feed. The one works for Allied Messenger Service.'

Freddie nodded, did something with his computer.

'Yes,' Warbaby said, gazing at something only he could see, 'it's possible. Entirely possible.'

Rydell, and he removed the glasses, 'you have a look.' Rydell let the drapes fall back, went to Warbaby, took the glasses, put them on. Somehow he felt it would be a mistake to hesitate, even if it meant having to look at the dead guy again.

Black into color into full face and profile of this girl. Fingerprints. Image of her right retina blown up to the size of her head. Stats. WASHINGTON, CIIEVETTE-MARII.. Big gray eyes, long straight nose, a little grin for the camera. I)ark hair cut short and spikey, except for this crazy ponytail stuck up from the crown of her head.

12.0

'Well,' Warbaby asked, 'what do you think?'

Rydell couldn't figure what he was being asked. Finally he just said 'Cute.'

He heard Freddie snort, like that was a dumb thing to say.

But Warbaby said 'Good. That way you remember.'

Sammy Sal lost her, where Bryant stuttered out in that jackstraw tumble of concrete tank-traps. Big as he was, he had no equal when it came to riding tight; he could take turns that just weren't possible; he could bongo and pull a three-sixty if he had to, and Chevette had seen him do it on a bet. But she had a good idea where she'd find him.

She looked up, just as she whipped between the first of the slabs, and the bridge seemed to look down at her, its eyes all torches and neon. She'd seen pictures of what it had looked like, before, when they drove cars back and forth on it all day, but she'd never quite believed them. The bridge was what it was, and somehow always had been. Refuge, weirdness, where she slept, home to however many and all their dreams.

She skidded past a fish-wagon, losing traction in shaved ice, in gray guts the gulls would fight over in the morning. The fish man yelled something after her, but she didn't catch it.

She rode on, between stalls and stands and the evening's commerce, looking for Sammy Sal. Found him where she thought she would, leaning on his bars beside an espresso wagon, not even breathing hard. A Mongolian girl with cheekbones like honey-coated chisels was running him a cup. Chevette bopped the particle-brakes and slid in beside him.

'Thought I'd have time for a short one,' he said, reaching for the tiny cup.

Her legs ached with trying to keep up with him. 'You

12.2.

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better,' she said, with a glance toward the bridge, then she gestured to the girl to run her one. She watched the steaming puck of brown grounds thumped out, the fresh scoop, the quick short tamp. The girl swui~g the handle up and twisted the basket back into the machine.

'You know,' Sammy Sal said, ausing before a first shallow sip, 'you shouldn't have this kind of problem. You don't need to. There's only but two kinds of people. People can afford hotels like that, they're one kind We're the other. Used to be, like, a middle class, people in between. But not anymore. How you and I relate to those other people, we proj their messages on. We get paid for it. We try nt to drip rain on the carpet. And we get by, okay? But what happens on the interface? What happens when we touch?'

Chevette burned her mouth on espresso.

'Crime,' Sammy Sal said, 'sex. Maybe drugs.' He put his cup down on the wagon's plywood counter.

'About covers  
it.,

'You fuck them,' Chevette said 'You said.'

Sammy Sal shrugged. 'I like to. Trouble comes down from that, I'm up for it. But you just went and did something, no reason. Reached through the membrane. Let your fingers do the walking. Bad idea.'

Chevette blew on her coffee. 'I know.'

'So how you going to deal witi whatever's coming down?'

'I'm going up to Skinner's room, get those glasses, take 'em up on the roof, and throw 'em over.'

'Then what?'

'Then I go on the way I do, 'til somebody turns up.'

'Then what?'

~'Didn't do it. Don't know shit Never happened.~'

He nodded, slow, hut he was studying her. 'Uh-huh. Maybe. Maybe not. Somebody wants those glasses back, they can lean on you real hard. Anther way to go: we get 'em, ride back over to Allied, tell 'em ~ow it happened.'

12.3

'We?'

'Uh-huh. I'll go with you.' 'I'll lose my job.'

'You can get you another job.'

She drank the little cup off in a gulp. Wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. 'Job's all I got, Sammy. You know that. You got it for me.'

'You got a place to sleep, up there. You got that crazy old motherfucker took you in-'

'I feed him, Sammy Sal-'

'You got your ass intact, honey. Some rich man decide to screw you over, 'cause you took his data-glasses, maybe that ceases to be the case.'

Chevette put her empty cup down on the counter, dug in the pockets of her jacket. Gave the girl fifteen for the two coffees and a two-dollar tip. Squared her shoulders under Skinner's jacket, the ball-chains rattling. 'No. Once that shit's in the Bay, nobody can prove I did anything.'

Sammy Sal sighed. 'You're an innocent.'

It sounded funny, like she didn't know you could use the word that way. 'You coming, Sammy Sal?' 'What for?'

'Talk to Skinner. Get between him and his magazines. That's where I left them. Behind his magazines. Then he won't see me get them out. I'll go up on the roof and off them.'

'Okay,' he said, 'but I say you'll just be fucking up worse.'

'I'll take the chance, okay?' She dismounted and started wheeling her bike toward the bridge.

'I guess you will,' Sammy Sal said, but then he was off his bike, too, and pushing it, behind her.

There'd only ever been three really good, that was to say seriously magic, times in Chevette's life. One was the night

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Sammy Sal had told her he'd try to get her on at Allied, and he had. One was the day she'd paid cash money for her bike at City Wheels, and rode right on out of there. And there'd been the night she first met Lowell at Cognitive Dissidents-if you could count that now as lucky.

Which was not to say that these were the times she'd been luckiest, because those were all times that had been uniformly and life-threateningly shitty, except for the part where the luck cut in. She'd been lucky the night she'd gone over the razor-wire and out of the Juvenile Center outside Beaverton, but that had been one deeply shitty night. She had scars on both palms to prove it.

And she'd been very lucky the time she'd first wandered out onto the bridge, the lower deck, her knees wobbling with a fever she'd picked up on her way down the coast. Everything hurt her: the lights, every color, every sound, her mind pressing out into the world like a swollen ghost. She remembered the loose, flapping sole of her sneaker dragging over the littered deck, how that hurt her, too, and how she had to sit down, finally, everything up and turning, around her, the Korean man running out of his little store to yell at her, get up, get up, not here, not here. And Not Here had seemed like such a totally good idea, she'd gone straight there, right over backward, and hadn't even felt her skull slam the pavement.

And that was where Skinner had found her, though he didn't remember or maybe want to talk about it; she was never sure. She didn't think he could've gotten her up to his room on his own; he needed help to get back up there himself, with his hip and everything. But there were still days when an energy got into him and you could see how strong he must've been, once, and then he'd do things you didn't think he could do, so she'd never be sure.

The first thing she'd seen, opening her eyes, was the round church-window with the rags stuck into the gaps, and sun

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coming through it, little dots and blobs of colors she'd never seen before, all swimming in her fevered eye like bugs in water. Then the bone-crack time, the virus wringing her like the old man had wrung the gray towels he wrapped her head in. When the fever broke and rolled away, out a hundred miles it felt like, back out to there and over the rim of sickness, her hair fell out in dry clumps, stuck to the damp towels like some kind of dirty stuffing.

When it grew back, it came in darker, nearly black. So after that she felt sort of like a different person. Or anyway her own person, she'd figured.

And she'd stayed with Skinner, doing what he said to get them food and keep things working up in his room. He'd send her down to the lower deck, where the junk-dealers spread their stuff. Send her down with anything: a wrench that said 'BMW' on the side, a crumbling cardboard box of those flat black things that had played music once, a bag of plastic dinosaurs. She never figured any of it would be worth anything, but somehow it always was. The wrench bought a week's food, and two of the round things brought even more. Skinner knew where old things came from, what they'd been for, and could guess when somebody'd want them. At first she was worried that she wouldn't get enough for the things she sold, but he didn't seem to care. If something didn't sell, like the plastic dinosaurs, it just went back into stock, what he called the stuff ranged around the bases of the four walls.

As she'd gotten stronger, and her new hair grew in, she'd started ranging farther from the room on top of the tower. Not into either city, at first, though she'd walked over to Oakland a couple of times, over the cantilever, and looked out at it. Things felt different over there, though she was never sure why. But where she felt best was on the suspension bridge, all wrapped in it, all the people hanging and hustling and doing what they did, and the way the whole thing grew a little, changed a little, every day. There wasn't anything like that, not that she knew of, not up in Oregon.

At first she didn't even know that it made her feel good; it was just this weird thing, maybe the

fever had left her a little crazy, but one day she'd decided she was just happy, a little happy, and she'd have to get used to it.

But it turned out you could be sort of happy and restless at the same time, so she started keeping back a little of Skinner's junk-money to use to explote the city. And that was plenty to do, for a while. She found Haight Street and walked it all the way to the wall around Skywalker, with the Temple of Doom and everything sticking up in there, but she didn't try to go in. There was this long skinny park that led up to it, called the Panhandle, and that was 5till public. Way too public, she thought, with people, mostly old or anyway looking that way, stretched out side by side, wrapped in silvery plastic to keep the rays off, this crinkly stuff that glittered like those Elvis suits in a video they'd showed them sometimes, up in Beaverton. It kind of made her think of maggots, like if somebody rolled each one up in its own little piece of foil. They had a way of moving like that, just a little bit, and it creeped her out.

The Haight sort of creeped her out, too, even though there were stretches that felt almost like you were on the bridge, nobody normal in sight anc people doing things right out in public, like the cops were never going to come at all. But she wasn't ever scared, on the bridge, maybe because there were always people around she knew, people who lived there and knew Skinner. But she liked looking around the Haight because there were a lot of little shops, a lot of places that sold cheap food. She knew this bagel place where you could buy them a day old, and Skinner said they were better that way anyway. He said fresh bagels were the next thing to poison, like they'd plug you up or something. He had a lot of ideas like that. Most of the shops, she could actually go into, if she was quiet and smilci a little and kept her hands in her pockets.

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One day on Haight she saw this shop called Colored People and she couldn't figure out what it sold. There was a curtain behind the window and a few things set out in front of that: cactus in pots, big rusty hunks of metal, and a bunch of these little steel things, polished and bright. Rings and things. Little rods with round balls on the ends. They were hung on the needles of the cactus and spread out on the rusted metal. She decided she'd open the door and just look in, because she'd seen a couple of people going in and out and knew it wasn't locked. A big fat guy in white coveralls, with his head all shaved, coming out, whistling, and these two tall women, black-haired, like handsome crows, all dressed in black, going in. She just wondered what it was. She stuck her head in there. There was a woman with short red hair behind a counter, and every wall covered with these bright cartoony pictures, colors that made your eyes jump, all snakes and dragons and everything. So many pictures it was hard to take it in, so it wasn't until the woman said come on, don't just block the door, and Chevette had come in, that she saw this woman wore a sleeveless flannel shirt, open all the way down, and her front and arms all covered, solid, with those same pictures.

Now Chevette had seen tattoos in the Juvenile Center, and on the street before that, but those were the kind you did yourself, with ink and needles, thread and an old ballpoint. She walked over and took a good long look at the colors exploding between the woman's breasts-which, though she was maybe thirty, weren't as big as Chevette's-and there was an octopus there, a rose, bolts of blue lightning, all of it tangling together, no untouched skin at all.

'You want something,' the woman said, 'or you just looking?'

Chevette blinked. 'No,' she heard herself say, 'hut I was sort of wondering what those little metal things arc, in the window.'

12.8

The woman swung a big black book around on the counter, [like a school binder except its covers were chrome-studded black leather. Flipped it open and Chevette was looking at this ~uy's thing, a big one, just hanging there. There were two Little steel balls on either side of its wedge-shaped head.

Chevette just sort of grunted.

'Call that an amphalang,' the woman said. She started flipping through the album. 'Barbells,' she said. 'Septum spike. Labret stud. That's a chunk ring. This one's called a milkchurn. These are bomb weights. Surgical steel, niobium, white gold, fourteen-carat.' She flipped it back to the jim with the bolt, sideways through the end of it. Maybe it was a trick, Chevette thought, a trick picture.

'That's gotta hurt,' Chevette said.

'Not as much as you'd think,' this big deep voice, 'and then it starts to feel jus' good...'

Chevette looked up at this black guy, his big white grin, all those teeth, a micropore filtration-mask pulled down under his chin, and that was how she'd met Samuel Saladin DuPree.

Two days later she saw him again in Union Square, hanging with a bunch of bike messengers. She'd already put messengers down as something to watch for in the city. They had clothes and hair like



nobody else, and bikes with neon and light-up wheels, handlebars carved up and over like scorpion-tails. Helmets with little radios built in. Either they were going somewhere fast or they were just goofing, hanging, drinking coffee.

He was standing there with his legs over either side of the cross-tube of his bike, eating half a sandwich. Music was coming out of the black-flecked pink frame, mostly bass, and he was sort of bopping to it. She edged up to get a better look at the bike, how it was made, the intricacy of its brakes and shifters pulling her straight in. Beauty.

'l)ang,' he said, around a mouthful of sandwich, 'dang, my am-phalang. Where did you get those shoes?'

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They were Skinner's, old canvas sneakers, too long for her so she'd stuck some paper in the toes.

'Here.' He handed her the other half of his sandwich. 'I'm full already.'

'Your bike,' she said, taking the sandwich.

'What about it?'

'It's . . . it's . . .'

'Like it?'

'Uh-huh!'

He grinned. 'Sugawara frame, Sugawara rings 'n' 'railers, Zuni hydraulics. Clean.'

'I like the wheels,' Chevette said.

'Well,' he said, 'that's just flash. Lets some motherfucker see you 'fore he runs you over, y'know?'

Chevette touched the handlebars. Felt that music.

'Eat that sandwich,' he said. 'Look like you need it.'

She did, and she did, and that was how they got to talking.

Shouldering their bikes up the plywood stairs, Chevette telling him about the Japanese girl, how she fell out of that elevator. How she, Chevette, wouldn't even have been at that party if she hadn't been standing right there, right then. Sammy grunting, his Fluoro-Rimz gone dead opal now they weren't turning.

'Who was it throwing this do, Chev? You think to ask anybody that?'

Remembering that Maria. 'Cody. Said it was Cody's party...'

Sammy Sal stopped, his brows lifting. 'Huh. Cody Harwood?'

She shrugged, the paper bike next to weightless on her shoulder. 'Dunno.'

'You know who that is?'

'No.' Reaching the platform, putting the bike down to wheel it.

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'That's some serious money. Advertising. Harwood Levine, but that was his father.'

'Well, I said it was rich.' Not paying him much attention.

'His father's company did Millbank's PR, both eleclions.'

But she was activating the recognition-loop now, nt bothering with the screamers from Radio Shack. Sammy's FluoroRimz pulsed as he set his bike down beside hers. 'I'll loop it to mine. Be okay here anyway.'

'That's what I said,' Sammy said, 'last two I bst.' He watched her pull the ioop out, twist it around his bike's frame, careful of the pink-and-black enamel, and seal it with her thumbprint. She headed for the yellow lift, glad to see it there, where she'd left it, and not at the top of the track. 'Let's do this thing, okay?' Remembering she'd meant to buy Skinner some soup from Thai Johnny's wagon, that sweet-sour lemnon one he liked.

When she'd told Sammy she wanted to mess, wanted her own bike, he'd gotten her this little Mexican headset taught you every Street lfl San Francisco. Three days and she had it down, pretty much, even though he said that wasn't like the map in a messenger's head. You needed to know buildings, hcv to get into them, how to act, how to keep your wheels fron getting stolen. But when he'd taken her in to meet Bunny, :hat was magic.

Three weeks and she'd earned enough to buy her first serious bike. That was magic, too.

Somewhere around then she started hanging out after work with a couple of the other Allied girls, Tami Two and Alice Maybe, and that was how she'd wound up at Cognitive Dissidents, that night she'd met Lowell.

'Nobody locks their door here,' Sammy said, on t~c ladder below her, as she lifted the hatch.

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Chevette closed her eyes, saw a bunch of cops (whatever that would look like) standing around

Skinner's room. Opened her eyes and stuck her head up, eyes level with the floor. Skinner was on his bed, his little television propped on his chest, big old yellow toenails sticking out of holes in his lumpy gray socks. He looked at her over the television. 'Hey,' she said, 'I brought Sammy. From work.' She climbed up, making room for Sammy Sal's head and shoulders.

'Howdy,' Sammy Sal said.

Skinner just stared at him, colors from the little screen flicking across his face.

'How you doin'?' Sammy Sal asked, climbing up.

'Bring anything to eat?' Skinner asked her.

'Thai Johnny'll have soup ready in a while,' she said, moving toward the shelves, the magazines. Dumb-ass thing to say and she knew it, because Johnny's soup was always ready; he'd started it years ago and just kept adding to the pot.

'How you doin', Mr. Skinner?' Sammy Sal stood slightly hunched, feet apart, holding his helmet with both hands, like a boy saying hello to his girlfriend's father. He winked at Chevette.

'What you winkin' at, boy?' Skinner shut the set off and snapped its screen shut. Chevette had bought it for him off a container-ship in the Trap. He said he couldn't tell the difference anymore between the 'programs' and the 'commercials,' whatever that meant.

'Somethin' in my eye, Mr. Skinner,' Sammy Sal said, his big feet shifting, even more like a nervous boyfriend. Made Chevette want to laugh. She got behind Sammy's back and reached in behind the magazines. It was there. Into her pocket.

'You ever seen the view from up top here, Sammy?' She knew she had this big crazy grin on, and Skinner was staring at it, trying to figure what was happening, hut she didn't care. She swung up the ladder to the roof-hatch.

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'Gosh, no, Chevette, honey. Must be just breathtaking.'

'Hey,' Skinner said, as she opened the hatch, 'what's got into you?'

Then she was up and out and into one of the weird pockets of stillness you got up there sometimes. Usually the wind made you want to lie down and hang on, but then there were these patches when nothing moved, dead calm. She heard Sammy Sal coming up the ladder behind her. She had the case out, was moving toward the edge.

'Hey,' he said, 'lemme see.'

She raised the thing, winding up to throw.

He plucked it from her fingers.

'Hey!'

'Shush.' Opening it, pulling them out. 'Huh. Nice ones...'

'Sammy!' Reaching for them. He gave her the case instead.

'See how you do this now?' Opening them, one side-piece in either hand. 'Left is aus, right's em. Just move 'em a little.' She saw how he was doing it, in the light that spilled up through the hatch from Skinner's room. 'Here. Check it out.' He put them on her.

She was facing the city when he did it. Financial district, the Pyramid with its brace on from the Little Grande, the hills behind that. 'Fuck a duck,' she said, these towers blooming there, buildings bigger than anything, a stone regular grid of them, marching in from the hills. Each one maybe four blocks at the base, rising straight and featureless to spreading screens like the colander she used to steam vegetables. Then Chinese writing filled the sky. 'Sammy.. .'

She felt him grab her as she lost her balance.

The Chinese writing twisted into English.

SUNFLOWER CORPORATION

'Sammy...'

'Huh?'

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'What the fuck is this?' Anything she focused on, another label lit the sky, dense patches of technical words she didn't understand.

'How should I know,' he said. 'Let me see.' Reaching for the glasses.

'Hey,' she heard Skinner say, his voice carrying up through the hatch, 'it's Scooter. What you doin' back here?'

Sammy Sal pulled the glasses off and she was kneeling, looking down through the hatch at that Japanese nerd who came around to see Skinner, the college boy or social worker or whatever he was. But he looked even more lost than usual. He looked scared. And there was somebody with him.

'Hey, Scooter,' Skinner said, 'how you doing?'

'This Mr. Loveless,' Yamazaki said. 'He ask to meet you.'

Gold flashed up at Chevette from the stranger's grin. 'Hi there,' he said, taking his hand out of the side pocket of his long black raincoat. The gun wasn't very big, but there was something too easy in the way he held it, like a carpenter with a hammer. He was wearing surgical gloves. 'Why don't you come on down here?'

'How this works,' Freddie said, handing Rydell a debit-card, 'you pay five hundred to get in, then you're credited for five hundred dollars' worth of merchandise.'

Rydell looked at the card. Some Dutch bank. If this was how they were going to pay him, up here, maybe it was time he asked them what he'd actually be getting. But maybe he should wait until Freddie was in a better mood.

Freddie said this Container City place was a good quick bet for clothes. Regular clothes, Rydell hoped. They'd left Warbaby drinking herbal tea in some kind of weird coffee joint because he said he needed to think. Rydell had gone out to the Patriot while Warbaby and Freddie held a quick huddle, there.

'What if he wants us, wants the car?'

'He'll beep us,' Freddie said. He showed Rydell how to put the debit-card into a machine that gave him a five-hundred-dollar Container City magstrip and validated the parking on the Patriot. 'This way.' Freddie pointed at a row of turnstiles.

'Aren't you gonna buy one?' Rydell asked.

'Shit, no,' Freddie said. 'I don't get my clothes off boats.' He took a card out of his wallet and showed Rydell the IntenSecure logo.

'I thought you guys were strictly freelance.'

'Strictly hut frequently,' Freddie said, feeding the card to a turnstile. It clicked him through. Rydell fed it the magstrip and followed him.

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17 The trap

'Costs people five hundred bucks just to get in here?'

'Why people call it the Trap. But that's just how they make sure the overhead's covered. You don't come in here unless you know you're gonna drop that much. Gives 'em a guaranteed per-cap.'

Container City turned out to be the biggest semi-roofed mall Rydell had ever seen, if you could call something a mall that had ships parked in it, big ones. And the five-hundred-dollar guaranteed purchase didn't seem to have put anybody off; there were more people in here than out on the street, it looked like. 'Hong Kong money,' Freddie said. 'Bought 'em a hunk of the Embarcadero.'

'Hey,' Rydell said, pointing at a dim, irregular outline that rose beyond gantries and towers of floodlights, 'that's that bridge, the one people live on.'

'Yeah,' Freddie said, giving him a funny look, 'crazy-ass people.' Steering Rydell onto an escalator that ran up the white-painted flank of a container ship.

Rydell looked around at Container City as they rose. 'Crazier than anything in L.A.,' he said, admiringly.

'No way,' Freddie said, 'I'm from L.A. This just a mall, man.'

Rydell bought a burgundy nylon bomber, two pairs of black jeans, socks, underwear, and three black t-shirts. That came out to just over five hundred. He used the debit-card to make up the difference.

'Hey,' he told Freddie, his purchases in a big yellow Container City bag, 'that's a pretty good deal. Thanks.'

Freddie shrugged. 'Where they say those jeans made?' Rydell checked the tag. 'African Union.'

'Slave labor,' Freddie said, 'you shouldn't buy that shit.'

'I didn't think about it. They got any food in here?'

'Food Fair, yeah...'

'You ever try this Korean pickled shit? It's hot, man. . .'

'I got an ulcer.' Freddie was methodically spooning plain

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white frozen yogurt into his mouth with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

'Stress. That's stress-related, Freddie.'

Freddie looked at Rydell over the rim of the pink plastic yogurt cup. 'You trying to be funny?'

'No,' Rydell said. 'I just know about ulcers because they thought my daddy had them.'

'Well, didn't he? Your "daddy"? Did he have 'em or not?'

'No,' Rydell said. 'He had stomach cancer.'

Freddie winced, put his yogurt down, rattled the ice in his paper cup of Evian and drank some.

'Hernandez,' he said, 'he told us you were trainin' to be a cop, some redneck place. . .'  
'Knoxville,' Rydell said. 'I was a cop. Just not for very long.'  
'I hear you, I hear you,' Freddie said, like he wanted Rydell to relax, maybe even to like him.  
'You got trained and all? Cop stuff?'  
'Well, they try to give you a little bit of everything,' Rydell said. 'Crime scene investigation  
... Like up in that room today. I could tell they hadn't done the Super Glue thing.'  
'No?'  
'No. There's this chemical in Super Glue sticks to the water in a print, see, and about ninety-  
eight percent of a print is water. So you've got this little heater, for the glue? Screws into a  
regular light socket? So you tape up the doors and windows with garbage bags and stuff and you  
leave that little heater turned on. Leave it twenty-four hours, then you come back and purge the  
room.'  
'How you do that?'  
'Open up the doors, windows. Then you dust. But they hadn't done that, over at the hotel. It  
leaves this film all over. And a smell...'  
Freddie raised his eyebrows. 'Shit. You almost kinda technical, aren't you, Rydell?'  
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'Mostly it's just common sense,' he said. 'Like not going to the bathroom.'  
'Not going?'  
'At a crime scene. Don't ever use the toilet. Don't flush it. You drop something in a toilet, the  
way the water goes  
You ever notice how it goes up, underneath there?' Freddie nodded.  
'Well, maybe your perp flushed it after he dropped something in there. But it doesn't always work  
like it's meant to, and it might be just floating back there ... You come in and flush it again,  
then it's gone for sure.'  
'Damn,' Freddie said, 'I never knew that.'  
'Common sense,' Rydell said, wiping his lips with a paper napkin.  
'I think Mr. Warbaby's right about you, Rydell.'  
'How's that?'  
'He says we're wasting you, just letting you drive that four-by-four. Bein' straight with you,  
man, I wasn't sure, myself.' Freddie waited, like he figured Rydell might take offense.  
'Well?'  
'You know that brace on Mr. Warbaby's leg?'  
'Yeah.'  
'You know that bridge, the one you noticed when we were coming up here?'  
'Yeah.'  
'And Warbaby, he showed you that picture of that tough-ass messenger kid?'  
'Yeah.'  
'Well,' Freddy said, 'She's the one Mr. Warbaby figures took that man's property. And she lives  
out on that bridge, Rydell. And that bridge, man, that's one evil motherfucking place. Those  
people anarchists, antichrists, cannibal motherfuckers out there, man . . .'  
'I heard it was just a bunch of homeless people,' Rydell  
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said, vaguely recollecting some documentary he'd seen in Knoxville, 'just sort of making do.'  
'No, man,' Freddie said, 'homeless fuckers, they're on the street. Those bridge motherfuckers,  
they're like king-hell satanists and shit. You think you can just move on out there yourself? No  
fucking way. They'll just let their own kind, see? Like a cult. With 'nitiations and shit.'  
'Nitiations?'  
'Black 'nitiates,' Freddie said, leaving Rydell to decide that he probably didn't mean it  
racially.  
'Okay,' Rydell said, 'but what's it got to do with that brace on Warbaby's knee?'  
'That's where he got that knee hassled,' Freddie said. 'He went out there, knowing he was takin'  
his life in his hands, to try and recover this little baby. Baby girl,' Freddie added, like he  
liked the ring of that. 'Cause these bridge motherfuckers, they'll do that.'  
'Do what?' Rydell asked, flashing back to the Pooky Bear killings.  
'They steal children,' Freddie said. 'And Mr. Warbaby and me, we can't either of us go out there  
anymore, Rydell, because those motherfuckers are on to us, you followin' me?'  
'So you want me to?' Rydell asked, stuffing his folded napkin into the oily white paper box that  
had held his two Kim Chee WaWa's.  
'I'll let Mr. Warbaby explain it to you,' Freddie said.

They found Warbaby where they'd left him, in this dark, high-ceilinged coffee place in what Freddie said was North Beach. He was wearing those glasses again and Rydell wondered what he might be seeing.

Rydell had brought his blue Samsonite in from the Patriot, his bag from Container City. He went into the bathroom to change his clothes. There was just the one, unisex, and it really was a bathroom because it had a bathtub in it. Not like

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anybody used it, because there was this mermaid painted full-size on the inside, with a brown cigarette butted out on her stomach, just above where the scales started.

Rydell discovered that Kevin's khakis were split up the ass. He wondered how long he'd been walking around like that. But he hadn't noticed it back at Container City, so he hoped it had happened in the car. He took the IntenSecure shirt off, stuffed it into the wastebasket, put on one of the black t-shirts. Then he unlaced his trainers and tried to figure out a way to change pants, socks, and underwear without having to put his feet on the floor, which was wet. He thought about doing it in the tub, but that looked sort of scummy, too. Decided you could manage it, sort of, by standing with your feet on the top of your sneakers, and then sort of half-sitting on the toilet. He put everything he took off into the basket. Wondering how much the debit-card Freddie had given him was still good for, he transferred his wallet to the right back pocket of his new jeans. Put on his new jacket. Washed his hands and face in a gritty trickle of water. Combed his hair. Packed the rest of his new clothes into the Samsonite, saving the Container City bag to keep dirty laundry in.

He wanted a shower, but he didn't know when he'd get one. Clean clothes were the next best thing. Warbaby looked up when Rydell got back to his table. 'Freddie's told you a little about the bridge, has he, Rydell?'

'Says it's all baby-eatin' satanists.'

Warbaby glowered at Freddie. 'Too colorfully put, perhaps, but all too painfully close to the truth, Mr. Rydell. Not at all a wholesome place. And effectively outside the reach of the law. You won't find our friends Svobodov or Orlovsky out there, for instance. Not in any official capacity.'

Rydell caught Freddie start to grin at that, but saw how it was pinched off by Warha by's glare.

'Freddie gave me the idea you want me to go out there, Mr. Warhahy. Go out there and find that girl.~

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'Yes,' Warbaby said, gravely, 'we do. I wish that I could tell you it won't be dangerous, but that is not the case.'

'Well.. . How dangerous is it, Mr. Warbaby?'

'Very,' Warbaby said.

'And that girl, she's dangerous, too?'

'Extremely,' Warbaby said, 'and all the more because she doesn't always look it. You saw what was done to that man's throat, after all . . .'

'Jesus,' Rydell said, 'you think that little girl did thai?'

Warbaby nodded, sadly. 'Terrible,' he said, 'these people will do terrible things . . .'

When they got out to the car, he saw that he'd parked it right in front of this mural of J. D. Shapely wearing a black leather biker jacket and no shirt, being carried up to heaven by half a dozen extremely fruity-looking angels with long blond rocker hair. There were these blue, glowing coils of DNA or something spiraling out of Shapely's stomach and attacking what Rydell assumed was supposed to be an AIDS virus, except it looked more like some kind of rusty armored space station with mean robot arms.

It made him think what a weird-ass thing it must've been to be that guy. About as weird as it had ever been to be anybody, ever, he figured. But it would be even weirder to be Shapely, and dead like that, and then have to look at that mural.

YET HE LIVES IN US NOW, it said under the painting, in foot-high white letters, AND THROUGH HIM DO WE LIVE.

Which was, strictly speaking, true, and Rydell had had a vaccination to prove it.

18 Capacitor

Chevette's mother had had this boyfriend once named Oakley, who drank part-time and drove logging trucks the rest, or anyway he said he did. He was a long-legged man with his blue eyes set a little too far apart, in a face with those deep seams down each cheek. Which made him look, Chevette's mother said, like a real cowboy. Chevette just thought it made him look kind of dangerous. Which he wasn't, usually, unless he got himself around a bottle or two of whiskey and

forgot where he was or who he was with; like particularly if he mistook Chevette for her mother, which he'd done a couple of times, but she'd always gotten away from him and he'd always been sorry about it afterward, bought her Ring-Dings and stuff from the Seven-Eleven. But what Oakley did that she remembered now, looking down through the hatch at this guy with his gun, was take her out in the woods one time and let her shoot a pistol. And this one had a face kind of like Oakley's, too, those eyes and those grooves in his cheeks. Like you got from smiling a lot, the way he was now. But it sure wasn't a smile that would ever make anybody feel good. Gold at the corners of it.

'Now come on down here,' he said, stressing each word just the same. 'Who the fuck are you?' Skinner, sounding more interested than pissed-off. The gun went off. Not very loud, but sharp, with this blue flash. She saw the Japanese guy sit down on the floor, like his legs had gone out from under him, and she thought the guy had shot him. 'Shut up.' Then up at Chevette, 'I told you :0 get down here.' Then Sammy Sal touched her on the back of her neck, his fingertips urging her toward the hatch before they withdrew. The guy might not even know Sammy Sal was up here at all. Sammy Sal had the glasses. And one thing Chevette was sure of now, this guy was no cop. 'Sorry,' the Japanese guy said, 'sorry I. . . .' 'I'm going to shoot you in the right eye with a subsonic titanium bullet.' Still smiling, the way he might say I'm going to buy you a sandwich. 'I'm coming,' Chevette said. And he didn't shoot, not her, not the Japanese guy. She thought she heard Sammy Sal step back across the roof, away from her, but she didn't look back. She wasn't sure whether she should try to close the hatch behind her or not. She decided not to because the guy had only told her to come down. She'd have to reach past the edge of the hole to get hold of the hatch and it might look to him like she was going for a gun or something. Like in a show.

She dropped down from the bottom rung, trying to keep her hands where he could see them. 'What were you doing up there?' Still smiling. His gun wasn't anything like Oakley's big old Brazilian revolver; it was a little stubby square thing made out of dull metal, the color of Skinner's old tools. A thin ring of lighter metal around the narrow hole in the end. Like the pupil of an eye. 'Looking at the city,' she said, not feeling scared, particularly. Not really feeling anything, except her legs were trembling. He glanced up, the gun staying right when it was. She didn't want him to ask her if she was alone up here, because

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the answer might hang in the air and tell him it was a lie. 'You know what I'm here for.' Skinner was sitting up on his bed, back against the wall, looking as wide awake as she'd ever seen him. The Japanese guy, who didn't look like he'd been shot after all, was sitting on the floor, his skinny legs spread out in front of him in a V. 'Well,' Skinner said, 'I'd guess money or drugs, but it happens you're shit out of luck. Give you fifty-six dollars and a stale joint of Humbolt, you want it.' 'Shut up.' When the automatic smile went away, it was like he didn't have any lips. 'I'm talking to her.' Skinner looked like he was about to say something, or maybe laugh, but he didn't. 'The glasses.' Now the smile was back. He raised the gun, so that she was looking right into the little hole. If he shoots me, she thought, he'll still have to hunt for them. 'Hepburn,' Skinner said, with a crazy little grin, and just then Chevette noticed that the poster of Roy Orbison had a hole in the middle of its gray forehead. 'Down there,' she said, pointing to the hatch in the floor.

'Where?' 'My bike,' hoping Sammy Sal didn't bump into that old rusty wagon in the dark up there, make a noise. He looked up at the roof-hatch, like he could hear what she was thinking. 'Lean up against the wall there, palms flat.' He moved in closer. 'Get your feet apart ...' The gun touched her neck. His other hand slid under Skinner's jacket, feeling for a weapon. 'Stay that way.' He'd missed Skinner's knife, the one with the fractal blade. She turned her head a little and saw him wrapping something red and rubbery around one of the Japanese guy's wrists, doing it one-handed. She thought of those gummy-worm candies you bought out of a big plastic jar. He yanked

the Japanese guy by the red thing, dragging him across the floor to the shelf-table where she'd eaten

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breakfast. He stuck one end of the red thing behind the angle-brace that held the table up, then twisted it around the guy's other wrist. He took another one out of his pocket and shook it out, like a toy snake. Reached behind Skinner with it and did something with his hand. 'You stay on that bed, old man,' touching the gun to Skinner's temple. Skinner just looking at him.

He came back to Chevette. 'You're climbing down a ladder. Need yours in front.'

The thing was cool and slick and fused into itself as soon as he had it around her wrists. Flowed together. Moved by itself. Plastic ruby bracelets, like a kid's toy. One of those tricks with molecules.

'I'm going to watch you,' he said, with another glance up at the open roof-hatch, 'so you just go down nice and slow. And if you jump, or run when you get to the bottom, I'll kill you.'

And she didn't doubt he would, if he could, but she was remembering something Oakley had told her that day in the woods, how it was hard to hit something if you had to shoot almost straight down at it, even harder straight up. So maybe the thing to do was just project when she hit the bottom. She'd only have to clear about six feet from the ladder to be where he couldn't see her. But she looked at the gun's black and silver eye and it just didn't seem like a good idea.

So she went to the hole in the floor and got down on her knees. It wasn't easy, with her hands tied that way. He had to steady her, grabbing a handful of Skinner's jacket, but she got her feet down on the third rung and her fingers around the top one, and worked her way down that way. She had to get her feet on a rung, let go of the one she was holding, snatch the next one down before she lost her balance, do it again.

But she got to think while she was doing it, and that helped her decide to go ahead and try to do what she had in mind. It was weird to be thinking that way, how quiet she felt, but it

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wasn't the first time. She'd felt that way in Beaverton, the night she'd gone over the wire, and that without any more planning. And one time these truckers had tried to drag her into the sleeper in the back; she'd made like she didn't mind, then threw a thermos of hot coffee in one's face, kicked the other in the head, and gotten out of there. They'd looked for her for an hour, with flashlights, while she squatted down in river-mud and let mosquitos eat her alive. Lights searching for her through that brush.

She got to the bottom and backed off a step, holding her bound wrists out where he could see them if he wanted to. He came down fast, no wasted movement, not a sound. His long coat was made of something black, some cloth that didn't throw back the light, and she saw he was wearing black cowboy boots. She knew he could run just fine in those, if he had to; people didn't always think so, but you could.

'Where is it?' Gold flashing at the corners of his smile. His hair, brushed straight back, was somewhere between brown and blond. He moved his hand, keeping her aware of the gun. She saw his hand was starting to sweat, spots of wetness darkening there, inside the white rubber glove.

'We gotta take the-' She stopped. The yellow lift was where she and Sammy Sal had left it, so how had he gotten up?

Extra bits of gold. 'We took the stairs.'

They'd come up the painter's ladder, bare steel rungs, some of them rusted through. So she wouldn't hear the lift. No wonder the Japanese guy had looked scared. 'Well,' she said, 'you coming?'

He followed her over to the lift. She kept her eyes on the deck, so she wouldn't forget and look up to try and find Sammy, who had to be there, somewhere. He wouldn't have had time to get down, or else they would have heard him.

He held her shoulder again while she swung her leg over and climbed in, then got in after her, watching her the whole time.

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'This one's down,' she said, pointing at one of the levers.

'Do it.'

She moved it a notch, another, and the engine whined beneath their feet, gearing them down the incline. There was a patch of light at the bottom, under a bulb caged in corroded aluminum, and she wondered what he'd do if somebody happened to step into it just then, say Fontaine or one of the other people who came to check the electrical stuff. Anybody. He'd shoot them, she decided. Just pop them and roll them over into the dark. You could see it in his face. It was right there. He got out first, helped her over. A wind was rising and you could feel the harmonics coming up

through your soles, the bridge starting to hum like a muffled harp. She could hear people laughing, somewhere.

'Where?' he said.

She pointed to where her bike stood, cabled to Sammy Sal's. 'The pink and black one.'

He gestured with the gun.

'Back off,' her bike said when she was five feet from it.

'What's that?' The gun in her back.

'This other bike. Clunker with a voice-alarm. Keeps people off mine.' She bent to thumb the tab that released Sammy Sal's bike, but she didn't touch the recognition-loop behind the seat of her own.

'I fucking mean it, shithead,' her bike said.

'Shut it off,' he said.

'Okay.'

She knew she had to do it in one go, flip it sideways and over, just her thumb and forefinger on the nonconductive rubber of the tire.

But it was really just an accident that the frame hit his gun. She saw an inch of lightning arc between her bike and the pistol, hot purple and thick as your finger, the particle-brake capacitors in the up-tube emptying their stored charge into the

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anti-theft system worked into the fake rust and the carefully frayed silver duct-tape. He went down on his knees, eyes unfocused, a single silver bubble of spit forming and bursting between his half-open lips. She thought she saw steam curl from the gun in his hand.

Proj. she thought, crouching to run, but then the black thing hit him and knocked him flat, flapping down out of the dark above them with a sound like broken wings. A roll of tarpaper. She made out Sammy Sal then, standing up there on a dark carbon cross-brace, his arm around an upright. She thought she saw his white smile.

'Forgot this,' he said, and tossed something down. The glasses in their case. Hands tied, she caught them anyway, like they knew where they wanted to go. She'd never know why he did that.

Because the little pistol made a chewing sound then, blue pops like a dozen backfires run together, and Sammy Sal went over backward off the brace, just gone.

And then she was running.

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Yamazaki heard gunfire, where he knelt on the floor, his wrists joined by glistening plastic behind the rough metal brace that supported Skinner's wall-table. Or was it only the sound of some hydraulic tool?

There was a smell in the room, high and acrid. He thought it must be the smell of his own fear.

His eyes were level with a chipped white plate, a smear of pulped avocado blackening on its edge.

'Told him what I had,' Skinner said, struggling to his feet, his arms fastened behind him. 'Didn't want it. Want what they want, don't they?' The little television slid off the edge of the bed and hit the floor, its screen popping out on a rainbow ribbon of flat cable. 'Shit.' He swayed, wincing as his bad hip took his weight, and Yamazaki thought he would fall. Skinner took one step, another, leaning forward to maintain his balance.

Yama~aki strained at the plastic bonds. Yelped as he felt them tighten. Like something alive.

'You tug, twist 'em,' Skinner said, behind him, 'bastards'll clinch up on you. Cops used to carry those. Got made unconstitutional.' There was a crash that shook the room and made the light flicker.

Yamazaki looked over his shoulder and saw Skinner sitting on the floor, his knees drawn half up, leaning k)rWard. 'There's a pair of twenty-inch bolt-cutters in here,' the old man said, indicating a dented, rust-scarred green toolkit with his left foot. 'That'll do it, if I can get

'em

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19 Superball

out.' Yamazaki watched as he began to work his toes through the holes in his ragged gray socks.

'Not sure I can do shit with 'em, once I do ...' He stopped. Looked at Yamazaki. 'Better idea, but you won't like it.'

'Skinner-san?'

'Look at that brace there.'

Discolored blobs of puddled welding-rod held the thing together, but it looked sturdy enough. He counted the mismatched heads of nine screws. The diagonal brace itself seemed to be made up of thin metal shims, lashed together top and bottom with rusting twists of wire.

'I made that,' Skinner said. 'Those're three sections of blade off a factory saw. Never did grind the teeth off. On top there.'



Yamazaki's fingertips moved over hidden roughness.  
'Shot, Scooter. Wouldn't cut for shit. Why I used 'em.'  
'I saw plastic?' Poising his wrists.  
'Wait up. You start sawing on that crazy-goo, it isn't gonna like it. Have to get through it quick or it's gonna close up right down to the bone. I said wait...'  
Yamazaki froze. He looked back.  
'You're too close to the center. You cut through there, you'll have a ring around each wrist and the suckers'll still close up. You want to go through as close to one side as possible, get over here and get the cutter on the other one before it does you. I'll try to get this open . . .' He bumped the case with his toes. It rattled.  
Yamazaki brought his face close to the red restraint. It had a faint, medicinal smell. He took a breath, set his teeth, and sawed furiously with his wrists. The thing began to shrink. Bands of iron, the pain hot and impossible. He remembered Loveless's hand around his wrist.  
'Do it,' Skinner said.  
The plastic parted with an absurdly loud pop, like some sound-effect in a child's cartoon. He was free and, for an ISO ) instant, the rec band around his left wrist loosened, absorbing the rest of the mass.  
'Scooter!'  
It tightened. He scrambled for the toolkit, amazed to see it open, as Skinner kicked it over with his heel, spilling a hundred pieces of tooled metal.  
'Blue handles!'  
The bolt-cu:ter was long, clumsy, its handles wrapped in greasy blue tape. He saw the red band narrowing, starting to sink below the level of his flesh. Fumbled the cutter one-handed from the tangle, sank its jaws blindly into his wrist and brought a.l his weight down on the uppermost handle. A stab of pain. The detonation.  
Skinner blew air out between his lips, a long low sound of relief. 'You okay?'  
Yamazaki looked at his wrists. There was a deep, bluish gouge in the left one. It was starting to bleed, but no more than he woulc have expected. The other had been scratched by the saw. He glanced around the floor, looking for the remains of the restraint.  
'Do me,' Skinner said. 'But hook it under the plastic, okay? Try not to take a hunk out. And do the second one fast.'  
Yamazaki tested the action of the cutter, knelt behind Skinner, slid one of the blades beneath the plastic around the old man's right wrist. The skin translucent there, blotched and discolored, the veins swollen and twisted. The plastic parted easily, with that same ridiculous noise, instantly whipping itself around 5skinner's other wrist, writhing like a live thing. He severed it before it could tighten, but this time, with the cartoon pop, it simply vanished.  
Yamazaki stared at the space where the restraint had been.  
'Katey bar tie door!' Skinner roared.  
'What?'  
'Lock the fucking hatch!'  
'5'  
Yamazaki scrambled across the floor on hands and knees, dropped the hatch into place, and bolted it with a flat device of dull bronze, something that might once have been part of a ship. 'The girl,' he said, looking back at Skinner.  
'She can knock,' Skinner said. 'You want that dickhead with the gun back in here?'  
Yamazaki didn't. He looked up at the ceiling-hatch, the one that opened onto the roof. Open now.  
'Go up there and look for the 'mo.'  
'Skinner-san? Pardon?'  
'Big fag buddy. The black one, right?'  
Not knowing what or whom Skinner was talking about, Yamazaki climbed the ladder. A gust of wind threw rain into his face as he thrust his head up through the opening. He had the sudden intense conviction that he was high atop some ancient ship, some black iron schooner drifting derelict on darkened seas, its plastic sails shredded and its crew mad or dead, with Skinner its demented captain, shouting orders from his cell below.  
'There is nobody here, Skinner-san!'  
The rain came down in an explosive sheet, hiding the lights of the city.  
Yamazaki withdrew his head, feeling for the hatch, and closed it above him. He fastened the catch, wishing it were made of stronger stuff.  
He descended the ladder.  
Skinner was on his feet now, swaying toward his bed. 'Shit,' he said, 'somebody's broken my tv.'

He toppled forward onto the mattress.

'Skinner?'

Yamazaki knelt beside the bed. Skinner's eyes were closed, his breath shallow and rapid. His left hand came up, fingers spread, and scratched fitfully at the tangled thatch of white hair at the open collar of his threadbare flannel shirt.

Yamazaki smelled the sour tang of urine above the acrid edge

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of whatever explosive had propelled Loveless's bullet. He looked at Skinner's jeans, blue gone gray with wear, wrinkles sculpted permanently, shining faintly with grease, and saw that Skinner had wet himself.

He stood there for several minutes, uncertain of what he should do. Finally he took a seat on the paint-splattered stool beside the little table where he had so recently been a prisoner. He ran his fingertips over the teeth of the saw blades. Looking down, he noticed a neat red sphere. It lay on the floor beside his left foot.

He picked it up. A glossy marble of scarlet plastic, cool and slightly yielding. One of the restraints, either his or Skinner's.

He sat there, watching Skinner and listening to the bridge groan in the storm, a strange music emerging from the bundled cables. He wanted to press his ear against them, but some fear he couldn't name held him from it.

Skinner woke once, or seemed to, and struggled to sit up, calling, Yamazaki thought, for the girl.

'She isn't here,' Yamazaki said, his hand on Skinner's shoulder. 'Don't you remember?'

'Hasn't been,' Skinner said. 'Twenty, thirty years. Motherfucker. Time.'

'Skinner?'

'Time. That's the total fucking mother fucker, isn't it?'

Yamazaki held the red sphere before the old man's eyes. 'Look, Skinner. See what it became?'

'Superball,' Skinner said.

'Skinner-san?'

'You go and fucking bounce it, Scooter.' He closed his eyes. 'Bounce it high...'

20 The big empty

'Swear to God,' Nigel said, 'this shit just moved.'

Chevette, with her eyes closed, felt the blunt back of the ceramic knife press into her wrist; there was a sound like an inner-tube letting go when you've patched it too many times, and then that wrist was free.

'Shit. Jesus-' His hands rough and quick, Chevette's eyes opening to a second pop, a red blur whanging back and forth around the stacked scrap. Nigel's head following it, like the counterweighted head of a plaster dog that Skinner had found once and sent her down to sell. Every wall in this narrow space racked with metal, debraised sections of old Reynolds tubing, dusty jam jars stuffed with rusting spokes. Nigel's workshop, where he built his carts, did what shadetree fixes he could to any bike came his way. The salmon-plug that dangled from his left ear ticked in counterpoint to his swiveling head, then jingled as he snatched the thing in mid-bounce. A ball of red plastic.

'Man,' he said, impressed, 'who put this on you?'

Chevette stood up and shivered, this tremor running down through her like a live thing, the way those red bracelets had moved.

How she felt, now, was just the way she'd felt that day she'd come back to the trailer and found her mother all packed up and gone. No message there but a can of ravioli in a pot on the Stove, with the can-opener propped up beside it.

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She hadn't eaten that ravioli and she hadn't eaten any since and she knew she never would. But this feeling had come, that day, and swallowed everything up inside it, so big you couldn't really prove it was there except by an arithmetic of absence and the memory of better days. And she'd moved around in it, whatever it was, from one point to another, 'til she'd wound up behind that wire in Beaverton, in a place so bad it was like a piece of broken glass to rub against that big empty. And thereby growing aware of the thing that had swallowed the world, though it was only just visible, and then in sidelong glances. Not a feeling so much as a form of gas, something she could almost smell in the back of her throat, lying chill and inert in the rooms of her subsequent passage.

'You okay?' Nigel's greasy hair in his eyes, the red ball in his hand, a cocktail toothpick with a

spray of amber cellophane stuck in the corner of his mouth.

For a long time she'd wondered if maybe the fever hadn't burned it out, hadn't accidentally fried whatever circuit in her it fed back on. But as she'd gotten used to the bridge, to Skinner, to messing at Allied, it had just come to seem like the emptiness was filled with ordinary things, a whole new world grown up in the socket of the old, one day rolling into the next-whether she danced in Dissidents, or sat up all night talking with her friends, or slept curled in her bag up in Skinner's room, where wind scoured the plywood walls and the cables thrummed down into rock that drifted (Skinner said) like the slowest sea of all.

Now that was broken.

'Vette?'

That jumper she'd seen, a girl, hauled up and over the side of a Zodiac with a pale plastic hook, white and limp, water running from nose and mouth. Every hone broken or dislocated, Skinner said, if you hit just right. Ran through the bar naked and took a header off some tourist's table nearest

'55

the railing, out and over, tangled in Haru's Day-Glo net and imitation Japanese fishing floats. And didn't Sammy Sal drift that way now, maybe already clear of the dead zone that chased the fish off the years of toxic lead fallen there from uncounted coats of paint, out into the current that sailed the bridge's dead, people said, past Mission Rock, to wash up at the feet of the micropored wealthy jogging the concrete coast of China Basin?

Chevette bent over and threw up, managing to get most of it into an open, empty paint can, its lip thickly scabbed with the gray primer that Nigel used to even out his dodgier mends.

'Hey, hey,' Nigel dancing around her, unwilling in his shy bearish way to touch her, his big hands hovering, anxious that she was sick and worried she'd puke over his work, something that might ultimately require the in-depth, never-bef ore-attempted act of cleaning out, rather than up, his narrow nest. 'Water? Want water?' Offering her the old coffee can he kept there to quench hot metal. Oily flux afloat atop it like gas beside a dock, and she nearly heaved again, but sat down instead.

Sammy Sal dead, maybe Skinner, too. Him and that grad student tied up up there with the plastic worms.

'Chev?'

He'd put the coffee can down and was offering her an open can of beer instead. She waved it aside, coughing.

Nigel shifted, foot to foot, then turned and peered through the triangular shard of lucite that served as his one window. It was vibrating with the wind. 'Stormin',' he said, like he was glad to note the world outside continuing on any recognizable course at all, however drastic. 'Stormin' down rain.'

Running from Skinner's and the gun in the killer's hand, from his eyes and the gold in the corners of his smile, bent low for balance over her bound hands and the case that held the asshole's glasses, Chevette had seen all the others running, too, racing, it must have been, against the breaking calm, the first slap of rain almost warm when it came. Skinner would've

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known it was coming; hed have watched the barometer in its corny wooden case like tw wheel of some old boat; he knew his weather, Skinner, pe:ched in his box on the top of the bridge. Maybe the other; knew, too, but it was the style to wait and then race it, bidding out for a last sale, another smoke, some bit of business. The hour before a storm was good for that, people naking edgy purchases against what was ordinarily a bearahe uncertainty. Though a few were lost, if the storm was big enough, and not always the unestablished, the newconers lashed with their ragged baggage to whatever freehold they might have managed on the outer structure; sometimes a wiole patchwork section would just let go, if the wind caught it right; she hadn't seen that but there were stories. There was iothing to stop the new people from coming in to the shelter cf the decks, but they seldom did.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and took the beer from Nigel. Took a sip. It was warm. She handed it back to him. He took the toothpick from his mouth, started to raise the can for a swallow, thought better of it, put it down beside his welding-torch.

'Somethin's wrong,' he said. 'I can tell.'

She massaged her wrsts. Twin rings of rash coming up, pink and moist, where t~~e plastic had gripped her. Picked up the ceramic knife and clesed it automatically.

'Yeah,' she said, 'yeah Something's wrong. . .'

'What's wrong, Chevette?' He shook hair out of his eyes like a worried dog, fing~rs running nervously over his tools. His hands were like pali dirty animals, capable in their mute and agile

way of solving problems that would have hopelessly baffled the man himself. 'That Jap shit delaminated on you,' he decided, 'and you're pssed . .

'No,' she said, not really hearing him.

'Steel's what you wait for a messenger bike. Weight. Big basket up front. Not cadhoard with some crazy aramid shit wrapped around it, weghs about as much as a sandwich.

'57

What if you hit a b-bus? Bang into the back of it? You got more m-mass than the b-bike, you flip over and c-crack open

crack your.. .' His hands twisting, trying more accurately to frame the physics of the accident he was seeing. Chevette looked up and saw that he was trembling.

'Nigel,' she said, standing up, 'somebody just put that thing on me for a joke, understand?'

'It moved,' he said. 'I saw it.'

'Well, not a funny joke, okay? But I knew where to come. To you, right? And you took it off.'

Nigel shook his hair back into his eyes, shy and pleased. 'You had that knife. Cuts good.' Then he frowned. 'You need a steel knife...'

'I know,' she said. 'I gotta go now ...' Bending to pick up the paint can. 'I'll toss this.

Sorry.'

'It's a storm,' Nigel said. 'Don't go out in a storm.'

'I've got to,' she said. 'I'll be okay.' Thinking how he'd kill Nigel, too, if he found her here.

Hurt him. Scare him.

'I cut them off.' Holding up the red ball.

'Get rid of that,' she said.

'Why?'

'Look at this rash.'

Nigel dropped the bali like it was poison. It bounced out of sight. He wiped his fingers down the filthy front of his t-shirt.

'Nigel, you got a screwdriver you'll give me? A flathead?'

'Mine are all worn down ...' The white animals running over a shoal of tools, happy to be hunting, while Nigel gravely watched them. 'I throw those flathead screws away as soon as I get 'em off.

Hex is how you want to go-'

'I want one that's all worn down.'

The right hand pounced, came up with its prize, blackhandled and slightly bent.

'That's the one,' she said, zipping up Skinner's jacket. Both hands offered it to her, Nigel's eyes hiding behind his hair, watching. 'I. . . like you, Chevette.'

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'I know,' she said, standing there with a paint can with vomit in it in one hand, a screwdriver in the other. 'I know you do.'

Baffled by the patchwork of plastic that roofed the upper deck, the rain was following waste-lines and power-cables, emerging overhead at crazy angles, in random cascades, miniature Niagaras rushing off corrugated iron and plywood. From the entrance to Nigel's workshop, Chevette watched an awning collapse, gallons of silver water splashing all at once from what had been a taut concavity, a bulging canvas bathtub that gave way with a sharp crack, instantly becoming several yards of flapping, sodden cloth. Nothing here was ever planned, in any overall sense, and problems of drainage were dealt with as they emerged. Or not, more likely.

Half the lights were out, she saw, but that could be because people had shut them down, had pulled as many plugs as possible. But then she caught the edge of that weird pink flash you got when a transformer blew, and she heard it boom. Out toward Treasure. That took care of most of the remaining lights and suddenly she stood in near darkness. There was nobody in sight, nobody at all. Just a hundred-watt bulb in an orange plastic socket, twirling around in the wind.

She moved out into the center of the deck, trying to watch out for fallen wires. She remembered the can in her hand and flung it sideways, hearing it hit and roll.

She thought of her bike lying there in the rain, its capacitors drained. Somebody was going to take it, for sure, and Sammy Sal's, too. It was the biggest thing, the most valuable thing she'd ever owned, and she'd earned every dollar she'd put down on the counter at City Wheels. She didn't think about it like it was a thing, more the way she figured people thought about horses. There were messengers who named their bikes, but Chevette never would have done that, and somehow because she did think about it like it was something alive.

'59

Proj, she told herself, they'll get you if you stay here. Her back to San Francisco, she set out toward Treasure.

They who? That one with his gun. He'd come for the glasses. Came for the glasses and killed Sammy. Had those people sent him, the ones who called up Bunny and Wilson the owner? Rentacops. Security guys.

The case in her pocket. Smooth. And that weird cartoon of the city, those towers with their spreading tops. Sunflower.

'Jesus,' she said, 'where? Where'm I going?'

To Treasure, where the wolf-men and the death-cookies hung, the bad crazies chased off the bridge to haunt the woods there? Been a Navy base there, Skinner said, but a plague put paid to that just after the Little Grande, something that turned your eyes to mush, then your teeth fell out.

Treasure Island fever, like maybe something crawled out of a can at that Navy place, after the earthquake. So nobody went there now, nobody normal. You saw their fires at night, sometimes, and smoke in the daytime, and you walked straight over to the Oakland span, the cantilever, and the people who lived there weren't the same, really, as the people over here in the suspension.

Or should she go back, try to get her bike? An hour's riding and the brakes would be charged again. She saw herself just riding, maybe east, riding forever into whatever country that was, deserts like you saw on television, then flat green farms where big machines came marching along in rows, doing whatever it was they did. But she remembered the road down from Oregon, the trucks groaning past in the night like lost mad animals, and she tried to picture herself riding down that. No, there wasn't any place out on a road like that, nothing human-sized, and hardly ever even a light, in all the fields of dark. Where you could walk and walk forever and never come to anything, not even a place to sit down. A bike wouldn't get her anywhere out there.

Or she could go hack to Skinner's. Co up there and see- No. She shut that down, hard.

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The empty rose out of the rain-rattled shadws like a gas, and she held her breath, not to breathe it in.

How it was, when you lost things, it was like you only knew for the first time that you'd ever had them. Took a mother's leaving for you to know she'd ever been there, because otherwise she was that place, everythin~, like weather. And Skinner and the Coleman stove and the oil she had to drop into the little hole to keep its leather gasket soft so the pump would work. You didn't wake up ever~' morning and say yes and yes to every little thing. But little things were what it was all made of. Or just somebody to see, there, when you woke up. Or Lowell. When she'd had Lowell.-if she could say she ever had, and she guessed she hadn't, really-but while he'd been there, anyway, he'd been a little like that- 'Chev? That you?'

And there he was. Lowell. Sitting up cross-legged on top of a rusty cooler said SHRIMP across the froit, smoking a cigarette and watching rain run off the shrimp man's awning. She hadn't seen him for three weeks now, and the only thing she could think of was how she really must look like total shit. That skinhead boy they called Codes was sitting up beside him, black hood of a sweatshirt pulled up and his hands hidden in the long sleeves. Codes hadn't ever liked her.

But Lowell, he was grinning around the glow of that cigarette. 'Well,' he said, 'you gonna say "hi" 0: what?'

'Hi,' Chevette said.

21 Cognitive dissidents

Rydell wasn't too sure about this whole bridge thing, and less sure about what Freddie had had to say about it, in Food Fair and on the way back from North Beach. He kept remembering that documentary he'd seen in Knoxville and he was pretty sure there hadn't been anything on that about cannibals or cults. He thought that had to be Freddie wanting him to think that, because he, Rydell, was the one who had to go out there and get this girl, Chevette Washington.

And now he was actually out on it, watching people hurry to get their stuff out of the way of the weather, it looked even less like what Freddie had said it was all about. It looked like a carnival, sort of. Or a state fair midway, except it was roofed over, on the upper level, with crazy little shanties, just boxes, and whole house-trailers winched up and glued into the suspension with big gobs of adhesive, like grasshoppers in a spider-web. You could go up and down, between the two original deck levels, through holes they'd cut in the upper deck, all different kinds of stairs patched in under there, plywood and welded steel, and one had an old airline gangway, just sitting there with its tires flat.

Down on the bottom deck, once you got in past a lot of food-wagons, there were mostly bars, the smallest ones Rydell had ever seen, some with only four stools and not even a door, just a big shutter they could pull down and lock.

But none of it done to any plan, not that he could see. Not like a mall, where they plug a business into a slot and wait to

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see whether it works or not. This place had just grcwn, it looked like, one thing patched onto the next, until the whole span was wrapped in this formless mass of stuff, and io two pieces of it matched. There was a different material anywhere you looked, almost none of it being used for what it had originally been intended for. He passed stalls faced with turquoise Formica, fake brick, fragments of broken tile vorked into swirls and sunbursts and flowers. One place, dready shuttered, was covered with green-and-copper skbs of desoldered component-board.

He found himself grinning at it all, and at the peopli, none of them paying him the least attention, cannibaliitic or otherwise. They looked to be as mixed a bunch a; their building materials: all ages, races, colors, and all & them rushing ahead of the storm that very definitely was coming now, wind stiffening as he threaded his way past carts ~nd old ladies lugging straw suitcases. A little kid, staggering with his arms wrapped around a big red fire-extinguisher, bumped into his legs. Rydell hadn't ever seen a little kid with tattons like that. The boy said something in some other language aid then he was gone.

Rydell stopped and got Warbaby's map out of his jacket pocket. It showed where this girl lived and how to get up there. Right up on the roof of the damned thing, in a little shanty stuck to the top of one of the towers they hing the cables from. Warbaby had beautiful handwriting, really graceful, and he'd drawn this map out in the back of the patriot, and labelled it for Rydell. Stairs here, then you weni along this walkway, took some kind of elevator.

Finding that first set of stairs was going to be a bitch, though, because, now that he looked around, he saw lots of narrow little stairways snaking up between stalls and shattered micro-bars, and no pattern to it at all. He guessed they all led up into the same rats-nest, hut there was no guarantee they'd all connect up.

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Exhaustion hit him, then, and he just wanted to know where and when he was supposed to sleep, and what was all this bullshit about, anyway? What had he let Hernandez get him in for?

Then the rain hit, the wind upping its velocity a couple of notches and the locals diving seriously for cover, leaving Rydell to hunch in the angle between a couple of old-fashioned Japanese vending-machines. The overall structure, if you could call it that, was porous enough to let plenty of rain in, but big enough and clumsy enough to tangle seriously with the wind. The whole thing started creaking and popping and sort of groaning. And the lights started going out. He saw a burst of white sparks and a wire came down, out of that crazy tangle. Somebody yelled, but the words were pulled away into the wind and he couldn't make them out. He looked down and saw water rising around his SWAT shoes. Not good, he thought: puddles, wet shoes, alternating current. There was a fruitstand next to one of the vending-machines, knocked together from scavenged wood like a kid's fort. But it had a sort of shelf under it, raised up six inches, and it looked dry under there. He hunched himself in, on top of it, with his feet up out of the water. It smelled like overripe tangerines, but it was ninety-percent dry and the vending-machine took most of the wind.

He zipped his jacket as high as it went, balled his fists into the pockets, and thought about a hot bath and a dry bed. He thought about his Futon Mouth futon, down in Mar Vista, and actually felt homesick. Jesus, he thought, be missing those stick-on flowers next.

A canvas awning came down, its wooden braces snapping like toothpicks, spilling maybe twenty gallons of rain. And right then was when he saw her, Chevette Washington, right out in plain sight. Just like he was dreaming. Not twenty feet away. Just standing there.

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Rydell had sort of had this girlfriend down in Florida, after his father had moved down there and gotten sick. Her name was Claudia Marsalis and she was from Boston and her mother had her RV in the same park as Rydell's father, right near Tampa Bay. Rydell was in his first year at the Academy, but you got a couple of breaks and his father knew ways to get a deal on plane tickets. So Rydell would go down there on breaks and stay with his father and sometimes at night he'd go out and ride around with Claudia Marsalis in her mother's ~ Lincoln, which Claudia said had been cherry when they brought it down but now the salt was starting to get to it. Evidently up in Boston she'd only ever taken it out on the road in the summer, so the chemicals wouldn't eat it out. It had these blue-and-white MASS. HERITAGE plates on it because it was a collector's item. They were the old-fashioned kind, stamped metal, and they didn't light up from inside.

It was kind of rough, around that part of Tampa, with the street signs all chewed up for target practice or the late-night demonstration of the choke on somebody's shotgun. There were plenty of shotguns around to be demonstrated, too; a few in the window-rack of every pick-up and 4X4, and usually a couple of big old dogs. Claudia used to give Rydell a hard time about that, about these Florida boys in gimme hats, riding around with their guns and dogs. Rydell told her it didn't have anything to do with him, he was from Knoxville, and people didn't drive around Knoxville with

their guns showing. Or shoot holes in street signs either, not if the Department could help it. But Claudia was one of those people thought everything south of D.C. was all just the same, or maybe she just pretended to to tease him.

But at night it smelled like salt and magnolia and swamp, and they'd drive around in that Lincoln with the windows down and listen to the radio. When it got dark you could watch the lights on ships, and on the big bulk-lifters that went

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drumming past like the world's slowest UFOs. They'd maybe get in a little listless boogy in the back seat, sometimes, but Claudia said it just got you too sweaty in Florida and Rydell tended to agree. It was just they were both down there and alone and there wasn't much else to do.

One night they were listening to a country station out of Georgia and 'Me And Jesus'll Whup Your Heathen Ass' came on, this hardshell Pentecostal Metal thing about abortion and ayatollahs and all the rest of it. Claudia hadn't ever heard that one before and she about wet her pants, laughing. She just couldn't believe that song. When she'd gotten hold of herself and wiped the tears out of her eyes, she'd asked Rydell why he wanted to be a policeman anyway? And he'd felt kind of uncomfortable about that, because it was like she thought his going to the Academy was funny, too, as funny as she thought that dumb-ass song was. But also because it wasn't actually something he'd thought about, much.

The truth was, it probably had a lot to do with how he and his father had always watched Cops in Trouble together, because that show seriously did teach you respect. You got to see what kind of problems the police were flat up against. Not just tooled-up slimeballs high on shit, either, but the slimeballs' lawyers and the damn courts and everything. But if he told her it was because of a tv show, he knew she'd just laugh at that, too. So he thought about it a while and told her it was because he liked the idea of being in a position to help out people when they were really in trouble. When he'd said that, she just looked at him.

'Berry,' she said, 'you really mean that, don't you?'

'Sure,' he said, 'guess I do.'

'But Berry, when you're a cop, people are just going to lie to you. People will think of you as the enemy. The only time they'll want to talk to you is when they're in trouble.'

Driving, he glanced sideways at her. 'How come you know SO much about it, then?'

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'Because that's what my father does,' she said, end of :onversation, and she never did bring it up again~

But he'd thought about that, driving Gunhead for IntenSecure, because that was like being a top except it wasn't. The people you were there to help didn't even give enough of a shit to lie to you, mostly, because they were the ones paying the bill.

And here he was, out on this bridge, craw~ing out from under a fruitstand to follow this girl that ~Varbaby and Freddie~who Rydell was coming to decide lie didn't trust worth a rat's ass-claimed had butchered that German or whatever he was up in that hotel. And stolen these glasses Rydell was supposed to get back, ones like Wa:~baby's. But if she'd stolen them before, how come she'd gone back to kill the guy later? But the real question was, what did that have to do with anything, or even with watching Cops in Trouble all those times with his father? And the answer, he guessed, was that he, like anybody else in his position, was just trying to make a living.

Solid streams of rain were coming down cut of various points in all that jackstraw stuff upstairs, sphshing on the deck. There was a pink flash, like lightning, off down the bridge. He thought he saw her fling something t the side, but if he stopped to check it out he might lose her. She was moving now, avoiding the waterfalls.

Street-surveillance technique wasn't something you got much training in, at the Academy, not unless yu looked like such good detective material that they streamlined you right into the Advanced CI courses. But Rydell bad gone and bought the textbook anyway. Trouble was, because of that he knew you pretty well needed at least one partnei to do it with, and that was assuming you had a radio link anc some citizens going about their business to give you a little uver. I)eing it this way, how he had to do it now, about the best you could hope for was just to sneak along behind her.

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He knew it was her because of that crazy hair, that ponytail ;tuck up in the back like one of those fat Japanese wrestlers. The wasn't fat, though. Her legs, sticking out of a big old biker jacket that might've been hanging in a barn for a couple of years, looked like she must work out a lot. They were covered with some tight shiny black stuff, like Kevin's micropore outfits from Just

Blow Me, and they went down into some kind of dark boots or high-top shoes. Paying that much attention to her, and trying to stay out of sight in case she turned around, he managed to walk right under one of those waterfalls. Right down the back of his neck. Just then he heard somebody call to her, 'Chev, that you?' and he went down on one knee in a puddle, behind this stack of salvaged lumber, two-by-fours with soggy plaster sticking to them. ID positive. The waterfall behind him was making too much noise for him to hear what was said then, but he could see them: a young guy with a black leather jacket, a lot newer than hers, and somebody else in something black, with a hood pulled up. They were sitting up on a cooler or something, and the guy with the leather was dragging on a cigarette. Had his hair combed up in sort of a crest; good trick, in that rain. The cigarette arced out and winked off in the wet, and the guy got down from there and seemed to be talking to the girl. The one with the black hood got down, too, moving like a spider. It was a sweatshirt, Rydell saw, with sleeves that hung down six inches past his hands. He looked like a floppy shadow from some old movie Rydell had seen once, where shadows got separated from people and you had to catch them and sew them back on. Probably Sublett could tell him what that was called. He worked hard on not moving, kneeling there in that puddle, and then they were moving, the two of them on either side of her and the shadow glancing back to check behind them. He caught a fraction of white face and a pair of hard, careful eyes.

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He counted: one, two, three. Then he got up and followed them.

He couldn't say how far they'd gone before he saw them drop, it looked like, straight out of sight. He wiped rain from his eyes and tried to figure it, but then he saw that they'd gone down a flight of stairs, this one cut into the lower deck, which was the first time he'd seen that. He could hear music as he came up on it, and see this bluish glow. Which proved to be from this skinny little neon sign that said, in blue capital letters: COGNITIVE DISSIDENTS.

He stood there for a second, hearing water sizzle off the sign's transformer, and then he just took those stairs.

They were plywood, stapled with that sandpapery no-slip stuff, but he almost slipped anyway. By the time he'd gotten halfway to the bottom, he knew it was a bar, because he could smell beer and a couple of different kinds of smoke.

And it was warm, down there. It was like walking into a steam bath. And crowded. Somebody threw a towel at him. It was soaking wet and hit him in the chest, but he grabbed it and rubbed at his hair and face with it, tossed it back in the direction it had come from. Somebody else, a woman by the sound, laughed. He went over to the bar and found an empty space at the end. Fished in his soggy pockets for a couple of fives and clicked them down on the counter. 'Beer,' he said, and didn't look up when somebody put one down in front of him and swept the coins out of sight. It was one of those brewed-in-America Japanese brands that people in places like Tampa didn't drink much. He closed his eyes and drank about half of it at a go. As he opened his eyes and put it down, somebody beside him said 'Tumble?'

He looked over and saw this jawless character with little pink glasses and a little pink mouth, thinning sandy hair combed straight back and shining with something more than the damp in the room.

'What?' Rydell said.

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'I said "tumble."'

'I heard you,' Rydell said.

'So? Need the service?'

'Uh, look,' Rydell said, 'all I need right now's this beer, okay?'

'Your phone,' the pink-mouthed man said. 'Or fax. Guaranteed tumble, one month. Thirty days or your next thirty free. Unlimited long, domestic. You need overseas, we can talk overseas. But three hundred for the basic tumble.' All of this coming out in a buzz that reminded Rydell of the kind of voice-chip you got in the cheapest possible type of kid's toy.

'Wait a sec,' Rydell said.

The man blinked a couple of times, behind his pink glasses.

'You talking about doing that thing to a pocket phone, right? Where you don't have to pay the company?'

The man just looked at him.



'Well, thanks,' Rydell said, quickly. 'I appreciate it, but I just don't have any phone on me. If I did, I'd be happy to take you up on it.'

Still looking at him. 'Thought I saw you before ...' Doubt.

'Naw,' Rydell said. 'I'm from Knoxville. Just come in out of the rain.' He decided it was time to risk turning around and checking the place out, because the mirrors behind the bar were steamed up solid and running with drops. He swung his shoulder around and saw that Japanese woman, the one he'd seen that time up in the hills over Hollywood, when he'd been cruising with Sublett. She was standing up on a little stage, naked, her long curly hair falling around her to her waist. Rydell heard himself grunt.

'Hey,' the man was saying, 'hey...'

Rydell shook himself, a weird automatic thing, like a wet dog, but she was still there.

'Hey. Credit.' The drone again. 'Got problems? Maybe

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just wanna see what they've got on you? Anybody else, you got the right numbers-'

'Hey,' Rydell said, 'wait up. That woman up there?'

The pink glasses tilted.

'Who is that?' Rydell asked.

'That's a hologram,' the man said, in a completely different voice, and walked away.

'Damn,' said the bartender, behind him. 'You just set a record for blowing off Eddie the Shit.

Earned yourself a beer, my man.'

The bartender was a black guy with copper beads in his hair. He was grinning at Rydell. 'Call him Eddie the Shit cause he ain't worth one, don't give another. Hook your phone up to some box doesn't have a battery, push a few buttons, pass a dead chicken over it, take your money. That's Eddie.' He uncapped a beer and put it down beside the other one.

Rydell looked back at the Japanese woman. She hadn't moved. 'I just came in out of the rain,' he said, all he could think to say.

'Good night for it,' the bartender said.

'Say,' Rydell said, 'that lady up there-'

'That's Josie's dancer,' the bartender said. 'You watch. She'll dance her in a minute, soon as there's a song she likes.'

'Josie?'

The bartender pointed. Rydell looked where he was pointing. Saw a very fat woman in a wheelchair, her hair the color and texture of coarse steel wool. She wore brand-new blue denim bib overalls and an XXL white sweatshirt, and both her hands were hidden inside something that sat on her lap like a smooth gray plastic muff. Her eyes were closed, face expressionless. He couldn't have said for sure that she wasn't asleep.

'Hologram?' The Japanese woman hadn't moved at all. Rydell was remembering what he'd seen, that night. 'He

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horned crown, all silver. Her pubic hair, shaved like an exclamation point. This one didn't have either of those, but it was her. It was.

'Josie's always projectin',' the bartender said, like it was something that couldn't really be helped.

'From that thing on her lap?'

'That's the interface,' the bartender said. 'Projector's, well, there.' He pointed. 'Top of that NEC sign.'

Rydell saw a little black gizmo clamped to the top of this Did illuminated sign. It looked kind of like an old camera, the optical kind. He didn't know if NEC was a beer or what. The whole wall was covered with these signs, all different brands, and now he recognized a few of the names he decided they were ads for old electronics companies.

He looked at the gizmo, back at the fat woman in the wheelchair, and felt sad. Angry, too. Like he'd lost something. 'Not like I knew what I thought it was,' he said to himself.

'Fool anybody,' said the bartender.

Rydeil thought about somebody sitting out there by that valley road. Waiting for cars. Like he and his friends would lie under the bushes down Jefferson Street and toss cans under people's tires. Sounded like a hubcap had come off. See them get out and look, shake their heads. So what he'd seen had just been a version of that, somebody playing with an expensive toy.

'Shit,' he said, and put his mind to looking for Chevette Washington in all this crowd. He didn't notice the beer-smell now, or the smoke, more the wet hair and clothes and just bodies. And there she was, her and her two friends, hunched over a little round table in a corner. The sweatshirt's

hood was down now, showing Rydell a white, stubbled head with some kind of bat or bird tattooed on the side, up where it would be hidden if the hair grew in. It was the kind of tattoo somebody had done by hand, not the kind you got done on a computer-driven table. Baldhead had a hard little face, in

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profile, and he wasn't talking. Chevette Washington was telling something to the other one and not looking happy.

Then the music changed, these drums coming in, like there were millions of them, ranked back somehow beyond the walls, and weird waves of static riding in on that, failing back, riding in again, and women's voices, crying like birds, and none of it natural, the voices dopplering past like sirens on a highway, and the drums, when you listened, made up of little snipped bits of sound that weren't drums at all.

The Japanese woman—the hologram, Rydell reminded himself—raised her arms and began to dance, a sort of looping shuffle, timed not to the tempo of the drums but to the waves of static washing back and forth across the sound, and when Rydell thought to look he saw the fat woman's eyes were open, her hands moving inside that plastic muff.

Nobody else in the bar was paying it any attention at all, just Rydell and the woman in the wheelchair. Rydell leaned there on the bar, watching the hologram dance and wondering what he should do next.

Warbaby's shopping list went like this: best he got the glasses and the girl, next best was the glasses, just the girl was definitely third, but a must if that was all that was going.

Josie's music slid out and away for the last time and the hologram's dance ended. There was some drunken applause from a couple of the tables, Josie nodding her head a little like she was thanking them.

The terrible thing about it, Rydell thought, was that there Josie was, shoehorned into that chair, and she just wasn't much good at making that thing dance. It reminded him of this blind man in the park in Knoxville, who sat there all day strumming an antique National guitar. There he was, blind, had this old guitar, and he just couldn't chord for shit. Never seemed to get any better at it, either. It didn't seem fair.

Now some people got up from a table near where Chevette Washington was sitting. Rydell was in there quick, bringing

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the beer he'd won for getting rid of Eddie the Shit. He still wasn't close enough to pick out what they were saying, but he could try. He tried to think up ways to maybe start up a conversation, but it seemed pretty hopeless. Not that he looked particularly out of place, because he had the impression that most of this crowd weren't regulars here, just a random sampling, come in out of the rain. But he just didn't have any idea what this place was about. He couldn't figure out what 'Cognitive Dissidents' meant; it wouldn't help him figure out what the theme, or whatever, was. And besides, whatever Chevette Washington and her guy were discussing, it looked to be getting sort of heated.

Her guy, he thought. Something there in her body-language that said Pissed-Off Girlfriend, and something in how hard this boy was studying to show how little any of it bothered him, like maybe she was the Ex—All this abruptly coming to nothing at all as every conversation died and Rydell looked up from his beer to see Lt. Orlovsky, the vampire-looking cop from SFPD Homicide, stepping in from the stairwell in his London Fog, some kind of fedora that looked like it was molded from flesh-colored plastic on his head, and those scary half-frame glasses. Orlovsky stood there, little streams running off the hem of his rain-darkened coat and pooling around his wingtips, while he unbuttoned the coat with one hand. Still had his black flak vest on underneath, and now that hand came up to rest on the smooth, injection-molded, olive-drab butt of his floating-breech H&K. Rydell looked for the badge-case on the nylon neck-thong, but didn't see it.

The whole bar was looking at Orlovsky.

Orlovsky looked around the room, over the tops of his glasses, taking his time, giving them all a good dose of Cop Eye. The music, some weird hollow techie stuff that sounded like bombs going off in echo-chambers, started to make a different kind of sense.

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Rydell saw Josie the wheelchair woman looking at the Russian with an expression Rydell couldn't process.

Spotting Chevette Washington in her corner, Orlovsky walked over to her table, still taking his time, making the rest of the room take that same time. His hand still on that gun.

It seemed to Rydell like the Russian just might be about to haul out and shoot her. Sure looked like it, but what kind of cop would do that?

Now Orlovsky stopped in front of their table, just the right distance, too far for them to reach him and far enough to allow room to pull that big gun if he was going to.

The Boyfriend, Rydell was somehow pleased to see, looked fit to shit himself. Baldhead looked like he'd been cast in plastic, just frozen there, hands on the table. Between his hands, Rydell saw a pocket phone.

Orlovsky locked the girl with his full current of Eye-thing, his face lined, gray in this light, unsmiling. He jerked the brim of the plastic fedora, just this precise little fraction, and said 'Get up.'

Rydell looked at her and saw her trembling. There was never any question the Russian meant her and not her friends-Boyfriend looking like he might faint any second and Baldhead playing statue.

Chevette Washington stood up, shaky, the rickety little wooden chair going over behind her.

'Out.' The hat-brim indicated the stairs. The hairy back of Orlovsky's hand covered the butt of the H&K.

Rydell heard his own knees creak with tension. He was leaning forward, gripping the edges of the table. He could feel old dried pads of gum under there.

The lights went out.

Much later, trying to explain to Sublett what it had been like when Josie whipped her hologram on Orlovsky, Rydell said it looked sort of like the special effect at the end of Raiders of

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the Lost Ark, that part where those angels or whatever they were came swirling out of that box and got all over those

Nazis.

But it had all been happening at once, for Rydell. When the lights went, they all went, all those signs on the wall, everything, and Rydell just tossed that table sideways, without even thinking about it, and Went For where she'd been standing. And this ball of light had shot down, expanding, from a point on the wall that must've marked the upper edge of that NEC sign. It was the color of the hologram's skin, kind of honey and ivory, all marbled through with the dark of her hair and eyes, like a fast-forward of a satellite storm-system. All around that Russian, a three-foot sphere around his head and shoulders, and as it spun, her eyes and mouth, open in some silent scream, blinked by, all magnified. Each eye, for a fraction of a second, the size of the ball itself, and the white teeth big, too, each one long as a man's hand.

Orlovsky swatted at it, and that kept him, for some very little while, from getting his gun out.

But it also gave off enough light to let Rydell see he was grabbing the girl and not Boyfriend.

Just sort of picking her up, forgetting everything he'd ever been taught about comealongs and restraints, and running, best he could, for the stairs.

Orlovsky yelled something, but it must've been in Russian.

His uncle, the one who'd gone off to Africa in the Army, used to say, if he liked how a woman's ass moved when she walked, that it looked like two baby bobcats in a croker sack. And that was the expression that popped into Rydell's mind as he ran up those stairs with Chevette Washington held out in front of him like a big bunch of groceries. But it didn't have anything to do with sexy.

He was just lucky she didn't get an eye or break any of his ribs.

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22 Rub-a-dub

Whoever had grabbed her, she just kept kicking and punching, right up the stairs, backward. But he had her held out so far in front of him that he almost fell on top of her.

Then she was out on the deck, in what light there was, and looking at some kind of plastic machine gun, the color of a kid's army toy, in the hands of another one of these big ugly raincoat guys, this one with no hat and his wet hair slicked back from a face with the skin on too tight.

'You drop her now, fuckhead,' this one with the gun said. Had an accent out of an old monster movie. She barely kept to her feet when the one who was holding her let go.

'Fuckhead,' the gun-guy said, like Pock Ed, 'you try to make move or what?'

'War,' the one who'd grabbed her said, then doubled over, coughing. 'Baby,' he said, straightening, then winced, hugging his ribs, looking at he-. 'Jesus fuck, you got a kick on you.' Sounded American, but not West Coast. In a cheap nylon jacket with one sleeve half ripped off at the shoulder, white fuzzy stuff hanging out~

'You try to make a move ...' And the plastic gun was pointing right at the guy's face. 'War-baby, war-baby,' the guy said, or anyway it sounded like that, 'war-baby seilt me to get her. He's parked back out there past those tank-ttap things, waiting for me to bring her Out.'

'Arkady ...' It was the ofle in the plastic hat, coming up  
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the stairs behind the guy who'd grabbed her. He had a pair of night-vision glasses on, that funny-looking center-tube poking out from beneath the brim of his hat. He was holding up something that looked like a miniature aerosol can. He said something in this language. Russian? He gestured with the little can, back down the stairs.

'You use capsicum in an enclosed space like that,' said the one who'd grabbed her, 'people'll get hurt. Get you some permanent sinus problems.'

The tight-faced man looked at him like he was something crawled out from under a rock. 'You drive, yes?' he said, gesturing for the hat-man to put the thing away, whatever it was.

'We had a coffee. Well, you had tea. Svobodov, right?'

Chevette caught the tight-faced man's glance at her, like he hadn't liked her hearing his name. She wanted to tell him she'd heard it Rub-a-Dub, how this other guy talked, so that couldn't really be it, could it?

'Why you grab her?' asked the tight-faced man, Rub-a-Dub.

'She coulda got away in the dark, couldn't she? Didn't know your partner here had night vision. Besides, he sent me to get her. Didn't mention you. In fact, they said you didn't come out here.' The one with the hat was behind her now, jerking her arm up in a hold. 'Lemme go-'

'Hey,' the one who'd grabbed her said, like it made things okay, 'these men are police officers. SFPD Homicide, right?'

Rub-a-Dub whistled softly. 'Fuckhead.'

'Cops?' she asked.

'Sure are.'

Which produced a little snort of exasperation from Rub-aDub.

'Arkady, now we go. These dirthags try to spy us from below . . .' The hat-man pulling off his night-glasses and dancing like he had to pee.

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'Hey,' she said, 'somebody's killed Sammy. If you're cops, listen, he killed Sammy Sal!'

'Who's Sammy?' the one in the torn jacket said.

'I work with him! At Allied. Sammy DuPree. Sammy. He got shot.'

'Who shot him?'

'Ry-dell. Shut fuck up.' Shot, Pock, Op. 'She's tellin' us she's got-information-regarding-a-possiblehomicide, and you're telling me to shut up?'

'Yes, I tell you shut fuck up. War-baby. He will explain.'

And her arm twisted up so she'd go with them.

Svobodov had insisted on cuffing him to Chevette Washington. They were Beretta cuffs, just like he'd carried on patrol in Knoxville. Svobodov said he and Orlovsky needed their hands free in case any of these bridge people caught on they were taking the girl off.

But if they were taking her in, how come they hadn't read her any Miranda, or even told her she was under arrest? Rydell had already decided that if it got to court and he was called to witness, no way was he going to perjure himself and say he'd heard any fucking Miranda. These Russians were balls-out cowboys as far as he could see, just exactly the kind of officers the Academy had tried hard to train Rydell not to be.

In a way, though, what they were reflected what a lot of people more or less unconsciously expected cops to be and do, and that, this one lecturer at the Academy had said, was because of mythology. Like what they called the Father Mulcahy Syndrome, in barricaded hostage situations. Where somebody took a hostage and the cops tried to decide what to do. And they'd all seen this movie about Father Mulcahy once, so'd they'd say, yeah, I got it, I'll get a priest, I'll get the guy's parents, I'll lay down my gun and I'll go in there and talk him out. And he'd go in there and get his ass drilled out real good. Because he forgot, and let himself think a movie was how you really did it. And it could work the other way, too, SO you gradually became how you saw cops were in

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23 Gone and done it

movies and on television. They'd all been warned about that. But people like Svobodov and Orlovsky, people who'd come here from other countries, maybe that media stuff worked even stronger

on them. Check how they dressed, for one thing.

Man, he was going to have him a shower. Hot shower. He was going to stay in there until he couldn't stand it anymore, or until the hot ran out. Then he was going to get out and towel off and put on all brand-new, totally dry clothes, in whatever hotel room Warbaby had got for him. He was going to send down for a couple of club sandwiches and an ice-bucket with about four-five of those long-neck Mexican beers like they drank in L.A. And he'd sit there with a remote and watch some television. Maybe see Cops in Trouble. Maybe he'd even call up Sublett, shoot the shit, tell him about this wild-ass time up in Northern California. Sublett always worked deep graveyard because he was light-sensitive, so if it happened to be his night off, he'd be up watching his movies.

'Watch where you're walking-' Yanking his cuffed hand so hard he nearly fell over. He'd been about to go one side of an upright as she was about to go the other. 'Hey. Sorry,' he said.

She wouldn't look at him. But she just didn't look to Rydell like she'd sit down on some guy's chest with a razor and haul his tongue out the hard way. Well, she did have that ceramic knife, when Svobodov shook her down, plus a pocket phone and the damn glasses everybody was after. Those looked just like Warbaby's, and had this case. The Russians were real happy about that, and now they were tucked away safe in the inside pocket of Svobodov's flak vest.

She wasn't the right kind of scared, either, something kept telling him. She wasn't giving off that vibe of perp fear that you got to know by about your third day on the job. It was like victim fear, what it was, even though she'd already flatout admitted to Orlovsky that she'd stolen those glasses. Said she'd done that up at a party in that hotel, the night before.

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But neither of the Russians had said shit about any homicide beef, or any Blix or whatever the victim's name had been. Or even larceny. And she'd said that about somebody killing Sammy, whoever Sammy was. Maybe Sammy was the German. But the Russians had just dropped it, and shut Etydell up, and now she'd clammed up except to bitch at him if he started to fall asleep on his feet.

The place was coming back to life, sort of, now that the storm had quit, but it was God knows when in the morning and there weren't exactly a lot of people swarming out yet to check the damage.

Lights kept coming back on, here and there, and there were a few people sweeping water off decks and things, and a few drunks, and this guy who looked like he was on dancer, talking to himself a mile a minute, who kept following them until Svobodov pulled out his H&K and spun around and said he'd grease him to fucking catfood if he didn't get his dancer ass to Oakland like yesterday, fuckhead, and the guy did, naturally, his eyes about to bug right out of his head, and Orlovsky laughing at him.

They came out into some more lights, about where Rydell had first laid his eyes on Chevette Washington. Looking down to keep track of his footing, Rydell saw she was wearing black SWAT trainers just like his. Lexan insoles.

'Hey,' he said, 'major footwear.'

And she just looked up at him like he was crazy, and he saw tears running down her face.

And Svobodov jammed the muzzle of that H&K, hard, into the joint of Rydell's jaw, just in front of his right ear, and said: 'Fuckhead. You don't talk to her.'

Rydell looked at Svobodov, edgewise, down the top of the barrel. Waited until he thought it was safe to say okay.

After that, he didn't try to say anything to her, or even look at her. When he thought he could get away with it, he looked at Svobodov. When they took that cuff off, he just might deck that SOfl of a hitch.

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But just after the Russian had pulled the gun out of his ear, Rydell had registered something behind him. Not registered big-time, but it clicked for him later: this big bear of a longhair, blinking out at them, where they stood in the light, from this little doorway looked like it wasn't more than a foot wide.

Rydell didn't have anything special going about black people or immigrants or anything, not like a lot of people did. In fact, that had been one of the things that had gotten him into the Academy when he hadn't exactly had great grades from high school. They'd run all these tests on him and decided he wasn't racist. He wasn't, either, but not because he thought about it particularly. He just couldn't see the point. It just made for a lot of hassle, being that way, so why be that way? Nobody was going to go back and live where they lived before, were they, and if they did (he vaguely suspected) there wouldn't be any Mongolian barbecue and maybe we'd all be listening to Pentecostal Metal and anyway the President was black.

He had to admit, though, as he and Chevette Washington walked out between those tank-trap slabs, their cuffed wrists swinging in that stupid prom-night unison that you get with handcuffs, that currently he was feeling a little put upon by a few very specific blacks and immigrants. Warbaby's tvpreacher melancholy had worn thin on him; he thought Freddie was, as his father would have put it, a jive-ass motherfucker; Svobodov and Orlovsky, they must be what his uncle, the one who went in the army, had meant by stone pigs.

And here he could see Freddie with his butt propped against the front fender of the Patriot, bobbing his head to something on earphones, the lyrics or whatever sliding around the edges of his sneakers, animated in red LEDs. Must've sat out the rain in the car, because his pistol-print shirt and his big shorts weren't even wet.

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And Warbaby there in his long quilted coat, his hat jammed down level with those VL glasses. Looked like a refrigerator, if a refrigerator could lean on a cane.

And the Russians' gray tanker of an unmarked, pulled up nose to nose with the Patriot, armored tires and that graphite mesh rhino-chaser screaming Cop Car at anybody who was interested. As indeed some were, Rydell saw, a thin crowd of bridge-people watching from various perches on the concrete slabs and battened food-wagons. Little kids, a couple of Mexican-looking women with hairnets like they worked in food-preparation, some rough-looking boys in muddy workclothes and leaning on shovels and push-brooms there. Just looking, their faces carefully neutral, the way people's faces got when they saw cops working and were curious.

And somebody in the Russians' car, hunched down knees-up in the shotgun seat.

The Russians closing in tight on either side of Rydell and the girl, walking them out. Rydell could feel them responding to the presence of the crowd. Shouldn't've left the car out there like that.

Svobodov, this close, sort of creaked when he walked, and that was the armor under his shirt that Rydell had noticed before, back in that greasy spoon. Svobodov was smoking one of his Marlboro cigarettes, hissing out clouds of blue smoke. Had the gun out of sight now.

And right up to Warbaby, Freddie shining the whole scene on with a grin that made Rydell want to kick him, but Warbaby looking sad as ever.

'Get this fucking cuff off,' Rydell said to Warbaby, raising his wrist, Chevette Washington's coming up with it. The crowd saw the cuffs then; there was a ripple of reaction, voices.

Warbaby looked at Svobodov. 'You get it?'

'Here.' Svobodov touched the front of his London Fog.

Warbaby nodded, looked at Chevette Washington, then at Rydell. 'Good then.' To Orlovsky: 'Take the cuffs off.'

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Orlovsky took Rydell's wrist, slid a mag-strip into the slot in the cuff.

'Get in the car,' Warbaby said to Rydell.

'They haven't read her any Miranda,' Rydell said.

'Get in the car. You're driving, remember?'

'She under arrest, Mr. Warbaby?'

Freddie giggled.

Chevette Washington was holding her wrist up for Orlovsky, but he was putting the mag-strip away.

'Rydell,' Warbaby said, 'get in the car now. We've done our part here.'

The passenger-side door of the gray car opened. A man got out. Black cowboy boots and a long black waterproof. Sandy hair, no particular length. He had those deep smile-creases down his cheeks, like somebody had carved them there. Light-colored eyes. Then he did smile, and it was about two-thirds gum and a third teeth, with gold at the corners.

'That's him,' Chevette Washington said, in this hoarse voice, 'he killed Sammy.'

And that was when the big longhair, the one in the dirty shirt, the one Rydell had noticed back on the bridge, plowed this bicycle square into Svobodov's back. Not any regular bicycle, either, but this big old rusty coaster-brake number with a heavy steel basket welded in front of the bars. The bike and the basket probably weighed a hundred pounds between them, and there must've been another hundred pounds of scrap metal piled up in the basket when Svobodov got nailed. Put him face-down across the hood of the Patriot, Freddie jumping like a scalded cat.

The longhair landed on top of Svobodov and all that junk like a bear with rabies, grabbed him by the ears, and starting slamming his face into the hood. Orlovsky was pulling out his H&K and Rydell saw Chevette Washington bend down, tug something out of the top of one SWAT shoe. jab it into Orlovsky's hack. Looked like a screwdriver. Hit whatever

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armor he was wearing, but it put him off-balance as he pulled the trigger. Nothing in the world ever sounded like caseless ammunition, at full-auto, out of a floating breech. It wasn't the sound of a machine gun, but a kind of ear-shattering, extended whoop. The first burst didn't seem to hit anything, but with Chevette Washington clawing at his gun arm, Orlovsky tried to turn it on her. Second burst went in the general direction of the crowd. People screaming, grabbing up kids. Warbaby's mouth was just open, like he couldn't believe it. Rydell was behind Orlovsky when he tried to bring the gun up again, and, well, it was just one of those times. He side-kicked the Russian about three inches below the back of his knee, that third burst whooping almost straight up as Orlovsky went down. Freddie tried to grab Chevette Washington, seemed to see the screwdriver for the first time, and just managed to bring his laptop up with both hands. That screwdriver went right through it. Freddie yelped and dropped it. Rydell grabbed the loose cuff, the one that had been around his wrist, and just pulled. Opened the passenger-side door of the Patriot and hauled her right in after him. Getting into the driver's seat, he had a grandstand view of the longhair pounding Svobodov's bloody face into the hood, all these pieces of rusty junk jumping each time he did it. Key. Ignition. Rydell saw Chevette Washington's phone and the case with the VL glasses fall out of Svobodov's flak vest. Powered down the window and reached around. Somebody shot the longhair off Svobodov, pop, pop, pop, and Rydell, stomping it in reverse, saw the man from the cop car swinging a little gun around, two-handed. just like they taught you in FATSS. The back of the Patriot slammed into something and Svobodov

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flew off the hood in a cloud of rusty chain and odd lengths of pipe. Chevette Washington was trying to get out the passenger door, so he had to hang on to the cuff and spin the wheel one-handed, let go of her long enough to shove it into forward and tromp on it, then grab her again. The passenger door slammed shut as he took it straight for the man with the big smile, who maybe got off one more before he had to get out of the way, fast, The Patriot was fishtailing in about an inch of water, and he barely missed clipping the back of a big orange waste-hauler pulled up beside a building there. He caught this one crazy glimpse in the dash-mirror, out the back window: the bridge towering up like something wrapped in seaweed, sky graying now behind it, and Warbaby taking one stiff-legged step, another, raising the cane straight out from his shoulder, pointing it at the Patriot like it was a magic wand or something. Then whatever came out of the end of Warbaby's cane took out the Patriot's back window, and Rydell hung a right so tight it almost tipped them over. 'Jesus,' said Chevette Washington, like somebody talking in their sleep, 'what are you doing?' He didn't know, but hadn't he just gone and done it? When the lights went out, Yamazaki fumbled in the dark for his bag. Finding it, he felt through it for his flashlight. In the white beam, Skinner slept slack-jawed beneath the blankets and a ragged sleeping-bag. Yamazaki searched the several shelves above the table-ledge: small glass jars of spices, identical jars containing steel screws, an ancient Bakelite telephone reminding him of the origin of the verb 'to dial,' rolls of many different kinds and colors of adhesive tape, twists of heavy copper wire, pieces of what he took to be salt-water tackle, and, finally, a bundle of dusty candle-stubs secured with a rotting rubber band. Selecting the longest of these, he found a lighter beside the green campstove. Standing the candle upright on a white saucer, he lit it. The flame fluttered and went out. Flashlight in hand, he moved to the window and tugged it more tightly into its deep circular frame. Now the candle stayed lit, though the flame pulsed and swelled in drafts he could never hope to locate. Returning to the window, he looked out. The darkened bridge was invisible. Rain was driving almost horizontally against the window, tiny droplets reaching his face through cracks in the glass and corroded segments of the supporting lead. It occurred to him that Skinner's room might be made to function as a camera obscura. If the church window's tiny central hull's-eye pane were removed, and the other panes covered, an

inverted image would be cast on the opposite wall.

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24 Song of the central pier

Yamazaki knew that the central pier, the bridge's center anchorage, had once qualified as one of the world's largest pinhole cameras. In the structure's pitch-black interior, light shining in through a single tiny hole had projected a huge image of the underside of the lower deck, the nearest tower, and the surrounding bay. Now the heart of the anchorage housed some uncounted number of the bridge's more secretive inhabitants, and Skinner had advised him against attempting to go there. 'Nothin' like those Mansons out in the bushes on Treasure, Scooter, but you don't want to bother 'em anyway. Okay people but they just aren't looking for anybody to drop in, know what I mean?'

Yamazaki crossed to the smooth curve of cable that interrupted the room's floor. Only an oval segment of it was visible, like some mathematical formula barely breaking a topological surface in a computer representation. He bent to touch it, the visible segment polished by other hands. Each of the thirty-seven cables, containing four hundred and seventy-two wires, had withstood, and withstood now, a force of some million pounds. Yamazaki felt something, some message of vast, obscure moment, shiver up through the relic-smooth dorsal hump. The storm, surely; the bridge itself was capable of considerable mobility; it expanded and contracted with heat and cold; the great steel teeth of the piers were sunk into bedrock beneath the Bay mud, bedrock that had scarcely moved even in the Little Grande.

Godzilla. Yamazaki shivered, recalling television images of Tokyo's fall. He had been in Paris, with his parents. Now a new city rose there, its buildings grown, literally, floor by floor. The candlelight showed him Skinner's little television, forgotten on the floor. Taking it to the table, he sat on the stool and examined it. There was no visible damage to the screen. It had simply come away from its frame, on a short length of multicolored ribbon. He folded the ribbon into the frame and

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pressed with his thumbs on either side of the screen. It popped back into place, but would it still function? He bent to examine the tiny controls. ON.

Lime-and-purple diagonals chased themselves across the screen, then faded, revealing some steadycam fragment, the NHK logo displayed in the lower left corner. '-heir-apparent to the Harwood Levine public relations and advertising fortune, departed San Francisco this afternoon after a rumored stay of several days, declining comment on the purpose of his visit.' A long face, horselike yet handsome, above a raincoat's upturned collar. A large white smile. 'Accompanying him,' mid-distance shot down an airport corridor, the slender, dark-haired woman wrapped in something luxurious and black, silver gleaming at the heels of her shining boots, 'was Maria Paz, the Padanian media personality, daughter of film director Carlo Paz-.' The woman, who looked unhappy, vanished, to be replaced by infrared footage from New Zealand, as Japanese peace-keeping forces in armored vehicles advanced on a rural airport. '-losses attributed to the outlawed South Island Liberation Front, while in Wellington-' Yamazaki attempted to change the channel, but the screen only strobed its lime-and-purple, then framed a portrait of Shapely. A BBC docu-drama. Calm, serious, mildly hypnotic. After two more unsuccessful attempts at locating another channel, Yamazaki let the British voiceover blot out the wind, the groaning of the cables, the creaking of the plywood walls. He focused his attention on the familiar story, its outcome fixed, comforting-if only in its certainty.

James Delmore Shapely had come to the attention of the AIDS industry in the early months of the new century. He was thirty-one years old, a prostitute, and had been HIVpositive for twelve years. At the time of his 'discovery,' by Dr. Kim Kutnik of Atlanta, Georgia, Shapely was serving a two hundred and fifty day prison term for soliciting. (His status as HIV-positive, which would automatically have war-

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ranted more serious charges, had apparently been 'glitched.') Kutnik, a researcher with the Sharman Group, an American subsidiary of Shibata Pl-armaceuticals, was sifting prison medical data in search of individuals who had been HIV-positive for a decade or more, were asymptomatic, and had entirely normal (or, as in Shapely's case, above the norm) T-cell counts.

One of the Sharman Group's research initiatives centered around the possibility of isolating mutant strains of HIV. Arguing that viruses obey the laws of natural selection, several Sharman biologists had proposed that the HIV virus, in its then-current genetic format, was excessively lethal. Allowed to range unchecked, argued the Sharman team, a virus demonstrating 100 percent lethality must eventually bring about the extinction of the host organism. (Other Sharman researchers countered by citing the long incubation period as contributing to the survival of the



host population.) As the BBC writers were careful to make clear, the idea of locating nonpathogenic strains of HIV, with a view of overpowering and neutralizing lethal strains, had been put forward almost a decade earlier, though the 'ethical' implications of experimentation with human subjects had impeded research. The core observation of the Sharman researchers dated from this earlier work: The virus wishes to survive, and cannot if it kills its host. The Sharman team, of which Dr. Kutnik was a part, intended to inject HIV-positive patients with blood extracted from individuals they believed to be infected with nonpathogenic strains of the virus. It was possible, they believed, that the nonpathogenic strain would overpower the lethal strain. Kim Kutnik was one of seven researchers given the task of locating HIV-positive individuals who might be harboring a nonpathogenic strain. She elected to begin her search through a sector of data concerned with current inmates of state prisons who were (a) in apparent good health, and (b) had tested HIV-positive at least a decade before. Her initial

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search turned up sixty-six possibles-among them, J. D. Shapely.

Yamazaki watched as Kutnik, played by a young British actress, recalled, from a patio in Rio, her first meeting with Shapely. 'I'd been struck by the fact that his T-cell count that day was over 1,000, and that his responses to the questionnaire seemed to indicate that 'safe sex,' as we thought of it then, was, well, not exactly a priority. He was a very open, very outgoing, really a very innocent character, and when I asked him, there in the prison visiting room, about oral sex, he actually blushed. Then he laughed, and said, well, he said he 'sucked cock like it was going out of style' . . .' The actress Kutnik looked as though she were about to blush herself. 'Of course,' she said, 'in those days we didn't really understand the disease's exact vectors of infection, because, grotesque as it now seems, there had been no real research into the precise modes of transmission. . .'

Yamazaki cut the set off. Dr. Kutnik would arrange Shapely's release from prison as an AIDS research volunteer under Federal law. The Sharman Group's project would be hindered by fundamentalist Christians objecting to the injection of 'HIV-tainted' blood into the systems of terminally ill AIDS patients. As the project foundered, Kutnik would uncover clinical data suggesting that unprotected sex with Shapely had apparently reversed the symptoms of several of her patients. There would be Kutnik's impassioned resignation, the flight to Brazil with the baffled Shapely, lavish funding against a backdrop of impending civil war, and what could only be described as an extremely pragmatic climate for research.

But it was such a sad story.

Better to sit here by candlelight, elbows on the edge of Skinner's table, listening for the song of the central pier.

He kept saying he was from Tennessee and he didn't need this shit. She kept thinking she was going to die, the way he was driving, or anyway those cops would be after them, or the one who shot Sammy. She still didn't know what had happened, and wasn't that Nigel who'd plowed into that tight-faced one?

But he'd hung this right off Bryant, so she told him left on Folsom, because if the assholes were coming, she figured she wanted the Haight, best place she knew to get lost, and that was definitely what she intended to do, earliest opportunity. And this Ford was just like the one Mr. Matthews drove, ran the holding facility up in Beaverton. And she'd tried to stab somebody with a screwdriver. She'd never done anything like that in her life before. And she'd wrecked that black guy's computer, the one with the haircut. And this bracelet on her left wrist, the other half flipping around, open, on three links of chain- He reached over and grabbed the loose cuff. Did something

to it without taking his eyes off the street. He let go. Now it was locked shut.

'Why'd you do that?'

'So you don't snag it on something, wind up cuffed to the door-handle or a street sign-'

'Take it off.'

'No key.'

She rattled it at him. 'Take it off.'

'Stick it up the sleeve of your jacket. Those are Beretta

'93

25 Without a paddle

cuffs. Real good cuffs.' He sounded like he was sort of happy to have something to talk about, and his driving had evened out. Brown eyes. Not old; twenties, maybe. Cheap clothes like K-Mart stuff, all wet. Light brown hair cut too short but not short enough. She watched a muscle in his jaw work, like he was chewing gum, but he wasn't.

'Where we going?' she asked him.

'Fuck if I know,' he said, gunning the engine a little. 'You the one said "left" . .

'Who are you?'

He glanced over at her. 'Rydell. Berry Rydell.'

'Barry?'

'Berry. Like straw. Like dingle. Hey, this a big fucking Street, lights and everything-'

'Right.'

'So where should I-'

'Right!'

'Okay,' he said, and hung it. 'Why?'

'The Haight. Lots of people up late, cops don't like to go there. ...'

'Ditch this car there?'

'Turn your back on it two seconds, it's history.'

'They got ATM's there?'

'Uh-uh.'

'Well, here's one ...' Up over a curb, hunks of crazed safety-glass falling out of the frame where the back window had been. She hadn't even noticed that.

He dug a soggy-looking wallet out of his back pocket and started pulling cards out of it. Three of them. 'I have to try to get some cash,' he said. He looked at her. 'You wanna jump out of this car and run,' he shrugged, 'then you just go for it.' Then he reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out the glasses and Codes's phone that she'd scooped when the lights went out in I)issidents.

Because she knew from Lowell that people in trouble need a phone, most times worse than

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anything. He dropped them in her lap, the a'shole's glasses and the phone. 'Yours.'

Then he got out, walked over to the AT-v1, and started feeding it cards. She sat there, watching it e~nerge from its armor, the way they do, shy and cautious, its ameras coming out, too, to monitor the transaction. He stood tkre, drumming his fingers on the side, his mouth like he was whistling but he wasn't making any noise. She looked down at the case and the phone and wondered why she didn't just jun~p out and run, like he said.

Finally he came back, thumb-counting a fold of bills, stuck it down in his front jeans pocket, and got in He sailed the first of his cards out the open window at th~ ATM, which was pulling back into its shell like a crab. 'Don't know how they cancelled that one so quick, after you put that thing through Freddie's laptop.' Flicked another. Then the last one. They lay in front of the ATM as its lex2n shield came trundling down, their little holograms win~ing up in the machine's halogen floods.

'Somebody'll get those,' she said.

'Hope so,' he said, 'hope they get 'em and go tcMars.' Then he did something in reverse with all four wheels and the Ford sort of jumped up and backward, into the street, some other car swerving past them all brakes and horn and the driver's mouth a black 0, and the part of her that was still a messenger sort of liked it. All the times they'd cut her off. 'Shit,' he sa:d, jamming the gear-thing around until he got what he needed and they took off.

The handcuff was rubbing on the rash where the red worm had been. 'You a cop?'

'No.'

'Security? Like from the hotel?'

'Uh-uh.'

'Well,' she said, 'what are you?'

Streetlight sliding across his face. Seemed like he was thinking about it. 'Up shit creek. Without a paddle.'

The first thing Rydell saw when he got out of the Patriot, in the alley off Haight Street, was a one-armed, one-legged man on a skateboard. This man lay on his stomach, on the board, and propelled himself along with a curious hitching motion that reminded Rydell of the limbs of a gigged frog. He had his right arm and his left leg, which at least allowed for some kind of symmetry, but there was no foot on the leg. His face, as if by some weird osmosis, was the color of dirty concrete, and Rydell couldn't have said what race he was. His hair, if he had any, was covered by a black knit cap, and the rest of him was sheathed in a black, one-piece garment apparently stitched from sections of heavy-duty rubber inner-tube. He looked up, as he hitched past Rydell, through puddles left by the storm, headed for the mouth of the alley, and said, or Rydell thought he said: 'You wanna talk to me? You wanna talk to me, you better shut your fuckin' mouth...'

Rydell stood there, Samsonite dangling, and watched him go.

Then something rattled beside him. The hardware on Chevette Washington's leather jacket. 'Come on,' she said, 'don't wanna hang around back in here.'

'You see that?' Rydell asked, gesturing with his suitcase.

'You hang around back in here, you'll see worse than that,' she said.

Rydell looked back at the Patriot. He'd locked it and left the key under the driver's scat, because he hadn't wanted to

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26 Colored people

make it look too easy, but he'd forgotten about that back window. He'd never been in the position before of actively wanting a car to be stolen.

'You sure somebody'll take that?' he asked her.

'We don't get out of here, they'll take us with it.' She started walking. Rydell followed. There was stuff painted on the brick walls as high as anyone could reach, but it didn't look like any language he'd ever seen, except maybe the way they wrote cuss-words in a printed cartoon.

They'd just rounded the corner, onto the sidewalk, when Rydell heard the Patriot's engine start to rev. It gave him goosebumps, like something in a ghost story, because there hadn't been anybody back in there at all, and now he couldn't see the skateboard man anywhere.

'Look at the ground,' Chevette Washington said. 'Don't look up when they go by or they'll kill us...'

Rydell concentrated on the toes of his black SWATs. 'You hang out with car-thieves much?'

'Just walk. Don't talk. Don't look.'

He heard the Patriot wheel out of the alley and draw up beside them, pacing them. His toes were making little squelching noises, each time he took a step, and what if the last thing you knew before you died was just some pathetic discomfort like that, like your shoes were soaked and your socks were wet, and you weren't ever going to get to change them?

Rydell heard the Patriot take off, the driver fighting the unfamiliar American shift-pattern. He started to look up.

'Don't,' she said.

'Those friends of yours or what?'

'Alley pirates, Lowell calls 'em.'

'Who's Lowell?'

'You saw him in l)issidents.'

'That bar?'

'Not a bar. A chill.'

'Serves alcohol,' Rydell said.

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~A chill. Where you hang.'

"You" who? This Lowell, he hang there?' Yeah.'

You too?'

~No,' she said, angry.

'He your friend, Lowell? Your boyfriend?'

'You said you weren't a cop. You talk like one.'

'I'm not,' he said. 'You can ask 'em.'

'He's just somebody I used to know,' she said. 'Fine.'

She looked at the Samsonite. 'You got a gun or something, in there?'

'Dry socks. Underwear.'

She looked up at him. 'I don't get you.'

'Don't have to,' he said. 'We just walking, or you maybe know somewhere to go? Like off this street?'

'We want to look at some flash,' she said to the fat man. He had a couple of things through each nipple, looked like Yale locks. Kind of pulled him down, there, and Rydell just couldn't look at them. Had on some kind of baggy white pants with the crotch down about where the knees should've been, and this little blue velvet vest all embroidered with gold. He was big and soft and fat and covered with tattoos.

Rydell's uncle, the one who'd gone to Africa with the army and hadn't come back, had had a couple of tattoos. The best one went right across his back, this big swirly dragon with horns and sort of a goofy grin. He'd gotten that one in Korea, eight colors and it had all been done by a computer. He'd told Rydell how the computer had mapped his back and showed him exactly what it was going to look like when it was done. Then he had to lie down on this table while this robot put the tattoo on. Rydell had imagined a robot kind of like a vacuumcleaner, but with twisty chrome arms had needles on the end. But his uncle said it was more like being fed through a dot-

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matrix printer, and he'd had to go back eight times, one time for each color. It was a great dragon, though, and lots brighter than the tattoos on his uncle's arms, which were American eagles and a Harley trademark. When his uncle worked out in the backyard with Rydell's set of Sears weights, Rydell would watch the dragon ripple.

This fat bald guy with the weights through his nipples had tattoos everywhere except his hands and his head. Looked like he was wearing a suit of them. They were all different, no American eagles or Harley trademarks either, and they sort of ran together. They made Rydell feel kind of dizzy, so he looked up at the walls, which were covered with more tattoos, like samples for you to pick from.

'You've been here before,' the man said.

'Yeah,' Chevette Washington said, 'with Lowell. You remember Lowell?'

The fat man shrugged.

'My friend and I,' she said, 'we wanna pick something out...'

'I haven't seen your friend before,' the fat man said, perfectly nice about it but Rydell could hear the question in his voice. He was looking at Rydell's suitcase.

'It's okay,' she said. 'He knows Lowell. He's a 'Land boy, too.'

'You bridge people,' the fat man said, like he liked bridge people. 'That storm was just terrible, wasn't it? I hope it didn't do you people too much damage ... We had a client last month brought in a wide-angle Cibachrome he wanted done as a back-piece. Your whole suspension span and everything on it. Beautiful shot but he wanted it inked just that size, and he just wasn't broad enough...' He looked up at Rydell. 'Would've fit, on your friend here...'

'Couldn't he get it?' she asked, and Rydell caught that instinct to keep people talking, keep them involved.

'We're a full-service shop here at Colored People,' the fat

'99

man said. 'Lloyd put it on a graphics engine, rotated it thirty degrees, heightened the perspective, and it's gorgeous

Now, were you interested in seeing some flash for yourself, or for your big friend here?'

'Uh, actually,' Chevette said, 'we're looking for something for both of us. Like, uh, matching, you know?'

The fat man smiled. 'That's romantic. . .'

Rydell looked at her.

'Just come this way.' The fat man sort of jingled when he walked, and it made Rydell wince. 'May I bring you some complimentary tea?'

'Coffee?' Rydell asked hopefully.

'I'm sorry,' the fat man said, 'but Butch left at twelve and I don't know how to operate the machine. But I can bring you some nice tea.'

'Yeah,' Chevette said, urging Rydell along with little elbow-jabs, 'tea.'

The fat man took them down a hallway and into a little room with a couple of wallscreens and a leather sofa. 'I'll just get your tea,' he said, and shuffled out, jingling.

'Why'd you say that, about matching tattoos?' Rydell was looking around the room. Clean. Blank walls. Soft light but no shadows.

'Because he'll leave us alone while we're trying to pick one, and 'cause it'll take us so long to make up our minds.'

Rydell put his Samsonite down and sat on the couch. 'So we can stay here?'

'Yeah, as long as we keep calling up flash.'

'What's that?'

She picked up a little remote and turned one of the wallscreens on. Started blipping through menus. Hi-rez close-ups of tattooed skin. The fat man came back with a couple of big rough mugs of steaming tea Ofl a little tray. 'Yours is green,' he said to Chevette Washington, 'and yours is Mormon,' he said to Rydell, 'because you did ask for coffee. . .'

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'Urn, thanks,' Rydell said, taking the mug he was offered.

'Now you two take plenty of time,' the fat man said, 'and you want anything, just call.' He went out, tray tucked under his arm, and closed the door behind him.

'Mormon?' Rydell sniffed at the tea. It didn't smell much of anything.

'Aren't supposed to drink coffee. That kind of tea's got ephedrine in it.'

'Got drugs in it?'

'It's made from a plant with something that'll keep you awake. Like coffee.'

Rydell decided it was too hot to drink now anyway. Put it down on the floor beside the couch. The girl on the wallscreen had a dragon sort of like his uncle's, but on her left hip. Little tiny

silver ring through the top edge of her belly button. Chevette Washington flipped it to a big sweaty biker-arm with President Milibank's face looking out from it in shades of gray. Rydell struggled out of his damp jacket, noticing the ripped shoulder, the cheap white stuffing popping out. He dropped it behind the couch. 'You got any tattoos?'

'No,' she said.

'So how come you know about this?'

'Lowell,' she said, flipping through half a dozen more images, 'he's got a Giger.'

"Gigger"?' Rydell opened his Samsonite, got out a pair of socks, and started unlacing his SWAT shoes.

'This painter. Like nineteenth-century or something. Real classical. Bio-mech. Lowell's got this Giger back-piece done off a painting called "N.Y.C. XXIV." She said it x, x, i, v. 'It's like this city. Shaded black-work. But he wants sleeves to go with it, so we'd come in here to look for more Gigers to match it.'

'Why don't you sit down,' Rydell said, 'you're making my neck hurt.' She was pacing back and forth in front of the

2.01

screens. He took his wet socks off, put them in the Container City bag, and put the dry ones on. Thought about leaving his shoes off for a while, but what if he had to leave in a hurry? He put them back on. He was lacing them up when she sat down beside him.

She unzipped her jacket and shrugged it off, the loose Beretta cuff rattling. The sleeves of her plain black t-shirt had been scissored off and her upper arms were smooth and pale. She reached over the end of the couch and put the jacket down, sort of propped against the wall, the leather stiff enough that it just stayed there, its arms slumped down, like it was asleep. Like Rydell wished he could be. Now she had the remote in her hand.

'Hey,' Rydell said, 'that guy in the raincoat back there, the one shot-' He was about to say the big longhair on the bicycle, but she grabbed his wrist, the handcuff rattling.

'Sammy. He shot Sammy, up at Skinner's. He ... He was after the glasses, and Sammy had them, and-'

'Wait. Wait a sec. The glasses. Everybody wants the glasses. That guy wants 'em, Warbaby wants 'em...'

'Who's Warbaby?'

'The big black man shot the back window out of his car I was stealing. That Warbaby.'

'You think I know what they are?'

'You don't know why people are after them?'

She gave him a look like you might give a dog that had just told you it was a good day to spend all your money on one particular kind of lottery ticket.

'Let's start over,' Rydell suggested. 'You tell me where you got the glasses.'

'Why should I?'

He thought about it. 'Because you'd be dead by now if I hadn't done the kind of dirt-stupid shit I just did, back there.'

She thought about that. 'Okay,' she said.

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2.02.

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Maybe there really was something in the fat man's Mormon tea, or maybe Rydell had just crossed over into that point of tiredness where it all flipped around for a while and you started to feel like you were more awake, some ways, than you usually ever were. But he wound up sipping that tea and listening to her, and when she'd get too deep into her story to remember to keep flipping the tattoo-pictures on the wallscreen, he'd do it for her.

When you worked it around to sequential order, she was this girl from Oregon, didn't have any family, who'd come down here and moved out on that bridge with this old man, crazy by the sound of it, had a bad hip and needed somebody around to help him. Then she'd gotten her a job riding a bicycle around San Francisco, delivering messages. Rydell knew about messengers from his foot-patrol period in downtown Knoxville, because you had to keep ticketing them for riding on the sidewalk, traffic violation, and they'd give you a hard time about it. But they made pretty good money if they worked at it. This Sammy she'd said was shot, murdered, he was another messenger, a black guy who'd gotten her on at Allied, where she worked.

And her story of how she'd taken the glasses out of the guy's pocket at this big drunk party she'd

wandered into up in the Morrisey, that made as much sense to him as anything. And it wasn't the kind of story people made up. Not like the glasses crawled into her hand or anything, she just flat-out stole them, impulse, just because the guy was in her face and obnoxious. Nuisance crime, except they'd turned out to be valuable.

But from her description he knew her asshole up in the Morrisey had been the same one got himself the Cuban necktie, your German-born Costa Rican citizen who maybe wasn't either, star of that X-rated fax of Warhahy's and the one Svohodov and Orlovsky had been investigating. If they had been.

2.03  
'Shit,' he said, in the middle of something she was trying to tell him.

'What?'

'Nothing. Keep talking...'

The Russians were bent, and he knew that. They were Homicide, they were bent, and he'd bet dollars to donuts they weren't even investigating the case. They could talk Warbaby's way onto the crime-scene, tap their department's computer, but the rest of it had just been window-dressing, for him, for Rydell, the hired help. And what was that that Freddie had said, about DatAmerica and IntenSecure being basically your same company?

But Chevette Washington was on a roll of her own now, like sometimes when people get started talking they just let it all hang out, and she was saying how Lowell, who was the one with the hair and not the skinhead, and who actually had, sort of, been her boyfriend for a while, was a guy who could (you know?) get things done with computers, if you had the money, and that sort of scared her because he was always talking about the cops and how he didn't have to worry about them.

Rydell nodded, automatically flipping through a couple more pictures of tattoos-lady there with these pink carnations sort of followed her bikini-line--but really he was listening to something going around in his own head. Like Hernandez was IntenSecure, the Morrisey was IntenSecure, Warbaby was IntenSecure, Freddie said DatAmerica and IntenSecure were like the same thing- '-  
Desire . . .'

Rydell blinked. Skinny guy there with J. D. Shapely all mournful on his chest. But you'd be mournful, too, you had chest hair growing out your eyes. 'What?'

'Republic. Republic of Desire.'

'What is?'

'Why Lowell says the COPS won't ever bother him, but I told him he was full of shit.'

2.04

'Hackers,' Rydell said.

'You haven't heard a word I said.'

'No,' Rydell said, 'no, that's not true. Desire. Republic of. Run that one by again, okay?'

She took the remote, blipped through a shaven head with a sun at the very top, planets orbiting down to the top of the ears, a hand with a screaming mouth on the palm, feet covered with blue-green creature-scales. 'I said,' she said, 'Lowell bullshits about that, how he's connected up with this Republic of Desire, how they can do anything they feel like with computers, so anybody messes with him is gonna get it.'

'No shit,' Rydell said. 'You ever see these guys?'

'You don't see them,' she said, 'not like live. You talk to them, on the phone. Or like with goggles, and that's the wildest.'

'Why?'

'Cause they look like lobsters and shit. Or some tv star. Anything. But I don't know why I'm telling you.'

'Because I'll nod out otherwise, then how're we gonna decide if we're getting the creature-feet or the crotch-carnations?'

'It's your turn,' she said, and just sat there until he started talking.

He told her how he was from Knoxville and about getting into the Academy, about how he'd always watched Cops in Trouble and then when he'd been a cop and gotten in trouble, it had looked like he was going to be on the show. How they'd brought him out to Los Angeles because they didn't want Adult Survivors of Satanism stealing their momentum, but then the Pookey Bear murders had come along and they'd sort of lost interest, and he'd had to get on with IntenSecure and drive Gunhead. He told her about Sublett and living with Kevin Tarkovsky in the house in Mar Vista, and sort of skipped over the Republic of Desire and the night he'd driven Gunhead into the Schonbrunns' place in Benedict Canyon.

2.05

About how Hernandez had come over, just the other morning but it seemed like years, to tell him he could come up here and drive for this Mr. Warbaby. Then she wanted to know what it was that skip

tracers did, so he explained what it was they were supposed to do, and what it was he figured they probably did do, and she said they sounded like bad news.

When he was done, she just looked at him. 'That's it? That's how you got here and what you're doing?'

'Yeah,' he said, 'guess it is.'

'Jesus,' she said. Sort of shook her head. They both watched a couple of full body-suits blip past, one of them all circuit-patterns, like they stenciled on old-fashioned circuit-boards. 'You got eyes,' she said, and yawned in the middle of it, 'like two piss-holes in a snowbank.'

There was a knock at the door. It opened a crack, and somebody, not the man who jingled when he walked, said: 'You having any luck picking a design? Henry's gone home...'

'Well it's just so hard to decide,' Chevette Washington said, 'there's so many of them and we want to get just the right one.'

'That's fine,' said the voice, bored. 'You just go right on looking.' The door closed.

'Let me see those glasses,' Rydell said.

She reached over and got her jacket. Got out the case with the glasses, the phone. Handed him the glasses. The case was made out of some dark stuff, thin as eggshell, rigid as steel. He opened it. The glasses looked exactly like Warbaby's. Big black frames, the lenses black now. They had a funny heft to them, weighed more than you thought they would.

Chevette Washington had flipped open the phone's keypad.

'Hey,' Rydell said, touching her hand, 'they'll have your number for sure. You dial out on that, or even take a call, they'll be in here in about ten minutes.'

'Won't have this number,' she said. 'It's one of Codes's phones. I took it off the table when the lights went out.'

'Thought you said you didn't just steal things.'

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'Well,' she said, 'if Codes had it, it's stolen already. Codes trades 'em off people in the city, then Lowell gets somebody to tumble 'em, change the numbers.' She tapped the pad, held the little phone to her ear. 'Dead,' she said, shrugging.

'Here,' Rydell said, putting the glasses down on his lap and taking the phone. 'Maybe it got wet, or the battery's knocked loose. What's old Codes trade for these, anyway?' He ran his thumbnail around the back of the phone, looking for the place whtre you could pry it open.

'Well,' she said, 'stuff.'

He popped thc case. Saw a tightly rolled mini-Ziploc wedged in there beside tie battery. It had pushed the contacts out of alignment. He took it out and unrolled it. 'Stuff?'

'Uh-huh.'

'This type of stuff.'

'Uh-huh.'

He looked at her. 'If this is 4-Thiobuscaline, it's a controlled substance.'

She looked at the bag of grayish powder, then at him. 'But you aren't a cop anymore.'

'You don't do this stuff, do you?'

'No. Well, once or twice. Lowell did, sometimes.'

'Well, just do~i't do any around me, because I've seen what it does. Nice noTmal people do a couple of hits of this, they go snake-shit crazy.' He tapped the bag. 'Enough in this to get half a dozen people fucked up like you wouldn't believe.' He handed it to he~ and picked up the phone, trying to get the battery back where it belonged.

'I'd believe it, she said. 'I saw what it did to Lowell. . .'

'Dial tone,' he said. 'Who you want to call?'

Thought ahoit it, then she took the phone and flipped it shut. 'Guess thee isn't anybody.'

'That old man have a phone?'

'No,' she sad, and her shoulders hunched. 'I'm scared they killed him,too. 'Cause of me . . .'

2.07

Rydell couldn't think of anything to say to that. He was too tired to flick the remote. Some guy's arm with a furled Confederate flag on it. Just like home. He looked at her. She sure didn't look anywhere near as tired as he was. That could just be being young, he thought. He sure hoped she wasn't on any ice or dancer or anything. Maybe she was in some kind of shock, still. Said this Sammy had been killed, two others she was worried about. Evidently she'd known the guy plowed in Svobodov on that bicycle, but she didn't know yet that he'd been shot. Funny what you miss seeing in a fight. Well, he didn't see any reason to tell her, not right now.

'I'll try Fontaine,' she said, opening the phone again.

'Who?'

'He does Skinner's electricity and stuff.' She dialled a number, put the phone to her ear.

His eyes closed and his head hit the back of the couch so hard it almost woke him up.

'Smells like piss,' Skinner said, accusingly, waking Yamazaki from a dream in which he stood beside J. D. Shapely on a great dark plane, before a black and endless wall inscribed with the names of the dead.

Yamazaki raised his head from the table. The room in darkness. Light through the church window.

'What are you doing here, Scooter?'

Yamazaki's buttocks and lower back ached. 'The storm,' he said, still half in his dream.

'What storm? Where's the girl?'

'Gone,' Yamazaki said. 'Don't you remember? Loveless?'

'What are you talking about?' Skinner struggled up on one elbow, kicking off the blankets and the sleeping-bag back, his gray-stubbled face twisted with disgust. 'Need a bath. Dry clothes.'

'Loveless. He found me in a bar. He made me bring him here. I think he must have followed me, earlier, when I left you-'

'Sure. Shut up, Scooter, okay?'

Yamazaki closed his mouth.

'Now we need a bunch of water. Hot. First for coffee, then some so I can wash off. You know how to work a Coleman stove?'

'A what?'

'Green thing over there, red tank on the front. You go jiggle that tank off, I'll tell you how to pump it up.'

2.09

27 After the storm

Yamazaki stood up, wincing at the pain in his back, and stumbled toward the green-painted metal box Skinner was pointing at.

'Gone off fucking that no-ass greaseball boyfriend of hers again. Useless, Scooter.. .'

He stood on Skinner's roof, pantlegs flapping in a breeze that gave no hint of last night's storm, looking out at the city washed in a strange iron light, shreds of his dream still circling dimly ... Shapely had spoken to him, his voice the voice of the young Elvis Presley. He said that he had forgiven his killers.

Yamazaki stared at Transamerica's upright thorn, bandaged with the brace they'd applied after the Little Grande, half-hearing the dreamed voice. They just didn't know any better, Scooter.

Skinner cursing, below, as he sponged himself with water Yamazaki had warmed on the Coleman stove.

Yamazaki thought of his thesis advisor in Osaka.

'I don't care,' Yamasaki said, in English, San Francisco his witness.

The whole city was a Thomasson. Perhaps America itself was a Thomasson.

How could they understand this in Osaka, in Tokyo?

'Yo! On the roof!' someone called.

Yamazaki turned, saw a thin black man atop the tangle of girders that braced the upper end of Skinner's lift. He wore a thick tweed overcoat and a crocheted cap.

'You okay up there? How 'bout Skinner?'

Yamazaki hesitated, remembering Loveless. If Skinner or the girl had enemies, how could he recognize them?

'Name's Fontaine,' the man said. 'Chevette called me, told me to get over here and see if Skinner got through the blow all right. I take care of the wiring tip here, make sure his lift's running and all.'

'He's bathing now,' Yamazaki said. 'In the storm, he became.. . confused. He doesn't seem to remember.'

'Have some power for you in about another half an hour,' the man said. 'Wish I could say the same for over my end. Lost four transformers. Got us five dead bodies, twenty injured that I know of. Skinner got coffee on?'

'Yes,' Yamazaki said.

'Do with a cup about now.'

'Yes, please,' Yamazaki said, and bowed. The black man smiled. Yamazaki scrambled down through the hatch. 'Skinner-san! A man named Fontaine, he is your friend?'

Skinner was struggling into yellowed thermal underwear. 'Useless bastard. Still don't have any power...'

Yamazaki unlatched the hatch in the floor and hauled it open. Fontaine eventually appeared at the bottom of the ladder, a battered canvas tool-bag in either hand. Putting one down and slinging the other over his shoulder, he began to climb.

Yamazaki poured the remaining coffee into the cleanest cup.



'Fuel-cell's buggered,' Skinner said, as Fontaine pushed his bag ahead of him, through the opening. Skinner was layered now in at least three threadbare flannel shirts, their tails pushed unevenly into the waistband of an ancient pair of woolen Army trousers.

'We're working on it, boss,' Fontaine said, standing up and smoothing his overcoat. 'Had us a big old storm here.'

'What Scooter says,' Skinner said.

'Well, he's not shittin' you, Skinner. Thanks.' Fontaine accepted the steaming cup of black coffee and blew on it. He looked at Yamazaki. 'Chevette said she might not get back here for a while. Know anything about that?'

Yamazaki looked at Skinner.

'Useless,' Skinner said. 'Gone off with that shithead again.'

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'Didn't say anything about that,' Fontaine said. 'Didn't say much at all. But if she's not going to be around, you're going to need somebody take care of things for you.'

'Take care of myself,' Skinner said.

'I know that, boss,' Fontaine assured, 'but we got a couple of fried servos in your lift down there. Take a few days get that going for you, the kind of backlog we're looking at. Need you somebody go up and down the rungs. Bring you food and all.'

'Scooter can do it,' Skinner said.

Yamazaki blinked.

'That right?' Fontaine raised his eyebrows at Yamazaki. 'You stay up here and take care of Mr. Skinner?'

Yamazaki thought of his borrowed flat in the tall Victorian house, its black marble bathroom larger than his bachelor apartment in Osaka. He looked from Fontaine to Skinner, then back. 'I would be honored, to stay with Skinner-san, if he wishes.'

'Do what you like,' Skinner said, and began laboriously stripping the sheets from his mattress.

'Chevette told me you might be up here,' Fontaine said. 'Some kind of university guy ...' He put his cup down on the table, bent to swing his tool-bag up beside it. 'Said maybe you people worried about uninvited guests.' He undid the bag's two buckles and opened it. Tools gleamed there, rolls of insulated wire. He took out something wrapped in an oily rag, looked to see that Skinner wasn't observing him, and tucked the thing behind the glass jars on the shelf above the table.

'We can pretty much make sure nobody you don't know will get up here for the next couple days,' he said to Yamazaki, lowering his voice. 'But that's a .38 Special, six rounds of hollow-point. You use it, do me a big favor and toss it off the side, okay? It's of, uh,' Fontaine grinned, "dubious provenance."

2.11

Yamazaki thought of Loveless. Swallowed. 'You gonna be okay up here?' Fontaine asked. 'Yes,'

Yamazaki said, 'yes, thank you.'

28 Rv

It was ten-thirty before they finally had to hit the street, and then only because Laurie, who Chevette knew from that first day she'd ever come in here, said that the manager, Benny Singh, was going to be showing up and they couldn't stay in there anymore, particularly not with her friend asleep like that, like he was passed out or something. Chevette said she understood, and thanked her.

'You see Sammy Sal,' Laurie said, 'you say hi for me.'

Chevette nodded, sad, and started shaking the guy's shoulder. He grunted and tried to brush her hand away. 'Wake up. We gotta go.'

She couldn't believe she'd told him all that stuff, but she'd just had to tell somebody or she'd go crazy. Not that telling it had made it make any more sense than it did before, and with this Rydell's side of it added on, it sort of made even less. The news that somebody had gone and murdered the asshole just didn't seem real, but if it was, she supposed, she was in deeper shit than ever.

'Wake up!'

'Jesus.. .' He sat up, knuckling his eyes.

'We gotta go. Manager'll be in soon. My friend let you sleep a while.'

'Go where?'

Chevette had been thinking about that. 'Cole, over by the Panhandle, there's places rent rooms by the hour.'

'Hotels?'

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'Not exactly,' she said. 'For people just need the bed for a little while.'

He dug behind the couch for his jacket. 'Look at that,' he said, sticking his fingers into the rip in the shoulder. 'Brand new last night.'

Neighborhoods that mainly operated at night had a way of looking a lot worse in the morning. Even the beggars looked worse off this time of day, like that guy there with those sores, the one trying to sell half a can of spaghetti sauce. She stepped around him. Another block or two and they'd start to hit the early crowd of day-trippers headed for Skywalker Park; more cover in the crowd but more cops, too. She tried to remember if Skywalker's rentacops were IntenSecure, that company Rydell talked about.

She wondered if Fontaine had gone to Skinner's like he'd said he would. She hadn't wanted to say too much over the phone, so at first she'd just said she was going away for a while, and would Fontaine go over and see how Skinner was doing, and maybe this Japanese student guy who'd been hanging around lately. But Fontaine could tell she sounded worried, so he'd sort of pushed her about it, and she'd told him she was worried about Skinner, how maybe there were some people gonna go up there and hassle him.

'You don't mean bridge people,' he'd said, and she'd said rio, she didn't, but that was all she could say about it. The line went quiet for a few seconds and she could hear one of Fontaine's kids singing in the background, one of those African songs with the weird throat-clicks. 'Okay,' Fontaine finally said, 'I'll look into that for you.' And Chevette said thanks, fast, and clicked off. Fontaine did a lot of favors for Skinner. He'd never talked to Chevette about it, but he seemed to have known Skinner all his life, or anyway as long as he'd been on the bridge. There were a lot of people like that, and Chevette knew Fontaine could fix it so people would watch the tower

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there, and the lift. Watch for strangers. People did that for each other, on the bridge, and Fontaine was always owed a lot of favors, because he was one of the main electricity men. Now they were walking past this bagel place had a sort of iron cage outside, welded out of junk, where you could sit in there at little tables and have coffee and eat bagels, and the smell of the morning's baking about made her faint from hunger. She was thinking maybe they'd better go in there and get a dozen in a bag, maybe some cream cheese, take it with them, when Rydell put his hand on her shoulder.

She turned her head and saw this big shiny white RV had just turned onto Haight in front of them, headed their way. Like you'd see rich old people driving back in Oregon, whole convoys of them, pulling boats on trailers, little jeeps, motorcycles hanging off the backs like lifeboats. They'd stop for the night in these special camps had razor-wire around them, dogs, NO TRESSPASSING signs that really meant it.

Rydell was staring at this RV like he couldn't believe it, and now it was pulling up right beside them, this gray-haired old lady powering down the window and leaning out the driver's side, saying 'Young man! Excuse me, but I'm Danica Elliott and I believe we met yesterday on the plane from Burbank.'

Danica Elliott was this retired lady from Altadena, that was down in SoCal, and she'd flown up to San Francisco, she said on the same plane as Rydell, to get her husband moved to a different cryogenic facility. Well, not her husband, exactly, but his brain, which he'd had frozen when he died.

Chevette had heard about people doing that, but she hadn't ever understood why they did it, and evidently Danica Elliott didn't understand it either. But she'd come up here to throw good money after bad, she said, and get her husband David's brain moved to this more expensive place that would keep it on ice in its Own private little tank, and not just tumbling around in a big tank with a hunch of other people's frozen

zi6

brains, which was where it had been before. She seemed like a really nice lady to Chevette, but she sure could go on about this stuff, so that after a while Rydell was just driving and nodding his head like he was listening, and Chevette, who was navigating, was mostly paying attention to the map-display on the RV's dash, plus keeping a lookout for police cars.

Mrs. Elliott had taken care of getting her husband's brain relocated the night before, and she said it had made her kind of emotional, so she'd decided to rent this RV and drive it back to Altadena, just take her time and enjoy the trip. Trouble was, she didn't know San Francisco, and she'd picked it up that morning at this rental place on sixth and gotten lost looking for a freeway. Wound up driving around in the Haight, which she said did not look at all like a safe neighborhood but was certainly very interesting.

The loose handcuff kept falling out of the sleeve of Skinner's jacket, but Mrs. Elliott was too busy talking to notice. Rydell was driving, Chevette was in the middle, and Mrs. Elliot was on the

passenger side. The RV was Japanese, and had these three power-adjustable buckets up front, with headrests with speakers built in.

Mrs. Elliott had told Rydell she was lost and did he know the city and could he drive her to where she could get on the highway to Los Angeles? Rydell had sort of gawked at her for a minute, then shook himself and said he'd be glad to, and this was his friend Chevette, who knew the city, and he was Berry Rydell.

Mrs. Elliott said Chevette was a pretty name.

So here they were, headed out of San Francisco, and Chevette had a pretty good idea that Rydell was going to try to talk Mrs. Elliott into letting them go along with her. That was all she could think of to do, herself, and here they were off the street and headed away from the guy who'd shot Sammy and from that Warbaby and those Russian cops, which seemed like a good idea to her, and aside from her

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stomach feeling like it was starting to eat itself, she felt a little better.

Rydell drove past an In-and-Out Burger place and she remembered how this boy she knew called Franklin, up in Oregon, had taken a pellet-gun over to an In-and-Out and shot out the B and the R, so it just said IN-AND-OUT URGE. She'd told Lowell about that, but he hadn't thought it was funny. Now she thought about how she'd told Rydell stuff about Lowell that Lowell would go ballistic if he ever found out about, and here Rydell was the next thing to a cop. But it bothered her how Lowell had been, the night before. There he was, all cool and heavy with his connections and everything, and she tells him she's in trouble and somebody's just shot Sammy Sal and they're gonna be after her for sure, and him and Codes just sit there, giving each other these looks, like they like this story less by the minute, and then the big motherfucker cop in the raincoat walks in and they're about to shit themselves.

Served her right. She hadn't had a single friend liked Lowell much, and Skinner had hated him on sight. Said Lowell had his head so far up his ass, he might as well just climb in after it and disappear. But she just hadn't ever really had a boyfriend before, not like that, and he'd been so nice to her at first. If he just hadn't started in doing that dancer, because that brought the asshole out in him real fast, and then Codes, who hadn't ever liked her, could get him going about how she was just a country girl. Fuck that.

'You know,' she said, 'I don't get something to eat soon, I think I'll die.'

And Mrs. Elliott started making a fuss about how Rydell should stop immediately and get something for Chevette, and how sorry she was she hadn't thought to ask if they'd had breakfast.

'Well,' Rydell said, frowning into the rear-view, 'I really would like to miss the, uh, lunch-hour traffic here. .

zi8

'Oh,' Mrs. Elliott said. Then she brightened. 'Chevette, dear, if you'll just go in the back, you'll find a fridge there. I'm sure the rental people have put a snack basket in there. They almost always do.'

Sounded fine to Chevette. She undid her harness and edged back between her seat and Mrs.

Elliott's. There was a little door there and when she went through it the lights came on. 'Hey,' she said, 'it's a whole little house back here...'

'Enjoy!' said Mrs. Elliott.

The light stayed on when she closed the door behind her. She hadn't ever seen the inside of one of these things before, and the first thing she thought of was that it had nearly as much space as Skinner's room, plus it was about ten times more comfortable. Everything was gray, gray carpet and gray plastic and gray imitation leather. And the fridge turned out to be this cute little thing built into a counter, with this basket in there, wrapped up in plastic with a ribbon on it. She got the plastic off and there was some wine, little cheeses, an apple, a pear, crackers, and a couple of chocolate bars. There was Coke in the fridge, too, and bottled water. She sat on the bed and ate a cheese, a bunch of crackers, a chocolate bar that was made in France, and drank a bottle of water. Then she tried out the tv, which had twenty-three channels on downlink.

When she was done, she put the empty bottle and the torn paper and stuff in a little wastebasket built into the wall, cut the tv off, took off her shoes, and lay back on the bed.

It was strange, to stretch out on a bed in a little room that was moving, she didn't know where, and she wondered where she'd be tomorrow.

Just before she fell asleep, she remembered that she still had Codes' hag of dancer stuck down in her pants. She'd better get rid of that. She figured there was enough there to go to jail for.

She thought about how it made you feel, and how weird it was that people spent all that money to feel that way.

2.19

She sure wished Lowell hadn't liked to feel that way.

She woke up when he lay down beside her, the RV moving but she knew it must've stopped before. The lights were off.

'Who's driving?' she said.

'Mrs. Armbruster.'

'Who?'

'Mrs. Elliott. Mrs. Armbruster was this teacher I had, looked like her.'

'Where's she driving to?'

'Los Angeles. Told her I'd take over when she got tired. Told her not to bother waking us up when she goes through at the state line. Lady like that, if she tells 'em she's not carrying any agricultural products, they'll probably let her through without checking back here.'

'What if they do?'

He was close enough to her on the narrow bed that she could feel it when he shrugged.

'Rydell?'

'Huh?'

'How come there's Russian cops?'

'How do you mean?'

'You watch on tv, like a cop show, about half the big cops are always Russian. Or those guys back there on the bridge. How come Russian?'

'Well,' he said, 'they kind of exaggerate that on tv, 'cause of the Organizatsiya thing, how people like to see shows about that. But the truth is, you get a situation where there's Russians running most of your mob action, you'll want to get you some Russian cops.. .' She heard him yawn. Felt him stretch.

'Are they all like those two came to Dissidents?'

'No,' he said. 'There's always some crooked cops, but that's just the way it is . . '

'What'll we do, when we get to Los Angeles?'

But he didn't answer, and after a while he started to snore.

Rydell opened his eyes. Vehicle not moving.

He held his Timex up in front of his face and used the dial-light. 3:15 PM. Chevette Washington was curled up beside him in her biker jacket. Felt like sleeping next to a piece of old luggage. He rolled over until he could find the shade over the window beside him and raise it a little. As dark out there as it was in here.

He'd been dreaming about Mrs. Armbruster's class, fifth grade at Oliver North Elementary. They were about to be let out because LearningNet said there was too much Kansas City flu around to keep the kids in Virginia and Tennessee in school that week. They were all wearing these molded white paper masks the nurses had left on their seats that morning. Mrs. Armbruster had just explained the meaning of the word pandemic. Poppy Markoff, who sat next to him and already had his tits out to here, had told Mrs. Armbruster that her daddy said the KC flu could kill you in the time it took to walk out to the bus. Mrs. Armbruster, wearing her own mask, the micropore kind from the drugstore, started in about the word panic, tying that into pandemic because of the root, but that was where Rydell woke up.

He sat up on the bed. He had a headache and the start of a cold. Kansas City flu. Maybe Mokola fever.

'Don't panic,' he said, under his breath.

22.1

29 Dead mall

But he sort of had this feeling.

He got up and felt his way to the front. A little bit of light there, coming from under the door. He found the handle. Eased it open a crack.

'Hey there.' Gold at the edges of a smile. Square little automatic pointing at Rydell's eye. He'd swung the passenger-side bucket around and tilted it back. Had his boots up on the middle seat. Had the dome-light turned down low.

'Where's Mrs. Elliott?'

'Mrs. Elliott is gone.'

Rydell opened the door the rest of the way. 'She work for you?'

'No,' the man said. 'She's IntenSecure.'

'They put her on that plane to keep track of me?'

The man shrugged. Rydell noticed that the gun didn't move at all when he did that. He was wearing surgical gloves, and that same long coat he'd had on when he'd gotten out of the Russians' car, like an Australian duster made out of black micropore.

'How'd she know to pick us up by that tattoo parlor?'

'Warbaby had to be good for something. He had a couple of people on you for backup.'

'Didn't see anybody,' Rydell said.

'Weren't supposed to.'

'Tell me something,' Rydell said. 'You the one did that Blix guy, up in the hotel?'

The man looked at him over the barrel of the gun. That small a bore, ordinarily, wouldn't mean much damage, so Rydell figured the ammunition would be doctored some way. 'I don't see what it's got to do with you,' he said.

Rydell thought about it. 'I saw a picture of it. You just don't look that crazy.'

'It's my job,' he said.

Uh-huh, Rydell thought, just like running a french-fry computer. There was a fridge and sink on the right side of the

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door, so he knew he couldn't move that way. If he went left, he figured the guy'd just stitch through the bulkhead, probably get the girl, too.

'Don't even think about it.'

'About what?'

'The hero thing. The cop shit.' He took his feet off the center bucket. 'Just do this. Slowly. Very. Get into the driver's seat and put your hands on the wheel. Nine o'clock and two o'clock.

Keep them there. If you don't keep them there, I'll shoot you behind your right ear. But you won't hear it.' He had this kind of slow, even tone, reminded Rydell of a vet talking to a horse.

Rydell did like he was told. He couldn't see anything outside. Just dark, and the reflections from the dome light. 'Where are we?' he asked.

'You like malls, Rydell? You got malls back in Knoxville?' Rydell looked at him sideways.

'Eyes front, please.'

'Yeah, we got malls.'

'This one didn't do so well.'

Rydell squeezed the foam padding on the wheel.

'Relax.'

Rydell heard him give the bulkhead a kick with the heel of one boot. 'Miss Washington! Rise and shine, Miss Washington! Do us the favor of your presence.'

Rydell heard the double thump as she startled from sleep, tried to jump up, hit her head, fell off the bed. Then he saw her white face reflected in the windshield, there in the doorway. Saw her see the man, the gun.

Not the screaming kind. 'You shot Sammy Sal,' she said.

'You tried to electrocute me,' the man said, like he could afford to see the humor in it now.

'Come out here, turn around, and straddle the central console. Very slowly. That's right. Now lean forward and brace your hands on the seat.'

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She wound up next to Rydell, her legs on either side of the instrument console, facing backward. Like she was riding some cafe-racer.

Gave him about a two-inch difference of arc between shooting either one of them in the head.

'I want you to take your jacket off,' he said to her, 'so you'll have to take your hands off the seat to do that. See if you can manage to keep at least one hand on the seat at all times. Take plenty of time.'

When she'd gotten it to where she could shrug it off her left shoulder, it fell over against the man's legs.

'Are there any hypodermic needles in here,' he said, 'any blades, dangerous objects of any kind?'

'No,' she said.

'How about electrical charges? You don't have a great record for that.'

'Just the asshole's glasses and a phone.'

'See, Rydell,' he said, "the asshole." How he'll be remembered. Nameless. Another nameless asshole ...' He was going through the jacket's pockets with his free hand. Came up with the case and the phone and put them on the RV's deep, padded dash-panel. Rydell had his head turned now and was watching him, even though he'd been told not to. He watched the gloved hand open the case by feel, take out the black glasses. That was the only time those eyes left him, to check those glasses, and that took about a second.

'That's them,' Rydell said. 'You got 'em now.'

The hand put them back in their case, closed it. 'Yes.'

'Now what?'

The smile went away. When it did, it looked like he didn't have any lips. Then it came back, wider and steeper.

'You think you could get me a Coke out of the fridge? All the windows, the door back there, are sealed.'

'You want a Coke?' Like she didn't believe him. 'You're gonna shoot mc. When I get up.'

2.24

'No,' he said, 'not necessarily. Because I want a Coke. My throat's a little dry.'

She turned her head to look at Rydell, eyes big with fear.

'Get him his Coke,' Rydell said.

She got off the console and edged through, into the back, there, but just by the door, where the fridge was.

'Look out the front,' he reminded Rydell. Rydell saw the fridge-light come on, reflected there, caught a glimpse of her squatting down.

'D-diet or regular?' she said.

'Diet,' he said, 'please.'

'Classic or decaf?'

'Classic.' He made a little sound that Rydell thought might be a laugh.

'There's no glasses.'

He made the sound again. 'Can.'

'K-kinda messy,' she said, 'rn-my hand's shakin'-' Rydell looked sideways, saw him take the red can, some brown cola dripping off the side. 'Thank you. You can take your pants off now.'

'What?'

'Those black ones you're wearing. Just peel them down, slow. But I like the socks. Say we'll keep the socks.'

Rydell caught the expression on her face, reflected in the black windshield, then saw how it went sort of blank. She bent, working the tight pants down.

'Now get back on the console. That's right. Just like you were. Let me look at you. You want to look too, Rydell?'

Rydell turned, saw her squatting there, her bare legs smooth and muscular, dead white in the glow of the dome-light. The man took a long swallow of Coke, watching Rydell around the rim. He put the can down on the dash-panel and wiped his mouth with the back of his gloved hand. 'Not bad, huh, Rydell?' with a nod toward Chevette Washington. 'Some potential there, I'd say.'

2.25

Rydell looked at him.

'Is this bothering you, Rydell?'

Rydell didn't answer.

The man made the sound that might've been a laugh. Drank some Coke. 'You think I enjoyed having to mess that shitbag up the way I did, Rydell?'

'I don't know.'

'But you think I did. I know you think I enjoyed it. And I did, I did enjoy it. But you know what the difference is?'

'The difference?'

'I didn't have a hard on when I did it. That's the difference.'

'Did you know him?'

'What?'

'I mean like was it personal, why you did that?'

'Oh, I guess you could say I knew him. I knew him. I knew him like you shouldn't have to know anyone, Rydell. I knew everything he did. I'd go to sleep, nights, listening to the sound of him breathing. It got so I could judge how many he'd had, just by his breathing.'

'He'd had?'

'He drank. Serbian. You were a policeman, weren't you?'

'Yeah.'

'Ever have to watch anybody, Rydell?'

'I never got that far.'

'It's a funny thing, watching someone. Traveling with them. They don't know you. They don't know you're there. Oh, they guess. They assume you're there. But they don't know who you are. Sometimes you catch them looking at someone, in the lobby of the hotel, say, and you know they think it's you, the one who's watching. But it never is. And as you watch them, Rydell, over a period of months, you start to love them.'

Rydell saw a shiver go through Chevette Washington's tensed white thigh.

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'But then, after a few more months, twenty flights, two dozen hotels, well, it starts to turn itself around . . .

'You don't love them?'

'No. You don't. You start to wait for them to fuck up, Rydell. You start to wait for them to betray the trust. Because a courier's trust is a terrible thing. A terrible thing.'

'Courier?'

'Look at her, Rydell. She knows. Even if she's just riding confidential papers around San Francisco, she's a courier. She's entrusted, Rydell. The data becomes a physical thing. She carries it. Don't you carry it, baby?'

She was still as some sphinx, white fingers deep in the gray fabric of the center bucket.

'That's what I do, Rydell. I watch them carry it. I watch them. Sometimes people try to take it from them.' He finished the Coke. 'I kill those people. Actually that's the best part of the job. Ever been to San Jose, Rydell?'

'Costa Rica?'

'That's right.'

'Never have.'

'People know how to live, there.'

'You work for those data havens,' Rydell said.

'I didn't say that. Somebody else must've said that.'

'So did he,' Rydell said. 'He was carrying those glasses to somebody, up from Costa Rica, and she took 'em.'

'And I was glad she did. So glad. I was in the room next to his. I let myself in through the connecting door. I introduced myself. He met Loveless. First time. Last time.' The gun never wavered, but he began to scratch his head with his hand in the surgical glove. Scratch it like he had fleas or something.

'Loveless?'

'My nom. Nom de thing.' Then a long rattle of what Rydell took to be Spanish, hut he only caught nombre de something. 'Think she's tight, Rydell? I like it tight, myself.'

'You American?'

22.7

His head sort of whipped sideways, a little, when Rydell said that, and his eyes unfocused for a second, but then they came back, clear as the chromed rim around the muzzle of his gun. 'You know who started the havens, Rydell?'

'Cartels,' Rydell said, 'the Colombians.'

'That's right. They brought the first expert systems into Central America, nineteen-eighties, to coordinate their shipping. Somebody had to go down there and install those systems. War on drugs, Rydell. Lot of Americans on either side, down there.'

'Well,' Rydell said, 'now we just make our own drugs up here, don't we?'

'But they've got the havens, down there. They don't even need that drug business. They've got what Switzerland used to have. They've got the one place in the world to keep what people can't afford to keep anywhere else.'

'You look a little young to have helped put that together.'

'My father. You know your father, Rydell?'

'Sure.' Sort of, anyway.

'I never did. I had to have a lot of therapy, over that.'

Sure glad it worked, Rydell thought. 'Warbaby, he work for the havens?'

A sweat had broken out on the man's forehead. Now he wiped it with the back of the hand that held the gun, but Rydell saw the gun click back into position like it was held by a magnet.

'Turn on the headlights, Rydell. It's okay. Left hand off the wheel.'

'Why?'

"Cause you're dead if you don't."

'Well, why?'

'Just do it, okay?' Sweat running into his eyes.

Rydell took his left hand off the wheel, clicked the lights, double-clicked them to high beams.

Two cones of light hit into a wall of dead shops, dead signs, dust on plastic. The one in front of the left beam said THE GAP.

2.2.8

'Why'd anybody ever call a store that?' Rydell said.

'Trying to fuck with my head, Rydell?'

'No,' Rydell said, 'it's just a weird name. Like ad those places look like gaps, now. . .'

'Warbaby's just hired help, Rydell. IntenSecure brings him in when things get too sloppy. And they do, they always do.'

They were parked in a sort of plaza, in a mall, the stores all boarded or their windows

whitewashed. Either underground ~r else it was roofed over. 'So she stole the glasses out of a hotel had IntenSecure security, they brought in Warbaby?' Rydell looked at Chevette Washington. She looked like one of those chrome things on the nose of an antique car, except she was getting goosebumps down her thigh. Not exactly warm in here, which made Rydell think it might be underground after all.

'Know what, Rydell?'

'What?'

'You don't know shit about shit. As much as I tell you, you'll never understand the situation. It's just too !ig for someone like you to understand. You don't know how to think in those terms. IntenSecure belongs to the company that owns the information in those glasses.'

'Singapore,' Rydell said. 'Singapore own DatAmerica, too?'

'You can't prove it, Rydell. Neither could Congress.'

'Look at those rats over there. . .'

'Fucking with my head...'

Rydell watched the last of the three rats vanish into the place that had been called The Gap. In through a locse vent ~r something. A gap. 'Nope. Saw 'em.'

'Has it occurred to you that you wouldn't be heie right now if Lucius fucking Warhahy hadn't taken up rollerblading last month?'

'How's that?'

'He wrecked his knee. Warbaby wrecks his knee, can't

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drive, you wind up here. Think about it. What does that tell you about late-stage capitalism?'

'Tell me about what?'

'Don't they teach you anything in that police academy?'

'Sure,' Rydell said, 'lots of stuff.' Thinking: how to talk to crazy fuckers when you're being held hostage, except he was having a hard time remembering what they'd said. Keep 'em talking and don't argue too much, something like that. 'How come the stuff in those glasses has everybody's tail in a twist, anyway?'

'They're going to rebuild San Francisco. From the ground up, basically. Like they're doing to Tokyo. They'll start by layering a grid of seventeen complexes into the existing infrastructure. Eighty-story office/residential, retail/residence in the base. Completely self-sufficient. Variable-pitch parabolic reflectors, steam-generators. New buildings, man; they'll eat their own sewage.'

'Who'll eat sewage?'

'The buildings. They're going to grow them, Rydell. Like they're doing now in Tokyo. Like the maglev tunnel.'

'Sunflower,' Chevette Washington said, then looked like she regretted it.

'Somebody's been look-ing . . . ' Gold teeth flashing.

'Uh, hey ... ' Go for that talking-to-the-armed-insane mode.

'Yes?'

'So what's the problem? They wanna do that, let 'em.'

'The problem,' this Loveless said, starting to unbutton his shirt, 'is that a city like San Francisco has about as much sense of where it wants to go, of where it should go, as you do. Which is to say, very little. There are people, millions of them, who would object to the fact that this sort of plan even exists. Then there's the business of real estate. . .'

'Real estate?'

'Know the three most important considerations in any

2.30

purchase of real estate, Rydell?' Loveless's chest, hairless and artificially pigmented, was gleaming with sweat.

'Three?'

'Location,' Loveless said, 'location, and location.'

'I don't get it.'

'You never will. But the people who know where to buy, the people who've seen where the footprints of the towers fall, they will, Rydell. They'll get it all.'

Rydell thought about it. 'You looked, huh?'

Loveless nodded. 'In Mexico City. He left them in his room. He was never, ever supposed to do that.'

'But you weren't supposed to look either?' It just slipped out.

Loveless's skin was running with sweat now, in spite of the cool. It was like his whole lymbic system or whatever had just let loose. Kept blinking and wiping it back from his eyes. 'I've done



my job. Did my job. Jobs. Years. My father, too. You haven't seen how they live, down there. The compounds. People up here have no idea what money can do, Rydell. They don't know what real money is. They live like gods, in the compounds. Some of them are over a hundred years old, Rydell ...' There were flecks of white stuff at the corners of Loveless' smile, and Rydell was back in Turvey's girlfriend's apartment, looking into Turvey's eyes, and it just clicked, what she'd done. Dumped that whole bag of dancer into the Coke she'd brought him. She hadn't been able to pour it all in, so she'd sloshed the Coke out onto the top of the can to wash it down, mix it around. He had his shirt undone all the way now, the dark fabric darker with sweat, and his face was turning red.

'Loveless-' Rydell started, no idea what he was about to say, hut Loveless screamed then, a high thin inhuman sound like a rabbit with its leg caught in a wire, and started pounding the butt of his pistol into the tight crotch of his jeans like

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there was something terrible fastened on him there, something he had to kill. Each time the gun came down, it fired, blowing holes in the carpeted floorboard the size of five-dollar pieces. Chevette Washington came off that console like she was on rubber bands, right over the top of the center bucket and into the cabin in back.

Loveless froze, quivering, like every atom in him had locked down all at once, spinning in some tight emergency orbit. Then he smiled, like maybe he'd killed the thing that was after his crotch, screamed again, and started firing out through the windshield. All Rydell could remember was some instructor telling them that an overdose of dancer made too much PCP look like putting aspirin in a Coke. In a Coke.

And Chevette Washington, she was going just about that crazy herself, by the sound of it, trying to beat her way out the back of the RV.

'Hundred years old, those fuckers,' Loveless said, and sort of sobbed, ejecting the empty magazine and snapping a fresh one in, 'and they're still getting it. ..'

'Out there,' Rydell said. 'By The Gap-'

'Who?'

'Svobodov,' Rydell said, guessing that might do it.

The bullets came out of the little gun like the rubber cubes out of a chunker. By the third one, Rydell had reached over, deactivated the door-lock, and just sort of fallen out. Landed on his back on some cans and what felt like foam cups. Rolled. Kept rolling 'til he hit something. Those little bullets blowing big holes in the whitewashed glass of the dead stores. A whole section fell away with a crash.

He could hear Chevette Washington pounding on the back door of the RV and he wished he could get her to stop.

'Hey! Loveless!'

The shooting stopped.

'Svohodov's down, man!'

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Chevette still pounding. Jesus.

'He needs an ambulance!'

On his hands and knees, up against some low tiled fountain smelled of chlorine and dust, he saw Loveless scramble down from the driver's side, his face and chest slick and shining. The man had been trained so deeply, it occurred to Rydell, that it even cut through whatever the dancer was doing to him. Because he still moved the way they taught you to move in FATSS, the pistol out in both hands, the half-crouch, the smooth swings through potential arcs of fire.

And Chevette, she was still trying to kick her way out through the hexcel or whatever the back of the RV was made of. Then Loveless put a couple of bullets into it and she all of a sudden stopped.

At four o'clock Yamazaki descended the rungs he'd climbed with Loveless, in the dark, the night before.

Fontaine had gone, twenty minutes before the power returned, taking with him, against Skinner's protests, an enormous bundle of washing. Skinner had spent the day sorting and re-sorting the contents of the green toolkit, the one he'd overturned in his bid for the bolt-cutters.

Yamazaki had watched the old man's hands as they touched each tool in turn, imagining he saw some momentary strength or purpose flow into them there, or perhaps only memories of tasks undertaken, abandoned, completed. 'You can always sell tools,' Skinner had mused, perhaps to Yamazaki, perhaps to himself. 'Somebody'll always buy 'em. But then you always need 'em again, exactly the one you sold.' Yamazaki didn't know the English words for most of the tools there, and many were completely unfamiliar. 'T-reamer,' Skinner said, holding up his fist, a rust-brown, machined spike of steel protruding menacingly between his second and third fingers. 'Now that's about as handy a

thing as you can have, Scooter, but most people never seen one.'

'Its purpose, Skinner-san?'

'Makes a round hole bigger. Keeps it round, too, you use it right. Sheet-metal, mostly, but it'll do plastic, synthetics. Anything thin, fairly rigid. Short of glass.'

'You have many tools, Skinner-san.'

'Never learned how to really use 'em, though.'

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30 Carnival of souls

'But you built this room?'

'You ever watch a real carpenter work, Scooter?'

'Once, yes,' Yamazaki said, remembering a demonstration at a festival, the black blades flying, the smell of cut cedar. He remembered the look of the lumber, creamy and flawless. A tea-house was being erected, to stand for the duration of the festival. 'Wood is very scarce in Tokyo, Skinner-san. You would not see it thrown away, not even small scraps.'

'Not that easy to come by here,' Skinner said, rubbing the ball of his thumb with the edge of a chisel. Did he mean in America, San Francisco, on the bridge? 'We used to burn our scrap, before we got the power in. City didn't like that at all. Bad for the air, Scooter. Don't do that as much, now.'

'This is by consensus?'

'Just common sense ...' Skinner put the chisel into a greasy canvas case and tucked it carefully away in the green box.

A procession was making its way toward San Francisco, along the upper deck, and Yamazaki instantly regretted having left his notebook in Skinner's room. This was the first evidence he had seen here of public ritual.

In the narrow, enclosed space, it was impossible to view the procession as anything other than a succession of participants, in their ones and twos, but it was a procession nonetheless, and clearly funereal, perhaps memorial, in its purpose. First came children, seven by his hasty count, one behind the other, in ragged, ash-dusted clothing. Each child wore a mask of painted plaster, clearly intended to represent Shapely. But there was nothing funereal in their progress; several were skipping, delighted with the attention they were receiving.

Yamazaki, on his way to purchase hot soup, had halted between a bookseller's wagon and a stall hung with caged birds. He felt awkward there, very much out of place, with the unaccustomed shape of the insulated canister under his

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arm. If this was a funeral, perhaps there was some required gesture, some attitude he might be expected to assume? He glanced at the bookseller, a tall woman in a greasy sheepskin vest, her gray hair bound back into a knot transfixed by two pink plastic chopsticks.

Her stock, which consisted primarily of yellowing paperbacks in various stages of disintegration, each in a clear plastic bag, was stacked before her on her wagon. She had been crying her wares, when she saw the children masked as Shapely; she'd been calling out strange phrases that he supposed were titles: 'Valley of the dolls, blood meridian, chainsaw savvy ...' Yamazaki, struck by the queer American poetry, had been on the verge of asking after Chainsaw Savvy. Then she'd fallen silent, and he too had seen the children.

But there was nothing in her manner now that indicated the procession required anything more of her than whatever degree of her attention she might choose to afford it. She was automatically counting her stock, he saw, as she watched the children pass, her hands moving over the bagged books.

The keeper of the bird stall, a pale man with a carefully groomed black mustache, was scratching his stomach, his expression mild and blank.

After the children came five dancers in the skeleton-suits of La Noche de Muerte, though Yamazaki saw that several of the masks were only half-masks, micropore respirators molded to resemble the grinning jaws of skulls. These were teenagers, evidently, and shaking to some inner music of plague and chaos. There was a strong erotic undercurrent, a violence, to the black, bone-painted thighs, the white cartoon pelvises daubed on narrow denimed buttocks. As the bonedancers passed, one fixed Yamazaki with a sharp stare, blue adolescent eyes above the black, molded nostrils of the white respirator.

Then two tall figures, black men in an ugly beige face-paint, costumed as surgeons, in pale green gowns and long gloves of

2.36

scarlet latex. Were they the doctors, predominantly white, who had failed to rescue so many, prior

~o Shapely's advent, or did they somehow represent the Brazilian biomedical firms who had so successfully and lucratively overseen Shapely's transformation, the illiterate prostitute become the splendid source? And after them, the first of the bodies, wrapped and bound in layers of milky plastic, each one tiding a two-wheeled cart of the kind manufactured here to transport baggage or bulk foodstuffs. The carts, temporarily equipped with narrow pallets of plywood, were steered along, front and back, by men and women of no special costume or demeanor, though Yamazaki noted that they looked neither to the right nor left, and seemed to make no eye-contact with the onlookers.

'There's Nigel,' the bookseller said, and probably built the cart they're taking him off on.'

'These are the victims of the storm?' Yamazaki ventured.

'Not Nigel,' the woman said, narrowing her eyes as she saw that he was a stranger. 'Not with those holes in him...'

Seven in all, each to its cart, and then a man and a woman, in identical paper coveralls, carrying between them a laminated lithograph of Shapely, one of those saccharine portraits, large of eye and hollow of cheek, that invariably left Yamazaki feeling slightly queasy.

But then a small, red, capering figure. A tailless, hornless devil, perhaps, dancing with an enormous gun, an ancient AK-47, its bolt long gone, the curved magazine carved from wood, and all of it dipped, once, into red enamel, worn now by hands, by processions.

And Yamazaki knew, without asking, that the red dancer represented the way of Shapely's going, like some terrible base stupidity waiting at the core of things.

'Skinner-san?' The notebook ready. 'I saw a procession today. Bodies being taken from the bridge. The dead from the

Storm.'

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'Can't keep 'em out here. Can't throw 'em in the water. City sticks on that. We pass 'em over for cremation. Some people, they don't hold with fire, they bury 'em over on Treasure. Kind of people live out on Treasure, you kind of wonder if that makes much sense.'

'In the procession there were many references to Shapely, to his story.'

Skinner nodded over his little television.

'Children masked as J. D. Shapely, two black men painted as white doctors, Shapely's portrait...'

Skinner grunted. Then, distantly: 'While since I saw one of those.'

'And at the end, a small figure, red. Dancing. With an assault rifle.'

'Uh-huh.' Skinner nodded.

Yamazaki activated the notebook's transcription function.

Me, you know, I never even got it. Off him, I mean. That piece of him in everybody now. Couldn't see the point at my age and anyway I never held with medicine. Happened I never got the other kind either, not that I didn't have plenty of chances. You're too young to remember how it felt, though. Oh, I know, I know you all think you live in all the times at once, everything recorded for you, it's all there to play back. Digital. That's all that is, though:

playback. You still don't remember what it felt like, watching them pile up like that. Not here so much, bad as it was, but Thailand, Africa, Brazil. Jesus, Scooter. That thing was just romping on us. But slow, slow, slowmotion thing. Those retroviruses are. One man told me once, and he had the old kind, and died of it, how we'd lived in this funny little pocket of time when a lot of people got to feel like a piece of ass wasn't going to kill anybody, flot even a woman. See, they always had to worry anyway, every time it's a chance, get knocked up

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and maybe die in childbirth, die getting rid of it, or anyway your life's not gonna be the same. But in that pocket, there, there were pills for that, whatnot, shots for the other things, even the ones had killed people all over hell, before. That was a time, Scooter. So here this thing comes along, changes it back. And we're sliding up on woo, shit's changing all over, got civil wars in Europe already and this AIDS thing just kicking along. You know they tried to say it was the gays, said it was the CIA, said it was the U.S. Army in some fort in Maryland. Said it was people cornholing green monkeys. I swear to God. You know what it was? People. Just too goddamn many of 'em, Scooter. Flying all the fuck over everywhere and walking around back in there. Bet your ass somebody's gonna pick up a bug or two. Every place on the damn planet just a couple of hours from any other place. So here's poor fucking Shapely comes along, he's got this mutant strain won't kill you. Won't do shit to you at all, 'cept it eats the old kind for breakfast. And I don't buy any of that bullshit he was Jesus, Scooter. Didn't think Jesus was, either.

'Any coffee left?'

'I will pump stove.'

'Put a little drop of Three-in-One in that hole by the piston-arm, Scooter. Leather gasket in there. Keeps it soft.'

She didn't see that first bullet, but it must have hit a wire or something, coming through, because the lights came on. She did see the second one, or anyway the hole it blew in the leather-grain plastic. Something inside her stopped, learning this about bullets: that one second there isn't any hole, the next second there is. Nothing in between. You see it happen, but you can't watch it happening.

Then she got down on her hands and her knees and started crawling. Because she couldn't just stand there and wait for the next one. When she got up by the door, she could see her black pants crumpled up on the floor there, beside a set of keys on a gray, leather-grain plastic tab. There was this smell from when he'd shot the gun into the floor. Maybe from the carpet burning, too, because she could see that the edges of the holes were scorched and sort of melted.

Now she could hear him yelling, somewhere outside, hoarse and hollow and chased by echoes. Held her breath. Yelling how they (who?) did the best PR in the world, how they'd sold Hunnis Millbank, now they'd sell Sunflower. If she heard it right.

'Down by the door, here. Driver side.'

It was Rydell, the door on that side standing open.

'He left the keys in here,' she said.

'Think he's gone down there where the Dream Walls franchise used to be.'

'What if he comes back?'

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31 Driver side

'Probably come back anyway, we stick around here. You crawl up there and toss me those?'

She edged through the door and between the buckets. Saw Rydell's head there, by the open door. Grabbed the keys and threw them sideways, without looking. Snatched her pants and scooted backward, wondering could she maybe fit in the fridge, if she folded her legs up?

'Why don't you lie down flat on the floor back there ...' His voice from the driver's seat.

'Lie down?'

'Minimum silhouette.'

'Huh?'

'He's going to start shooting. When I do this-' Ignition-sound. Glass flying from fresh holes in the windshield and she threw herself flat. The RV lurched backward, turning tight, and she could hear him slapping the console, trying to find some function he needed, as more bullets came, each one distinct, a blow, like someone was swinging an invisible hammer, taking care to keep the rhythm.

Rydell must've gotten it lined up how he needed it, then, because he did that thing boys did, up in Oregon, with their brakes and the transmission.

She realized then that she was screaming. Not words or anything, just screaming.

Then they were in a turn that almost took them over, and she thought how these RV's probably weren't meant to move very fast. Now they were moving even faster, it felt like, uphill.

'Well fuck,' she heard Rydell say, in this weirdly ordinary kind of voice, and then they hit the door, or the gate, or whatever, and it was like the time she tried to pull this radical bongo over in Lafayette Park and they'd had to keep explaining to her how'd she'd come down on her head, and each time they did, she'd forget.

\*

2.41

She was back in Skinner's room, reading National Geographic, about how Canada split itself into five countries. Drinking cold milk out of the carton and eating saltines. Skinner in bed with the tv, watching one of those shows he liked about history. He was talking about how all his life these movies of history had been getting better and better looking. How they'd started out jumpy and black and white, with the soldiers running around like they had ants in their pants, and this terrible grain to them, and the sky all full of scratches. How gradually they'd slowed down to how people really moved, and then they'd been colorized, the grain getting finer and finer, and even the scratches went away. And it was bullshit, he said, because every other bit of it was an approximation, somebody's idea of how it might have looked, the result of a particular decision, a particular button being pushed. But it was still a hit, he said, like the first time you heard Billie Holiday without all that crackle and tin.

Billie Holiday was probably a guy like Elvis, Chevette thought, with spangles on his suit, but like when he was younger and not all fat.

Skinner had this thing he got on about history. How it was turning into plastic. But she liked to show him she was listening when he told her something, because otherwise he could go for days without saying anything. So she looked up now, from her magazine and the picture of girls waving blue and white flags in the Republic of Quebec, and it was her mother sitting there, on the edge of Skinner's bed, looking beautiful and sad and kind of tired, the way she could look after she got off work and still had all her make-up on.

'He's right,' Chevette's mother said.

'I~'Iom?'

'About history, how they change it.'

'Mom, you-'

'Everybody does that anyway, honey. Isn't any new thing. Just the movies have caught up with memory, is all.'

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Chevette started to cry.

'Chevette-Marie,' her mother said, in that singsong out of so far back, 'you've gone and hurt your head.'

'How well you say you know this guy?' she asked.

Rydell's SWAT shoe crunched on little squares of safety-glass every time he used the brake. If he'd had time and a broom, he'd have swept it all out. As it was, he'd had to bash out what was left of the windshield with a piece of rusty rebar he found beside the road, otherwise Highway Patrol would've seen the holes and hauled them over. Anyway, he had those insoles. 'I worked with him in L.A.,' he said, braking to steer around shreds of truck-trailer tires that lay on the two-lane blacktop like the moulted skin of monsters.

'I was just wondering if he'll turn out like Mrs. Elliott did. Said you knew her too.'

'Didn't know her,' Rydell said, 'I met her, on the plane. If Sublett's some kind of plant, then the whole world's a plot.' He shrugged. 'Then I could start worrying about you, say.' As opposed, say, to worrying about whether or not Loveless or Mrs. Elliot had bothered to plant a locator-bug in this motorhome, or whether the Death Star was watching for them, right now, and could it pick them up, out here? They said the Death Star could read the headlines on a newspaper, or what brand and size of shoes you wore, from a decent footprint.

Then this wooden cross seemed to pop up, in the headlights, about twelve feet high, with TUNE IN across the horizontal and TO HIS IMMORTAL DOWNLINI( coming down the upright, and this dusty old portable tv nailed up where Jesus's head

244

32 Fallonville

ought to have been. Somebody'd taken a .zz to the screen, it looked like.

'Must be getting closer,' Rydell said.

Chevette Washington sort of grunted. Then she drank some of the water they'd gotten at the Shell station, and offered the bottle to him.

When he'd crashed out of that mall, he'd felt like they were sure to be right by a major highway. From the outside, the mall was just this low tumble of tan brick, windows bDarded up with sheets of that really ugly hot-pressed recyc they ran off from chopped scrap, the color of day-old vomit. He'd gone screeching around this big empty parking lot, just a few dead clunkers and old mattresses to get in the way, until he'd found a way out through the chain link.

But there wasn't any highway there, just some deserted four-lane feeder, and it looked like Loveless had put a bullet into the navigation hardware, because the map was locked on downtown Santa Ana and just sat there, sort of flickering. Where he was had the feel of one of those fallen-in edge-cities, the kind of place that went down when the Euro-money imploded.

Chevette Washington was curled up by the fridge with her eyes closed, and she wouldn't answer him. He was scared Loveless had put one through her, too, but he knew he couldn't afford to stop until he'd put at least a little distance between them and the mall. And he couldn't see any bbod on her or anything.

Finally he'd come to this Shell station. You could tell it had been Shell because of the shape of the metal things up on the poles that had supported the signs. The men's room door was ripped off the hinges; the women's chained and padlocked. ~omebody had taken an automatic weapon to the pop machine, it looked like. He swung the RV around to the back and saw this real old Airstream trailer there, the same kind a

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neighbor of his father's had lived in down in Tampa. There was a man there kneeling beside a

hibachi, doing something with a pot, and these two black Labradors watching him. Rydell parked, checked to see Chevette Washington was breathing, and got down out of the cab. He walked over to the man beside the hibachi, who'd gotten up now and was wiping the palms of his hands on the thighs of his red coveralls. He had on an old khaki fishing cap with about a nine-inch bill sticking straight out. The threads on the embroidered Shell patch on his coveralls had sort of frayed and fuzzed-out.

'You just lost,' the man said, 'or is there some kind of problem?' Rydell figured him to be at least seventy.

'No sir, no problem, but I'm definitely lost.' Rydell looked at the black Labs. They looked right back. 'Those dogs of yours there, they don't look too happy to see me.'

'Don't see a lot of strangers,' the man said.

'No sir,' Rydell said, 'I don't imagine they do.'

'Got a couple of cats, too. Right now I'm feeding 'em all on dry kibble. The cats get a bird sometimes, maybe mice. Say you're lost?'

'Yes sir, I am. I couldn't even tell you what state we're in, right now.'

The man spat on the ground. 'Welcome to the goddamn club, son. I was your age, it was all of this California, just like God meant it to be. Now it's Southern, so they tell me, but you know what it really is?'

'No sir. What?'

'A lot of that same happy horseshit. Like that woman camping in the goddamn White House.' He took the fishing cap off, exposing a couple of silver-white cancer-scars, wiped his brow with a grease-stained handkerchief, then pulled the cap back on. 'Say you're lost, are you?'

'Yes sir. My map's broken.'

'Know how to read a paper one?'

2.46

'Yes sir, I do.'

'What the hell'd she do to her head?' Looking past Rydell.

Rydell turned and saw Chevette Washington leaning over the driver's bucket, looking out at them.

'How she cuts her hair,' Rydell said.

'I'll be damned,' the man said. 'Might be sort of good-looking, otherwise.'

'Yes sir,' Rydell said.

'See that box of Cream o' Wheat there? Think you can stir me up a cup of that into this water when it boils?'

'Yes sir.'

'Well, I'll go find you a map to look at. Skeeter and Whitey here, they'll just keep you company.'

'Yes sir . . .

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327 CHANNELS ON DOWNLINK

And a taller cross rising beyond that, this one welded from rusty railroad track, a sort of framework stuck full of old televisions, their dead screens all looking out toward the road there. Chevette Washington was asleep now, so she missed that. Rydell thought about how he'd used Codes's phone to get through to Suhlett's number in L.A., and

gotten this funny ring, which had nearly made him hang up right then, hut it  
2.47

had turned out to be call-forwarding, because Sublett had this leave to go and stay with his mother, who was feeling kind of sick.

'You mean you're in Texas?'

'Paradise, Berry. Mom's sick 'cause she 'n' a bunch of others got moved up here to SoCal.'

'Paradise?'

Sublett had explained where it was while Rydell looked at the Shell man's map.

'Hey,' Rydell had said, when he had a general idea where it was, 'how about I drive over and see you?'

'Thought you had you a job up in San Francisco.'

'Well, I'll tell you about that when I get there.'

'You know they're saying I'm an apostate here?' Sublett hadn't sounded happy about that.

'A what?'

'An apostate. 'Cause I showed my mom this Cronenberg film, Berry? This Videodrome? And they said it was from the Devil.'

'I thought all those movies were supposed to have God in 'em.'

'There's movies that are clearly of the Devil, Berry. Or anyway that's what Reverend Fallon says.'

Says all of Cronenberg's are.'

'He in Paradise, too?'

'Lord no,' Sublett had said, 'he's in these tunnels out on the Channel Islands, between England and France. Can't leave there, either, because he needs the shelter.'

'From what?'

'Taxes. You know who dug those same tunnels, Berry?'

'Who?'

'Hitler did, with slave labor.'

'I didn't know that,' Rydell had said, imagining this scary little guy with a black mustache, standing up on a rock and cracking a big whip.

2.48

Now here came another sign, this one not nearly as professional as the first one, just black spraypaint letters on a couple of boards.

R.U. READY FOR ETERNITY?

HE LIVES! WILL YOU?

WATCH TELEVISION

'Watch television?' She was awake now.

'Well,' Rydell said, 'Fallonites believe God's sort of just there. On television, I mean.'

'God's on television?'

'Yeah. Kind of like in the background or something. Sublett's mother, she's in the church herself, but Sublett's kind of lapsed.'

'So they watch tv and pray, or what?'

'Well, I think it's more like kind of a meditation, you know? What they mostly watch is all these old movies, and they figure if they watch enough of them, long enough, the spirit will sort of enter into them.'

'We had Revealed Aryan Nazarenes, up in Oregon,' she said. 'First Church of Jesus, Survivalist. As soon shoot you as look at you.'

'Bad news,' Rydell agreed, the RV cresting a little ridge there, 'those kind of Christians ...'

Then he saw Paradise, down there, all lit up with these lights on poles.

The security perimeter they advertised was just coils of razor-wire circling maybe an acre and a half. Rydell doubted if it actually was electrified, but he could see screamers hanging on it, every ten feet or so, so it would be pretty effective anyway. There was a sort of blockhouse-and-gate set-up where the road ran in, but all it seemed to be protecting were about a dozen campers, trailers, and semi-rigs, parked on cement beds around what looked like an old-fashioned radio tower they'd topped with a whole cluster of satellite dishes, those

2.49

little expensive ones that looked sort of like giant gray plastic marshmallows. Somebody had dammed a creek, to make a sort of pond for swimming, but the creek itself looked like the kind of

industrial runoff you wouldn't even find bugs around, let alone birds. Sure had the whole place lit up, though. He could hear the drumming of big generators as they drove down the incline.

'Jesus,' Chevette Washington said.

Rydell pulled up by the blockhouse and powered his window down, glad it still worked. A man in a blaze-orange fleece jacket and a matching cap came out, carrying some kind of shotgun with a skeletal metal stock. 'Private property,' he said, looking at where the windshield should've been. 'What happened to your windshield there, mister?'

'Deer,' Chevette Washington said.

'Here to visit our friends, the Subletts?' Rydell said, hoping he could distract the guard before he'd notice the bullet holes or anything. 'Expecting us, if you wanna go call 'em.'

'Can't say you much look like Christians.'

Chevette Washington sort of leaned across Rydell and gave the guard this stare. 'I don't know about you, brother, but we're Aryan Nazarene, out of Eugene. We wouldn't want to even come in there, say you got any mud people, any kind of race-mixing. Race-traitors all over, these days.' The guard looked at her. 'You Nazarene, how come you ain't skins?'

She touched the front of her crazy haircut, the short spikey part. 'Next thing you're gonna tell me, Jesus was a Jew. Don't know what this means?'

He looked more than maybe just a little worried, now.

'Got us some sanctified nails in the hack, here. Maybe that gives you some idea.'

Rydell saw the guard hesitate, swallow.

'Hey, good buddy,' Rydell said, 'you gonna call tip ol' Suhlett for us, or what?'

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The man went back into the blockhouse.

'What's that about nails?' RydeE asked.

'Something Skinner told me about once,' she said. 'Scared me.'

Dora, Sublett's mother, drank Coke and Mexican vodka. Rydell had seen people drink thai before, but never at room temperature. And the Coke was flat, because she bought it and the vodka in these big plastic supermarket bottles, and they looked as though they'd already lasted her a while.

Rydell decided he didn't feel like drinking anyway.

The living room of Dora's trailer had a matching couch and reclining lounge. Dora lay back in the lounge with her feet up, for her circulation she said, Rydell and Chevette Washington sat side by side on the couch, which was more a loveseat, and Sublett sat on the floor, his knees drawn up almost under his chin. There was a lot of stuff on the walls, and on little ornamental shelves, but it was all very clean. Rydell figured that was because of Sublett's allergies. There sure was a lot of it, though: plaques and pictures and figurines and things Rydell figured had to be those prayer hankies. There was a flat type of hologram of Rev. Fallon, looking as much like a possum as ever, but a possum that had gotten a tan and maybe had plastic surgery. There was a life-size head of J. D. Shapely that Rydell didn't like because the eyes seemed to follow you. Most of the good stuff was sort of grouped around the television, which was big and shiny but the old kind from before they started to get real big and flat. It was on now, showing this black and white movie, but the sound was off.

'You're sure you won't have a drink, Mr. Rydell?'

'No ma'am, thank you,' Rydell said.

'Joel doesn't drink. He has allergies, ~OU know.'

'Yes ma'am.' Rydell hadn't ~ver known Sublett's first name before.

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Sublett was wearing brand-new white denim jeans, a white t-shirt, white cotton socks, and disposable white paper hospital slippers.

'He was always a sensitive boy, Mr. Rydell. I remember one time he sucked on the handle of this other boy's Big Wheel. Well, his mouth like to turned inside-out.'

'Momma,' Sublett said, 'you know the doctor said you ought to get more sleep than you been getting.'

Mrs. Sublett sighed. 'Yes, well, Joel, I know you young people want a chance to talk.' She peered at Chevette Washington. 'That's a shame about your hair, honey. You're just as pretty as can be, though, and you know it'll just grow in so nice. I tried to light the broiler on this gas range we had, down in Galveston, that was when Joel was just a baby, he was so sensitive, and that stove about blew up. I just had had this perm, dear and, well . . .'

Chevette Washington didn't say anything.

'Momma,' Sublett said, 'now you know you've had your nice drink. . .'



Rydell watched Sublett lead the old woman off to bed.

'Jesus Christ,' Chevette Washington said, 'what's wrong with his eyes?'

'Just light-sensitive,' Rydell said.

'It's spooky, is what it is.'

'He wouldn't hurt a fly,' Rydell said.

Sublett came back, looked at the picture on the tv, then sighed and shut it off. 'You know I'm not supposed to leave the trailer, Berry?'

'How's that?'

'It's a condition of my apostasy. They say I might corrupt the congregation by contact.' He perched on the edge of the recliner so he wouldn't have to actually recline in it.

'I thought you'd blown Fallon off when you came out to LA.'

Suhlett looked embarrassed. 'Well, she's hecn sick, Rerry, 2.52

so when I came here I told 'em I was here to reconsider. Meditate on the box 'n' all.' He wrung his long pale hands. 'Then they caught me watching Videodrome. You ever see, uh, Deborah Harry, Rydell?' Sublett sighed and sort of quivered.

'How'd they catch you?'

'They've got it set up so they can monitor what you're watching.'

'How come they're out here anyway?'

Sublett ran his fingers back through his dry, straw-colored hair. 'Hard to say, but I'd figure it's got something to do with Reverend Fallon's tax problems. Most of what he does, lately, it's about that. Didn't your job in San Francisco work out, Berry?'

'No,' Rydell said, 'it didn't.'

'You want to tell me about it?' Rydell said he did.

'I think he shot through something to do with the damned heater, too,' Rydell said. They were back in the RV, outside the perimeter.

'I like your friend,' she said. 'I do too.'

'No, I mean he really cares about what's going to happen to you. He really does.'

'You take the bed,' he said. 'I'll sleep up front.' 'There's no windshield. You'll freeze.'

'I'll be okay.'

'Sleep back here. We did before. It's okay.'

He woke in the dark and listened to the sound of her breathing, to the creak of stiff old leather from the jacket spread over her shoulder.

Suhlett had listened to his story, nodding sometimes, asking a question here and there, his mirrored contacts reflecting tiny

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convex images of them sitting there on that loveseat. In the end he'd just whistled softly and said, 'Berry, it sounds to me like you're really in trouble now. Bad trouble.'

Really in trouble now.

Rydell slid his hand down, brushing one of hers by accident as he did it, and touched the bulge of his wallet in his back pocket. What money he had was in there, but Wellington Ma's card was in there, too. Or what was left of it. The last time he'd looked, it had broken into three pieces.

'Big trouble,' he said to the dark, and Chevette Washington lifted the edge of her jacket and sort of snuggled in closer, her breathing never changing, so he knew she was still asleep.

He lay there, thinking, and after a while he started to get this idea. About the craziest idea he'd ever had.

'That boyfriend of yours,' he said to her, in the tiny kitchen of Sublett's mother's trailer, 'that Lowell?'

'What about him?'

'Got a number we could reach him at?'

She poured milk on her cornflakes. It was the kind you mixed up from powder. Had that thin chalky look. The only kind Sublett's mother had. Sublett was allergic to milk. 'Why?'

'I think maybe I want to talk to him about something.'

'About what?'

'Something I think maybe he could help me with.'

'Lowell? Lowell's not gonna help you. Lowell doesn't give a rat's ass for anybody.'

'Well,' Rydell said, 'why don't you just let me talk to him.'

'If you tell him where we are, or he has it traced back through the cd-net, he'll turn us in. Or he would if he knew anybody was after us.'

'Why?'

'He's just like that.' But then she gave Rydell the phone and the number.

\*

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'Hey, Lowell?'

'Who the fuck is this?'

'How you doin'?'

'Who gave you-'

'Don't hang up.'

'Listen, motherf-'

'SFPD Homicide.'

He could hear Lowell draw on a cigarette. 'what did you say?' Lowell said.

'Orlovsky. SFPD Homicide, Lowell. That big fucker with the great big fucking gun? Came in the bar there? You remember. Just before the lights went out. I was over there by the bar, talking with Eddie the Shit.'

Lowell took another drag, shallower by the sound of it. 'Look, I don't know what you-'

'You don't have to. You can just hang up right now, Lowell. But if you do, boy, you just better kiss your ass goodbye. Because you saw Orlovsky come in there for the girl, Lowell, didn't you? You saw him. He didn't want you to. He wasn't in there on any SFPD business, Lowell. He was there on his own stick. And that's one serious bad officer, Lowell. Serious as cancer.'

Silence. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Then you just listen, Lowell. Listen up. You don't listen, I'll tell Orlovsky you saw him. I'll give him this number. I'll give him your description, and that skinhead's, too. Tell him you been talking about him. And you know what he'll do, Lowell? He'll come out there and shoot your ass dead, that's what he'll do. And nobody to stop him. Homicide, Lowell. Then he can investigate it himself, he wants to. Man's heavy, Lowell, I gotta tell ya.'

Lowell coughed, a couple of times. Cleared his throat. 'This is a joke, right?'

'I don't hear you laughing.'

'Okay,' Lowell said, 'say it's for real. Then what? What're you after?'

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'I hear you know people can get things done. With computers and things.' He could hear Lowell lighting a fresh cigarette.

'Well,' Lowell said, 'sort of.'

'Republic of Desire,' Rydell said. 'I need you to get them to do me a favor.'

'No names,' Lowell said, fast. 'There's scans set to pick things out of traffic-'

"Them." "Them" okay? Need you to get them to do something for me.'

'It'll cost you,' Lowell said, 'and it won't be cheap.'

'No,' Rydell said, 'it'll cost you.'

He pressed the button that broke the connection. Give old Lowell a little time to think about it; maybe look Orlovsky up on the Civil List, see he was there and he was Homicide. He flipped the little phone shut and went back into the trailer. Sublett's mother kept the air-conditioning up about two clicks too high.

Sublett was sitting on the loveseat. His white clothes made him look sort of like a painter, a plasterer or something, except he was too clean. 'You know, Berry, I'm thinking maybe I better get back to Los Angeles.'

'What about your mother?'

'Well, Mrs. Baker's here now, from Galveston? They been neighbors for years. Mrs. Baker can watch out for her.'

'That apostate crap getting to you?'

'Sure is,' Sublett said, turning to look at the hologram of Fallon. 'I still believe in the Lord, Berry, and I know I've seen His face in the media, just like Reverend Fallon teaches. I have. But the rest of it, I swear, it might as well be just a flatout hustle.' Sublett almost looked like he might be about to cry. The silver eyes swung around, met Rydell's. 'And I been thinking about IntenSecure, Berry. What you told me last night. I don't see how I can go hack there and work, knowing the kinds of things they'll condone. I thought I was at least

2.

helping to protect people from a few of the evils in this world, Berry, but now I know I'd just be working for a company with no morals at all.'

Rydell walked over and had a closer look at the prayer-hankies. He wondered which one of them was

supposed to keep the AIDS off. 'No,' he said, finally, 'you go back to work. You are protecting people. That part's real. You got to make a living, Sublett.'

'What about you?'

'Well, what about me?'

'They'll just find you and kill you, Berry. You and her.'

'You, too, probably, if they knew what I'd told you. I shouldn't ought've done that, Sublett.'

That's one reason Chevette and I have to get out of here. So there won't be any hassle for you and your mom.'

'Well,' Sublett said, 'I'm not working for them anymore, Berry. But I'm leaving here, too. I just have to.'

Rydell looked at Sublett, seeing him, somehow, in his full IntenSecure outfit, Glock and all, and suddenly that big crazy idea-thing sort of up and shook itself, and rolled over, revealing all these new angles. But you can't get him involved, Rydell told himself, it just wouldn't be fair.

'Sublett,' Rydell heard himself saying, about a minute later, 'I bet I got a career-option here you haven't ever even considered.'

'What's that?' Sublett said.

'Getting in trouble,' Rydell said.

33 Notebook

rice

scouring pads broom

detergent liquid sleeping bag

stove fuel oil/gasket

He sleeps now. Rice with the curry from the Thai wagon. Asks where the girl has gone. Tell him Fontaine has heard from her but does not know where she is or why. The pistol on the shelf.

Reluctant to touch it (cold, heavy, smelling of oil, the dark blue finish worn to silver-gray down the sides of its muzzle, around the fluted segments of the cylinder. ('SMITH & WESSON.' Thomasson.) Tonight he spoke again of Shapely.

How they did him like that, Scooter, that's just some sorry shit. Same shit all over. Always some of 'em, anyway, makes you wonder how these damn religions last so long or what started it in the first place. Could be he'll be that himself one day, crazy fuckers out killing people for him, or they'll say it's for him. Used to be these Crucified Jesus people, they wouldn't talk at all except Of1 Mondays, and that was the day they'd go and dig Of1C spadeful of dirt out of their grave, Scooter. Every

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little while they'd get one of them thought he'd got the spirit in him and they'd just do it, do it with these special chrome nails they all carried, leather neck-pouch, see, it had to be unborn lambskin. Hell, you'd have to say they were crazier than the ones got him, Scooter. Put 'em all away, finally. Weren't any left at all, after about 1998.

'Inner Tube, honey,' Mrs. Sublett said, 'Talitha Morrow, Todd Probert, Gary Underwood. 1996.' She was leaning back in the recliner with a damp washcloth folded across her forehead. It was the same color blue as her slippers, and they were terrycloth, too.

'I never saw that,' Chevette said, flipping through the pages of a magazine all about Reverend Fallon. There was this has-been actress, Gudrun Weaver, and she was up there hugging Fallon on a stage somewhere. If he'd turned around, Chevette thought, his nose would've barely come up to her breastbone. Looked like he'd had some kind of pink wax injected, all under his skin; had the creepiest-looking hair she'd ever seen, like a really short wig but it sort of looked like it might get up and walk off by itself.

'All about television,' Mrs. Sublett said, 'so naturally it's of special significance to the Church.'

'What's it about?'

'Talitha Morrow is this newswoman, and Todd Probert is a bank robber. But he's a good bank robber, because he only needs the money to pay for a heart-transplant for his wife. Carrie Lee. Remember her? In a mature role, honey. More like a cameo. Well, Gary Underwood is Talitha's ex, but he's still got it for her, bad. In fact he's got-whatcha callit?-erotomania, like it's all he ever thinks about and, honey, it's turned pure evil. First he's sending her these chopped up Barbie dolls; sends her a dead white rahhit, then all this fancy underwear with hlood on it. . .'

z60

34 Punching out of paradise

Chevette let the old lady talk. She could just sort of tune her out, the way she used to do with her own mother, sometimes. She wondered what it was Rydell and Sublett were so worked up about. Up to something; whispering in the kitchen.

She watched a fly buzz around the stuff on Mrs. Sublett's shelves. It looked slow, like maybe the air-conditioning was too much for it.

She wondered if maybe she wasn't starting to fall for Rydell. Maybe it was just that he'd showered and shaved and put on clean clothes from his stupid-looking suitcase. The clothes were exactly the same as the ones he'd been wearing before. Maybe he never wore anything else. But she had to admit he had a cute butt in those jeans. Sublett's mother said he looked like a young Tommy Lee Jones. Who was Tommy Lee Jones? Or maybe it was because she had the idea somehow he was going to do something mean to Lowell. She'd thought she was still in love with Lowell, or something anyway, but now she didn't think so, not at all. If Lowell just hadn't started doing dancer. She'd thought about how that Loveless had got when she'd dumped all that dancer in his Coke. She'd asked Rydell if that was enough to have killed him, and Rydell had said no. Said it was enough to keep him stone crazy for a while, and when he got back together, he was going to be hurting. Then she'd asked Rydell why Loveless had done that, banging his gun into his crotch that way. Rydell had sort of scratched his head and said he wasn't sure, but he thought it had something to do with what it did to your nervous system. Said he'd heard it induced priapism, for one thing. She'd asked him what that was. Well, he'd said, it's when the man is, like, overstimulated. She didn't know about that, but it had given Lowell these total brickbat boners that just didn't want to go away. And that would've been just fine, or anyway okay, except he got all mean with it, too, SO she'd wind up all sore and then he'd be badmouthing her in front of these people he hung out with, like Codes. Anyway, she

2.61

wasn't going to waste any time worrying about what Rydell might have in mind for Lowell, no way. What she did worry about was Skinner, whether he was okay, whether he was being taken care of. She was kind of scared to try phoning Fontaine now; every time Rydell made a call out, she worried it might get traced back or something. And it made her sad to think about her bike. She was sure somebody would've gotten it by now. She kind of hated to admit it, but that was starting to make her nearly as sad as Sammy getting killed that way. And Rydell had said he thought maybe Nigel had gotten shot, too.

'And then,' Sublett's mother was saying, 'Gary Underwood goes through this window. And he falls on one of those fences? Kind with spikes on top.'

'Hey, Mom,' Sublett said, 'you're bending Chevette's ear.'

'Just telling her about Inner Tube,' Mrs. Sublett said, from under the washcloth.

'1996,' Sublett said. 'Well, Rydell and I, we need her for something.' Sublett gestured for her to follow him back into the kitchen.

'I don't think it's a real good idea for her to go outside, Berry,' he said to Rydell. 'Not in the daytime.'

Rydell was sitting at the little plastic table where she'd had breakfast. 'Well, you can't go, Sublett, because of your apostasy. And I don't want to be in there by myself, not with my head stuck in one of those eyephone things. His parents could walk in. He might listen.'

'Can't you just call them on the regular phone, Berry?' Sublett sounded unhappy.

'No.' Rydell said, 'I can't. They just don't like that. He says they'll at least talk to me if I call them on an eyephone rig.'

'What's the problem?' Chevette said.

'Sublett's got a friend here who's got a pair of eyephones.'

z6z

'Buddy,' Sublett said.

'Your buddy?' she asked.

'Name's Buddy,' Sublett said, 'but that VR, eyephones 'n' stuff, it's against Church law. It's been revealed to Reverend Fallon that virtual reality's a medium of Satan, 'cause you don't watch enough tv after you start doing it...~

'You don't believe that,' Rydell said.

'Neither does Buddy,' Sublett said, 'but his daddy'll whip his head around if he finds that VR stuff he's got under the bed.'

'Just call him up,' Rydell said, 'tell him what I told you. Two hundred dollars cash, plus the time and charges.'

'People'll see her,' Sublett said, his shy silver gaze bouncing in Chevette's direction, then back to Rydell.

'What do you mean, "see" me?'

'Well, it's your haircut,' Sublett said. 'It's too unusual for 'em, I can tell you that.'

'Now, Buddy,' Rydell said to the boy, 'I'm going to give you these two hundred-dollar bills here. Now when'd you say your father's due back?'

'Not for another two hours,' Buddy said, his voice cracking with nervousness. He took the money like it might have something on it. 'He's helping pour a new pad for the fuel cells they're bringing from Phoenix on the Church's bulk-lifter.' Buddy kept looking at Chevette. She had on a straw sun-hat that belonged to Sublett's mother, with a big floppy brim, and a pair of these really strange old-lady sunglasses with lemon-yellow frames and lenses that sort of swooped up at the side. Chevette tried smiling at him, but it didn't seem to help.

'You're friends of Joel's, right?' Buddy had a haircut that wasn't quite skin, some kind of gadget in his mouth to straighten his teeth, and an Adam's apple about a third the size of his head. She watched it bob up and down. 'From L.A.?'

2.63

'That's right,' Rydell said.

'I. . . I wanna g-go there,' Buddy said.

'Good,' Rydell said. 'This is a step in the right direction, you just believe it. Now you wait out there like I said, and tell Chevette here if anybody's coming.'

Buddy went out of his tiny bedroom, closing the door behind him. It didn't look to Chevette like anybody Buddy's age lived there at all. Too neat, with these posters of Jesus and Fallon. She felt sorry for him. It was close and hot and she missed Sublett's mother's air-conditioning. She took off that hat.

'Okay,' Rydell said, picking up the plastic helmet, 'you sit on the bed here and pull the plug if we get interrupted.' Buddy had already hooked up the jack for them. Rydell sat down on the floor and put the helmet on, so she couldn't see his eyes. Then he pulled on one of those gloves you use to dial with and move stuff around in there.

She watched his index finger, in that glove, peck out something on a pad that wasn't there. Then she listened to him talking to the telephone company's computer about getting the time and charges after he was done.

Then his hand came up again. 'Here goes,' he said, and started punching out this number he said Lowell had given him, his finger coming down on the empty air. When he was done, he made a fist, sort of wiggled it around, then lowered the gloved hand to his lap.

He just sat there for a few seconds, the helmet kind of swiveling around like he was looking at stuff, then it stopped moving.

'Okay,' he said, his voice kind of funny, but not to her, 'but is there anybody here?'

Chevette felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

'Oh,' he said, the helmet turning, 'Jesus-'

Rydell had liked doing Dream Walls, when he was a kid in high school. It was this Japanese franchise operation they set up in different kinds of spaces, mostly in older malls; some were in places that had been movie theaters, some were in old department stores. He'd gone to one once that they'd put into an old bowling alley; made it real long and narrow and the stuff sort of distorted on you if you tried to move it too fast.

There were a lot of different ways you could play with it, the most popular one in Knoxville being gunfights, where you got these guns and shot at all kinds of bad guys, and they shot back and then you got the score. Sort of like FATSS at the Academy, but only about half the rez. And none of the, well, color.

But the one Rydell had liked most was where you just went in and sort of sculpted things out of nothing, out of that cloud of pixels or polygons or whatever they were, and you could see what other people were doing at the same time, and maybe even put your stuff together with theirs, if you both wanted to. He'd been kind of self-conscious about it, because it seemed like something that mostly girls did. And the girls were always doing these unicorns and rainbows and things, and Rydell liked to do cars, kind of dream-cars, like he was some designer in Japan somewhere and he could build anything he wanted. You could get these full-color printouts when you were done, or a cassette, if you'd animated it. There'd always be a couple of girls down at the far end, doing

35 The republic of desire

plastic surgery on pictures of themselves, fiddling around with their faces and hair, and they'd get printouts of those if they did one they really liked.

Rydell would be up closer to the entrance, molding these grids of green light around a frame he'd drawn, and laying color and texture over that to see how different ones looked.

But what he remembered when he clicked into the Republic of Desire's eyephone-space was the sense you got, doing that, of what the space around Dream Walls was like. And it was a weird thing, because if you looked up from what you were doing, there really wasn't anything there; nothing in particular, anyway. But when you were doing it, designing your car or whatever, you could get this funny sense that you were leaning out, over the edge of the world, and the space beyond that sort of fell away, forever.

And you felt like you weren't standing on the floor of an old movie theater or a bowling alley, but on some kind of plain, or maybe a pane of glass, and you felt like it just stretched away behind you, miles and miles, with no real end.

So when he went from looking at the phone company's logo to being right out there on that glassy plain, he just said 'Oh,' because he could see its edges, and see that it hung there, level, and around and above it this cloud or fog or sky that was no color and every color at once, just sort of seething.

And then these figures were there, bigger than skyscrapers, bigger than anything, their chests about even with the edges of the plain, so that Rydell got to feel like a bug, or a little toy. One of them was a dinosaur, this sort of T. Rex job with the short front legs, except they ended in something a lot more like hands. One was a sort of statue, it looked like, or more like some freak natural formation, all shot through with cracks and fissures, but it was shaped like a wide-faced man with dreadlocks, the face relaxed and the lids half-closed. But all stone and moss, the dreadlocks somehow stacked from whole mountains of shale.

L66

Then he looked and saw the third one there, and just said

'Jesus.'

This was a figure, too, and just as big, but all made up of television, these moving images winding and writhing together, and barely, it seemed, able to hold the form they took: something that might either have been a man or a woman. It hurt his eyes, to try to look too close at any one part of it. It was like trying to watch a million channels at once, and this noise was rushing off it like a waterfall off rocks, a sort of hiss that somehow wasn't a sound at all.

'Welcome to the Republic,' said the dinosaur, its voice the voice of some beautiful woman. It smiled, the ivory of its teeth carved into whole temples. Rydell tried to look at the carvings; they got really clear for a second, and then something happened.

'You don't have a third the bandwidth you need,' the dreadlocked mountain said, its voice about what you'd expect from a mountain. 'You're in K-Tel space...'

'We could turn off the emulator,' the thing made of television suggested, its voice modulating up out of the waterfall-hiss.

'Don't bother,' said the dinosaur. 'I don't think this is going to be much of a conversation.'

'Your name,' said the mountain.

Rydell hesitated.

'Social Security,' said the dinosaur, sounding bored, and for some reason Rydell thought about his father, how he'd always gone on about what that had used to mean, and what it meant now.

'Name and number,' said the mountain, 'or we're gone.'

'Rydell, Stephen Berry,' and then the string of digits. He'd barely gotten the last one out when the dinosaur said 'Former policeman, I see.'

'Oh dear,' said the mountain, who kept reminding Rydell of something.

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'Well,' said the dinosaur, 'pretty permanently former, by the look of it. Worked for IntenSecure after that.'

'A sting,' said the mountain, and brought a hand up to point at Rydell, except it was this giant granite lobster-claw, crusted with lichen. It seemed to fill half the sky, like the side of a space ship. 'The narrow end of the wedge?'

'They don't come much narrower, if you ask me,' the storm of television said. 'You seem to have gotten our Lowell's undivided attention, Rydell. And he wouldn't even tell us what your name was.'

'Doesn't know it,' Rydell said.

'Don't know his ass from a hole in the ground, hee haw,' said the mountain, lowering the claw, its voice a sampled parody of Rydell's. Rydell tried to get a good look at its eyes; got a flash of still blue pools, waving ferns, some kind of tan rodent hopping away, before the focus slipped.

'People like Lowell imagine we need them more than they need us.'

'State your business, Stephen Berry,' said the dinosaur.

'There was something happened, up Benedict Canyon-'

'Yes, yes,' said the dinosaur, 'you were the driver. What does it have to do with us?'

That was when it dawned on Rydell that the dinosaur, or all of them, could probably see all the

records there were on him, right then, anywhere. It gave him a funny feeling. 'You're looking at all my stuff,' he said.

'And it's not very interesting,' said the dinosaur. 'Benedict Canyon?'

'You did that,' Rydell said.

The mountain raised its eyebrows. Windblown scrub shifting, rocks tumbling down. But just on the edge of Rydell's vision. 'For what it's worth, that was not us, not exactly. We would've gone a more elegant route.'

'But why did ~OU do it?'

'Well,' said the dinosaur, 'to the extent that anyone did it, or caused it to be done, I imagine you might look to the lady's

husband, who I see has since filed for divorce. On very solid grounds, it seems.'

'Like he set her up? With the gardener and everything?'

'Lowell has some serious explaining to do, I think,' the mountain said.

'You haven't told us what it is you want, Mr. Rydell.' This from the television-thing.

'A job like that. Done. I need you to do one of those. For me.'

'Lowell,' the mountain said, and shook its dreadlocked head. Cascades of shale in Rydell's peripheral vision. Dust rising on a distant slope.

'That sort of thing is dangerous,' the dinosaur said. 'Dangerous things are very expensive. You don't have any money, Rydell.'

'How about if Lowell pays you for it?'

'Lowell,' from that vast blank face twisting with images, 'owes us.'

'Okay,' Rydell said, 'I hear you. And I think I know somebody else might pay you.' He wasn't even sure if that was bullshit or not. 'But you're going to have to listen to me. Hear the story.'

'No,' the mountain said, and Rydell remembered who it was he figured the thing was supposed to look like, that guy you saw on the history shows sometimes, the one who'd invented eyephones or something, 'and if Lowell thinks he's the only pimp out there, he might have to think again.' And then they were fading, breaking up into those paisley fractal things, and Rydell knew he was losing them.

'Wait,' he said. 'Any of you live in San Francisco?'

The dinosaur came flickering back. 'What if we did?'

'Well,' Rydell said, 'do you like it?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Because it's all going to change. They're going to do it like they're doing Tokyo.'

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'Tokyo?' The television-storm, coming back now as this big ball, like that hologram in Cognitive Dissidents. 'Who told you that?'

Now the mountain was back, too. 'There's not a lot of slack, for us, in Tokyo, now...'

'Tell us,' the dinosaur said.

So Rydell did.

She had the hat back on, when he took the helmet off, but she was holding those sunglasses in her hand. Just looking at him.

'I don't think I made sense of much of that,' she said. She'd only been able to hear his side of it, but it had been mostly him talking, there at the end. 'But I think you're flat fucking crazy.'

'I probably am,' he said.

Then he got the time and charges on the call. It came to just about all the money he had left.

'I don't see why they had to put the damn thing through Paris,' he said.

She just put those glasses back on and slowly shook her head.

36 Notebook (z)

The city in sunlight, from the roof of this box atop the tower. The hatch open. Sound of Skinner sorting and resorting his belongings. A cardboard box, slowly filling with objects I will take below, to the sellers of things, their goods spread on blankets, on greasy squares of ancient canvas. Osaka far away. The wind brings sounds of hammering, song. Skinner, this morning, asking if I had seen the pike in the Steiner Aquarium.

-No.

-He doesn't move, Scooter.

Sure that's all Fontaine said? But he'd found her bike? That's no good. Wouldn't go this long without that. Cost an arm and a fucking leg, that thing. Made of paper, inside. Japanese

construction-paper, what's it called? Useless, Scooter. Shit, it's your language. Forgetting it faster than we are ... Tube of that paper, then they wrap it with aramyd or something. No, she wouldn't leave that. Day she brought it home, three hours down there spraying this fake rust on it, believe that? Fake rust, Scooter. And wrapping it with old rags, innertubes, anything. So it wouldn't look new. Well, it makes more sense than just locking it, it really does. Know how you break a Kryptonite lock, Scooter? With a Volvo jack. Volvo jack fits right in there, like it was made for it. Give it a shove or two, zingo. But they never use 'em anymore, those  
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locks. Some people still carry 'em, though. One of those up 'side the head, you'll notice it ... I just found her one day. They wanted to cart her down to the end, let the city have her. Said she'd be dead before they got her off anyway. Told 'em they could fuck off into the air. Got her up here. I could still do that. Why? Hell. Because. See people dying, you just walk by like it was television?  
37 Century city

Chevette didn't know what to think about Los Angeles. She thought those palm trees were weird, though. On the way in, Sublett's electric car had pulled up behind this big white trailer-rig with A-LIFE INSTALLATIONS, NANOTRONIC VEGETATION across the back of it, and the heads of these fake palm trees sticking out, all wrapped in plastic. She'd seen it all on tv once, with Skinner, how they were putting in these trees to replace the ones the virus had killed, some Mexican virus. They were kind of like the Bay maglev, or like what Rydell and Sublett said that that Sunflower company was going to do in San Francisco; these things that kind of grew, but only because they were made up of all these little tiny machines. One show she'd seen with Skinner, they'd talked about how these new trees were designed so that all kinds of birds and rats and things could nest in them, just like the ones that had died. Skinner told her that he'd run a Jeep into a real palm tree, in L.A., once, and about ten rats had fallen out, landed on the hood and just sort of stood there, until they got scared and ran away. It sure didn't feel like San Francisco. She felt kind of two ways about it. Like it was just this bunch of stuff, all spread out pretty much at random, and then like it was this really big place, with mountains somewhere back there, and all this energy flowing around in it, lighting things up. Maybe that was because they'd got there at night. Sublett had this little white Eurocar called a Montxo. She  
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knew that because she'd had to look at the logo on the dash all the way from Paradise. Sublett said it rhymed with poncho. It was built in Barcelona and you just plugged it into the house-current and left it until it was charged. It wouldn't do much more than forty on a highway, but Sublett didn't like to drive anything else because of his allergies. She said he was lucky they had electric cars; he'd told her all about how he was worried about the electromagnetic fields and cancer and stuff. They'd left his mother with this Mrs. Baker, watching Spacehunter on the tv. They were both real excited about that because they said it was Molly Ringwald's first film. They'd get excited about just about anything, like that, and Chevette never had any idea who they were talking about. Rydell was just spending more and more time on the phone, and they'd~ had to stop and buy fresh batteries twice, Sublett paying. It kind of bothered her that he didn't give her any more attention. And they'd slept on the same bed again, in the room at the motel, but nothing had happened, even though Sublett had slept out in the Montxo, with the seats tilted back. All Rydell ever did now was talk to those Republic of Desire people Lowell knew, but on the regular phone, and try to leave messages on somebody's voicemail. Mr. Mom or something. Ma. But he didn't think anybody was getting them, so he'd called up the Desire people and gone on and on about the whole story, everything that happened to them, and they'd recorded it and they were supposed to put it in this Mr. Ma's voicemail. Rydell said they were going to stuff it there, so there wasn't any other mail. Said that ought to get his attention. When they'd got to L.A. and got a room in a motel, Chevette had been kind of excited, because she'd always wanted to do that. Because her mother had always seemed to have real good times when she went to motels. Well, it had turned out to be sort of like a trailer camp without the  
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trailers, with these little concrete buildings divided up into smaller rooms, and there were foreign people cooking barbecues down in what had been the swimming pool. Sublett had gotten



really upset about that, how he couldn't handle the hydrocarbons and everything, but Rydell had said it was just for the one night. Then Rydell had gone over to the foreign people and talked to them a little, and came back and said they were Tibetans. They made a good barbecue, too, but Sublett just ate this drugstore food he'd brought with him, bottled water and these yellow bars looked like soap, and went out to sleep in his Montxo.

Now here she was, walking into this place called Century City II, and trying to look like she was there to pull a tag. It was this kind of green, tit-shaped thing up on these three legs that ran up through it. You could see where they went because the walls were some kind of glass, mostly, and you could see through. It was about the biggest thing around; you could see it forever. Rydell called it the Blob.

It was real upscale, too, kind of like China Basin, with those same kind of people, like you mostly saw in the financial district, or in malls, or when you were pulling tags.

Well, she had her badges on, and she'd had a good shower at the motel, but the place was starting to creep her out anyway. All these trees in there, up all through this sort of giant, hollow leg, and everything under this weird filtered light came in through the sides. And here she was standing on this escalator, about a mile long, just going up and up, and around her all these people who must've belonged there. There were elevators, Rydell said, up the other two legs, and they ran at an angle, like the lift up to Skinner's. But Sublett's friend had said there were more IntenSecure people watching those, usually.

She knew that Sublett was behind her, somewhere, or anyway that was how they'd worked it out before Rydell dropped them off at the entrance. She'd asked him where he was going

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then, and he'd just said he had to go and borrow a flashlight. She was starting to really like him. It sort of bothered her. She wondered what he'd be like if he wasn't in a situation like this. She wondered what she'd be like if she wasn't in a situation like this.

He and Sublett had both worked for the company that did security for this building, IntenSecure, and Sublett had called up a friend of his and asked him questions about how tight it was. The way he'd put it, it was like he wanted a new job with the company. But he and Rydell had worked it out that she could get in, particularly if he was following her to keep track.

What bothered her about Sublett was that he was acting sort of like he was committing suicide or something. Once he'd gotten with the program, Rydell's plan, it was like he felt cut loose from things. Kept talking about his apostasy and these movies he liked, and somebody called Cronenberg. Had this weird calm like somebody who knew for sure he was going to die; like he'd sort of made peace with it, except he'd still get upset about his allergies.

Green light. Rising up through it.

They'd made her up this package at the motel. What it had in it was the glasses. Addressed to Karen Mendelsohn.

She closed her eyes, told herself Bunny Malatesta would bongo on her head if she didn't make the tag, and pushed the button.

'Yes?' It was one of those computers.

'Allied Messenger, for Karen Mendelsohn.'

'A delivery?'

'She's gotta sign for it.'

'Authorized to barcode-'

'Her hand. Gotta see her hand. Do it. You know?'

Silence. 'Nature of delivery?'

'You think I open them or what?'

'Nature of delivery?'

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'Well,' Chevette said, 'it says "Probate Court," it's from San Francisco, and you don't open the door, Mr. Wizard, it's on the next plane back.'

'Wait, please,' said the computer.

Chevette looked at the potted plants beside the door. They were big, looked real, and she knew Sublett was standing behind them, but she couldn't see him. Somebody had put a cigarette out on one, between its roots.

The door open, a crack. 'Yes?'

'Karen Mendelsohn?'

'What is it?'

'Allied Messenger, San Francisco. You wanna sign for this?' Except there was nothing, no tag, to sign.

'San Francisco?'

'What it says.'

The door opened a little more. Dark-haired woman in a long pale terrycloth robe. Chevette saw her check the badges on Skinner's jacket. 'I don't understand,' Karen Medelsohn said. 'We do everything via GlobEx.'

'They're too slow,' Chevette said, as Sublett stepped around the plant, wearing this black uniform. Chevette saw herself reflected in his contacts, sort of bent out at the middle.

'Ms. Mendelsohn,' he said, 'afraid we've got us a security emergency, here.'

Karen Mendelsohn was looking at him. 'Emergency?'

'Nothing to worry about,' Sublett said. He put his hand on Chevette's shoulder and guided her in, past Karen Mendelsohn. 'Situation's under control. Appreciate your co-operation.'

'Wally' Divac, Rydell's Serbian landlord, hadn't really wanted to loan Rydell his flashlight, but Rydell had lied and promised he'd get him something a lot better, over at IntenSecure, and bring it along when he brought the flashlight back. Maybe one of those telescoping batons with the wireless taser-tips, he said; something serious, anyway, professional and maybe quasi-illegal. Wally was sort of a cop-groupie. Liked to feel he was in with the force. Like a lot of people, he didn't much distinguish between the real PD and a company like IntenSecure. He had one of those armed response signs in his front yard, too, but Rydell was glad to see it wasn't IntenSecure. Wally couldn't quite afford that kind of service, just like his car was second-hand, though he would've told you it was previously owned, like the first guy was just some flunky who'd had the job of breaking it in for him.

But he owned this house, where he lived, with the baby-blue plastic siding that looked sort of like painted wood, and one of those fake lawns that looked realer than AstroTurf. And he had the house in Mar Vista and a couple of others. His sister had come over here in 1994, and then he'd come himself, to get away from all the trouble over there. Never regretted it. Said this was a fine country except they let in too many immigrants.

'What's that you're driving?' he'd asked, from the steps of the renovated Craftsman two blocks above Mel rose.

'A Montxo,' Rydell said. 'I~rom Barcelona. Electric.'

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38 Miracle mile

'You live in America,' he'd said, his gray hair plastered neatly back from his pitted forehead.

'Why you drive that?' His BMW, immaculate, reposed in the driveway; he'd had to spend five minutes disarming it to get the flashlight out for Rydell. Rydell had remembered the time in Knoxville, Christmas day, when the Narcotics team's new walkie-talkies had triggered every car-alarm in a ten-mile radius.

'Well,' Rydell said, 'it's real good for the environment.'

'It's bad for your country,' Wally said. 'Image thing. An American should drive some car to feel proud of. Bavarian car. At least Japanese.'

'I'll get this back to you, Wally.' Holding up the big black flashlight.

'And something else. You said.'

'Don't worry about it.'

'When you pay rent on Mar Vista?'

'Kevin'll take care of it.' Getting into the tiny Montxo and starting up the flywheel. It sat there, rocking slightly on its shocks, while the wheel got up to speed.

Wally waved, shrugged, then backed into his house and closed the door. Rydell hadn't ever seen him not wear that Tyrolean hat before.

Rydell looked at the flashlight, figuring out where the safety was. It wasn't much, but he felt like he had to have something. And it was nonlethal. Guns weren't that hard to buy, on the street, but he didn't really want to have to have one around today. You did a different kind of time, if there was a gun involved.

Then he'd driven back toward the Blob, taking it real easy at intersections and trying to keep to the streets that had designated lanes for electric vehicles. He got Chevette's phone out and hit redial for the node-number in Utah, the one Godeater had given him, back in Paradise. God-eater was the one who looked like the mountain, or so he said. Rydell had asked him what kind of a name that was. He'd said he was a full-blood Blood Indian. Rydell sort of doubted it.

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None of their voices were real, even; it was all digital stuff. God-eater could just as well be a woman, or three different people, or all three of the ones he'd seen there might've been just one person. He thought about the woman in the wheelchair in Cognitive Dissidents. It could be her. It could be anybody. That was the spooky thing about these hackers. He heard the node-number ringing,

in Utah. God-eater always picked up on five, in mid-ring.

'Yes?'

'Paradise,' Rydell said.

'Richard?'

'Nixon.'

'We have your goods in place, Richard. One little whoops and a push.'

'You get me a price yet?' The light changed. Somebody was honking, pissed-off at the Montxo's inability to do anything like accelerate.

'Fifty,' God-eater said.

Fifty thousand dollars. Rydell winced. 'Okay,' he said, 'fair enough.'

'Better be,' God-eater said. 'We can make you pretty miserable in prison, even. In fact, we can make you really miserable in prison. The baseline starts lower, in there.'

I'll bet you got lots of friends there, too, Rydell thought. 'How long you estimate the response-time, from when I call?'

God-eater burped, long and deliberate. 'Quick. Ten, fifteen max. We've got it slotted the way we talked about. Your friends're gonna shit themselves. But really, you don't wanna be in the way.

This'll be like something you never saw before. This new unit they just got set up.'

'I hope so,' Rydell said, and broke the connection.

He gave the parking-attendant Karen's apartment number. After this, it really wasn't going to matter much. He had the flashlight stuck down in the back of his jeans, under the

z8o

denim jacket Buddy had loaned him. It was probably Buddy's father's. He'd told Buddy he'd help him find a place when he got to L.A. He sort of hoped Buddy never did try that, because he imagined kids like Buddy made it about a block from the bus station before some really fast urban predator got them, just a blur of wheels and teeth and no more Buddy to speak of. But then again you had to think about what it would be like to be him, Buddy, back there in his three-by six-foot bedroom in that trailer, with those posters of Fallon and Jesus, sneaking that VR when his daddy wasn't looking. If you didn't at least try to get out, what would you wind up feeling like? And that was why you had to give it to Sublett, because he'd gotten out of that, allergies and all.

But he was worried about Sublett. Pretty crazy to be worried about anybody, in a situation like this, but Sublett acted like he was already dead or something. Just moving from one thing to the next, like it didn't matter. The only thing that got any kind of rise out of him was his allergies.

And Chevette, too, Chevette Washington, except what worried him there was the white skin of her back, just above the waist of those black bike-pants, when she was curled on the bed beside him. How he kept wanting to touch it. And how her tits stuck out against her t-shirt when she'd sit up in the morning, and those little dark twists of hair under her arms. And right now, walking up to this terracotta coffee-module near the base of the escalator, the rectangular head of Wally's pepper-spray flashlight digging into his spine, he knew he might never get another chance. He could be dead, in half an hour, or on his way to prison.

He ordered a latte with a double shot, paid for it with just about the last of his money, and looked at his Timex. Ten 'iii three. When he'd called Warbaby's personal portable from the motel, the night before, he'd told him three.

God-eater had gotten him that number. God-eater could get you any number ~t all.

Warbaby had sounded really sad to hear from him.

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Disappointed, like. 'We never expected this of you, Rydell.'

'Sorry, Mr. Warbaby. Those fucking Russians. And that cowboy fucker, that Loveless. Got on my case.'

'There's no need for obscenity. Who gave you this number?'

'I had it from Hernandez, before.' Silence.

'I got the glasses, Mr. Warbaby.'

'Where are you?'

Chevette Washington watching him, from the bed. 'In Los Angeles. I figured I'd better get as far away from those Russians as I could.'

A pause. Maybe Warbaby had put his hand over the phone. Then, 'Well, I suppose I can understand your behavior, although I can't say I approve...'

'Can you come down here and get them, Mr. Warbaby? And just sort of call it even?'

A longer pause. 'Well, Rydell,' sadly, 'I wouldn't want you to forget how disappointed I am in you, but, yes, I could do that.'

'But just you and Freddie, right? Nobody else.'

'Of course,' Warbaby had said. Rydell imagined him looking at Freddie, who'd be tap-tapping away on some new laptop, getting the call traced. To a cell-node in Oakland, and then to a tumbled number.

'You be down here tomorrow, Mr. Warbaby. I'll call you at your same number, tell you where to come. Three o'clock. Sharp.'

'I think you've made the right decision, Rydell,' Warbaby had said.

'I hope so,' Rydell had said, then clicked off.

Now he looked at his Timex. l'ook a sip of coffee. Three o'clock. Sharp. He put the coffee down on the counter and got the phone out. Started punching in Warbaby's number.

It took them twenty minutes to get there. They came in two

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cars, from opposite directions; Warbaby and Freddie in a black Lincoln with a white satellite-dish on top, Freddie driving it, then Svobodov and Orlovsky in a metallic-gray Lada sedan that Rydell took for a rental.

He watched them meet up, the four of them, then walk in, onto the plaza under the Blob, past those kinetic sculptures, heading for the nearest elevator, Warbaby looking sad as ever and leaning on that cane. Warbaby had his same olive coat on, his Stetson, Freddie was wearing a big shirt with a lot of pink in it, had a laptop under his arm, and the Russians from Homicide had these gray suits on, about the color and texture of the Lada they were driving.

He gave it a while to see if Loveless was going to turn up, then started keying in that number in Utah.

'Please, Jesus,' he said, counting the rings.

'Your latte okay?' The Central Asian kid in the coffee-module, looking at him.

'It's fine,' Rydell said, as God-eater picked up.

'Yes?'

'Paradise.'

'This Richard?'

'Nixon. They're here. Four but not Smiley.'

'Your two Russians, Warbaby, and his jockey?'

'Got 'em.'

'But not the other one?'

'Don't see him . . .'

'His description's in the package anyway. Okay, Rydell. Let's do it.' Click.

Rydell stuck the phone in his jacket pocket, turned, and headed, walking fast, for the escalator.

The boy in the coffeemodule probably thought there was something wrong with that lane.

God-eater and his friends, if they weren't just one person, say some demented old lady up in the Oakland hills with a couple

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of million dollars' worth of equipment and a terminally bad attitude, had struck Rydell as being almost uniquely full of shit. There was nothing, if you believed them, they couldn't do. But if they were all that powerful, how come they had to hide that way, and make money doing crimes? Rydell had gotten a couple of lectures on computer crime at the Academy, but it had been pretty dry. The history of it, how hackers used to be just these smart-ass kids dickening with the phone companies. Basically, the visiting Fed had said, any crime that was what once had been called white-collar was going to be computer crime anyway, now, because people in offices did everything with computers. But there were other crimes you could still call computer crimes in the old sense, because they usually involved professional criminals, and these criminals still thought of themselves as hackers. The public, the Fed had told them, still tended to think of hackers as some kind of romantic bullshit thing, sort of like kids moving the outhouse. Merry pranksters. In the old days, he said, lots of people still didn't know there was an outhouse there to be moved, not until they wound up in the shit. Rydell's class laughed dutifully. But not today, the Fed said; your modern hacker was about as romantic as a hit man from some ice posse or an enforcer with a dancer combine. And a lot harder to catch, although if you could get one and lean on him, you could usually count on landing a few more. But they were set up mostly in these cells, the cells building up larger groups, so that the most you could ever pop, usually, were the members of a single cell; they just didn't know who the members of the other cells were, and they made a point of not finding out.

God-eater and his friends, however many of them there were or weren't, must've been a cell like

that, one of however many units in what they called the Republic of Desire. And if they were really going to go ahead and do the thing for him, he figured there were three reasons: they hated the idea of San Francisco getting rebuilt because they liked an infrastructure

2.84

with a lot of holes in it, they were charging him good money-money he didn't have-and they'd figured out a way to do something that nobody had ever done before. And it was that last one that had really seemed to get them going, once they'd decided to help him out.

And now, climbing the escalator, up through all these kinds of people who lived or worked up here, forcing himself not to break into a run, Rydell found it hard to believe that God-eater and them were doing what they'd said they could do. And if they weren't, well, he was just fucked.

No, he told himself, they were. They had to be. Somewhere in Utah a dish was turning, targeted out toward the coast, toward the California sky. And out of it, fed in from wherever God-eater and his friends were, were coming these packages, no, packets, of signals. Packets, God-eater called them. And somewhere, high above the Blob, up over the whole L.A. Basin, was the Death Star.

Rydell dodged past a silver-haired man in tennis whites and ran up the escalator. Came out under the copper tit. People going in and out of that little mall there. A fountain with water sliding down big ragged sheets of green glass. And there went the Russians, their wide gray backs heading toward the white walls of the complex where Karen's apartment was. He couldn't see Warbaby or Freddie.

3:32. 'Shit,' he said, knowing it hadn't worked, that God-eater had fucked him, that he'd doomed Chevette Washington and Sublett and even Karen Mendelsohn and it was one more time he'd just gone for it, been wrong, and the last fucking time at that.

And then these things came through a long gap in the glass, just south of where the handball-courts were, and he hadn't ever seen anything like them. There were a bunch of them, maybe ten or a dozen, and they were black. They hardly made any sound at all, and they were sort of floating. Just skimming along. The players on the courts stopped to watch them.

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They were helicopters, but too small to carry anybody. Smaller than the smallest micro-light. Kind of dish-shaped. French Aerospatiale gun-platforms, the kind you saw on the news from Mexico City, and he guessed they were under the control of ECCCS, the Emergency Command Control Communications System, who ran the Death Star. One of them swung by, about twenty feet over his head, and he saw the clustered tubes of some kind of gun or rocket-launcher.

'Damn,' Rydell said, looking up at the future of armed response.

'POLICE EMERGENCY. REMAIN CALM.'

A woman started screaming, from somewhere over by the mall, over and over, like something mechanical.

'REMAIN CALM.'

And mostly they did, all those faces; faces of the residents of this high country, their jawlines firm, their soft clothes fluttering in the dancing downdrafts.

Rydell started running.

He ran past Svobodov and Orlovsky, who were looking at the three helicopters that were much lower now, and so clearly edging in on them. The Russians' mouths were open and Orlovsky's half-frame glasses looked like they were about to fall off.

'ON YOUR FACES. NOW. OR WE FIRE.'

But the residents, slender and mainly blond, stood unmoved, watching, with racquets in their hands, or dark glossy paper bags from the mall. Watching the helicopters. Watching Rydell as he ran past them, their eyes mildly curious and curiously hard.

He ran past Freddie, who was flat down on the granite payers, doing what the helicopters said, his hands above his head and his laptop between them.

'REMAIN CALM.'

Then he saw Warbaby, slouched back on a cast-iron bench like he'd been sitting there forever, just watching life go by. Warhahy saw him, too.

2.86

'POLICE EMERGENCY.'

His cane was beside him, propped on the bench. He picked it up, lazy and deliberate, and Rydell was sure he was about to get blown away.

'REMAIN CALM.'

But Warbaby, looking sad as ever, just brought the cane up to the brim of his Stetson, like some kind of salute.

'DROP THAT CANE.'

The amplified voice of a SWAT cop, bunkered down in the hardened sublevels of City Hall East,

working his little Aerospatiale through a telepresence rig. Warbaby shrugged, slowly, and tossed the cane away.

Rydell kept running, right through the open gates and up to Karen Mendelsohn's door. Which was half-open, Karen and Chevette Washington both there, their eyes about to pop out of their heads. 'Inside!' he yelled.

They just gaped at him.

'Get inside!'

There were a bunch of big plants beside the door, in a terracotta pot about as high as his waist. He saw Loveless step around it, raising his little gun; Loveless had on a silvery sportscoat and his left arm was in a sling; his face was studded with micropore dressings that weren't quite the right shade, so he looked like he had leprosy or something. He was smiling that smile.

'No!' Chevette Washington screamed, 'you murdering little fuck!'

Loveless brought the gun around, about a foot from her head, and Rydell saw the smile vanish.

Without it, he noticed, Loveless sort of looked like he didn't have any lips.

'REMAIN CALM,' the helicopters reminded them all, as Rydell brought tip Wally's flashlight.

Loveless never even managed to pull the trigger, which you had to admit was kind of impressive.

What that capsicum did,

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it was kind of like when Sublett got an allergic reaction, but a lot worse, and a lot quicker.

'You crazy, crazy motherfucker,' Karen Mendelsohn kept saying, her eyes swollen up like she'd walked through a swarm of hornets. She and Chevette had both caught the edges of that pepper-spray, and Sublett was so worried about the residue that he'd gone into a closet in Karen's bedroom and wouldn't come out. 'You crazy, outrageous motherfucker. Do you know what you've done?' Rydell just sat there, in one of her white Retro Aggressive armchairs, listening to those helicopters yelling outside. Later on, when it all came out, they'd find out that the Republic of Desire had set Warbaby and them up as these bomb-building mercenaries working for the Sonoran Separatist Front, with enough high explosives stored in Karen's place to blow that nipple off the tit and clear to Malibu. And they'd also worked in this hostage-taking scenario, to guarantee the SWAT guys made a soft entry, if they had to. But when the real live Counterterrorism Squad got in there, it would've been pretty hairy, at least if Karen hadn't been a lawyer for Cops in Trouble. Those were some angry cops, and getting angrier, at first, but then Pursley's people seemed to have their ways to calm them down.

But the funny thing was, they, the LAPD, never would, ever, admit to it that anybody had hacked the Death Star. They kept saying it had been phoned in. And they stuck to that, too; it was so important to them, evidently, that they were willing, finally, to let a lot of the rest of it just go.

But when he was sitting there, listening to Karen, and gradually getting the idea that, yeah, he was the kind of crazy motherfucker she liked, he kept thinking about Nightmare Folk Art, and whatever that woman's name was, over there, and hoping she was coping okay, because God-eater had needed an L.A. number to stick into his fake data-packet, a

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number where the tip-off was supposed to have come from. And Rydell hadn't wanted to give them Kevin's number, and then he'd found the Nightmare number in his wallet, on part of a People cover, so he'd given God-eater that.

And then Chevette came over, with her face all swollen from the capsicum, and asked him if it was working or were they totally fucked? And he said it was, and they weren't, and then the cops came in and it wasn't okay, but then Aaron Pursley turned up with about as many other lawyers as there were cops, and then Wellington Ma, in a navy blazer with gold buttons.

So Rydell finally got to meet him.

'Always a pleasure to meet a client in person,' Wellington Ma said, shaking his hand.

'Pleased to meet you, Mr. Ma,' Rydell said.

'I won't ask you what you did to my voice-mail,' Wellington Ma said, 'but I hope you won't do it again. Your story, though, is fascinating.'

Rydell remembered God-eater and that fifty thousand, and hoped Ma and Karen and them weren't going to be pissed about that. But he didn't think so, because Aaron Pursley had already said, twice, how it was going to be bigger than the Pookey Bear thing, and Karen kept saying how telegenic Chevette was, and about the youth angle, and how Chrome Koran would fall all over themselves to do the music.

And Wellington Ma had signed up Chevette, and Sublett, too, but he'd had to pass the papers back into that closet because Sublett still wouldn't come out.

Rydell could tell from what Karen said that Chevette had told her pretty much the whole story while she and Sublett had kept her there, and kept her from hitting any IntenSecure panic-buttons. And Karen, evidently, knew all about those VL glasses and how to get them to play things back, SO she'd spent most of the time doing that, and now she knew all about Sunflower or whatever it was called. And she kept

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telling Pursley that there was a dynamite angle here because they could implicate Cody fucking Harwood, if they played their cards right, and was he ever due for it, the bastard.

Rydell hadn't ever even had a chance to see that stuff, on the glasses.

'Mr. Pursley?' Rydell kind of edged over to him.

'Yes, Berry?'

'What happens now?'

'Well,' Pursley said, tugging at the skin beneath his nose, 'you and your two friends here are about to be arrested and taken into custody.'

'We are?'

Pursley looked at his big gold watch. It was set with diamonds around the dial, and had a big lump of turquoise on either side. 'In about five minutes. We're arranging to have the first press-conference around six. That suit you, or would you rather eat first? We can have the caterers bring you something in.'

'But we're being arrested.'

'Bail, Berry. You've heard of bail? You'll all be out tomorrow morning.' Pursley beamed at him.

'Are we going to be okay, Mr. Pursley?'

'Berry,' Pursley said, 'you're in trouble, son. A cop. And an honest one. In trouble. In deep, spectacular, and, please, I have to say this, clearly heroic shit.' He clapped Rydell on the shoulder. 'Cops in Trouble is here for you, boy, and, let me assure you, we are all of us going to make out just fine on this.'

Chevette said jail sounded just fine to her, but please could she call somebody in San Francisco named Fontaine?

'You can call anybody you want, honey,' Karen said, dabbing at Chevette's eyes with a tissue.

'They'll record it all, but we'll get a copy, too. What was the name of your friend, the black man, the one who was shot?'

'Sam my Sal,' Chevette said.

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Karen looked at Pursley. 'We'd better get Jackson Gale,' she said. Rydell wondered what for, because Jackson Gale was this new young black guy who acted in made-for-tv movies.

Then Chevette came over and hugged him, all of her pressing up against him, and just sort of looking up at him from under that crazy-ass haircut. And he liked that, even if her eyes were all red and her nose was running.

On Saturday, the fifteenth of November, the morning after his fourth night with Skinner, Yamazaki, wearing an enormous, cape-like plaid jacket, much mended and smelling of candle-grease, descended in the yellow lift to do business with the dealers in artifacts. He brought with him a cardboard carton containing several large fragments of petrified wood, the left antler of a buck deer, fifteen compact discs, a Victorian promotional novelty in the shape of a fluted china mug, embossed with the letters 'OXO,' and a damp-swollen copy of The Columbia Literary History of the United States.

The sellers were laying out their goods, the morning iron-gray and clammy, and he was grateful for the borrowed jacket, its pockets silted with ancient sawdust and tiny, nameless bits of hardware. He had been curious about the correct manner in which to approach them, but they took the initiative, clustering around him, Skinner's name on their lips.

The petrified wood brought the best price, then the mug, then eight of the compact discs. It all went, finally, except for the literary history, which was badly mildewed. He placed this, its blue boards warping in the salt air, atop a mound of trash. With the money folded in his hand, he went looking for the old woman who sold eggs. Also, they needed coffee.

He was in sight of the place that roasted and ground coffee when he saw Fontaine coming through the morning bustle, the collar of his long tweed coat turned up against the fog.

'How's the old man doing, Scooter?'

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'He asks more frequently after the girl...' 'She's in jail down in L.A.,' Fontaine said. 'Jail?'

'Out on bail this morning, or that's what she said last night. I was on my way over to bring you this.' He took a phone from his pocket and handed it to Yamazaki. 'She has that number. Just don't go making too many calls home, you hear?'

'Home?'

'Japan.'

Yamazaki blinked. 'No. I understand...'

'I don't know what she's been up to since that damned storm hit, but I've been too busy to bother thinking about it. We got the power back but I've still got an injury case nobody's bothered to claim yet. Fished him out of what was left of somebody's greenhouse, Wednesday morning. Sort of down under your place, there, actually. Don't know if he hit his head or what, but he just keeps coming around a little, then fading off. Vital signs okay, no broken bones. Got a burn along his side could be from a bullet, some kind of hot-shoe load...'

'You would not take him to a hospital?'

'No,' Fontaine said, 'we don't do that unless they ask us to, or unless they're gonna die otherwise. Lot of us have good reason not to go to places like that, get checked out on computers and all.'

'Ah,' Yamazaki said, with what he hoped was tact.

'Ah' so,' Fontaine said. 'Some kids probably found him first, took his wallet if he had one. But he's a big healthy brother and somebody'll recognize him eventually. Hard not to, with that bolt through his johnson.'

'Yes,' Yamazaki said, failing to understand this last, 'and I still have your pistol.'

Fontaine looked around. 'Well, if you feel like you don't need it, just chuck it for me. But I'll need that phone back, sometime. How long you gonna be staying out here, anyway?'

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'I. . . I do not know.' And it was true.

'You be down here this afternoon, see the parade?'

'Parade?'

'November fifteenth. It's Shapely's birthday. Something to see. Sort of Mardi Gras feel to it. Lot of the younger people take their clothes off, but I don't know about this weather. Well, see you around. Say hi to Skinner.'

'Hi, yes,' Yamazaki said, smiling, as Fontaine went on his way, the rainbow of his crocheted cap bobbing above the heads of the crowd.

Yamazaki walked toward the coffee-vendor, remembering the funeral procession, the dancing scarlet figure with its red-painted rifle. The symbol of Shapely's going.

Shapely's murder, some said sacrifice, had taken place in Salt Lake City. His seven killers, heavily armed fundamentalists, members of a white racist sect driven underground in the months following the assault on the airport, were still imprisoned in Utah, though two of them had subsequently died of AIDS, possibly contracted in prison, steadfastly refusing the viral strain patented in Shapely's name.

They had remained silent during the trial, their leader stating only that the disease was God's vengeance on sinners and the unclean. Lean men with shaven heads and blank, implacable eyes, they were God's gunmen, and would stare, as such, from all the tapes of history, forever.

But Shapely had been very wealthy when he had died, Yamazaki thought, joining the line for coffee. Perhaps he had even been happy. He had seen the product of his blood reverse the course of darkness. There were other plagues abroad now, but the live vaccine bred from Shapely's variant had saved uncounted millions.

Yamazaki promised himself that he would observe Shapely's birthday parade. He would rernemher to bring his notchook.

He stood in the smell of fresh-ground coffee, awaiting his turn.

#### Acknowledgments

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This book owes a very special debt to Paolo Polledri, founding Curator of Architecture and Design, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Mr. Polledri commissioned, for the 1990 exhibition Visionary San Francisco, a work of fiction which became the short story 'Skinner's Room,' and also arranged for me to collaborate with the architects Ming Fung and Craig Hodgetts, whose redrawn map of the city (though I redrew it once again) provided me with Skywalker Park, the Trap, and the Sunflower towers. (From another work commissioned for this exhibition, Richard Rodriguez's powerful 'Sodom: Reflections on a Stereotype,' I appropriated Yamazaki's borrowed Victorian and the sense of its melancholy.)



The term Virtual Light was coined by scientist Stephen Beck to describe a form of instrumentation that produces 'optical sensations directly in the eye without the use of photons' (Mondo 2000). Rydell's Los Angeles owes much to my reading of Mike Davis's City of Quartz, perhaps most particularly in his observations regarding the privatization of public space.

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Thanks

Sogho Ishii, the Japanese director, introduced me to Kowloon Walled City via the photographs of Ryuji Miyamoto. It was Ishiisan's idea that we should make a science fiction movie there. We never did, but the Walled City continued to haunt me, though I knew no more about it than I could gather from Miyamoto's stunning images, which eventually provided most of the texture for the Bridge in my novel Virtual Light.

Architect Ken Vineberg drew my attention to an article about the Walled City in Architectural Review~, where I first learned of City of Darkness, the splendid record assembled by Greg Girard

and Ian Lambrot (Watermark, London, 1993). From London, John Jarrold very kindly arranged for me to receive a copy.

Anything I know of the toecutting business, I owe to the criminal memoirs of Mark Brandon "Chopper" Read (Chopper from the inside, Sly Ink, Australia, 1991). Mr. Read is a great deal scarier than Blackwell, and has even fewer ears.

Karl Taro Greenfeld's Speed Tribes (HarperCollins, New York, 1994) richly fed my dreams of Laney's jet lag.

Stephen P. ("Plausibility") Brown rode shotgun on the work in progress for many months, commenting daily, sometimes more often, and always with a fine forbearance, as I faxed him a bewildering flurry of disconnected fragments he was somehow expected to interpret as "progress." His constant encouragement and seemingly endless patience were absolutely essential to this book's completion.

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1. Death Cube K

After Slitscan, Laney heard about another job from Rydell, the night security man at the Chateau. Rydell was a big quiet Tennessean with a sad shy grin, cheap sunglasses, and a walkie-talkie screwed permanently into one ear.

"Paragon-Asia Datafiow," Rydell said, around four in the morning, the two of them seated in a pair of huge old armchairs. Concrete beams overhead had been hand-painted to vaguely resemble blond oak. The chairs, like the rest of the furniture in the Chateau's lobby, were oversized to the extent that whoever sat in them seemed built to a smaller scale. -

"Really?" Laney asked, keeping up the pretense that someone like Rydell would know where he could still find work.

"Tokyo, Japan," Rydell said, and sucked iced latte through a plastic straw. "Guy I met in San Francisco last year. Yamazaki. He's working for 'em. Says they need a serious netrunner,"

Netrunner. Laney, who liked to think of himself as a researcher, suppressed a sigh. "Contract job?"

"Guess so. Didn't say."

"I don't think I'd want to live in Tokyo."

Rydell used his straw to stir the foam and ice remaining at the bottom of his tall plastic cup, as though he were hoping to find a secret prize. "He didn't say you'd have to." He looked up. "You ever been to Tokyo?"

"No."

"Must be an interesting place, after that quake and all." The walkie-talkie ticked and whispered. "I gotta go on out and check the gate by the bungalows now. Feel like coming?"

"No," Laney said. "Thanks."

Rydell stood, automatically straightening the creases in his khaki uniform trousers. He wore a black nylon web-belt hung with various holstered devices, all of them black, a short-sleeved white shirt, and a peculiarly immobile black tie. "I'll leave the number in your box," he said.

Laney watched the security man cross the terra cotta and the various rugs, to vanish past the darkly polished panels of the registration desk. He'd had something going on cable once, Laney had gathered. Nice guy. Loser.

Laney sat there until dawn came edging in through the tall, arched windows, and Taiwanese stainless could be heard to rattle, but gently, from the darkened cave of the breakfast room. Immigrant voices, in some High Steppe dialect the Great Khans might well have understood. Echoes woke from the tiled floor, from the high beams surviving from an age that must once have seen the advent of Laney's kind or predecessors, their ecology of celebrity and the terrible and inviolable order of that food chain.

Rydell left a folded sheet of Chateau notepaper in Laney's box. A Tokyo number. Laney found it there the next afternoon, along with an updated estimate of his final bill from the lawyers.

He took them both up to the room he could no longer even pretend to afford.

A week later he was in Tokyo, his face reflected in an elevator's goldveined mirror for this three-floor ascent of the aggressively nondescript 0 My Golly Building. To be admitted to Death Cube K, apparently a Franz Kafka theme bar.

Stepping from the elevator into a long space announced in acid-etched metal as The Metamorphosis. Where salarimen in white shirts had removed their suit jackets and loosened their dark ties, and sat at a bar of artfully corroded steel, drinking, the high backs of their chairs molded from some brown and chitinous resin. Insectoid mandibles curved above the drinkers' heads like scythes.

He moved forward into brown light, a low murmur of conversation. He understood no Japanese. The walls, unevenly transparent, repeated a motif of wing cases and bulbous abdomens, spikey brown limbs folded in at regular intervals. He increased his pace, aiming for a curving stairway molded to resemble glossy brown carapaces.

The eyes of Russian prostitutes followed him from tables opposite the bar, flat and doll-like in this roach-light. The Natashas were everywhere, working girls shipped in from Vladivostok by the Kombinat. Routine plastic surgery lent them a hard assembly-line beauty. Slavic Barbies. A simpler operation implanted a tracking device for the benefit of their handlers.

The stairway opened into The Penal Colony, a disco, deserted at this hour, pulses of silent red lightning marking Laney's steps across the dance floor. A machine of some kind was suspended from the ceiling. Each of its articulated arms, suggestive of antique dental equipment, was tipped with sharp steel. Pens, he thought, vaguely remembering Kafka's story. Sentence of guilt, graven in the flesh of the condemned man's back. Wincing at a memory of upturned eyes unseeing. Pushed it down. Moved on.

A second stairway, narrow, more steep, and he entered The Trial, low-ceilinged and dark. Walls the color of anthracite. Small flames shivered behind blue glass. He hesitated, nightblind and jet-lagged.

"Cohn Laney, is it?"

Australian. Enormous. Who stood behind a little table, shoulders sloping bearlike. Something strange about the shape of his shaven head. And another, much smaller figure, seated there. Japanese, in a long-sleeved plaid shirt buttoned up to its oversized collar. Blinking up at Laney through circular lenses.

"Have a seat, Mr. Laney," the big man said.

And Laney saw that this man's left ear was missing, sheared away, leaving only a convoluted stump.

When Laney had worked for Slitscan, his supervisor was named Kathy Torrance. Palest of pale blonds. A pallor bordering on translucence, certain angles of light suggesting not blood but some fluid the shade of summer straw. On her left thigh the absolute indigo imprint of something twisted and multibarbed, an expensively savage pictoglyph. Visible each Friday, when she made it her habit to wear shorts to work.

She complained, always, that the nature of celebrity was much the worse for wear. Strip-mined, Laney gathered, by generations of her colleagues.

She propped her feet on the ledge of a hotdesk. She wore meticulous little reproductions of lineman's boots, buckled across the instep and stoutly laced to the ankle. He looked at her legs, their taut sweep from wooly sock tops to the sandpapered fringe of cut-off jeans. The tattoo looked like something from another planet, a sign or message burned in from the depths of space, left there for mankind to interpret.

He asked her what she meant. She peeled a mint-flavored toothpick from its wrapper. Eyes he suspected were gray regarded him through mint-tinted contacts.

"Nobody's really famous anymore, Laney. Have you noticed that?"

"No."

"I mean really famous. There's not much fame left, not in the old sense. Not enough to go around."

"The old sense?"

"We're the media, Laney. We make these assholes celebrities. It's a push-me, pull-you routine. They come to us to be created." Vibram cleats kicked concisely off the hotdesk. She tucked her boots in, heels

4 William Gibson

against denim haunches, ~ white knees hiding her mouth. Balanced there on the pedestal of the hotdesk's articulated Swedish chair.

"Well," Laney said, going back to his screen, "that's still fame, isn't it?"

"But is it real?"

He looked back at her.

"We learned to print money off this stuff," she said. "Coin of our realm. Now we've printed too much; even the audience knows. It shows in the ratings."

Laney nodded, wishing she'd leave him to his work.

"Except," she said, parting her knees so he could see her say it, "when we decide to destroy one."

Behind her, past the anodyzed chainlink of the Cage, beyond a framing rectangle of glass that filtered out every tint of pollution, the sky over Burbank was perfectly blank, like a sky-blue paint chip submitted by the contractor of the universe.

The man's left ear was edged with pink tissue, smooth a~ wax. Laney wondered why there had been no attempt at reconstruction.

"So I'll remember," the man said, reading Laney's eyes.

"Remember what?"

"Not to forget. Sit down."

Laney sat on something only vaguely chairlike, an attenuated construction of black alloy rods and laminated Hexcel. The table was round and approximately the size of a steering wheel. A votive flame licked the air, behind blue glass. The Japanese man with the plaid shirt and metal-framed

glasses blinked furiously. Laney watched the large man settle himself, another slender chair-thing lost alarmingly beneath a sumo-sized bulk that appeared to be composed entirely of muscle.

"Done with the jet lag, are we?"

"I took pills." Remembering the SST's silence, its lack of apparent motion.

"Pills," the man said. "Hotel adequate?"

"Yes," Laney said. "Ready for the interview."

"Well then," vigorously rubbing his face with heavily scarred hands. He lowered his hands and stared at Laney, as if seeing him for the first time. Laney, avoiding the gaze of those eyes, took in the man's outfit, some sort of nanopore exercise gear intended to fit loosely on a smaller but still very large man. Of no particular color in the darkness of the Trial. Open from collar to breastbone. Straining against abnormal mass. Exposed flesh tracked and crossed by an atlas of scars, baffling in their variety of shape and texture. "Well, then?"

Laney looked up from the scars. "I'm here for a job interview."

"Are you?"

"Are you the interviewer?"

"Interviewer'?" The ambiguous grimace revealing an obvious dental prosthesis.

Laney turned to the Japanese in the round glasses. "Cohn Laney."

"Shinya Yamazaki," the man said, extending his hand. They shook. "We spoke on the telephone."

"You're conducting the interview?"

A flurry of blinks. "I'm sorry, no," the man said. And then, "I am a student of existential sociology."

"I don't get it," Laney said. The two opposite said nothing. Shinya Yamazaki looked embarrassed. The one-eared man glowered.

"You're Australian," Laney said to the one-eared man.

"Tazzie," the man corrected. "Sided with the South in the Troubles."

"Let's start over," Laney suggested. "Paragon-Asia Dataflow.' You them?"

"Persistent bugger."

"Goes with the territory," Laney said. "Professionally, I mean."

"Fair enough." The man raised his eyebrows, one of which was bisected by a twisted pink cable of scar tissue. "Rez, then. What do you think of him?"

"You mean the rock sta~?" Laney asked, after struggling with a basic problem of context.

A nod. The man regarded Laney with utmost gravity.

"From Lo/Rez? The band?" Half Irish, half Chinese. A broken nose, never repaired. Long green eyes.

"What do I think of him?"

In Kathy Torrance's system of things, the singer had been reserved a special disdain. She had viewed him as a living fossil, an annoying survival from an earlier, less evolved era. He was at once massively and meaninglessly famous, she maintained, just as he was both massively and meaninglessly wealthy. Kathy thought of celebrity as a subtle fluid, a universal element, like the phlogiston of the ancients, something spread evenly at creation through all the universe, but prone now to accrete, under specific conditions, around certain individuals and their careers.

Rez, in Kathy's view, had simply lasted far too long. Monstrously long. He was affecting the unity of her theory. He was defying the proper order of the food chain. Perhaps there was nothing big enough to eat him, not even Slitscan. And while Lo/Rez, the band, still extruded product on an annoyingly regular basis, in a variety of media, their singer stubbornly refused to destroy himself, murder someone, become active in politics, admit to an interesting substance-abuse problem or an arcane sexual addiction-indeed to do anything at all worthy of an opening segment on Slitscan. He glimmered, dully perhaps, but steadily, just beyond Kathy Torrance's reach. Which was, Laney had always assumed, the real reason for her hating him so.

"Well," Laney said, after some thought, and feeling a peculiar compulsion to attempt a truthful answer, "I remember buying their first album. When it came out."

"Title?" The one-eared man grew graver still.

"Lo Rez Skyline," Laney said, grateful for whatever minute synaptic event had allowed the recall. "But I couldn't tell you how many they've put out since."

"Twenty-six, not counting compilations," said Mr. Yamazaki, straightening his glasses.

Laney felt the pills he'd taken, the ones that were supposed to cushion the jet lag, drop out from under him like some kind of rotten pharmacological scaffolding. The walls of the Trial seemed to grow closer.

"If you aren't going to tell me what this is about," he said to the one-eared man, "I'm going back to the hotel. I'm tired."

"Keith Alan Blackwell," extending his hand. Laney allowed his own to be taken and briefly shaken. The man's palm felt like a piece of athletic equipment. "Keithy.' We'll have a few drinks and a little chat."

"First you tell me whether or not you're from Paragon-Asia," Laney suggested.

"Firm in question's a couple of lines of code in a machine in a backroom in Lygon Street," Blackwell said. "A dummy, but you could say it's our dummy, if that makes you feel better."

"I'm not sure it does," Laney said. "You fly me over to interview for a job, now you're telling me the company I'm supposed to be interviewing for doesn't exist."

"It exists," said Keith Alan Blackwell. "It's on the machine in Lygon Street."

A waitress arrived. She wore a shapeless gray cotton boilersuit and cosmetic bruises.

"Big draft. Kirin. Cold one. What's yours, Laney?"

"Iced coffee."

"Coke Lite, please," said the one who'd introduced himself as Yamazaki.

"Fine," said the earless Blackwell, glumly, as the waitress vanished into the gloom.

"I'd appreciate it if you could explain to me what we're doing here," Laney said. He saw that Yamazaki was scribbling frantically on the screen of a small notebook, the lightpen flashing faintly in the dark. "Are you taking this down?" Laney asked.

"Sorry, no. Making note of waitress' costume."

"Why?" Laney asked.

"Sorry," said Yamazaki, saving what he'd written and turning off the notebook. He tucked the pen carefully into a recess on the side. "I am a student of such things. It is my habit to record ephemera of popular culture. Her costume raises the question: does it merely reflect the theme of this club, or does it represent some deeper response to trauma of earthquake and subsequent reconstruction?"

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2. Lo Rez Skyline

They met in a jungle clearing.

Kelsey had done the vegetation: big bright Rousseau leaves, car-won orchids flecked with her idea of tropical colors (which reminded Chia of that mall chain that sold "organic" cosmetic products in shades utterly unknown to nature). Zona, the only one telepresent who'd ever seen anything like a real jungle, had done the audio, providing birdcalls, invisible but realistically dopplering bugs, and the odd vegetational rustle artfully suggesting not snakes but some shy furry thing, soft-pawed and curious.

The light, such as there was, filtered down through high, green canopies, entirely too Disneyesque for Chia-though there was no real need for "light" in a place that consisted of nothing else.

Zona, her blue Aztec death's-head burning bodiless, ghosts of her blue hands flickering like strobe-lit doves: "Clearly, this dickless whore, the disembodied, has contrived to ensnare his soul." Stylized lightning zig-zags rose around the crown of the neon skull in deliberate emphasis.

Chia wondered what she'd really said. Was "dickless whore" an

artifact of instantaneous on-line translation, or was that really something you could or would say in Mexican?

"Waiting hard con-firm from Tokyo chapter," Kelsey reminded them. Kelsey's father was a Houston tax lawyer, something of his particular species of biz-speak tending to enter his daughter around meeting time; also a certain ability to wait that Chia found irritating,

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particularly as manifested by a saucer-eyed nymph-figure out of some old anime. Which Chia was double damn sure Kelsey would not look like realtime, were they ever to meet that way. (Chia herself was presenting currently as an only slightly tweaked, she felt, version of how the mirror told her she actually looked. Less nose, maybe. Lips a little fuller. But that was it. Almost.)

"Exactly," Zona said, miniature stone calendars whirling angrily in her eye-holes. "We wait. While he moves ever closer to his fate. We wait. If my girls and I were to wait like this, the Rats would sweep us from the avenues." Zona was, she claimed, the leader of a knife-packing chilanga girl gang. Not the meanest in Mexico City, maybe, but serious enough about turf and tribute. Chia wasn't sure she believed it, but it made for some interesting attitude in meetings.

"Really?" Kelsey drew her nymph-self up with elvin dignity, batting manga-doe lashes in disbelief. "In that case, Zona Rosa, why don't you just get yourself over to Tokyo and find out what's really going on? I mean, did Rez say that, that he was going to marry her, or what? And while you're at it, find out whether she exists or not, okay?"

The calendars stopped on a dime.

The blue hands vanished.

The skull seemed to recede some infinite distance yet remain perfectly in focus, clear in every textural detail.

Old trick, Chia thought. Stalling.

"You know that I cannot do that," Zona said. "I have responsibilities here. Maria Conchita, the Rat warlord, has stated that--"

"As if we care, right?" Kelsey launched herself straight up, her nymphness a pale blur against the rising tangle of green, until she hovered just below the canopy, a beam of sunlight flattering one impossible cheekbone. "Zona Rosa's full of shit!" she bellowed, not at all nymphlike.

"Don't fight," Chia said. "This is important. Please."

Kelsey descended, instantly. "Then you go," she said.

"Me?"

"You," Kelsey said.

"I can't," Chia said. "To Tokyo? How could I?"

"In an airplane."

"We don't have your kind of money, Kelsey."

"You've got a passport. We know you do. Your mother had to get one for you when she was doing the custody thing. And we know that you are, to put it delicately, 'between schools,' yes?"

"Yes-"

"Then what's the prob?"

"Your father's a big tax lawyer!"

"I know," Kelsey said. "And he flies back and forth, all over the world, making money. But you know what else he earns, Chia?"

"What?"

"Frequent-flyer points. Big-ass frequent-flyer points. On Air Magellan."

"Interesting," said the Aztec skull. "Tokyo," said the mean nymph. Shit, Chia thought.

The wall opposite Chia's bed was decorated with a six-by-six laser blowup of the cover of Lo Rez Skyline, their first album. Not the one you got if you bought it today, but the original, the group shot they'd done for that crucial first release on the indie Dog Soup label. She'd pulled the file off the club's site the week she'd joined, found a place near the Market that could print it out that big. It was still her favorite, and not just, as her mother too frequently suggested, because they all still looked so young. Her mother didn't like that the members of Lo/Rez were nearly as old as she was. Why wasn't Chia into music by people her own age?

-Please, mother, who?

-That Chrome Koran, say.

-Gag, mother.

Chia suspected that her mother's perception of time differed

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from her own in radical and mysterious ways. Not just in the way that a month, to Chia's mother, was not a very long time, but in the way that her mother's "now" was such a narrow and literal thing. News-governed, Chia believed. Cable-fed. A present honed to whatever very instant of a helicopter traffic report.

Chia's "now" was digital, effortlessly elastic, instant recall supported by global systems she'd never have to bother comprehending.

Lo Rez Skyline had been released, if you could call it that, a week (well, six days) before Chia had been born. She estimated that no hard copies would have reached Seattle in time for her nativity, but she liked to believe there had been listeners here even then, PacRim visionaries netting new sounds from indies as obscure, even, as East Teipei's Dog Soup. Surely the opening chords of "Positron Premonition" had shoved molecules of actual Seattle air, somewhere, in somebody's basement room, at the fateful moment of her birth. She knew that, somehow, just as she knew that "Stuck Pixel," barely even a song, just Lo noodling around on some pawnshop guitar, must



have been playing somewhere when her mother, who'd spoken very little English at that point, chose Chia's name from something cycling past on the Shopping Channel, the phonetic caress of those syllables striking her there in Postnatal Recovery as some optimally gentle combination of sounds Italian and English; her baby, red-haired even then, subsequently christened Chia Pet McKenzie (somewhat, Chia later gathered, to the amazement of her absent Canadian father).

These thoughts arriving in the pre-alarm dark, just before the infrared winkie on her alarm clock stuttered silently to the halogen gallery-spot, telling it to illuminate Lo/Rez in all their Dog Soup glory. Rez with his shirt open (but entirely ironically) and Lo with his grin and a prototype mustache that hadn't quite grown in.

Hi, guys. Fumbling for her remote. Zapping infrared into the shadows. Zap: Espressomatic. Zap: cubic space heater.

Beneath her pillow the unfamiliar shape of her passport, like a vintage game cartridge, hard navy blue plastic, textured like leatherette, with its stamped gold seal and eagle. The Air Magellan

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tickets in their limp beige plastic folder from the travel agent in the mall.

Going now.

She took a deep breath. Her mother's house seemed to take one as well, but more tentatively, its wooden bones creaking in the winter morning cold.

The cab arriving as scheduled, but magically nonetheless, and no, it didn't honk, exactly as requested. Kelsey having explained how these things were done. Just as Kelsey, briskly interviewing Chia on the circumstances of her life, had devised the cover for her impending absence: ten days in the San Juans with Hester Chen, whose well-heeled luddite mother so thoroughly feared electromagnetic radiation that she lived phoneless, in a sod-roofed castle of driftwood, no electricity allowed whatever. "Tell her you're doing a media fast, before your new school thing comes together," Kelsey had said. "She'll like that." And Chia's mother, who felt that Chia spent entirely too much time gloved and goggled, did.

Chia was actually fond of the gentle Hester, who seemed to get what Lo/Rez were about, though somehow without being quite as fundamentally moved as could have been expected, and Chia had in fact already tried the pleasures of Mrs. Chen's island retreat. But Hester's mother had made them both wear special baseball caps, sewn from some EMR-proof fabric, so that their young brains might not be bathed quite so constantly in the invisible soup of bad media.

Chia had complained to Hester that the caps made them both look like meshbacks.

-Don't be racist, Chia.

-I'm not.

-Classist, then.

-It's a matter of aesthetics.

And now in the overheated cab, her one bag beside her on the seat, she felt guilt at this deception, her mother sleeping there be-

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hind those darkened windows matted with frost, under the weight of her thirty-five years and the flowered duvet Chia had bought at Nordstrom's. When Chia had been small, her mother had worn her hair in a long braid, its tip skewered with turquoise and abalone and carved bits of bone, like the magical tail of some mythical animal, swaying there for Chia to grab. And the house looked sad, too, as if it regretted her leaving, white paint peeling from the underlying gray of ninety-year-old cedar clapboards. Chia shivered. What if she never came back?

"Where to?" the driver said, a black man in a puffy nylon jacket and a flat plaid cap.

"SeaTac," Chia said, and pushed her shoulders back into the seat.

Pulling out past the old Lexus the neighbors kept up on concrete blocks in the driveway.

Airports were spooky places, early in the morning. There was a hollowness that could settle on you there, something sad and empty. Corridors and people moving away down them. Standing in line behind people she'd never seen before and would never see again. Her bag over her shoulder and her passport and ticket in her hand. She wanted another cup of coffee. There was one back in her room, in the EspressoMatic. Which she should've emptied and cleaned, because now it would go moldy while she was away.

"Yes?" The man behind the counter wore a striped shirt, a tie with the Air Magellan logo repeated down it diagonally, and a green jade labret stud. Chia wondered what his lower lip looked like when he took it out. She never would, she decided, if she had one of those. She handed him her ticket. He sighed and removed them from the folder, letting her know that she should've done that herself.

She watched him run a scanner over her ticket.

"Air Magellan one-oh-five to Narita, economy return."

"That's right," Chia said, trying to be helpful. He didn't seem to appreciate that.

"Travel document."

Chia handed him her passport. He looked at it as though he'd never seen one before, sighed, and plugged it into a slot in the top of his counter. The slot had beat-up aluminum lips, and someone had covered these with transparent tape, peeling now and dirty. The man was looking at a monitor Chia couldn't see. Maybe he was going to tell her she couldn't go. She thought about the coffee in her EspressoMatic. It would still be warm.

"Twenty-three D," he said, as a boarding-pass spooled from a different slot. He pulled her passport out and handed it to her, along with her ticket and the boarding pass. "Gate fifty-two, blue concourse. Checking anything?"

"Passengers who've cleared security may be subject to noninvasive DNA sampling," he said, the words all run together because he was only saying it because it was the law that he had to.

She put her passport and ticket away in the special pocket inside her parka. She kept the boarding pass in her hand. She went looking for the blue concourse. She had to go downstairs to find it, and take one of those trains that was like an elevator that ran sideways. Half an hour later she was through security, looking at the seals they'd put on the zippers of her carry-on. They looked like rings of rubbery red candy. She hadn't expected them to do that; she'd thought she could find a pay-station in the departure lounge, link up, and give the club an update. They never sealed her carry-on when she went to Vancouver to stay with her uncle, but that wasn't really international, not since the Agreement.

She was riding a rubber sidewalk toward Gate 52 when she saw the blue light flashing, up ahead. Soldiers there, and a little barncade. The soldiers were lining people up as they came off the sidewalk. They wore fatigues and didn't seem to be much older than the guys at her last school.

"Shit," she heard the woman in front of her say, a big-haired blond with obvious extensions woven in. Big red lips, multilevel o

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mascara, padded shoulders out to here, tiny little skirt, white cowboy boots. Like that country singer her mother liked, Ashleigh Modine Carter. Kind of a meshback thing, but with money.

Chia stepped off the end of the rubber sidewalk and took her place in line behind the woman who looked like Ashleigh Modine Carter.

The soldiers were taking hair samples and slotting people's passports. Chia assumed that was to prove you really were who you said you were, because your DNA was there in your passport,

converted into a kind of bar code.

The sampler was a little silver wand that vacuumed the tips of a couple of strands in and clipped them off. They'd wind up with the world's biggest collection of split ends, Chia thought. Now it was the blond's turn. There were two boy-soldiers there, one to work the sampler and one to rattle off the line about how you'd already agreed to this by coming this far, and please produce your passport.

Chia watched as the woman handed over her passport, becoming somehow instantly and up-front sexy, like a lightbulb coming on, with a big smile for the soldier that made him blink and swallow and nearly drop the passport. Grinning, he stuck the passport into a little console attached to the barricade. The other soldier raised his wand. Chia saw the woman reach up and choose one of her hair-extensions, offering the end of this for sampling. The whole thing taking maybe eight seconds, including the return of her passport, and the first soldier was still smiling now that it was Chia's turn.

The woman moved on, having just committed what Chia felt fairly certain would be a federal offense. Should she tell the soldier?

But she didn't, and then they were handing back her passport and Chia was on her way to Gate 53. Where she looked for the woman but didn't see her.

She watched the ads cycle by on the walls, until they were called to board by rows.

Seat 23E remained empty as Chia waited for takeoff, sucking on a peppermint the flight attendant had given her. The only empty seat on the plane, she figured. If nobody arrived to take it, she thought, she'd be able to fold the armrest away and curl up there. She tried putting out a negative mental field, a vibe that would keep anyone from getting on at the last minute and sitting there. Zona Rosa was into that, part of her whole girl-gang martial arts thing. Chia didn't see how you could seriously believe it would work.

And it didn't, because here came that blond down the aisle, and wasn't that an eye-click of recognition Chia saw there?

3. Almost a Civilian

It had been a weeknight, a Wednesday, when Laney had last seen Kathy Torrance, and her tattoo had not been visible. She'd stood there in the Cage, screaming as he cleaned out his locker. She was wearing an Armani blazer cut from gun-metal fustian, its matching skirt concealing the sign from outer space. A single strand of pearls was visible at the open throat of her white, man-tailored blouse. Her dress uniform. Called on the carpet for her subordinate's defection.

He knew that she was screaming because her mouth was open, but the syllables of her rage couldn't penetrate the seamless hissing surf of the white-noise generator provided by his lawyers. He'd been advised to wear the generator at all times, during this last visit to the Slitscan offices. He'd been instructed to make no statements. Certainly he would hear none.

And later he would sometimes wonder exactly how she might have framed her fury. Some restatement of her theory of celebrity and the nature of its price, of Slitscan's place in that, of Laney's inability to function there? Or would she have focused on his treason? But he hadn't heard; he'd only put these things he didn't really want into a corrugated plastic carton that still smelled faintly of Mexican oranges. The notebook, screen cracked now, useless, that he'd carried through college. Insulated mug with the Nissan County logo peeling away. Notes he'd made on paper, counter to office policy. A coffeestained fax from a woman he'd slept with in Ixtapa, someone whose

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initials couldn't be deciphered now and whose name he'd forgotten. Pointless pieces of the self, destined for a cannister in the building's parking lot. But he'd leave nothing here, and Kathy kept on screaming.

Now, in Death Cube K, he imagined that she'd told him that he'd never work in that town again, and

indeed it seemed he might not. Disloyalty to one's employers being a particularly difficult notch on anyone's ticket, and perhaps particularly so, in that town, when the act itself had sprung from what Laney recalled had once been called scruples.

The word itself striking him now as singularly ridiculous.

"You smiled." Blackwell staring at him from across the tiny table.

"Serotonin depletion."

"Food," said Blackwell.

"I'm not really hungry."

"Need to carbo-load," Blackwell said, standing. He took up a remarkable amount of space.

Laney and Yamazaki got to their feet and followed Blackwell down out of Death Cube K, to descend the 0 My Golly Building itself. Out of roach-light, into the chrome and neon gulch of Roppongi Don. A reek of putrid fish and fruit even in this chill damp night, though muted somewhat by the baking-sugar sweetness of Chinese gasohol from the vehicles whirring past on the expressway. But there was comfort in the steady voice of traffic, and Laney found it better to be upright, moving.

If he kept moving, perhaps he could puzzle out the meaning of Keith Alan Blackwell and Shinya Yamazaki.

Blackwell leading the way across a pedestrian overpass. Laney's hand brushed an irregularity on the alloy rail. He saw that it was an accidental fold or pucker in a bright little sticker; a bare-breasted girl smiling up at him from a palm-sized silvery hologram. As his angle of vision changed, she seemed to gesture at the telephone number above her head. The railing, end to end, was dressed with these small ads, though there were precise gaps where a few had been peeled away for later perusal.

Blackwell's bulk parted the sidewalk crowd on the far side like a freighter through a bobbing stream of pleasure craft. "Carbohydrates," he said, over a mountainous shoulder. He steered them down an alley, a narrow maw of colored light, past an all-night veterinary clinic in whose window a pair of white-gowned surgeons were performing an operation on what Laney hoped was a cat. A relaxed little tableau of pedestrians paused here, observing from the pavement.

Blackwell eased himself edgewise into a bright cave, where steam rose from cookers behind a counter of reconstituted granite.

Laney and Yamazaki followed him in, the counterman already ladling out fragrant messes of broth-slick beige to the Australian's order.

Laney watched Blackwell raise the bowl to his mouth and apparently inhale the bulk of his noodles, severing them from the remainder with a neat snap of his bright plastic teeth. Muscles in the man's thick neck worked mightily as he swallowed.

Laney stared.

Blackwell wiped his mouth with the back of one vast and pinkly jigsawed hand. He belched. "Give us one of those baby tubes of Dry He downed the entire beer in a single swallow, absently crushing the sturdy steel can as though it were a paper cup. "Similar," he said, rattling his bowl for the counterman.

Laney, suddenly ravenous in spite or because of this gluttonous display, gave his attention to his own bowl, where dyed pink slices of mystery meat, thin as paper, basked atop a sargasso of noodles.

Laney ate in silence, as did Yamazaki, Blackwell downing another three beers to no apparent effect. As Laney drank off the remaining broth, and put his bowl down on the counter, he noticed an ad behind the counter for something called Apple Shires Authentic Fine Fruit Beverage. Misreading it initially as Alison Shires, once the object of his scruples.

"Taste the wet warm life in Apple Shires," the ad advised.

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Alison Shires, glimpsed first as animated headshots, five months into his time at Slitscan, had been a rather ordinarily attractive girl murmuring her stats to imagined casting directors, agents, someone, anyone.

Kathy Torrance had watched his face, as he watched the screen. "Babed out' yet, Laney? Allergic reaction to cute? First symptoms are a sort of underlying irritation, a resentment, a vague but persistent feeling that you're being gotten at, taken advantage of. .

"She isn't even as 'cute' as the last two."

"Exactly. She's almost normal-looking. Almost a civilian. Tag her."

Laney looked up. "What for?"

"Tag her. He could get off pretending she's a waitress or something."

"You think she's the one?"

"You've got another three hundred in there easy, Laney. Picking probables is a start."

"At random?"

"We call it 'instinct.' Tag her."

Laney cursor-clicked, the pale blue arrow resting by chance in the shadowed orbit of the girl's lowered eye. Marking her for closer examination as the possible sometime partner of a very publicly married actor, famous in a way that Kathy Torrance understood and approved of. One who must obey the dictates of the food chain. Not too big for Slitscan to swallow. But he or his handlers had so far been very cautious. Or very lucky.

But no more. A rumor had reached Kathy, via one of those "back channels" she depended on, and now the food chain must have its way.

"Wake up," Blackwell said. "You're falling asleep in your bowl. Time you tell us how you lost your last job, if we're going to offer you another."

"Coffee," Laney said.

Laney was not, he was careful to point out, a voyeur. He had a peculiar knack with data-collection architectures, and a medically documented concentration-deficit that he could toggle, under certain conditions, into a state of pathological hyperfocus. This made him, he continued over lattes in a Roppongi branch of Amos 'n' Andes, an extremely good researcher. (He made no mention of the Federal Orphanage in Gainesville, nor of any attempts that might have been made there to cure his concentration-deficit. The 5-SB trials or any of that.)

The relevant data, in terms of his current employability, was that he was an intuitive fisher of patterns oi information: of the sort of signature a particular individual inadvertently created in the net as he or she went about the mundane yet endlessly multiplex business of life in a digital society. Laney's concentration-deficit, too slight to register on some scales, made him a natural channel-zapper, shifting from program to program, from database to database, from platform to platform, in a way that was, well, intuitive.

And that was the catch, really, when it came to finding employment: Laney was the equivalent of a dowser, a cybernetic water-witch. He couldn't explain how he did what he did. He just didn't know.

He'd come to Slitscan from DatAmerica, where he'd been a research assistant on a project code named TIDAL. It said something about the corporate culture of DatAmerica that Laney had never been able to discover whether or not TIDAL was an acronym, or (even remotely) what TIDAL was about. He'd spent his time skimming vast floes of undifferentiated data, looking for "nodal points" he'd been trained to recognize by a team of French scientists who were all keen tennis players, and

none of whom had had any interest in explaining these nodal points to Laney, who came to feel that he served as a kind of native guide. Whatever the Frenchmen were after, he was there to scare it up for them. And it beat Gainesville, no contest. Until

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TIDAL, whatever it was, had been cancelled, and there didn't seem to be anything else for Laney to do at DatAmerica. The Frenchmen were gone, and when Laney tried to talk to other researchers about what they'd been doing, they looked at him as though they thought he was crazy.

When he'd gone to interview for Slitscan, the interviewer had been Kathy Torrance. He'd had no way of knowing that she was a department head, or that she would soon be his boss. He told her the truth about himself. Most of it, anyway.

She was the palest woman Laney had ever seen. Pale to the point of translucence. (Later he'd learned this had a lot to do with cosmetics, and in particular a British line that boasted of peculiar light-bending properties.)

"Do you always wear Malaysian imitations of Brooks Brothers blue oxford button-downs, Mr. Laney?"

Laney had looked down at his shirt, or tried to. "Malaysia?"

"The stitch-count's dead on, but they still haven't mastered the thread-tension."

"Oh."

"Never mind. A little prototypic nerd chic could actually lend a certain frisson, around here. You could lose the tie, though. Definitely lose the tie. And keep a collection of felt-tipped pens in your pocket. Unchewed, please. Plus one of those fat flat highliners, in a really nasty fluorescent shade."

"Are you joking?"

"Probably, Mr. Laney. May I call you Cohn?"

"Yes.."

She never did call him "Cohn," then or ever. "You'll find that humor is essential at Slitscan, Laney. A necessary survival tool. You'll find the type that's most viable here is fairly oblique."

"How do you mean, Ms. Torrance?"

"Kathy. I mean difficult to quote effectively in a memo. Or a court of law."

Yamazaki was a good listener. He'd blink, swallow, nod, fiddle with the top button of his plaid shirt, whatever, all of it managing to somehow convey that he was getting it, the drift of Laney's story.

Keith Alan Blackwell was something else. He sat there inert as a bale of beef, utterly motionless except when he'd raise his left hand and squeeze and twiddle the lobe-stump that was all that remained of his left ear. He did this without hesitation or embarrassment, and Laney formed the impression that it was affording him some kind of relief. The scar tissue reddened slightly under Blackwell's ministrations.

Laney sat on an upholstered bench, his back to the wall. Yamazaki and Blackwell faced him across the narrow table. Behind them, over the uniformly black-haired heads of late-night Roppongi coffee-drinkers, the holographic features of the chain's namesake floated in front of a lurid sunset vista of snow-capped Andean peaks. The lips of the 'toon-Amos were like inflated red rubber sausages, a racial parody that would've earned the place a firebombing anywhere in the L.A. basin. He was holding up a steaming coffee cup, white and smoothly iconic, in a big, white-gloved, three-fingered urDisney hand.

Yamazaki coughed, delicately. "You are telling us, please, about your experiences at Slitscan?"

Kathy Torrance began by offering Laney a chance to net-surf, Slitscan style.

She checked a pair of computers out of the Cage, shoed four employees from an SBU, invited Laney in, and closed the door. Chairs, a round table, a large softboard on the wall. He watched as she jacked the computers into dataports and called up identical images of a longhaired dirty-blond guy in his mid-twenties. Goatee and a gold

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earring. The face meant nothing to Laney. It might have been a face he'd passed on the street an hour before, the face of a minor player in daytime soap, or the face of someone whose freezer had recently been discovered to be packed with his victims' fingers.

"Clinton Hillman," Kathy Torrance said. "Hairdresser, sushi chef, music journalist, extra in mid-budget hardcore. This headshot's tweaked, of course." She tapped keys, detweaking it. Clint Hillman's eyes and chin, on her screen, grew several clicks smaller. "Probably did it himself. With a professional job, there'd be nothing to work back from."

"He acts in porno?" Laney felt obscurely sorry for Hillman, who looked lost and vulnerable without his chin.

"It isn't the size of his chin they're interested in," Kathy said. "It's mainly motion-capture, in porno. Extreme close. They're all body-doubles. Map on better faces in post. But somebody's still gotta get down in the trenches and bump uglies, right?"

Laney shot her a sideways look. "If you say so."

She handed Laney an industrial-strength pair of rubberized Thomson eyephones. "Do him."

"Do?"

"Him. Go for those nodal points you've been telling me about. The headshot's a gateway to everything we've got on him. Whole gigs of sheer boredom. Data like a sea of tapioca, Laney. An endless vanilla plane. He's boring as the day is long, and the day is long. Do it. Make my day. Do it and you've got yourself a job."

Laney looked at the tweaked Hillman on his screen. "You haven't told me what I'm looking for."

"Anything that might be of interest to Slitscan. Which is to say, Laney, anything that might be of interest to Shitscan's audience. Which is best visualized as a vicious, lazy, profoundly ignorant, perpetually hungry organism craving the warm god-flesh of the anointed. Personally I like to imagine something the size of a baby hippo, the color of a week-old boiled potato, that lives by itself, in the dark, in a double-wide on the outskirts of Topeka. It's covered

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with eyes and it sweats constantly. The sweat runs into those eyes and makes them sting. It has no mouth, Laney, no genitals, and can only express its mute extremes of murderous rage and infantile desire by changing the channels on a universal remote. Or by voting in presidential elections."

Yamazaki had his notebook out, hightpen poised. Laney found that he didn't mind. It made the man look so much more comfortable. "Strategic Business Unit," he said. "A small conference room. Shitscan's post office."

"Post office?"

"California plan. People don't have their own desks. Check a computer and a phone out of the Cage when you come in. Hotdesk it if you need more peripherals. The SBUs are for meetings, but it's hard to get one when you need it. Virtual meetings are a big thing there, better for sensitive topics. You get a locker to keep your personal stuff in. You don't want them to see any printouts~ And they hate Post-its."

"Why?"

"Because you might've written something down from the in-house net, and it might get out. That notebook of yours would never have been allowed out of the Cage. If there was no paper, they had a record of every call, every image called up, every keystroke."

Blackwell nodded now, his stubbled dome catching the red of Amos's inner-tube lips. "Security."

"And you were successful, Mr. Laney?" Yamazaki asked. "You found the . . . nodal points?"

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4. Venice Decompressed

"Shut up now,~' the woman in 23E said, and Chia hadn't said anything at all. "Sister's going to tell you a story."

Chia looked up from the seatback screen, where she'd been working her way through the eleventh level of a lobotomized airline version of Skull Wars. The blond was looking straight ahead, not at Chia. Her screen was down so that she could use the back of it for a tray, and she'd finished another glass of the iced tomato juice she kept paying the flight attendant to bring her. They came, for some reason, with squared-off pieces of celery stuck up in them, like a straw or stir-stick, but the blond didn't seem to want these. She'd stacked five of them in a square on the tray, the way a kid might build the walls of a little house, or a corral for toy animals.

Chia looked down at her thumbs on the disposable Air Magellan

touchpad. Back up at the mascaraed eyes. Looking at her now.

"There's a place where it's always light," the woman said. "Bright, everywhere. No place dark. Bright like a mist, like something falling, always, every second. All the colors of it. Towers you can't see the top of, and the light falling. Down below, they pile up bars. Bars and strip clubs and discos. Stacked up like shoe boxes, one on top of the other. And no matter how far you worm your way in, no matter how many stairs you climb, how many elevators you ride, no matter how small a room you finally get to, the light still finds you. It's a light that blows in under the door, like powder. Fine, so fine.

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Blows in under your eyelids, if you find a way to get to sleep. But you don't want to sleep there. Not in Shinjuku. Do you?"

Chia was suddenly aware of the sheer physical mass of the plane, of the terrible unlikeliness of its passage through space, of its airframe vibrating through frozen night somewhere above the sea, off the coast of Alaska now-impossible but true. "No," Chia heard herself say, as Skull Wars, noting her inattention, dumped her back a level.

"No," the woman agreed, "you don't. I know. But they make you. They make you. At the center of the world." And then she put her head back, closed her eyes, and began to snore.

Chia exited Skull Wars and tucked the touchpad into the seat-back pocket. She felt like screaming. What had that been about?

The attendant came by, scooped up the corral of celery sticks in a napkin, took the woman's glass, wiped the tray, and snapped it up into position in the seatback.

"My bag?" Chia said. "In the bin?" She pointed.

He opened the hatch above her, pulled out her bag, and lowered it into her lap.

"How do you undo these?" She touched the loops of tough red jelly that held the Zip-tabs together.

He took a small black tool from a black holster on his belt. It looked like something she'd seen a vet use to trim a dog's nails. He held his other hand cupped, to catch the little balls the loops became when he snipped them with the tool.



"Okay to run this?" She pulled a zip and showed him her Sand-benders, stuffed in between four pairs of rolled-up tights.

"You can't port back here; only in business or first," he said. "But you can access wha: You've got. Cable to the seatback display, if you want."

"Thanks," she said. "Got gogs." He moved on.

The blond's snore faltered in mid-buzz as they jolted over a pocket of turbulence. Chia dug her glasses and tip-sets from their nests of clean underwear, putting them beside her, between her hip and the armrest. She pulled the Sandbenders out, zipped the bag shut, and used her free hand and both feet to wedge the bag under the seat in front of her. She wanted out of here so bad.

With the Sandbenders across her thighs, she thumbed a battery check. Eight hours on miser mode, if she was lucky. But right now she didn't care. She uncoiled the lead from around the bridge of her glasses and jacked it. The tip-sets were tangled, like they always were. Take your time, she told herself. A torn sensor-band and she'd be here all night with an Ashleigh Modine Carter clone. Little silver thimbles, flexy framework fingers; easy did it... . Plug for each one. Jack and jack...

The blond said something in her sleep. If sleep was what you called it.

Chia picked up her glasses, slid them on, and hit big red.

-My ass out of here.

And it was.

There on the edge of her bed, looking at the Lo Rez Skyline poster. Until Lo noticed. He stroked his half-grown mustache and grinned at .her.

"Hey, Chia."

"Hey." Experience kept it subvocal, for privacy's sake.

"What's up, girl?"

"I'm on an airplane. I'm on my way to Japan."

"Japan? Kicky. You do our Budokan disk?"

"I don't feel like talking, Lo." Not to a software agent, anyway, sweet as he might be.

"Easy." He shot her that catlike grin, his eyes wrinkling at the corners, and became a still image. Chia looked around, feeling disappointed. Things weren't quite the right size, somehow, or maybe she should've used those fractal packets that messed it all up a little, put dust in the corners and smudges around the light switch. Zona Rosa swore by them. When she was home, Chia liked it that the construct was cleaner than her room ever was. Now it made her homesick; made her miss the real thing. 0

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She gestured for the living room, phasing past what would've been the door to her mother's bedroom. She'd barely wireframed it, here, and there was no there there, no interiority. The living room had its sketchy angles as well, and furniture she'd imported from a Playmobil system that predated her Sandbenders. Wonkily bitmapped fish swam monotonously around in a glass coffee table she'd built when she was nine. The trees through the front window were older still: perfectly cylindrical Crayola-brown trunks, each supporting an acid-green cotton ball of undifferentiated foliage. If she looked at these long enough, the Mumphalumphagus would appear outside, wanting to play, so she didn't.

She positioned herself on the Playmobil couch and looked at the programs scattered across the top

of the coffee table. The Sandbenders system software looked like an old-fashioned canvas water bag, a sort of canteen (she'd had to consult What Things Are, her icon dictionary, to figure that out). It was worn and spectacularly organic, with tiny beads of water bulging through the tight weave of fabric. If you got in super close you saw things reflected in the individual droplets: circuitry that was like beadwork or the skin on a lizard's throat, a long empty beach under a gray sky, mountains in the rain, creek water over different-colored stones. She loved Sandbenders; they were the best. THE SANDBENDERS, OREGON, was screened faintly across the sweating canvas, as though it had almost faded away under a desert sun. SYSTEM 5.9. (She had all the upgrades, to 6.3. People said 6.4 was buggy.)

Beside the water bag lay her schoolwork, represented by a three-ring binder suffering the indignities of artificial bit-rot, its wire-frame cover festering with digital mung. She'd have to reformat that before she started her new school, she reminded herself. Too juvenile.

Her Lo/Rez collection, albums, compilations and bootlegs, were displayed as the original cased disks. These were stacked up, as casually as possible, beside the archival material she'd managed to assemble since being accepted into the Seattle chapter. This looked, thanks to a fortuitous file-swap with a member in Sweden, like a litho

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graphed tin lunch box, Rez and Lo peering stunned and fuzzy-eyed from its flat, rectangular lid. The Swedish fan had scanned the artwork from the five printed surfaces of the original, then mapped it over wireframe. The original was probably Nepalese, definitely unlicensed, and Chia appreciated the reverse cachet. Zona Rosa coveted a copy, but so far all she'd offered were a set of cheesy tv spots for the fifth Mexico Dome concert. They weren't nearly cheesy enough, and Chia wasn't prepared to 5W~tp. There was a shadowy Brazilian tour documentary supposed to have been made by a public-access subsidiary of Globo. Chia wanted that, and Mexico was the same direction as Brazil.

She ran a finger down the stacked disks, her hand wireframed, the finger tipped with quivering mercury, and thought about the Rumor. There had been run~ors before, there were rumors now, there would always be rumors. There had been the rumor about Lo and that Danish model, that they were going to get married, and that had probably been true, ever~ though they never did. And there were always rumors about Rez atid different people. But that was people. The Danish model was people, as much as Chia thought she was a snotbag. The Rumor was Sottiething else.

What, exactly, she was O~ her way to Tokyo to find out.

She selected Lo Rez Skyline

The virtual Venice her father had sent for her thirteenth birthday looked like an old dusty book with leather covers, the smooth brown leather scuffed in places mm a fine suede, the digital equivalent of washing denim in a machine full of golf balls. It lay beside the featureless, textureless gray file that was her copy of the divorce decree and the custody agreement.

She pulled the Venice tOward her, opened it. The fish flickered out of phase, her system lauochmng a subroutine.

Venice decompressed.

The Piazza in midwinter monochrome, its facades texturemapped in marble, porphyry, polished granite, jasper, alabaster (the

rich mineral names scrolling at will in the menu of peripheral vi- 0

3E

sion). This city of winged lions and golden horses. This default hour of gray and perpetual dawn.

She could be alone here, or visit with the Music Master.

Her father, phoning from Singapore to wish her a happy birthday, had told her that Hitler, during his first and only visit, had slipped away to range the streets alone, in these same small hours, mad perhaps, and trotting like a dog.

Chia, who had only a vague idea who Hitler might have been, and that mainly from references in songs, understood the urge. The stones of the Piazza flowed beneath her like silk, as she raised a silvered finger and sped into the maze of bridges, water, arches, walls.

She had no idea what this place was meant to mean, the how or why of it, but it fit so perfectly into itself and the space it occupied, water and stone slotting faultlessly into the mysterious whole.

The gnarliest piece of software ever, and here came the opening chords of "Positron Premonition." Clinton Emory Hiliman, twenty-five: hairdresser, sushi chef, music journalist, porno extra, reliable purveyor of proscribed fetal tissue cultures to three of the more endomorphic members of the decidedly meshbacked Dukes of Nuke 'Em, whose "Gulf War Baby" was eighteen with a bullet on the Billboard chart, in heavy rotation on I (heart) America, and had already been the subject of diplomatic protests from several Islamic states.

Kathy Torrance looked as though she might be prepared to be pleased. "And the fetal tissue, Laney?"

"Well," Laney said, putting the 'phones down beside the computer, "I think that might be the good part."

"Why?"

"It has to be Iraqi. They make a point of insisting on that. They won't shoot up any other kind."

"You're hired."

"I am?"

"You must have correlated the calls to Ventura with the parking charges from the garage in the Beverly Center. Although that running gag about 'Gulf War babies' would've been hard to miss."

"Wait a minute," Laney said. "You knew."

"It's the top segment on Wednesday's show." She closed the computer without bothering to turn off Clint Hiliman's detweaked chin. "But now I've had a chance to watch you work, Laney. You're a natural. I could almost believe there might actually be something to

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5. Nodal Points

that nodal point bullshit. Some of your moves made no logical sense whatever, but I've just watched you hone in, cold, on something it took three experienced researchers a month to excavate. You did it in just under half an hour."

"Some of that was illegal," Laney said. "You're tied into parts of DatAmerican that you aren't supposed to be."

"Do you know what a nondisclosure agreement is, Laney?"

Yamazaki looked up from his notebook. "Very good," he said, probably to Blackwell. "This is very good."

Blackwell shifted his weight, the chair's polycarbon frame creaking faintly in protest. "But he didn't last there, did he?"

"A little over six months," Laney said.

Six months could be a very long time, at Slitscan.

He used most of his first month's salary to lease a micro-bachelor in a retrofitted parking

structure on Broadway Avenue, Santa Monica. He bought shirts he thought were more like the ones people wore at Slitscan, and kerr his l~alaysian button-downs to sleep in. He bought an expensive pair of sunglasses and made sure he never displayed as much as a sirgle felt-pen in his shirt pocket.

Life at Slitscan had a certair. focused quality. Laney's colleagues limited themselves to a ~articular bandwidth of emotion. A certain kind of humor, as Kathy had said, was highly valued, but there was remarkably little laughter. 'The expected response was eye contact, a nod, the edge of a smile. Lives were destroyed here, and sometimes re-created, careers crushed or made anew in guises surreal and unexpected. Because Slitscan's business ~as the titual letting of blood, and the blood it let was an aichemical fluid: celebrity in its rawest, purest form.

Laney's ability to locate key data in apparently random wastes of incidental information earned him the envy and grudging admiration of more experiencec researchers. He became Kathy's favorite, and was almost pleased when he discovered that a rumor had spread that they were having an affair.

They weren't~except for that one time at her place in Sherman Oaks, and that hadn't been a good idea. Nothing either of them wanted to repeat.

But Laney was still narrowing down, getting focused, pushing the envelope of whatever it was that manifested as this talent, his touch. And Kathy liked that. With his eyephones on and Slitscan's dedicated landline feeding him the bleak reaches of DatAmerica, he felt increasingly at home. He went where Kathy suggested he go. He found the nodal points.

Sometimes, falling asleep in Santa Monica, he wondered vaguely if there might be a larger system, a field of greater perspective. Perhaps the whole of DatAmerica possessed its own nodal points, info-faults that might be followed down to some other kind of truth, another mode of knowing, deep within gray shoals of information. But only if there were someone there to pose the right question. He had no idea at all what that question might be, if indeed there were one, but he somthow doubted it would ever be posed from an SBU at Slitscan.

Slitscan was descended from "reality" programming and the network tabloids of the late twentieth century, but it resembled them no more than some large, swift, bipedal carnivore resembled its sluggish, shallow-dwelling ancestors. Slitscan was the mature form, supporting fully global franchises. Slitscan's revenues had paid for entire satellites and built the building he worked in in Burbank.

Slitscan was a show so popular that it had evolved into something akin to the old idea of a network. It was flanked and buffered by spinoffs and peripherals, each designed to shunt the viewer back to the crucial core, the familiar and reliably bloody altar that one of Laney's Mexican co-workers called Smoking Mirror.

It was impossible to work at Slitscan without a sense of part icipating in history, or else in what Kathy Torrance would argue had re

P aced history. Shtscan itself, Laney suspected, might be one of those 0

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larger nodal points he sometimes found himself trying to imagine, an informational peculiarity opening into some unthinkable deeper structure.

In his quest for lesser nodal pouts, the sort that Kathy sent him into DatAmerica to locate, Laney hid already affected the courses of municipal elections, the market in pitent gene futures, abortion laws in the State of New Jersey, and the spin on an ecstatic pro-euthanasia movement (or suicide cult, depending) called Cease Upon The Midnight, not to mention the lives and careers of several dozen celebrities of various kinds.

Not always for the worst, either, in terms of what the show's subjects might have wished for themselves. Kathy's segment on the Dukes of Nuke 'Em, exposing the band's exclusive predilection for Iraqi fetal tissue, had sent their subsequent release instant platinum (and had resulted in show-trials and public hangings in Baghdad, but he supposed life was hard there so begin with).

Laney had never been a Slitscan ~iewer, himself, and he suspected that this had counted in his favor when he'd applied as a researcher. He had no strong opinion of the show either way. He

accepted it, to the extent that he'd thought of it at all, as a fact of life. Slitscan was how a certain kind of news was done. Slitscan was where he worked.

Slitscan allowed him to do the one thing he possessed a genuine talent for, so he'd managed to avoid thinking in terms of cause and effect. Even now, attempting to explain himself to the attentive Mr. Yamazaki, he found it difficult to feel any clear linkage of responsibility. The rich and the famous, Kathy had once said, were seldom that way by accident. It was possible to be one or the other, but very seldom, accidentally, to be both,

Celebrities who were never something else again, and Kathy viewed these as crosses she must bear: a mass-murderer, for instance, or his most recent victim's parents. No star quality (though she always held out hope for the murderers, feeling that at least the potential was there).

It was the other kind that Kathy wanted, directing the attention of Laney and as many as thirty other researchers to the more private aspects of the lives of those who were deliberately and at least moderately famous.

Alison Shires wasn't famous at all, but the man Laney had confirmed she was having an affair with was famous enough.

And then something began to come clear to Laney.

Alison Shires knew, somehow, that he was there, watching. As though she felt him gazing down, into the pool of data that reflected her life, its surface made of all the bits that were the daily record of her life as it registered on the digital fabric of the world.

Laney watched a nodal point begin to form over the reflection of Alison Shires.

She was going to kill herself.

6. DESH  
(Chia had programmed her Music Master to have an affinity for bridges. He appeared in her virtual Venice whenever she crossed one at moderate speed: a slender young man with pale blue eyes and a penchant for long, flowing coats.

He'd been the subject of a look-and-feel action, in his beta release, when lawyers representing a venerable British singer had protested that the Music Master's designers had scanned in images of their client as a much younger man. This had been settled out of court, and all later versions, including Chia's, were much more carefully generic. (Kelsey had told her that it had mainly had to do with changing one of his eyes, but why only the one?)

She'd fed him into Venice on her second visit, to keep her company and provide musical variety, and keying his appearances to moments when she crossed bridges had seemed like a good idea. There were lots of bridges in Venice, some of them no more than a little arc of stone steps spanning the narrowest of waterways. There was the Bridge of Sighs, which Chia avoided because she found it sad and creepy, and the Bridge of Fists, which she liked mainly for its name, and so many others. And there was the Rialto, big and humped and fantastically old, where her father said men had invented banking, or a particular kind of banking. (Her father worked for a bank, which was why he had to live in Singapore.)

She'd slowed her rush through the city now, and was cruising at a walking pace up the stepped incline of the Rialto, the Music Mas-

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ter striding elegantly beside her, his putty-colored trenchcoat flapping in the breeze. "DESFI," he said, triggered by her glance, "the Idiomatic Elaboration of Static Harmony. Also known as the Major Chord with Descending Bassline. Bach's 'Air on a G String,' 1730. Procol Harum's 'A Whiter Shade of Pale,' 1967." If she made eye contact now, she'd hear his samples, directionless and at just the right volume. Then more about DESH, and more samples. She had him

here for company, though, and not for a lecture. But lectures were all there was to him, aside from his iconics, which were about being blond and fine-boned and wearing clothes more beautifully than any human ever could. He knew everything there was to know about music, and nothing else at all.

She didn't know how long she'd been in Venice, this visit. It was still that minute-before-dawn that she liked best, because she kept it that way.

"Do you know anything about Japanese music?" she asked.

"What sort, exactly?"

"What people listen to."

"Popular music?"

"I guess so."

He paused, turning, hands in his trouser pockets and the trench-coat swinging to reveal its lining.

"We could begin with a music called enka," he said, "although I doubt you'd like it." Software agents did that, learned what you liked. "The roots of contemporary Japanese pop came later, with the wholesale creation of something called 'group sounds.' That was a copy-cat phenomenon, flagrantly commercial. Extremely watered-down Western pop influences. Very bland and monotonous."

"But do they really have singers who don't exist?"

"The idol-singers," he said, starting up the hump-backed incline of the bridge. "The idoru. Some of them are enormously popular."

"Do people kill themselves over them?"

"I don't know. They could do, I suppose."

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"Do people marry them?"

"Not that I know of."

"How about Rei loei? Wondering if that was how you proflounced it."

"I'm afraid I don't know her," he said, with the slight wince that came when you asked him about music that had come out since his own release. This always made Chia feel sorry for him, which she knew was ridiculous.

"Never mind," she said, and closed her eyes.

She removed her glasses.

After Venice, the plane felt even more low-ceilinged and narrow, a claustrophobic tube packed with seats and people.

The blond was awake, watching her, looking a lot less like Ash-leigh Modine Carter now that she'd removed most of her makeup. Her face only inches away.

Then she smiled. It was a slow smile, modular, as though there were stages to it, each one governed by a separate shyness or hesitation.

"I like your computer," she said. "It looks like it was made by Indians or something."

Chia looked down at her Sandbenders. Turned off the red switch. "Coral," she said. "These are turquoise. The ones that look like ivory are the inside of a kind of nut. Renewable."

"The rest is silver?"

"Aluminum," Chia said. "They melt old cans they dig up on the beach, cast it in sand molds. These

panels are micarta. That's linen with this resin in it."

"I didn't know Indians could make computers," the woman said, reaching out to touch the curved edge of the Sandbenders. Her voice was hesitant, light, like a child's. The nail on the finger that rested on her Sandbenders was bright red, the lacquer chipped through and ragged. A tremble, then the hand withdrew.

"I drank too much. And with tequila in them, too. 'Vitamin T,' Eddie calls it. I wasn't bad, was I?"

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Chia shook her head.

"I can't always remember, if I'm bad."

"Do you know how much longer it is to Tokyo?" Chia asked, all she could think of to say.

"Nine hours easy," the blond said, and sighed. "Subsonics just suck, don't they? Eddie had me booked on a super, in full business, but then he said something went wrong with the ticket. Eddie gets all the tickets from this place in Osaka. We went on Air France once, first class, and your seat turns into a bed and they tuck you in with a little quilt. And they have an open bar right there and they just leave the bottles out, and champagne and just the best food." The memory didn't seem to cheer her up. "Aren't they give you perfume and makeup in its own case, from Hermès. Real leather, too. Why are you going to Tokyo?"

"Oh," Chia said. "Oh. Well. My friend. To see my friend."

"It's so strange. You know since the quake."

"But they've built it all back now. Haven't they?"

"Sure, but they did it all so fast, mostly with that nanotech, that just grows? Eddie got in there before the dust had settled. Told me you could see those towers growing at night. Rooms up top like a honeycomb, and walls just sealing themselves over, one after another. Said it was like watching a candle melt, but in reverse. That's too scary. Doesn't make a sound. Machines too small to see. They can get into your body, you know?"

Chia sensed an underlying edge of panic there. "Eddie?" she asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Eddie's like a businessman, he went to Japan to make money after the earthquake. He says the infrastructure, the structure was wide open, then. He says it took the spin out of it, sort of, so you could come in and root around, quick, before it healed over and hardened up again. And it healed over around Eddie, like he's an implant or something, so now he's part of the machine, the infrastructure."

"Infrastructure."

"The structure. Yeah. So now he's plugged in, to all that juice."

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He's a landlord, and he owns these clubs, and has deals in music and vids and things."

Chia leaned over, dragging her bag from beneath the seat in front, putting away the Sandbenders. "Do you live there, in Tokyo?"

"Part of the time."

"Do you like it?"

"It's . . . I . . . well . . . Weird, right? It's not like anywhere. This huge thing happened there, then they fixed it with what was maybe even a bigger thing, a bigger change, and everybody goes around pretending it never happened, that nothing happened. But you know what?"

"What?"

"Look at a map. A map from before? A lot of it's not even where it used to be. Nowhere near. Well,

a few things are, the Palace, that expressway, and that big city hall thing in Shinjuku, but a lot of the rest of it's like they just made it up. They pushed all the quake-junk into the water, like landfill, and now they're building that up, too. New islands."

"You know," Chia said, "I'm really sleepy. I think I'll try to go to sleep now."

"My name's Maryalice. Like it's one word."

"Mine's Chia."

Chia closed her eyes and tried to put her seat back a little more, but that was as far as it could go.

"Pretty name," Maryalice said.

Chia thought she could hear the Music Master's DESH behind the sound of the engines, not so much a sound now as a part of her. That whiter shade of something, but she could never quite make it out.

7. The Wet, Warm Life in Alison Shires  
~Shell try to kill herself," Laney said.

"Why?" Kathy Torrance sipped espresso. A Monday afternoon in the Cage.

"Because she knows. She can feel me watching."

"That's impossible, Laney."

"She knows."

"You aren't 'watching' her. You're examining the data she generates, like the data all our lives generate. She can't know that."

"She does."

The white cup clicking down into its saucer. "Then how can you know that she does? You're looking at her phone records, what she chooses to watch and when, the music she accesses. How could you possibly know that she's aware of your attention?"

The nodal point, he wanted to say. But didn't.

"I think you're working too hard, Laney. Five days off."

"No, I'd rather--"

"I can't afford to let you burn yourself out. I know the signs, Laney. Recreational leave, full pay, five days."

She added a travel bonus. Laney was sent to Slitscan's in-house agency and booked into a hollowed-out hilltop above Ixtapa, a hotel with vast stone spheres ranged across the polished concrete of its glass-walled lobby. Beyond the glass, iguanas regarded the registration staff with an ancient calm, green scales bright against dusty brown branches.

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Laney met a woman who said she edited lamps for a design house in San Francisco. Tuesday evening. I-Ie'd been in Mexico three hours. Drinks in the lobby bar.

lie asked her what that meant, to edit lamps. Laney had recently noticed that the only people who had titles that clearly described their jobs had jobs he wouldn't have wanted. if people asked him what he did, he said he was a quantitative analyst. He didn't try to explain the nodal points, or Kathy Torrance's theories about celebrity.

The woman replied that her company produced short-run furniture and accessories, lamps in



particular. The actual manufacturing took place at any number of different locations, mainly in Northern California. Cottage industry. One maker might contract to do two hundred granite bases, another to lacquer and distress two hundred steel tubes in a very specific shade of blue. She brought out a notebook and showed him animated sketches. All of the things had a thin, spiky look that made him think of African insects he'd seen on the Nature Channel.

Did she design them? No. They were designed in Russia, in Moscow. She was the editor. She selected the suppliers of components. She oversaw manufacture, transport to San Francisco, assembly in what once had been a cannery. If the design documents specified something that couldn't be provided, she either found a new supplier or negotiated a compromise in material or workmanship.

Laney asked who they sold to. People who wanted things other people didn't have, she said. Or that other people didn't like? That too, she said. Did she enjoy it? Yes. Because she generally liked the things the Russians designed, and she tended to like the people who manufactured the components. Best of all, she told him, she liked the feeling of bringing something new into the world, of watching the sketches from Moscow finally become objects on the floor of the former cannery.

It's there, one day, she said, and you can look at it, and touch it, and know whether or not it's good.

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Laney considered this. She seemed very calm. Shadows lengthened with almost visible speed across the floor of glossy concrete.

lie put his hand over hers.

And touch it, and know whether or not it's good

Just before dawn, the editor of lamps asleep in his bed, he watched the curve of the bay from the suite's balcony, the moon a milky thing, translucent, nearly gone.

In the night, in the Federal District, somewhere east of here, there had been rocket attacks and rumors of chemical agents, the latest act in one of those obscure and ongoing struggles that made up the background of his world.

Birds were waking in the trees around him, a sound he knew from Gainesville, from the orphanage and other mornings there.

Kathy Torrance announced herself satisfied with Laney's recuperation. He looked rested, she said.

He took to the seas of DatAmerica without comment, suspecting that another leave might prove permanent. She was watching him the way an experienced artisan might watch a valued tool that had shown the first signs of metal-fatigue.

The nodal point was different now, though he had no language to describe the change. He sifted the countless fragments that had clustered around Alison Shires in his absence, feeling for the source of his earlier conviction. He called up the music she'd accessed while he'd been in Mexico, playing each song in the order of her selection. He found her choices had grown more life-affirming; she'd moved to a new provider, Upful Groupvine, whose relentlessly positive product was the musical equivalent of the Good News Channel.

Cross-indexing her charges against the records of her creditprovider and its client retailers, he produced a list of everything she'd purchased in the jMtst week. Six-pack, blides, Tokkai carton opener. Did she own a Tokkai carton opener? But then he remembered Kathy's advice, that this was the part of esearch most prone to produce serious transference, the point at which the researcher's intimacy with the subject could lead to los of per;pective. "It's often easiest for us to identify at the retail lev1, Lane3'. We're a shopping species. Find yourself buying a different )rand of frozen peas because the subject does, watch out."

The floor of Laney's apartment was terraed against the original slope of the parking garage. He slept at the deep end, on an inflatable guest bed he'd ordered from the Shopping Channel. There were no windows. Regulations required a sump-pump, and reconstituted sunlight sometimes fell from a panel in the ceiling, but he was seldom there during daylight hours.

He sat on the slippery edge of the inflatable, picturing Alison Shires in her Fountain Avenue apartment. Larger than this, he knew, but not by much. Windows. Her rent was paid, Slitscan had finally determined, by her married actor. Via a fairly intricate series of blinds, but paid nonetheless. "His reptilian fund," Kathy called it.

He could hold Alison Shires' history in his mind like a single object, like the perfectly detailed scale model of something ordinary but miraculous, made luminous by the intensity of his focus. He'd never met her, or spoken to her, but he'd come to know her, he supposed, in more ways than anyone ever had or would. Husbands didn't know their wives this way, or wives their husbands. Stalkers might aspire to know the objects of their obsession this way, but never could.

Until the night he woke after midnight, head throbbing. Too hot, something wrong with the conditioning again. Florida. The blue shirt he slept in clinging to his back and shoulders. What would she be doing now?

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Was she staring up, awake, at faint bars of reflected light on the ceiling, listening to U2's "The Fly"?

Kathy suspected he might be cracking up. He looked at his hands. They could be anybody's. He looked at them as though he'd never seen them before.

He remembered the 5-SB in the orphanage. The taste of it coming while it was still being injected. Rotting metal. The placebo brought no taste at all.

He got up. The Kitchen Korner, sensing him, woke. The fridge door slid aside. A single ancient leaf of lettuce sagged blackly through the plastic rods of one white shelf. A half-empty bottle of Evian on another. He held his cupped hands above the lettuce, willing himself to feel something radiating from its decay, some subtle life force, orgones, particles of an energy unknown to science.

Alison Shires was going to kill herself. He knew he'd seen it. Seen it somehow in the incidental data she generated in her mild-mannered passage through the world of things.

"Hey there," the fridge said. "You've left me open."

Laney said nothing. -

"Well, do you want the door open, partner? You know it interferes with the automatic de-frost."

"Be quiet." His hands felt better. Cooler.

He stood there until his hands were quite cold, then withdrew them and pressed the tips of his fingers against his temples, the fridge taking this opportunity to close itself without further comment.

Twenty minutes later he was on the Metro, headed for Hollywood, a jacket over his sleep-creased Malaysian oxford shirt. Isolated figures on station platforms, whipped sideways by perspective in the wind of the train's passing.

"We're not talking conscious decision, here?" Blackwell kneaded what was left of his right ear.

"No," Laney said, "I don't know what I thought I was doing."

"You were trying to save her. The girl."

"It felt like something snapped. A rubber hand. It felt like gravity."

"That's what it feels like," Blackwell said, "when you decide."

Somewhere down the hill from the Sunset Metro exit he passed a man watering his lawn, a rectangle perhaps twice the size of a pooltable, illuminated by the medicinal glow of a nearby streetlight. Laney saw the water beading on the perfectly even blades of bright green plastic. The plastic lawn was fenced back from the street with welded steel, upright prison bars supporting bright untarnished coils of razor-wire. The man's house was scarcely larger than his glittering lawn; a survival from a day when this slope to the hills had been covered with bungalows and arbors. There were others like it, tucked between the balconied, carefully varied faces of condos and apartment complexes, tiny properties dating from before the area's incorporation into the city. There was a hint of oranges in the air, but he couldn't see them.

The waterer looked up, and Laney saw that he was blind, eyes hidden by the black lozenges of video units coupled directly to the optic nerve. You never knew what they were watching.

Laney went on, letting whatever drew him set his course through these sleeping streets and the occasional scent of a blooming tree. Distant brakes sounded on Santa Monica.

Fifteen minutes later he was in front of her building on Fountain Avenue. Looking up. Fifth floor. 502.

The nodal point.

"You don't want to talk about it?"

Laney looked up from his empty cup, meeting Blackwell's eyes across the table.

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"I've never really told this to anyone," he said, and it was true.

"Let's walk," Blackwell said, and stood, his hulk seeming to lift effortlessly, as though he were a helicopter parade float. Laney wondered what time it might be, here or in L.A. Yamazaki was taking care of the bill.

He left Amos 'n' Andes with them, out into a falling mist that wasn't quite rain, the sidewalk a bobbing stream of black umbrellas. Yamazaki produced a black object no larger than a business card, slightly thicker, and flexed it sharply between his thumbs. A black umbrella flowered. Yamazaki handed it to him. The curve of the black handle felt dry and hollow and very slightly warm.

"How do you fold it?"

"You don't," Yamazaki said. "It goes away." He opened another for himself. Hairless Blackwell, in his micropore, was evidently immune to rain. "Please continue with your account, Mr. Laney."

Through a gap between two distant towers, Laney glimpsed the side of another, taller building. He saw vast faces there, vaguely familiar, contorted in inexplicable drama.

The nondisclosure agreement Laney had signed was intended to cover any incidences of Slitscan using its connections with DatAmerica in ways that might be construed as violations of the law. Such incidences, in Laney's experience, were frequent to the point of being constant, at least at certain advanced levels of research. Since DatAmerica had been Laney's previous employer, he hadn't found any of this particularly startling. DatAmerica was less a power than a territory; in many ways it was a law unto itself.

Laney's protracted survey of Alison Shires had already involved any number of criminal violations, one of which had provided him with the codes required to open the door into her

building's foyer, activate the elevator, unlock the door of her fifth-floor apartment, and

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cancel the private security alarm that would automatically warrant an armed response if she did these things without keying in two extra digits. This last was intended as insurance against endemic home invasion, a crime in which residents were accosted in parking garages and induced to surrender their codes. Alison Shires' code consisted of her month, date, and year of birth, something any security service strongly advised against. Her back-up code was 23, her age the year before, when she'd moved in and become a subscriber.

Laney softly reciting these as he stood before her building, its eight-story facade feinting toward someone's idea of Tudor Revival. Everything looking so sharply and comprehensively detailed, in these first moments of an L.A. dawn.

23.

"So," Blackwell supposed, "you just walked in. Punched up her codes and bang, there you were." The three of them waiting to cross at an intersection.

-Bang.

No sound at all in the mirrored foyer. A sense of vacuum. A dozen Laney's reflected there as he crossed an expanse of new carpet. Into an elevator smelling of something floral, where he used part of the code again. It took him straight to five. The door slid open. More new carpet. Beneath a fresh coat of cream enamel the corridor's walls displayed the faint irregularities of old-fashioned plaster.

502.

"What do you think you're doing?" Laney asked aloud, though whether to himself or to Alison Shires he did not nor would he ever know.

The brass round of an antique security fish-eye regarded him from the door, partially occluded by a cataract of pale paint.

The key-pad was set flush with the door's steel frame, not quite

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level with the fish-eye. I-Ic watched his finger finding its way through the sequence.

23.

But Alison Shires, naked, opened the door before the code could key, Upful (iroupvine soaring joyfully behind her as Laney grabbed her blood-slick wrists. And saw there in her eyes what he took then and forever as a look of simple recognition, not even of blame.

"This isn't working," she said, as though she were indicating a minor appliance, and Laney heard himself whimper, a sound he hadn't made since childhood. He needed to see those wrists, but couldn't, holding her. He was walking her backward, toward a wicker armchair he wasn't even aware he'd seen.

"Sit," he said, as if to a stubborn child, and she did. He let go of her wrists. Ran for where he guessed the bathroom had to be. Towels there and some kind of tape.

And discovered himself kneeling beside her where she sat, red fingers curled in toward red palms, as if in meditation. He rolled a dark green hand towel around her left wrist and whipped the tape around it, some rubbery beige product meant to mask specific areas during the application of aerosol cosmetics. He knew that from her product-purchase data.

Were her fingers turning blue, beneath their coat of red? He looked up. Into that same

recognition. One cheekbone brushed with blood.

"Don't," he said.

"It's slowing."

Laney wrapping her right forearm now, the tape-roll dangling from his teeth.

"I missed the artery."

"Don't move," Laney said, and sprang up, tripping over his own feet, crashing face-first into what he recognized, just before it broke his nose, as the work of the editor of lamps. The carpet seemed to whip up and smack him playfully in the face.

"Alison--"

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Her ankle stepping past him, kitchenward. "Alison, sit down!"

'Sorry,' he thought he heard her say, and then the shot.

Blackwell's shoulders heaved as he sighed, making a sound that Laney heard above the traffic, Yamazaki's glasses were filled with jittering pastels, the walls here all neon, a glare to shame Vegas, every surface lit and jumping.

Blackwell was staring at Laney. "This way," he said, finally, and rounded a corner, into relative darkness and an edge of urine. Laney followed, Yamazaki behind him. At the far end of the narrow passage, they emerged into fairyland.

No neon here at all. Ambient glow from the towers overhead. Austere rectangles of white frosted glass, the size of large greeting cards, were daubed with black ideograms, each sign marking a tiny structure like some antique bathing cabin on a forgotten beach. Crowded shoulder to shoulder down one side of the cobbled lane, their miniature facades suggested a shuttered sideshow in some secret urban carnival. Age-silvered cedar, oiled paper, matting; nothing to pin the place in time but the fact that the signs were electric.

Laney stared. A street built by leprechauns.

"Golden Street," said Keith Alan Blackwell.

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Chia deplaned behind Maryalice, who'd had a couple of those vitamin drinks and then tied up one of the toilets for twenty minutes while she teased her extensions and put on lipstick and mascara. Chia couldn't say much for the result, which looked less like Ashleigh Mo-dine Carter than something Ashleigh Modine Carter had slept on.

When Chia stood up, she felt like she had to tell her body to do every single thing she needed it

to. Legs: move.

She'd gotten a few more hours sleep, somewhere back there. She'd packed her Sandbenders back in her bag, and now she was putting one foot in front of the other, as Maryalice, in front of her, shuffle-swayed along the narrow aisle in her white cowboy boots.

It seemed to take forever to get out of the plane, but then they were breathing airport air in a corridor, under big logos that Chia had known all her life, all those Japanese companies, and everything crowded and moving in one direction. "You check anything?" Maryalice asked, beside her.

'No,' Chiasaid.

Maryalice let Chia go ahead of her through Passport Control, where Chia gave the Japanese policeman her passport and the Cash-flow smartcard Zona Rosa had forced Kelsey to come up with because this was all Kelseys idea anyway. In theory, the amount in the card represented the bulk of the Seattle chapter's treasury, but Chia suspected Kelsey would wind up footing the bill for the whole thing, and probably wouldn't even care. 0

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3. Narita

The policeman pulled her passport out of the counter-slot and handed it back to her. He hadn't bothered to check the smartcard. "Two week maximum stay," he said, and nodded her on.

Frosted glass slid open for her. It was crowded here, way more than SeaTac. So many planes mustve come in at once, to have all these people waiting for their luggage. She edged aside to let a little robot stacked with suitcases pass. It had dirty pink rubber tires and big cartoon eyes that rolled morosely as it made its way through the crowd.

"Now, that was easy," said Maryalice, behind her. Chia turned in time to see her take a long deep breath, hold it, and let it out. Maryalice's eyes looked pinched, like she was having a headache.

"Do you know which way I should go to get the train?" Chia asked. She had maps in her Sandbenders, but she didn't want to have to get it out now.

"This way,' Maryalice said.

Maryalice worked her way between people, Chia following with her bag under her arm. Emerging in front of a carousel where bags were sliding down a ramp, bumping, swinging past and away.

"Here's one," Maryalice said, snagging a black one and sounding so forcefully cheerful that it made Chia look at her. "And ... two." Another one like it, except this one had a sticker on the side from Nissan County, the third largest gated attraction in the Californias. "Would you mind carrying this for me, honey? My back goes our on long plane rides." Passing Chia the bag with the sticker. It wasn't too heavy, like maybe it was only half-full of clothes. But it was too large for her; she had to lean over in the opposite direction to keep it off the ground.

"Thanks," Maryalice said. "Here," and she handed Chia a crumpled square of sticky-backed paper with a bar code on it. "That's the check. Now we just want to go this way.

It was even harder getting through the crowd, lugging Mary-alice's bag. Chia had to concentrate on not stepping on people's feet, and not bumping them too hard with the bag, and the next thing she 60 William Gibson knew, shed lost Maryalice. She looked around, expecting to see hair-extensions bobbing above the crowd, who were mostly shorter than Maryalice, but Maryalice was nowhere in sight.

ALL ARRIVING PASSENGERS MUST EXIT THROUGH CUSTOMS.

Chia watched the sign twist itself up into Japanese letters, then pop back out as English.

Well, that was the way to go. She got in line behind a man in a red leather jacket that said

Concept Collision" across the back in gray chenille letters. Chia stared at that, imagining concepts colliding, which she guessed was a concept in itself, but then she thought it was probably just the name of a company that fixed cars, or one of those slogans the Japanese made up in English, the ones that almost seemed to mean something but didn't. This trans-Pacific jet lag thing was serious.

'Next.'

They were feeding Concept Collision's suitcase through a machine the size of a double bed, but taller. There was an official of some kind in a video-helmet, evidently reading feed off the scanners, and another policeman, to take your passport, slot it in the machine, then put your bags through. Chia let him take Maryalice's suitcase and flip it up, onto the conveyor. Chia handed him her carry-on. "There's a computer in there. This scan okay for that?" He didn't seem to hear her. She watched her carry-on follow Maryalice's bag into the machine.

The man in the helmet, eyes hidden, was bobbing his head from side to side as he accessed gaze-activated menus.

"Baggage check," the policeman said, and Chia remembered she had it in her hand. It struck her as strange, handing it over, that Maryalice had thought to give her that. The policeman ran a hand-scanner over it.

"You packed these bags yourself?" asked the man in the helmet.

He couldn't see her directly, but she assumed he could see the clips stored in her passport, and he could probably see her on live feed as well. Airports were full of cameras. 3

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"Yes," Chia said, deciding it was easier than trying to explain that it was Maryalice's bag, not hers. She tried to read the expression on the helmeted man's lips, but it was hard to say if he even had one.

"You packed this?"

"Yes Chia said, not sounding nearly as certain this time.

The helmet bobbed.

"Next," he said.

Chia went to the other end of the machine and collected her bag and the black suitcase,

Through another sliding wall of frosted glass: she was in a larger hall, beneath a higher ceiling, bigger ads overhead but no thinning of the crowd, Maybe this wasn't so much a matter of crowds as it was of Tokyo, maybe of Japan in general: more people, closer together.

More of those robot baggage carts. She wondered what it cost to rent one. You could lie down on top of your luggage, maybe, tell it where you wanted to go, and then just go to sleep. Except she wasn't sure she felt sleepy, exactly. She transferred Maryalice's bag from her left to her right hand, wondering what to do with it if she didn't find Maryalice inside the next, say, five minutes. She'd had enough of airports and the space between them, and she wasn't even sure where she was supposed to sleep tonight. Or if it was night, even.

She was looking up, hoping to find some kind of time display, when a hand closed around her right wrist. She looked down at the hand, saw gold rings and a watch to match, fat links of a gold bracelet, the rings connected to the watch with little gold chains.

"That's my suitcase."

Chia's eyes followed the hand's wrist to a length of bright white cuff, then up the arm of a black jacket. To pale eyes in a long face, each cheek seamed vertically, as if with a modelling instrument. For a second she took him for her Music Master, loose somehow in this airport. But her

Music Master would never wear a watch like that, and this one's hair, a darker blond, was swept back, long and wetlooking, from his high forehead. He didn't look happy.

"Maryalice's suitcase," Chia said.

02 William Gibson

"She gave it to you? In Seattle?"

"She asked me to carry it."

"From Seattle?"

"No," Chia said. "Back there. She sat beside me on the plane."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know," Chia said.

He wore a black, long-coated suit, buttoned high. Like something from an old movie, but new and expensive-looking. He seemed to notice that he was still holding her wrist; now he let it go.

"I'll carry it for you," he said. "We'll find her."

Chia didn't know what to do. "Maryalice wanted me to carry it."

"You did. Now I'll carry it." He took it from her.

"Are you Maryalice's boyfriend? Eddie?" The corner of his mouth twitched.

"You could say that," he said.

Eddie's car was a Daihatsu Graceland with the steering wheel on the wrong side. Chia knew that because Rez had ridden in the back of one in a video, except that that one had had a bath in it, black marble, big gold faucets shaped like tropical fish. People had posted that that was an ironic take on money, on the really ugly things you could do with it if you had too much. Chia had told her mother about that. Her mother said there wasn't much point in worrying what you might do if you had too much, because most people never even had enough. She said it was better to try to figure out what "enough" actually meant.

But Eddie had one, a Graceland, all black and chrome. From the outside it looked sort of like a cross between an RV and one of those long, wedge-shaped Hummer limousines. Chia couldn't imagine there'd be much of a Japanese market; the cars here all looked like little candy-colored lozenges. The Graceland was meshback pure and simple, designed to sell to the kind of American who made a point of trying not to buy imports. Which, when it came to cars, definitely narrowed your options. (Hester Chen's mother had one of those really ugly Canadian trucks that cost a fortune but were guaranteed to last for eighty-five years; that was supposed to be better for the ecology.)

Inside, the Graceland was all burgundy velour, puffed up in diamonds, with little chrome nubs where the points of the diamonds met. It was about the tackiest thing Chia had ever seen, and she guessed Maryalice thought so too, because Maryalice, seated next to her, was explaining that it was an "image" thing, that Eddie had this very hot, very popular country-music club called Whiskey Clone, so he'd gotten the Graceland to go with that, and he'd also started dressing the way they did in Nashville. Maryalice thought that look suited him, she said.

Chia nodded. Eddie was driving, talking in Japanese on a speakerphone. They'd found Maryalice at a tiny little bar, just off the arrivals area. It was the third one they'd looked in, Chia got the feeling that Eddie wasn't very happy to see Maryalice, but Maryalice hadn't seemed to care.

It was Maryalice's idea that they give Chia a ride into Tokyo. She said the train was too crowded and it cost a lot anyway. She said she wanted to do Chia a favor, because Chia had carried her bag for her. (Chia had noticed that Eddie had put one bag in the Graceland's trunk, but kept the one with the Nissan County sticker up front, next to him, beside the driver's seat.)



Chia wasn't really listening to Maryalice now; it was some time at night and the jet lag was too weird and they were on this big bridge that seemed to be made out of neon, with however many lanes of traffic around them, the little cars like strings of bright beads, all of them shiny and new. There were screens that kept blurring past, tall and narrow, with Japanese writing jumping around on some of them, and people on others, faces, smiling as they sold something.

And then a woman's face: Itei Toei, the idoru Rez wanted to marry. And gone.

04 William Gibson

"Rice Daniels, Mr. Lane>'. Out of control." Pressing a card of some kind to the opposite side of the scratched plastic that walled the room called Visitors away from those who gave it its name. Laney had tried to read it, but the attempt at focusing had driven an atrocious spike of pain between his eyes. He'd looked at Rice Daniels instead, through tears of pain: close-cropped dark hair, close-fitting sunglasses with small oval lenses, the black frames gripping the man's head like some kind of surgical clamp.

Nothing at all about Rice Daniels appeared to be out of control.

"The series," he said. "'Out of Control.' As in: aren't the media? Out of Control: the cutting edge of counter-investigative journalism."

Laney had gingerly tried touching the tape across the bridge of his nose: a mistake. "Counter-investigative?"

"You're a quant, Mr. Laney." A quantitative analyst. He wasn't, really, but that was technically his job description, "For Slitscan."

Laney didn't respond.

"The girl was the focus of intensive surveillance. Slitscan was all over her. You know why. We believe a case can be made here for Slitscan's culpability in the death of Alison Shires."

Lane>' looked down at his running shoes, their laces removed by the Deputies. "She killed herself," he said.

"But we know why." 3

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9. Out of Control

"No," Laney said, meeting the black ovals again, "I don't, Not exactly." The nodal point. Protocols of some other realm entirely.

"You're going to need help, Lane>'. You might be looking at a manslaughter charge. Abetting a suicide. They'll want to know why you were up there."

"I'll tell them why."

"Our producers managed to get me in here first, Lane>'. It wasn't easy. There's a spin-control team from Slitscan out there now, waiting to talk with you. If you let them, they'll turn it all around. They'll get you off, because they have to, in order to cover the show. They can do it, with enough money and the right lawyers. But ask yourself this: do you want to let them do it?"

Daniels still had his business card thumbed up against the plastic. Trying to focus on it again, Laney saw that someone had scratched something in from the other side, in small, uneven mirror-letters, so that he could read it left to right:

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'i've never heard of Out of Control."

"Our hour-long pilot is in production as we speak, Mr. Lane>'." A measured pause. "We're all very excited."

"Why?"

"Out of Control isn't just a series. We think of it as an entirely new paradigm. A new way to do television. Your story-Alison Shires' story-is precisely what we intend to get out there. Our producers are people who want to give something back to the audience. They've done well, they're established, they've proven themselves; now they want to give something back-to restore a degree of honesty, a new opportunity for perspective." The black ovals drew slightly closer to the scratched plastic. "Our producers are the producers of 'Cops in Trouble' and 'A Calm and Deliberate Fashion.'"

"A what?"

"Factual accounts of premeditated violence in the global fashion industry."

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"Counter-investigative'?" Yamazaki's pen hovered over the notebook.

"It was a show about shows like Slitscan," Laney explained. "Supposed abuses." There were no stools at the bar, which might have been ten feet long. You stood. Aside from the bartender, in some kind of Kabuki drag, they had the place to themselves. By virtue of filling it, basically. It was probably the smallest freestanding commercial structure Lane>' had ever seen, and it seemed to have been there forever, like a survival from ancient Edo, a city of shadows and minute dark lanes. The walls were shingled with faded postcards, gone a uniform sepia under a glaze of accumulated nicotine and cooking smoke.

"Ah," Yamazaki said at last, "a meta-tabloid.'"

The bartender was broiling two sardines on a doll's hotplate. He flipped them with a pair of steel chopsticks, transferred them to a tiny plate, garnished them with some kind of colorless, translucent pickle, and presented them to Laney.

"Thanks," Lane>' said. The bartender ducked his shaven eyebrows.

In spite of the modest decor, there were dozens of bottles of expensive-looking whiskey arranged behind the bar, each one with a hand-written brown paper sticker: the owner's name in Japanese. Yamazaki had explained that you bought one and they kept it there for you. Blackwell was on his second tumbler of the local vodka-analog, on the rocks, Yamazaki was sticking to Coke Lire. Laney had an untouched shot of surrealistically expensive Kentucky srraight bourbon whiskey in front of him, and wondered vaguely what it would do to his jet lag if he were actually to drink it.

"So," Blackwell said, draining the tumbler, ice clinking against his prosthetic, "they get you out so they can have a go at these other bastards." 3

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"That wu it, basically," Laney said, They had their own Legal team waiting, to do that, and another team to work on the nondisclosure agreement I'd signed with Slirscan."

"And the second team had the bigger job," Blackwell said, shoving his empty glass toward the bartender, who swept it smoothly out of sight, producing a fresh replacement just as smoothly, as if from nowhere.

"That's true," Laney said. He'd had no idea, really, of what he'd be getting into when he'd found himself agreeing to the general outlines of Rice Daniels' offer. But there was something in him that didn't want to see Slitscan walk away from the sound of that one single shot from Alison Shires' kitchen. (Produced, the cops had pointed out, by a Russian-made device that was hardly more than a cartridge, a tube to contain it, and the simplest possible firing mechanism; these were designed with suicide almost exclusively in mind; there was no way to aim them at anything more than two inches away. Laney had heard of them, but had never seen one before; for some itason, they were called Wednesday Night Specials.)

And Slitscan would walk away, he knew; they'd drop the sequence on Alison's actor, if they felt

they had to, and the whole thing would settle to the sea floor, silting over almost instantly with the world's steady accretion of data.

And Alison Shires' life, as he'd known it in all that terrible, banal intimacy, would lie there forever, forgotten and finally unknowable.

But if he went with Out of Control, her life might retrospectively become something else, and he wasn't sure, exactly, sitting there on the hard little chair in Visitors, what that might be.

He thought of coral, of the reefs that grew around sunken aircraft carriers; perhaps she'd become something like that, the buried mystery beneath some exfoliating superstructure of supposition, or even of myth.

It seemed to him, in Visitors, that that might be a slightly less dead way of being dead. And he wished her that.

08 William Gibson

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"Get me out of here," he said to Daniels, who smiled beneath his surgical clamp, whipping the card triumphantly away from the plastic.

"Steady," said Blackwell, laying his huge hand, with its silvery-pink fretwork of scars, over Laney's wrist, "You haven't even had your drink yet."

Lane>' had met Rydell when the Out of Control team installed him in a suite at the Chateau, that ancient simulacrum of a still more ancient original, its quaint concrete eccentricities pinched between the twin brutalities of a particularly nasty pair of office buildings dating from the final year of the previous century. These reflected all the Millennial anxiety of the year of their creation, while refracting it through some other, more mysterious, weirdly muted hysteria that seemed somehow more personal and even less attractive.

Laney's suite, much larger than his apartment in Santa Monica, was like an elongated 1920s apartment following the long, shallow concrete balcony that faced Sunset, this in turn overlooking a deeper balcony on the floor below and the tiny circular lawn that was all that remained of the original gardens.

Lane>' thought it was a strange choice, considering his situation. He would have imagined they'd choose something more corporate, more fortified, more heavily wired, but Rice Daniels had explained that the Chateau had advantages all its own. It was a good choice in terms of image, because it humanized Laney; it looked like a habitation, basically, something with walls and doors and windows, in which a guest could be imagined to be living something akin to a life-not at all the case with the geometric solids that were serious business hotels. It also had deeply rooted associations with the Hollywood star system, and with human tragedy as well. Stars had lived here, in the heyday of old Hollywood, and, later, certain stars had

died here. Out of Control planned to frame the death of Alison Shires 3  
as a tragedy in a venerable Hollywood tradition, but one that had 0

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been brought on by Slitscan, a very contemporary entity. Besides, Daniels explained, the Chateau was far more secure than it might at first look. And at this point Lane>' had been introduced to Berry Rydell, the night security man.

Daniels and Rydell, it seemed to Laney, had known one another prior to Rydell working at the Chateau, though how, exactly, remained unclear. Rydell seemed oddly at home with the workings of the infotainment industry, and at one point, when they'd found themselves alone together, he'd asked Laney who was representing him.

"How do you mean?" Lane>' had said.

"You've got an agent, don't you?"

Laney said he didn't.

"You better get one," Rydell had said. "Not that it'll necessarily come out the way you'd wanted, but, hey, it's show business, right?"

It was indeed show business, to an extent that very quickly made Laney wonder if he'd made the right decision. There had been sixteen people in his suite, for a four-hour meeting, and he'd only been out of the lock-up for six hours. When they'd finally gone, Laney had staggered the length of the place, mistakenly trying several closet doors in his search for the bedroom. Finding it, he'd crawled onto the bed and fallen asleep in the clothes they'd sent Rydell to the Beverly Center to buy for him.

Which he thought he might well do right here, now, in this Golden Street bar, thereby answering the question of what the bourbon was doing to his jet lag. But now, finishing the remainder of the shot, he felt one of those tidal reversals begin, perhaps less to do with the drink than with some in-built chemistry of fatigue and displacement.

"Was Rydell happy?" Yamazaki asked,

It seemed a strange question, to Lane>', but then he'd remembered Rydell mentioning someone Japanese, someone he'd known in San Francisco, and that, of course, had been Yamazaki.

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"Well," Lariey said, "he didn't strike me as desperately unhappy, but there was something sort of down about him. You could say that. I mean, I don't really know him well at all."

"It is too bad," Yamazaki said. "Rydell is a brave man."

"How about you, Laney," Blackwell said, "you think of yourself as a brave man?" The wormlike scar that bisected his eyebrow writhed into a new degree of concentration.

"No," Laney said, "I don't."

"But you went up against Slitscan, didn't you, because of what they did to the girl? You had a job, you had food, you had a place to sleep. You got all that from Slitscan, but they did the girl, so you opted to do 'em back. Is that right?"

"Nothing's ever that simple," Laney said.

When Blackwell spoke, Laney was unexpectedly aware of another sort of intelligence, something the man must ordinarily conceal. "No," Blackwell said, almost gently, "it fucking well isn't, is it?" One large, pinkly jigsawed hand, like some clumsy animal in its own right, began to root in the taut breast pocket of Blackwell's micropore. Producing a small, gray, metallic object that he placed on the bar.

"Now that's a nail," Blackwell said, "galvanized, one-and-a-half-inch, roofing, I've nailed men's hands to bars like this, with nails like that. And some of them were right bastards." There was nothing at all of threat in Blackwell's voice. "And some of those, you nail their one hand, their other comes up with a razor, or a pair of needle-nose pliers." Blackwell's forefinger absently found an angry-looking scar beneath his right eye, as though something had entered there and been deflected along the cheekbone. "To have a go, right?"

"Pliers?"

"Bastards," Blackwell said. "You have to kill 'em, then, Now that's one kind of 'brave,' Laney. What I mean is, how's that so different from what you tried to do to Slitscan?"

"I just didn't want them to let it drop. To let her ... settle to the 3 bottom. Be fotgotten. I didn't really care how badly Slitscan got

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hurt, or even if they were damaged or not. I wasn't thinking of revenge, as much as of a way of . . . keeping her alive?"

"There's other men, you nail their hand to a table, they'll sit there and look at you. That's your true hard man, Laney. Do you think you're one of those?"

Laney looked from Blackwell to the empty bourbon glass, back to Blackwell; the bartender moved, as if to refill it, but Laney covered it with his hand. "If you nail my hand to the bar, Blackwell," and here he spread his other hand, flat, palm down, on the dark wood, the drink-ringed varnish, "I'll scream, okay? I don't know what any of this is about. You might be crazy. But what I most definitely am not is anybody's idea of a hero. I'm not now, and I wasn't back there in

L.A."

Blackwell and Yamazaki exchanged glances. Blackwell pursed his lips, gave a tiny nod. "Good on you then," he said. "I think you just might be right for the job."

"No job," Laney said, but let the bartender pour him a second bourbon. "I don't want to hear about any job at all, not until I know who's hiring me."

"I'm chief of security for Lo/Rez," Blackwell said, "and I owe that silly bastard my life. The last five of which I'd've passed in the punitive bowels of the State of fucking Victoria. If it hadn't been for him. Though I'd've topped myself first, no fear."

"The band? You're security for them?"

"Rydell spoke well of you, Mr. Laney." Yamazaki's neck bobbed in the collar of his plaid shirt,

"I don't know Rydell," Laney said. "He was just the night watchman at a hotel I couldn't afford."

"Rydell has a good sense of people, I think," Yamazaki said.

To Blackwell: "LoJRez? They're in trouble?"

"Rez," Blackwell said. "He says he's going to marry this Jap twist doesn't fucking exist! And he knows she doesn't, and says we've no fucking imagination! Now hear me," and Blackwell produced, from some unspecific region of his clothing, a mirror-polished rectangle

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with a round hole through its uppermost, leading corner. Something not much larger than a cashcard, to see it in his big hand. "Someone's got to our boy, hear? Got to him. Don't know how, don't know who. Though personally myself I'd bet on the fucking Kombinat. Those Russ bastards, But you, my friend, you're going to do your nodal thing for us, on our Rez, and you are going to find flicking out. Who." And the rectangle came down with a concise little thunk, to be left standing, crosswise to the counter's grain, and Laney saw that it was a very small meat cleaver, with round steel rivets through its tidy rosewood handle.

"And when you do," Blackwell said, "we shall sort them well and fucking out."

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10. Whiskey Clone

Eddie's club was way up in something like an offke building. Chia didn't think there were music clubs on the upper floors of buildings like that in Seattle, but she wasn't sure. She'd fallen asleep in the Graceland, and only woke up as Eddie was driving into a garage entrance, and then up into something vaguely like a Ferris wheel, or the cylinder of an old-fashioned revolver, except the bullets were cars. She watched out the windows as it swung them up and over, to stop at the top, where Eddie drove forward into a parking garage that might've been anywhere, except the cars were all big and black, though none as big as the Graceland.

"Come on up with us and freshen up, honey," Maryalice said.

'You look wrecked."

"I have to port," Chia said. "Find my friend I'm staying with..

"Easy enough," Maryalice said, sliding across the velour and opening the door. Eddie got out the driver's side, taking the bag with the Nissan County sticker with him. He still didn't look very happy. Chia took her bag with her and followed Maryalice. They all got into an elevator. Eddie pressed his palm against a hand-shaped outline on the wall and said something in Japanese. The elevator said something back, then the door closed and they were going up. Fast, it felt like, but they just kept going.

Being in the elevator didn't seem to be improving Eddie's mood.

He had to stand right up close to Maryalice, and Chia could see a lit

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tie muscle working, in the hinge of his jaw, as he looked at her. Maryalice just looked right back at him.

"You oughta lighten up," Maryalice said. "It's done."

The little muscle went into overdrive. "That was not the deal," he said, finally. "That was not the arrangement,"

Maryalice lifted an eyebrow. 'You used to appreciate a little innovation."

Eddie glanced from Maryalice to Chia, then, quick, back to Maryalice. "You call that an innovation~"

'You used to have a sense of humor, too," Maryalice said, as the elevator stopped and the door slid open. Eddie glared, then stepped out, Chia and Maryalice following. "Never mind him," Maryalice said. "Just how he gets, sometimes."

Chia wasn't sure what she'd expected, but this definitely wasn't it. A messy room jammed with shipping cartons, and a bank of security monitors. The low ceiling was made of those fibery tiles that were hung on little metal rails; about half of them were missing, with wires and cables looping down from dusty-looking shadow. There were a couple of small desk lamps, one of them illuminating a stack of used instant-noodle containers and a black coffee mug filled with white plastic spoons. A Japanese man in a black meshback that said "Whiskey Clone" across the front was sitting in a swivel chair in front of the monitors, pouring himself a hot drink out of a big thermos with pink flowers on the side.

"Yo, Calvin," Maryalice said, or that was what it sounded like.

"Hey," the man said.

"Calvin's from Tacoma," Maryalice said, as Chia watched Eddie, still carrying the suitcase, march straight through the room, through a door, and out of sight.

"Boss looks happy," the man said, sounding no more Japanese than Maryalice. He took a sip from his thermos cup.

"Yeah," Maryalice said, "He's so glad to see me, he's beside himself."

"This too will pass." Another sip. Looking at Chia from beneath

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the bill of the meshback. The letters in "Whiskey Clone" were the kind they'd use in a mall when they wanted you to think a place was traditional.

"This is Chia," Maryalice said. "Met her in SeaTac," and Chia noticed that she hadn't said she'd met her on the plane. Which made her remember that business with the DNA sampling and the hair-extensions.

"Glad to hear it's still there," the man said. "Means there's some way back out of this batshir."

"Now, Calvin," Maryalice said, "you know you love Tokyo."

"Sure. Had a place in Redmond had a bathroom the size of the whole apartment I got here, and it wasn't even a big bathroom. I mean, it had a shower, No tub or anything."

Chia looked at the screens behind him, Lots of people there, but she couldn't tell what they were doing.

"Looks like a good night," Maryalice said, surveying the screens.

"Just fair," he said. "Fair to middling."

"Quit talking like that," Maryalice said. "You'll have me doing it."

Calvin grinned. "But you're a good old girl, aren't you, Mary-alice?"

"Please," Chia said, "may I use a dataport?"

"There's one in Eddie's office," Maryalice said. "But he's probably on the phone now. Why don't you go in the washroom there," indicating another door, closed, "and have a wash. You're looking a little blurry. Then Eddie'll be done and you can call your friend."

The washroom had an old steel sink and a very new, very complicated-looking toilet with at least a dozen buttons on top of the tank. These were labeled in Japanese. The polymer seat squirmed slightly, taking her weight, and she almost jumped up again. It's okay, she reassured herself, just foreign technology. When she was done, she chose one of the controls at random, producing a superfine spray of warm, perfumed water that made her gasp and jump back.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, then stood well to the side and tried another button. This one seemed to do the trick: the toilet flushed with a jetstream sound that reminded him of being on the plane.

As she washed her hands, and then her face, at the reassuringly ordinary sink, using pale blue liquid soap from a pump-top dispenser shaped like a one-eyed dinosaur, she heard the flushing stop and another sound begin. She looked back and saw a ring of purplish light oscillating, somewhere below the toilet seat. UV, she supposed, sterilizing it.

There was a poster of the Dukes of Nuke 'Em taped on the wall, this hideous 'roidhead metal band. They were sweaty and blank-eyed, grinning, and the drummer was missing his front teeth. The lettering was in Japanese. She wondered why anyone in Japan would be into that, because groups like the Dukes were all about hating anything that wasn't their idea of American. But Kelsey, who'd been to Japan lots, with her father, had said that you couldn't tell what the Japanese would make of anything.

There wasn't anything here to dry your hands on. She got a t-shirt out of her bag and used that, although it didn't work very well. As she was kneeling to stuff the shirt back in, she noticed a corner of something she didn't recognize, but then Calvin cracked the door behind her.

"Excuse me," he said.

"It's okay," Chia said, zipping the bag shut.

"It's not," he said, looking back over his shoulder, then back at her. "You really meet Maryalice at SeaTac?"

"On the plane," Chia said.

"You're not part of it?"

Chia stood up, which made her feel kind of dizzy. "Part of what?"

He looked at her from beneath the brim of the black cap. "Then you really ought to get out of here. I mean right now."

"Why?" Chia asked, although it didn't strike her as a bad idea at all.

"Nothing you want to know anything about." There was a crash, somewhere behind him. He winced. "It's okay. She's just throwing things. They haven't gotten serious yet. Come on," and he grabbed her bag by the shoulder strap

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~ and lifted it up. He was moving fast now, and she had to hustle to keep up with him. Out past the closed door of Eddie's office, past the bank of screens (where she thought she saw people line-dancing in cowboy hats, but she was never sure).

Calvin slapped his hand on the sensor-plate on the elevator door. "Take you to the garage," he said, as the sound of breaking glass came from Eddie's office. "Hang a left, about twenty feet, there's another elevator. Skip the lobby; we got cameras there. Bottom button gets you the subway. Get on a train." He passed her her bag.

"Which one?" Chia asked.

Maryalice screamed. Like something really, really hurt.

"Doesn't matter," Calvin said, and quickly said something in Japanese to the elevator. The elevator answered, but he was already gone, the door closing, and then she was descending, her bag seeming to lighten slightly in her arms.

Eddie's Graceland was still there when the door slid open, a hulking wedge beside those other black can. She found the second elevator Calvin had told her to take, its door scratched and dented. It had regular buttons, and it didn't talk, and it took her down to malls bright as day, crowds moving through them, to escalators and platforms and mag-levs and the eternal logos tethered overhead.

She was in Tokyo at last,

#### 11. Collapse of New Buildings

Laney's room was high up in a narrow tower faced with white ceramic tile. It was trapezoidal in cross section and dated from the eighties boomtown, the years of the Bubble. That it had survived the great earthquake was testimony to the skill of its engineers; that it had survived the subsequent reconstruction testified to an arcane tangle of ownership and an ongoing struggle between two of the city's oldest criminal organizations. Yamazaki had explained this in the cab, returning from New Golden Street.

"We were uncertain how you might feel about new buildings,"

he'd said.

"You mean the nanotech buildings?" Laney had been struggling to keep his eyes open. The driver wore spotless white gloves.

"Yes. Some people find them disturbing." "I don't know. I'd have to see one."

"You can see them from your hotel, I think."

And he could. He knew their sheer brutality of scale from constructs, but virtuality had failed to convey the peculiarity of their apparent texture, a streamlined organicism. "They are like Giger's paintings of New York," Yamazaki had said, but the reference had been lost on Laney.

Now he sat on the edge of his bed, staring blankly out at these

miracles of the new technology, as banal and as sinister as such miracles usually were, and they



were only annoying: the world's largest

inhabited structures. (The Chernobyl containment structure was larger, but nothing human would ever live there.)

The umbrella Yamazaki had given him was collapsing into itself, shrinking. Going away.

The phone began to ring. He couldn't find it.

"Telephone," he said. "Where is it?"

A nub of ruby light, timed to the rings, began to pulse from a flat rectangle of white cedar arranged on a square black tray on a bedside ledge. He picked it up. Thumbed a tiny square of mother-of-pearl.

"Hey," someone said. "That Laney?"

"Who's calling?"

"Rydell. From the Chateau. Hans let me use the phone." Hans was the night manager. "I get the time right? You having breakfast?"

Laney rubbed his eyes, looked out again at the new buildings. "Sure."

"I called Yamazaki," Rydell said. "Got your number."

"Thanks," Laney said, yawning, "but I--"

"Yamazaki said you got the gig."

"I think so," Laney said. "Thanks. Guess I owe--"

"Slitscan," Rydell said. "All over the Chateau,"

"No," Laney said, "that's over."

"You know any Katherine Torrance, Laney? Sherman Oaks address? She's up in the suite you had, with about two vans worth of sensing gear. Hans figures they're trying to get a read on what you were doing up there, any dope or anything."

Laney stared out at the towers. Part of a facade seemed to move, but it had to be his eyes.

"But Hans says there's no way they can sort the residual molecules out in those rooms anyway. Place has too much of a history."

"Kathy Torrance? From Slitscan?"

"Not like they said they were, but they've got all these techs, and techs always t'alk too much, and Ghengis down in the garage saw the decals on some of the cases, when they were unloading. There's about 82 William Gih,ion twenty of 'em, if you don't count the gophers. Got two suites and four singles. Don't tip."

"But what are they doing?"

"That sensor stuff. Trying to figure out what you got up to in the suite. And one of the bellmen saw them setting up a camera."

The entire facade of one of the new buildings seemed to ripple, to crawl slightly. Laney closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, discovering a faint trace of pain residing there from the break. He opened his eyes. "But I never got up to anything."

"Whatever." Rydell sounded slightly hurt. "I just thought you ought to know, is all."

Something was definitely happening to that facade. "I know. Thanks. Sorry."

"I'll let you know if I hear anything," Rydell said. "What's it like over there, anyway?"

Laney was watching a point of reflected light slide across the distant structure, a movement like osmosis or the sequential contraction of some sea creature's palps. "It's strange."

"Bet it's interesting," Rydell said. "Enjoy your breakfast, okay? I'll keep in touch."

"Thanks," Laney said, and Rydell hung up.

Laney put the phone back on the lacquer tray and stretched out on the bed, fully clothed. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see the new buildings. But they were still there, in the darkness and the light behind his lids. And as he watched, they slid apart, deliquesced, and trickled away, down into the mazes of an older city.

He slid down with them.

12. Mitsuko

Clia used a public dataport in the deepest level of the station. The Sandbenders sent the number they'd given her for Mitsuko Mimura, the Tokyo chapter's "social secretary" (everyone in Tokyo chapter seemed to have a formal title). A girl's sleepy voice in Japanese from the Sandbenders' speakers. The translation followed instantly:

"Hello? Yes? May I help you?"

"It's Chia McKenzie, from Seattle."

"You are still in Seattle?"

"I'm here. In Tokyo." She upped the scale on the Sandbenders' map. "In a subway station called Shinjuku."

"Yes. Very good. Are you coming here now?"

"I'd sure like to. I'm really tired."

The voice began to explain the route.

"It's okay," Chia said, "my computer can do it. Just tell me the station I have to get to." She found it on the map, set a marker. "How

long will it take to get there?"

"Twenty to thirty minutes, depending on how crowded the trains are. I will meet you there."

"You don't have to do that," Chia said. "Just give me your address."

"Japanese addresses are difficult."

"It's okay," Chia said, "I've got global positioning." The Sandbenders, working the Tokyo telco, was already showing her Mitsuko Mimura's latitude and longitude. In Seattle, that only worked for business numbers.

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No," Mitsuko said, "I must greet you. Jam the social secretary.'

Thanks," Chia said. "I'm on my way.'

With her bag over her shoulder, left partly unzipped so she could follow the Sandbenders' verbal prompts, Chia rode an escalator up, two levels, bought a ticket with her cashcard, and found her platform. It was really crowded, as crowded as the airport, but when the train came she let the crowd pick her up and squash her into the nearest car; it would've been harder not to get on.

As they pulled out, she heard the Sandbenders announce that they were leaving Shinjuku station.

The sky was like mother-of-pearl when Chia emerged from the station. Gray buildings, pastel neon, a streetscape dotted with vaguely unfamiliar shapes. Dozens of bicycles were parked everywhere, the fragile-looking kind with paper-tube frames spun with carbon fiber. Chia took a step back as an enormous turquoise garbage truck rumbled past, its driver's white-gloved hands visible on the high wheel. As it cleared her held of vision, she saw a Japanese girl wearing a short plaid skirt and black biker jacket. The girl smiled. Chia waved.

Mitsuko's second-floor room was above the rear of her father's restaurant. Chia could hear a steady thumping sound from below, and Mitsuko explained that that was a food-prep robot that chopped and sliced things.

The room was smaller than Chia's bedroom in Seattle, but much cleaner, very neat and organized. So was Mitsuko, who had a razor-edged coppery diagonal bleached into her black bangs, and wore sneakers with double soles. She was thirteen, a year younger than Chia.

Mitsuko had introduced Chia to her father, who wore a white, short-sleeved shirt, a tie, and was supervising three white-gloved men in blue coveralls, who were cleaning his restaurant with great energy and determination, Mitsuko's father had nodded, smiled, said something in Japanese, and gone back to what he was doing. On their way upstairs, Mitsuko, who didn't speak much English, told Chia that she'd told her father that Chia was part of some cultural-exchange program, short-term homestay, something to do with her school.

Mitsuko had the same poster on her wall, the original cover shot from the Dog Soup album.

Mitsuko went downstairs, returning with a pot of tea and a covered, segmented box that contained a California roll and an assortment of less familiar things. Grateful for the familiarity of the California roll, Chia ate everything except the one with the orange sea-urchin goo on top. Mitsuko complimented her on her skill with chopsticks. Chia said she was from Seattle and people there used chopsticks a lot.

Now they were both wearing wireless ear-clip headsets. The translation was generally glitch-free, except when Mitsuko used Japanese slang that was too new, or when she inserted English words that she knew but couldn't pronounce.

Chia wanted to ask her about Rez and the idoru, but they kept getting onto other things. Then Chia fell asleep, sitting up cross-legged on the floor, and Mitsuko must have managed to roll her onto a hard little futon-thing that she'd unfolded from somewhere, because that was where Chia woke up, three hours later.

A rainy silver light was at the room's narrow window.

Mitsuko appeared with another pot of tea, and said something in Japanese. Chia found her ear-clip and put it on.

"You must have been exhausted," the ear-clip translated. Then Mitsuko said she was taking the day off from school, to be with Chia.

They drank the nearly colorless tea from little nubby ceramic cups. Mitsuko explained that she lived here with her father, her mother, and a brother, Masahiko. Her mother was away, visiting a

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relative in Kyoto. Mitsuko said that Kyoto was very beautiful, and that Chia should go there.

"I'm here for my chapter," Chia said. "I can't do tourist things. I have things to find out."

"I understand," Mitsuko said.

"So is it true? Does Rez really want to marry a software agent?"

Mirsuko looked uncomfortable. "I am the social secretary," she said. "You must first discuss this with Hiromi Ogawa."

"Who's she?"

"Hiromi is the president of our chapter."

"Fine," Chia said. "When do I talk to her?"

"We are erecting a site for the discussion, It will be ready soon." Mitsuko still looked uncomfortable.

Chia decided to change the subject. "What's your brother like? How old is he?"

"Masahiko is seventeen," Mitsuko said. "He is a 'pathologicaltechno-.fetishist-with-social-deflclit,'" this last all strung together like one word, indicating a concept that taxed the lexicon of the ear-clips. Chia wondered briefly if it would be worth running it through her Sandbenders, whose translation functions updated automatically whenever she ported.

"A what?"

"Otaku," Mitsuko said carefully in Japanese. The translation burped its clumsy word string again.

"Oh," Chia said, "we have those, We even use the same word."

"I think that in America they are nor the same," Mitsuko said.

"Well," Chia said, "it's a boy thing, right? The otaku guys at my last school were into, like, plastic anime babes, military simulations, and trivia. Bigtime into trivia." She watched Mitsuko listen to the translation.

'Yes," Mitsuko said, "but you say they go to school. Ours do not go to school. They complete their studies on-line, and that is bad, because they cheat easily. Then they are tested, later, and are caught, and fail, but they do not care, It is a social problem."

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"Your brother's one?"

"Yes," Mitsuko said. "He lives in Walled City."

"In where?"

"A multi-user domain. It is his obsession. Like a drug. He has a room here. He seldom leaves it, All his waking hours he is in Walled City. His dreams, too, I think."

Chia tried to get more of a sense of Hiromi Ogawa, before the noon meeting, but with mixed results. She was older, seventeen (as old as Zona Rosa) and had been in the club for at least five years. She was possibly overweight (though this had had to be conveyed in intercultural girl-code, nothing overt) and favored elaborate iconics. But overall Chia kept running up against Mitsuko's sense of her duty to her chapter, and of her own position, and of Hiromi's position.

Chia hated club politics, and she was beginning to suspect they might pose a real problem here.

Mitsuko was getting her computer out. It was one of those soft, transparent Korean units, the kind that looked like a flat bag of clear white jelly with a bunch of colored jujubes inside. Chia unzipped her bag and pulled her Sandbenders out.

'~What is that?" Mitsuko asked.

"My computer."

Mitsuko was clearly impressed. "It is by Harley-Davidson?"

"It was made by the Sandbenders," Chia said, finding her goggles and gloves. "They're a commune, down on the Oregon coast. They do these and they do software."

"It is American?"

"Sure."

"I had not known Americans made computers," Mitsuko said.

Chia worked each silver thimble over the tips of her fingers and thumbs, fastened the wrist straps.

"I'm ready for the meeting," she said.

Mitsuko giggled nervously.

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13. Character Recognition

Yamazaki phoned just before noon. The day was dim and overcast. Laney had closed the curtains in order to avoid seeing the nanotech buildings in that light.

He was watching an NHK show about champion top-spinners. The star, he gathered, was a little girl with pigtails and a blue dress with an old-fashioned sailor's collar. She was slightly cross-eyed, perhaps from concentration. The tops were made of wood. Some of them were big, and looked heavy.

'Hello, Mr. Laney,' Yamazaki said. "You are feeling better now?"

Laney watched a purple-and-yellow top blur into action as the girl gave the carefully wound cord an expert pull. The commentator held a hand mike near the top to pick up the hum it was producing, then said something in Japanese.

'Better than last night,' Laney said.

"It is being arranged for you to access the data that surrounds .

our friend. It is a complicated process, as this data has been protected in many different ways. There was no single strategy. The ways in which his privacy has been protected are complexly incremental."

"Does 'our friend' know about this?"

There was a pause. Laney watched the spinning top. He imagined Yamazaki blinking. "No, he does not."

"I still don't know who I'll really be working for. For him? For

Blackwell?"

'Your employer is Paragon-Asia Dataflow, Melbourne. They are employing me as well.'

'What about Blackwell?'

"Blackwell is employed by a privately held corporation, through which portions of our friend's income pass. In the course of our friend's career, a structure has been erected to optimize that flow, to minimize losses. That structure now constitutes a corporate entity in its own right."

"Management," Laney said. "His management's scared because it looks like he might do something crazy. Is that it?"

The purple-and-yellow top was starting to exhibit the first of the oscillations that would eventually bring it to a halt. "I am still a stranger to this business-culture, Mr. Laney. I find it difficult to assess these things."

"What did Blackwell mean, last night, about Rez wanting to marry a Japanese girl who isn't real?"

"Idoru," Yamazaki said.

"What?"

"'Idol-singer.' She is Rei Toei. She is a personality-construct, a congeries of software agents, the creation of information-designers. She is akin to what I believe they call a 'synthespian,' in Hollywood."

Laney closed his eyes, opened them. "Then how can he marry her?"

"I don't know," Yamazaki said. "But he has very forcefully declared this to be his intention."

"Can you tell me what it is they've hired you to do?"

"Initially, I think, they hoped I would be able to explain the idotu to them: her appeal to her audience, therefore perhaps her appeal to him. Also, I think that, like Blackwell, they remain unconvinced that this is not the result of a conspiracy of some kind. Now they want me to acquaint you with the cultural background of the situation."

"Who are they?"

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"I cannot be more specific now."

The top was starting to wobble. Laney saw something like terror in the girl's eyes. "You don't think there's a conspiracy?"

"I will try to answer your questions this evening. In the meantime, while it is being arranged for you to access the data, please study these

"Hey," Laney protested, as his top-spinning girl was replaced by an unfamiliar logo: a grinning cartoon bulldog with a spiked collar, up to its muscular neck in a big bowl of soup.

"Two documentary videos on Lo/Rez," Yamazaki said. "These are on the Dog Soup label, originally a small independent based in East Taipei. They released the band's first recordings LofRez later purchased Dog Soup and used it to release less commercial material by other artists."

Laney stared glumly at the grinning bulldog, missing the girl with pigtails. "Like documentaries about themselves?"

"The documentaries were not made subject to the band's approval, They are not Lo/Rez corporate documents."

"Well, I guess we've got that to be thankful for."

"You are welcome." Yamazaki hung up.

The virtual POV zoomed, rotating in on one of the spikes on the dog's collar: in close-up, it was a shining steel pyramid. Reflected clouds whipped past in time-lapse on the towering triangular face as the Universal Copyright Agreement warning scrolled into view.

Laney watched long enough to see that the video was spliced together from bits and pieces of the band's public relations footage, "Art-warning," he said, and went into the bathroom to decipher the shower controls.

He managed to miss the first six minutes, showering and brushing his teeth. He'd seen things like that before, art videos, but he'd never actually tried to pay attention to one. Putting on the hotel's white terry robe, he told himself he'd better try. Yamazaki seemed capable of quizzing him on it later.

Why did people make things like this? There was no narration, no apparent structure; some of the same fragments kept repeating throughout, at different speeds.

In Los Angeles there were whole public-access channels devoted to things like this, and home-made

talkshows hosted by naked Encino witches, who sat in front of big paintings of the Goddess they'd done in their garages. Except you could watch that. The logic of these cut-ups, he supposed, was that by making one you could somehow push back at the medium. Maybe it was supposed to be something like treading water, a simple repetitive human activity that temporarily provided at least an illusion of parity with the sea. But to Laney, who had spent many of his waking hours down in the deeper realms of data that underlay the worlds of media, it only looked hopeless. And tedious, too, although he supposed that that boredom was somehow meant to be harnessed, here, another way of pushing back.

Why else would anyone have selected and edited all these bits of Lo and Rez, the Chinese guitarist and the half-Irish singer, saying stupid things in dozens of different television spots, most of them probably intended for translation? Greetings seemed to be a theme. "We're happy to be here in Vladivostok, We hear you've got a great new aquarium!" "We congratulate you on your free elections and your successfull dengue-abatement campaign!" "We've always loved London!" "New York, you're ...pragmatic!"

Laney explored the remains of his breakfast, finding a half-eaten slice of cold brown toast under a steel plate cover. There was an inch of coffee left in the pot. He didn't want to think about the call from Rydell or what it might mean. He'd thought he was done with Slitscan, done with the lawyers .

"Singapore, you're beautiful!" Rez said, Lo chiming in with "Hell-o, Lion City!"

He picked up the remote and hopefully tried the last-forward, No. Mute? No. Yamazaki was having this stuff piped in for his benefit. He considered unplugging the console, but he was afraid they'd be able to tell.

It was speeding up now, the cuts more frequent, the whole more content-free, a numbing blur. Rez's grin was starting to look sinister, something with an agenda of its own that jumped unchanged from one cut to the next,

Suddenly it all slid away, into handheld shadow, highlights on rococo gilt. There was a clatter of glassware. The image had a peculiar flattened quality that he knew from Slitscan: the smallest lapel-cameras did that, the ones disguised as flecks of lint.

A restaurant? Club? Someone seated opposite the camera, beyond a phalanx of green bottles. The darkness and the bandwidth of the tiny camera making the features impossible to read. Then Rez leaned forward, recognizable in the new depth of focus. He gestured toward the camera with a glass of red wine.

"If we could ever once stop talking about the music, and the industry, and all the politics of that, I think I'd probably tell you that it's easier to desire and pursue the attention of tens of millions of total strangers than it is to accept the love and loyalty of the people closest to us."

Someone, a woman, said something in French. Laney guessed that she was the one wearing the camera.

"Ease up, Rozzer. She doesn't understand half you're saying." Laney sat forward. The voice had been Blackwell's.

"Doesn't she?" Rez receded, out of focus. "Because if she did, I think I'd tell her about the loneliness of being misunderstood. Or is it the loneliness of being afraid to allow ourselves to be understood?"

And the frame froze on the singer's blurred face. A date and time-stamp. Two years earlier. The word "Misunderstood" appeared.

The phone rang.

"Yeah?"

"Blackwell says there is a window of opportunity. The schedule has been moved up. You can access

now." It was Yamazaki.

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"Good," Laney said. "I don't think I'm getting very far with this first video."

"Rez's quest for renewed artistic meaning? Don't worry; we will screen it for you again, later."

"I'm relieved," Laney said. "Is the second one as good?"

"Second documentary is more conventionally structured. In-depth interviews, biographical detail, BBC, three years ago."

"Wonderful."

"Blackwell is on his way to the hotel. Goodbye."

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The site Mitsuko's chapter had erected for the meeting reminded Chia of Japanese prints she'd seen on a school trip to the museum in Seattle; there was a brownish light that seemed to arrive through layers of ancient varnish. There were hills in the distance with twisted trees, their branches like quick black squiggles of ink. She came vectoring in, beside Mitsuko, toward a wooden house with deep overhanging eaves, its shape familiar from anime. It was the sort of house that ninjas crept into in the dark, to wake a sleeping heroine and tell her that all was not as she thought, that her uncle was in league with the evil warlord. She checked how she was presenting in a small peripheral window; put a nudge more depth into her lips.

Nearing the house, she saw that everything had been worked up out of club archives, so that the whole environment was actually made of Lo/Rez material. You noticed it first in the wood-and-paper panels of the walls, where faint image-fragments, larger than life, came and went with the organic randomness of leaf-dappled sun and shadow: Rez's cheekbone and half a pair of black glasses, La's hand chording the neck of his guitar. But these changed, were replaced with a mothlike flicker, and there would be more, all the way down into the site's finest resolution, its digital fabric. She wasn't sure if you could do that with enough of the right kind of fractal packets, or if you needed some kind of special computer. Her Sandbenders man

aged a few effects like that, but mainly in its presentation of Sand- 3  
benders software. 0

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14. Tokyo Chapter

Screens slid aside as she and Mitsuko, seated crosslegged, entered the house. Coming to a neat halt side by side, still seated, floating about three inches off the tatami (which Chia avoided focusing on after she'd seen that it was woven from concert-footage; too distracting). It was a nice way to make an entrance. Mitsuko was wearing the kimono and the wide belt-thing, the whole traditional outfit, except there was some low-key animation going on in the weave of the fabric. Chia herself had downloaded this black Silke-Marie KoIb blousonand-tights set, even though she hated paying for virtual designer stuff that they wouldn't even let you keep or copy. She'd used Kelsey's cashcard number for that, though, which had made her feel better about it.

There were seven girls waiting there, all in kimonos, all floating just off the tatami. Except the one sitting by herself, at the head of the imaginary table, was a robot. Not like any real robot, but a slender, chrome-skinned thing like mercury constrained within the form of a girl. The face was smooth, only partially featured, eyeless, with twin straight rows of small holes where a mouth should have been. That would be Hiromi Ogawa, and Chia immediately decided to believe that she was overweight.

Hiromi's kimono was crawling with animated sepia-tone footage from band interviews.

The introductions took a while, and everyone there definitely had a title, but Chia had stopped paying attention after Hiromi's introduction, except to bow when she thought she was supposed to. She didn't like it that Hiromi would turn up that way for a first meeting. It was rude, she thought, and it had to be deliberate, and the trouble they'd gone to with the space just seemed to



make it more deliberate.

"We are honored to welcome you, Chia McKenzie. Our chapter looks forward to affording you every assistance. We are proud to be a part of the ongoing global appreciation of Lo/Rez, their music and their art."

"Thank you," Chia said, and sat there as a silence lengthened.

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Mitsuko quietly cleared her throat. Uh-oh, Chia thought. Speech time. "Thank you for offering to help," Chia said. "Thanks for your hospitality. If any of you ever comes to Seattle, we'll find a way to put you up. But mainly thanks for your help, because my chapter's been really worried about this story that Rez claims he wants to marry some kind of software agent, and since he's supposed to have said it when he was over here, we thought-" Chia had had the feeling that she was moving along a little too abruptly, and this was confirmed by another tiny throat-clearing signal from Mitsuko.

"Yes," Hiromi Ogawa said, "you are welcome, and now Tomo Oshima, our chapter's historian, will favor us with a detailed and accurate account of our chapter's story, how we came, from simple but sincere beginnings, to be the most active, the most respectful chapter in Japan today."

Chia couldn't believe it.

The girl nearest Hiromi, on Chia's right, bowed and began to recite the chapter's history in what Chia immediately understood would be the most excruciatingly boring detail. The two boarding-school roommates, best friends and the most loyal of buddies, who discovered a copy of the Dog Soup album in a bin in Akihabara. How they returned to school with it, played it, were immediate converts. How their schoolmates mocked them, at one point even stealing and hiding the precious recording. . . And on, and on, and Chia already felt like screaming, but there was nothing for it but to sit there. She pulled up a clock and stuck it on the mirrored robot's face, where the eyes should have been. Nobody else could see it, but it made her feel a little better.

Now they were into the first Japanese national Lo/Rez convention, snapshots flashing on the white paper walls, little girls in jeans and t-shirts drinking Coca-Cola in some function room in an Osaka airport hotel, a few obvious parents standing around in the background.

Forty-five minutes later, by the red read-out stuck to Hiromi

Ogawa's blank metallic face, Tomo Oshima concluded: "Which 3 brings us to the present, and the historic visit of Chia McKenzie, the

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representative of our sister chapter in Seattle, in the State of Washington. And now I hope that she will honor us by recounting the history of her own chapter, how it was founded, and the many activities it has undertaken to honor the music of Lo/Rez

There was a soft burst of applause. Chia didn't join in, uncertain whether it was for her or for Tomo Oshima.

"Sorry," Chia said. "Our historian put all that together for you, but it got corrupted when they ran my computer through that big scanner at the airport."

"We are very sorry to hear that," the silver robot said. "How unfortunate."

"Yeah," Chia said, "but I guess it gives us more time to discuss what brings me here, right?"

"We had hoped-"

"To help us understand this whole Rez thing, right? We know. We're glad you do. Because we're all really worried about this rumor. Because it seems like it started here, and this Rei Toei's a local product, so if anybody can tell us what's going on, it's you."

The silver robot said nothing. It was expressionless as ever, but Chia took the clock away just to be sure,

"That's why I'm here," Chia said. "To find out if it's true he wants to marry her."

She sensed a general uneasiness. The six girls were looking at the texture-mapped tatami, unwilling to meet her eye. She wanted to look at Mitsuko, but it would have been too obvious.

"We are an official chapter," Hiromi said. "We have the honor of working closely with actual employees of the band. Their publicists are also concerned with the rumor you mention, and they have requested that we assist them in seeing that it not spread further."

"Spread? It's been on the net for a week!"

"It is rumor only."

"Then they should issue a denial."

"Denial would add weight to the rumor."

"The posting said that Rez had announced that he was in love with  
100 William Gibson

Rd Toe~, that he was going to marry her. There was a long quote." Chia was definitely starting to get the feeling that something was wrong here. This was not what she'd come all this physical distance for; she might as well have been sitting in her bedroom in Seattle.

"We think that the original posting was a hoax. It would not be the first."

"You think? Doesn't that mean you don't know?"

"Our sources within the organization assure us there is no cause for concern,"

"Spin control," Chia said.

"You imply that Lo/Rez employees are lying to us?"

"Look," Chia said, "I'm as into the band as anybody. I came all this way, right? But the people who work for them are just people who work for them. If Rez gets up in a club one night, takes the mike, and announces that he's in love with this idoru and swears he's going to marry her, the PR people are going to say whatever they think they have to say."

"But you have no evidence that any of this occurred. Only an anonymous posting, claiming to be a transcription of a recording made in a club in Shinjuku."

"Monkey Boxing.' We looked it up; it's there."

"Really? Perhaps you should go there."

"Why?"

"There is no longer a club called Monkey Boxing."

"There isn't?"

"Clubs in Shinjuku are extremely short-lived. There is no Monkey Boxing." All of Hiromi's smug satisfaction came through in the Sandbenders' translation.

Chia stared at the smooth silver Ece. Stonewalling bitch. What to do? What would Zona Rosa do if she were in Chia's place? Something symbolically violent, Chia decided. But that wasn't her style,

"Thank you," Chia said. "We just wanted to make sure it wasn't

happening. Sorry I hit on you that way, but we had to be certain. If 3  
you say it's not happening, we'll accept that. We all care about Rez 0

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and the rest of the band, and we know you do too." Chia added a bow of her own, one that seemed to take Hiromi off guard.

Now it was the robot's turn to hesitate. She hadn't expected Chia to just roll over that way. "Our friends in the Lo/Rez organization are very concerned that this pointless hoax not affect the public's perception of Rez. You are aware that there has always been a tendency to portray him as the most creative but least stable member of the band."

This last, at least, was true, though Rez's style of instability was fairly mild, compared with most of his pop-cultural forebears. He had never been arrested, never spent a night in jail. But he was still the one most likely to get into trouble. It had always been part of his charm.

"Sure," Chia said, playing along, relishing the uncertainty she was sure she was causing Hiromi. "And they try to make Lo out as some kind of boring techie, the practical one, but we know that isn't true either." She tagged it with a smile.

"Yes," Hiromi said, "of course. But you are satisfied, then? You will explain to your chapter that this was all the result of some prank, and that all is well with Rez?"

"If you say so," Chia said, "absolutely. And if that settles it, then I've got three more days to kill in Japan."

"To kill?"

"Idiom," Chia said. "Free time. Mitsuko says I ought to see Kyoto.' ,

"Kyoto is very beautiful.

"I'm on my way," Chia said. "Thanks for putting this site together for our meeting. It's really great, and if you'll save it, I'd love to access it later with the rest of my chapter. Maybe we could all get together here when I'm back in Seattle, introduce our chapters."

"Yes Hiromi definitely didn't know what to make of Chia's attitude.

So worry about it, Chia thought.

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"You knew," Chia said. "You knew she'd do that."

Mitsuko was blushing, bright red. Looking at the floor, her jelly-bag computer on her lap. "I am sorry. It was her decision."

"They got to her, right? They told her to get rid of me, hush it up.

"She communicates with the Lo/Rez people privately. It is one of the privileges of her position."

Chia still had her tip-sets on. "I have to talk with my chapter now. Can you give me a few minutes alone?" She felt sorry for Mitsuko, but she was still angry. "I'm not angry with you, okay?"

"I will make tea," Mitsuko said.

When Mitsuko had closed the door behind her, Chia checked that the Sandbenders was still ported, put the goggles back on, and selected the Seattle chapter's main site.

She never got there. Zona Rosa was waiting to cut her out.

15. Akihabara

Low gray cloud pressing down on the sheer gray city. A glimpse of new buildings, through the scaled-down limo's tinted, lace-curtained windows.

They passed an Apple Shires ad, a cobbled lane leading away into some hologram nursery land, where smiling juice bottles danced and sang. Laney's jet lag was back, in some milder but more baroque format. Something compounded of a pervasive sense of guilt and a feeling of physical distance from

his own body, as though the sensory signals arrived stale, after too long a passage, through some other country that he himself was never privy to.

"I thought we'd done with all of that when we got rid of those Siberian neuropaths," Blackwell said. He was dressed entirely in black, which had the effect of somewhat reducing his bulk. I-Ic wore a soft, smocklike garment sewn from very black denim, multiple pockets around its wide hem. Laney thought it looked vaguely Japanese, in some medieval way. Something a carpenter might wear. "Bent as a dog's hind legs. Picked them up touring the Kombinat states."

"Neuropaths?"

"Filling Rez's head with their garbage. He's vulnerable to influences, touring. Combination of stress and boredom. Cities start to look the same. One hotel room after another. It's a syndrome, is what itis."

"Where are we going?"

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"Akihbara"

Where?'

Where we're going." Blackwell consulted an enormous, elaborately dialed, steel-braceleted chronometer that looked as though it had been designed to do double duty as brass knuckles. "Took a month before they'd let me have a go, do what was needed. Then we got him over to a clinic in Paris and they told us what those bastards had been feeding him had made a pig's breakf~st of his endocrine system. Put him right, in the end, but it needn't have happened, none of it."

But you got rid of them?" Laney had no idea what Blackwell was talking about, but it seemed best to keep up the illusion of conversation.

"Told them I was thinking about putting them face-first through a little Honda tree-shredder I'd purchased, just on the off chance," Blackwell said. "Not necessary. Showed them it, though. In the end, they were sent along with no more than a moderate touch-up.'

Laney looked at the back of the driver's head. The right-hand drive worried him. He felt like there was nobody in the driver's seat. "How long did you say you'd worked for the band?'

"Five years."

Laney thought of the video, Blackwell's voice in the darkened club. Two years ago. "Where are we going?"

"Be there, soon enough."

They entered an area of narrower streets, of featureless, vaguely shabby buildings covered with unlit, inactivated advertising. Huge representations of media platforms Laney didn't recognize. Some of the buildings revealed what he assumed was quake damage. Head-sized gobs of a btownish, glasslike substance protruded from cracks that ran diagonally across one facade, like a cheap toy repaired badly by a clumsy giant. The limo pulled to the curb.

"'Electric Town,'" Blackwell said. "I'll page you," he said to the driver, who nodded in a way that struck Laney as being not particularly Japanese. Blackwell opened the door and got out with that same

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unlikely grace Laney had noted before, the car bucking noticeably with the departure of his weight. Laney, sliding across the gray velour seat, felt tired and wooden.

'Somehow I was expecting a more upscale destination," he said to Blackwell. It was true.

'Stop expecting," Blackwell said.

The building with the cracks and the brown, saplike knobs opened into a white-and-pastel sea of kitchen appliances. The ceiling was low, laced with temporary-looking pipes and conduits. Laney

followed Blackwell down a central aisle. A few figures stood along other aisles to either side, but he had no way of knowing whether these were salespeople or potential customers.

An old-fashioned escalator was grinding away, at the end of the central aisle, the rectilinear steel teeth at the edges of each ascending step worn sharp and bright. Blackwell kept walking. Levitated ahead of Laney, climbing, his feet barely seeming to move. Laney mounted hard behind him.

They rose up to a second level, this one displaying a less consistent range of goods: wallscreens, immersion consoles, automated rediners with massage-modules bulging from their cushions like the heads of giant mechanical grubs.

Along an aisle walled with corrugated plastic cartons, Blackwell with his scarred hands tucked deep in the pockets of his ninja smock. Into a maze of bright blue plastic tarps, slung from pipes overhead. Unfamiliar tools. A worker's dented thermos standing on a red toolkit that spanned a pair of aluminum sawhorses. Blackwell holding a final tarp aside. Laney ducked, entering.

"We've been holding it open for the past hour, Blackwell," someone said. "Not an easy thing."

Blackwell let the tarp fall into place behind him. "Had to collect him from the hotel."

The space, walled off with the blue rarps on three sides, was twice the size of Laney's hotel room but considerably more crowded.

A lot of hardware was assembled there: a collection of black consoles o

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were cabled together in a white swamp of Styrofoam packing-forms, 1 torn corrugated plastic, and crumpled sheets of bubble-pack. Two men and a woman, waiting. It was the woman who had spoken. As Laney shuffled forward, ankle-deep through the packing materials, the stuff creaked and popped, slippery under the soles of his shoes.

Blackwell kicked at it. "You might have tidied up."

"We aren't set-dressers," the woman said. She sounded to Laney as though she was from Northern California. She had short brown hair cut in bangs, and something about her reminded him of the quants who worked at Slitscan. Like the other two, men, one Japanese and one red-haired, she wore jeans and a generic nylon bomber jacket.

"Hell of a job on short notice," the redhead said.

"No notice," the other corrected, and he was definitely from California. His hair was pulled straight back, fastened high in a little samurai ponytail.

"What you're paid for," Blackwell said.

"We're paid to tour," the redhead said.

"If you want to tour again, you'd better hope that these work." Blackwell looked at the cabled consoles.

Laney saw a folding plastic table set up against the rear wall. It was bright pink. There was a gray computer there, a pair of eye-phones. Unfamiliar cables ran to the nearest console: flat ribbons candy-striped in different colors. The wall behind was plastered with an overlay of old advertising; a woman's eye was directly behind the pink table, a yard wide, her laser-printed pupil the size of Laney's head.

Laney moved toward the table, through the Styrofoam, sliding his feet, a motion not unlike cross-country skiing.

"Let's do it," he said. "Let's see what you've got."

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Zona Rosa kept a secret place, a country carved from what once had been a corporate website.

It was a valley lined with ruined swimming pools, overgrown with cactus and red Christmas flowers.

Lizards posed like hieroglyphs on mosaics of shattered tile.

No houses stood in that valley, though sections of broken wall gave shade, or rusting rectangles of corrugated metal set aslant on weathered wooden uprights. Sometimes there were ashes of a cooking fire.

She kept it early evening there.

"Zona?"

"Someone is trying to find you." Zona in her ragged leather jacket over a white t-shirt. In that place she presented as a quick collage, fragments torn from films, magazines, Mexican newspapers: dark eyes, Aztec cheekbones, a dusting of acne scars, her black hair tangled like smoke. She kept the resolution down, never let herself come entirely into focus.

"My mother?"

"No. Someone with resources. Someone who knows that you are in Tokyo." The narrow toes of her black boots were pale with the dust of the valley. There were copper zips down the outer seams of her faded black jeans, waist to ankle. "Why are you dressed that way?"

Chia remembered that she was still presenting in the Silke-Marie

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16. Zona

KoIb outfit. "There was a meeting. Very formal. Major butt-pain. I got this with Kelsey's cashcard."

"Where were you ported, when you paid for it?"

"Where I'm ported now. Mitsuko's place."

Zona frowned. "What other purchases have you made?"

"None."

"Nothing?"

"A subway ticket."

Zona snapped her fingers and a lizard scurried from beneath a rock. It ran up her leg and into her waiting hand. As she stroked it with the fingers of the other hand, the patterns of its coloration changed. She tapped its head and the lizard ran down her leg, vanishing behind a crumpled sheet of rusted roofing. "Kelsey is frightened, frightened enough to come to me."

"Frightened of what?"

"Someone contacted her about your ticket. They were trying to reach her father, because the points used to purchase it were his. But he is traveling. They spoke with Kelsey instead. I think they threatened her."

"With what?"

"I don't know. But she gave them your name and the number of the cashcard."

Chia thought about Maryalice and Eddie.

Zona Rosa took a knife from her jacket pocket and squatted on a shelf of pinkish rock. Golden dragons swirled in the shallow depths of the knife's pink plastic handles. She thumbed a button of plated tin and the dragon-etched blade snapped out, its spine sawtoothed and merciless. "She has no balls, your Kelsey."

"She's not my Kelsey, Zona."

Zona picked up a length of green-barked branch and began to shave thin curls from it with the edge of the switchblade. "She would not last an hour, in my world." On a previous visit, she'd told Kelsey stories of the war with the Rats, pitched battles fought through the garbage-strewn playgrounds and collapsing parking garages of vast  
110 William Gibson  
housing projects. How had that war begun? Over what? Zona never said.

"Neither would I."

"So who is looking for you?"

"My mother would be, if she knew I was here

"That was not your mother, the one who put the fear into Kelsey."

"If someone knew my seat number on the flight over, they could get a ticket number and trace it back, right?"

"If they had certain resources, yes. It would be illegal."

"From there, they could go to Kelsey-"

"From there they are in the frequent-flyer files of Air Magellan, which implies very serious resources."

"There was a woman, on the plane... She had the seat beside me. Then I had to carry her suitcase, and she and her boyfriend gave me a ride into Tokyo.

"You carried her suitcase?"

"Yes."

"Tell me this story. All of it. When did you first see this woman?"

"In the airport, SeaTac. They were doing noninvasive DNA samples and I saw her do this weird thing Chia began the story of Maryalice and the rest of it, while Zona Rosa sat and peeled and sharpened her stick, frowning.

"Fuck your mother," Zona Rosa said, when Chia had finished her story. The translation rendered her tone as either amazement or disgust, Chia couldn't tell.

"What?" Chia's confusion was absolute.

Zona looked at her along the length of the peeled stick. "An idiom. Idioma. Very rich and complicated. It has nothing to do with your mother." She lowered the stick and did something to her knife, folding the blade away with a triple click. The lizard she'd adjusted  
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earlier came scurrying low across a narrow ledge of rock, clinging so close as to appear two-dimensional. Zona picked it up and stroked it into yet another color-configuration.

"What are you doing?"

"Harder encryption," Zona said, and put the lizard on the lapel of her jacket, where it clung like a brooch, its eyes tiny spheres of onyx. "Someone is looking for you. Probably they've already found you. We must try to insure that our conversation is secure."

"Can you do that, with him?" The lizards head moved.

"Maybe. He's new. But those are better." She pointed up with the stick. Chia squinted into the evening sky, dark cloud tinted with streaks of sunset pink. She thought she saw a sweep of wings, so high. Two things flying. Big. Not planes. But then they were gone. "Illegal, in your country. Colombian. From the data-havens." Zona put the pointed end of her stick on the ground and began to twirl it one way, then the other, between her palms. Chia had seen a rabbit make -fire that way, once, in an ancient cartoon. "You are an idiot."

"Why?"

"You carried a bag through customs? A stranger's bag?"

"Yes -

"Idiot!"

"I am not."

"She is a smuggler. You are hopelessly naive."

But you went along with sending me here, Chia thought, and suddenly felt like crying. "But why are they looking for me?"

Zona shrugged. "In the District, a cautious smuggler would not let a mule go free.

Something silvery and cold executed a tight little flip somewhere behind and below Chia's navel, and with it came the unwelcome recollection of the washroom at Whiskey Clone, and the corner of something she hadn't recognized. In her bag. Stuffed down between her t-shirts. When she'd used one to dry her hands.

"What's wrong?"

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I "I better go. Mitsuko went to make tea. . . Talking too quickly, biting off the words.

"Go? Are you insane? We must-"

"Sorry. 'Bye." Pulling off the goggles and scrabbling at the wrist-fasteners.

Her bag there, where she'd left it.

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17. The Walls of Fame

"We had no time to do this right," the woman said, handing Laney the eyephones. He was sitting on a child-sized pink plastic bench that matched the table. "If there is a way to do it right."

There are areas we could not arrange access to," said the

Japanese-American with the ponytail. "Blackwell said you've had experience with celebrities."

"Actors," Laney said. "Musicians, politicians .

"You'll probably find this different. Bigger. By a couple oi degrees of magnitude.'

"What cant you access?" Laney asked, settling the 'phones over

his eyes.

We don't know," he heard the woman say. "You'll get a sense of the scale of things, going in. The



blanks might be accountancy, tax-law stuff, contracts . . . We're just tech support. He has other people someone pays to make sure parts of it stay as private as possible."

"Then why not bring them in?" Laney asked.

He felt Blackwell's hand come down on his shoulder like a bag of sand. "I'll discuss that with you later. Now get in there and have a look. What we pay you for, isn't it?"

In the week following Alison Shires' death, Laney had used Out of Control's DatAmerica account to re-access the site of her personal

data. The nodal point was gone, and a certain subtle reduction had taken place. Not a shrinkage so much as a tidying, a folding in.

But the biggest difference was simply that she was no longer generating data. There was no credit activity. Even her Upful Groupvine account had been canceled. As her estate was executed, and various business affairs terminated, her data began to take on a neat rectilinearity. Laney thought of the dead bundled squarely in their graveclothes, of coffins and cairns, of the long straight avenues of cemeteries in the days when the dead had been afforded their own real estate.

The nodal point had formed where she had lived, while she had lived, in the messy, constantly proliferating interface with the ordinary yet endlessly multiplex world. Now there was no longer an interface.

He'd looked, but only briefly, and very cautiously, to see whether her actor might be undertaking tidying activities of his own. Nothing obvious there, but he imagined Out of Control would have set a more careful watch on that.

Her data was very still. Only a faint, methodical movement at its core: something to do with the ongoing legal mechanism of the execution of her estate.

A catalog of each piece of furniture in the bedroom of a guesthouse in Ireland. A subcatalog of the products provided in the seventeenth-century walnut commode at bedside there: toothbrush, toothpaste, analgesic tablets, tampons, razor, shaving gel. Someone would check these periodically, restock to the inventory. (The last guest had taken the gel but not the razor.) In the first catalog, there was a powerful pair of Austrian binoculars, tripod-mounted, which also functioned as a digital camera.

Laney accessed its memory, discovering that the recording function had been used exactly once, on the day the manufacturer's warranty had been activated. The warranty was now two months void, 116 William Gibson the single recorded image a view from a white-curtained balcony, looking toward what Laney took to be the Irish Sea. There was an unlikely palm tree, a length of chainlink fence, a railbed with a twin dull gleam of track, a deep expanse of grayish-brown beach, and then the gray and silver sea. Closer to the sea, partially cut off by the image's border, there appeared to be a low, broad fort of stone, like a truncated tower. Its stones were the color of the beach.

Laney tried to quit the bedroom, the guesthouse, and found himself surrounded by archaeologically precise records of the restoration of five vast ceramic stoves in an apartment in Stockholm. These were like giant chess pieces, towers of brick faced with elaborately glazed, lavishly molded ceramic. They rose to the fourteen-foot ceilings, and several people could easily have stood upright in one. There was a record of the numbering, disassembly, cleaning, restoration, and reassembly of each brick in each stove. There was no way to access the rest of the apartment, but the proportions of the stoves led Laney to assume that it was very large. He clicked to the end of the stove-record and noted the final price of the work; at current rates it was more than several times his former annual salary at Slitscan.

He clicked back, through points of recession, trying for a wider view, a sense of form, -but there were only walls, bulking masses of meticulously arranged information, and he remembered Alison Shires and his apprehension of het data-death.

"The lights are on," Laney said, removing the eyephones, "but there's nobody home." He checked the computer's clock: he'd spent a little over twenty minutes in there.

Blackwell regarded him dourly, settled on an injection-molded crate like a black-draped Buddha, the scars in his eyebrows knitted into new configurations of concern. The three technicians looked carefully blank, hands in the pockets of their matching jackets.

"How's that, rheni" Blackwell asked.

"I'm not sure," Laney said. 'He doesn't seem to do anything."

"He doesn't bloody do anything but do things," Blackwell declared, "as you'd know if you were orchestrating his bloody security!"

"Okay," Laney said, "then where'd he have breakfast?" Blackwell looked uncomfortable. "In his suite."

"His suite where?"

"Imperial Hotel." Blackwell glared at the technicians. "Which empire, exactly?"

"Here. Bloody Tokyo"

"Here? He's in Tokyo?"

"You lot," Blackwell said, "outside," The brown-haired woman shrugged, inside her nylon jacket, and went kicking through the Styrofoam, head down, the other two following in her wake. When the tarp dropped behind them, Blackwell rose from his crate. "Don't think you can try me on for size.

"I'm telling you that I don't think this is going to work. Your man isn't in there."

'~That's his bloody life."

"How did he pay for his breakfast?"

"Signed to the suite."

"Is the suite in his name?"

"Of course not."

"Say he needs to buy something, during the course of the day?"

"Someone buys it for him, don't they?"

"And pays with?"

"A card,"

"But not in his name."

"Right."

"So if anyone were looking at the transaction data, there'd be no way to connect it directly to him, would there?"

"No."

"Because you're doing your job, right?"

"Yes."

"Then he's invisible. To me. I can't see him. He isn't there. I can't do what you want to pay me to do. It's impossible."

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"But what about all the rest of it?"

Laney put the eyephones down on the keyboard "That isn't a person. That's a corporation."

"But you've got it all! His bloody houses! His fiats! Where the gardeners put the bloody flowers in the rock wall! All of it!"

"But I don't know who he is. I can't make him out against the rest of it, He's not leaving the traces that make the patterns I need."

Blackwell sucked in his upper lip and kept it there. Laney heard the dislodged prosthesis click against his teeth.

"I have to get some idea of who he really is," Laney said.

The lip re-emerged, damp and gleaming. "Christ," Blackwell said, "that~r a poser."

"I have to meet him."

Blackwell wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "His music, then?" He raised his eyebrows hopefully. "Or there's video--"

"I've got video, thanks. It really might help if I could meet him."

Blackwell touched his ear-stump. "You meet him, you think you'll be able to get his nodes, nodal, do that thing Yama's on about?"

"I don't know," Laney said. "I can try."

"Bloody hell," Blackwell said. He plowed through the Styrofoam, swept the tarp aside with his arm, barked for the waiting technicians, then turned back to Laney. "Sometimes I'd as soon be back with my mates in Jika Jika. Get things sorted, in there, they'd bloody stay that way." The woman with the brown bangs thrust her head in, past the edge of the tarp. "Collect this business in the van," Blackwell told her. "Have it ready to use when we need it."

"We don't have a van, Keithy," the woman said.

"Buy one," Blackwell said.

18. The Otaku

Something rectangular, yielding to the hrst touch but hard inside, as she tugged it free. Wrapped in a blue and yellow plastic bag from the SeaTac duty-free, crookedly sealed with wrinkled lengths of slick brown tape. Heavy. Compact.

"Hello."

Chia very nearly falling backward, where she crouched above her open bag, at the voice and the sight of this boy, who in that first instant she takes to be an older girl, side-parted hair falling past her shoulders.

"I am Masahiko." No translator. He wore a dark, oversized tunic, vaguely military, buttoned to its high, banded collar, loose around his neck. Old gray sweatpants bagging at the knees. Grubby-looking white paper slippers.

"Mitsuko made tea," indicating the tray, the stoneware pot, two

cups. "But you were pcrted."

"Is she here?" Chia pushed the thing back down into her bag.

"She went out," Masahiko said. "May I look at your computer?"

"Computer?" Chia stood, confused.

"It is Sandbenders, yes?"

She poured some of the tea, which was still steaming. "Sure. You want tea?"

"No," Masahiko said. "I drink coffee only." He squatted on the

tatami, beside the low table, and ran an admiring fingertip along the

edge of the Sandbenders' cast aluminum. "Beautiful. I have seen a small disk player by the same maker. It is a cult, yes?"

"A commune. Tribal people. In Oregon."

The boy's black hair was long and glossy and smoothly brushed, but Chia saw there was a bit of noodle caught in it, the thin, kinky kind that came in instant ramen bowls.

"I'm sorry I was ported when Mitsuko came back. She'll think I was rude."

"You are from Seattle." Not a question.

'You're her brother?'

"Yes. Why are you here?" His eyes large and dark, his face long and pale.

"Your sister and I are both into Lo/Rez."

"You have come because he wants to marry Rei Toei?"

Hot tea dribbled down Chia's chin. "She told you that?"

"Yes," Masahiko said. "In Walled City, some people worked on her design." He was lost in his study of her Sandbenders, turning it over in his hands. His fingers were long and pale, the nails badly chewed.

"Where's that?"

"Netside,' he said, flipping the weight of his hair back, over one shoulder.

'What do they say about her?~'

"Original concept. Almost radical.' He stroked the keys. "This is very beautiful

"You learned English here?"

"In Walled City."

Chia tried another sip of tea, then put the cup down. "You have any coffee?"

"In my room," he said.

Masahiko's room, at the bottom of a short flight of concrete stairs, to the rear of the restaurant's kitchen, had probably been a storage

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closet. It was a boy-nightmare, the sort of environment Chia knew from the brothers of friends, its floor and ledgelike bed long vanished beneath unwashed clothes, ramen-wrappers, Japanese magazines with wrinkled covers. A tower of empty foam ramen bowls in one corner, their hologram labels winking from beyond a single cone of halogen. A desk or table forming a second, higher ledge, cut from some recycled material that looked as though it had been laminated from shredded juice cartons. His computer there, a featureless black cube. A shallower shelf of the juice-carton board supported a pale blue microwave, unopened ramen bowls, and half a dozen tiny steel cans of

coffee.

One of these, freshly microwaved, was hot in Chia's hand. The coffee was strong, sugary, thickly creamed. She sat beside him on the lumpy bed ledge, a padded jacket wadded up behind her for a cushion.

It smelled faintly of boy, of ramen, and of coffee. Though he seemed very clean, now that she was this close, and she had a vague idea that Japanese people generally were. Didn't they love to bathe? The thought made her want a shower.

"I like this very much." Reaching to touch the Sandbenders again, which he'd brought from upstairs and placed on the work surface, in front of his black cube, sweeping aside a litter of plastic spoons, pens, nameless bits of metal and plastic.

"I-low do you see to work yours?" Gesturing toward his computer with the miniature can of coffee.

He said something in Japanese. Worms and dots of pastel neon lit the faces of the cube, crawling and pulsing, then died.

The walls, from floor to ceiling, were thickly covered with successive layers of posters, handbills, graphics files. The wall directly in front of her, above and behind the black computer, was hung with a large scarf, a square of some silky material screened with a map or diagram in red and black and yellow. Hundreds of irregular blocks or rooms, units of some kind, pressing in around a central vacancy, an uneven vertical rectangle, black.

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"Walled City," he said, following her eye. He leaned forward, fingertip finding a particular spot. 'This is mine. Eighth level.'

Chia pointed to the center of the diagram. "What's this?"

"Black hole. In the original, something like an airshaft." He looked at her. "Tokyo has a black hole, too. You have seen this?"

'No," she said.

"The Palace. No lights. From a tall building, at night, the Imperial Palace is a black hole. Watching, once, I saw a torch flare."

"What happened to it in the earthquake?"

He raised his eyebrows. "This of course would not be shown. All now is as before. We are assured of this." He smiled, but only with the corners of his mouth.

"Where did Mitsuko go?" He shrugged.

"Did she say when she'd be back?" "No."

Chia thought of Hiromi Ogawa, and then of someone phoning for Kelsey's father. Hiromi? But then there was whatever it was, upstairs in her bag in Mitsuko's room. She remembered Maryalice yelling from behind the door to Eddie's office. Zona had to be right.

"You know a club called Whiskey Clone?"

"No." He stroked the buffed aluminum edges of her Sand-benders.

"How about Monkey Boxing?" He looked at her, shook his head.

"You probably don't get out much, do you?" He held her gaze. "In Walled City."

"I want to go to this club, Monkey Boxing. Except maybe it isn't called that anymore. It's in a place called Shinjuku. I was in the station there, before."

"Clubs are not open, now."

"That's okay. I just want you to show me where it is. Then I'll be able to find my own way back."

"No. I must return to Walled City. I have responsibilities. Find

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the address of this place and I will explain to your computer where to go."

The Sandbenders could find its own way there, but Chia had decided she didn't want to go alone. Better to go with a boy than Mitsuko, and Mitsuko's allegiance to her chapter could be a problem anyway. Mainly, though, she just wanted to get out of here. Zona's news had spooked her. Somebody knew she was here. And what to do about the thing in her bag?

"You like this, right?" Pointing at her Sandbenders.

"Yes," he said.

"The software's even better. I've got an emulator in there that'll install a virtual Sandbenders in your computer. Take me to Monkey Boxing and it's yours."

"Have you always lived here?" Chia asked, as they walked to the station. "In this neighborhood, I mean?"

Masahiko shrugged. Chia thought the street made him uncomfortable. Maybe just being outside. He'd traded his gray sweats for equally baggy black cotton pants, cinched at the ankle with elastic-sided black nylon gaiters above black leather workshoes. He still wore his black tunic, but with the addition of a short-billed black leather cap that she thought might have once been part of a school uniform. If the tunic was too big for him, the cap was too small. He wore it perched forward at an angle, the bill riding low. "I live in Walled City," he said.

"Mitsuko told me. That's like a multi-user domain,"

"Walled City is unlike anything."

"Give me the address when I give you the emulator. I'll check it out." The sidewalk arched over a concrete channel running with grayish water. It reminded her of her Venice. She wondered if there had been a stream there once.

"It has no address," he said.

"That's impossible," Chia said,  
He said nothing.

She thought about what she'd found when she'd opened the SeaTac duty-free bag. Something flat and rectangular, dark gray. Maybe made from one of those weird plastics that had metal in them. One end had rows of little holes, the other had complicated shapes, metal, and a different kind of plastic. There didn't seem to be any way to open it, no visible seams. No markings. Didn't rattle when she shook it. Maybe What Things Are, the icon dictionary, would recognize it, but she hadn't had time. Masahiko had been downstairs changing when she'd slit the blue and yellow plastic with Mitsuko's serially numbered, commemorative Lo/Rez Swiss Army knife. She'd glanced around the room for a hiding place. Everything too neat and tidy.

Finally she'd put it back in her bag, hearing him coming up the stairs from the kitchen. Which was where it was now, along with her Sandbenders, under her arm, as they entered the station. Which was probably not smart but she just didn't know.

She used Kelsey's cashcard to buy them both tickets.

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There was a fax from Rydell waiting for Laney when Blackwell dropped him at the hotel. It had been printed on expensive-looking gray letterhead that contrasted drastically with the body of the fax itself, which had been sent from a Lucky Dragon twenty-four-hour convenience store on Sunset. The smiling Lucky Dragon, blowing smoke from its nostrils, was centered just below the hotel's silver-

embossed logo, something Laney thought of as the Droopy Evil Elf Hat. Whatever it was supposed to be, the hotel's decorators were very fond of it. It formed a repeating motif in the lobby, and Laney was glad that it didn't seem to have reached the guest rooms yet.

Rydell had hand-printed his fax with a medium-width fiber-pen in scrupulously neat block capitals. Laney read it in the elevator.

It was addressed to C. LANEY, GUEST

I THINK THEY KNOW WHERE YOU ARE. SHE AND THE  
DAY MANAGER HAD COFFEE IN THE LOBBY AND HE  
KEPT LOOKING AT ME. HE COULD'VE CHECKED THE  
PHONE LOG EASY. WISH I HADN'T CALLED YOU THERE.  
SORRY. ANYWAY, THEN SHE AND THE OTHERS CHECKED  
OUT FAST, LEFT THE TECHS TO PACK UP. A TECH  
TOLD GHENGIS IN THE GARAGE THAT SOME OF THEM  
WERE ON THEIR WAY TO JAPAN AND HE WAS GLAD HE  
WASN'T, WATCH OUT, OKAY? RYDELL

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19. Arleigh

"Okay," Laney said, and remembered how he'd walked to the Lucky Dragon one night, against Rydell's advice, because he couldn't sleep. There were scary-looking bionic hookers posted every block or so, but otherwise it hadn't felt too dangerous. Someone had painted a memorial mural to J. D. Shapely on one side of the Lucky Dragon, and the management had had the good sense to leave it there, culturally integrating their score into the actual twenty-four-hour life of the Strip. You could buy a burrito there, a lottery ticket, batteries, tests for various diseases. You could do voice-mail, e-mail, send faxes. It had occurred to Laney that this was probably the only store for miles that sold anything that anyone ever really needed; the others all sold things that he couldn't even imagine wanting.

He re-read the fax, walking down the corridor, and used the cardkey to open his door.

There was a shallow wicker basket on the bed, spread with white tissue and unfamiliar objects. On closer inspection, these proved to be his socks and underwear, freshly laundered and arranged in little paper holders embossed with the Elf Hat. He opened the narrow, mirrored closet door, activating a built-in light, and discovered his shirts arranged on hangers, including the blue button-downs Kathy Torrance had made fun of. They looked brand new. He touched one of the lightly starched cuffs. "Stitch count," he said. He looked down at Rydell's folded fax. He imagined Kathy Torrance headed straight for him, on an SST from Los Angeles. He discovered that he couldn't imagine her sleeping. He'd never seen her asleep and somehow it didn't seem like something she'd willingly do. In the weird vibrationless quiet of supersonic flight, she'd be staring at the gray blank of the window, or at the screen of her computer.

Thinking of him.

The screen behind him came on with a soft chime and he jumped, four inches, straight up. He turned and saw the BBC logo. Yarnazaki's second video.

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He was a third of the way through it when the door chimed. Ret was strolling along a narrow trail

in the jungle somewhere, wearing sun-bleached khakis and rope-soled sandals. He was singing something as he went, a wordless little melody, over and over, trying different tones and stresses. His bare chest shone with sweat, and when the open shirt swung aside you'd catch a corner of his I Ching tattoo. He had a length of bamboo, and swung it as he walked, swatting at dangling vines. Laney had a sneaking suspicion that the wordless melody had subsequently turned into some global billion-seller, but he couldn't place it yet. The door chimed again.

He got up, crossed to the door, thumbed the speaker button. "Yes?"

"Hello?" A woman's voice.

He touched the card-sized screen set into the doorframe and saw a dark-haired woman. Bangs. The tech from the appliance warehouse. He unlocked the door and opened it.

"Yamazaki thinks we should talk," she said.

Laney saw that she was wearing a black suit with a narrow skin, dark stockings.

"Aren't you supposed to be shopping for a van?" He stepped back to let her in.

"Got one," closing the door behind her. "When the Lo/Rez machine decides to throw money at a problem, money will be thrown. Usually in the wrong direction." She looked at the screen, where Rez was still swinging along, swatting flies from his neck and chest, lost in composition.

"Homework?"

'Yamazaki.'

"Arleigh McCrae," she said, taking a card from a small black purse and handing it to him. Her name there, then four telephone numbers and two addresses, neither of them physical. "Do you have a card, Mr. Laney?"

"Cohn. No. I don't."

"They can make them up for you at the desk. Everyone has a card 3 here,"

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He put the card in his shirt pocket. "Blackwell didn't give me one. Neither did Yamazaki."

"Outside the Lo/Rez organization, I mean. It's like not having socks."

"I have socks," Laney said, indicating the basket on the bed. "Do you feel like watching a BBC documentary on Lo/Rez?"

"No."

"I don't think I can turn it off. He'll know."

"Try lowering the volume. Manually." She demonstrated.

"A technician," Laney said.

"With a van. And umpti-million yen worth of equipment that didn't seem to do much for you." She sat down in one of the room's two small armchairs, crossing her legs.

Laney took the other chair. "Not your fault. You got me in there just fine. But it's not the kind of data I can work with."

"Yamazaki told me what you're supposed to be able to do," she said. "I didn't believe him."

Laney looked at her. 'I can't help you there.' There were three smiling suns, like black woodblock prints, down the inside of her left calf.

"They're woven into the stockings. Catalan."

Laney looked up. "I hope you're not going to ask me to explain what it is people think they pay me



to do," he said, "because I can't. I don't know."

"Don't worry," she said. "I just work here. But what I'm being paid to do, right now, is determine what it is we could give you that would allow you to do whatever it is that you're alleged to be able to do."

Laney looked at the screen. Concert footage now, and Rez was dancing, a microphone in his hand. "You've seen this video, right? Is he serious about that 'Sino-Celtic' thing he was talking about in that interview?"

"You haven't met him yet, have you?"

"No."

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"Its not the easiest thing, deciding what Re2 is serious about."

"But how can there be 'Sino-Celtic mysticism' when the Chinese and the Celts don't have any shared history?"

"Because Rez himself is half Chinese and half Irish. And if there's one thing he's serious about

"Yes?"

"It's Rez."

Laney stared glumly at the screen as the singer was replaced by a close-up of Lo's playing, his hands on the black-bodied guitar. Earlier, a venerable British guitarist in wonderful tweeds had opined as how they hadn't really expected the next Hendrix to emerge from Taiwanese Canto-pop, but then again they hadn't actually been expecting the first one, had they?

"Yamazaki told me the story. What happened to you," Arleigh McCrae said. "Up to a certain point."

Laney closed his eyes.

"The show never aired, Laney. Out of Control dropped it. What happened?"

He'd taken to having break&st beside the Chateau's small oval pool, past the homely clapboard bungalows that Rydell said were a later addition. It was the one time of the day that felt like his own, or did until Rice Daniels arrived, which was usually toward the bottom of a three-cup pot of coffee, just prior to his eggs and bacon.

Daniels would cross the tern cotta to Laney's table with what could only be described as a spring in his step. Laney privately wished to ascribe this to drug-use, of which he'd seen no evidence whatever, and indeed Daniels's most potent public indulgence seemed to be multiple cups of decaf espresso taken with curls of lemon peel. He favored loosely woven beige suits and collarless shirts.

This particular morning, however, Daniels had not been alone, 3  
and Laney had detected a lack of temper in the accustomed spring; a 0

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certain jangled brittleness there, and the painful-hooking glasses seeming to grip his head even more tightly than usual. Beside him came a gray-haired man in a dark brown suit of Western cut, hawk-faced and wind-burnt, the blade of his impressive nose protruding from a huge black pair of sunglasses. He wore black alligator roping-boots and carried a dusty-looking briefcase of age-darkened tan cowhide, its handle mended with what Laney supposed had to be baling wire.

"Laney," Rice Daniels had said, arriving at the table, "this is Aaron Pursley."

'Don't get up, son," Pursley said, though Laney hadn't thought to. "Fella's just bringing you your breakfast." One of the Mongolian waiters was crossing with a tray, from the direction of the bungalows. Pursley put his battle-scarred briefcase down and took one of the white-painted metal

chairs. The waiter served Laney's eggs. Laney signed for them, adding a 15-percent tip. Purshey was flipping through the contents of his case. He wore half a dozen heavy silver rings on the fingers of either hand, some of them studded with turquoise. Laney couldn't remember when he'd last seen anyone carry around that much paper.

"You're the lawyer," Laney said. "On television."

"In the flesh as well, son." Pursley was on "Cops in Trouble," and before that he'd been famous for defending celebrity clients. Daniels hadn't taken a seat, and stood behind Pursley now with a hunched, uncharacteristic posture, hands in his trouser pockets. "Here we are," Pursley said. He drew out a sheaf of blue paper. "Don't let your eggs get cold."

"Have a seat," Laney said to Daniels. Daniels winced behind his glasses.

"Now," Pursley said, "you were in a Federal Orphanage, in Gainesville, it says here, from age twelve to age seventeen."

Laney looked at his eggs. "That's right."

"During that time, you participated in a number of drug trials? You were an experimental subject?"

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"Yes," Laney said, his eggs looking somehow farther away, or like a picture in a magazine.

"This was voluntary on your part?"

"There were rewards."

"Voluntary," Pursley said. "You get on any of that 5-SB?"

"They didn't tell us what they were giving us," Laney said. "Sometimes we'd get a placebo instead."

"You don't mistake 5-SB for any placebo, son, but I think you know that."

Which was true, but Laney just sat there.

"Well?" Pursley removed his big heavy glasses. His eyes were cold and blue and set into an intricate topography of wrinkles.

"I probably had it," Laney said.

Pursley slapped the blue papers on his thigh. "Well, there you are. You almost certainly did. Now, do you know how that substance eventually affected many of the test subjects?"

Daniels unclamped his glasses and began to knead the bridge of his nose. His eyes were closed.

"Stuff tends to turn males into fixated homicidal stalkers," Pursley said, putting his glasses back on and stuffing the papers into his case. "Comes on years later, sometimes. Go after media faces, politicians. . . . That's why it's now one of the most illegal substances, any damn country you care to look. Drug that makes folks want to stalk and kill politicians, well, boy, it'll get to be." He grinned dryly.

"I'm not one," Laney said. "I'm not like that."

Daniels opened his eyes. "It doesn't matter," he said. "What matters is that Slitscan can counter all our material by raising the possibility, the merest shadow, however remote, that you are."

"You see, son," Pursley said, "they'd just make out you got into your line of work because you were predisposed to that, spying on famous people. You didn't tell them about any of it, did you?"

"No," Laney said, "I didn't."

"There you go," said Purshey. "They'll say they hired you because 3

you were good at it, but you just got too damn good at it." 0

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"But she wasn't &mous," Laney said.

"But he is," Rice Daniels said, "and they'll say you were after him. They'll say the whole thing was your idea. They'll wring their hands about responsibility. They'll talk about their new screening procedures for quantitative analysts. And nobody, Laney, nobody at a/l will be watching us."

"That's about the size of it," Pursley said, standing. He picked up the briefcase. "That real bacon there, like off a hog?"

"They say it is," Laney said.

"Damn," Pursley said, "these Hollywood hotels are fast-lane." He stuck out his hand. Laney shook it. "Nice meeting you, son."

Daniels didn't even bother to say goodbye. And two days later, going over the printout of his charges, Laney would notice that it all began, the billing in his own name, with a large pot of coffee, scrambled eggs and bacon, and a 15-percent tip.

Arleigh McCrae was staring at him.

"Do they know that?" she asked. "Does Blackwell?"

"No," Laney said, "not that part, anyway." He could see Rydell's fax, folded on the bedside stand. They didn't know about that, either.

"What happened then? What did you do?"

"I found out I was paying for at least some of the lawyers they'd gotten for me. I didn't know what to do. I sat out there by the pool a lot. It was sort of pleasant, actually. I wasn't thinking about anything in particular. Know what I mean?"

"Maybe," she said.

"Then I heard about this job from one of the security people at the hotel."

She slowly shook her head.

"What?" he said.

"Never mind," she said. "You make about as much sense as the rest of it. Probably you'll fit right in."

"Into what?"

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She looked at her watch, black-faced stainless on a plain black nylon band. "Dinner's at eight, but Rez will be late. Come out for a walk and a drink. I'll try to tell you what I know about it."

"If you want to," Laney said.

"They're paying me to do it," she said, getting up. "And it probably beats wrestling large pieces of high-end electronics up and down escalators."

20. Monkey Boxing

Between stations there was a gray shudder beyond the windows of the silent train. Not as of surfaces rushing past, but as if particulate matter were being vibrated there at some crucial rate, just prior to the emergence of a new order of being.

Chia and Masahiko had found two seats, between a trio of plaid-skirted schoolgirls and a businessman who was reading a fat Japanese comic. There was a woman on the cover with her breasts bound up like balls of twine, but conically, the nipples protruding like the popping eyes of a cartoon victim. Chia noticed that the artist had devoted much more time to drawing the twine, exactly how it was wrapped and knotted, than to drawing the breasts themselves. The woman had sweat running clown her face and was trying to back away from someone or something cut off by the edge of the cover.

Masahiko undid the top two buttons of his tunic and withdrew a six-inch square of something black and rigid, no thicker than a pane of glass. He brushed it purposefully with the fingers of his right hand, beaded lines of colored light appearing at his touch. Though these were fainter here, washed out by the train's directionless fluorescents, Chia recognized the square as the control-face of the Computer she'd seen in his room.

He studied the display, stroked it again, and frowned at the result. "Someone pays attention to my address," he said, "and to Mitsukos

"The restaurant?"

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"Our user addresses,"

'What kind of attention?"

"I do not know. We are not linked."

-Except by me.

"Tell me about Sandbenders," Masahiko said, putting the control-face away and buttoning his tunic.

"It started with a woman who was an interface designer," Chia said, glad to change the subject. "Her husband was a jeweller, and he'd died of that nerve-attenuation thing, before they saw how to fix it. But he'd been a big green, too, and he hated the way consumer electronics were made, a couple of little chips and boards inside these plastic shells. The shells were just point-of-purchase eye-candy, he said, made to wind up in the landfill if nobody recycled it, and usually nobody did. So, before he got sick, he used to tear up her hardware, the designer's, and put the real parts into cases he'd make in his shop. Say he'd make a solid bronze case for a minidisk unit, ebony inlays, carve the control surfaces out of fossil ivory, turquoise, rock crystal. It weighed more, sure, but it turned out a lot of people liked that, like they had their music or their memory, whatever, in something that felt like it was there. . . . And people liked touching all that stuff: metal, a smooth stone. . . . And once you had the case, when the manufacturer brought out a new model, well, if the electronics were any better, you just pulled the old ones out and put the new ones in your case. So you still had the same object, just with better functions."

Masahiko's eyes were closed, and he seemed to be nodding slightly, though perhaps only with the motion of the train.

"And it turned out some people liked that, too, liked it a lot. He started getting commissions to make these things. One of the first was for a keyboard, and the keys were cut from the keys of an old piano, with the numbers and letters in silver. But then he got sick . . .

Masahiko's eyes opened, and she saw that not only had he been listening, but that he was impatient for more.

"So after he was dead, the software designer started thinking

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about all that, and how she wanted to do something that took what he'd been doing into something else. So she cashed out her stock in all the companies she'd worked for, and she bought some land on the coast, in Oregon-

And the train pulled into Shinjuku, and everyone stood up, heading for the doors, the businessman closing his breast-bondage comic and tucking it beneath his arm.

Chia was leaning back to look at the strangest building she'd ever seen. It was shaped like the old-fashioned idea of a robot, a simplified human figure, its legs and upraised arms made of transparent plastic over a framework of metal. Its torso appeared to be of brick, in red, yellow and blue, arranged in simple patterns. Escalators, stairways, and looping slides twisted through the hollow limbs, and puffs of white smoke emerged at regular intervals from the rectangular mouth of the thing's enormous face. Beyond it the sky all gray and pressing down.

"Tetsujin Building," Masahiko said. "Monkey Boxing was not there."

"What is it?"

"Osaka Tin Toy Institute," he said. "Monkey Boxing this way." He was consulting the swarming squiggles on his control-face. He pointed along the street, past a fast-food franchise called California Reich, its trademark a stylized stainless-steel palm tree against one of those twisted-cross things like the meshbacks had drawn on their hands in her class on European history. Which had pissed the teacher off totally, but Chia couldn't remember them drawing any palm trees. Then two of them had gotten into a fight over which way you were supposed to draw the twisted parts on the cross, pointing left or pointing right, and one of them had zapped the other with a stungun, the kind they were always making out of those disposable flashcameras, and the teacher had to call the police.

"Ninth floor, Wet Leaves Fortune Building," he said. He set off o

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down the crowded pavement. Chia followed, wondering how long jet lag lasted, and how you were supposed to separate it from just being tired.

Maybe what she was feeling now was what her civics program at her last school had called culture shock. She felt like everything, every little detail of Tokyo, was just different enough to create a kind of pressure, something that built up against her eyes, as though they'd grown tired of having to notice all the differences: a little sidewalk tree that was dressed up in a sort of woven basketwork jacket, the neon-avocado color of a payphone, a serious-looking girl with round glasses and a gray sweatshirt that said "Free Vagina." She'd been keeping her eyes extra-wide to take all these things in, like they'd be processed eventually, but now her eyes were tired and the differences were starting to back up. At the same time, she felt that if she squinted, maybe, just the right way, she could make all this turn back into Seattle, some downtown part she'd walked through with her mother. Homesick. The strap of her bag digging into her shoulder each time her left foot came down.

Masahiko turned a corner. There didn't seem to be alleys in Tokyo, not in the sense that there were smaller streets behind the big streets, the places where they put out the garbage, and there weren't any stores. There were smaller streets, and smaller ones behind those, but you couldn't guess what you'd find there: a shoe-repair place, an expensive-looking hair salon, a chocolate-maker, a magazine stand where she noticed a copy of that same creepy comic with the woman all wrapped up like that.

Another corner and they were back on what she took to be a main street. Cars here, anyway. She watched one turn into a street-level opening and vanish. Her scalp prickled. What if that were the way up to Eddie's club, that Whiskey Clone? That was right around here, wasn't it? How big was this Shinjuku place, anyway? What if the Graceland pulled up beside her? What if Eddie and Maryalice were out looking (hr her?

They were passing the opening the car had disappeared into. She

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looked in and saw that it was a kind of gas station. "Where is it?" she asked.

"Wet Leaves Fortune," he said, pointing up.

Tall and narrow, square signs jutting out at the corners of each floor. It looked like almost all

the others, but she thought Eddie's had been bigger. "How do we get up there?"

He led her into a kind of lobby, a ground-floor arcade lined with tiny stall-like shops. Too many lights, mirrors, things for sale, all blurring together. Into a cramped elevator that smelled of stale smoke. He said something in Japanese and the door closed. The elevator sang them a little song to tinkling music. Masahiko looked irritated.

At the ninth floor the door opened on a dust-covered man with a black headband sagging over his eyes. He looked at Chia. "If you're the one from the magazine," he said, "you're three days early." He pulled the headband off and wiped his face with it. Chia wasn't sure if he was Japanese or not, or what age he might be. His eyes were brown, spectacularly bloodshot under deep brows, and his black hair, pulled straight back and secured by the band, was streaked with gray.

Behind him there was a constant banging and confusion, men yelling in Japanese. Someone pushing a high-sided orange plastic cart crammed with folded, plaster-flecked cables, shards of plastic painted with gold gilt and Chinese red. Part of a suspended ceiling let go with a twanging of wires, crashed to the floor. More cries.

"I'm looking for Monkey Boxing," Chia said.

"Darling," the man said, "you're a bit late." He wore a black paper coverall, its sleeves torn off at the elbows, revealing arms tracked with blobby blue lines and circles, some kind of faux-primitive decoration. He wiped his eyes and squinted at her. "You aren't from the magazine in London?"

"No," Chia said.

"No," he agreed. "You seem a bit young even for them."

"This is Monkey Boxing?"                   o

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Another section of ceiling came down. The dusty man squinted at her. "Where did you say you were from?"

"Seattle."

"You heard about Monkey Boxing in Seattle?"

"Yes

He smiled wanly. "That's fine: heard about it in Seattle. You're on the club scene yourself, dear?"

"I'm Chia McKenzie--"

"Jun. I'm called Jun, dear. Owner, designer, DJ. But you're too late. Sorry. All that's left of Monkey Boxing's going out in these gomi-carts. Landfill now. Like every other broken dream. Had a lovely run while it lasted, better part of three months. You heard about our Shaolin Temple theme? That whole warrior-monk thing?" He sighed extravagantly. "It was heaven. Every instant of it. The Okinawan bartenders shaved their heads, after the first three nights, and started to wear the orange robes. I surpassed myself, in the booth. It was a vision, you understand? But that's the nature of the floating world, isn't it? 'We are in the water trade, after all, and one tries to be philosophical. But who is your friend here? I like his hair.

"Masahiko Mimura," Chia said.

"I like that black-clad boho butch bedsit thing," the man said. "Mishima and Dietrich on the same halfshell, if it's done right."

Masahiko frowned.

"If Monkey Boxing is gone," Chia said, "what will you do now?"

Jun retied his headband. He looked less pleased. "Another club, but I won't be designing. They'll say I've sold out. Suppose I have. I'll still be managing the space, very nice salary and an apartment along with it, but the concept .." He shrugged.

"Were you here the night Rez told them he wanted to marry the idoru?"

His brow creased, behind the headband. "I had to sign agreements," he said, "You aren't from the magazine?"

"No."

"If he hadn't come in that night, I suppose we might still be up

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and running. And really he wasn't the sort of thing we'd cried to be about. We'd had Maria Paz, just after she'd split up with her boyfriend, the public relations monster, and the press were thick as flies. She's huge here, did you know that? And we'd had Blue Ahmed from Chrome Koran and the press scarcely noticed. Rez and his friends, though, press was not a problem. Sent in this big minder who looked as though he'd been using his face as a chopping block. Came up to me and said Rez had heard about the place and was about to drop in with a few friends, and could we arrange a table with a bit of privacy. . . . Well, really, I had to think: Rez who? Then it clicked, of course, and I said fine, absolutely, and we put three tables together in the back, and even borrowed a purple cordon from the gumi boys in the hostess place upstairs."

"And he came? Rez?"

"Absolutely. An hour later, there he is. Smiling, shaking hands, signing things if you asked him to, though there wasn't too burning a demand, actually. Four women with him, two other men if you didn't count the minder. Very nice black suit. Yohji. Bit the worse for wear. Rez, I mean. Been out to dinner, it looked like. Had a few drinks with it. Certain amount of laughter, if you follow me.' He turned and said something to one of the workmen, who wore shoes like two-toed black leather socks.

Chia, who had no idea what Monkey Boxing had actually been about, imagined Rez at a table with some other people, behind a purple rope, and in the foreground a crowd of Japanese people doing whatever Japanese people did at a club like that. Dancing?

"Then our boy gets up, he's going to the toilet. The big minder makes as if he's getting up to go too, but our boy waves him back. Big laugh from the table, big minder not too happy. Two of the women start to get up, like they're going with him; he'll have none of it, waves 'em back, more laughter. Not that anyone else was paying him that much attention, I was going into the booth in five minutes, with a set of extremely raw North African; had to judge the crowd, get

on it with them, know just when to drop it in. But there he went, 0

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-right through them, and only one or two even noticed, and they

didn't stop dancing.'

What kind of club was it, where nobody would stop dancing for Rez?

"So I was thinking about my set, the order of it, and suddenly he's right in front of me. Big grin. Eyes funny, though I wouldn't swear it was anything he'd done in the toilet-if you know what I mean."

Chia nodded her head. What did he mean?

"And would I mind, he said, hand on my shoulder, if he just spoke briefly to the crowd? Said he'd been thinking about something for a long time, and now he'd made up his mind and he wanted to tell people. And the big minder just materialized there, wanting to know was there any problem? None at all, Rez says, giving my shoulder a squeeze, but he was just going to have a word with the crowd."

Chia looked at Jun's shoulders, wondering which one had been squeezed by Rca's actual hand. "So he did," Jun said.

"But what did he say?" Chia asked.

"A load of bollocks, dear. Evolution and technology and passion; man's need to find beauty in the emerging order; his own burning need to get his end in with some software dolly wank toy. Balls, Utter." He pushed his headband up with his thumb, but it fell back. "And because he did that, opened his mouth up himy club, Lo slash bloody Rez bought my club. Bought me as well, and I've signed agreements that I won't talk to any of you about any of that. And now if you and your charming friend will excuse me, darling, I have work to do."

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There was a man on stilts at the intersection nearest the hotel. He wore a hooded white paper suit, agas mask, and a pair of rectangular sign-boards. Messages scrolled down the boards in Japanese as he shifted his weight to maintain balance. Streams of pedestrian traffic flowed around and past him.

"What's that?" Laney asked, indicating the man on stilts.

"A sect," Arleigh McCrae said. "New Logic.' They say the world will end when the combined weight of all the human nervous tissue on the planet reaches a specific figure."

A very long multi-digit number went scrolling down.

"Is that it?" Laney asked.

"No," she said, "that's their latest estimate of the current total weight." She'd gone back to her room for the black coat she now wore, leaving Laney to change into clean socks, underwear, a blue shirt. He didn't have a tie, so he'd buttoned the shirt at the collar and put his jacket back on. He'd wondered if everyone who worked for Lo/Rez stayed in that same hotel.

Laney saw the man's eyes through the transparent visor as they passed. A look of grim patience. The stilts were the kind workers wore to put up ceilings, articulated alloy sprung with steel. "What's supposed to happen when there's enough nervous tissue?"

"A new order of being. They don't talk about it. Rez was interested in them, apparently. He tried to arrange an audience with the hunder." 3

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21. Standower Man

"And?"

'the founder declined. He said that Rn made his living through the manipulation of human nervous tissue, and that that made him untouchable."

"Rez was unhappy?"

"Not according to Blackwell. Blackwell said it seemed to cheer him up a little."

"He's not cheerful, ordinarily?" Laney sidestepped to avoid a bicycle someone was wheeling in the opposite direction.

"Let's say that the things that bother Rez aren't the things that bother most people."

Laney noticed a dark green van edging along beside them. Its wraparound windows were mirrored, its neon license plates framed with animated tubes of mini-Vegas twinklers. "I think we're being followed," he said.

"We'd better be. I wanted the kind with the weird chrome curb-feelers that make them look like silverfish, but I had to settle for custom license-plate trim. Where you go, it goes. And parking, around here, is probably more of a challenge than anything you'll be expected to do tonight. Now,"



she said, "down here."

Steep, narrow stairs, walled with an alarming pink mosaic of glistening tonsil-like nodules. Laney hesitated, then saw a sign, the letters made up of hundreds of tiny pastel oblongs: LE CHICLE. Stepping down, he lost sight of the van.

A chewing-gum theme-bar, he thought, and then: I'm getting too used to this. But he still avoided touching the wall of chewed gum as he followed her down.

Into powdery pinks and grays, but these impersonating the unchewed product, wall-wide slabs of it, hung with archaic signage from the nation of his birth. Screen-printed steel, Framed and ancient cardboard, cunningly lit. Icons of gum. Bazooka Joe featured centrally, a figure unknown to Laney but surely no more displaced.

"Come here often?" Laney asked, as they took stools with bulbous cushions in a particularly lurid bubble-gum pink. The bar was laminated with thousands of rectangular chewing-gum wrappers.

"Yes," she said, "but mainly because it's unpopular. And it's nonsmoking, which is still kind of special here."

"What's 'Black Black'?" Laney asked, looking at a framed poster depicting a stylized 1940s automobile hurtling through the faint suggestion of city streets. Aside from "Black Black," it was lettered in a sort of Art Deco Japanese.

"Gum. You can still buy it," she said. "The cab drivers all chew it. Lots of caffeine."

"In gum?"

"They sell pick-me-ups here full of liquid nicotine."

"I think I'll have a beer instead."

When the waitress, in tiny silver shorts and a prehensile pink angora top, had taken their orders, Arleigh opened her purse and removed a notebook. "These are linear topographies of some of the structures you accessed earlier today." She passed Laney the notebook. "They're in a format called Realtree 7.2."

Laney clicked through a series of images: abstract geometrics arranged in vanishing linear perspective. "I don't know how to read them," he said.

She poured her sake. "You really were trained by DatAmerica?"

"I was trained by a bunch of Frenchmen who liked to play tennis."

"Realtree's from DatAmerica. The best quantitative analysis software they've got." She closed the notebook, put it back in her purse.

Laney poured his beer. "Ever hear of something called TIDAL?"

"Tidal'?"

"Acronym. Maybe."

"No." She lifted the china cup and blew, like a child cooling tea.

"It was another DatAmerica tool, or the start of one. I don't think it reached the market. But that was how I learned to find the nodal points."

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"Okay," she said. "What are the nodal points?" I

Laney looked at the bubbles on the surface of his beer. "It's like seeing things in clouds," Laney said. "Except the things you see are really there."

She put her sake down. "Yamazaki promised me you weren't crazy."

"It's not crazy. It's something to do with how I process low-level, broad-spectrum input. Something to do with pattern-recognition."

"And Slitscan hired you on the basis of that?"

"They hired me when I demonstrated that it works, but I can't do that with the kind of data you showed me today"

"Why not?"

Laney raised his beer. "Because it's like trying to have a drink with a bank. It's not a person. It doesn't drink. There's no place for it to sit." He drank. "Rez doesn't generate patterns I can read, because everything he does is at one remove. It's like looking in an annual report for the personal habits of the chairman of the board. It's not going to be there. From the outside, it just looks like that Realtree stuff. If I enter a specific area, I don't get any sense of how the data there relates to the rest of it, see? It's got to be relational." He drummed his fingers on the laminated gum wrappers. "Somewhere in Ireland. Guesthouse with a beach view. Nobody there. Records of how it was kept stocked: stuff for the bathroom, toothpaste, shaving foam."

"I've been there," she said. "That's on an estate he bought from an older musician, an Irishman. It's beautiful. Like Italy, in a way."

"You think he'll take this idoru back there, when they get hitched?"

"Nobody has any idea what he's talking about when he says he wants to 'marry' her."

"Then an apartment in Stockholm. Huge. Great big stoves in each room, made of glazed ceramic bricks."

"I don't know that one. He has places all over, and some of them are kept very quiet. There's another country place in the south of

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France, a house in London, apartments in New York, Paris, Barcelona. . . . I was working out of the Catalan office, reformatting all their stuff and Spain's as well, when this idoru thing hit, I've been here ever since."

"But you know him? You knew him before?"

"He's the navel of the world I work in, Laney. That has a way of making people unknowable."

"What about Lo?"

"Quiet. Very. Bright. Very." She frowned at her sake. "I don't think any of it's ever really gotten to Lo. He seems to regard their entire career as some freak event unrelated to anything else."

"Including his partner deciding to marry a software agent?"

"Lo told me a story once, about a job he'd had. He worked for a soup vendor in Hong Kong, a wagon on the sidewalk. He said the wagon had been in business for over fifty years, and their secret was that they'd never cleaned the kettle. In fact, they'd never stopped cooking the soup. It was the same seafood soup they'd been selling for fifty years, but it was never the same, because they added fresh ingredients every day, depending on what was available. He said that was what his career as musician felt like, and he liked that about it. Blackwell says if Rez were more like Lo, he'd still be in prison."

"Why?"

"Blackwell was serving a nine-year sentence, in an Australian maximum-security prison, when Rez talked his way in. To give a concert. Just Rez. Lo and the others thought it was too dangerous. They'd been warned that it could turn into a hostage-taking situation. The prison authorities refused to take any responsibility, and they wanted it in writing. Rez signed anything they put in front of him. His security people resigned on the spot. He went in with two guitars, a wireless mike, and a very basic amplification system. During the concert, a riot broke out. Apparently it was orchestrated by a group of Italian prisoners from Melbourne. Five of them took Rez into the prison laundry, which they'd chosen because it was windowless and easily defended. They informed Rez they were going to kill

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him if they couldn't negotiate their release in exchange for his. They discussed cutting off at least one of his fingers to demonstrate that they meant business. Or possibly some more intimate part, though that may simply have been to make him more anxious. Which it did." She signaled the pink angora waitress for more sake. "Blackwell, who'd evidently been extremely irritated at the interruption of the concert, which he'd been enjoying enormously, appeared in the laundry approximately forty minutes after Rez was taken prisoner. Neither Rez nor the Italians saw him arrive, and the Italians definitely hadn't been expecting him." She paused. "He killed three of them, with a tomahawk. Put the end of it into their heads: one, two, three, Rez says, like that. No fuss whatever."

'A tomahawk?'

"Sort of narrow-bladed hatchet, with a spike opposite the blade. Extends the reach, imparts terrific force, and with practice can be thrown with considerable accuracy. Blackwell swears by it. The other two fled, although they both seem to have died in the aftermath of the riot. Personally, I'm sure Blackwell or his 'mates' killed them, because he was never charged with the murder of the other three. The sole surviving witness was Rez, whom Blackwell escorted to the barricade the guards had erected in the exercise yard." Her sake arrived. "It took Rez's lawyers three months to get Blackwell's sentence reversed on a technicality. They've been together ever since."

"What was Blackwell in for?"

"Murder," she said. "Do you know what a standover man is?"

"No."

"It's a peculiarly Australian concept. I'm tempted to think it could only have grown out of a culture comprised initially of convicts, but my Australian friends don't buy that. The standover man is a loner, a predator who preys on other, more prosperous criminals, often extremely dangerous ones. He captures them and 'stands over' them. To extort money."

"What's that mean?"

"He tortures them until they tell him where their money is. And

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these are often fairly serious operators, with people paid to take care of them, specifically to prevent this sort of thing

"Tortures them?"

"'Toe-cutter' is a related term. When they tell him what he needs to know, he kills them."

And Blackwell was suddenly and noiselessly and simply there, very black, and matte, in an enormous waxed-cotton drover's coat. Behind him the faded American advertising and the grays and pinks of gum. Flis fretted scalp concealed by the waxed-cotton crown of a broad black hat.

"Arleigh, dear, you wouldn't take the name in vain, would you?"

But he smiled at her.

"I'm explaining your earlier career to Mr. Laney, Blackwell. I'd only just gotten up to the massage parlor, and now you've ruined it."

"Never mind. Dinner's been moved up, at the request of his Rozzer. I'm here to take you. Change of venue as well. Hope you don't mind."

"Where?" Arleigh asked, as if not yet prepared to move.

"The Western World," said Blackwell.

"And me in my good shoes," she said.

22. Gomi Boy

The trains more crowded now, standing room only, everyone pressed in tight, and somehow the eye-contact rules were different here, but she wasn't sure how. Her hag with the Sandbenders was jammed up against Masahiko's back. He was looking at the control-face again, holding it up the way a commuter would hold a strategically folded newspaper.

On their way back to Mitsuko's father's restaurant, and then she didn't know what. She'd done the thing that Hiromi hadn't wanted her to do. And gotten nothing for it but a vaguely unpleasant idea of Rez as someone capable of being boring. And where did it leave her? She'd gone ahead and used Kelsey's cashcard, to pay for the train, and flow another train back. And Zona had said somebody was looking for her; they could track her when she used the cashcard. Maybe there was a way to cash it in, but she doubted it.

None of this had gone the way she'd tried to imagine it, back in Seattle, but then you couldn't be expected to imagine anyone like Maryalice, could you? Or Eddie, or even Hiromi.

Masahiko frowned at the control-face. Chia saw the dots and squiggles changing.

That thing Maryalice had stuck in her bag. Right here under her arm. She should've left it at Mitsuko's. Or thrown it away, but then what would she say if Eddie or Maryalice showed up? What if it was full of drugs?

In Singapore they hung people, right in the mall, for that. Her

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father didn't like it and he said that was one of the reasons he never invited her there. They put it on television, too, so that it was really hard to avoid seeing it, and he didn't want her to see it. Now she wondered how far Singapore was from Tokyo? She wished she could go there and keep her eyes closed until she was in her father's apartment, and never turn the rv on, just be there with him and smell his shaving smell and put her face against his scratchy wool shirt, except she guessed you didn't wear those in Singapore because it was hot there. She'd keep her eyes closed anyway, and listen to him talk about his work, about the arbitrage engines shuttling back and forth through the world's markets like invisible dragons, fast as light, shaving fragments of advantage for traders like her father

Masahiko turned, accidentally knocking her bag aside, as the train stopped at a station-not theirs. A woman with a yellow shopping bag said something in Japanese. Masahiko took Chia's wrist and pulled her toward the open door.

"This isn't where we get off--"

"Come! Come!" Out onto the platform. A different smell here; something chemical and sharp. The walls not so clean, somehow. A broken tile in the ceramic ceiling.

"What's the matter? Why are we getting off?"

He pulled her into the corner formed by the tiled wall and a huge vending machine. "Someone is at the restaurant, waiting for you." He looked down at her wrist, as if amazed to find that he was holding it, and instantly released her.

"How do you know?"

"Walled City. There have been inquiries, in the last hour."

"Who?"

"Russians."

"Russians?"

"There are many from the Kombinat here, since the earthquake. They forge relationships with the gumi."

"What's gumi?"

"Mafia, you call it Yakuza. My father has arrangement with lo  
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cal gumi. Necessary, in order to operate restaurant. GuS representatives spoke about you to my father.'

Your neighborhood mafia is Russian?" Behind his head, on the side of the machine, the animated logo of something called Apple Shires.

"No. Yamaguchi-gumi franchise. My father knows these men. They tell my father Russians ask about you, and this is not good. They cannot guarantee usual safety. Russians not reliable."

"I don't know any Russians," Chia said.

"We go now."

"Where?"

He led her along the crowded platform, its pavement wet from hundreds of furred umbrellas. It must be raining now, she thought. Toward an escalator.

"When Walled City saw attention was being paid to our addresses, my sister's and mine, a friend was sent to remove my computer.

"Why?"

"Because I have responsibility. For Walled City. Distributed processing."

"You've got a MUD in your computer?"

"Walled City is not anywhere," he said, as they stepped onto the escalator. "My friend has my computer. And he knows about men who are waiting for you."

Masahiko said his friend was called Gomi Boy.

He was very small, and wore an enormous, balloon-bottomed pair of padded fatigue pants covered with at least a dozen pockets. These were held up with three-inch-wide Day-Glo orange suspenders, over a ratty cotton sweater with the cuffs rolled back. His shoes were pink, and looked like the shoes babies wore, but bigger. He was perched on an angular aluminum chair now and the baby shoes

didn't quite touch the floor. His hair looked as though it had

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been sculpted with a spatula, gleaming swirls and dips, like your hand might stick there if you touched it. It was the way they painted

J. D. Shapely's hair on those murals in Pioneer Square, and Chia knew from school that that had something to do with that whole Elvis thing, though she couldn't remember exactly what.

He was talking with Masahiko in Japanese, over the crashing sound-surf of this gaming arcade. Chia wished she was wearing a translator, but she'd have to open her bag, find one, turn the Sand-benders on. And Gomi Boy looked like he'd be just as happy knowing she couldn't understand him.

He was drinking a can of something called Pocari Sweat, and smoking a cigarette. Chia watched the blue smoke settling out in layers in the air, lit by the glare of the games. There was cancer in that, and they'd arrest you in Seattle if you did it. Gomi Boy's cigarette looked like it had been made in a factory: a perfect white tube with a brown tip he put to his lips. Chia had seen those in old movies; sometimes, the ones they hadn't gone through yet to digitally erase them, but the only other cigarettes she'd seen were the twisted-up paper ones they sold on the street in Seattle, or you could buy a little baggie of the tobacco stuff and the white squares of paper to roll it up in. Meshbacks in school did it.

The rain was still coming down. Through the arcade's streaming window she could make out another arcade, across the street, one of the ones with the machines the silver balls poured through. The neon and the rain and the silver balls ran all together, and she wondered what Masahiko and Gomi Boy were talking about.

Gomi Boy had Masahiko's computer in a plaid plastic carry-bag with quilted pink International Biohazard symbols on the sides. It was sitting on the little table beside the can of Pocari Sweat. What was a Pocari? She imagined a kind of wild pig, with bristles, turned-up tusks, like she'd seen on the Nature Channel.

Gomi Boy sucked on his cigarette, making the end glow. He squinted through the smoke at Masahiko and said something. Masahiko shrugged. There was a fresh mini-can of microwaved  
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espresso in front of him, and Chia had another Coke Lire. In Tokyo there was nowhere to sit down unless you bought something, and it was quicker to buy a drink than something to eat. And it cost less. Except she wasn't paying for these. Gomi Boy was, because he and Masahiko didn't want her to use Kelsey's cashcard.

Gomi Boy spoke again. "He wishes to talk with you," Masahiko said.

Chia bent over, unzipped her bag, found the ear-clips. She only had the two, so she handed one to Gomi Boy, put the other on herself, and hit power. He put his on. "I am from Walled City," he said. "You understand?"

"A MUD, right? Multi user domain."

"Not in the sense you mean, but approximately, yes. Why are you in Tokyo?"

"To gather information about Rez's plan to marry the idiotu, Rei Toei."

Gomi Boy nodded. Being an otaku was about caring a lot about information; he understood being a fan. "Do you have dealings with the Combine?" Chia knew he had said Kombinat, and the translator had covered it. He meant that mafia government in Russia.

"No," Chia said.

"And you came to be at Masahiko's because. . .

"Mitsuko's the social secretary of the Tokyo chapter of the Lo/Rez group I belong to in Seattle."

"How many times did you port, from the restaurant?"

"Three times." The Silke-Marie KoIb outfit. The meeting. Zona Rosa. "I paid for presentation software, Mitsuko and I did the meeting, I linked home."

"You paid for the software with your cashcard?"

"Yes." She looked from Gomi Boy to Masahiko. Between and behind them, the rain. The endless racketing cascade of the little silver balls, through the glass across the street. Players hunched there on integral stools, manipulating the flood of metal. Masahiko's expression told her nothing at all.

"Masahiko's computer maintains certain aspects of Walled City," Gomi Boy said. "Contingency plans were in place for its removal to safety. When it became obvious that both Masahiko's and his sister's user addresses were attracting unusual attention, I was sent to secure his machine. We frequently exchange hardware. I am a dealer in second-hand equipment. That is why I am called Gomi Boy. I have my own keys to Masahiko's room. His father knows I am allowed to enter. His tither does not care. I came and took the computer. Nearby is a small civic recreation area. The restaurant is visible from it. Seeing Oakland Overbombers, I crossed the street and spoke with them."

"Seeing what?"

"A skateboard group. They are named for the California soccer club. I asked them if there had been unusual activity. They told me they had seen a very large vehicle, an hour before .

-A Graceland.

"A Daihatsu Graceland. There are fewer here than in America, I think."

Chia nodded. Her stomach did that cold flip-thing again. She thought she might throw up.

Gomi Boy leaned sideways with his cigarette, which was short now, and mashed the lit end into a little chrome bowl that was fastened to the side of a game console. Chia wondered what this was actually used for, and why he did that, but she supposed he had to put it somewhere or it would burn his fingers. "The Graceland parked near the restaurant. Two men got out .

"What did they look like?"

"Gumi representatives."

"Japanese?"

"Yes. They went into the restaurant. The Graceland waited. After fifteen minutes, they returned, got into the Graceland, and left. Masahiko's father appeared. He looked in all directions, studying the street. He took his phone from his pocket and spoke with someone.

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He went back into the restaurant." Gomi Boy looked at the carry-bag. "I did not want to remain in the recreation area with Masahiko's computer. I told the leader of the Overbombers I would give him a better telephone, later, if he would remain there and phone me if more activity occurred. The Overbombers do nothing anyway, so he agreed. I left. He phoned twenty minutes later to report a gray Honda van. The driver is Japanese, but the other three are foreigners. He thinks they are Russian."

"Why?"

"Because they are very large, and dress in a style he associates with the Combine. They are still there."

"How do you know?"

"If they leave, he must call me. He wants his new phone."

"Can I port from here? I have to talk to Air Magellan right away about changing my reservations. I want to go home," And leave Maryalice's package in that trash cannister she could see behind Gomi Boy.

"You must not port," Masahiko said. "You must not use the cash-card. If you do, they will find you."

"But what else am I supposed to do?" she said, startled by her own voice, which sounded like someone else's. "I just want to go home!"

"Let me see the card," Gomi Boy said. It was in her parka, with her passport and her ticket home. She took it out and handed it to him. He opened a pocket on his fatigue pants and took out a small rectangular device that seemed to be held together with multiple layers of fraying silver tape. He swiped Chia's card along a slot and peered into a peephole reader like the one on a fax-beeper. "This is nontransferable and cannot be used to obtain cash. It is also very easy to trace."

"My friend's pretty sure they've got the number anyway," Chia said, thinking of Zona.

Gomi Boy began to tap the edge of the cashcard on the rim of his can of Pocari Sweat. "There is a place where you can use this and not be traced," he said, Tap tap. "Where Masahiko could access Walled City." Tap tap. "Where you could phone home."

"Where's that?"

"A love hotel." Tap. "Do you know what that is?"

"No," Chia said. Tap.

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Emerging from Le Chicle's pink mosaic gullet into the start of rain, Laney saw that the stilt-walking New Logic disciple was still at his post, his animated sandwich-board illuminated against the evening. As Blackwell held the door of a mini-limo for Arleigh, Laney looked back at the scrolling numerals and wondered how much the planet's combined weight of human nervous tissue had increased while they'd been in the bar.

Laney got in after her, noticing those Catalan suns again, the three of them, decreasing in size down her inner calf. Blackwell thunked the door behind him, then opened the front, should've-beeri driver's side door and seemed to pour himself into the car, a movement that simultaneously suggested the sliding of a ball of mercury and the settling of hundreds of pounds of liquid concrete. The car waddled and swayed as its shocks adjusted to accommodate his weight.

Laney saw how the brim of Blackwell's black-waxed hat drooped low in back, but not far enough to conceal a crisscrossing of fine red welts decorating the back of his neck,

Their driver, to judge by the back of his head, might have been the same one who'd driven them to Akihabara. He pulled out into the mirror-image traffic. The rain was running and pooling, tugging reflected neon out of the perpendicular and spreading it in wriggly lines across sidewalk and pavement.

Arleigh McCrae was wearing perfume, and it made Laney wish

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23. Here at the Western World

that Blackwell wasn't there, and that they were on their way somewhere other than wherever it was they were going now, and in another city, and that quite a lot of the last seven months of Laney's life hadn't happened at all, or had happened differently, or maybe even as far back as DatAmerica and the Frenchmen, but as it became more complicated, it became depressing.

"I'm not sure you're going to enjoy this place," she said.

"How's that?"

"You don't seem like the type."

"Why not?"

"I could be wrong. Lots of people do enjoy it. I suppose if you take it as a very elaborate joke



"What is it?"

"A club. Restaurant. An environment. If we turned up there without Blackwell, I doubt they'd let us in. Or even admit it's there."

Laney was remembering the Japanese restaurant in Brentwood, the one Kathy Torrance had taken him to. Not Japanese Japanese. Owned and operated. Its theme an imaginary Eastern European country. Decorated with folk art from that country, and everyone who worked there wore native garb from that country, or else a sort of metallic-gray prison outfit and these big black shoes. The men who worked there all had these haircuts, shaved high on the sides, and the women had big double braids, rolled up like wheels of cheese. Laney's entrée had had all kinds of different little sausages in it, the smallest he'd ever seen, and some kind of pickled cabbage on the side, and it hadn't tasted like it had come from anywhere in particular, but maybe that was the point. And then they'd gone back to her apartment, decorated like a sort of deluxe version of the Cage at Slitscan. And that hadn't worked out either, and sometimes he wondered whether that had made her even angrier, when he'd gone over to Out of Control.

"Laney?"

"Sorry This place-Rez likes it?"

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Past ambient forests of black umbrellas, waiting to cross at an intersection.

"I think he just likes to brood there," she said.

The Western World occupied the top two floors of an office building that hadn't quite survived the quake. Yamazaki might have said that it represented a response to trauma and subsequent reconstruction. In the days (some said hours) immediately following the disaster, an impromptu bar and disco had come into being in the former offices of a firm that had brokered shares in golf-club memberships. The building, declared structurally unsound, had been sealed by emergency workers at the ground floor, but it was still possible to enter through the ruined sublevels. Anyone willing to climb eleven flights of mildly fissured concrete stairs found the Western World, a bizarrely atypical (but some said mysteriously crucial) response to the upheaval that had, then, so recently killed eighty-six thousand of the region's thirty-six million inhabitants. A Belgian journalist, struggling to describe the scene, had said that it resembled a cross between a permanent mass wake, an ongoing grad night for at least a dozen subcultures unheard of before the disaster, the black market cafes of occupied Paris, and Goya's idea of a dance party (assuming Goya had been Japanese and smoked freebase methamphetamine, which along with endless quantities of alcohol was the early Western World's substance of choice). It was, the Belgian said, as though the city, in its convulsion and grief, had spontaneously and necessarily generated this hidden pocket universe of the soul, its few unbroken windows painted over with black rubber aquarium paint. There would be no view of the ruptured city. As the reconstruction began around it, it had already become a benchmark in Tokyos psychic history, an open secret, an urban legend.

But now, Arleigh was explaining, as they climbed the first of those eleven flights of stairs, it was very definitely a commercial op

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eration, the damaged building owing its continued survival to the unlicensed penthouse club that was its sole occupant. If in fact it continued to be unlicensed, and she had her doubts about that. "There isn't a lot of slack here," she said, climbing, "not for things like that. Everybody knows the Western World's here, I think there's a very quiet agreement, somewhere, to allow them to operate the place as though it were still unlicensed. Because that's what people want to pay for."

"Who owns the building?" Laney asked, watching Blackwell float up the stairs in front of them, his arms, in the matte black sleeves of the drover's coat, like sides of beef dressed for a funeral. The stairwell was lit with irregular loops of faintly bioluminescent cable.

"Rumor has it, one of the two groups who can't quite agree on who owns our hotel."

"Mafia?"

"Local equivalent, but only very approximately equivalent. Real estate was baroque, here, before the quake; now it's more like occult."

Laney, glancing down as they passed one of the glowing loops, noticed, on the treads of the stairs, hardened trickles of something that resembled greenish amber. "There's stuff on the stairs," he said.

"Urine," Arleigh said.

"Urine?"

"Solidified, biologically neutral urine."

Laney took the next few steps in silence. His calves were starting to ache. Urine?

"The plumbing didn't work, after the quake," she said. "They couldn't use the toilets. People just started going, down the stairs. Pretty horrible, by all accounts, although some people actually get nostalgic about it."

"It's solid?"

"There's a product here, a powder, looks like instant soup. Some kind of enzyme. They sell it mainly to mothers with young kids. The kid has to pee, you can't get them to a toilet in time, they pee in a pa-  
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per cup, an empty juice box. You drop in the contents of a handy, purse-sized sachet of this stuff, zap, it's a solid. Neutral, odorless, completely hygienic. Pop it in the trash, it's landfill."

They passed another loop of light and Laney saw miniature stalactites suspended from the edges of a step. "They used that stuff."

"Lots of it. Constantly. Eventually they had to start sawing off the build-up."

"They still ... ?"

"Of course not. But they kept the Grotto." Another flight. Another loop of ghostly undersea light. "What did they do about the solids?" he asked. "I'd rather not know."

Winded, his ankles sore, Laney emerged from the Grotto. Into a black-walled and indeterminate space defined by blue light and the uprights of gilded girders. After chemically frozen frescoes of piss, the Western World disappointed. A gutted office block dressed with mismatched couches and nondescript bars. Something looming in the middle foreground. He blinked. A tank. American, he thought, and old.

"How did they get that up here?" he asked Arleigh, who was passing her black coat to someone. And why hadn't the floor collapsed?

"It's resin," she said. "Membrane sculpture. Stereo lithogtaphy. Otaku thing: they bring them in in sections and glue them together."

Blackwell had given up his drover's coat, exposing a garment that resembled a suit jacket but seemed to have been woven from slightly tarnished aluminum. Whatever this fabric was, there was enough of it there for a double bedspread. He moved forward, through the maze of couches and low tables, with that same effortless determination, Laney and Arleigh drawn along in his wake.

'That's a Sherman tank,' Laney said, remembering a CD-ROM from Gainesville, one about the history of armored vehicles, Arleigh

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didn't seem to have heard him, But then she'd probably never played with CD-ROMs, either, Time in a Federal Orphanage had a way of acquainting you with dead media platforms.

If Arleigh were right, and the Western World were being kept on as a kind of tourist attraction, Laney wondered what the crowd would have been like in the early days, when the sidewalks below were buried in six feet of broken glass.

These people on the couches, now, hunched over the low tables that supported their drinks, seemed unlike any crowd he'd seen so far in Tokyo. There was a definite edged-out quality there, and prolonged eye-contact might have been interesting in some cases, dangerous in others. Distinct impression that the room's combined mass of human nervous tissue would have been found to be freighted with the odd few colorants. Or else these people were somehow preselected for a certain combination of facial immobility and intensity of glance?

"Laney," Blackwell said, dropping a hand on Laney's shoulder and twirling him into the gaze of a pair of long green eyes, "this is Rez. Rez, Cohn Laney. He's working with Arleigh."

"Welcome to the Western World," smiling, and then the eyes slid past him to Arleigh. "Evenin', Miz MacCrae."

Laney noticed something then that he knew from his encounters with celebs at Slitscan: that binary flicker in his mind between image and reality, between the mediated face and the face there in front of you. He'd noticed how it always seemed to speed up, that alternation, until the two somehow merged, the resulting composite becoming your new idea of the person. (Someone at Slitscan had told him that it had been clinically proven that celebrity-recognition was handled by one particular area in the brain, but he'd never been sure whether or not they were joking.)

Those had been tame celebrities, the ones Kathy had already had her way with. In the building (but never the Cage) to have various aspects of their public lives scripted, per whatever agreements were already in place. But Rez wasn't tame, and was a much bigger deal in

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his own way, although Laney had only been aware of his later career because Kathy had hated him so.

Rez had his arm around Arleigh now, gesturing with the other into the relative darkness beyond the Sherman tank, saying something Laney couldn't hear.

"Mr. Laney, good evening." It was Yamazaki, in a green plaid sportscoat that sat oddly on his narrow shoulders. He blinked rapidly,

"Yamazaki."

"You have met Rez, yes? Good, very good. A table is prepared, to dine." Yamazaki put two fingers inside the oversized, buttoned collar of his cheap-looking white dress shirt and tugged, as though it were far too tight. 'I understand initial attempts to identi~' nodal points did not meet with success." He swallowed,

"I can't pull a personal fix out of something textured like corporate data. He's just not there."

Rez was moving in the direction of whatever lay beyond the tank.

"Come," Yamazaki said, then lowered his voice. "Something extraordinary. She is here. She dines with Rez. Rei Toei."

The idoru.

24. Hotel Di

In this tiny cab now with Masahiko and Gomi Boy, Masahiko up front, on what should've been the driver's side, Gomi Boy beside her in the back. Gomi Boy had so many pockets in his fatigue pants,

and so many things in them, that he had trouble getting comfortable. Chia had never been in a car this small, let alone a cab. Masahiko's knees were folded up, almost against his chest. The driver had white cotton gloves and a hat like the hats cab drivers wore in 1940s movies. There were little covers made of starched white lace fixed to all the headrests with special clips.

She guessed it was such a small cab because Gomi Boy was going to be paying, cash money, and he made it clear he didn't have a lot of that.

Somehow they had ascended out of the rain into this crazy, impressive, but old-fashioned-looking multilevel expressway, its steel bones ragged with bandages of Kevlar, and were whipping past the middle floors of tall buildings--maybe that Shinjuku again, because there went that Tin Toy Building, she thought, glimpsed through a gap, but far away and from another direction--and here, gone so fast she was never sure she'd seen him, through one window like all the rest, was a naked man, crosslegged on an office desk, his mouth open as wide as possible, as if in a silent scream.

Then she began to notice other buildings, through sheets of rain, and these were illuminated to a degree excessive even by local stan

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dards, like Nissan County attractions in a television ad, isolated theme-park elements thrusting up out of a strata of more featureless structures, unmarked and unlit. Each bright building with its towering sign: HOTEL KING MIDAS with its twinkling crown and scepter, FREEDOM SHOWER BANFE with blue-green mountains flanking a waterfall of golden light. At least six more in rapid succession, then Gomi Boy said something in Japanese. The driver's shiny black bill dipped in response.

They swung onto an off-ramp, slowing. From the ramp's curve, in the Hat, ugly flare of sodium floods, she saw a rainy, nowhere intersection, no cars in sight, where pale coarse grass lay wet and dishevelled up a short steep slope. No place at all, like it could as easily have been on the outskirts of Seattle, the outskirts of anywhere, and the homesickness made her gasp.

Gomi Boy shot her a sidewise glance, engaged in the excavation of something from another of his pockets, this one apparently inside his pants. From somewhere well below the level of his crotch he fished up a wallet-sized fold of paper money, secured with a wide black elastic band. In the passing glare of another road light Chia saw him snap the elastic back and peel off three bills. Bigger than American money, and on one she made out the comfortingly familiar logo of a company whose name she'd known all her life. He tucked the three bills into the sleeve of his sweater and set about replacing the rest wherever it was he kept it.

"There soon," he said, withdrawing his hand and refastening his suspenders.

"Where soon?"

They took a right and stopped, all around them a strange white fairy glow, falling with the rain to oil-stained concrete neatly painted with two big white arrows, side by side, pointing in opposite directions. The one pointing in the direction they were headed indicated a square opening in a featureless, white-painted concrete wall. Five-inch-wide ribbons of shiny pink plastic hung from its upper edge to

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the concrete below, concealing whatever was behind and reminding Chia of streamers at a school dance. Gomi Boy gave the driver the three bills. He sat patiently, waiting for change.

Her legs cramping, Chia reached for the door handle, but Masahiko quickly reached across from the front, stopping her. "Driver must open," he said. "If you open, mechanism breaks, very expensive." The driver gave Gomi Boy change. Chia thought Gomi Boy would tip him, but he didn't. The driver reached down and did something, out of sight, that made the door beside Chia open.

She climbed out into the rain, dragging her bag after her, and looked up at the source of the white glow: a building like a wedding cake, HOTEL DI spelled out in white neon script edged with clear twinkling bulbs. Masahiko beside her now, urging her toward the pink ribbons. She heard the cab pull away behind her. "Come." Gomi Boy with the plaid bag, ducking through the wet ribbons.

Into an almost empty parking area, two small cars, one gray, one dark green, their license plates concealed by rectangles of smooth black plastic. A glass door sliding aside as Gomi Boy approached.

A disembodied voice said something in Japanese. Gomi Boy answered. "Give him your card," Masahiko said. Chia took out the card and handed it to Gomi Boy, who seemed to be asking the voice a series of questions. Chia looked around. Pale blues, pink, light gray. A very small space that managed to suggest a hotel lobby without actually offering a place to sit down. Pictures cycling past on wallscreens: interiors of very strange-looking rooms. The voice answering Gomi Boy's questions.

"He asks for a room with optimal porting capacity," Masahiko said quietly.

Gomi Boy and the voice seemed to reach agreement. He slotted Chia's card above something that looked like a small pink water fountain. The voice thanked him. A narrow hatch opened and a key slid down into the pink bowl. Gomi Boy picked it up and handed it to Masahiko. Chia's card emerged from the slot; Gomi Boy pulled it

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out and passed it to Chia. He handed Masahiko the plaid bag, turned, and walked out, the glass door hissing open for him.

"He isn't coming with us?"

"Only two people allowed in room. He is busy elsewhere. Come." Masahiko pointed toward an elevator that opened as they approached.

"What kind of hotel did you say this is?" Chia got into the elevator. He stepped in behind her and the door closed.

He cleared his throat. "Love hotel," he said.

"What's that?" Going up.

"Private rooms. For sex. Pay by the hour."

"Oh," Chia said, as though that explained everything. The elevator stopped and the door opened. He got out and she followed him along a narrow corridor lit with ankle-high light-strips. He stopped in front of a door and inserted the key they'd been given. As he opened the door, lights came on inside.

"Have you been to one of these before?" she asked, and felt herself blush. She hadn't meant it that way.

"No," he said. He closed the door behind her and examined the locks. He pushed two buttons. "But people who come here sometimes wish to port. There is a reposting service that makes it very hard to trace. Also for phoning, very secure."

Chia was looking at the round pink frierry bed. It seemed to be upholstered in what they made stuffed animals out of. The wall-to-wall was shaggy and white as snow, the combination reminding her of a particularly nasty-looking sugar snack called a Ring-Ding.

Velcro made that ripping sound. She turned to see Masahiko removing his nylon gaiters. He took off his black workshoes (the toe was out, in one of his thin gray socks) and slid his feet into white paper sandals. Chia looked down at her own wet shoes on the white shag and decided she'd better do the same. "Why does this place look the way it does?" she asked, kneeling to undo her laces.

Masahiko shrugged. Chia noticed that the quilted International

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Biohazard symbol on the plaid bag was almost exactly the color of the fur on the bed.

Spotting what was obviously the bathroom through an open door, she carried her own bag in there

and closed the door behind her. The walls were upholstered with something black and shiny, and the floor was checkered with black and white tiles. Complicated mood-lighting came on and she was surrounded by ambient birdsong. This bathroom was nearly as big as the bedroom, with a bath like a miniature black swimming pool and something else that Chia only gradually recognized as a toilet. Remembering the one back in Eddie's office, she put her bag down and approached the thing with extreme caution. It was black, and chrome, and had arms and a back, sort of like a chair at the stylist's. There was a display cycling, on a little screen beside it, with fragments of English embedded in the Japanese. Chia watched as "(A) Pleasure" and "(B) Super Pleasure" slid past. "Uh-uh," she said.

After studying the seat and the ominous black bowl, she lowered her pants, positioned herself strategically over the toilet, squatted carefully, and urinated without sitting down. She'd let someone else flush that one, she decided, while she washed her hands at the basin, but then she heard it flush itself.

There was a glossy pink paper bag beside the basin with the words "Teen Teen Toiletry Bag" printed on it in swirly white script. It was sealed at the top with a silver stick-on bow. She removed the bow and looked inside. Lots of different little give-away cosmetics and at least a dozen different kinds of condoms, everything packaged to look more or less like candy.

There was a shiny black cabinet to the left of the mirror above the basin, the only thing in the toom that looked Japanese in that old-fashioned way. She opened it; a light came on inside, revealing three glass shelves arranged with shrink-wrapped plastic models of guy's dicks, all different sizes of them, molded in weird colors. Other

objects she didn't recognize at all: knobby balls, something that 3

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looked like a baby's pacifier, miniature inner-tubes with long rubbery whiskers. In the middle of it all stood a little black-haired doll in a pretty kimono made of bright paper and gold cloth. But when she tried to pick it up, the wig and the kimono came off in one piece, revealing yet another shrink-wrapped replica, this one with delicately painted eyes and a Cupid's-bow mouth. When she tried to put the wig and kimono back on, it fell over, knocking over everything on its shelf, so she closed the cabinet, Then she washed her hands again.

Back in the Ring-Ding room, Masahiko was cabling his computer to a black console on a shelf full of entertainment gear. Chia put her bag on the bed. Something chimed softly, twice, and then the surface of the bed began to ripple, slow osmotic waves centering in on the bag, which began to rise slightly, and fall .

"Ick," she said, and pulled the bag off the bed, which chimed again and began to subside.

Masahiko glanced in her direction, but went back to whatever he was doing with the equipment on the shelf.

Chia found that the room had a window, but it was hidden be-hind some kind of softscreen. She tried the clips that held the screen in place until she got the one that let her slide the screen aside on hidden tracks. The window looked out on a chainlinked parking lot beside a low, beige building sided with corrugated plastic. There were three trucks parked there, the first vehicles she'd seen in Japan that weren't new or particularly clean. A wet-looking gray cat emerged from beneath one of the trucks and sprang into the shadow beneath another. It was still raining.

"Good," she heard Masahiko say, evidently satisfied. "We go to Walled City."

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"How do you mean, she's 'here'?" Laney asked Yamazaki, as they rounded the rear of the Sherman tank. Clots of dry clay clung to the segments of its massive steel treads.

"Mr. Kuwayama is here," Yamazaki whispered. "He represents her-"

Laney saw that several people were already seated at a low table.

Two men. A woman. The woman must be Rei Toei.

If he'd anticipated her at all, it had been as some industrial-strength synthesis of Japan's last three dozen top female media faces. That was usually the way in Hollywood, and the formula tended to be even more rigid, in the case of software agents-.eigenheads, their features algorithmically derived from some human mean of proven popularity.

She was nothing like that.

Her black hair, rough-cut and shining, brushed pale bare shoulders as she turned her head. She had no eyebrows, and both her lids and lashes seemed to have been dusted with something white, leaving her dark pupils in stark contrast.

And now her eyes met his.

He seemed to cross a line. In the very structure of her face, in geometries of underlying bone, lay coded histories of dynastic flight, privation, terrible migrations. He saw stone tombs in steep alpine meadows, their lintels traced with snow. A line of shaggy pack ponies, their breath white with cold, followed a trail above a canyon.

25. The Idoru

The curves of the river below were strokes of distant silver. Iron harness bells clanked in the blue dusk.

Laney shivered. In his mouth a taste of rotten metal.

The eyes of the idoru, envoy of some imaginary country, met his. "We're here." Arleigh beside him, hand at his elbow. She was indicating two places at the table. "Are you all right?" she asked, under her breath. "Take your shoes off."

Laney looked at Blackwell, who was staring at the idoru, something like pain in his face, but the expression vanished, sucked away behind the mask of his scars.

Laney did as he was told, kneeling and removing his shoes, moving as if he were drunk, or dreaming, though he knew he was neither, and the idoru smiled, lit from within.

"Laney?"

The table was set above a depression in the floor. Laney seated himself, arranging his feet beneath the table and gripping his cushion with both hands. "What?"

"Are you okay?"

"Okay?"

"You looked.., blind."

Rez was taking his place now at the head of the table, the idoru to his right, someone else-Laney saw that it was I.o, the guitarist-to his left. Next to the idoru sat a dignified older man with rimless glasses, gray hair brushed back from his smooth forehead. He wore a very simple, very expensive-looking suit of some lusterless black material, and a high-collared white shirt that buttoned in a complicated way. When this man turned to address Rei Toei, Laney quite clearly saw the light of her face reflect for an instant in the almost circular lenses.

Arleigh's sharp intake of breath. She'd seen it too.

A hologram. Something generated, animated, projected. He felt his grip relax slightly, on the edges of the cushion,

But then he remembered the stone tombs, the river, the ponies with their iron bells.

Nodal.

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Laney had once asked Gerrard Delouvrier, the most patient of the tennis-playing Frenchmen of

TIDAL, why it was that he, Laney, had been chosen as the first (and, as it would happen, the only) recipient of the peculiar ability they sought to impart to him. He hadn't applied for the job, he said, and had no reason to believe the position had even been advertised. He had applied, he told Delouvrier, to be a trainee service rep.

Delouvrier, with short, prematurely gray hair and a suntable tan, leaned back in his articulated workstation chair and stretched his legs. He seemed to be studying his crepe-soled suede shoes. Then he looked out the window, to rectangular beige buildings, anonymous landscaping, February snow. "Do you not see? How we do not teach you? We watch. We wish to learn from you."

They were in a DatAmerica research park in Iowa. There was an indoor court for Delouvrier and his colleagues, but they complained constantly about its surface.

"But why me?"

Delouvrier's eyes looked tired. "We wish to be kind to the orphans? We are an unexpected warmth at the heart of DatAmerica?" He rubbed his eyes. "No. Something was done to you, Laney. In our way, perhaps, we seek to redress that. Is that a word, 'redress'?"

"No," Laney said.

"Do not question good fortune. You are here with us, doing work that matters. It is winter in this Iowa, true, but the work goes on." He was looking at Laney now. "You are our only proof," he said.

"Of what?"

Delouvrier closed his eyes. "There was a man, a blind man, who mastered echo-location. Clicks with the tongue, you understand?" Eyes closed, he demonstrated. "Like a bat. Fantastic," He opened his eyes. "He could perceive his immediate environment in great detail, ride a bicycle in traffic. Always making the :lk, :lk. The ability was his, was absolutely real. And he could never explain it, never teach it to another. He wove his long fingers together and cracked his knuckles. "We must hope that this is not the case with you."

Don't think of a purple cow. Or was it a brown one? Laney couldn't remember. Don't look at the idoru's face. She is not flesh; she is information. She is the tip of an iceberg, no, an Antarctica, of information. Looking at her face would trigger it again: she was some unthinkable volume of information. She induced the nodal vision in some unprecedented way; she induced it as narrative.

He could watch her hands. Watch the way she ate.

The meal was elaborate, many small courses served on individual rectangular plates. Each time a plate was placed before Rei Toei, and always within the field of whatever projected her, it was simultaneously veiled with a flawless copy, holo food on a holo plate.

Even the movement of her chopsticks brought on peripheral flickers of nodal vision. Because the chopsticks were information too, but nothing as dense as her features, her gaze. As each "empty" plate was removed, the untouched serving would reappear.

But when the flickering began, Laney would concentrate on his own meal, his clumsiness with his own chopsticks, conversation around the table. Kuwayama, the man with the rimless glasses, was answering something Rez had asked, though Laney hadn't been able to catch the question itself. "- the result of an array of elaborate constructs that we refer to as 'desiring machines.'" Rez's green eyes, bright and attentive. "Not in any literal sense," Kuwayama continued, "but please envision aggregates of subjective desire. It was decided that the modular array would ideally constitute an architecture of articulated longing. The man's voice was beautifully modulated, his English accented in a way that Laney found impossible to place.

Rez smiled then, his eyes going to the face of the idoru. As did Laney's as well, automatically.

He fell through her eyes. He was staring up at a looming cliff face that seemed to consist



entirely of small rectangular balconies,  
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none set at quite the same level or depth. Orange sunset off a tilted, steel-framed window.  
Oilslick colors crawling in the sky.

He closed his eyes, looked down, opened them. A fresh plate there, more food.

"You're really into your meal," Arleigh said.

A concentrated effort with the chopsticks and he managed to capture and swallow something that was like a one-inch cube of cold chutney omelet. "Wonderful. Don't want any of that fugu though. Blowfish with the neurotoxins? Heard about that?"

"You've already had seconds," she said. "Remember the big plate of raw fish arranged like the petals of a chrysanthemum?"

"You're kidding," Laney said.

"Lips and tongue feel faintly numb? That's it."

Laney ran his tongue across his lips. Was she kidding? Yamazaki, seated to his left, leaned close. "There may be a way around the problem you face with Rez's data. You are aware of Lo/Rez global fan activity?"

"Of what?"

"Many fans. They report each sighting of Rez, Lo, other musicians involved. There is much incidental detail."

Laney knew from his day's video education that Lo/Rez were theoretically a duo, but that there were always at least two other "members," usually more. And Rez had been adamant from the start about his dislike of drum machines; the current drummer, "Blind" Willy Jude, seated opposite Yamazaki, had been with them for years. He'd been turning his enormous black glasses in the idoru's direction throughout the meal; now he seemed to sense Laney's glance. The black glasses, video units, swung around. "Man," Jude said, "Rozzer's sittin' down there makin' eyes at a big aluminum thermos bottle."

"You can't see her?"

"Holos are hard, man," the drummer said, touching his glasses with a fingertip "Take my kids to Nissan County, I'll call ahead, get 'em tweaked around a little. Then I can see 'em. But this lady's on a

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funny frequency or something. All I can see's the projector and this kinda, kinda ectoplasmic, right? Glow, like,"

The man seated between Jude and Mr. Kuwayama, whose name was Ozaki, bobbed apologetically in Jude's direction. "We regret this very much. We regret deeply. A slight adjustment is required, but it cannot be done at this time,"

"Hey," Jude said, "no big problem. I seen her already. I get all the music channels with these. That one where she's a Mongol princess or something, up in the mountains.

Laney lost a chopstick.

"The most recent single," Ozaki said.

"Yeah," Jude said, "that's pretty good. She wears that gold mask? Okay shit." He popped a section of maki into his mouth and chewed.

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Chia and Masahiko sat facing one another on the white carpet. The room's only chair was a fragile-looking thing with twisted wire legs and a heart-shaped seat upholstered in pink metal-flake plastic. Neither of them wanted to sit on the bed. Chia had her Sandbenders across her knees and was working her fingers into her tip-sets. Masahiko's computer was on the carpet in front of him; he'd put its control-face back on and peeled a very compact pair of tip-sets out of the back of the cube, along with two small black oval cups on fine lengths of optical cable. Another length of the cable ran from his computer to a small open hatch at the back of the Sandbenders.

"Okay," Chia said, settling the last of her tips, "let's go. I've got to get hold of somebody.

"Yes," he said. He picked up the black cups, one in either hand, and placed them over his eyes. When he let go, they stayed there. It looked uncomfortable.

Chia reached up and pulled her own glasses down, over her eyes "What do I-

Something at the core of things moved simultaneously in mutually impossible directions. It wasn't even like porting. Software conflict? Faint 'impression of light through a fluttering of rags.

And then the thing before her: building or biomass or cliff face looming there, in countless unplanned strata, nothing about it even or regular. Accreted patchwork of shallow random balconies, thousands of small windows throwing back blank silver rectangles of fog.

26. HakNani

Stretching either way to the periphery of vision, and on the high, uneven crest of that ragged facade, a black (hr of twisted pipe, antennas sagging under vine growth of cable. And past this scribbled border a sky where colors crawled like gasoline on water.

"flak Nam," he said, beside her.

"What is it?"

"'City of darkness.' Between the walls of the world."

She remembered the scarf she'd seen, in his room behind the kitchen, its intricate map of something chaotic and compacted, tiny irregular segments of red and black and yellow. And then they were moving forward, toward a narrow opening. "It's a MUD, right?" Something like a larger, permanent version of the site the Tokyo chapter had erected for the meeting, or the tropical forest Kelsey and Zona had put up. But people played games in MUDs; they made up characters for themselves and pretended. Little kids did it, and lonely people.

"No," he said, "not a game." They were inside now, smoothly accelerating, and the squirming density of the thing was continual visual impact, an optical drumming. "Tai Chang Street." Walls scrawled and crawling with scrolling messages, spectral doorways passing like cards in a shuffled deck.

And they were not alone: others there, ghost-figures whipping past, and everywhere the sense of eyes .

Fractal filth, bit-rot, the corridor of their passage tented with crazy swoops of faintly flickering lines of some kind. "Alms House Backstreet." A sharp turn. Another. Then they were ascending a maze of twisting stairwells, still accelerating, and Chia took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Retinal fireworks bursting there, but the pressure was gone.

When she opened her eyes, they were in a much cleaner but no larger version of his room behind the kitchen in the restaurant. No empty ramen bowls, no piles of clothing. He was beside her on the sleeping ledge, staring at the shifting patterns on his computer's control-face. Beside it on the work-surface, her Sandbenders. The

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texture-mapping was rudimentary, everything a little too smooth and glossy. She looked at him, curious to see how he'd present. A basic scan job, maybe a year out of date: his hair was shorter. He wore the same black tunic.

On the wall behind the computers was an animated version of the printed scarf, its red, black, and yellow bits pulsing slightly. A bright green line traced a route in from the perimeter; where it ended, bright green, concentric rings radiated from one particular yellow square.

She looked back at him, but he was still staring at the control-face.

Something chimed. She glanced at the door, which was mapped in a particularly phoney-looking wood-grain effect, and saw a small white rectangle slide under the door. And keep sliding, straight toward her, across the floor, to vanish under the sleeping ledge. She looked down in time to see it rise, at exactly the same rate, up the edge of the striped mattress and over, coming to a halt when it was in optimum position to be read. It was in that same font they'd used at Whiskey Clone, or one just like it. It said "Ku Klux Klan Collectibles," and then some letters and numbers that didn't look like any kind of address she knew.

Another chime. She looked at the door in time to see a gray blur scoot from under it. Flat, whirling, &st. It was on the white rectangle now, something like the shadow of a crab or spider, two-dimensional and multi-legged. It swallowed it, shot for the door.

"I have completed responsibility to Walled City," Masahiko said, turning from the control-face.

"What were those things?" Chia asked him.

"What things?"

"Like a business card, Crawled under the door. Then another thing, like a gray cut-out crab, that ate it."

"An advertisement," he decided, "and a sub-program that of  
ferred criticism." 3

"It didn't offer criticism; it ate it." o

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"Perhaps the person who wrote the sub-program dislikes advertising. Many do. Or dislikes the advertiser. Political, aesthetic, personal reasons, all are possible."

Chia looked around at the reproduction of his tiny room. "Why don't you have a bigger site?" Instantly worried that it was because he was Japanese, and maybe they were just used to that. But still it was about the smallest virtual space she could remember having been in, and it wasn't like a bigger one cost more, not unless you were like Zona and wanted yourself a whole country.

"The Walled City is a concept of scale. Very important. Scale is place, yes? Thirty-three thousand people inhabited original. Two-point-seven hectares. As many as fourteen stories,"

None of which made any sense to Chia. "I have to port, okay?"

"Of course," he said, and gestured toward her Sandbenders.

She was braced for that two-directions-at-once thing, but it didn't happen. The bit-mapped fish were swimming around in the glass coffee table. She looked out the window at the crayon trees and wondered where the Mumphalumpagus was. She hadn't seen it for a while. It was something her father had made for her when she was a baby, a big pink dinosaur with goof-y eyelashes.

She checked the table for mail, but there was nothing new.

She could phone from here. Call her mother. Sure.

-Hi, I'm in Tokyo. In a "love hotel." People are after me because somebody put something in my bag. So, uh, what do you think I should I do?

She tried porting to Kelsey's address instead, but all she got was that annoying marble anteroom and the voice, not Kelsey's, that said that Kelsey Van Troyer wasn't in at the moment. Chia exited without leaving a message. The next address she tried was Zona's, but Zona's provider was down. That happened a lot, in Mexico, and particularly in Mexico City, where Zona lived. She decided to try Zona's secret place, because it was on a mainframe in Arizona and it was never down. She knew Zona didn't like people just showing up there, because Zona didn't want the company that had built the original  
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website, and then forgotten about it, to discover that Zona had gotten in and set up her own country.

She asked the Sandbenders where she was porting from now and it said Helsinki, Finland. So that reporting capability at the hotel was working, at least.

Just before twilight at Zona's, like always. Chia scanned the floor of a dry swimming pool, looking for Zona's lizards, but she didn't see them. Usually they were right there, waiting for you, but not this time. "Zona?"

Chia looked up, wondering if she'd see those spooky condor-things that Zona kept. The sky was beautiful but empty. Originally that sky had been the most important part of this place, and no expense had been spared. Serious sky: deep and clean and a crazy Mexican shade like pale turquoise. They'd brought people here to sell them airplanes, corporate jets, when the jets were still in the design phase. There'd been a white concrete landing strip, but Zona had folded it up into a canyon and mapped over it. All the local color was Zona's stuff: the cooking fires and the dead pools and the broken walls. She'd imported landscape files, maybe even real stuff she knew from somewhere in Mexico. "Zona?"

Something rattled, up the nearest ridge, like pebbles on a sheet of metal.

-It's okay. One of the lizards. She's just not here now. A twig snapped. Closer.

-Don't hick around, Zona.

But she exited.

The bit-mapped fish swam back and forth.

That had been very creepy. She wasn't sure why, exactly, but it had been. Still was, kind of. She looked at the door to her bedroom and found herself wondering what she'd find there if she gestured for it. The bed, her Lo Rez Skyline poster, the agent of Lo greeting her in his mindless friendly way. But what if she found something else?

Something waiting. Like she could still hear that rattle, up the slope. Or what if she went to the wire-framed door where her mother's

room would have been? What if she opened it and her mother's room was there after all, and not her mother, waiting, but something else?

She was creeping herself out, that was all. She looked at her stack of Lo/Rez albums beside the lithographed lunch box, her virtual Venice beside that. Even her Music Master would seem like company now. She opened it, watching the Piazza decompress like some incredibly intricate paper pop-up book on fast-forward, facades and colonnades springing up around her, with the hour before a winter's dawn for backlight.

Turning from the water, where the prows of black gondolas bobbed like marks in some lost system of musical notation, she lifted her finger and shot forward into the maze, thinking as she did that this place had been as strange, in its way, as Masahiko's Walled City, and what was that all supposed to be about anyway?

And it was only as she crossed her third bridge that she noticed that he wasn't there.

-Hey.

She stopped. A shop window displayed the masks of Carnival, the really ancient ones. Black, penis-nosed leather, empty eye-holes. A mirror draped with yellowed crepe.

Checking the Sandbenders to make sure she hadn't turned him off. She hadn't.

Chia closed her eyes and counted to three. Made herself feel the carpeted floor she sat on in the Hotel Di. She opened her eyes.

At the end of the narrow Venetian street, down the tilted, stepped cobbles, where it opened out into a small square or plaza, an unfamiliar figure stood beside the central fountain.

She pulled the goggles off without bothering to close Venice

Masahiko sat opposite her, his legs crossed, the black cups sucked up against his eyes. His lips were moving, silently, and his hands, on his knees, in their black tip-sets, traced tiny fingerpatterns in the air.

Maryalice was sitting on the furry pink bed with an unlit cigarette in her mouth. She had a little square gray gun in her hand, and  
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Chia saw how the freshly glossed red of her nails contrasted with the pearly plastic of the handle.

'Started again," Maryalice said, around the cigarette. She pulled the trigger, causing a small golden flame to spring up from the muzzle, and used it to light her cigarette. "Tokyo. I'll tell you. Does it every time."

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27. That Physical Thing

Laney was at a black rubber urinal in the Men's when he noticed the Russian combing his hair in the mirror.

Ar least it looked like black rubber, with sort of floppy edges. They obviously had the plumbing working, but he wondered what they'd say if you asked to make your own contribution to the Grotto? On his way here he'd noticed that one of the bars was topped with a slab of something murky green and translucent, lit from below, and he'd hoped they hadn't made that from what they'd sawn our of the stairwell.

Dinner was over and he'd probably had too much sake with it. He and Arleigh and Yamazaki had watched Rez meeting this new version of the idoru, the one Willy Jude saw as a big silver thermos. And Blackwell was having to get used to that, because Laney guessed that the bodyguard hadn't had any idea she'd be here, not until he'd walked in and Rez had told him.

Arleigh had talked with Lo through most of it, mainly about real estate. Different properties he owned around the world. Laney had listened to more of Yamazaki's ideas about accessing this

teenage fan-club sruff~ and there might actually be something to that, but they'd have to try it to 6nd oLit. Blackwell hadn't said two words to anybody, drinking lager instead of sake and packing his food away as though he were trying to plug something, some gap in security that could be taken care of if you stuffed it methodically with enough

sashimi. The Australian was an ace with chopsticks; he could proba-

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bly stick one in your eye at fifty paces. But the main show had been Rez and the idoru, and to a lesser extent Kuwayama, who'd carried on long conversations with them both. The other one, Ozaki, seemed to be the guy they brought along in case someone had to change the batteries in the silver thermos. And Willy Jude was amiable enough, but in about as content-free a way as possible.

Techs were supposed to be an easy source of whatever passed for gossip in a given company, so Laney had tried a few openings in that direction, but Ozaki hadn't said any more than he'd had to. And since Laney couldn't get Rei Toei within his field of vision without starting to slide over into nodal mode, he'd had to conduct his evening's eavesdropping with whatever pick-up visuals were available. Arleigh wasn't too bad for that. There was something about the line of her jaw that he particularly liked, and kept coming back to.

Laney zipped up and went to wash his hands, the basin made of that same floppy-looking black stuff, and noticed that the Russian was still combing his hair. Laney had no way of knowing if the man was literally Russian or not, but he thought of him that way because of the black patent paratrooper boots with contrasting white stitching, the pants with the black silk ribbon down the side, and the white leather evening jacket. Either Russian or one of those related jobs, but very definitely Kombinat-inflected, that mutant commiemafioso thing.

The Russian was combing his hair with a total concentration that made Laney think of a fly grooming itself with its front feet, He was very large, and had a large head, though it was mainly in the vertical, quite tall from the eyebrows up, seeming to taper very slightly toward the crown. For all the attention being given to the combing, the man didn't actually have much hair, not on top anyway, and Laney had thought these guys all went in for implants. Rydell had told him Kombinat types were all over Tokyo. Rydell had seen a documentary about it, how they were so singularly and surrealistically brutal that nobody wanted to mess with them. Then Rydell had started to tell him about two Russians, San Francisco cops of some

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kind, who he'd had some sort of run-in with, but Laney had to take a meeting with Rice Daniels and a make-up artist, and never heard the end of it.

Laney checked to see that he didn't have anything stuck in his teeth from dinner.

As he went out, the Russian was still combing.

He saw Yamazaki, blinking and looking lost. "It's back there," he said.

"What is?"

"The can."

"Can'?"

"Men's. The toilet."

"But I was looking for you."

"You found me."

"I observed, as we ate, that you avoided looking directly at the idoru."

"Right."

"I surmise that density of information is sufficient to allow nodal apprehension

"You got it."

Yamazaki nodded. "Ah. But this would not be the case with one of her videos, or even with a 'live' performance."

"Why not?" Laney had started back in the direction of their table.

"Bandwidth," Yamazaki said, "The version here tonight is high-bandwidth prototype."

"Are we compensated for beta-testing?"

"Can you describe the nature of nodal apprehension, please?" "Like memories," Laney said, "or clips from a movie. But something the drummer said made me think I was just seeing her latest video."

Someone shoved Laney out of the way, from behind, and he fell across the nearest table, breaking a glass. He felt the glass shatter under him and found himself staring straight down, for a second, into

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the taut gray latex lap of a woman who screamed explosively just before the table gave way. Something, probably her knee, clipped him hard in the side of the head.

He managed to get to his knees, holding his head, and found himself recalling an experiment they'd done in Science, back in Gainesville. Surface tension. You sprinkled pepper over the water in a glass. Brought the tip of a needle close to the film of pepper. Watched it spring back from the needle like a live thing. And he saw that happening here, his head ringing, but instead of pepper it was the crowd in the Western World, and he knew that the needle must be pointed at Rez's table.

The back of a white leather evening jacket. . . . But then he saw the Sherman tank come unmoored on the shoulders of the recoiling crowd, spinning toward him, huge and weightless, and the lights went out.

The crowd had been screaming anyway, but the dark twisted the communal pitch up into something that had Laney covering his ears. Or trying to, because someone stumbled into him and he went over, backward, instinctively curling into a tight fetal knot and clamping his hands across the back of his neck.

"Hey," said a voice, very close to his ear, "get on up. You gonna get stepped on." It was Willy Jude, "I can see." A hand around his wrist. "Got infrared."

Laney let the drummer pull him to his feet. "What is it? What's happening?"

"Dunno, but come on. Gonna get worse-" As if on cue, a terrible squeal of raw animal pain cut through the frenzied crowd-noise. "Blackwell got one," Willy Jude said, and Laney felt the drummer's hand grip his belt. He stumbled as he was pulled along. Someone ran into him, shouted in Japanese. After that he kept his hands up, trying to protect his face, and went where the drummer pulled him,

Suddenly they were in a cove or pocket of relative quiet. "Where are we?" Laney asked.

"This way        Something clipped Laney across the shins.

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"Stool," Willy Jude said. "Sorry." Glass snapped beneath Laney's shoes.

A curve of greenish light, broken cursive hanging in the dark. Another few steps and he saw the Grotto. Willy Jude let go of his belt. "You can see here, right? That bioluminescent stuff?"

"Yeah," Laney said. "Thanks,"

"It doesn't register on my glasses. I get infrared off warm bodies, but I can't make out the steps. Walk me down." He took Laney's hand. They started down the stairs together. A black-clad trio of Japanese shot past them, leaving a high-heeled pump on the encrusted stairs, and vanished around the landing. Laney kicked the shoe out of Willy Jude's way and kept going.

When they rounded the corner at the landing, Arleigh was there, a green champagne bottle cocked over her shoulder. There was a smear of blood at the corner of her mouth, darker than her lipstick. When she saw Laney, she lowered the bottle. "Where were you?" she said.

"The Men's," Laney said.

"You missed the show."

"What happened?"

"Damn it," she said, "my coat's up there."

"Keep moving, keep moving," Willy Jude said, More stairs, more landings, the rippling walls of the Grotto giving way to concrete. People kept rushing down, past them, knots and singles, taking the stairs too fast. Laney rubbed his ribs where he'd come down on the glass. It hurt, but somehow he hadn't been cut.

"They looked like Kombinat," Arleigh said. "Big ugly guys, bad outfits. I couldn't tell if they were after Rez or the idoru. Like they just thought they could walk in and do it."

"Do what?"

"Don't know," she said. "Kwayama had at least a dozen of his own security people at the two closest tables. And Blackwell probably prays for a scene like that every night before he goes to bed. He reached into hi~ jacket, then the lights went out." 0

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"He put 'em out," Willy Jude said. "Some kinda remote. He can see better in the dark than I can with these infrareds. Dunno how that is, but he can."

"How'd you get out?" Laney asked Arleigh.

"Flashlight. In my purse."

"Laney-san

Looking back to see Yamazaki, one sleeve of his green plaid coat pulled free at the shoulder, his glasses missing a lens. Arleigh had taken a phone from her purse and was cursing softly as she tried to get it to work.

Yamazaki caught up with them at the next landing. The four of them continued down together, Laney still holding the blind drummer's hand.

When they reached the street, the Western World's sullen crew of doorpeople were nowhere in sight. A single policeman with a plastic rain-cover on his cap was muttering frantically into a microphone clipped to the front of his rain-cape. He was walking in tight circles as he did this, gesturing dramatically with a white baton at nothing in particular. Several kinds of alien siren were converging on the Western World, and Laney thought he could hear a helicopter.

Willy Jude dropped Laney's hand and adjusted his video-goggles to the street's light-level.

"Where's my car?"

Arleigh lowered her phone, which apparently was working now. "You'd better come with us, Willy. Some kind of tactical unit is on the way.

"Nothing like it," Rez said, and Laney turned, to see the singer emerging from the Western World, brushing something white from his dark jacket. "That physical thing. Too much time in the virtual, we forget that, don't we? You're Leyner?" Extending his hand.



"Laney," Laney said, as Arleigh's dark green van pulled up beside them.

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Maryalice opened a curved drawer that was built into the pink bed's headboard. She was wearing a black skin-suit with big red Ashleigh Modine Carter-style sequin roses on the lapels. She took out a little blue glass dish and balanced it on her knee. "I hate these places," she said. "There's lots of ways to make sex ugly, but it's kind of hard to make it look this ridiculous." She knocked the gray end off her cigarette, into the blue saucer. "How old are you, anyway?"

"Fourteen," Chia said.

"About what I told 'em. You're fourteen, fifteen, for real, and no way you were on to me. I was on to you, right? It was my move. I planted on you. But they don't believe me. Say you're some kind of operator, say I'm just stupid, say that Rez guy sent you to SeaTac to get the stuff. Say you're a set-up and I'm crazy to believe a kid couldn't do that." She sucked on the cigarette, squinting. "Where is it?" She looked down at Chia's bag, open on the white carpet. "There?"

"I didn't mean to take it. I didn't know it was there."

"I know that," Maryalice said. "What I told 'em. I meant to get it back off you at the club."

"I don't understand any of this," Chia said. "It just scares me."

"Sometimes I bring stuff back for Eddie. Party favors for the club. It's illegal, but it's not all that illegal, you know? Not hard stuff, really. But this time he was doing something else on the side, something with the Russians, and I didn't like it. That's what scares me, that stuff like its alive."

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28. A Matter of Credit

"What stuff?"

"That. Assemblers, they're called."

Chia looked at her bag. "That thing in my bag is a nanotech assembler?"

"More like what you start with. Kind of an egg, or a little factory. You plug that thing into another machine that programs 'em, and they start building themselves out of whatever's handy. And when there's enough of 'em, they start building whatever it was you wanted them to. There's some kind of law against selling that stuff to the Kombinat, so they want it bad. But Eddie worked out a way to do it. I met these two creepy German guys in the SeaTac Hyatt. They'd flown in there from wherever, I figured maybe Africa." She mashed the lit end of the cigarette into the little blue dish, making it smell even worse. "They didn't want to give it to me, because they were expecting Eddie. Lot of back and forth on the phone. Finally they did. I was supposed to put it in the suitcase with the other stuff, but it made me nervous. Made me wanna self-medicate." She looked around the room. She put the blue dish with the crushed cigarette on a square black side table and did something that made the front of it open. It was a refrigerator, filled with little bottles. Maryalice bent over, peering in there. The pistol-shaped lighter slid off the pink bed. "No tequila," Maryalice said. "You tell me why anybody'd name a vodka 'Come Back Salmon' Removing a little square bottle with a fish on its side. "Japanese would, though." She looked down at the lighter. "Like a Russian would make a cigarette lighter that looks like a pistol."

Chia saw that Maryalice didn't have her hair-extensions in anymore. "When they were taking DNA samples, in SeaTac," Chia said, "you stuck the end of your extension in there."

Maryalice cracked the seal on the little bottle, opened it, drained it in a single gulp, and

shivered. "Those extensions are all my own hair," she said. "Grew 'em out when I was on sort of a health diet, understand? They catch people doing recreational, when they take

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those hair samples. Some recreational, they stay in your hair a long time." Maryalice put the empty bottle down beside the blue dish. "What's he doing?" Pointing at Masahiko.

"Porting," Chia said, unable to think of a quick way to explain the Walled City.

"I can see that. You came here 'cause these places'll re-post, right?"

"But you found us anyway."

"I got connections with a cab company. I figured it was worth a try. But the Russians'll think of it, too, if they haven't already."

"But how'd you get in? It was all locked."

"I know my way around these places, honey. I know my way entirely too well."

Masahiko removed the black cups that covered his eyes, saw Maryalice, looked down at the cups, then back up at Chia.

"Maryalice," Chia said.

Gomi Boy presented like a life-size anime of himself, huge eyes and even taller hair. "Who drank the vodka?" he asked.

"Maryalice," Chia said. "Who's Maryalice?"

"She's in the room at the hotel," Chia said.

"That was the equivalent of twenty minutes porting," Gomi Boy said. "How can there be someone in your room at the Hotel Di?"

"It's complicated," Chia said. They were back in Masahiko's room in the Walled City. They'd just clicked back, none of that maze-running like the first time. Past an icon reminding her she'd left her Venice open, but too late for that. Maybe once you were in here, you got back fast. But Masahiko'd said they had to, quick, there was trouble. Maryalice had said she didn't mind, but Chia didn't like it at all that Maryalice was in the room with them while they were porting.

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"Your cash card is good for twenty-six more minutes of room-time," Gomi Boy said. "Unless your friend hits the mini-bar again. Do you have an account in Seattle?"

"No," Chia said, "just my mother."

"We've already looked at that," Masahiko said. "Your mother's credit would not sustain rental of the room plus porting charges. Your father-"

"My father?"

"Has an expense account with his employer in Singapore, a merchant bank-"

"How do you know that?"

Gomi Boy shrugged. "Walled City. We find things out. There are people here who know things."

"You can't tap into my father's account," Chia said. "It's for his job."

"Twenty-five minutes remaining," Masahiko said.

Chia pulled her goggles off. Maryalice was taking another miniature bottle from the little fridge.

"Don't open that!"

Maryalice gave a guilty little shriek and dropped the bottle. "Just maybe some rice crackers," she said.

"Nothing," Chia said. "It's too expensive! We're running out of money!"

"Oh," Maryalice said, blinking. "Right. I don't have any, though. Eddie's cut my cards off, for sure, and the first time I plug one, he'll know exactly where I am."

Masahiko spoke to Chia without removing the eyecups. "We have your father's expense account on line.

Maryalice smiled. "What we like to hear, right?"

Chia was pulling off her tip-sets. "You'll have to take it to them," she said to Maryalice, "the nano-thing. I'll give it to you now, you take it to them, give it to them, tell them it was all a mistake." She scooted on her hands and knees over to where her bag sat open on the floor. She dug for the thing, found it, held it out to Maryalice in what was left of the blue and yellow bag from the SeaTac duty-free. The

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dark gray plastic and the rows of little holes made it look like some kind of deformed designer pepper grinder. "Take it. Explain to them. Tell them it was just a mistake."

Maryalice cringed. "Put it back, okay?" She swallowed. "See, the problem isn't whether or not there's been a mistake. The problem's they'll kill us now anyway, because we know about it. And Eddie, he'll let 'em. 'Cause he has to. And 'cause he's just sort of generally fed up with me, the ungrateful little greasy shithead motherfucker Maryalice shook her head sadly. "It's about the end of our relationship, you ask me."

"Account accessed," Masahiko said. "Join us here now, please. You have another visitor."

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29. Her Bad Side

Arleigh's van smelled of long-chain monomers and warm electronics. The rear seats had been removed to make room for the collection of black consoles, cabled together and wedged into place with creaking wads of bubble-pack.

Rez rode up front, beside the driver, the ponytailed Japanese Californian from Akihabara. Laney squatted on a console, between Ar-leigh and Yamazaki, with Willy Jude and the red-haired tech behind them. Laney's ribs hurt, where he'd come down on the table, and that seemed to be getting worse. He'd discovered that the top of his left sock was sticky with blood, but he wasn't sure where it had come from or even if it was his own.

Arleigh had her phone pressed to her ear. "Option eight," she said, evidently to the driver, who touched the pad beside the dashboard map. Laney glimpsed Tokyo grid-segments whipping past on the screen. "We're taking Rez back with us."

"Take me to the Imperial," Rez said.

"Blackwell's orders," Arleigh said.

"Let me talk to him." Reaching back for the phone.

They swung left, into a wider street, their lights picking out a small crowd speedwalking away from the Western World, all of them trying to look as though they just happened to be there, out for a brisk stroll. The neighborhood was nondescript and generically urban and, aside from the guilty-looking speedwalkers, quite deserted.

"Keithy," Rez said, "I want to go back to the hotel." The terrible

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white daystar of a police helicopter swept over them, carbon-black shadows speeding away across concrete. Rez was listening to the phone. They passed an all-night noodle wagon, its interior

ghostly behind curtains of yellowed plastic. Images flicking past on a small screen behind the counter. Arleigh nudged Laney's knee, pointed past Rez's shoulder. A trio of white armored cars shot through the approaching intersection, blue lights flashing on their rectangular turrets, and vanished without a sound. Rez turned, handing the phone back to her. "Keithy's being his para self. He wants me to go to your hotel and wait for him."

Arleigh took the phone. "Does he know what it was about?"

"Autograph-hunters?" Rez started to turn back around in his seat.

"What happened to the idoru?" Laney asked.

Rez peered at him. "If you kidnapped that new platform-and I thought it was wonderful-what exactly would you have?"

"I don't know."

"Rei's only reality is the realm of ongoing serial creation," Rez said. "Entirely process; infinitely more than the combined sum of her various selves. The platforms sink beneath her, one after another, as she grows denser and more complex. The long green eyes seemed to grow dreamy, in the light of passing storefronts, and then the singer turned away."

Laney watched Arleigh dab at the cut corner of her mouth with a tissue.

"Laney-san Yamazaki, a whisper. Putting something into his hand. A cabled set of eyephones. "We have global fin-activity database

His ribs hurt. Was his leg bleeding? "Later, okay?"

Arleigh's suite was at least twice as large as Laney's room. It had its own miniature sitting room, separated from the bedroom and bath

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with gilded French doors. The four chairs in the sitting room had very tall, very narrow backs, each one tapering to a rendition of the elf hat, done in sandblasted steel. These chairs were quite amazingly uncomfortable, and Laney was hunched forward on one now, in considerable pain, hugging his bruised ribs. The blood in his sock had turned out to be his own, from a skinned patch on his left shin. He'd plastered it over with micropore from the professional-looking first-aid kit in Arleigh's bathroom. He doubted there was anything there for his ribs, but he was wondering if some kind of elastic bandage might help.

Yamazaki was on the chair to his right, reattaching the sleeve of his plaid jacket with bright gold safety pins from an Evil Elf Hat emergency sewing kit. Laney had never actually seen anyone use a hotel room's emergency sewing kit for anything. Yamazaki had removed his damaged glasses and was working with the jacket held close to his face. This made him look older, and somehow calmer. To Yamazaki's right, the red-haired technician, who was called Shannon, was sitting up very straight and reading a complimentary style magazine.

Rez was sprawled on the bed, propped up on the maximum available number of pillows, and Willy Jude sat at its foot, channel-surfing with his video units. The panic at the Western World apparently hadn't made the news yet, although the drummer said he'd caught an oblique reference on one of the clubbing channels.

Arleigh was standing by the window, pressing an ice cube in a white washcloth against her swollen lip.

Did he give you any idea of when he might turn up?" Rez, from the bed.

"No," Arleigh said, "but he made it clear he wanted you to wait."

Rez sighed.

"Let the people take care of you, Rez," Willy Jude said. "It's what they're paid for."

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Laney had taken it for granted that all of them were expected to wait, along with Rez, for Blackwell. Now he decided to try to return to his room. All they could do was stop him.

Blackwell opened the door from the corridor, pocketing something black, something that definitely wasn't your standard-issue hotel key. There was a pale X of micropore across his right cheek, the longest arm reaching the tip of his chin.

"Evening, Keithy," Rez said.

"You really mustn't piss off like that," the bodyguard said. "Those Russians are a serious crew. Massive triers, those boys. Wouldn't do if they got hold of you, Rozzer. Not at an. You wouldn't like it."

"Kwayama and the platform?"

"Have to tell you, Rez." Blackwell stood at the foot of the bed. "I've seen you go with women I wouldn't take to a shit-fight on a dark night, but at least they were human. Hear what I'm saying?"

"I do, Keithy," the singer said. "I know how you feel about her. But you'll come around. It's the way of things, Keithy. The new way. New world."

"I don't know anything about that. My old dad was a Painter and Docker; had a docky's brief. Broke his heart. I turned out the sort of crim I did. Died before you'd got me out of B Division. Would've liked him to see me assume responsibility, Rez. For you. For your safety. But now I don't know. Might not impress him so. Might tell me I'm just minding a fool with a bloated sense of himself"

Rez came up off the bed, surprising Laney with his speed, a performer's grace, and then he was in front of Blackwell, his hands on the huge shoulders. "But you don't think that, do you, Keithy? You didn't in Pentridge. Not when you came for me. And not when I came back for you."

Blackwell's eyes glistened. He was about to say something, but Yamazalci suddenly stood up, blinking, and put his green plaid sportscoat on. He craned his neck, peering nearsightedly at the pins

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he'd used to mend it, then seemed to realize that everyone in the suite was looking at him. He coughed nervously and sat back down.

A silence followed. "Out of line, I was, Rozzer," Blackwell said, breaking it.

Rez clapped the bodyguard's shoulder, releasing him. "Stressed. I know." Rez smiled. "Kwayama? The platform?"

"Had his own team there,"

"And our crashers?"

"That's a bit odd," Blackwell said, "Kombinat, Rez. Say we've stolen something of theirs. Or at least that's all the one I questioned knew."

Rez looked puzzled, but seemed to put whatever it was out of his mind. "Take me back to the hotel," he said.

Blackwell checked his huge steel watch. "We're still sweeping, there. Another twenty minutes and I'll check with them."

Laney took this as his opportunity, standing up and stepping past Blackwell to the door. "I'm going to take a hot shower," he said. "Cracked my ribs up there." No one said anything. "Call if you need me." Then he opened the door, stepped out, closed it behind him, and limped in what he hoped was the direction of the elevator.

It was. In it, he leaned against the mirrored wall and touched the button for his floor.

It said something in a soothing tone, Japanese.

The door closed. He shut his eyes.

He opened his eyes as the door opened. Stepped out, turned the wrong way, then the right way. Fishing for his wallet, where he'd put his key. Still there. Bath, hot shower, these concepts more theoretical as he approached his room. Sleep. That was it. Undress and lie down and not be conscious.

He swiped the key down the slot. Nothing. Again. Click.

Kathy Torrance, sitting on the edge of his bed. She smiled at him. Pointed at the moving figures on the screen. One of whom was Laney, naked, with a larger erection than he recalled ever having had. 3

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The girl vaguely familiar, but whoever she was, he didn't remember doing that with her

"Don't just stand there," Kathy said. "You have to see this."

"That's not me," Laney said.

"I know," she said, delighted. "He's way too big. And I'd love to see you try to prove it."

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Chia worked the tips back on, regoggled, let Masahiko take her to his room. That same instant transition, the virtual Venice icon strobing. . . . Gomi Boy was there, and someone else, though at first she couldn't see him. Just this glass tumbler on the work-surface that hadn't been there before, mapped to a higher resolution than the rest of the room: filthy, chipped at the rim, something crusted at the bottom.

"That woman," Gomi Boy began, but someone coughed. A strange dry rattle.

"You are an interesting young woman," said a voice unlike any Chia had heard, a weird, attenuated rasp that might have been compiled from a library of faint, dry, random sounds. So that a word's long vowel might be wires in the wind, or the click of a consonant the rattle of a dead leaf against a window. "Young woman," it said again, and then there was something indescribable, which she guessed was meant as laughter.

"This is the Etruscan," Masahiko said. "The Etruscan accessed your father's expense account for us. He is most skilled."

Something there for a second. Skull-like. Above the dirty glass. The mouth drawn and petulant. "It was nothing, really.

She told herself it was all presentation. Like when Zona presented, you could never quite focus on her. This was like that, but more extreme. And a lot of work put into the audio. But she didn't

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30. The Etruscan

"You brought me here to meet him?" she asked Masahiko.

"Oh, no," said the Etruscan, the Oh a polyphonic chorale, "I just wanted a look, dear." The thing like laughter.

"The woman," Gomi Boy said. "Did you arrange for her to meet you, at Hotel Di?"

"No," Chia said. "She checked the taxi cabs, so you aren't as smart as you think."

"Well put." The p#: the sound of a single pebble falling into a dry marble fountain. Chia focused on the glass. A huge centipede lay curled at its bottom, a thing the color of dead cuticle. She saw that it had tiny, pink hands- The glass was gone. "Sorry," Masahiko said. "He wished only to meet you."

"Who is the woman in Hotel Di?" Gomi Boy's anime eyes were bright and eager, but his tone was hard.

"Maryalice," Chia said. "Her boyfriend's with those Russians. The thing they're after's in my bag there."

"What thing?" "Maryalice says it's a nano-assembler." "Unlikely," Gomi Boy said, "Tell it to the Russians." "But you have contraband? In the room?" "I've got something they want." Gomi Boy grimaced, vanished. "Where'd he go?"

"This changes the situation," Masahiko said. "You did not tell us you have contraband."

"You didn't ask! You didn't ask why they were looking for me.

Masahiko shrugged, calm as ever. "We were not certain that it was you they were interested in. The Kombinat would be very eager for the skills of someone like the Etruscan, for instance. Many people know of Hak Nam, but few know how to enter. We reacted to protect the integrity of the city."

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"But your computer's in the hotel room. They can just come there and get it."

"It no longer matters," he said. "I am no longer engaged in processing. My duties are assumed by others. Gomi Boy is concerned now for his safety outside, you understand? Penalties for possession of contraband are harsh. He is particularly vulnerable, because he deals in second-hand equipment."

"I don't think it's the police you want to worry about, right now. I think we want to call the police. Maryalice says those Russians'll kill us, if they find us."

"The police would not be a good idea. The Etruscan has accessed your father's account in Singapore. That is a crime."

"I think I'd rather get arrested than killed."

Masahiko considered that. "Come with me," he said. "Your visitor is waiting."

"Not the centipede," Chia said. "Forget it."

"No," he said, "not the Etruscan. Come."

And they were out of his room, fast-forward through the maze of Hak Nam, up twisted stairwells and through corridors, the strange, compacted world flickering past. What is this place? A communal site, right? But what are you so worried about? Why's it all a secret?"

"Walled City is of the net, but not on it. There are no laws here, only agreements."

"You can't be on the net and not be on the net," Chia said, as they shot up a final flight of stairs.

"Distributed processing," he said. "Interstitial, It began with a shared killfile-"

"Zona!" There across this uneven roofscape, overgrown with strangeness.

"Touch nothing. Some are traps. I come to you." Zona, presenting in that quick, fragmentary way, moved forward.

To Chia's right, a kind of ancient car lay tilted in a drift of tan-

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dom textures, something like a Christmas tree growing from its unbroken windshield. Beyond that.

She guessed that the rooftops of the Walled City were its dumping ground, but the things abandoned there were like objects out of a dream, bit-mapped fantasies discarded by their creators, their jumbled shapes and textures baffling the eye, the attempt to sort and decipher them inducing a kind of vertigo. Some were moving.

Then a movement high in the gasoline sky caught her eye. Zona's bird-things?

"I went to your site," Chia said. "You weren't there, something-"

"I know. Did you see it?" As Zona passed the Christmas tree, its round, silver ornaments displayed black eye-holes, each pair turning to follow her.

"No. I thought I heard it."

"I do not know what it is." Zona's presentation was even quicker and more Jumpy than usual. "I came here for advice. They told me that you had been to my site, and that now you were here .

"You know this place?"

"Someone here helped me establish my site. It is impossible to come here without an invitation, you understand? My name is on a list. Although I cannot go below, into the city itself,



unaccompanied."

"Zona, I'm in so much trouble now! We're hiding in this horrible hotel, and Maryalice is there-

"This bitch who made you her mule, yes? She is where?"

"In the room at this hotel. She said she broke up with her boyfriend, and it's his, the nano-thing-"

"The what?"

"She says it's some kind of nano-assembler thing."

Zona Rosa's features snapped into focus as her heavy eyebrows shot up. "Nanotechnology?"

"This is in your bag?" Masahiko asked.

"Wrapped in plastic."

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'One moment." He vanished.

"Who is that?" Zona asked.

"Masahiko. Mitsuko's brother. He lives here."

"Where did he go?"

"Back to the hotel we're porting from,"

"This shit you are in, it is crazy," Zona said.

"Please, Zona, help me! I don't think I'll ever get home!"

Masahiko reappeared, the thing in his hand minus the duty-free bag. "I scanned it," he said.

"Immediate identification as Rodel-van Erp primary biomolecular programming module C-slash-7A. This is a lab prototype. We are unable to determine its exact legal status, but the production model, C-slash-9E, is Class 1 nanotechnology, proscribed under international law. Japanese law, conviction of illegal possession of Class 1 device carries automatic life sentence."

"Life?" Chia said.

"Same for thermonuclear device," he said, apologetically, "poison gas, biological weapon" He held up the scanned object for Zona's inspection.

Zona looked at it. "Fuck your mother," she said, her tone one of somber respect.

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31. The Way Things Work

"See how things work, Laney? 'What goes around, comes around 7 You can run, but you can't hide'? Know those expressions, Laney? How some things get to be clich~s because they touch on certain truths, Laney? Talk to me, Laney."

Laney lowered himself into one of the miniature armchairs, hugging his ribs.

"You look like shit, Laney. Where have yOU been?"

"The Western World," he said. He didn't like watching himself do those things on the screen, but he found he couldn't look away. He knew that wasn't him, there. They'd mapped his face onto someone else. But it was his face. He remembered hearing something someone had said about mirrors, a long time ago, that they were somehow unnatural and dangerous.

"So you're trying your hand at the Orient now?"

She hadn't understood, he thought, which meant she didn't know where he'd been, earlier. Which meant they hadn't been watching him here. "That's that guy," he said, "that Hillman. From the day I met you. My job interview. He was a porno extra."

"Don't you think he's being awfully rough with her?"

"Who is she, Kathy?"

"Think back. If you can remember Clinton Hillman, Laney . . .

Laney shook his head.

"Think actor, Laney. Think Alison Shires . . ."

"His daughter," Laney said, no doubt at all.

"I definitely think that's too rough. That borders on rape, Laney. Assault. I think we could make a case for assault."

'Why would she do that? How could you get her to do that?' Turning from the screen to Kathy. "I mean, unless it really is rape.'

"Let's hear the soundtrack, Laney. See what you're saying, there. Cast some light on motive.

'Don't,' he said. "I don't want to hear it."

'You're talking about her father the whole time, Laney. I mean, obsession is one thing, but just droning on about him that way, right through a white-knuckle skull-luck-"

He almost fell, coming up out of the chair. He couldn't find the manual controls. Wires back there. He pulled out the first three he found. Third did it.

"Put it on the Lo/Rez tab, Laney? Rock and roll lifestyle? Aren't you supposed to throw them out the window, though?"

"What's it about, Kathy? You want to just tell me now?"

She smiled at him. Exactly the smile he remembered from his job interview. "May I call you Cohn?"

"Kathy: fuck you."

She laughed. "We may have come full circle, Laney."

"How's that?"

"Think of this as a job interview."

"I've got a job."

"We're offering you another, Laney. You can moonlight."

Laney made it back to the chair. Lowered himself in as slowly as possible. The pain made him gasp.

"What's wrong?"

"Ribs. Hurt." He found a way to settle back that seemed to help.

"Were you in a fight? Is that blood?"

"I went to a club."

"This is Tokyo, Laney. They don't have fights in clubs."

"That was really her, the daughter?"

"It certainly is. And she'll be more than happy to talk about it on Slitscan, Laney. Seduced into sadistic sex games by a stalker obsessed

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with her famous, her loving dad. Who has come around, by the way. Who is one of ours now."

'Why? Why would she do that? Because he told her to?"

"Because," Kathy said, looking at him as though she were concerned that he might have sustained brain damage as well, "she's an aspiring actress in her own right, Laney." She looked at him hopefully, as though he might suddenly start to process. "The big break."

"That is going to be her big break?"

"A break," Kathy Torrance said, "is a break. And you know something? I'm trying, I'm trying really hard, to give you one instead. Right now. And it wouldn't be the first, would it?"

The phone began to ring. "You'd better take this," she said, passing him the white slab of cedar.

"Yes?"

"The fan-activity data-base." It was Yamazaki. "You must access it now."

"Where are you?"

"In hotel garage. With van."

"Look, I'm in kind of rough shape, here. Can it wait?"

"Wait?" Yamazaki sounded horrified.

Laney looked at Kathy Torrance. She was wearing something black and not quite short enough to show her tattoo. Her hair was shorter now. "I'll be down when I can. Keep it open for me." He hung up before Yamazaki could reply.

"What was that about?"

"Shiatsu."

"You're lying."

"What do you want, Kathy? What's the deal?"

"Him, I want him. I want a way in. I want to know what he's doing. I want to know what he thinks he's doing, trying to screw a piece of Japanese software,"

"Marry," Laney said.

Her smile vanished. "You don't correct me, Laney."

"You want me to spy on him." 0

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"Research."

"Balls.'

"You wish."

"If I got anything you could use, you'd want me to ser him up." The smile returned. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"And lget?"

"A life. A life in which you haven't been branded an obsessive stalker who preyed on the attractive daughter of the object of your obsession. A life in which it isn't public knowledge that a series of disastrous pharmaceutical trials permanently and hideously rewired you. Fair enough?"

"What about her? The daughter. She do all that with the Hill-man guy for nothing?"

"Your call, Laney. Work for us, get me what I need, she's shit out of luck."

"That easy? She'd go along with that? After what she had to do?" "If she wants even the remotest hope of having a career eventually-yes."

Laney looked at her. "That isn't me. It's a morph. If I could prove it was a morph, I could sue you."

"Really? You could afford that, could you? It takes years. And even then, you might not win. We've got a lot of money and talent to throw at problems like that, Laney. We do it all the time." The door chimed. "That'll be mine," she said. She got up, went to the door, touched the security screen. Laney glimpsed part of a man's face. She opened the door. It was Rice Daniels, minus his trademark sunglasses. "Rice is with us now, Laney," she said. "He's been a terrific help with your backgrounder."

"Out of Control didn't work out?" Laney asked Daniels.

Daniels showed Laney a lot of very white teeth. "I'm sure we could work together, Laney. I hope you don't have any issues around what happened."

"Issues," Laney said.

Kathy walked back, handed Laney a blank white card with a 210 William Gibson pencilled number. "Call me. Before nine tomorrow. Leave a message. Yes or no."

"You're giving me a choice?"

"It's more fun that way. I want you to think about it." She reached down and flicked the collar of Laney's shirt. "Stitch-count," she said. Turned and walked out, Daniels pulling the door shut behind them.

Laney sat there, staring at the closed door, until the phone began to ring.

It was Yamazaki.

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32. The Uninvited

'We must attack," said Zona Rosa, punctuating it with a quick shift to Aztec death's-head mode. They were with Masahiko and Gomi Boy now, back in Masahiko's room in the Walled City, away from the hypnotic chaos of the crawling roofscape.

'Attack?" Gomi Boy's huge eyes bulged as brightly as ever, but his voice betrayed his tension. "Who will you attack?"

"We will find a way to carry the fight to the enemy," Zona Rosa said, gravely. "Passivity is death."

Something that looked to Chia like a bright orange drink coaster came gliding in under Masahiko's door and across the floor, but the shadow-thing gobbled it before she could get a closer look.

"You.'" said Gomi Boy to Zona Rosa, "are in Mexico City. You are not physically or legally endangered by any of this!"

"Physically?" said Zona Rosa, snapping back into a furious version of her previous presentation. "You want physically, son of a bitch? I'll fucking kill you, physically! You think I can't do that? You think you live on Mars or something? I fly here Aeronaves direct with my girls, we find you, we cut your Japanese balls offl You think I can't do that?" The saw-toothed, dragon-handled switchblade was out now, quivering, in front of Gomi Boy's face.

"Zona, please," Chia begged. "He hasn't done anything so far hut help me! Don't!"

Zona snorted. The blade reversed, vanishing. "You don't push

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I me," she said to Gomi Boy. "My friend, she is in some bad shit, and I have some ghost-bastard thing on my site

"It's in the software on my Sandbenders, too,' Chia said. "I saw it in Venice."

"You saw it?" The fractured images cycling faster.

"I saw something-"

What? You saw what?"

"Someone. By the fountain at the end of a street. It might have been a woman. I was scared. I bailed. I left my Venice open-"

"Show me," Zona said. "In my site I could not see it. My lizards could not see it either, but they grew agitated. The birds flew lower, but could find nothing. Show me this thing!"

"But Zona-"

"Now!" Zona said. "It is part of this shit you are in. It must be."

"My God," Zona said, staring up at St. Mark's. "Who wrote this?"

"It's a city in Italy," Chia said. "It used to be a country. They invented banking. That's St. Mark's. There's a module where you can see what they do at Easter, when the Patriarch brings out all these bones and things, set into gold, parts of saints."

Zona Rosa crossed herself. "Like Mexico ... this is where the water comes up to the bottoms of the doors, and the streets, they are water?"

"I think a lot of this is under water now," Chia said.

"Why is it dark?"

"I keep it that way Chia looked away, searching the shadows beneath archways. "That Walled City, Zona, what is that?"

"They say it began as a shared killfile. You know what a killfile is?"

"No."

"It is an old expression. A way to avoid incoming messages. With the killfile in place, it was like those messages never existed.

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They never reached you. This was when the net was new, understand?"

Chia knew that when her mother was born, there had been no net at all, or almost none, but as her teachers in school were fond of pointing out, that was hard to imagine. "How could that become a city? And why's it all squashed in like that?"

'Someone had the idea to turn the killfile inside out. This is not really how it happened, you understand, but this is how the story is told: that the people who founded Hak Nam were angry, because the net had been very free, you could do what you wanted, but then the governments and the companies, they had different ideas of what you could, what you couldn't do. So these people, they found a way to unravel something. A little place, a piece, like cloth. They made something like a killfile of everything, everything they didn't like, and they turned that inside out." Zona's hands moved like a conjurer's. 'And they pushed it through, to the other side

'The other side of what?"

"This is not how they did it," Zona said impatiently, "this is the story. How they did it, I don't know. But that is the story, how they tell it. They went there to get away from the laws- To have no laws, like when the net was new."

'But why'd they make it look like that?"

"That I know," Zona said. "The woman who came to help me build my country, she told me. There was a place near an airport, Kowloon, when Hong Kong wasn't China, but there had been a mistake, a long time ago, and that place, very small, many people, it still belonged to China. So there was no law there. An outlaw place. And more and more people crowded in; they built it up, higher. No rules, just building, just people living. Police wouldn't go there. Drugs and whores and gambling. But people living, too. Factories, restaurants. A city. No laws."

"Is it still there?"

"No," Zona said, "they tore it down before it all became China

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again. They made a park with concrete. But these people, the ones they say made a hole in the net, they found the data. The history of it. Maps. Pictures. They built it again."

"Why?"

"Don't ask me. Ask them. They are all crazy." Zona was scanning the Piazza. "This place makes me cold ..." Chia considered bringing the sun up, but then Zona pointed. "Who is that?"

Chia watched her Music Master, or something that looked like him, stroll toward them from the shadows of the stone arches where the cafes were, a dark greatcoat flapping to reveal a lining the color of polished lead.

"I've got a software agent that looks like that," Chia said, "but he isn't supposed to be there unless I cross a bridge. And I couldn't find him, when I was here before."

"This is not the one you saw?"

"No," Chia said.

An aura bristled around Zona, who grew taller as the spikey cloud of light increased in resolution. Shifting, overlapping planes like ghosts of broken glass. Iridescent insects whirling there.

As the figure in the greatcoat drew toward them across the Piazza's patchworked stone, snow resolved behind it; it left footprints.

Zona's aura bristled with gathering menace, a thunderhead of flickering darkness forming above the shattered sheets of light. There was a sound that reminded Chia of one of those blue-light bug-zappers popping a particularly juicy one, and then vast wings cut the air, so close: Zona's Colombian condors, things from the data-havens. And gone. Zona spat a stream of Spanish that overwhelmed translation, a long and liquid curse.

Behind the advancing figure of her Music Master, Chia saw the facades of the great square vanish entirely behind curtains of snow.

Zona's switchblade seemed the size of a chainsaw now, its toothed spine rippling, alive. The golden dragons from the plastic handles chased their fire-maned double tails around her brown fist,

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through miniature clouds of Chinese embroidery. dijill take you out," Zona said, as if savoring each word.

Chia saw the world of snow that had swallowed her Venice abruptly contract, shrinking, following the line of footprints, and the features of the Music Master became those of Rei Toei, the idoru.

"You already have," said the idoru.

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33. Topology

Arleigh was waiting for him by the elevator, on the fifth and lowest of the hotel's parking levels. She'd changed back into the work clothes he'd first seen her in. Despite the patch of micropore on her swollen lip, the jeans and nylon bomber jacket made her look wide-awake and competent, two things Laney felt he might never be again.

"You look terrible," she said.

The ceiling here was very low, and flocked with something drab and wooly, to reduce noise. Lines of bioluminescent cable were bracketed to it, and the unmoving air was heavy with the sugary smell of exhausted gasohol. Spotless ranks of small Japanese cars glittered like bright wet candy. "Yamazaki seemed to feel it was urgent," Laney said.

"If you don't do it now," she said, "we don't know how long it'll

take to get it all up and running again."

"So we'll do it."

"You don't look like you should even be walking."

He started walking, unsteadily, as if by way of demonstration. "Where's Rez~"

"Blackwell's taken him back to his hotel. The sweep team didn't find anything. This way." She led him along a line of surgically clean grills and bumpers. He saw the green van parked with its front to the wall, its hatch and doors open. It was fenced behind orange plastic barricades, and surrounded by the black modules. Shannon, the red-

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haired tech, was doing something to a red and black cube centered on a folding plastic table.

"What's that?" Laney asked.

"Espresso," he said, his hand inside the housing, "but I think the gasket's warped."

"Sit here, Laney," Arleigh said, indicating the van's front passenger seat. "It reclines."



Laney climbed up into the seat. "Don't try it," he said. "You might not be able to wake me up."

Yamazaki appeared, over Arleigh's shoulder, blinking. "You will access the Lo/Rez data as before, Laney-san, but you will simultaneously access the fan-activity base. Depth of field. Dimensionabty. The fan-activity data providing the degree of personalization you requite. Parallax, yes?"

Arleigh handed Laney the eyephones. "Have a look," she said. "If it doesn't work, to hell with it." Yamazaki flinched. "Either way, we'll go and find you the hotel doctor, after.'

Laney settled his neck against the seat's headrest and put the 'phones on.

Nothing. He closed his eyes. Heard the 'phones power up. Opened his eyes to those same faces of data he'd seen earlier, in Akihabara. Characterless. Institutional in their regularity.

"Here comes the fan club," he heard Arleigh say, and the barren faces were suddenly translucent, networked depths of postings and commentary revealed there in baffling organic complexity.

"Something's-" he started to say, but then he was back in the apartment in Stockholm, with the huge ceramic stoves. But it was a place this time, not just a million tidily filed factoids. Shadows of flames danced behind the narrow mica panes of the stove's ornate iron door.

Candlelight. The floors were wooden planks, each one as broad as Laney's shoulders, spread with the soft tones of old carpets. Something directed his point of view into the next room, past a leather sofa spread with more and smaller rugs, and showed him the black

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window beyond the open drapes, where snowflakes, very large and ornate, fell with a deliberate gravity past the frosted panes.

"Getting anything?" Arleigh. Somewhere far away.

He didn't answer, watching as his view reversed. To be maneuvered down a central hallway, where a tall oval mirror showed no reflection as he passed. He thought of CD-RUMs he'd explored in the orphanage: haunted castles, monstrously infested spacecraft abandoned in orbit. . , . Click here. Click there. And somehow he'd always felt that he never found the central marvel, the thing that would have made the hunt worthwhile. Because it wasn't there, he'd finally decided; it never quite was, and so he'd lost interest in those games.

But the central marvel here-click on bedroom-was Rei Toei. Propped on white pillows at the head of a sea of white, her head and gowned shoulders showing above eyelet lace and the glow of fine cottons.

"You were our guest tonight," she said. "I wasn't able to speak with you. I am sorry. It ended badly, and you were injured."

He looked at her, waiting for the mountain valleys and the bells, but she only looked back, nothing came, and he remembered what Yamazaki had said about bandwidth.

A stab of pain in his side. "How do you know? That I was injured?"

"The preliminary Lo/Rez security report. Technician Paul Shannon states that you appeared to have been injured."

"Why are you here?" ("Laney," he heard Arleigh say, "are you okay?")

"I found it," the idoru said. "Isn't it wonderful? But he has not been here since the renovations were completed. So, realty, he's never been here. But you've been here before, haven't you? I think that's how I found it." She smiled. She was very beautiful here, floating in this whiteness. He hadn't been able to really look at her in the Western World.

"I accessed it earlier," he said, "but it wasn't like this."

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"But then it. . . rounded out, didn't it? It became so much better. Because one of the artisans who reassembled the stoves had made a record of it all, when it was done. Just for herself, for her friends, but you see what it's done. It was in the data from the fan club." She gazed in delight at a single taper, banded horizontally in cream and indigo, that burned in a candlestick of burnished brass. Beside it on the bedside table were a book and an orange. "I feel very close to him, here."

"I'd feel closer to him if you'd put me back, outside."

"In the street? It's snowing. And I'm not certain the street is there."

"In the general data-construct, Please. So I can do my job

"Oh," she said, and smiled at him, and he was staring into the tangled depths of the data-faces.

"Laney?" Arleigh said, touching his shoulder. "Who are you talking to?"

"The idoru," Laney said.

"In nodal manifestation?" Yamazaki.

"No. She was there in the data, I don't know how. She was in a model of his place in Stockholm. Said she got there because I'd cruised it before. Then I asked her to put me back out here.

"Out where?" Arleigh asked.

"Where I can see," Laney said, staring down into intricately overgrown canyons, dense with branchings that reminded him of Arleigh's Realtree 7.2, but organic somehow, every segment thickly patched with commentary. "Yamazaki was right. The fan stuff seems to do it."

He heard Gerrard Delouvrier, back in the TIDAL labs, urge him not to focus. What you 4 it is opposite of the concentration, but we will learn to direct it.

Drift. Down through deltas of former girlfriends, degrees of confirmation of girlfriendhood, personal sightings of Rez or Lo together

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with whichever woman in whatever public place, each account illuminated with the importance the event had held for whoever had posted it. This being for Laney the most peculiar aspect of this data, the perspective in which these two loomed. Human in every detail but then not so. Everything scrupulously, fanatically accurate, probably, but always assembled around the hollow armature of celebrity. He could see celebrity here, not like Kathy's idea of a primal substance, but as a paradoxical quality inherent in the substance of the world. He saw that the quantity of data accumulated here by the

- band's fans was much greater than everything the band themselves had ever generated. And their actual art, the music and the videos,

- was the merest fragment of that.

"But this is my favorite," Laney heard the idoru say, and then he was watching Rez mount a low stage in a crowded club of some kind, everything psychedelic Korean pinks, hypersaturated tints like cartoon versions of the flesh of tropical melons. "It is what we feel." Rez raised a microphone and began to speak of new modes of being, of something he called "the alchemical marriage."

And somewhere Arleigh's hand was on his arm, her voice tense. "Laney? Sorry. We need you back here now. Mr. Kuwayama is here."

34. Casino

Chia looked out between the dusty slats, to the street where it was raining. The idoru had done that. Chia had never made it rain, in Venice, but she didn't mind the way it looked. It seemed to fit. It was like Seattle.

The idoru said this apartment was called a casino. Chia had seen casinos on television and they hadn't looked anything like this. This was a few small rooms with flaking plaster walls, and big old-fashioned furniture with gold lion-feet. Everything worked up with fractals so you could almost smell it. It would've smelled dusty, she thought, and also like perfume. Chia hadn't been to many of these modules, the insides of her Venice, because they were all sort of creepy. They didn't give her the feeling she got in the streets.

Zona's head, on the lion-footed table, made that bug-zap sound. She'd reduced herself to that, Zona: this little blue neon miniature of her Aztec skull, about the size of a small apple. Because Chia had told her to shut up and put the switchblade away. And that had pissed her off, and maybe hurt her feelings, but Chia hadn't known what else to do. Chia had wanted to hear what the idoru had had to say, and Zona's I'm-dangerous act totally got in the way. And that was all it was, just acting out, because people couldn't really hurt each other when they were ported. Not physically, anyway. And that had always been a problem, with Zona. That whole swelling-up

thunderhead macho thing. Kelsey and the others would make fun of ~  
it, hut Zona was fierce enough, verbally, that they'd only do it behind  
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her back. Chia had never known what to make of it was like Zona's personality wasn't together, around acting like that.

Now Zona wasn't talking, just making the bug-zap sound every so often, to remind Chia she was still there and still pissed off.

The idoru was talking, though, telling Chia the old Venetian meaning of the word casino, not some giant sort of malt place where people went to gamble and watch shows, but something that sounded more like what Masahiko had said about love hotels. Like people had houses where they lived, but these casinos, these secret little apartments, hidden around town, were where they went to be with other people. But they hadn't been too comfortable there, not to judge by this one, even though the idoru kept adding more and more candles. The idoru said she loved candles.

The idoru had the Music Master's haircut now; it made her look like a girl pretending to be a boy. She seemed to like his greatcoat, too, because she kept turning on her heel-his heel-to twirl the hem out. "I've seen so many new places," she said, smiling at Chia, "so many different people and things"

-So have I, but .

"He told me it would be this way, but I had no idea, really." Twirl. "Having seen all this, I'm so much more ... Does it feel like that for you, when you travel?"

The death's-head emitted a burst of blue light and a sound like a short, sharp fart. "Zona!" Chia hissed. Then all in a rush, to the idoru, "I haven't traveled much and so far I don't think I like it, but we just came here to see what you were, because we didn't know, be-cause you're in my software, and maybe in Zona's site, too, and that bothers her because it's supposed to be private."

"The country with the beautiful sky?"

"Yeah," Chia said. "You aren't really supposed to be able to go there unless she asks you."

"I didn't know. I'm sorry." The idoru looked sad. "I thought I could go anywhere-except where you come from."

"Seattle?"

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'The hive of dreams," said the idoru, "windows heaped against the sky. I can see the pictures, but

there is no path. I know you've conic from there, but it's there , . . isn't there!"  
"The Walled City?" It had to be, because that was where she and Zona were coming from now. 'We're only ported through. Zona's in Mexico City and I'm in this hotel, okay? And we really better go back now, 'cause I don't know what's happening-"

The blue skull expanded and went Zonaform, grim and sullen, "Finally you say something worthwhile. Why do you speak with this thing? She is nothing, only a mote expensive version of this toy of yours she's stolen and taken over. Now that I have seen her, I can only think that Rez is crazy, pathetically deluded

"But he isn't crazy," the idoru said. "It is what we feel together. He has told me that we will not be understood, not at first, and there will be resistance, hostility. But we mean no harm, and he believes that in the end only good can come from our union."

"You synthetic bitch," Zona said. "You think we don't see what you're doing? You aren't real! You aren't as real as this imitation of a drowned city! You're a made-up thing, and you want to suck what's real out of him!" Chia saw the thunderhead, the aura, starting to build. "This girl crossed the ocean to find you out, and now her uS is in danger, and she is too stupid to see that you are the cause!"

The idoru looked at Chia. "Your life?"

Chia had to swallow. "Maybe," she said. "I don't know. I'm scared."

And the idoru was gone, draining from Chia's Music Master like a color that had no name. He stood there in the light of twenty candles, his expression unreadable. "I'm sorry," he said, "but what exactly was it we were discussing?"

"We weren't," said Chia, then her goggles were lifted away, taking the Music Master and the room in Venice and Zona with them, and two of the fingers of the hand that held the goggles was ringed with gold, each ring linked to a gold watch's massive bracelet with its own fine length of chain. Pale eyes looked into hers.

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Eddie smiled.

Chia drew her breath in to scream, and another hand, not Eddie's, but large and white, smelling of metallic perfume, covered her mouth and nose. And a hand on her shoulder, pressing down, as Eddie stepped back, letting the goggles fall to the white carpet.

Holding her gaze, Eddie raised one finger to his lips, smiled, and said "Shhhh." Then stepped aside, turning away, so that Chia saw Masahiko sitting there on the floor, the black cups over his eyes, his fingers moving in their tip-sets.

Eddie took something black from his pocket and reached Masahiko in two silent, exaggerated steps. He did something to the black thing and bent down with it. She saw it touch Masahiko's neck.

Masahiko's muscles all seemed to jerk at once, his legs straightening, throwing him sideways, where he lay on the white carpet, twitching, his mouth open. One of the black cups had come off. The other still covered his right eye.

Eddie turned back, looking at her.

"Where is it?" he said.

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Shannon offered Laney a tall foam cup with half an inch of very hot, very black coffee in it. Beyond him, past the orange barricades, was a long white Land-Rover with integral crash-bars and green-tinted windows. Kuwayama waited there, in a dark gray suit, his rimless glasses glinting in the greenish light from the cable overhead. A black-suited driver stood beside him.

"What's he want?" Laney asked Arleigh, tasting Shannon's espresso. It left grit on his tongue.

"We don't know," said Arleigh, "But apparently Rez told him where to find us."

"That's what he said."

Yamazaki appeared at Laney's elbow. His glasses had either been repaired or replaced, but two of the pins holding the sleeve of his green jacket had come undone. "Mr. Kuwayama is Rei Toei's creator, in a sense. He is the founder and chief executive officer of Famous Aspect, her corporate entity. He was the initiator of her project. He asks to speak with you."

"I thought it was so urgent that I access the combined data for you."

"It is, yes," said Yamazaki, "but I think you should speak with Kuwayama now, please."

Laney followed him through the black modules and past the barricades, and watched as the two exchanged bows. "This is Mr. Cohn

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35. The Testhed of Futurity

Laney," Yamazaki said, "our special researcher." Then, to Laney: "Michio Kuwayama, Chief Executive Officer of Famous Aspect."

No one would have guessed that Kuwayama had so recently been up there in the dark at the Western World, the crowd heaving and screaming around him. How had he gotten out, Laney wondered, and wouldn't the idoru have been lit up like a Christmas tree? Blood had seeped down into Laney's shoe; it was sticky between his toes. How much had the combined weight of all the human nervous tissue on the planet increased since he and Arleigh had left the bubble-gum bar with Blackwell? He felt like he'd acquired more himself, all of it uncomfortable. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't have a card."

"It doesn't matter," Kuwayama said, in his precise, oddly accented English. He shook Laney's hand. "I know that you are very busy. We appreciate your taking the time to meet with us." The plural caused Laney to glance at the driver, who wore the kind of shoes that Rydell had worn at the Chateau, flexible-looking black lace-ups with cleated, rubbery soles, but it didn't seem as though the driver was the other half of that "we." "Now," Kuwayama said to Yamazaki, "if you will excuse us Yamazaki bowed quickly and walked back toward the van, where Arleigh, pretending to be doing something to the espresso machine, was watching out of the corner of her eye. The driver opened the Land-Rover's rear door for Laney, who got in. Kuwayama got in from the other side. When the door closed behind him, they were alone.

Something that looked like a large silver thermos bottle was mounted between the two seats, in a rack with padded clamps.

"Yamazaki tells us that you had band-width difficulties during the dinner," Kuwayama said.

"That's true," Laney said.

"We have adjusted the band-width ,.."And the idoru appeared between them, smiling. Laney saw that the illusion even provided a seat for her, melding the two buckets in which he and Kuwayama sat into a third.

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"Did you find what you were looking for, when you left me in Stockholm, Mr, Laney?"

He looked into her eyes. What sort of computing power did it take to create something like this, something that looked back at you? He remembered phrases from Kuwayama's conversation with Rez: desiring machines, aggregates of subjective desire, an architecture of articulated longing..."I started to," he said.

"And what was it that you saw, that made you unable to look at me, during our dinner?"

"Snow," Laney said, and was startled to feel himself begin to blush. "Mountains But I think it was only a video you've made."

"We don't 'make' Rei's videos," Kuwayama said, "not in the usual sense, They emerge directly from her ongoing experience of the world. They are her dreams, if you will."

"You dream as well, don't you, Mr. Laney?" the idoru said. "That is your talent. Yamazaki says it is like seeing faces in the clouds, except that the faces are really there. I cannot see the faces in clouds, but Kuwayama-san tells me that one day I will. It is a matter of plectics.

Yamazaki says? "I don't understand it," Laney said. "It's just something I can do."

"An extraordinary talent," Kuwayama said. "We are most fortunate. And we are fortunate as well in Mr. Yamazaki, who, though hired by Mr. Blackwell, has an open mind."

"Mr. Blackwell is not too pleased about Rez and.." Nodding toward her. "Mr. Blackwell might be unhappy that I'm talking with you."

"Blackwell loves Rez in his own way," she said. "It is concern that he feels. But he does not understand that our union has already taken place. Our 'marriage' will be gradual, ongoing. We wish simply to grow together. When Blackwell and the others can see that our union is best for both of us, all will be well. And you can do that for us, Mr. Laney."

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"I can?"

'Yamazaki has explained what you are attempting with the data from the Lo/Rez fan archives," Kuwayama said. "But that data says nothing, or very little, about Rei. We propose the addition of a third level of information: we will add Rei to the mix, and the pattern that emerges will be a portrait of their union."

But you're just information yourself, Laney thought, looking at her. Lots of it, running through God knows how many machines. But the dark eyes looked back at him, filled with something for all the world like hope. "Will you do it, Mr. Laney? Will you help us?"

"Look," Laney said, "I only work here. I'll do it if Yamazaki tells me to. If he takes the responsibility. But I want you to tell me something, okay?"

"What is it that you wish to know?" asked Kuwayama.

"What is all this about?" The question surprised Laney, who hadn't quite known what it was he was

about to ask.

Kuwayama's mild eyes regarded him through the rimless lenses. "It is about fliturity, Mr. Lane>'."

"Futurity?"

"Do you know that our word for 'nature' is of quite recent coinage? It is scarcely a hundred years old. We have never developed a sinister view of technology, Mr. Laney. It is an aspect of the natural, of oneness. Through our efforts, oneness perfects itself" Kuwayama smiled. "And popular culture," he said, "is the testbed of our futurity."

Arleigh made a better espresso than Shannon. Laney, squatting in the back of the green van, on popping shreds of bubble-pack, watched Yamazaki over the rim of a foam cup with a fresh double shot. "What do you think you're doing, Yamazaki? You want us both to wind up wearing smaller shoes, or what? Blackwell likes to nail people's hands to tables, and you're making deals with the idoru and her

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boss?" Laney had insisted that they climb in back here for privacy. Yamazaki squatted opposite him, blinking.

"I am not the one making deals," Yamazaki said. "Rez and Rei Toei are in almost constant contact now, and recent improvements allow her new degrees of freedom. Rez let her into the data, all that you first tried to access. He did this without informing Blackwell." He shrugged. "Now she accesses the fan data as well. And what they propose may well allow us to bring this to a conclusion. Blackwell is more than ever convinced there is some conspiracy. The attack in the nightclub.

"Which was about?"

"I do not know. An attempted kidnapping? They wished to harm Rez? To abduct the idoru's peripheral? It was handled with amazing clumsiness, but Blackwell says that is the earmark of the Kombinat. . . . Is that the word, 'earmark'?"

"I don't know," Laney said.

"Hallmark'?"

"You don't think Blackwell's going to cut our toes off, if we do this?"

"No. We are employed by a Lo/Rez shell corporation--"

"Paragon-Asia?"

"--but Blackwell is employed by the Lo/Rez Partnership. If Rez tells us to do something, we must do it,"

"Even if Blackwell thinks it endangers Rez's security?"

Yamazaki shrugged. Past his shoulder, through the van's rear window, Lane>' could see Shannon trundling the gray module they'd unloaded from the rear of Kuwayama's Land-Rover. It was twice the size of the black ones that Arleigh used.

He watched Shannon push it past the orange barricades.

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36. Maryalice

"Not yelling, please," said the one who held her, and then he took his hand away from her mouth.

"Where is it?" Eddie's pale eyes.

"There," Chia said, pointing. She could see the ragged edge of blue and yellow plastic sticking up out of her open bag. Then she saw that Maryalice was asleep on the pink bed, cLirled up with her high-heeled shoes still on, clutching a pillow to her face. The top of the little fridge was covered with empty, miniature bottles.

Eddie took a black-and-gold pen from his coat pocket and went

to the bag. He bent over it and used his pen as a probe, moving the plastic aside so he could see. "It's here," he said.

"Is there?" The other hand was still holding Chia's shoulder down, where she sat on the carpet.

"This is it," Eddie said.

'Stay putting.' The hand left her shoulder and the man, who must've been kneeling behind her, got up and joined Eddie, peering into Chia's bag. He was taller, and wore a tan suit and fancy Western boots. Big bones in his face, his hair a lighter blond than Eddie's, a reddish, crescent-shaped birthmark high on his right cheekbone. ~'How you are being sure?'

"Jesus, Yevgeni . . .

The man in the tan suit straightened up, looked at Maryalice, bent to pull the pillow away from her face. "How is your woman sleeping on bed in this room, Eddie?"

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Eddie saw that it was Maryalice. "Fuck," he said.

'You are telling us girl and your woman, is 'incidental.' You are telling us they meet on plane, is only accident. Is accident your woman is here? We do not like accident.'

Eddie looked from Maryalice to the man-he must be Russian- to Chia. "What the flick is this bitch doing here?" Like it had to be Chia's fault.

'She found us," Chia said. She said she knew somebody at the cab company."

"No,' said the Russian, "we know somebody at cab company. Is too much incident."

"We've got it, okay?" Eddie said. 'Why do you want to complicate things?'

The Russian rubbed his cheek, as though the birthmark might come off on his hand. "Please consider," he said. "We are giving you isotope. You want to know is isotope, you can test. You are giving us this." He poked the sharp toe of his cowboy boot into the side of Chia's bag. "How are we sure?"

"Yevgeni," Eddie said, very calmly, "you must know that deals like this require a certain basis of trust.'

The Russian considered that. "No," he said, "basis not good. Our people trace this girl to big rocker band. What is she working for, Eddie? Tonight we send people to talk to them, they fall on us like fucking wolfs. One man I am still losing."

"I don't work for Lo/Rez!" Chia said. "I'm just in the club! Maryalice put that thing in my bag when I was asleep on the plane!"

Masahiko groaned, sighed, and seemed to go back under. Eddie still had the stungun in his hand. "You ready for another jolt?" he asked Masahiko, super-tense and angry.

"Eddie,' Maryalice said from the bed, "you ungrateful piece of shit      Sitting up on the edge of the bed with her cigarette lighter held in both hands, pointing it straight at Eddie.

Eddie stiffened. You could see something run through him, freezing him there.

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"Some basis," said the Russian.



"Jesus, Maryalice," Eddie said. "Whered you get that? You got any idea how illegal that is, here?"

"Off a Russian boy," she said. "Exit-holes the size of grapefruit Maryalice didn't sound drunk, exactly, but something about the look in her reddened eyes told Chia she was. Some very scary kind of drunk. "You think you can just use people up, Eddie? Use 'em up and throw 'em away?" She used the toe of one shoe to get the other off, then used her toe to get the first shoe off. She stood up in her stocking feet, swaying just a little bit, but the gun-shaped lighter stayed straight out from her shoulders, the way cops did it on television.

Eddie still had the stungun in his hand. "Make him throw that black thing away, Maryalice!" Chia urged.

"Drop it," Maryalice said, and it seemed to give her pleasure to say it, something she'd been hearing people say on shows all her life, and now she was getting to say it herself, and mean it. Eddie dropped it. "Now kick it away.'

That's the other half of the line, Chia thought.

The stungun wound up a few feet from Chia's knee, beside her goggles, which were upside down on the carpet, still cabled to her Sandbenders. She could see the twin flat rectangles on the opaque lens-faces, simple video units; if Zona went to Chia's systems software and activated those, now, she'd get a bug's-eye view of Mary-alice's stocking feet, Eddie's shoes, the Russian's cowboy boots, and maybe the side of Masahiko's head.

"Ungrateful," Maryalice said. "Ungrateful shit. Get in that bathroom." She came around so the lighter was pointing at Eddie and the Russian, but with the open bathroom door behind them.

"I know you're upset--"

"Shit. Shit goes in the toilet, Eddie Get in the bathroom."

Eddie took a step backward, his palms up in what he probably thought looked like an appeal to reasonableness and understanding.

The Russian took a step back too. 0

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"Seven flicking years," Maryalice said. "Seven. You weren't shit when I met you. God. You and that uppity-mobile talk. You make me sick. Who paid the fucking rent? Who bought the meals? Who bought you your fucking clothes, you vain piece of shit? You and your uppity-mobile and your image and you gotta have a smaller fucking phone than the next guy because I'm telling you, honey, you sure as fuck don't have a bigger dick!" Maryalice's hands were shaking now, but really just enough to make the lighter look even more dangerous.

"Maryalice," Eddie said, "you know I know everything you've done for me, everything you've contributed to my career. It doesn't leave my mind for a minute, baby, believe me, it never does, and all of this is a misunderstanding, baby, just a rough patch on the highway of life, and if you will only just put down that flicking gun and have a nice drink like a civilized person--"

"Shut the fuck up!" Maryalice screamed, at the top of her lungs, the words all run together.

Eddie's mouth snapped shut like a puppet's.

"Seven flicking years," Maryalice said, making it sound like some children's charm, "seven fucking years and two of 'em here, Eddie, two of 'em here, and flying back and fucking forth for you, Eddie, and coming back. And it's always light, here Tears came, streaking Maryalice's makeup. "Everywhere. Couldn't sleep for all the light, like a fog over the city. . . . Get in the bathroom." Maryalice taking a step forward, Eddie and the Russian taking one back.

Chia reached over and picked up the stungun, she wasn't sure why. It had a pair of blunt chrome fangs on one end, a red, ridged stud on one edge. She was surprised at how little it weighed. She remembered the ones the boys at her school had made from those disposable flash-cameras.

'And it always finds me, that light," Maryalice said. "Always. No matter what I drink, what I take

on top of that, It finds me and it wakes me up. It's like powder, blows in under the door. Nothing to do about it. Gets in your eyes. And all that brightness, falling .

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Eddie was half back through the doorway now, the Russian behind him, actually in the bathroom, and Chia didn't like that because she couldn't see the Russian's hands. She heard the ambient birdsong start as the bathroom sensed the Russian, "And you put me there, Eddie. That Shinjuku. You put me where that light could get me, and I could never get away."

And then Maryalice pulled the trigger.

Eddie screamed, a weird shrill sound bouncing off the black and white tiles. That must've covered the click of the lighter, which hadn't even produced a flame.

Maryalice didn't panic.

She held her aim and calmly pulled the trigger again.

She got a light, that time, but Eddie, with a howl of rage, swatted the lighter aside, grabbed Maryalice by the throat, and started pounding her in the face with his fist, the howl resolving into "Bitch! Bitch! Bitch!" in sync with each blow.

And that was when Chia, without really thinking about it, came up from where she'd been sitting for so long that, she found, her legs were asleep, and didn't work, so that she had to turn her lunge into a roll, and roll again, before she could jam the chrome tips of the stun-gun against Eddie's ankle and push the red stud.

She wasn't sure it would work on an ankle, or through his sock. But it did. Maybe because Eddie wore those really thin socks.

But it got Maryalice, too, so that they seemed to jerk together, toppling into each other's arms.

And the dark blur that flew past Chia then was Masahiko, who pulled the door shut on the Russian, grabbed the knob with both hands and jumped up, jamming one paper-slippered foot against the wall, the other against the door, and hung there. "Run," he said, his arms and legs straining. Then his hands slipped off the round chrome knob and he landed on his ass.

Chia saw the knob start to turn.

She put the fangs of the stungun against the doorknob and pushed the stud. And kept pushing it.

37. Work Experience

Laney sat in the van's front passenger seat again, the 'phones on his lap, waiting for Arleigh to connect Kuwayama's gray module, He looked through the windshield at the concrete wall. His side didn't hurt quite as much now, but the meeting with Kuwayama and the idoru, and then his huddle in the van with Yamazaki, had left him more confused than ever. If Rez and Rei Toei were making decisions in tandem, and if Yamazaki had decided to go along with them, where did that leave him? He couldn't see that Blackwell was going to wake up to find some innate wonderfulness in the idea of Rez and Rei together. As far as Blackwell was concerned, Rez was still just trying to marry a software agent-whatever that might turn out to mean.

But Laney knew now that the idoru was more complex, more powerful, than any Hollywood synthespian. Particularly if Kuwayama were telling the truth about the videos being her "dreams." All he knew about artificial intelligence came from work he'd done on a Slitscan episode documenting the unhappy personal life of one of the field's leading researchers, but he knew that true AI was assumed never to have been achieved, and that current attempts to achieve it were supposed to be in directions quite opposite the creation of software that was good at acting like beautiful young women.

If there were going to be genuine AI, the argument ran, it was

most likely to evolve in ways that had least to do with pretending to

be human. Laney remembered screening a lecture in which the Slitscan episode's subject had

suggested that Al might be created accidentally, and that people might not initially recognize it for what it was.

Arleigh opened the door on the driver's side and got in. Sorry this is taking so long," she said.

"You weren't expecting it," Laney said.

"It isn't the software, it's an optical valve. A cable-tip. They use a different gauge, one the French use." She curled her hands around the top of the wheel and rested her chin on them. "So we're dealing with these huge volumes of information, no problem, but we don't have the right cable to pour it through."

"Can you fix it?"

"Shannon's got one in his room, Probably on a porno outfit, but he won't admit it." She looked at him sideways. "Shannon's got a friend on the security team. His friend says that Blackwell 'questioned' one of the men who tried to grab Rez tonight."

"That's who they were after? Rez?"

"Seems like it. They're Kombinat, and they claim Rez has hijacked something of theirs."

"Hijacked what?"

"He didn't know." She closed her eyes.

"What do you think happened to him, the one Blackwell questioned?"

"I don't know," She opened her eyes, straightened up. "But somehow I don't think we'll find out."

"Can he do that? Torture people? Kill them?"

She looked at Laney. "Well," she said, finally, "he does have a certain advantage, making us think he might. It's an established fact that he did that in his previous line of work. You know what scares me most about Blackwell?"

'What?'

"Sometimes I find myself getting used to him."

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Shannon rapped on the door beside her. Held up a length of cable.

"Ready when you are," she said to Laney, opening the door and sliding from behind the wheel.

Laney looked through the tinted windshield at the concrete wall and remembered policing the steps outside the Municipal Court in Gainesville with Shaquille and Kenny, two others from the orphanage. Shaquille had gone on to the drug-testing program with Laney, but Kenny had been transferred to another facility, near Denver. Laney had no idea what had become of either of them, but it had been Shaquille who'd pointed out to Laney that when the injection had the real stuff in it, your mouth filled with a taste like corroded metal, aluminum or something. Pl-ceed-o, Shaquille had said, don't taste. And it was true. You could tell right away.

The three of them had had Work Experience there, five or six times, picking up the offerings people left before their day in court. These were considered to be a health hazard, and were usually carefully hidden, and you often found them by the smell, or the buzzing of flies. Parts of chickens, usually, tied up with colored yasn. What Shaquille said was the head of a goat, once. Shaquille said the people who left these things were drug dealers, and they did it because it was their religion. Laney and the others wore pale green latex gloves with orange Kevlar thimbles on the tips that gave you heat rash. They put the offerings in a white snap-top bucket with peeling Biohazard stickers. Shaquille had claimed to know the names of some of the gods these things were offered up to, but Laney hadn't been fooled. The names Shaquille made up, like O'Gunn and Sam Eddy, were obviously just that, and even Shaquille, dropping a white ball of chicken feathers into the bucket, had said an extra lawyer or two was probably a better investment. 'But they do it while

they waitin'. Hedge they bet.' Laney had actually preferred this to Work Experiences at fast-food franchises, even though it meant they got body-searched for drugs when they got back.

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He'd told Yamazaki and Blackwell about knowing that Alison Shires was going to try to commit suicide, and now they must think he could see the future. But he knew he couldn't. That would be like those chicken parts the dealers hid around the courthouse steps changing what was going to happen. What would happen in the future came out of what was happening now. Laney knew he couldn't predict it, and something about the experience of the nodal points made him suspect that nobody could. The nodal points seemed to form when something might be about to change. Then he saw a place where change was most likely, if something triggered it. Maybe something as small as Alison Shires buying the blades for a box-cutter. But if an earthquake had come, that night, and pitched her apartment down into Fountain Avenue. . . . Or if she'd lost the pack of blades, . . . But if she'd used credit to buy that Wednesday Night Special, which she couldn't do because it was illegal, and required cash, then it would've been obvious to anybody what she might be on the verge of doing.

Arleigh opened the passenger door. "You okay?"

"Sure," Laney said, picking up the eyephones.

"Sure?"

"Let's do it." He looked at the 'phones.

"It's up to you." She touched his arm, "We'll get you a doctor, after, okay?"

"Thanks," Laney said, and put the 'phones on, the taste flooding his mouth- The Lo/Rez data, translucent and intricately interpenetrated by

the archives of the band's fan-base, was crawling with new textures, maps that resolved, when he focused on them, into- Shaquille, in his federal-issue sweats, showing Laney the goat's

head. It had been skinned, and nails had been driven into it, and Shaquille had pried open the jaw to show where the missing tongue had been replaced with a blood-soaked piece of brown paper with writing on it, That would be the name of the prosecutor, Shaquille had explained.

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Laney shut his eyes, but the image remained.

He opened them on the idoru, her features rimmed with flit. She was looking at him. She wore some kind of embroidered, fur-lined hat, with earfiaps, and snow was swirling around her, but then she flattened, dwindling into the texture-maps that ran down through the reef of data, and he let himself go, go with that, and he felt himself pass through the core of it, the very center, and out the other side.

"Wait-" he said, and there seemed to be a lag before he heard his own voice.

"Perspective," the idoru said. "Yamazaki's parallax." Something seemed to turn him around, so that he looked directly at the data, but from some new angle, and from a great distance. And all around it, there was . . . nothing at all.

But through the data, like some infinitely more complex version of Arleigh's Realtree, ran two vaguely parallel armatures. Rez and the idoru. They were sculpted in duration, Rez's beginning, at the far end of it all, as something very minor, the first hints of his career. And growing, as it progressed, to something braided, multistranded. . . . But then it began to get smaller again, Laney saw, the strands loosening. . . . And that would be the point, he thought, where the singer began to become the thing that Kathy hated, the one who took up celebrity space just because he

was a celebrity, because he was of a certain order of magnitude .

The idoru's data began somewhere after that, and it began as something smoothly formed, deliberate, but lacking complexity. But at the points where it had swerved closest to Rez's data, he saw that it had begun to acquire a sort of complexity. Or randomness, he thought. The human thing. That's how she learns.

And both these armatures, these sculptures in time, were nodal, and grew more so toward the point, the present, where they intertwined , .

He stood beside the idoru on the beach he'd seen recorded on the binoculars in the bedroom of the guesrhouse in Ireland. Brownish- g

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green sea flecked with whitecaps, stiff wind catching at the earfiaps of her hat. He couldn't feel that wind, but he could hear it, so loud now that he had trouble hearing her over it. "Can you see them?" she shouted.

"See what?"

"The faces in the clouds! The nodal points! I can see nothing! You must indicate them to me!"

And she was gone, the sea with her, Laney staring into the data again, where the digitized histories of Rez and Rei Toei mingled, on the verge of something else. If he had tried, in Los Angeles, would the box-cutter blade have emerged from Alison Shires' nodal point?

He tried.

He was looking out across a fuzzy, indistinct white plain. Not snow. To where a pair of vast and very ornate brown-on-brown Western boots swung past against a cliff-like backdrop of violent pink. Then the image was gone, replaced by the rotating form of a. three-dimensional object, though Laney had no idea what it was supposed to be. With no clues as to scale, it looked vaguely like a Los Angeles bus with the wheels removed.

"Suite 17," the idoru said. "Hotel Di."

"Die?" Bus vanished, apparently taking boots with it.

"What is a 'love hotel'?"

'What?'

"Love. Hotel."

"Where people go to make love-I think.

"What is 'Rodel-van Erp primary biomolecular programming module C-slash-7A'?"

"I don't know," Laney said.

"But you have just shown it to me! It is our union, out intersection, that from which the rest must unfold!"

"Wait," Laney said, "wait, you've got another one here; they sort of overlap-" The trying made his side hurt, but there were hills in the distance, twisted trees, the low roofline of a wooden house- But the idoru was gone, and the house, its fabric eaten from

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within, wu shimmering, folding. And then a glimpse of something towering, mismatched windows and a twisting, moire sky.

Then Arleigh pulled the 'phones off. "Stop screaming," she said. Yamazaki was beside her. "Stop it, Laney."

He took a long, shuddering breath, braced his palms against the padded cowling of the dash, and closed his eyes. He felt Arleigh's hand against his neck.

'We have to go there," he said.

"Go where?"

"Suite 17 We'll be late, for the wedding . . 38. Star

When the stungun quit making that zapping sound, Chia dropped it. The doorknob wasn't turning. No sound from the bathroom but the faint recorded cries of tropical birds. She whipped around. Masahiko was trying to get his computer into the plaid carrier-bag. She dived for her Sandbenders, grabbed it up, still trailing her goggles, and turned to the pink bed. Her bag was beside it on the floor, with the blue and yellow SeaTac plastic showing. She pulled that out, the thing still in it, and tossed it on the bed. She bent to shove her Sandbenders into her bag, but glanced back at the bathroom door when she thought she heard something.

The knob was turning again.

The Russian opened the door. When he let go of the knob, she saw that his hand was inside something that looked like a Day-Glo pink hand-puppet. One of the sex toys from the black cabinet. He was using it as insulation. He peeled it off his fingers and tossed it back over his shoulder. The bird sounds faded as he stepped out.

Masahiko, who'd been trying to get one of his feet into one of his

black shoes, was looking at the Russian too. He still had a paper slipper on the other foot.

"You are going?" the Russian said.

"It's on the bed," Chia said. "We didn't have anything to do with it."

The Russian noticed the stungun on the carpet, beside the  
pointed toe of his boot. He raised the boot and brought his heel  
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down. Chia heard the plastic case crack. "Artemi, my friend of Novokuznetskaya, is doing himself great indignity with this." He prodded the fragments of the stungun with his toe. "Is wearing very tight jeans, Artemi, leather, is fashion. Putting in front pocket, trigger is pressing accident. Artemi is shocking his manhood." The Russian showed Chia his large, uneven teeth. "Still we are laughing, yes?"

"Please," Chia said. "We just want to go."

The Russian stepped past Eddie and Maryalice, who lay tangled on the carpet. "You are accident like Artemi to his manhood, yes? You are only happening to this owner of fine nightclub." He indicated the unconscious Eddie. "Who is smuggler and other things, very complicated, but you, you are only accident?"

"That's right," Chia said.

"You are of LoIREz." It sounded like Lor-ess. He stepped closer to Chia and looked down into the bag. "You are knowing what this is."

"No," Chia lied. "I'm not."

The Russian looked at her. "We are not liking accident, ever. Not allowing accident." His hands

came up, then, and she saw that the back of the third joint of each of his fingers was pink with those dots, each one the size of the end of a pencil eraser. She'd seen those at her last school and knew they meant a laser had recently been used to remove a tattoo.

She looked up at his face. He looked like someone who was about to do something that he might not want to do, but that he knew he had to.

But then she saw his eyes slide past her, narrowing, and she turned in time to see the door to the corridor swing inward. A man wider than the doorway seemed to flow into the room. There was a big X of flesh-colored tape across one side of his face, and he was wearing a coat the color of dull metal. Chia saw one huge, scarred hand slip into his coat; the other held something black that ended in a mag-strip tab.

"Yob tvoyu mat," said the RUSSIAN, soft syllables of surprise.

The stranger's hand emerged, holding something that looked to Chia like a very large pair of chrome-plated scissors, but then Un-

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folded, with a series of small sharp clicks, and apparently of its own accord, into a kind of glittering, skeletal axe, its leading edge hawk-like and lethal, the head behind it tapering like an icepick.

"My mother?" said the stranger, who sounded somehow delighted. "Did you say my mother?" His face was shiny with scar tissue. More scars crisscrossed his shaven, stubbled skull.

"Ah, no," the Russian said, lifting his hands so that the palms showed. "Figuring of speech, only."

Another man stepped in, around the man with the axe, and this one had dark hair and wore a loose black suit. The headband of a monocle-rig crossed his forehead, the unit covering his right eye. The eye she could see was wide and bright and green, but still it took a second before she recognized him.

Then she had to sit down on the pink bed.

"Where is it?" this man who looked like Rez asked. (Except he looked thicker, somehow, his cheeks unhollowed.)

Neither the Russian nor the man with the axe answered. The man with the axe closed the door behind him with his heel.

The green eye and the video-monocle looked at Chia. "Do you know where it is?"

"What?"

"The biomech primer module, or whatever it is you call it...." He paused, touching the phone in his right ear, listening. "Excuse me: 'Rodel-van Erp primary biomolecular programming module Cslash-7A.' Ilove you."

Chia stared.

"Rei Toei," he explained, touching the headband, and she knew that it had to be him.

"It's here. In this bag."

He reached into the blue and yellow plastic and drew the thing out, turning it over in his hands. "This? This is our future, the medium of our marriage?"

"Excuse, please," the Russian said, 'but you must know this is belonging to mc." Lie sounded genuinely sorry. 0

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Rez looked up, the nanotech unit held casually in his hands. "It's yours?" Rez tilted his head, like a bird, curious. "Where did you get it?"

The Russian coughed. "An exchange. This gentleman on floor."

Rez saw Eddie and Maryalice. "Are they dead?"

"Volted, yes? Being most-time nonlethal. Your girl on bed."

Rez looked at Chia. "Who are you?"

"Chia Pet McKenzie," she said automatically. "I'm from Seattle. I'm. . . I'm in your fan club." She felt her face burning.

The brow above the green eye went up. He seemed to be listening to something. "Oh," he said, and paused. "She did? Really? That's wonderful." He smiled at Chia. "Rei says you've been totally central to everything, and that we have a great deal to thank you for."

Chia swallowed. "She does?"

But Rez had turned to the Russian. "We have to have this." He raised the nanotech unit. "We'll negotiate now. Name your price."

"Rozzer," the man at the door said, "you can't do that. This bastard's Kombinat."

Chia saw the green eye close, as if Rez were making a conscious effort to calm himself. When it opened, he said: "But they're the government, aren't they, Blackwell? We've negotiated with governments before."

"It's for the legals," the scarred man said, but now there was an edge of worry in his voice.

The Russian seemed to hear it too. He slowly lowered his hands. "What were you planning to do with this?" Rez asked him. The Russian looked down at the thing in Rez's hands, as if considering, then raised his eyes. A muscle was jumping, in his cheek. He seemed to come to a decision. "We are developing ambitious public works project," he said.

"0 Jesus," Maryalice said from the carpet, so hoarsely that at first Chia couldn't identify the source. "They must've put something in that. They did. I swear to God they did. And then she threw up.

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Yamazaki lost his balance as the van shot up the narrow ramp, out of the hotel. Laney, holding Arleigh's phone to the dashboard map, toning the number of the Hotel Di, heard him crash down on the shredded bubble-pack. The display beeped as Laney completed the number; grid-segments clicked across the screen. "You okay, Yamazaki?"

"Thank you," Yamazaki said. "Yes." Getting to his knees again, he craned around the headrest of Laney's seat. "You have located the hotel?"

"Expressway," Arleigh said, glancing at the display, as they swung right, up an entrance ramp. "Hit speed-dial three. Thanks. Gimme." She took the phone. "McCrae. Yeah. Priority? Fuck you, Alex. Ring me through to him." She listened. "Di? Like D, I? Shit. Thanks." She clicked off.

"What is it?" Laney asked, as they swung onto the expressway, the giant bland brow of an enormous articulated freight-hauler pulling up behind and then past them, quilted stainless steel flashing in Laney's peripheral vision. The van rocked with the big truck's passage.

"I tried to get Rez. Alex says he left the hotel, with Blackwell. Headed the same place we are."

"When?"

"Just about the time you were having your S( reaming fit, when

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39. Trans

you had the 'phones on," Arleigh said. She looked grim. "Sorry," she said.

Laney had had to argue with her for fifteen minutes, back there, before she'd agreed to this. She'd kept saying she wanted him to see a doctor. She'd said that she was a technician, not a researcher, not security, and that her first responsibility was to stay with the data, the modules, because anyone who got those got almost the entire Lo/Rez Partnership business plan, plus the books, plus whatever Kuwayama had entrusted them with in the gray module. She'd only given in after Yamazaki had sworn to take Full responsibility for everything, and after Shannon and the man with the ponytail had promised not to leave the modules. Not even, Arleigh said, to piss. "Go against the wall, God damn it," she'd said, 'and get half a dozen of Blackwell's boys down here to keep you :ompany."

"He knows," Laney said. "She told him it's there."

"What is there, Laney-san?" asked Yamazaki, around the headrest.

"I don't know. Whatever it is, they think it'll facilitate their marriage."

"Do you think so?" Arleigh asked, passing a string of bright little cars.

"I guess it must be capable of it," Laney said, as something under her seat began to clang, loudly and insistently. "But I don't think that means it'll necessarily happen. What the hell is that?"

"I'm exceeding the speed limit," she said. "Every vehicle in Japan is legally required to be equipped with one of these devices. You speed, it dings."

Laney turned to Yamazaki. "Is that true?"

"Of course," Yamazaki said, over the steady clanging.

"And people don't just disconnect them?"

"No," Yamazaki said, looking puzzled. "Why would they?"

Arleigh's phone rang. "McCrae. Willy?" Silence as she listened.

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Then Laney felt the van sway slightly. It slowed until the clanging suddenly stopped. She lowered the phone.

"What is it?" Laney asked.

"Willy Jude," she said. "He. . . He was just watching one of the clubbing channels. They said Rez is dead. They said he was dead. In a love hotel."

40. The Business

When nobody did anything to help Maryalice, Chia got up from the bed, squeezed past the Russian and into the bathroom, triggering the ambient bird track. The black cabinet was open, its light on, and there were Day-Gb penis-things scattered across the black and white tile floor. She took a black towel and a black washcloth from a heated chrome rack, wet the washcloth at the black and chrome basin, and went back to Maryalice. She folded the towel, put it down over the vomit on the white carpet, and handed Maryalice the washcloth.

Nobody said anything, or tried to stop her. Masahiko had sat back down on the carpet, with his computer between his feet. The scarred man, who seemed to take up as much space as anything in the room, had lowered his axe. He held it down, along a thigh wider than Chia's hips, with the spike jutting from beside his knee.

Maryalice, who'd managed to sit up now, wiped her mouth with

the cloth, taking most of her lipstick with it. When Chia straightened up, a whiff of the Russian's cologne made her stomach heave.

"You're a developer, you say?" Rez still held the nanotech unit.

"You are asking many questions," the Russian said. Eddie groaned, then, and the Russian kicked him. "Basis," the Russian said.

"A public works project?" Rez raised his eyebrow. "A water filtration plant, something like that?" The Russian kept his eye on the big man's axe. "In Tallin," he said, "we soon are building exclusive mega-mall, affluent gated sub-

urbs, plus world-class pharmaceutical manufakura. We are unfairly denied most advanced means of production, but we are desiring one hundred percent modern operation."

"Rez," the man with the axe said, "give it up. This boon and his mates need that thing to build themselves an Estonian drug factory. Time I took you back to the hotel."

"But wouldn't they be more interested in . . . Tokyo real estate?"

The big man's eyes bulged, the scars on his forehead reddening. One of the upper arms of the micropore X had come loose, revealing a deep scratch. "What bulshit is that? You don't have any real estate here!"

"Famous Aspect," Rez said. "Rei's management company. They invest for her."

"You are discussing nanotech exchanged for Tokyo real estate?" The Russian was looking at Rez.

"Exactly," Rez said.

"What kind real estate?"

"Undeveloped landfill in the Bay. An island. One of two. Off one of the old 'Toxic Necklace' sites, but that's been cleaned up since the quake."

"Wait a minute," Maryalice said, from the floor. "I know you. You were in that band, the one with the skinny Chinese, the guitar player, wore the hats. I know you. You were huge."

Rez stared at her.

"I think is not good, here to discuss the business," the Russian said, rubbing his birthmark. "But I am Starkov, Yevgeni." He extended his hand, and Chia noticed the laser-scars again. Rez shook it.

Chia thought she heard the big man groan.

"I used to watch him in Dayton," Maryalice said, as if that proved something.

The big man took a small phone from his pocket with his free hand, squinted at the call-display, and ptit it to his left ear. Which Chia flow saw was missing. He listened. "Ta," he said, and lowered the iphone. lie moved to the window, the one Chia had found behind

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the waliscreen, and stood looking out. "Better have a look at this, Rozzer," he said.

Rez joined him. She saw Rez touch the monocle. "What are they doing, Keithy? What is it?"

"It's your funeral," the big man said.

41. ~andIeIight and Tears

Office windows flickered past, very close, beyond the earthquake-bandaged uprights of the expressway. Taller buildings gave way to a lower sprawl, then something bright in the middle distance: HOTEL KING MIDAS. The dashboard map began to bleep.

"Third exit right," Laney said, watching the cursor. He felt her

accelerate and heard the speed-limit warning kick in. Another glittering sign: FREEDOM SHOWER BANFF.

"Laney-san," Yamazaki asked, around the headrest. "Did you apprehend any suggestion of Rez's death or other misfortune?"

"No, but I wouldn't, not unless there was a degree of intentionality that would emerge from the data. Accidents, actions by anyone who isn't represented. . ." The clanging stopped as she slowed, approaching the exit indicated on the map. "But I saw their data as streams, merging, and whatever it was merging around seemed to be where we're going."

Arleigh made the exit. They were on the off-ramp now, swinging through a curve, and Laney saw three young girls, their shoes clumped with mud, descending a sharp slope planted with some kind of pale rough grass. One of them seemed to be wearing a school uniform: kneesocks and a short plaid skirt. They looked unreal, in the harsh sodium light of the intersection, but then Arleigh stopped the van and Laney turned to see the road in front of them completely blocked by a silent, unmoving crowd.

"Jesus," Arleigh said. "The fans."

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"Rez," the man with the axe said, "give it up. This hoon and his mates need that thing to build themselves an Estonian drug factory. Time I took you back to the hotel."

"But wouldn't they be more interested in . . . Tokyo real estate?"

The big man's eyes bulged, the scars on his forehead reddening. One of the upper arms of the micropore X had come loose, revealing a deep scratch. "What bulshit is that? You don't have any real estate here!"

"Famous Aspect," Rez said. "Rei's management company. They invest for her."

"You are discussing nanotech exchanged for Tokyo real estate?" The Russian was looking at Rez.

"Exactly," Rez said.

"What kind real estate?"

"Undeveloped landfill in the Bay. An island. One of two. Off one of the old 'Toxic Necklace' sites, but that's been cleaned up since the quake."

"Wait a minute," Maryalice said, from the floor. "I know you. You were in that band, the one with the skinny Chinese, the guitar player, wore the hats. I know you. You were huge."

Rez stared at her.

"I think is not good, here to discuss the business," the Russian said, rubbing his birthmark. "But I am Starkov, Yevgeni." He extended his hand, and Chia noticed the laser-scars again. Rez shook it.

Chia thought she heard the big man groan.

"I used to watch him in Dayton," Maryalice said, as if that proved something.

The big man took a small phone from his pocket with his free hand, squinted at the call-display, and put it to his left ear. Which Chia now saw was missing. I-Ic listened. "Ta," lie said, and lowered the phone. He moved to the window, the one (ha had found behind  
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the waliscreen, and stood looking out. "Better have a look at this, Rozzer," he said.

Rez joined him. She saw Rez touch the monocle. "What are they doing, Keithy? What is it?"

"It's your funeral," the big man said.

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41. Candlelight and Tears

Office windows flickered past, very close, beyond the earthquake-bandaged uprights of the expressway. Taller buildings gave way to a lower sprawl, then something bright in the middle distance: HOTEL KING MIDAS. The dashboard map began to bleep.

"Third exit right," Laney said, watching the cursor. He felt her

accelerate and heard the speed-limit warning kick in. Another glittering sign: FREEDOM SHOWER BANFF.

"Laney-san," Yamazaki asked, around the headrest. "Did you apprehend any suggestion of Rez's death or other misfortune?"

"No, but I wouldn't, not unless there was a degree of intentionality that would emerge from the data. Accidents, actions by anyone who isn't represented. . ." The clanging stopped as she slowed, approaching the exit indicated on the map. "But I saw their data as streams, merging, and whatever it was merging around seemed to be where we're going."

Arleigh made the exit. They were on the off-ramp now, swinging through a curve, and Laney saw three young girls, their shoes clumped with mud, descending a sharp slope planted with some kind of pale rough grass. One of them seemed to be wearing a school uniform: kneesocks and a short

plaid skirt. They looked unreal, in the harsh sodium light of the intersection, but then Arleigh stopped the van and Laney turned to see the road in front of them completely blocked by a silent, unmoving crowd.

"Jesus," Arleigh said. "The fans."

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If there were boys in the crowd, Laney didn't see them. It was a level sea of glossy black hair, every girl facing the white building that rose there, with its white, brilliantly illuminated sign framed by something meant to represent a coronet: HOTEL DI. Arleigh powered down her window and Laney heard the distant wail of a siren.

"We'll never get through," Laney said. Most of the girls held a single candle, and the combined glow danced among the tear-streaked faces. They were so young, these girls: children. Kathy Torrance had particularly loathed that about Lo/Rez, the way their fan-base had refreshed itself over the years with a constant stream of pubescent recruits, girls who fell in love with Rez in the endless present of the net, where he could still be the twenty-year-old of his earliest hits.

"Pass me that black case," Arleigh said, and Laney heard Yamazaki scrabbling through the bubble-pack. A flat rectangular carrying case appeared between the seats. Laney took it. "Open it," she said. Laney undid the zip, exposing something flat and gray. The Lo/Rez logo on an oblong sticker. Arleigh pulled it from its case, put it on the dashboard, and ran her finger around its edge, looking for a switch. LO/REZ, mirror-reversed in large, luminous green letters, appeared on the windshield. \*\*TOUR SUPPORT VEHICLE\*\*. The asterisks began to flash.

Arleigh let the van roll forward a few inches. The girls directly in front turned, saw the windshield, and stepped aside. Silently, gradually, a few feet at a time, the crowd parted for the van.

Laney looked out across the black, center-parted heads of the grieving fans and saw the Russian, the one from the Western World, still in his white leather evening jacket, struggling through the crowd. The girls' heads came barely to his waist, and he looked as though he were wading through black hair and candle-glow. The expression on his face was OfIC Of confusion, almost of terror, but when he saw Laney at the window of the green van, he grima'ed and changed course, heading straight for them.

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Chia looked out and saw that the rain had stopped. Beyond the chainlink fence, the parking lot was full of small, unmoving figures holding candles. A few of them were standing on the tops of the trucks parked there, and there seemed to be more on the roof of the low building behind. Girls. Japanese girls. All of them seemed to be staring at the Hotel Di.

The big man was telling Rez that someone had announced that he'd died, that he'd been found dead in this hotel, and it was out on the net and was being treated like it had really happened.

The Russian had produced his own phone now and was talking to someone in Russian. "Mr. Lor-ess," he said, lowering the phone, "we are hearing police come. This nanotech being heavily proscribed, is serious problem."

"Fine," Rez said. "We have a car in the garage."

Someone nudged Chia's elbow. It was Masahiko, handing her her bag. He'd put her Sandbenders in it and zipped it up; she could tell by the weight. He had his computer in the plaid bag. "Put your shoes on now," he said. His were already on.

Eddie was curled into a knot on the carpet; he'd been like that since the Russian had kicked him. Now the Russian took a step toward him again and Chia saw Maryalice cringe, where she sat beside Eddie on the carpet.

"You are lucky man," the Russian said to Eddie. "We are honor

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42. Checking Out

ing our agreement. Isotope to be delivered. But we are wanting no more the business with you."

There was a click, and another, and Chia watched as the big man with no left ear folded his axe, collapsing it smoothly into itself without looking at it. "That thing you're holding is a heavy crime, Rozzer. Your fan-club turnout's bringing the police. Better let me be in possession."

Rez looked at the big man. "I'll carry it myself, Keithy."

Chia thought she saw a sudden sadness in the big man's eyes. "Well then," he said. "Time to go." He slipped the folded weapon inside his jacket. "Come on, then. You two." Gesturing Chia and Masahiko toward the door. Rez followed Masahiko, the Russian close behind him, but Chia saw that the room key was on top of the little fridge. She ran over and grabbed it. Then she stopped, looking down at Maryalice.

Maryalice's mouth, with her lipstick gone, looked old and sad. It was a mouth that must've been hurt a lot, Chia thought. "Come with us," Chia said.

Maryalice looked at her.

"Come on," Chia said. "The police are coming."

"I can't," Maryalice said. "I have to take care of Eddie."

"Tell your Eddie," Blackwell said, reaching Chia in two steps, "that if he whines to anyone about any of this, he'll be grabbed and his shoe size shortened."

But Maryalice didn't seem to hear, or if she did, she didn't look up, and the big man pulled Chia out of the room, closed the door, and then Chia was following the back of the Russian's tan suit down the narrow corridor, his fancy cowboy boots illuminated by the ankle-high light-strips.

Rez was stepping into the elevator with Masahiko and the Russian when the big man caught his shoulder. "You're staying with me," he said, shoving Chia into the elevator.

Masahiko pushed the button. "You are having vehicle?" the Russian asked Masahiko.

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"No," Masahiko said.

The Russian grunted. His cologne was making Chia's stomach turn over. The door opened on the little lobby. The Russian pushed past her, looking around. Chia and Masahi-o followed. The elevator door closed. "Looking for vehicle," the Russian said. "Come." They followed him through the sliding glass door, into the parking area, where Eddie's Graceland seemed to take up at least half the available space. Beside it was a silver-gray Japanese sedan, and Chia wondered if that was Rez's. Someone had put black plastic rectangles over the license plates of both cars.

She heard the glass door hiss open again and turned to see Rez coming out, the nanotech unit tucked beneath his arm like a football. The big man was behind him.

Then a really angry man in a shiny white tuxedo burst through the pink plastic strips that hung down across the entrance. He had a smaller man by the collar of his jacket, and the smaller man was trying to get away. Then the smaller man saw them there and shouted "Blackwell!" and actually managed to slip right out of his jacket, but the man in the white tuxedo reached out with the other hand and caught him by the belt.

The Russian was yelling in Russian now and the man in the white tuxedo seemed to see him for the first time. He let go of the other man's belt.

"We've got the van," the other man said.

The big man with the missing ear stepped up really close to the man in the white tuxedo, glared at him, and took the other man's jacket. "Okay, Rozzer," he said, turning to Rez. "You know the drill this one. Old hat. Same as leaving that house in St. Kilda with the bastard Melbourne tabs outside, right?" He draped the jacket over Rez's head and shoulders, slapped him encouragingly on the upper arm. He walked over to the pink strips and drew one aside, looking out. "Fucking hell," he said. "Right then, all of you. It's move fast, stay together, Rez in the center, and into the

van. On my count of  
three."

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43. Toecutters Breakfast

"You aren't eating," Blackwell said, after he'd cleared his second plate of links and eggs. He'd appropriated this dining room on one of the Elf Hat's executive floors, and insisted Laney join him. The view was similar to the one from Laney's room, six floors below, and sunlight was glinting from the distant parapets of the new buildings.

"Who put out the word that Rez was dead, Blackwell? The idoru?"

"Her? Why d'you think she would?" He was using the edge of a triangle of toast to squeegee his plate.

"I don't know," Laney said, "but she seems to like to do things.

And they aren't necessarily that easy to understand."

"It wasn't her," Blackwell said. "We're checking it out. Looks as though some fan of his in Mexico went berserk; used some fairly drastic sort of 'ware-weapon on the Tokyo club's central site. Took that over from a converted corporate website in the States and issued the bulletin. Called on every fan local to Tokyo to get up immediately and go to that love hotel." He popped the toast into his mouth, swallowed, and wiped his lips with a thick white napkin.

"But Rez was there," Laney said.

Blackwell shrugged. "We're looking into it. We have more than enough on our hands, now. Have to dissociate Lo/Rez from this death hoax, reassure his audience. Legal's flying in from London and New York for talks with Starkov and his people. Her people too," he added. "Going to be busy."

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"Who were those kids?" Laney asked. "The little redhead and the Japanese hippie?"

"Rez says they're okay. Have 'em here in the hotel. Arleigh's sorting it out."

"Where's the nanotech unit?"

"You didn't say that," Blackwell said. "Now don't say it again. The official truth of the night's events is currently being formulated, and that will never be a part of it. Am I understood?"

Laney nodded. He looked out at the new buildings again. Either the angle of light had changed or that parapet had shifted slightly. He looked at Blackwell. "Is it my imagination, or has your attitude on all this undergone some kind of change? I thought you were adamantly opposed to Rez and the idoru getting together."

Blackwell sighed. "I was. But it's starting to look like something of a done deal now, isn't it? De facto relationship, really. I suppose I'm old-fashioned, but I'd hoped that he might eventually wind up with a bit of the ordinary. Someone to polish his gun, pick up his socks, have a baby or two. But it isn't going to happen, is it?"

"I guess not."

"In which case," Blackwell said, "I have two options. Either I leave the silly bastard to his own resources, or I stay and I do my job and try to adjust to whatever it is this is going to become. And at the end of the bloody day, Laney, regardless, I have to remember where I'd be if he hadn't come behind the walls at Pentridge to give that solo concert. Aren't you going to eat that?" Looking at the scrambled eggs going cold on Laney's plate.

"My job's done," Laney said. "It didn't work out the way you wanted it to, but I did it. Agreed?"

"No question."

"Then I'd better go. Get me paid off, I'm out of here today."

Blackwell looked at him with new interest. "That fast, eh? What's your hurry? Don't find us agreeable?"

"No," Laney said. "It's just that that way's better all round."

"Not what Yama's saying. Rez either. Not to mention her other-

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ness, who no doubt will voice an opinion in that regard. I'd say you were set to become the court prognosticator, Laney. Unless, of course, that whole business with the Kombinat turns out to be absolute bollocks, and it's discovered that you simply make that nodal nonsense up-which I for one would actually find quite amusing. But no, your services are very much desired now, you might even say required, and none of us would currently be happy to see you go."

"I have to," Laney said. "I'm being blackmailed."

This brought Blackwell's lids to half-mast. He leaned slightly forward. The pink worm of scar tissue squirmed in his eyebrow. "Are you?" he said softly, as though Laney had just ventured to confess some unusual sexual complication. "And may I ask who by?"

"Slitscan. Kathy Torrance. It's sort of personal, for her."

"Tell me about it. Tell me all about it. Do."

And Laney did, including the 5-SB trials and their record for eventually turning the participants into homicidal stalkers of celebrities. "I didn't want to bring that up, before," Laney said, "because I was afraid you might think I was at risk. That I might go that way."

"Not that I haven't had experience with the type," Blackwell said. "We have a young man in Tokyo right now who is the author of all of the songs Lo and Rez have ever written, not to mention Blue Ahmed's complete output for Chrome Koran. And he's an explosives expert. Watch him closely. But we have that capacity, you see. So the safest place for you, Laney, in the event you go werewolf on us, would be right here, at the watchful heart of our security apparatus."

Laney thought about it. It almost made sense. "But you won't want me around if Slitscan runs that footage. I won't want myself around. I don't have any family, nobody else for it to damage, but I'm still going to have to live with it."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"I'll go somewhere where people don't watch that shit."

"Well," said Blackwell, "when you find that fair land, I will go

there with you myself. We'll live off fruit and nuts, commune with o

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all that's left of bloody nature. But 'til then, Laney, I'm going to have a conversation with your Kathy Torrance. I will explain certain things to her. Nothing complicated. Simple, simple protocols of cause and effect. And she will never allow Slitscan to run that footage of your doppelganger."

"Blackwell," Laney said, "she dislikes me, she has her motive for revenge, but she wants, she needs, to destroy Rez. She's a very powerful woman in a very powerful, fully global organization. Some simple threat of violence on your part isn't going to stop her. It'll only up the ante; she'll go to her security people-

"No," said Blackwell, "she won't, because that would be a violation of the very personal terms I will have established in our conversation. That's the key word here, Laney, 'personal.' 'Up close,



and.' We will not meet, we will not carve out this deep and meaningful and bloody unforgettable episode of mutual face-time as representatives of our respective faceless corporations. Not at all. It's one-on-one time for your Kathy and I, and it may well prove to be as intimate, and I may hope enlightening, as any she ever had. Because I will bring a new certainty into her life, and we all need certainties. They help build character. And I will leave your Kathy with the deepest possible conviction that if she crosses me, she will die-but only after she's been made to desire that, absolutely." And Blackwell's smile, then, giving Laney the full benefit of his dental prosthesis, was hideous. "Now how was it exactly you were supposed to contact her, to give her your decision?"

Laney found his wallet, produced the blank card with the pencilled number. Blackwell took it. "Ta." He stood up. "Shame to waste a good breakfast that way. Ring the hotel doctor from your room and get yourself sorted. Sleep. I'll deal with this." He tucked the card into the breast pocket of his aluminum jacket.

And as Blackwell left the room, Laney noticed, centered on the bodyguard's squeegeed plate and standing upright on its broad flat head, a one-and-a-half-inch galvanized roofing-nail.

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Laney's ribs, an ugly patchwork of yellow, black, and blue, were sprayed with various cool liquids and tightly bound with micropore. He took the hypnotic the doctor had offered, showered at great length, climbed into bed, and was suggesting the light turn itself off when a fax was delivered.

It was addressed to C. LANEY, GUEST:

DAY MANAGER GAVE ME MY WALKING PAPERS. "FRATERNIZING." ANYWAY, I'M SECURITY HERE AT THE LUCKY DRAGON,

MIDNITE ON, YOU CAN GET ME FAX, E-MAIL, PHONE'S BIZ

ONLY BUT THE PEOPLE ARE OKAY. HOPE YOU'RE OKAY. FEEL

RESPONSIBLE. HOPE YOU'RE ENJOYING JAPAN, WHATEVER.

RYDELL

"Good night," Laney said, putting the fax on the bedside module, and fell instantly and very deeply asleep.

And stayed that way until Arleigh phoned from the lobby to suggest a drink. Nine in the evening, by the blue clock in the corner of the module-screen. Laney put on freshly ironed underwear and his other blue Malaysian button-down. He discovered that White Leather Tuxedo had sprung a few seams in his only jacket, but then the boss Russian, Starkov, hadn't let the man come with them in the van, so Laney figured they were even.

Crossing the lobby, he encountered a frantic-looking Rice Daniels, so tense that he'd reverted to the black head-clamp of his Out of Control days. "Laney! Jesus! Have you seen Kathy?"

"No. I've been asleep."

Daniels did a strange little jig of anxiety, rising on the toes of his brown calfskin loafers. "Look, this is too fiicking weird, but I swear- I think she's been abducted."

"I lave you called the police?"

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"We did, we did, but it's all flicking Martian, all these forms they tick through on their notebooks, and what blood type was she. . . . You don't know what blood type she is, do you,

Laney?"

"Thin," Laney said. "Sort of straw-colored."

But Daniels didn't seem to hear. He seized Laney's shoulder and showed him teeth, a rictus intended somehow to indicate friendship. "I have real respect for you, man. How you don't have any issues."

Laney saw Arleigh wave to him from the entrance to the lounge. She was wearing something short and black.

"You take care, Rice." Shaking the man's cold hand. "She'll turn up. I'm sure of it."

And then he was walking toward Arleigh, smiling, and he saw that she was smiling back.

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Chia was on the bed, watching television. It made her feel more normal. It was like a drug, that way. She remembered how much television her mother had watched, after her father had left.

But this was Japanese television, where girls who could have been Mitsuko, only a little younger, wearing sailor-suit dresses, were spinning huge wooden tops at a long table. They could really spin them, too; keep them up forever. It was a contest. The console could translate, but it was even more relaxing not to know what they were saying. The most relaxing parts of all were the close-ups of the tops spinning.

She'd used the translation to check out the NHK coverage of the death hoax on the net and the candlelight vigil at the Hotel Di.

She'd seen a very satisfyingly pudgy Hiromi Ogama denying she knew who had nuked her chapter's site and then issued the call to mourning from its ruins. It had not been a member of the club, Hiromi had stressed, either locally or internationally. Chia knew Hiromi was lying, because it had to have been Zona, but the Lo/Rez people would be telling her what to say. Arleigh had told Chia the whole thing had been launched out of a disused website that belonged to an aerospace company in Arizona. Which meant that Zona had blown her country, because now she wouldn't be able to go back there. (Nice as Arleigh seemed to be, Chia hadn't told her anything about Lona.)

And she'd seen the helicopter shots of the vigil, afield of the baf- 0

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S4. La Puirissima

fled tactical squads facing an estimated twenty-five hundred tearyeyed girls. The injury count was low, everything fairly minor except for one girl who'd slid down a freeway embankment and broken both her ankles. The real problem had been getting everyone out of there, because a lot of them had arrived five or six to a cab, and had no way of getting home. Some had taken the family car and then abandoned it in their hurry to reach the vigil, and that had created another kind of mess. There had been a few dozen arrests, mostly for trespassing.

And she'd seen the message Rez had recorded, assuring people he was alive and well, and regretting the whole thing, which of course he'd had nothing to do with. He wasn't wearing the monocle-rig, for this, but he had on the same black suit and t-shirt. He looked thinner, though; someone had tweaked it. He'd played it light, at first, grinning, saying he'd never been to the Hotel Di and in fact had never visited a love hotel, but now maybe he should. Then he'd turned serious and said how sorry he was that people had been inconvenienced and even hurt by someone's irresponsible prank. And he'd capped it, smiling, by saying that the whole thing had been quite uniquely moving for him, because how often do you get to watch your own funeral?

And she'd seen the people who owned and managed the Hotel Di, expressing their regret. They had no idea, they said, how any of this had happened. She got the feeling that expressing regret was a big thing here, but the owners of the Di had also managed to explain how there was no on-site staff at their hotel, in the interest of the guests' greater privacy. Arleigh, watching this, had said that that was the commercial, and that she bet the place was going to be booked solid for the next two months. It was famous, now.

All in all, the coverage seemed to treat the whole thing as some kind of silly-season item that might have had serious repercussions if the police hadn't acted as calmly and as skillfully as they eventually had, bringing in electric buses from the suburbs to ferry the girls to collection-points around the city.

Arleigh was from San l~ranclsc() and she worked for Lo/Rez and  
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knew Rez personally, and she was the one who'd driven the van out through the crowd. And then she'd lost a police helicopter by doing something completely crazy on that expressway, a kind of u-turn right over the concrete bumper-thing down the middle.

She'd brought Chia and Masahiko to this hotel, and put them in these adjoining rooms with weirdly angled corners, where they each had a private bath. She'd asked them both to please stay there, and not to port or use the phone without telling her, except for room service, and then she'd gone out.

Chia had had a shower right away. It was the best shower she'd ever had, and she felt like she never wanted to wear those clothes again as long as she lived. She didn't even want to have to look at them. She found a plastic bag you were supposed to put your clothes in to be laundered, and she put them in that and put it in the wastebasket in the bathroom. Then she'd put on all clean clothes from her bag, everything kind of wrinkled but it felt great, and she'd blow-dried her hair with the machine built into the bathroom wall. The toilet didn't talk and it only had three buttons to figure out.

Then she lay down on the bed and fell asleep, but not for long.

Arleigh kept popping in to make sure Chia was okay, and telling her news, so that Chia felt like she was part of it, whatever it was. Arleigh said Rez was back at his own hotel now, but that he'd come later to spend some time with her and thank her for all she'd done.

That made Chia feel strange. Now she'd seen him in real life, somehow that had taken over from all the other ways she'd known him before, and she felt kind of funny about him. Confused. Like all of this had pegged him in realtime for her, and she kept thinking of her mother complaining that Lo and Rez were nearly as old as she was.

And there was something else to it, too, that came from what she'd seen when she was crouched down in the back of that van, between the little Japanese guy with the sleeve of his jacket hanging down, and Masahiko: she'd looked out the window and seen the  
faces, as the van inched away. None of them knowing that that was 0

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Rez hunched down in there, under a jacket, but maybe sensing it somehow. And something in Chia letting her know she'd never quite be like that again. Never as comfortably a face in that crowd. Because now she knew there were rooms they never saw, or even dreamed of, where crazy things, or even just boring things, happened, and that was where the stars came from. And it was something like that that worried her now when she thought of Rez coming to see her. That and how he really was her mother's age.

And all of that made her wonder what she was going to tell the others, back in Seattle. How could they understand it? She thought Zona would understand. She really wanted to talk with Zona, but Arleigh had said it was better not to try to reach her now.

The longest-running top was starting to teeter, and they were cutting from that to the eyes of the girl who'd spun it.

Masahiko opened the door that connected their rooms.

The top gave a last wobble and kicked over. The girl covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes filled with the pain of defeat.

"You must come with me to Walled City now," Masahiko said.

Chia used the manual remote to turn the television off. "Arleigh asked us not to port."

"She knows," Masahiko said. "I've been there all day." He was wearing the same clothes but everything had been cleaned and pressed, and the legs of his baggy black pants looked strange with creases in them. "And on the phone with my father."

"Is he pissed off at you because those gumi guys came?"

"Arleigh McCrae asked Starkov to have someone speak with our gumi representative. They have apologized to my father. But Mitsuko was arrested near Hotel Di. That has caused him embarrassment and difficulty."

"Arrested?"

"l~or trespassing. She went to take part in the vigil. She climbed a fence, triggering an alarm. She could not climb back out before the police came."

"Is she okay?"

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"My father has arranged her release. But he is not pleased."

"I feel like it's my fault," Chia said.

He shrugged and went back through the door.

Chia got up. Her Sandbenders was beside her bag on the luggage rack, with her goggles and tip-sets on top of it. She carried it into the other room.

It was a mess. Somehow he'd managed to turn it into something like his room at home. The sheets were tangled on the bed. Through the open bathroom door, she saw towels crumpled up on the tiled floor, a spilled bottle of shampoo on the counter beside the sink. He'd set up his computer on the desk, with his student cap beside it. There were opened mini-cans of espresso everywhere, and at least three room-service trays with half-empty ceramic bowls of ramen.

"Has anyone there seen Zona?" she asked, shoving a pillow and an open magazine aside on the foot of the bed. She sat down with her Sandbenders on her lap and started putting her tip-sets on.

She thought he gave her a strange look, then. "I don't think so," he said.

"Take me in the way you did the first time," she said. "I want to see it again."

Hak Nam. Tai Chang Street. The walls alive with shifting messages in the characters of every written language. Doorways flipping past, each one hinting at its own secret world. And this time she was more aware of the countless watching ghosts. That must be how people presented here, when you weren't in direct communication with them. A city of ghost-shadows. But this time Masahiko took another route, and they weren't climbing the twisted labyrinth of stairs but winding in at what would have been ground level in the original city, and Chia remembered the black hole, the rectangular vacancy he'd pointed out on the printed scarf in his room at the restaurant.

"I must leave you now," he said, as they burst from the maze into that vacancy. "They wish privacy." 0

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He was gone, and at first Chia thought there was nothing there at all, only the faint grayish light filtering down from somewhere high above. When she looked up at this, it resolved into a vast, distant skylight, very far above her, but littered with a compost of strange and discarded shapes. She remembered the city's rooftops, and the things abandoned there.

"It is strange, isn't it?" The idoru stood before her in embroidered robes, the tiny bright patterns lit from within, moving. "Ho!low and somber. But he insisted we meet you here."

"Who insisted? Do you know where Zona is?"

And there was a small table or four-legged stand in front of the idoru, very old, its dragon-carved legs thick with flaking, pale green paint. A single dusty glass stood centered there,

something coiled inside it. Someone coughed.

"This is the heart of Hak Nam," the Etruscan said, that same creaking voice assembled from a million samples of dry old sounds. "Traditionally a place of serious conversation."

"Your friend is gone," the idoru said. "I wished to tell you myself. This one," indicating the glass, "volunteers details I do not understand."

"But they've only shut down her website," Chia said. "She's in Mexico City, with her gang."

"She is nowhere," the Etruscan said.

"When you were taken from her," the idoru said, "taken from the room in Venice, your friend went to your system software and activated the video units in your goggles. What she saw there indicated to her that you were in grave danger. As I believe you were. She must then have decided on a plan. Returning to her secret country, she linked her site with that of the Tokyo chapter of the Lo/Rez group. She ordered Ogawa, the president of the group, to post the message announcing Rez's death at Hotel Di. She threatened her with a weapon that would shatter the Tokyo chapter's site. .

"The knife," Cliia said. "It was real?"

"And extremely illegal," the Etruscan said.

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"When Ogawa refused," the idoru said, "your friend used her weapon.

"A serious crime," the Etruscan said, "under the laws of every country involved."

"She then posted her message through what remained of Ogawa's website," the idoru said. "It seemed official, and it had the effect of quickly surrounding Hotel Di with a sea of potential witnesses."

"Whatever the next stage of her plan," the Etruscan said, "she had exposed her presence in her website. The original owners became aware of her. She abandoned her site. They pursued her. She was forced to discard her persona."

"What 'persona'?" Chia felt a sinking feeling.

"Zona Rosa," said the Etruscan, "was the persona of Mercedes Purissima Vargas-Gutierrez. She is twenty-six years old and the victim of an environmental syndrome occurring most frequently in the Federal District of Mexico." His voice was like rain on a thin metal roof now. "Her father is an extremely successful criminal lawyer."

"Then I can find her," Chia said.

"But she would not wish this," the idoru said. "Mercedes Punssima is severely deformed by the syndrome, and has lived for the past five years in almost complete denial of her physical self."

Chia was sitting there crying. Masahiko removed the black cups from his eyes and came over to the bed.

"Zona's gone," she said.

"I know," he said. He sat down beside her. "You never finished telling me the story of the Sandbenders," he said. "It was very interesting story."

So she began to tell it to him.

45. Lucky

"Laney," he heard her say, her voice blurred with sleep. "What are you doing?"

The illuminated face of the cedar telephone. "I'm calling the

Lucky Dragon, on Sunset."

"The what?"

"Convenience store. Twenty-four hours."

"Laney, it's three in the morning .

"Have to thank Rydell, tell him the job worked out. She groaned and rolled over, pulling the pillow over her head. Through the window he could see the translucent amber, the serned cliffs of the new buildings, reflecting the lights of the city.

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46. Fables of the Reconstruction

Chia dreamed of a beach pebbled with crushed fragments of consumer electronics; crab-things scuttling low, their legs striped like antique resistors. Tokyo Bay, shrouded in fog from an old movie, a pale gray blanket meant to briefly conceal first-act terrors: sea monsters or some alien armada.

Hak Nam rose before her as she waded nearer, but with a dream's logic it grew no closer. Backwashing sea, sucking at her ankles. The Walled City is growing. Being grown. From the fabric of the beach, wrack and wreckage of the world before things changed. Unthinkable tonnage, dumped here by barge and bulk-lifter in the course of the great reconstruction. The minuscule bugs of Rodel-van Erp seethe there, lifting the iron-caged balconies that are sleeping rooms, countless unplanned windows throwing blank silver rectangles back against the fog. A thing of random human accretion, monstrous and superb, it is being reconstituted here, retranslated from its later incarnation as a realm of consensual fantasy.

The alarm's infrared stutter. Sunbright halogen illuminating the printed scarf, at its center the rectangle representing an emptiness, an address unknown: the kilifile of legend. Zapping the Espressomatic to life with her remote, she curls back into the quilt's dark, waiting for the building hiss of steam. Most mornings, now, she checks into the City, hears the gossip in a favorite barbershop in Sai Shing Road. The Etruscan is there, sometimes, with Klaus and the Rooster and the other ghosts he hangs with, and they tolerate her.

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She's proud of that, because they'll clam up around Masahiko. Are they old, incredibly ancient, or do they just act that way? Whatever, they tend to know things first, and she's learned to value that. And the Etruscan has been hinting at a vacancy, something really small, but with a window. Looking down into what would have been Lung Chun Road.

He likes her, the Etruscan. It's weird. They say he doesn't like anybody, really, but he fixed her father's credit, even though she'd forgotten to leave the key. (She keeps the key to Suite 17 in a watered-silk cosmetics case they gave her on the JAL flight home: it's made of white plastic, molded to look like an old-fashioned mechanical key, with a mag-strip down the long part and the flat thing shaped like the crown a princess wears. She gets it out and looks at it sometimes, but it just looks like a cheap white piece of plastic.)

The Etruscan and the others spy on the Project all the time. That's what they call it. Through them, Chia knows that the idoru's island isn't finished yet. It's there but it isn't stable;

something they have to do it before they build, even with nanotech, in case another earthquake comes. She wonders what the Russians will do with theirs, and sometimes she wonders about Maryalice, and Eddie, and Calvin, the guy at Whiskey Clone who got her out of there, for no reason other than he thought he should. But it seems like a long time ago, between the Walled City and school.

She figures her mother knows by now that she wasn't with Hester, but her mother's never said anything about it, except to talk to her twice about contraceptives and safe sex. And, really, she wasn't there much more than forty-eight hours, if you didn't count the travel-time, because Rez hadn't been able to make it over to thank her, and Arleigh had said that, all in all, it was better if she got home before anybody started asking any questions, but they'd send her first class on Japan Air Lines. So Arleigh had driven her back out to Narita that night, but not in her green van because she said it was a writeoff. And she'd still felt SO bad about Zona, and it made her feel SO stupid, because she felt like her friend was dead, but her friend hadn't  
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even really existed, and there was this other girl in Mexico City, with terrible problems, and so she wound up telling all that to Arleigh and just cryin-g.

And Arleigh said she should just wait. Because that girl in Mexico City, more than anything else, needed to be somebody else. And it didn't matter that she hadn't been Zona, because she'd made Zona up, and that was just as real. Just wait, Arleigh said, because somebody else would turn up, somebody new, and it would be like they already knew you. And Chia had sat and thought about that, beside Arleigh in heir fast little car.

-But I c:ouldn't ever tell her I knew?

-That would spoil it.

When they'd gotten to the airport, Arleigh checked her in at JAL, found somebody to take her to the lounge (which was sort of like a cross between a bar and really fancy business office), and gave her a bag with a roadie-grade Lo/Rez tour jacket in it. The sleeves were made of transparent rayon, and the lining that showed through that looked like liquid mercury. Arleigh said it was really tacky, but maybe she had a friend who'd like it. It was from their Kombinat tour, and it had all the tour dates embroidered on the back in three different languages.

She hadn't ever worn it, and she'd never really shown it to anybody either. It was hanging in her closet, under a piece of drycleaner's plastic. She hadn't really been that active in the chapter lately. (Kelsey had dropped right out.) Chia didn't really feel that anybody in the chapter would get it, if she tried to tell them what had happened, plus there were all the bits she couldn't tell them anyway.

But mainly it was the City taking up her time, because Rez and Rei were there, shadows among the other shadows but still you could tell. Working on their Project.

Plenty there who didn't like the idea, but plenty who did. The Erruscan did. He said it was the craziest thing since they'd turned that first kilifile inside out.

Sometimes Chia wondered if they all weren't just joking, because

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it just seemed impossible that anyone could ever do that. Build that, on an island in Tokyo Bay.

But the idoru said that that was where they wanted to live, now

that they were married. So they were going to do it.

And if they do, Chia thought, hearing the hiss of the Espressomatic, I'll go there.

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All Tomorrow's Parties

By

William Gibson

1. CARDBOARD CITY

THROUGH this evenings tide of faces unregistered, unrecognized, amid hurrying black shoes, furred umbrellas, the crowd descending like a single organism into the stations airless heart, comes Shinya Yamazaki, his notebook clasped beneath his arm like the egg case of some modest but moderately successful marine species.

Evolved to cope with jostling elbows, oversized Ginza shopping bags, ruthless briefcases, Yamazaki and his small burden of information go down into the neon depths. Toward this tributary of relative quiet, a tiled corridor connecting parallel escalators.

Central columns, sheathed in green ceramic, support a ceiling pocked with dust-furred ventilators, smoke detectors, speakers. Behind the columns, against the far wall, derelict shipping cartons huddle in a ragged train, improvised shelters constructed by the city's homeless. Yamazaki halts, and in that moment all the oceanic clatter of commuting feet washes in, no longer held back by his sense of mission, and he deeply and sincerely wishes he were elsewhere.

He winces, violently, as a fashionable young matron, features swathed in Chanel micropore, rolls over his toes with an expensive three-wheeled stroller. Blurting a convulsive apology, Yamazaki glimpses the infant passenger through flexible curtains of some pink-tinted plastic, the glow of a video display winking as its mother trundles determinedly away.

Yamazaki sighs, unheard, and limps toward the cardboard shelters. He wonders briefly what the passing commuters will think, to see him enter the carton fifth from the left. It is scarcely the height of his chest, longer than the others, vaguely coffin-like, a flap of thumb-smudged white corrugate serving as its door.

Perhaps the~~ will not see him, he thinks. Just as he himself has never seen anyone enter or exit one of these tidy hovels. It is as though their inhabitants are rendered invisible in the transaction that allows such structures to exist in the context of the station. lie is a student of

existential sociology, and such transactions have been his particular concern.

And now he hesitates, fighting the urge to remove his shoes and place them beside the rather greasy-looking pair of yellow plastic sandals arranged beside the entrance flap on a carefully folded sheet of Parco gift wrap. No, he thinks, imagining himself waylaid within, struggling with faceless enemies in a labyrinth of cardboard. Best he not be shoeless.

Sighing again, he drops to his knees, the notebook clutched in both hands. He kneels for an instant, hearing the hurrying feet of those who pass behind him. Then he places the notebook on the ceramic tile of the station's floor and shoves it forward, beneath the corrugate flap, and follows it on his hands and knees.

He desperately hopes that he has found the right carton.

He freezes there in unexpected light and heat. A single halogen fixture floods the tiny room with the frequency of desert sunlight. Unventilated, it heats the space like a reptile's cage.

"Come in," says the old man, in Japanese. "Don't leave your ass hanging out that way." He is naked except for a sort of breechclout twisted from what may once have been a red T-shirt. He is seated, cross-legged, on a ragged, paint-flecked tatami mat. He holds a brightly colored toy figure in one hand, a slender brush in the other. Yamazaki sees that the thing is a model of some kind, a robot or military exoskeleton. It glitters in the sun-bright light, blue and red and silver. Small tools are spread on the tatami: a razor knife, a sprue cutter, curls of emery paper.

The old man is very thin, clean-shaven but in need of a haircut. Wisps of gray hair hang on either side of his face, and his mouth is set in what looks to be a permanent scowl of disapproval. He wears glasses with heavy black plastic frames and archaically thick lenses. The lenses catch the light.

Yamazaki creeps obediently into the carton, feeling the door flap drop shut behind him. On hands and knees, he resists the urge to try to bow.

"He's waiting," the old man says, his brush tip poised above the figure in his hand. "In there." Moving only his head.

Yamazaki sees that the carton has been reinforced with mailing tubes, a system that echoes the traditional post-and-beam architecture of Japan, the tubes lashed together with lengths of salvaged poly-ribbon. There are too many objects here, in this tiny space. Towels and blankets and



cooking pots on cardboard shelves. Books. A small television.

"In there?" Yamazaki indicates what he takes to be another door, like the entrance to a hutch, curtained with a soiled square of melon-yellow, foam-cored blanket, the sort of blanket one finds in a capsule hotel. But the brush tip dips to touch the model, and the old man is lost in the concentration this requires, so Yamazaki shuffles on hands and knees across the absurdly tiny space and draws the section of blanket aside. Darkness.

"Laney-San?"

What seems to be a crumpled sleeping bag. He smells sickness- "Yeah?" A croak. "In here." Drawing a deep breath, Yamazaki crawls in, pushing his notebook before him. When the melon-yellow blanket falls across the entrance, brightness glows through the synthetic fabric and the thin foam core, like tropical sunlight seen from deep within some coral grotto.

"Laney?"

The American groans. Seems to turn, or sit up. Yamazaki can't see. Something covers Laney's eyes. Red wink of a diode. Cables. Faint gleam of the interface, reflected in a thin line against Laney's sweat-slick cheekbone.

"I'm deep in, now," Laney says, and coughs.

"Deep in what?"

"They didn't follow you, did they?"

"I don't think so."

"I could tell if they had."

Yamazaki feels sweat run suddenly from both his armpits, coursing down across his ribs. He forces himself to breathe. The air here is foul, thick. He thinks of the seventeen known strains of multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis

Laney draws a ragged breath. "But they aren't looking for me, are they?"

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"No," Yamazaki says, "they are looking for her."

"They won't find her," Laney says. "Not here. Not anywhere. Not now.',

"Why did you run away, Laney?"

"The syndrome," Laney says and coughs again, and Yamazaki feels the smooth, deep shudder of an incoming maglev, somewhere deeper in the station, not mechanical vibration but a vast pistoning of displaced air. "It finally kicked in. The 5-SB. The stalker effect." Yamazaki hears feet hurrying by, perhaps an arm's length away, behind the cardboard wall.

"It makes you cough?" Yamazaki blinks, making his new contact lenses swim uncomfortably.

"No," Laney says and coughs into his pale and upraised hand. "Some bug. They all have it, down here."

"I was worried when you vanished. They began to look for you, but when she was gone-

"The shit really hit the fan."

"Shit?"

Laney reaches up and removes the bulky, old-fashioned eyephones. Yamazaki cannot see what outputs to them, but the shifting light from the display reveals Laney's hollowed eyes. "It's all going to change, Yamazaki. We're coming up on the mother of all nodal points. I can see it, now. It's all going to change."

"I don't understand."

"Know what the joke is? It didn't change when they thought it would. Millennium was a Christian holiday. I've been looking at history, Yamazaki. I can see the nodal points in history. Last time we had one like this was 1911."

"What happened in 1911?"

"Everything changed."

"How?"

"It just did. That's how it works. I can see it now"

"Laney," Yamazaki says, "when you told me about the stalker effect, you said that the victims, the test subjects, became obsessed with one particular media figure."

"Yes."

"And you are obsessed with her?"

Laney stares at him, eyes lit by a backwash of data. "No. Not with her. Guy named Harwood. Cody Harwood. They're coming together, though. In San Francisco. And someone else. Leaves a sort of negative trace; you have to infer everything from the way he's not there.

"Why did you ask me here, Laney? This is a terrible place. Do you wish me to help you to escape?" Yamazaki is thinking of the blades of the Swiss Army knife in his pocket. One of them is serrated; he could easily cut his way out through the wall. Yet the psychological space is powerful, very powerful, and overwhelms him. He feels very far from Shinjuku, from Tokyo, from anything. He smells Laney's sweat. "You are not well."

"Rydell," Laney says, replacing the eyephones. "That rent-a-cop from the Chateau. The one you knew. The one who told me about you, back in LA."

"Yes?"

"I need a man on the ground, in San Francisco. I've managed to move some money. I don't think they can trace it. I dcked with DatArnerica's banking sector. Find Rydell and tell him he can have it as a retainer."

"To do what?"

Laney shakes his head. The cables on the eyephones move in the dark like snakes. "He has to be there, is all. Something's coming down. Everything's changing."

"Laney, you are sick, Let me take you-"

"Back to the island? There's nothing there. Never will be, now she's gone."

And Yamazaki knows this is true.

"Where's Rez?" Laney asks.

"He mounted a tour of the Kombinat states, when he decided she was gone."

Laney nods thoughtfully, the eyephones bobbing mantis-like in the dark. "Get Rydell, Yamazaki. I'll tell you how he can get the money"

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"But why?"

"Because he's part of it. Part of the node."

LATER Yamazaki stands, staring up at the towers of Shinjuku, the walls of animated light, sign and signifier twisting toward the sky in the unending ritual of commerce, of desire. Vast faces fill the screens, icons of a beauty at once terrible and banal.

Somewhere below his feet, Laney huddles and coughs in his cardboard shelter, all of DatAmerica pressing steadily into his eyes. Laney is his friend, and his friend is unwell. The American's peculiar talents with data are the result of experimental trials, in a federal orphanage in Florida, of a substance known as 5-SB. Yamazaki has seen what Laney can do with data, and what data can do to Laney.

He has no wish to see it again.

As he lowers his eyes from the walls of light, the mediated faces, he feels his contacts move, changing as they monitor his depth of focus. This still unnerves him.

Not far from the station, down a side street bright as day, he finds the sort of kiosk that sells anonymous debit cards. He purchases one. At another kiosk, he uses it to buy a disposable phone good for a total of thirty minutes, Tokyo-LA.

He asks his notebook for Rydell's number.

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2. Lucky Dragon

"HEROIN." declared Durius Walker, Rydell's colleague in security at the Lucky Dragon on Sunset. "It's the opiate of the masses."

Durius had finished sweeping up. He held the big industrial dustpan carefully, headed for the inbuilt hospital-style sharps container, the one with the barbed biohazard symbol. That was where they put the needles, when they found them.

They averaged five or six a week. Rydell had never actually caught anyone shooting anything up, in the store, although he wouldn't have put it past them. It just seemed like people dropped used needles on the floor, usually back by the cat food. You could find other things, sweeping up in the Lucky Dragon: pills, foreign coins, hospital identification bracelets, crumpled paper money from countries that still used it. Not that you wanted to go poking around in that dustpan. When Rydell swept up, he wore the same Kevlar gloves that Durius was wearing now, and latex underneath that.

He supposed Durius was right though, and it made you wonder: all the new substances around to abuse, but people didn't forget the ones that had been around forever. Make cigarettes illegal, say, and people found a way to keep smoking. The Lucky Dragon wasn't allowed to sell rolling papers, but they did a brisk trade in Mexican hair-curler papers that worked just as well. The most popular brand was called Biggerhair, and Rydell wondered if anyone had ever actually used any to curl their hair. And how did you curl your hair with little rectangles of tissue paper anyway?

"Ten minutes to," Durius said over his shoulder. "You wanna do the curb check?"

At four o'clock, one of them got to take a ten-minute break, out back. If Rydell did the curb check, it meant he got to take his break first, then let Durius take one. The curb check was something that Lucky Dragon's parent corporation, back in Singapore, had instituted on the advice of an in-house team of American cultural anthropologists. Mr.

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Park, the night manager, had explained this to Rydell, ticking off points on his notebook. He'd tapped each paragraph on the screen for emphasis, sounding thoroughly bored with the whole thing, but Rydell had supposed it was part of the job, and Mr. Park was a definite stickler. "'In order to demonstrate Lucky Dragon's concern with neighborhood safety, security personnel will patrol curb in front of location on a nightly basis.'" Rydell had nodded. "You not out of store too long," Mr. Park added, by way of clarification. "Five minute. Just before you take break." Pause. Tap. "Lucky Dragon security presence will be high-profile, friendly, sensitive to local culture.'" "

"What's that mean?"

"Anybody sleeping, you make them move. Friendly way. Hooker working there, you say hello, tell joke, make her move."

"I'm scared of those old girls," Rydell said, deadpan. "Christmastime, they dress up like Santa's elves."

"No hooker in front of Lucky Dragon."

"'Sensitive to local culture?'"

"Tell joke. Hooker like joke."

"Maybe in Singapore," Durius had said, when Rydell had recounted Park's instructions.

"He's not from Singapore," Rydell had said. "He's from Korea."

"So basically they want us to show ourselves, clear the sidewalk back a few yards, be friendly and sensitive?"

"And tell joke."

Durius squinted. "You know what kinda people hang in front of a convenience store on Sunset, four in the morning? Kids on dancer, tweaked off their dimes, hallucinating monster movies. Guess who gets to be the monster? Plus there's your more mature sociopaths; older, more complicated, polypharmic .

"Say what?"

"Mix their shit," Durius said. "Get lateral."

"Gotta be done. Man says."

Durius looked at Rydell. "You first." He was from Compton, and the only person Rydell knew who had actually been born in Los Angeles.

"You're bigger."

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"Size ain't everything."

"Sure," Rydell had said.

ALL that summer Rydell and Durius had been night security at the Lucky Dragon, a purpose-built module that had been coptered into this former car-rental lot on the Strip. Before that, Rydell had been night security at the Chateau, just up the Street, and before that he'd driven a wagon for IntenSecure. Still farther back, briefly and he tried not to think about it too often, he'd been a police officer in Knoxville, Tennessee. Somewhere in there, twice, he'd almost made the cut for Coiis in Trouble, a show he'd grown up on but now managed never to watch.

Working nights at the Lucky Dragon was more interesting than Rydell would have imagined. Durius said that was because it was the only place around, for a mile or so, that sold anything that anyone actually needed, on a regular basis or otherwise. Microwave noodles, diagnostic kits for most STDs, toothpaste, disposable anything, Net access, gum, bottled water. . . There were Lucky Dragons all over America, all over the world for that matter, and to prove it you had your trademark Lucky Dragon Global Interactive Video Column outside. You had to pass it entering and leaving the store, so you'd see whichever dozen Lucky Dragons the Sunset franchise happened to be linked with at that particular moment: Paris or Houston or Brazzaville, wherever. These were shuffled, every three minutes, for the practical reason that it had been determined that if the maximum viewing time was any more, kids in the world's duller suburbs would try to win bets by having sex on camera. As it was, you got a certain amount of mooning and flashing. Or, still more common, like this shit-faced guy in downtown Prague, as Rydell made his exit to do the curb check, displaying the universal finger.

"Same here," Rydell said to this unknown Czech, hitching up the neon-pink Lucky Dragon fanny pack he was contractually obligated to wear on duty. He didn't mind that though, even if it did look like shit: it was bulletproof, with a pull-up Kevlar baby bib to fasten around your neck if the going got rough. A severely lateral customer with a ceramic

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switchblade had tried to stab Rydell through the Lucky Dragon logo his second week on the job, and Rydell had sort of bonded with the thing after that.

He had that switchblade up in his room over Mrs. Siekevitz's garage. They'd found it below the

peanut butter, after the LAPD had taken the lateral one away. It had a black blade that looked like sandblasted glass. Rydell didn't like it; the ceramic blade gave it a weird balance, and it was so sharp that he'd already cut himself with it twice. He wasn't sure what he should do with it.

Tonight's curb check looked dead simple. There was a Japanese girl standing out there with a seriously amazing amount of legs running down from an even more amazingly small amount of shorts. Well, sort of Japanese. Rydell found it hard to make distinctions like that in LA. Durius said hybrid vigor was the order of the day, and Rydell guessed he was right. This girl with all the legs, she was nearly as tall as Rydell, and he didn't think Japanese people usually were. But then maybe she'd grown up here, and her family before her, and the local food had made them taller. He'd heard about that happening. But, no, he decided, getting closer, the thing was, she wasn't actually a girl. Funny how you got that. Usually it wasn't anything too obvious. It was like he really wanted to buy into everything she was doing to be a girl, but some subliminal message he got from her bone structure just wouldn't let him.

"Hey," he said.

"You want me to move?"

"Well," Rydell said, "I'm supposed to."

"I'm supposed to stand out here convincing a jaded clientele to buy blow jobs. What's the difference?"

Rydell thought about it. "You're freelance," he decided, "I'm on salary. You go on down the street for twenty minutes, nobody's going to fire you." He could smell her perfume through the complicated pollution and that ghostly hint of oranges you got out here sometimes. There were orange trees around, had to be, but he'd never found one.

She was frowning at him. "Freelance."

"That's right."

She swayed expertly on her stacked heels, fishing a box of Russian

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Marlboros from her pink patent purse. Passing cars were already honking at the sight of the Lucky Dragon security man talking to this six-foot-plus boyygirl, and now she was deliberately doing something illegal. She opened the red-and-white box and pointedly offered Rydell a cigarette. There were two in there, factory-made filter tips, but one was shorter than the other and had blue metallic lipstick on it.

"No thanks."

She took out the shorter one, partially smoked, and put it between her lips. "Know what I'd do if I were you?" Her lips, around the tan filter tip, looked like a pair of miniature water beds plastered with glittery blue candy coat.

"What?"

She took a lighter from her purse. Like the ones they sold in those tobacciana shops. They were going to make that illegal too, he'd heard. She snapped it and lit her cigarette. Drew in the smoke, held it, blew it out, away from Rydell. "I'd fuck off into the air."

He looked into the Lucky Dragon and saw Durius say something to Miss Praisegod Satansbane, the checker on this shift. She had a fine sense of humor, Praisegod, and he guessed you had to, with a name like that. Her parents were some particularly virulent stripe of SoCal NeoPuritan, and had taken the name Satansbane before Praisegod had been born. The thing was, she'd explained to Rydell, nobody much knew what "bane" meant, so if she told people her last name, they mostly figured she was a Satanist anyway. So she often went by the surname Proby, which had been her father's before he'd gotten religion.

Now Durius said something else, and Praisegod threw back her shoulders and laughed. Rydell sighed.

He wished it had been Durius' turn to do curb check.

"Look," Rydell said, "I'm not telling you you can't stand out here. The sidewalk's public property. It's just that there's this company policy."

"I'm going to finish this cigarette," she said, "and then I'm calling my lawyer."

"Can't we just keep it simple?"

"Uh-uh." Big metallic-blue, collagen-swollen smile.

Rydell glanced over and saw Durius making hand signals at him.

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Pointing to Praisegod, who held a phone. He hoped they hadn't called

LAPD. He had a feeling this girl really did have herself a lawyer, and

Mr. Park wouldn't like that.

Now Durius came out. "For you," he called. "Say it's Tokyo."

"Excuse me," Rydell said, and turned away. "Hey," she said.

"Hey what?" He looked back. "You're cute."

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3. DEEP IN

LANEY hears his piss gurgle into the screw-top plastic liter bottle. It's awkward kneeling here, in the dark, and he doesn't like the way the bottle warms in his hand, filling. He caps it by feel and stands it upright in the corner that's farthest from his head when he sleeps. In the morning, he'll carry it under his coat to the Men's and empty it. The old man knows he's too sick now to crawl out, to walk the corridor every time, but they have this agreement. Laney pisses in the bottle and takes it out when he can.

He doesn't know why the old man lets him stay here. He's offered to pay, but the old man just keeps building his models. It takes him a day to complete one, and they're always perfect. And where do they go when he finishes them? And where do the unbuilt kits come from?

Laney has a theory that the old man is a sensei of kit-building, a national treasure, with connoisseurs shipping in kits from around the world, waiting anxiously for the master to complete their vintage Gundams with his unequaled yet weirdly casual precision, his Zen moves, perhaps leaving each one with a single minute and somehow perfect flaw, at once his signature and a recognition of the nature of the universe. How nothing is perfect, really. Nothing ever finished. Everything is process, Laney assures himself, zipping up, settling back into his squalid nest of sleeping bags.

But the process is all a lot stranger than he ever bargained for, he reflects, bunching a fold of sleeping bag to pillow his head against the cardboard, through which he can feel the hard tile wall of the corridor.

Still, he thinks, he ,weds to be here. If there's any place in Tokyo Rez's people won't find him, this is it. He's not quite sure how he got here; things got a little fuzzy around the time the syndrome kicked in. Some kind of state change, some global shift in the nature of his perception. Insufficient memory. Things hadn't stuck.

Now he wonders if in fact he did make some deal with the old man. Maybe he's already covered this, the rent, whatever. Maybe that's why

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the old man gives him food and bottles of flat mineral water and tolerates the smell of piss. He thinks that might be it, but he isn't sure.

It's dark in here, but he sees colors, faint flares and swathes and stipplings, moving. Like the

afterimages of the DatAmerica flows are permanent now, retinally ingrained. No light penetrates from the corridor outside-he's blocked every pinhole with black tape-and the old man's halogen is off. He assumes the old man sleeps there, but he's never seen him do it, never heard any sounds that might indicate a transition from model-building to sleep. Maybe the old man sleeps upright on his mat, Gundam in one hand, brush in the other.

Sometimes he can hear music from the adjacent cartons, but it's faint, as though the neighbors use earphones.

He has no idea how many people live here in this corridor. It looks as though there might be room for six, but he's seen more, and it may be that they shelter here in shifts. He's never learned much Japanese, not after eight months, and even if he could understand, he guesses, these people are all crazy, and they'd only talk about the things crazy people talk about.

And of course anyone who could see him here now, with his fever and his sleeping bags, his eyephones and his cellular data port and his bottle of cooling piss, would think he was crazy too.

But he isn't. He knows he isn't, in spite of everything. He has the syndrome now, the thing that came after every test subject from that Gainesville orphanage, but he isn't crazy. Just obsessed. And the obsession has its own shape in his head, its own texture, its own weight. He knows it from himself, can differentiate, so he goes back to it whenever he needs to and checks on it. Monitors it. Makes sure it still isn't him. It reminds him of having a sore tooth, or the way he felt once when he was in love and didn't want to be. How his tongue always found the tooth, or how he'd always find that ache, that absence in the shape of the beloved.

But the syndrome wasn't like that. It was separate from him and had nothing to do with anyone or anything he, Laney, was even interested in. When he'd felt it starting, he'd taken it for granted that it would be about her, about Rei Toei, because there he was, close to her, or as close

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as you could get to anyone who didn't physically exist. 'I-hey'd tasked almost every day, Laney and the idoru.

And at first, he considered now, maybe it had been about her, hut then it was as though he'd been following something hack through the data flows, doing it without really thinking about it, the way your hand will find a thread on a garment and start pulling at it, unraveling it.

And what had unraveled was the way he'd thought the world worked. And behind that he'd found Harwood, who was famous, but famous in that way of being famous for being famous. Harwood who they said had elected the president. Harwood the PR genius, who'd inherited Harwood Levine, the most powerful PR firm in the world, and had taken it somewhere seriously else, into a whole other realm of influence, But who'd managed somehow never to become prey to the mechanism of celebrity itself. Which grinds, Laney so well knew, exceedingly fine, Harwood who, maybe, just maybe, ran it all, but somehow managed never to get his toe caught in it. Who managed, somehow, to be famous without seeming to be important, famous without being central to anything. Really, he'd never even gotten much attention, except when he'd split with Maria Paz, and even then it had been the Padanian star who'd made the top of every sequence, with Cody Harwood smiling from a series of sidebars, embedded hypertext lozenges: the beauty and this gentle-looking, secretive, pointedly uncharismatic billionaire.

"Hello," Laney says, his fingers finding the handle of a mechanical flashlight from Nepal, a crude thing, its tiny generator driven by a mechanism like a pair of spring-loaded pliers. Pumping it to life, he raises it, the faintly fluctuating beam finding the cardboard ceiling. Which is plastered, inch by inch, with dozens of stickers, small and rectangular, produced to order by a vending machine inside the station's west entrance: each one a different shot of the reclusive Harwood.

He can't remember going to the machine, executing a simple image search for Harwood, and paying to have these printed out, but he supposes he must have. Because he knows that that is where they are from. But neither can he remember peeling the adhesive backing from each One and sticking them up on the ceiling. But someone did. "I see you," Laney says and relaxes his hand, letting the dim beam brown and vanish.

15

4. FORMAL ABSENCES OF PRECIOUS THINGS

IN Market Street, the nameless man who haunts Laney's nodal configuration has just seen a girl.

Drowned down three decades, she steps fresh as creation from the bronze doors of some brokerage. And he remembers, in that instant, that she is dead, and he is not, and that this is another century, and this quite clearly another girl, some newly minted stranger, one with whom he will never speak.

And passing this one now, through a faint chromatic mist of incoming night, he bows his head some subtle increment in honor of that other, that earlier passing.

And sighs within his long coat, and the harness he wears beneath that: a taking in and giving up of one resigned breath, thronged around by the traders descending from their various places of employment. Who continue to emerge into the October street, toward drink or dinner or whatever home, whatever sleep, awaits them.

But now the one with whom he will not speak is gone as well, and he awash in some emotion, not loss exactly but a very particular awareness of his own duration in the world and in its cities, and this one most of all.

Beneath his right arm, reliably concealed, depends a knife that sleeps head down, like a vampire bat, honed to that edge required by surgeons, when surgeons cut with steel.

It is secured there with magnets set within a simple hilt of nickel silver. The blade's angled tip, recalling a wood carver's chisel, inclines toward the dark arterial pulse in the pit of his arm, as if reminding him that he too is only ever inches from that place the drowned girl went, so long ago, that timelessness. That other country, waiting.

He is by trade a keeper of the door to that country.

Drawn, the black blade becomes a key. When he holds it, he holds the wind in his hand.

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The door swings gently open.

But he does not draw it now, and the traders see only a gray-haired man, wolfishly professorial, in a coat of grayish green, the color of certain lichens, who blinks behind the fine gold rims of his small round glasses and raises his hand to halt a passing cab. Though somehow they do not, as they easily might, rush to claim it as their own, and the man steps past them, his cheeks seamed vertically in deep parentheses, as though it has been his habit frequently to smile. They do not see him smile.

THE Tao, he reminds himself, mired in traffic on Post Street, is older than God.

He sees a beggar seated beneath a jeweler's windows. In those windows are small empty pedestals, formal absences of precious things, locked away now for the night. The beggar has wrapped his legs and feet in brown paper tape, and the effect is startlingly medieval, as though someone has partially sculpted a knight from office materials. The trim calves, the tapered toes, an elegance calling out for ribbons. Above the tape, the man is a blur, a spastic scribble, his being abraded by concrete and misfortune. He has become the color of pavement, his very race in question. -

The cab lurches forward. The man in the loden coat reaches within it to adjust the knife against his ribs. He is left-handed, and he has thought often about such subtle polarities.

The girl who drowned so long ago has settled now, swept down in a swirl of toffee hair and less hurtful memories, to where his youth turns gently, in its accustomed tides, and he is more comfortable that way.

The past is past, the future unformed.



There is only the moment, and that is where he prefers to be.

And now he leans forward, to rap, once, upon the driver's tinted safety shield.

He asks to be taken to the bridge.

THE cab draws up before a rain-stained tumble of concrete tank traps, huge rhomboids streaked with rust, covered with the stylized initials of forgotten lovers.

This spot has a certain place in the local mythology of romance and has been the subject of any number of popular ballads.

"Pardon me, sir," says the cab driver, through several layers of protective plastic and digital translation, "but do you wish me to leave you here? This neighborhood is dangerous. I will be unable to wait for you." The question is rote, required by law against the possibility of litigation.

"Thank you. I will be in no danger." His English as formal as that of the translation program. He hears a musical rattle, his words rendered in some Asian language he doesn't recognize. The driver's brown eyes look back at him, mild and dispassionate, through goggles, shield; multiple layers of reflection.

The driver releases a magnetic lock.

The man opens the door and steps from the cab, straightening his coat. Above him, beyond the tank traps, lift the ragged, swooping terraces, the patchwork superstructure in which the bridge is wrapped. Some aspect of his mood lifts: it is a famous sight, a tourist's postcard, the very image of this city.

He closes the door, and the cab pulls away, leaving behind it the baking-sugar sweetness of exhausted gasohol.

He stands looking up at the bridge, at the silvered plywood of uncounted tiny dwellings, it reminds him of the favelas of Rio, though the scale of the parts is different, somehow. There is a fairy quality to the secondary construction, in contrast to the alternating swoop and verticality of the core structure's poetry of suspension. The individual shelters-if in fact they are shelters-are very small, space being at an absolute premium. He remembers seeing the entrance to the lower roadway flanked with guttering torches, though now, he knows, the residents largely cooperate with the city's air-pollution measures.

"Dancer?"

In concrete shadow she palms the tiny vial. Feral grimace intended to facilitate commerce. This drug causes the user's gums steadily to recede, producing in those few who survive its other rigors a characteristic and terrible smile.

He replies with his eyes, the force of his gaze punching through her intent as if through paper. Briefly in her eyes the light of panic, then she is gone.

Toffee hair swirls in the depths.

He looks down at the toes of his shoes. They are black and very precise, against the random mosaic of impacted litter.

He steps over an empty can of King Cobra and walks between the nearest rhomboids, toward the bridge.

These are not kindly shadows through which he moves, the legs of his narrow trousers like the blades of a deeper darkness. This is a lurking place, where wolves come down to wait for the weaker sheep. He has no fear of wolves, nor of any other predator the city might field, tonight or any other night. He simply observes these things, in the moment.

But now he allows himself to anticipate the sight that awaits him, past the last rhomboid: the

bridge's mad maw, the gateway to dream and memory, where sellers of fish spread their wares on beds of dirty ice. A perpetual bustle, a coming and going, that he honors as the city's very pulse.

And steps out, into unexpected light, faux-neon redline glare above a smooth sweep of Singaporean plastic. -

Memory is violated.

Someone brushes past him, too close, unseeing, and very nearly dies, the magnets letting go with that faint click that he feels more than hears. But he does not draw the blade fully, and the drunk staggers on, oblivious.

He reseats the hilt and stares bleakly at this latest imposition:

LUCKY DRAGON swirling in bland script up a sort of fin or pylon whose base seems comprised of dozens of crawling video screens.

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5. MARIACHI STATIC

'so she left you for this TV producer," the country singer said, slipping what was left of thirteen ounces of vodka back into the waistband of his indigo jeans, so new and taut that they creaked when he walked. The flat bottle's concavity rode there behind an antique buckle that resembled an engraved commemorative plaque, something someone had once won, Rydell supposed, for calf-roping or some similar competitive activity. Rydell powered the side window down, a crack, to let the fumes out.

"Production coordinator," Rydell said, wishing the vodka would put his passenger, whose name was Buell Creedmore, to sleep again. The man had spent the better part of their drive up the coast asleep, snoring lightly, and Rydell hadn't minded that. Creedmore was a friend, or maybe more of an acquaintance, of Durius Walker's. Durius had been a drug dealer before, in South Central, and had gotten addicted to the stuff. Now that he'd gotten his recovery, he spent a lot of time with other people who had drug problems, trying to help them. Rydell assumed Buell Creedmore was one of those, though as far he could see the man was just basically a drunk.

"Bet that one burned your ass," Creedmore said, his eyes slit with spirits. He was a small man, lightly built, but roped with the sort of whipcord muscle that had never seen the inside of a gym. Ditchdigger muscle. What Rydell took to be several layers of artificial tan were wearing off over an inherent pallor. Bleached hair with dark roots was slicked straight back with some product that kept it looking like he'd just stepped out of a shower. He hadn't, though, and he was sweating in spite of the air-conditioning.

"Well," Rydell said, "I figured it's her call."

"What kind of bleeding-ass liberal bullshit is that?" Creedmore asked. He pulled the bottle from his waistband and eyed the remaining liquor narrowly, as though he were a carpenter checking a level. It seemed to fail to meet his standards just then, so he returned it to its

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place behind the commemorative plaque. "What kind of man are you, anyway?"

Rydell briefly entertained the idea of pulling over on the margin,

beating Creedmore senseless, then leaving him there at the side of the five, to get up to San Francisco as best he could. But he didn't and, in fact, said nothing.

"Pussy-assed attitude like that, that's what's wrong with America today."

Rydell thought about illegal choke holds, brief judicious constriction of the carotid artery. Maybe Creedmore wouldn't even remember if Rydell put one on him. But it wouldn't keep him under, not that long anyway, and they'd taught Rydell in Knoxville that you couldn't count on how a drunk would react to anything.

"Hey, Buell," Rydell asked, "whose car is this anyway?"

Creedmore fell silent. Grew, Rydell felt, restive.

Rydell had wondered from the start if the car might not be stolen. He hadn't wanted to think about it really, because he needed the ride up to NoCal. A plane ticket would've had to come out of his severance from the Lucky Dragon store, and he had to be extra careful with that until he determined whether or not there was anything to this story of 'Yamazaki's, that there was money for him to earn, up in San Francisco.

Yamazaki was deep, Rydell told himself. He'd never actually figured out what it was that Yamazaki did. Sort of a freelance Japanese anthropologist who studied Americans, as near as Rydell could tell. Maybe the Japanese equivalent of the Americans Lucky Dragon hired to tell them they needed a curb check. Good man, Yamazaki, but not easy to say where he was coming from. The last time he'd heard from Yamazaki, he'd wanted Rydell to find him a netrunner, and Rydell had sent him this guy named Laney, a quantitative researcher who'd just quit Slitscan, and had been moping around the Chateau, running up a big bill. Laney had taken the job, had gone over to Tokyo, and Rydell had subsequently gotten fired for, they called it, fraternizing with the guests. That was basically how Rydell had wound up working night security in a nience store, because he'd tried to help Yamazaki.

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Now he was driving this Hawker-Aichi roadster up the Five, very definitely the designated driver, no idea what was waiting for him up there, and halfway wondering if he weren't about to transport a stolen vehicle across a state line. And all because Yamazaki said that that same Laney, over in Tokyo, wanted to hire him to do some fieldwork. That was what Yamazaki called it, "fieldwork."

And that, after he'd talked with Durius, had been enough for Rydell.

The Lucky Dragon had been starting to get old for Rydell. He hadn't ever gotten along with Mr. Park too well, and when he'd take his break, out back, after the curb check every morning, he'd started to feel really down. The patch of ground the Lucky Dragon had been set down on was sort of scooped out of the foot of the hillside there, and at some point the exposed, nearly vertical cut had been quake-proofed with some kind of weird, gray, rubbery polymer, a perpetual semi-liquid that knit the soil behind it together and trapped whatever was thrown or pressed against it in a grip like summer tar. The polymer was studded with hubcaps, because the place had been a car lot once. Hubcaps and bottles and more nameless junk. In the funk that had started to come over him, out back there on his breaks, he'd collect a handful of rocks and stand there, throwing them, as hard as he could, into the polymer. They didn't make much of a noise when they hit, and in fact they vanished entirely. Just ripped straight into it and then it sealed over behind them, like nothing had happened. And Rydell had started to see that as emblematic of broader things, how he was like those rocks, in his passage through the world, and how the polymer was like life, sealing over behind him, never leaving any trace at all that he'd been there.

And when Durius would come back to take his own break and tell Rydell it was time to get back out front, sometimes he'd find Rydell that way, throwing those rocks.

"Hit you a hubcap, man," Durius would advise, "break you a bottle."

But Rydell hadn't wanted to.

And when Rydell had told Durius about Yamazaki and Laney and some money, maybe, to be made up in San Francisco, Durius had listened carefully, asking a few questions, then advised Rydell to go for it.

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"What about job security?" Rydell had asked. "Job security? Doing this shit? Are you crazy?" "Benefits," Rydell countered.

"You tried to actually use the medical coverage they give you here?"

Gotta go to Tiajuana to get it."

"\Vell," Rydell had said, "I don't like to just quit."

"That's 'cause you got fired from every last job you ever had," Durius had explained. "I seen your résumé."

So Rydell had given Mr. Park written notice, and Mr. Park had promptly fired him, citing numerous violations of Lucky Dragon policy on Rydell's part, up to and including offering medical aid to the victim of a one-car collision on Sunset, an act which Mr. Park insisted could have involved Lucky Dragon's parent corporation in costly insurance litigation.

"But she walked in here under her own power," Rydell had protested. "All I did was offer her a bottle of iced tea and call the traffic cops."

"Smart lawyer claim ice tea put her in systemic shock."

"Shock my butt."

But Mr. Park had known that if he fired Rydell, the last paycheck would be smaller than if Rydell quit.

Praisegod, who could get all emotional if someone was leaving, had cried and given him a big hug, and then, as he'd left the store, she'd slipped him a pair of Brazilian GPS sunglasses, with inbuilt phone and AM-FM radio, about the most expensive item Lucky Dragon carried. Rydell hadn't wanted to take them, because he knew they'd turn up missing on the next inventory.

"Fuck the inventory," Praisegod had said.

Back in his room over Mrs. Siekevitz's garage, six blocks away and just below Sunset, Rydell had stretched out on his narrow bed and tried to get the radio in the glasses to work. All he'd been able to get, though, was static, faintly inflected with what might have been mariachi music.

He'd done a little better with the GPS, which had a rocker keypad built into the right temple. The fifteen-channel receiver seemed to have really good lock-on, but the tutorial seemed to have been translated

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badly, and all Rydell could do was zoom in and out of what he quickly realized was a street map of Rio, not LA. Still, he'd thought, taking the glasses off, he'd get the hang of it. Then the phone in the left temple had beeped, so he'd put the glasses back on.

"Yeah?"

"Rydell, hey."

"Hey, Durius."

"You want a ride up to NoCal tomorrow in a nice new car?"

"W/ho's going?"

"Name of Creedmore. Knows a guy I know in the program."

Rydell had had an uncle who was a Mason, and this program Durius belonged to reminded him of that.

"Yeah? Well, I mean, is he okay?"

"Prob'ly not," Durius had said, cheerfully, "so he needs a driver. This three-week-old 'lectric needs to get ferried up there though, and he says it's fine to drive. You used to be a driver, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it's free. This Creedmore, he'll pay for the charge."

Which was how Rydell came to find himself, now, driving a Hawker-Aichi two-seater, one of those low-slung wedges of performance materials that probably weighed, minus its human cargo, about as much as a pair of small motorcycles. There didn't seem to be any metal involved at all, just streamlined foam-core sandwiches reinforced with carbon fiber. The motor was in the back, and the fuel cells were distributed through the foam sandwiches that simultaneously passed for chassis and bodywork. Rydell didn't want to know what happened if you hit something, driving a rig like this.

It was damn near silent though, handled beautifully, and went like a bat once you got it up to speed. Something about it reminded Rydell of a recumbent bicycle he'd once ridden, except you didn't have to pedal.

"You never did tell me whose car this is," Rydell reminded Creedmore, who'd just downed the last two fingers of his vodka.

"This friend of mine," Creedmore said, powering down the window on his side and tossing out the empty bottle.

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"Hey," Rydell said, "that's a ten-thousand-dollar fine, they catch you:

"They can kiss our asses good-bye, is what they can do," Creedmore said. "Sons of bitches," he added, then closed his eyes and slept.

Rydell found himself starting to think about Chevette again. Regretting he'd ever let the singer get him on the topic. He knew he didn't want to think about that.

Just drive, he told himself,

On a brown hillside, off to his right, a wind farm's white masts. Late afternoon sunlight.

Just drive.

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6. SILENCIO

SILENCIO gets to carry. lie's the smallest, looks almost like a kid. He doesn't use, and if the cops grab him, he can't talk. Or anyway about the stuff.

Silencio has been following Raton and Playboy around for a while now, watching them use, watching them get the money they need in order to keep using. Raton gets mean when he's needing to use, and Silencio's learned to keep back from him then, out of range of feet and fists.

Raton has a long, narrow skull and wears contacts with vertical irises, like a snake. Silencio wonders if Raton is supposed to look like a rat who's eaten a snake, and now maybe the snake is looking out through its eyes. Playboy says Raton is a pinche Chupacabra from Watsonville and they all look this way.

Playboy is the biggest, his bulk wrapped in a long, formal topcoat worn over jeans and old work boots. He has a Pancho Villa mustache, yellow aviator glasses, a black fedora. He is kinder to Silencio, buys him burritos from the stalls, water, cans of pop, one time a big smooth drink made from fruit.

Silencio wonders if maybe Playboy is his father. He doesn't know who his father might be. His mother is crazy, back in los projectos. He doesn't think Playboy is his father really, because he remembers how he met Playboy in the market on Bryant Street, and that was just an accident, but sometimes he wonders anyway, when Playboy buys him food.

Silencio sits watching Raton and Playboy use, here behind this empty stall with its smell of apples. Raton has a little flashlight in his mouth so he can see what he is doing. It is the black tonight, and Raton is cutting the little plastic tube with the special knife, its handle longer than its short curved blade. The three of them are sitting on plastic crates.

Raton and Playboy use the black two, maybe three times in a day and a night. Three times with the black, then they must use the white

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as well. The white is more expensive, hut too much black and they start to talk fast and maybe see people who are not there. "Speaking with Jesus," Playboy calls that, hut the white he calls "walking with the king." But it is not walking: white brings stillness, silence, sleep. Silencio prefers the white nights.

Silencio knows that they buy the white from a black man, but the black from a white man, and he

assumes this is the mystery depicted in the picture Raton wears on the chain around his neck: the black and the white teardrops swirling together to make roundness; in the white teardrop a small round of black, in the black a small round of white.

To get the money they talk to people, usually in dark places, so the people are frightened. Sometimes Raton shows them a different knife, while Playboy holds their arms so they cannot move. The money is in little tabs of plastic printed with pictures that move. Silencio would like to keep these when the money is gone out of them, but this is not allowed. Playboy throws them away, after wiping them carefully. He drops them down the slots beside the street. He does not want his fingers to leave marks on them. Sometimes Raton hurts the people, so that they will tell the charms that make money come from the moving pictures. The charms are names, letters, numbers. Silencio knows every charm that Raton and Playboy have learned, but they do not know this; if he told them, they might be angry.

The three of them sleep in a room in the Mission. Playboy pulls the mattress from the bed and puts it on the floor. Playboy sleeps there, Raton on the other part of the bed. Silencio sleeps on the floor.

Now Raton has cut the tube and puts half of the black on Playboy's finger. Playboy has licked his finger so the black will stick. Playboy puts the finger in his mouth and rubs the black against his gums. Silencio wonders what it tastes like, but he does not ever wish to speak with Jesus. Now Raton is rubbing his own gums with black, the flashlight forgotten in his other hand. Raton and Playboy look foolish doing this, but it does not make Silencio laugh. Soon they will want to use again, and the black gives them energy to get the money they will need. Silencio knows there is now no money, because they have not eaten since yesterday.

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Usually they find people in the dark places between the big shapes at the foot of Bryant Street, but now Raton thinks the police are watching those places. Raton has told Silencio that the police can see in the dark. Silencio has looked at the eyes of the police, passing in their cars, and wondered how they can see in the dark.

But tonight Raton has led them out, onto the bridge where people live, and he says they will find money here. Playboy has said he does not like the bridge, because the bridge people are pinche; they do not like outsiders working here. Raton says he feels lucky.

Raton tosses the empty vial into the darkness, and Silencio hears it hit something, a single small click.

Raton's snake-eyes are wide with the black. He runs his hand back through his hair and gestures. Playboy and Silencio follow him.

SILENCIO passes the bodega for the second time, watching the man in his long coat, where he sits at his small white table, drinking coffee.

Raton says it is a fine coat. See the old man's glasses, says Raton:

they are made of gold. Silencio supposes Playboy's are made of gold too, but Playboy's have yellow glass. The man's are plain. He has gray hair cut very short and deep lines in his cheeks. He sits alone, looking at the smallest cup of coffee Silencio has ever seen. A doll's cup.

They have followed the old man here. He has walked in the direction of Treasure Island. This part of the bridge is for the tourists, Playboy says. There are bodegas, shops with glass windows, many people walking.

Now they are waiting to see which way the old man goes when he finishes his little coffee. If he walks back, toward Bryant, it will be difficult. If he goes on, toward Treasure, Raton and Playboy will be happy.

It is Silencio's job to tell them when the man leaves.

Silencio feels the man's eyes on him as he passes, but the man is only watching the crowd.

SILENCIO watches Raton and Playboy follow the man toward Treasure Island.

They are in the bridge's lower level now, and Silencio keeps looking

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up to see the bottom of the upper deck, its paint peeling. It reminds him of a wall in los projectos. There are only a few bridge people here. Only a few lights. The man walks easily. He does not hurry. Silencio feels the man is only walking; he has nowhere to go. Silencio feels the man needs nothing: he is not looking for money, to eat or to use. This must be because he already has the money he needs to eat or to use, and this is why Raton and Playboy have chosen him, because they see he has the money they need.

Raton and Playboy keep pace with the man, but they hang back. They do not walk together. Playboy has his hands in the pockets of his big coat. He has taken off his yellow glasses and his eyes are dark-circled with the look of those who have used the black. He looks sad when he is going to get the money to use. He looks like he is paying very close attention.

Silencio follows them, looking back sometimes. Now it is his job to tell them if someone comes.

The man stops, looking into the window of a shop. Silencio steps behind a cart piled with rolls of plastic, as he sees Raton and Playboy

step behind other things, in case the man looks back. The man doesn't, but Silencio wonders if the man is watching the street in the glass. Silencio has done this himself.

The man does not look back. He stands with his hands in the pockets of his long coat, looking into the glass.

Silencio unbuttons his jeans and quietly waters the rolls of plastic, careful that it makes no sound. As he buttons his jeans, he sees the man step away from the window, still moving toward Treasure, where Playboy says there are people who live like animals. Silencio, who knows only dogs and pigeons and gulls, has a picture in his head of dog-toothed men with wings. When Silencio has a picture in his head, the picture doesn't go away.

Stepping from behind the cart, as Raton and Playboy step out to follow the man, Silencio sees the man turn right. Gone. The man is gone. Silencio blinks, rubs his knuckles against his eyes, looks again. Raton and Playboy are walking faster now. They are not trying to hide. Silencio walks faster too not to be lost and amves at the place where the man

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turned. Baton's narrow back goes around that corner, after Playboy, and is gone.

Silencio stops. Feels his heart beating. Steps forward and looks around the corner.

It is a space where a shop is meant to be, but there is no shop. Sheets of plastic hang down from above. Pieces of wood, more rolls of plastic. He sees the man.

The man stands at the back of the space and looks from Playboy to Raton to Silencio. Looks through the round pieces of glass. Silencio feels how still the man is.

Playboy is walking toward the man, his boots stepping over the wood, the plastic. Playboy says nothing. His hands are still in the pockets of his coat. Raton is not moving but is ready to, and then he takes the knife from where he keeps it and opens it, flicking his wrist that way he practices, letting the man see it.

The man's face does not change when he sees it, and Silencio remembers other faces, how they changed when they saw Raton's knife.

Now Playboy steps down from the last of the wood, his hands coming out to take the man by the arms and spin him. That is how it is done.

Silencio sees the man move but only, it seems, a little.

Everything stops.

Silencio knows that he has seen the man's left hand reach into the long coat, which was buttoned before but now is not. But somehow he has not seen that hand return, and still it has. The man stands with his fist against Playboy's chest, just at the center. Pressing the thumb of his closed fist against Playboy's coat. And Playboy is not moving. His hands have stopped, almost touching the man, fingers spread, but he is not moving.

And then Silencio sees Playboy's fingers close, on nothing, and open. And the man's right hand comes up to push Playboy back, and the thin black thing is pulled out of Playboy's chest, and Silencio wonders how long it could have been hidden there, and Playboy falls back over the wood and the rolls of plastic.

Silencio hears someone say pinche madre and this is Raton. When Raton uses the black and fights, he is very fast and you do not know

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what he will do; he hurts people and then shakes, laughing, sucking air through his mouth. Now he comes over the rolls of plastic like he is flying, with his knife shining in his hand, and Silencio sees the picture of a man with dog teeth and wings, and Raton's teeth are like that, his snake eyes wide.

And the black thing, like a long wet thumb, goes through Raton's neck. And everything stops again.

Then Raton tries to speak, and blood comes on his lips. He swings his knife at the man, but the knife cuts only air, and Raton's fingers can no longer hold it.

The man pulls the black thing from Raton's throat. Raton sways on loose knees, and Silencio thinks of how it is when Raton uses too much white, then tries to walk. Raton puts his hands up to cover his throat on both sides. His mouth moves, but no words come out. One of Raton's snake eyes falls out. The eye behind it is round and brown.

Raton falls down on his knees, with his hands still on his throat. His snake eye and his brown eye look up at the man, and Silencio feels they look from different distances, seeing different things.

Then Raton makes a small, soft sound in his throat and falls over backward, still on his knees, so that he lies on his back with his knees spread wide and his legs twisted back, and Silencio watches Raton's gray pants go dark between his legs.

Silencio looks at the man. Who is looking at him.

Silencio looks at the black knife, how it rests in the man's hand. He feels that the knife holds the man. That the knife may decide to move.

Then the man moves the knife. Its point is almost square, like the real point has been snapped off. It only moves a little. Silencio understands this means he must move.

He steps sideways, so the man can see him.

The point moves again. Silencio understands.

Closer.

ALL TOMORROW S PARTIES 31

I

7. SHAREHOUSE

LEAVE a house empty in Malibu, Tessa told Chevette, and you get the kind of people come down from the hills and barbecue dogs in your fireplace.

Hard to get rid of, those kind of people, and locks wouldn't keep them out. That was why the people who used to live here, before the Spill, were willing to rent them out to students.



Tessa was Australian, a media sciences student at USC and the reason Chevette was out here now, couching it.

Well, that and the fact that she, Chevette, didn't have a job or any money, now she'd split with Carson.

Tessa said Carson was a piece of work.

And look where it had all gotten her, Chevette thought, pumping her way up the trainer's illusion of a Swiss mountain road and trying to ignore the reek of moldy laundry from the other side of the drywall partition. Someone had left a wet load in the machine, probably last Tuesday, before the fire, and now it was rotting in there.

Which was too bad, because that made it hard to get into riding the trainer. You could configure it for a dozen different bikes, and as many terrains, and Chevette liked this one, an old-fashioned steel-frame ten-speed you could take up this mountain road, wildflowers blurring in your peripheral vision. Her other favorite was a balloon-tired cruiser you rode along a beach, which was good for Malibu because you couldn't ride along the beach, not unless you wanted to climb over rusty razor wire and ignore the biohazard warnings every hundred feet.

But that gym-sock mildew reek kept catching in the back of her sinuses, nothing alpine meadow about it at all, telling her she was broke and out of work and staying in a sharehouse in Malibu.

The house was right on the beach, with the wire about thirty feet out from the deck. Nobody knew exactly what it was that had spilled, because the government wasn't telling. Something off a freighter, some people said, and some said it was a bulkifter that had come down in a

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storm. The government was using nanobots to clean it up though; everybody agreed on that, and that was why they said you shouldn't walk out there.

Chevette had found the trainer her second day here, and she'd ride two or three times a day or, like now, late at night. Nobody else seemed to be interested in it or ever to come into this little room off the garage, next to the laundry room, and that was fine with her. Living on the bridge, she'd been used to people being around, but everybody had always had something to do up there. The sharehouse was full of USC media sciences students, and they got on her nerves. They sat around accessing media all day and talking about it, and nothing ever seemed to get done.

She felt sweat run between the headband of the interface visor and her forehead, then down the side of her nose. She was getting a good bum on now; she could feel groups of muscles working in her back, ones that didn't usually get it.

The trainer did a better job on the bike's chartreuse lacquer than on the shift levers, she noticed. They were sort of cartoony, with road surface blurring past beneath them in generic texture map. The clouds would be generic too, if she looked up; just basic fractal stuff.

She was definitely not too happy with being here, or with her life in general at this point. She'd been talking with Tessa about that after dinner. Well, arguing about it.

Tessa wanted to make this documentary. Chevette knew what a documentary was because Carson had worked for a channel, Real One, that only just ran those, and Chevette had had to watch about a thousand of them. As a result, she thought, she now knew a whole lot about nothing in particular, and nothing in particular about whatever it was she was actually supposed to know. Like what to do now that her life had gotten her to this place.

Tessa wanted to take her back up to San Francisco, but Chevette had mixed feelings. The documentary Tessa wanted to make was about interstitial communities, and Tessa said Chevette had lived in one, because Chevette had lived on the bridge. Interstitial meant in between things, and Chevette figured that that made a kind of sense, anyway.

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And she did miss it up there, miss the people, but she didn't like thinking about it. Because of how things had gone since she'd come down here, and because she hadn't kept in touch.

Just pump, she told herself, cresting the illusion of a rise. Shift again. Pump harder. The road surface started to look glassy in places, because she was overtaking the simulator's refresh rate.

"Zoom in." Tessa's voice, in miniature.

"Shit," Chevette said. Flipping up the visor.

The camera platform, like a helium-filled cushion of silver Mylar, at eye level in the open doorway. Kid's toy with little caged propellers, controlled from Tessa's bedroom. Ring of light reflected in the lens housing as it extruded, zooming.

The propellers blurred to gray, brought it forward through the door, stopped; blurred to gray again, reversing. Rocked there, till it steadied on the ballast of the underslung camera. God's Little Toy, Tessa called her silver balloon. Disembodied eye. She sent it on slow cruises through the house, mining for image fragments. Everyone who lived here was constantly taping everyone else, except Iain, and Iain wore a motion-capture suit, even slept in it, and was recording every move he ever made.

The trainer, performance machine that it was, sensed Chevette's loss of focus and sighed, slowing, complex hydraulics beginning to deconfigure. The narrow wedge of seat between her thighs widened, spreading to support her butt in beach-bike mode. The handlebars unfolded, upward, raising her hands. She kept on pedaling, but the trainer was winding her down now.

"Sorry." Tessa's voice from the tiny speaker. But Chevette knew she wasn't.

"Me too," Chevette said, as the pedals made a final arc, locking for dismount. She swung the bars up and stepped down, batting at the platform, spoiling Tessa's shot.

"Une petite problemette. Concerns you, I think."

"What?"

"Come into the kitchen and I'll show you." Tessa reversed one set of props, turning the platform on its axis. Then two forward and it sailed back through the doorway, into the garage. Chevette followed it, pulling a towel from a nail driven into the doorjamb. Closing the door behind her. Should've had it closed when she was riding, but she'd forgotten. God's Little Toy couldn't open doors. The towel needed washing. A little stiff but it didn't smell bad. She used it to wipe sweat from her pits and chest. She overtook the balloon, ducked under it, entered the kitchen.

Sensed roaches scurrying for cover. Every flat surface, except the floor, was solid with unwashed dishes, empties, pieces of recording equipment. They'd had a party, the day before the fire, and nobody had cleaned up yet.

No light here now but a couple of telltales and the methodical flicker as the security system flipped from one external night-vision camera to the next. 4:32 A.M. showing in the corner of the screen. They kept maybe half the security shut down because people were in and out all day, and there was always someone there.

Whir of the platform as Tessa brought it up behind her.

"What is it?" Chevette asked.

'Watch the driveway."

Chevette moved closer to the screen The deck, slung out over the sand...

The space between the house and the next one. The driveway. With Carson's car sitting there.

"Shit," Chevette said, as the Lexus was replaced with the between-houses view on the other side, then a view from a camera under the deck.

"Been there since 3:24."

The deck, ..

"How'd he find me?"

Between houses...

"Web search, probably. Image matching. Someone was uploading Pictures from the party. You were in some of them."

The Lexus in the driveway. Nobody in it.

"Where is he)

Between the houses...

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Under the deck...

"No idea," Tessa said.

"Where are you?"

Deck again. Watch this and you start to see things that aren't there. She looked down at the mess on the counter and saw a foot-long butcher knife lying in what was left of a chocolate cake, the blade clotted with darkness.

"Upstairs," Tessa said. "Best you come up."

Chevette felt suddenly cold in her bike shorts and T-shirt. Shivered. Left the kitchen for the living room. Pre-dawn gray through walls of glass. English lain stretched, snoring lightly, on a long leather couch, a red LED on his motion-capture suit winking over his sternum. The lower half of Lain's face never seemed to be in focus to Chevette; teeth uneven, different colors, like he was lightly pixilated. Mad, Tessa said. And never changed the suit he slept in now; kept it laced corset-tight.

Muttered in his sleep, turning his back to her as she passed.

She stood with her face a few inches from the glass, feeling the chill that radiated from it. Nothing on the deck but a ghostly white chair, empty beer cans. Where was he?

The stair to the second floor was a spiral, wedge-shaped sections of very thick wood spun out from an iron shaft. She took that now, the carbon-fiber pedal clips set into the soles of her shoes clicking with each step.

Tessa waited at the top, slim blonde shadow bulked in a puffy coat Chevette knew was burnt-orange in daylight. "The van's parked next door," she said. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Up the coast. My grant came through. I was up talking to Mum, telling her that, when the boyfriend arrived."

"Maybe he just wants to talk," Chevette said. She'd told Tessa about him hitting her that time. Now she half regretted it.

"I don't think that's a chance you want to take. We're away, right? See? I'm packed." Bumping her hip against the bulging rectangle of a gear bag slung from her shoulder.

"I'm not," Chevette said.

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"You never unpacked, remember?" Which was true. "We'll go out over the deck, go 'round past Barbara's, get in the van: we're gone."

"No," Chevette said, "let's wake everybody up, turn on the outside lights. What can he do?"

"I don't know what he can do. But he can always come back. He knows you're here now. You can't stay."

"I don't know for sure he'd try to hurt me, Tessa."

"Want to be with him?"

"Did you invite him here?"

"No."

"Want to see him?" Hesitation. "No."

"Then get your bag." Tessa pushed past, leading with the gear bag. "Now," she said, over her shoulder, descending.

Chevette opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. Turned, felt her way along the corridor, to the door to her room. A closet, this had been, though bigger inside than some houses on the bridge. A frosted dome came on in the ceiling when you opened the door. Someone had cut a thick slab of foam so that it fit the floor, down half the length of the narrow, windowless space, between an elaborate shoe rack of some pale tropical hardwood and a baseboard of the same stuff. Chevette had never seen anything made of wood that was put together that well. The whole house was like that, under the sharehouse dirt, and she'd wondered who'd lived in it before, and how they'd felt about having to leave. Whoever it was, to judge by the rack, had had more shoes than Chevette had owned in her life.

Her knapsack sat at the end of the narrow foam bed. Like Tessa had said, still packed. Open, though. The mesh bag with her toilet stuff and makeup beside it. Skinner's old biker jacket hung above it, shoulders set broad and confident on a fancy wooden hanger. Black once, its horsehide had gone mostly gray with wear and time. Older than she was, he'd said. A pair of new black jeans were draped over the rod beside it. She pulled these down and worked her feet out of the riding shoes. Got the Jeans on over her shorts. A black sweatshirt from the open mouth of the

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knapsack. Smell of clean cotton as she pulled it over her head; she'd washed everything, at Carson's, when she'd decided she was leaving. She crouched at the foot of the foam, lacing up lug-soled high-tops, no socks. Stood and took Skinner's jacket from the hanger. It was heavy, as if it retained the weight of horses. She felt safer in it. Remembering how she'd always ridden with it in San Francisco, in spite of the weight. Like armor.

"Come on." Tessa, calling softly from the living room.

Tessa had come over to Carson's with another girl, South African, the day they'd first met, to interview him about his work at Real One. Something had clicked; Chevette smiling back at the skinny blonde whose features were all a little too big for her face; who looked great anyway and laughed and was so smart.

Too smart, Chevette thought, stuffing the mesh bag into the knapsack, because now she was on her way to San Francisco with her, and she wasn't sure that was such a good idea.

"Come on."

Bent to stuff the mesh bag into the knapsack, buckle it. Put that over her shoulder. Saw the riding shoes. No time now. Stepped out and closed the closet door.

Found Tessa in the living room, making sure the alarms on the sliding glass doors were deactivated.

lain grunted, thrashing out at something in a dream.

Tessa tugged one of the doors open, just wide enough to get out, its frame scraping in the corroded track. Chevette felt cold sea air. Tessa stepped out, reached back through to pull her gear bag out.

Chevette stepped through, knapsack rattling against the frame. Something brushed her hair, Tessa reaching out to capture God's Little Toy there. She handed the inflated platform to Chevette, who

took it by one of the propeller cages; it felt weightless and awkward and too easy to break. Then she and Tessa both grabbed the door handle one-handed, and together they pulled it shut against the friction of the track.

She straightened, turned, looked out at the lightening gray that was all she could see of the ocean now, past the black coils of razor wire, and felt a kind of vertigo, as though for just a second she stood at the very

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edge of the turning world. She'd felt that before, on the bridge, up on the roof of Skinner's place, high up over everything; just standing there in a fog that socketed the bay, throwing every sound back at you from a new and different distance.

Tessa took the four steps down to the beach, and Chevette heard the sand squeak under her shoes. It was that quiet. She shivered. Tessa crouched, checking under the deck. Where was he?

And they never saw him, not there and not then, as they trudged through the sand, past old Barbara's deck, where the wide windows were all blanked with quilted foil and sun-faded cardboard. Barbara was an owner from before the Spill, and not often seen. Tessa had tried to cultivate her, wanted her in her documentary, an interstitial community of one, become a hermit in her house, holed up amid sharehouses. Chevette wondered if Barbara was watching them go, past her house and around between it and the next, back to where Tessa's van waited, almost cubical, its paintwork scoured with windblown sand.

All this more dreamlike somehow with each step she took, and now Tessa was unlocking the van, after checking through the window with a flashlight to see he wasn't waiting there, and when Chevette climbed

up the passenger side and settled in the creaking seat, blanket laced over ripped plastic with bungee cord, she knew that she 'was going.

Somewhere.

And that was okay with her.

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8. THE HOLE  
DRIFT.

Laney is in drift.

That is how he does it. It is a matter, he knows, of letting go. He admits the random. The danger of admitting the random is that the random may admit the Hole.

The Hole is that which Laney's being is constructed around. The Hole is absence at the fundamental core. The Hole is that into which he has always stuffed things: drugs, career, women, information.

Mainly.-lately-information.

Information. This flow. This. . . corrosion.

Drift.

ONCE, before he'd come to Tokyo, Laney woke in the bedroom of his suite in the Chateau.

It was dark, only a shush of tires up from Sunset; muffled drumming of a helicopter, hunting the hills behind.

And the Hole right there, beside him in the lonely queen-size expanse of his bed.

The Hole, up close and personal.

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9. SWEEP SECOND

pRIGHT pyramids of fruit, beneath buzzing neon.

• He watches as the boy drains a second liter of the pulped drink. swallowing the entire contents of the tall plastic cup in an unbroken stream, with no apparent effort.

"You should not drink cold things so quickly."

The boy looks at him. There is nothing between the boy's gaze and his being: no mask. No personality. He is not, apparently, deaf, because he has understood the suggestion of the cold drink. But there is no evidence, as yet, that he is capable of speech.

"Do you speak Spanish?" This in the language of Madrid, unspoken for many years.

The boy places the empty cup beside the first one and looks at the man. There is no fear in him. 'The men who attacked me they were your friends~ Raising an eyebrow

Nothing at all

'How old are yo&

Older, the man guesses, than his emotional age. Touches of razored stubble at the corners of his upper lip. Brown eyes clear and placid.

The boy looks at the two empty plastic cups on the worn steel counter. He looks up at the man.

'Another? You wish to drink another~ The boy nods.

The man signals to the Italian behind the counter. He turns back ~: to the boy.

Do you have a name?"

Nothing. Nothing moves in the brown eyes. The boy regards him as calmly as might some placid dog.

The silver pulping machine chugs briefly amid the stacked fruit. Shaved ice whirs into the pulp.

The Italian transfers the drink to a plastic cup and places it before the boy. The boy looks at it

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The man shifts on the creaking metal stool, his long coat draped like resting wings. Beneath his arm, carefully cleaned now, the knife in its magnetic sheath swings free, sleeping.

The boy raises the cup, opens his mouth, and pours the thick sludge of ice and fruit pulp down his throat.

Defective, the man thinks. Syndromes of the city's tragic womb. The signal of life distorted by chemicals, by starvation, by blows of fortune. Yet he, like everyone else, like the man himself, is exactly where, exactly what, exactly when he is meant to be. It is the Tao: darkness within darkness.

The boy places the empty cup beside the other two.

The man straightens his legs, stands, buttoning his coat.

The boy reaches out. Two fingers touch the watch the man wears on his left wrist. He opens his mouth as if to speak.

"The time?"

Something moves in the affectless brown depths of the boy's eyes. The watch is very old, purchased from a specialist dealer in a fortified arcade in Singapore. It is military ordnance. It speaks to the man of battles fought in another day. It reminds him that every battle will one day be as obscure, and that only the moment matters, matters absolutely.

The enlightened warrior rides into battle as if to a loved one's funeral, and how could it be otherwise?

The boy leans forward now, the thing behind his eyes seeing only the watch.

The man thinks of the two he leaves tonight on the bridge. Hunters of sorts, now they will hunt no more. And this one, following them. To pick up scraps.

"You like this?"

Nothing registers. Nothing breaks the concentration, the link between that which has surfaced behind the boy's eyes and the austere black face of the watch.

The Tao moves.

The man unfastens the steel buckle that secures the strap. He hands the watch to the boy. He does this without thought. He does this

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with the same unthinking certainty with which, earlier, he killed. He does this because it fits, is fitting; because his life is alignment with the Tao.

There is no need to say good-bye.

He leaves the boy lost in contemplation of the black face, the hands.

He leaves now. The moment in balance.

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I

10. AMERICAN ACROPOLIS

RYD ELI managed to get part of the San Francisco grid on the Brazilian glasses coming in, but he still needed Creedmore to tell him how to get to the garage where they were leaving the Hawker-Aichi. Creedmore, when Rydell woke him for that, seemed uncertain as to who Rydell was, but did a fairly good job of covering it up. He did know, after consulting a folded business card he took from the watch pocket of his jeans, exactly where they should go.

It was an old building, in the kind of area where buildings like that were usually converted to residential, but the frequency of razor wire suggested that this was not yet gentrified territory. There were a couple of Universal square badges controlling entry, a firm that mostly did low-level industrial security. They were set up in an office by the gate, watching Real One on a flatscreen propped up on a big steel desk that looked like someone had gone over every square inch of it with a ball peen hammer. Cups of take-out coffee and white foam food containers. It all felt kind of homey to Rydell, who figured they'd be going off shift soon, seven in the morning. Wouldn't be a bad job, as bad jobs went.

"Delivering a drive-away," Rydell told them.

There was a deer on the flatscreen. Behind it the familiar shapes of the derelict skyscrapers of downtown Detroit. The Real One logo in the lower right corner gave him the context: one of those nature shows.

They gave him a pad to punch in the reservation number on Creedmore's paper, and it came up paid. Had him sign on the pad, there. Told him to put it in slot twenty-three, level six. He left the office, got back into the Hawker, swung up the ramp, wet tires squealing on concrete.

Creedmore was conducting a grooming operation in the illuminated mirror behind the passenger-side sun visor. This consisted of running his fingers repeatedly back through his hair, wiping them on his jeans, then rubbing his eyes. He considered the results. "Time for a drink," he said to the reflection of his bloodshot eyes.

~&  
"Seven in the morning," Rydell said.

"What I said," Creedmore said, flipping the visor back up. Rydell found the number twenty-three painted on the concrete,

between two vehicles shrouded in white dustcovers. He edged the Hawker carefully in and started shutting it down. He was able to do this without having to go to the help menu. Creedmore got out and went over to urinate on somebody's tire.

Rydell checked the interior to see they hadn't left anything, undid

-- the harness, leaned over to pull the passenger-side door shut, popped the trunk, opened the driver-side door, checked that he had the keys,

~ got out, closed the door.

"Hey, Buell. Your friend's gonna pick this up, right?" Rydell was pulling his duffel out of the Hawker-Aichi's weirdly narrow trunk, a space suggestive of the interior of a child's coffin. There was nothing else in there, so he assumed Creedmore was traveling without luggage.

"No," Creedmore said, "they gonna leave it up here get all dusty."

He was buttoning his fly.

"So I give the keys to those Universal boys downstairs?"

"No," Creedmore said, "you give 'em to me."

"I signed," Rydell said.

"Give 'em to me."

"Buell, this vehicle is my responsibility now. I've signed it in here."

He closed the trunk, activated the security systems.

"Please step back," said the I-Tawker-Aichi. "Respect my boundaries as I respect yours." It had a beautiful, strangely genderless voice, gentle but firm.

Rydell took a step back, another.

'°]That's my friend's car and my friend's keys, and I'm supposed to

- Øve 'em to him." Creedmore rested his hand on the big roper's buckle like it was the wheel of his personal ship of state, but he looked uncertam, as though his hangover were leaning on him.

"Just tell him the keys'll be here. That's how you do it. Safer all 'round, that way." Rydell shouldered his bag and started down the ramp,

~ glad to be stretching his legs. He looked back at Creedmore. "See you  
~ 'round, Buell."

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"Son of a bitch," Creedmore said, though Rydell took it to be more a reference to the universe that had created Rydell than to Rydell himself. Creedmore looked lost and disconnected, squinting under the greenish-white strip lighting.

Rydell kept walking, down the battered concrete spiral of the parking garage, five more levels, till he came abreast of the office at the entrance. The Universal guards were drinking coffee, watching the end of their nature show. Now the deer moved through snow, snow that blew sideways, frosting the perfectly upright walls of Detroit's dead and monumental heart, vast black tines of brick reaching up to vanish in the white sky.

They made a lot of nature shows there.

He went out into the street, looking for a cab or a place that made breakfast. Smelling how San Francisco was a different place than Los Angeles, and feeling that was fine by him. He'd get something to eat, use the Brazilian glasses to phone Tokyo.

Find out about that money.

48 WILLtAM GIBSON

11. OTHER GUY

CHEVETTE had never driven a standard, so it fell to Tessa to drive them up to San Francisco. Tessa didn't seem to mind. She had her head full of the docu they were going to make, and she could work it out as she drove, telling Chevette about the different communities she wanted to cover and how she was going to cut it all together. All Chevette had to do was listen, or look like she was listening, and finally just fall asleep. She fell asleep as Tessa was telling her about a place called the Walled City, how there'd actually been this place, by Hong Kong, but it had been torn down before Hong Kong went back to being part of China. And then these crazy net people had built their own version of it, like a big communal website, and they'd turned it inside out, vanished in there. It wasn't making much sense when Chevette nodded out, but it left pictures in her head. Dreams.

• "What about the other guy?" Tessa was asking, when Chevette woke from those dreams. Chevette blinked out at the Five, the white line that seemed to reel up beneath the van. "What other guy?"

'The cop. The one you went to Los Angeles with."

"Rydell," Chevette said.

"So why didn't that work?" Tessa asked.

Chevette didn't really have an answer. "It just didn't."

"So you had to hook up with Carson?"

"No," Chevette said, "I didn't have to." What were those white things, so many of them, off in a field there? Wind things: they made electricity. "It just seemed like the thing to do."



"I've done a few of those myself," Tessa said.

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12. EL PRIMERO

FONTAINE'S first glimpse of the boy comes as he starts to lay out the morning's stock in his narrow display window: rough dark hair above a forehead pressed against the armored glass.

Fontaine leaves nothing of value in the window at night, but he dislikes the idea of an entirely empty display.

He doesn't like to think of someone passing and glimpsing that vacancy. It makes him think of death. So each night he leaves out a few items of relatively little value, ostensibly to indicate the nature of the shop's stock, but really as a private act of propitiatory magic.

This morning the window contains three inferior Swiss mechanicals, their dials flecked with age, an IXL double penknife with jugged bone handles and shield, fair condition, and an East German military field telephone that looks as though it has been designed not only to survive a nuclear explosion but to function during one.

Fontaine, still on the morning's first coffee, stares down, through the glass, at the matted, spiky hair. Thinking this at first a corpse, and not the first he's discovered this way, but never propped thus, kneeling, as in attitude of prayer. But no, this one lives: breath fogs Fontaine's window.

In Fontaine's left hand: a 1947 Cortebert triple-date moon phase, manual wind, gold-filled case, in very nearly the condition in which it left the factory. In his right, a warped red plastic cup of black Cuban coffee. The shop is filled with the smell of Fontaine's coffee, as burnt and acrid as he likes it.

Condensation slowly pulses on the cold glass: gray aureoles outline the kneeler's nostrils.

Fontaine puts the Cortebert back in the tray with the rest of his better stock, narrow divisions of faded green velour holding a dozen watches. He sets the tray aside, on the counter behind which he stands when he does business, transfers the red plastic cup to his left hand, and with his right reassures himself of the Smith & Wesson .32-.22 Kit Gun in the right side pocket of the threadbare trench coat that serves him as a dressing gown.

The little gun is there, older than some of his better watches, its worn walnut grip comforting and familiar. Probably intended to be kept in a freshwater fisherman's tackle box, against the dispatching of water snakes or the decapitation of empty beer bottles, the Kit Gun is Fontaine's considered choice: a six-shot rimfire revolver with a four-inch barrel. He doesn't want to kill anyone, Fontaine, though if truth be known, he has, and very probably could again. He dislikes recoil, in a handgun, and excessive report, and distrusts semi-automatic weapons. He is an anachronist, a historian: he knows that the Smith & Wesson's frame evolved for a .32-caliber center-fire round, long extinct, that was once the standard for American pocket pistols. Rechambered for the homely .22, it survived, in this model, well into the middle of the twentieth century. A handy thing and, like most of his stock, a rarity.

He finishes the coffee, places the empty cup on the counter beside the tray of watches.

He is a good shot, Fontaine. At twelve paces, employing an archaic one-handed duelist's stance, he has been known to pick the pips from a playing card. -

He hesitates before unlocking the shop's front door, a complicated process. Perhaps the kneeler is not alone. Fontaine has few enemies on the bridge proper, but who is to say what might have drifted in from either end, San Francisco or Oakland? And the wilds of Treasure Island traditionally offer a more feral sort of crazy.

But still.

He throws the last hasp and draws the pistol.

Sunlight falls through the bridge's wrapping of scrap wood and plastic like some strange benison. Fontaine scents the salt air, a source of Corrosion.

"You," he says, "mister." The gun in his hand, hidden by the folds of the trench coat.

Under the trench coat, which is beltless, open, Fontaine wears faded plaid flannel pajama bottoms and a long-sleeved white thermal undershirt rendered ecru by the vagaries of the laundry process  
Black

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shoes, sockless and unlaced, their gloss gone matte in the deeper creases.

Dark eyes look up at him, from a face that somehow refuses to come into focus.

"What you doing there?"

The boy cocks his head, as if listening to something Fontaine cannot hear.

"Get away from my window."

With a weird and utter lack of grace that strikes Fontaine as amounting to a species of grace in itself, this person gets to his feet. The brown eyes stare at Fontaine but somehow do not see him, or do not recognize him, perhaps, as another being.

Fontaine displays the Smith & Wesson, his finger on the trigger, but he does not quite point it at the boy. He never points a gun at anyone he is not yet entirely willing to shoot, a lesson learned long ago from his father.

This kneeler, this breather on his glass, is not of the bridge. It would be difficult for Fontaine to explain how he knows this, but he does. It is a function of having lived here a long time. He doesn't know everyone on the bridge, nor would he want to, but he nonetheless distinguishes bridge dwellers from others, and with absolute certainty.

This one, now, has something missing. Something wrong; not a state bespeaking drugs, but some more permanent mode of not-being-there. And while the population of the bridge possesses its share of these, they are somehow worked into the fabric of the place and not inclined to appear thus, so randomly, as to disturb mercantile ritual.

Somewhere high above, the bay wind whips a loose flap of plastic, a frenzied beating, like the idiot wing of some vast wounded bird.

Fontaine, looking into brown eyes in the face that still refuses to come into focus (because, he thinks now, it is incapable), regrets having unlocked his door. Salt air even now gnaws at the bright metal vitals of his stock. He gestures with the barrel of his pistol: go.

The boy extends his hand. A watch.

"What? You want to sell that?"

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T

The brown eyes register no language.

Fontaine, motivated by something he recognizes as compulsion, takes a step forward, his finger tightening on the pistol's double-action trigger. The chamber beneath the firing pin is empty, for safety's sake, but a quick, long pull will do the trick.

Looks like stainless. Black dial.

Fontaine takes in the filthy black jeans, the frayed running shoes, the faded red T-shirt hiked above a paunch that betrays the characteristic bloat of malnutrition.

"You want to show that to me?"

The boy looks down at the watch in his hand, then points to the three in the window.

"Sure," Fontaine says, "we got watches. All kinds. You want to see?"  
Still pointing, the boy looks at him.

"Come on," Fontaine says, "come on in. Cold out here." Still holding the gun, though his finger has relaxed, he steps back into the shop. "You coming?"  
After a pause, the boy follows, holding the watch with the black dial as though it were a small animal.

Be nothing, Fontaine thinks. Army Waltham with the guts rusted out. Bullshit. Bullshit he's let this freak in here.

The boy stands, staring, in the center of the shop's tiny floor space. Fontaine closes the door, locks it once only, and retreats behind his

counter. All this done without lowering the gun, getting within grabbing distance, or taking his eyes off his visitor.

The boy's eyes widen as he sees the tray of watches. "First things first," Fontaine says, whisking the tray out of sight with his free hand.

'~ "Let's see." Pointing at the watch in the boy's hand. "Here," Fontaine commands, tapping the faded gilt Rolex logo on a padded round of dark green leatherette.

The boy seems to understand. He places the watch on the pad.

~ Fontaine sees the black beneath the ragged nails as the hand withdraws.

"Shit," Fontaine says. Eyes acting up. "Back up, there, a minute," ~r' he says, gently indicating direction with the barrel of the Smith & '~ Wesson. The boy takes a step back.

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I  
Still watching the boy, he digs in the left side pocket of the trench coat and comes up with a black loupe, which he screws into his left eye. "Don't you move now, okay? Don't want this gun to go off..

Fontaine picks up the watch, affords himself a quick squint through the loupe. 'Whistles in spite of himself. "Jaeger LeCoultre." He unsquints, checking; the boy hasn't moved. Squints again, this time at the ordnance markings on the caseback. "Royal Australian Air Force, 1953," he translates. "Where'd you steal this?"

Nothing.

"This is near mint." Fontaine feels, all at once, profoundly and unexpectedly lost. "This a redial?"

Nothing.

Fontaine squints through the loupe. "All original?"

Fontaine wants this watch.

He puts it down on the green pad, atop the worn symbol of a golden crown, noting that the black calf band is custom-made, handsewn around bars permanently fixed between the lugs. This work itself, which he takes to be either Italian or Austrian, may have cost more than some of the watches in his tray. The boy immediately picks it up.

Fontaine produces the tray. "Look here. You want to trade? Gruen Curvex here. Tudor 'London,' 1948; nice original dial. Vulcain Cricket here, gold head, very clean."

But already he knows that his conscience will never allow him to divest this lost soul of this watch, and the knowledge hurts him. Fontaine has been trying all his life to cultivate dishonesty, what his father called "sharp practices," and he invariably fails.

The boy is leaning forward over the tray, Fontaine forgotten.

"Here," Fontaine says, sliding the tray aside and replacing it with his battered notebook. He opens it to the pages where he shops for watches. "Just push this, then push this, it'll tell you

what you're looking at." He demonstrates. A Jaeger with a silver face.

Fontaine presses the second key. "1945 Jaeger chronometer, stainless steel, original dial, engraving on case back," says the notebook.

"Case," the boy says. "Back."

"This," Fontaine shows the boy the stainless back of a gold-filled

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Tissot tank. "But with writing on, like 'Joe Blow, twenty-five years with Blowcorp, congratulations."

The boy looks blank. Presses a key. Another watch appears on the screen. He presses the second key. "A 1960 Vulcain jump-hour, chrome, brassing at lugs, dial very good."

"Very good," Fontaine advises. "Not good enough. See these spots here?" Indicating certain darker flecks scattered across the scan. "If it were 'very fine,' sure."

"Fine," says the boy, looking up at Fontaine. He presses the key that produces the image of another watch.

"Let me see that watch, okay?" Fontaine points at the watch in the boy's hand. "It's okay. I'll give it back."

The boy looks from the watch to Fontaine. Fontaine puts the Smith & Wesson away in its pocket. Shows the boy his empty hands.

"I'll give it back."

The boy extends his hand. Fontaine takes the watch.

"You gonna tell me where you got this?"

Blank.

"You want a cup of coffee?"

Fontaine gestures back, toward the simmering pot on the hotplate. Smells its bitter brew, thickening.

The boy understands.

He shakes his head.

Fontaine screws the loupe into his eye and settles into contemplation.

Damn. He wants this watch.

LATER in the day, when the bento boy brings Fontaine his lunch, the Jaeger LeCoultre military is in the pocket of Fontaine's gray tweed Slacks, high-waisted and extravagantly pleated, but Fontaine knows that the watch is not his. The boy has been put in the back of the shop, in that cluttered little zone that divides Fontaine's business from his private life, and Fontaine has become aware of the fact that he can, yes, smell his visitor; under the morning's coffee smell a definite and insistent reek of old sweat and unwashed clothes.

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As the bento boy exits to his box-stacked bicycle, Fontaine undoes the clips on his own box. Tempura today, not his favorite for bento, because it cools, but still he's hungry. Steam wafts from the bowl of miso as he unsnaps its plastic lid. He pauses.

"Hey" he says, back into the space behind the shop, "you want some miso?" No reply. "Soup, you hear me?"

Fontaine sighs, climbs off his wooden stool, and carries the steaming soup into the back of the shop.

The boy is seated cross-legged on the floor, the notebook open on his lap. Fontaine sees the image of a large, very complicated chronometer floating there on the screen. Something from the eighties, by the look of it.

"You want some miso?"

"Zenith," says the boy. "El Primero. Stainless case. Thirty-one jewels, 3019PHC movement. Heavy stainless bracelet with flip lock. Original ;crewdown crown. Crown dial and movement signed."

Fontaine stares at him.

13. SECONDHAND DAYLIGHT

YAMAZAKI returns with antibiotics, packaged foods, coffee in self-heating tins. He wears a black nylon flight jacket and carries these things, along with his notebook, in a blue mesh bag.

He descends into the station through a crowd of only ordinary density well before the evening rush hour. He has found it difficult to sleep, his dreams haunted by the perfect face of Rei Toei, who is in a sense his employer, and who in another sense does not exist.

She is a voice, a face, familiar to millions. She is a sea of code, the ultimate expression of entertainment software. Her audience knows that she does not walk among them; that she is media, purely. And that is a large part of her appeal.

If not for Rei Toei, Yamazaki considers, Laney would not be here now. It was the attempt to understand her, to second-guess her motivation, that had originally brought Laney to Tokyo. In the employ of Rez's management team, the singer Rez having declared his intention to marry her. And how, they asked, was that to be? How could any human, even one so thoroughly mediated, marry a construct, a congeries of software, a dream?

And Rez, the Chinese-Irish singer, the pop star, had tried. Yamazaki knows this. He knows as much about this as any living human, includ

ing Rez, because Rei Toei has discussed it with him. He understands that Rez exists as thoroughly, in the realm of the digital, as it is possible ~ for a living human to exist. If Rez-the-man were to die, today, Rez-the icon would certainly live on. But Rez's yearning was to go there, literally to go where Rei Toei is. Or was, she having now effectively vanished.

The singer had sought to join her in some realm of the digital or in some not-yet-imagined borderland, some intermediate state. And had

failed.

But has she gone there now? And why had Laney fled as well?

Rez tours the Kombinat states now. Insists on traveling by rail.

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Station to station, Moscow hts goal, rumors of madness flickering in the band's wake.

It is a dark business, Yaivazaki thinks and wonders, taking the stairs to the cardboard city, what exactly Laney is about here. Speaking of nodal points in history, of son-te emerging pattern in the texture of things. Of everything changing.

Laney is a sport, a mutant, the accidental product of covert clinical trials of a drug that induced something oddly akin to psychic abilities in a small percentage of test subjects. But Laney isn't psychic in any non-rational sense; rather he is able, through the organic changes wrought long ago by 5-SB, this drug, tj somehow perceive change emerging from vast flows of data. And now Rei Toei is gone, her management claims, and how can that be? Yamazaki suspects that Laney may know why, or where, and that is a factor in Yamazaki's having decided to return here and find him. He has been extremely careful to avoid being followed, but he also knows that that can mean next to nothing.

The smell of the Tokyo Subway, familiar as the smell of his mother's apartment, comforts him now. It is a smell at once utterly distinctive and impossible to describe It is the smell of Japanese humanity, of which he very much feels himself a part, as manifested in this singular environment, this world of tubes, of white corridors, of whispering silver trains.

He finds the passageway between the two escalators, the tiled columns. He half suspects that the

shelters will be gone.

But they are here, and when he dons a white micropore mask and enters the model-builder's brightly lit hutch, nothing has changed except the kit the old man concentrates on now: a multi-headed dinosaur with robotic hind limbs in navy and silver. The brush tip works in the eye of one reptilian head. The old man does not look up.

"Laney?"

Nothing from behind the square of melon-yellow blanket.

Yamazaki nods to the old man and crawls past on hands and knees, pushing his mesh bag of supplies before him.

"Laney?"

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"Hush," Laney says, from the narrow fetid dark. "He's talking."

"Who is talking?" Pushing the bag past the limp, foam-filled fabric, its touch on his face reminding him of nursery school.

As Yamazaki enters, Laney activates a projector in the clumsy eye-phones: the images he sees splay across Yamazaki, blinding him. Yamazaki twists to avoid the beam. Sees figures framed in secondhand daylight. "-magine he does this on a regular basis?" Hand-held but digitally stabilized. "Something to do with phases of the moon?"

Zooms in on one of the figures, lean and male, as all are. Mouth obscured by a dark scarf. Stiff black hair above a high white forehead. "No evidence of that. Opportunistic. He waits for them to come to him. Then he takes them. These," and the camera swings smoothly to frame the face and bare chest of a dead man, eyes staring, "are jackers. This one had dancer in his pocket." There is a dark comma on the dead man's pale chest, just below the sternum. "The other one was stabbed through the throat, but somehow he managed to miss the arteries."

"He would," says the unseen man.

'We have profiles," the man with the scarf says, off-camera, the face of the corpse thrown across Laney's cardboard wall, the melon blanket. 'We have a full forensic psych run-up. But you ignore them!~

"Of course I do."

'You re in denial Two pairs of hands in latex gloves grasp the dead man flip him over There is a second smaller wound visible beneath one shoulder blade blood has pooled within the body darkened He poses as real a danger to you as to anyone else."

But hes interesting isn t he~

The wound in close up is a small unsmiling mouth The blood reads black. "Not to me."

But you aren t interesting are you~

No and the camera pans up light catching a sharp cheekbone above the black scarf, "and you don't want me to be, do you?"

There is a faint chime as the transmission is terminated. Laney throws back his head the image of the man with the scarf in freeze frame across the ceiling of the carton too bnght distorted and Yamazaki sees that the cardboard there is shingled with tiny self

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adhesive printouts, dozens of different images of a bland-looking man, oddly familiar. Yamazaki blinks, his contacts shifting, and misses his glasses. He feels incomplete without them. "Who was that man, Laney?"

"The help," Laney says.

" 'Help'?"

"Hard to get good help these days." Laney kills the projector and removes the massive eyephones. In the sudden gloom, his face is reduced to a child's drawing, smudged black eyeholes against a pallid smear. "The man who was taking that call-"

"The one who spoke?"

"He owns the world. Near as anyone does."

Yamazaki frowns. "I have brought medicine-"

"That was from the bridge, Yamazaki."

"San Francisco?"

"They followed my other man there. They followed him, last night, but they lost him. They always do. This morning they found those bodies.

"Followed who?"

"The man who isn't there. The one I'm having to infer."

"These are pictures of Harwood? Of Harwood Levine?" Yamazaki has recognized the face replicated on the stickers.

"Spooks are his. Best money can buy, probably, but they can't get close to the man who isn't there."

"What man?"

"I think he's someone Harwood ... collected. Collects people. Interesting people. I think he might've worked for Harwood, taken commissions. He doesn't leave a trace, none at all. When he crosses someone's path, they're just gone. Then he erases himself."

Yamazaki fumbles the antibiotics from his bag. "Will you take these, Laney? Your cough--"

"Where's Rydell, Yamazaki? He's supposed to be up there now. It's all coming together."

"What is?"

"I don't know," Laney says, leaning forward to dig through the con-

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tents of the bag. He finds a coffee and activates it, tossing it from hand to hand as it heats. Yamazaki hears the pop, the vacuum hiss, as Laney opens it. Smell of coffee. Laney sips from the steaming can.

"Something's happening," Laney says and coughs into his hand, slopping hot creamed coffee on Yamazaki's wrist. Yamazaki flinches.

"Everything's changing. Or it's not, really. How I see it is changing. But since I've been able to see it the new way, something else has started. There's something building up. Big. Bigger than big. It'll happen soon, then there'll be a cascade effect.

"What will happen?"

"I don't know." Another fit of coughing requires that he set aside the coffee. Yamazaki has opened the antibiotics and tries to offer them. Laney waves them aside. "Have you been back to the island? Do they have any idea where she is?"

Yamazaki blinks. "No. She is simply not present."

Laney smiles, faint gleam of teeth against the darkness of his mouth. "That's good. She's in it too, Yamazaki." He reaches for the coffee. "She's in it too."

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14. BREAKFAST, COOKING

RYDELL found a place in one of those buildings that had clearly been a bank, when banks had needed to have buildings. Thick walls. Someone had turned it into an all-day breakfast-special place, and that was what Rydell was after. Actually it looked like it had been some kind of discount store before that, and who knew what else before, but it had that eggs-and-grease smell, and he was hungry.

There were a couple of size-large construction types, covered with white drywall dust, waiting for a table, but Rydell saw that the counter was empty, so he went over there and took a stool. The waitress was a distracted-looking woman of indeterminate ancestry, acne scars sprinkled across her cheekbones, and she poured his coffee and took his order without actually indicating she

understood English. Like the whole operation could be basically phonetic, he thought, and she'd have learned the sound of "two eggs over easy" and the rest. Hear it, translate it into whatever she wrote in, then give it to the cook.

Rydell got the Brazilian glasses out, put them on, and scrolled for the number Yamazaki had given him in Tokyo. Someone picked up on the third ring, but the glasses didn't map a location for the answering phone. Probably meant another mobile.

Silence on the line, but it had a texture.

'Hey," Rydell said, "Yamazaki?"

'Rydell? Laney-" Cut off by a burst of coughing and then dead silence as someone hit mute.

When Laney came back on, he sounded strangled. "Sorry. Where are you?"

'San Francisco," Rydell said.

"I know that," Laney said.

'In a diner on, on. . ." Rydell was scrolling the GPS menu, trying to get in, but he kept getting what looked like Rio transit maps.

"Never mind," Laney said. Sounded tired. What time would it be in

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Tokyo? That would be in the phone menu, if he could find it. "What matters is you're there."

"Yamazaki said you had something for me to do up here."

"I do," said Laney, and Rydell remembered his cousin's wedding, Clarence having sounded just about as happy, saying that.

"You want to tell me what it is?"

"No," said Laney, "but I want to put you on retainer. Money up front for as long as you're up there."

"Is it legal, Laney, what you want done?"

There was a pause. "I don't know," Laney said. "Some of it hasn't ever been done before probably, so it's hard to say."

'Well, I think I need to know a little more than that before I can take it on," Rydell said, wondering how the hell he'd ever get back down to Los Angeles if this didn't pan out. Or indeed if there was any point in his going back.

"You could say it's a missing person," Laney said after another pause. "Name?"

- ~- "Doesn't have one. Probably has a few thousand, more like it. Listen you like cop stuff nght~?"

What s that supposed to mean?

No offense, you told me cop stones when I met you remember~ Okay so this person m looking for is very very good at not leaving traces Nothing ever turns up not in the deepest quantitative analysis Laney meant netsearch stuff that was what he did He s just a physi

cal presence

How do you know he s a physical presence if he doesn t leave traces~

Because people die Laney said

And just then there were people taking seats on either side of him ~j and a sharp reek of vodka- Get back to you Rydell said thumbing the pad and pulling the



~ glasses off

Creedmore gnning on his left Howdy said Creedmore This heresMarjane

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"Maryalice." On the stool to Rydell's right, a big old blonde with most of the top of her strapped up into something black and shiny, the unstrapped part forming a cleavage where Creedmore could easily have wedged one of those pint bottles. Rydell caught something deep in her tired eyes, some combination of fear, resignation, and a kind of blind and automatic hope: she was not having a good morning, year, or life probably, but there was something there that wanted him to like her. Whatever it was, it stopped Rydell from getting up with his bag and walking out, which was really what he knew he should be doing.

"Ain't you gonna say hi?" Creedmore's breath was toxic.

"Hey, Maryalice," Rydell said. "Name's Rydell. Pleased to meet you.

Maryalice smiled, about a decade's wear lifting, just for a second, from her eyes. "Buell here tells me you're from Los Angeles, Mr. Rydell." -

"Does he?" Rydell looked at Creedmore.

"Are you in the media down there, Mr. Rydell?" she asked.

"No," Rydell said, fixing Creedmore with the hardest look he could muster, "retail."

"I'm in the music business myself," Maryalice said. "My ex and I operated one of the most successful country music venues in Tokyo. But I felt the need to get back to my roots. To God's country, Mr. Rydell."

"You talk too much," said Creedmore, across Rydell, as the waitress brought Rydell's breakfast.

"Buell," Rydell said, with something approximating a tone of even good cheer, "shut the fuck up." Rydell started cutting the hardened edges off his eggs.

"Beer me," Buell said.

"Oh, Buell," Maryalice said. She hauled a big plastic zip bag up off the floor, some kind of advertising giveaway, and rummaged inside. Came up with a tall sweaty can of something she passed to Creedmore over Rydell's lap, under the counter. Creedmore popped it, held it to his ear, as if admiring the hiss of carbonation.

a, t.iii a •a~ emma.

"Sound of breakfast cooking," he said, then drank. Rydell sat there, chewing his leathery eggs. so you go to this site," Laney was saying, "give them my name, 'Cohnspace-Laney,' cap C, cap L, first four digits of this phone number, and 'Berry' That's your nickname, right?"

"Actually it's my name," Rydell said. "Family name on my mother's side." He was seated in a capacious but none too clean cubicle in the former bank's restroom. He'd gone there to get away from Creedmore and company, and so he could ring Laney back. "SO I give them that. What'll they give me?" Rydell looked up at his bag, where he'd hung it on the sturdy chrome hook on the cubicle door. He hadn't wanted to leave it out in the restaurant.

'They'll give you another number. You take that to any banking machine, show it picture ID, key the number. It'll issue you a credit chip. Should be enough to hold you for a few days, but if it's not, phone me."

Something about being in there made Rydell feel like he was in one of those old-fashioned submarine movies, the part where they shut off the engines and wait, really quiet, for the depth charges they know are on the way. It was that quiet in here, probably because the bank was so solidly built; the only sound was the running of the toilet tank, which alone."

not be."

he thought added to the illusion.

"Okay," Rydehl said, "assuming all that works, who is it you're looking for, and what was that you said about people dying?"

"European male, mid to late fifties, probably has a military background but that was a long time ago."

"That narrows it to maybe a million probables, up here in NoCal

"How this is going to work, Rydell, is he'll find you. I'll tell you where to go and what to ask for, and one thing and another will bring you to his attention."

"Sounds too easy."

"Coming to his attention will be easy. Staying alive once you do will

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Rydell considered. "So what am I supposed to do for you when he finds me?"

"Ask him a question."

'What question?"

"I don't know yet," Laney said, "I'm working on it."

"Laney," Rydell said, "what's this all about?"

"If I knew that," Laney said, and suddenly he sounded very tired, "I wouldn't have to be here." He fell silent. Clicked off.

"Laney?"

Rydehl sat listening to the toilet run. Eventually he got up, took his bag down from the hook, and exited the cubicle. He washed his hands in a trickle of cold water that ran into a black imitation marble sink crusted with yellowish industrial soap and made his way back along a corridor made narrow by cartons of what he took to be janitorial supplies.

He hoped that Creedmore and the country music mamma would've forgotten about him, gone away. -

Not so. The woman was working on her own plate of eggs, while Creedmore, his beer clipped between his denim thighs, was staring balefully at the two enormous, gypsum-dusted construction workers.

"Hey," Creedmore said, as Rydell walked past, carrying his bag.

"Hey, Buell," Rydell said, heading for the door to the street.

"Hey, where you going?"

"To work," RydeIl said.

"Work," he heard Creedmore say and "shit," but the door swung shut behind him, and he was on the street.

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15. BACK UP HERE

CHEVETTE stood beside the van, watching Tessa release God's Little Toy. The camera platform, like a Mylar muffin or an inflated coin, caught the day's watery light as it rose, wobbling, then leveled out, swaying, at fifteen feet or so.

Chevette felt very strange, being here, seeing this: the concrete tank traps, beyond them the impossible shape of the bridge itself. Where she

had lived, though it now seemed a dream, or someone else's life, atop the nearest cable tower. Way up in a cube of plywood there, sleeping

while the wind's great hands shoved and twisted and clawed, and she'd heard the tendons of the

bridge groan all in secret, a sound carried up the twisted strands for only her to hear, Chevette with her ear pressed

against the graceful dolphin back of cable that rose through the oval hole sliced for it through Skinner's plywood floor.

Now Skinner was dead, she knew. He'd gone while she was in Los Angeles, trying to become whoever it was she'd thought she wanted to be. She hadn't come up. The bridge people weren't big on funerals, and possession, here, was most points of the law. She wasn't Skinner's daughter, and even if she had been, and had wanted to hold his place atop the cable tower, it would've been a matter of staying there for as long as she intended it to be hers. She hadn't wanted that.

But she'd had no way to grieve him in Los Angeles, and now it all came up, came back, the time she'd lived with him. How he had found her, too sick to walk, and taken her home, feeding her soups he bought from the Korean vendors until she was well. Then he'd left her alone,

asking nothing, accepting her there the way you'd accept a bird on a windowsill, until she'd learned to ride a bicycle in the city and become a

messenger. And soon the roles had reversed: the old man failing, needing help, and she the one to go for soup, bring water, see that coffee was made. And that was how it had been, until she'd gotten herself into the trouble that had resulted in her first having met Rydell.

"Wind'll catch that," she cautioned Tessa, who had put on the glasses that let her watch the feed from the floating camera.

"I've got three more in the car," Tessa said, pulling a sleazy-looking black control glove over her right hand. She experimented with the touch pads, revving the platform's miniature props and swinging it through a twenty-foot circle.

"We've got to hire someone to watch the van," Chevette said, "if you want to see it again."

"Hire someone? Who?"

Chevette pointed at a thin black child with dusty dreadlocks to his waist. "You. What's your name?"

"What's it to you?"

"Pay you watch this van. We come back, chip you fifty. Fair?" The boy regarded her evenly. "Name Boomzilla," he said.

"Boomzilla," Chevette said, "you take care of this van?"

"Deal," he said.

"Deal," Chevette said to Tessa. -

"Lady," Boomzilla said, pointing up at God's Little Toy, "I want that."

"Stick around," Tessa said. "We'll need a grip."

Tessa touching fingers to black-padded palm. The camera platform executing a second turn and gliding out of sight, above the tank traps. Tessa smiling, seeing what it saw. "Come on," she said to Chevette and stepped between the nearest traps.

"Not that way," Chevette said. "Over here." There was a path you followed if you were just walking through. To take another route indicated either ignorance or the desire to do business.

She showed Tessa the way. It stank of urine between the concrete slabs. Chevette walked more quickly, Tessa behind her.

And emerged again into that wet light, but here it ran not across the stalls and vendors of memory, but across the red-and-white front of a modular convenience store, chunked down front and

center across the entrance to the bridge's two levels, LUCKY DRAGON and the shudder of video up the trademark tower of screens.

"Fucking hell," said Tessa, "how interstitial is that?"

Chevette stopped, stunned. "How could they do that?"

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• "It's what they do," Tessa said. "Prime location."

"But it's like . . . like Nissan County or something."

"'Gated attraction.' The community's a tourist draw, right?"

"Lots of people won't go where there's no police."

"Autonomous zones are their own draw," Tessa said. "This one's been here long enough to become the city's number-one postcard."

"God-awful," Chevette said. "It . . . ruins it."

"Who do you think Lucky Dragon Corp is paying rent to?" Tessa asked, swinging the platform around for a pan across the store.

"No idea," Chevette said. "It's right in the middle of what used to be the street."

"Never mind," Tessa said, moving on, into the pedestrian traffic flowing to and from the bridge. "We're just in time. We're going to document the life before it's theme-parked."

Chevette followed, not knowing what it was exactly that she felt.

THEY ate lunch in a Mexican place called Dirty Is God.

Chevette didn't remember it from before, but places changed

V names on the bridge. They changed size and shape too. You'd get these strange mergers, a hair place and an oyster bar deciding to become a bigger place that cut hair and sold oysters. Sometimes it worked: one of the longest-running places on the San Francisco end was an old-style,

manual tattoo parlor that served breakfast. You could sit there over a

plate of eggs and bacon and watch somebody get needled with some

kind of hand-drawn flash.

But Dirty Is God was just Mexican food and Japanese music, a

pretty straightforward proposition. Tessa got the huevos rancheros and

- - Chevette got a chicken quesadilla. They both had a Corona, and Tessa parked the camera platform up near the tented plastic ceiling. Nobody

noticed it up there apparently, so Tessa could do documentary while she ate.

Tessa ate a lot. She said it was her metabolism: one of those people who never gains any weight regardless of how much she ate, but she needed to do it to keep her energy up. Tessa put away her huevos before Chevette was halfway through her quesadilla. She drained her glass

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bottle of Corona and started fiddling with the wedge of lime, squeezing it, working it into the neck.

"Carson," Tessa said. "You worried about him?"

"What about him?"

"He's an abusive ex, is what about him. That was his car back in Malibu, wasn't it?"

"I think so," Chevette said.

"You think so? You aren't sure?"

"Look," Chevette said, "it was early in the morning. It was all pretty strange. It wasn't my idea to come up here, you know? It was your idea. You want to make your movie."

The lime popped down into the empty Corona bottle, and Tessa looked at it as though she'd just lost a private wager. "You know what I like about you? I mean one of the things I like about you?"

"What?" Chevette asked.

"You aren't middle class. You just aren't. You move in with this guy, he starts hitting you, what do you do?"

"Move out."

"That's right. You move out. You don't take a meeting with your lawyers."

"I don't have any lawyers," Chevette said.

"I know. That's what I mean."

"I don't like lawyers," Chevette said.

"Of course you don't. And you don't have any reflex to litigation."

"Litigation?"

"He beat you up. He's got eight hundred square feet of strata-title loft. He's got a job. He beats you up, you don't automatically order a surgical strike; you're not middle class."

"I just don't want anything to do with him."

"That's what I mean. You're from Oregon, right?"

"More or less," Chevette said.

"You ever think of acting?" Tessa inverted the bottle. The squashed lime wedge fell down into the neck. A few drops of beer fell on the scratched black plastic of the table. Tessa inserted the little finger of her right hand and tried to snag the lime wedge.

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"No."

"Camera loves you. You've got a body makes boys chew carpet." 'Get off Chevette said

Why do you think they were putting those party shots of you up on the website back in Malibu?"

'Because they were drunk Chevette said Because they don t have anything better to do Because they re media students

Tessa hooked the lime wedge what was left of it out of the bottle "Right on all three she said but the main reasons your looks

Behind Tessa on one of Dirty Is Gods recycled wall screens a very beautiful Japanese girl had appeared Look at her Chevette said "That s looks, right~

Tessa looked over her shoulder That s Rei Toei she said 'So she s beautiful She is

"Chevette," Tessa said, "she doesn't exist. There's no live girl there at all. She's code. Software."

No way Chevette said

'You didn t know that~

'But she s based on somebody right~ Some kind of motion capture deal  
'Nobody Tessa said Nothing Shes the real deal Hundred

• - - percent unreal."

- - - "Then that's what people want," Chevette said, watching Rei Toei

-- ~- swan through some kind of retro Asian nightclub, "not ex bicycle messengers from San Francisco."

No Tessa said you ye got it exactly backwards People don t know what they want, not before they see it. Every object of desire is a found object. Traditionally, anyway."

Chevette looked at Tessa across the two empty Corona bottles. "What are you getting at, Tessa?"

'The documentary It has to be about you."

"Forget it."

"No. I've got vision thing working big-time on this. I need you for the focus. I need narrative traction. I need Chevette Washington."

Chevette was actually starting to feel a little scared. It made her

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angry. "Don't you have a grant to do this one particular project you've been talking about? These innersitual things-

"Look," Tessa said, "if that's a problem, and I'm not saying it is, it's my problem. And it's not a problem, it's an opportunity. It's a shot. My shot."

"Tessa, there is no way you are going to get me to act in your movie. None. You understand?'

"'Acting' isn't in it, Chevette. All you have to do is be yourself. And that will involve finding out who you really are. I am going to make a film about you finding out who you really are."

"You are not," said Chevette, getting up and actually bumping into the camera platform, which must have descended to level with her head while they were talking. "Stop that!" Swatting at God's Little Toy.

The other four customers in Dirty Is God just looking at them.

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16. SUB-ROUTINES

THAT Hole at the core of Laney's being, that underlying absence, he begins to suspect, is not so much an absence in the self as of the self.

Something has happened to him since his descent into the cardboard city. He has started to see that previously he had, in some unthinkably literal way, no self.

But what was there, he wonders, before?

Sub-routines: maladaptive survival behaviors desperately conspiring to approximate a presence that would be, and never quite be, Laney. And he has never known this before, although he knows that he has always, somehow, been aware of something having been desperately and utterly wrong.

Something tells him this. Something in the core and totality, it seems, of DatAmerica. How can that be?

But now he lies, propped in sleeping bags, in darkness, as if at the earth's core, and beyond cardboard walls are walls of concrete, sheathed in ceramic tile, and beyond them the footing of this country, Japan, with the shudder of the trains a reminder of tectonic forces, the shifting of continent-wide plates.

Somewhere within Laney, something else is shifting. There is movement, and potential for greater movement still, and he wonders why he

is no longer afraid.

And all of this is somehow a gift of the sickness. Not of the cough, the fever, but of that underlying disease that he takes to be the product of the 5-SB he ingested so long ago in the orphanage in Gainesville.

We -were all volunteers, he thinks, as he clutches the eyephones and follows his point of view over the edge of a cliff of data, plunging down the wall of this code mesa, its face compounded of fractally differentiated fields of information he has come to suspect of hiding some power or intelligence beyond his comprehension.

Something at once noun and verb.

While Laney, plunging, eyes wide against the pressure of informa

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tion, knows himself to be merely adjectival: a Laney-colored smear, meaningless without context. A microscopic cog in some catastrophic plan. But positioned, he senses, centrally.

Crucially.

And that is why sleep is no longer an option.

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17. ZODIAC

THEY take Silencio, naked, the black man with the long face and the fat

white man with the red beard, into a room with wet wooden walls. Leave him. Hot rain falls from holes in the black plastic pipes above. Falls

harder, stings.

They have taken his clothes and shoes away in a plastic bag, and now the fat man returns, gives him soap. He knows soap. He remembers the warm rain falling from a pipe in los projectos but this is better, and he is alone in the tall wooden room.

V Silencio with his belly full, soaping himself repeatedly, because that is what they want. He rubs the soap into his hair.

He closes his eyes against the burning of the soap and sees the watches arrayed beneath greenish, randomly abraded glass, like fish from some warmer season frozen hard in lake ice. Bright highlights off steel and gold.

He has been colonized by an order uncomprehended: the multifold fact of these potent objects, their endless differentiation, their individual specificities. Infinite variety arising from the expression of dial,

- hands, numerals, hour markers.. . He likes the warm rain but he needs desperately to return, to see more, to hear the words.

He has become the words, what they mean.

Breguette hands. Tapestry dial. Bombay lugs. Original stem. Signed.

The rain slows, stops. The fat man, who wears plastic sandals, brings Silencio a thick dry cloth.

The fat man peers at him. "Watches, you say he likes?" the fat man asks the black man. "Yes," the black man says, "he seems to like watches."

The bearded man drapes the towel around Silencio's shoulders. "Does he know how to tell time?"

"I don't know," says the black man.

"Well," says the fat man, stepping back, "he doesn't know how to use a towel."

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Silencio feels confused, ashamed. He looks down.

"Leave him alone, Andy," the black man says. "Get me those clothes I brought."

THE black man's name: Fontaine. Like a word in the language of los projectos, a meaning about water. The warm rain in the wooden room.

Now Fontaine leads him through the upper level, where some people call out, selling fruit, past others selling old things spread on blankets, to where a thin dark man stands waiting beside a plastic crate. The crate is upturned, its bottom padded with foam and ragged silver tape, and this man wears a striped cloth thing with pockets down his front, and in the pockets are scissors, and things like the thing Raton liked to run endlessly through his hair, when he had balanced the black perfectly with the white.

Silencio is wearing the clothes Fontaine has given him: they are large, loose, not his own, but they smell good. Fontaine has given him shoes made of white cloth. Too white. They hurt his eyes.

The soap and the warm rain have made Silencio's hair strange as well, and now Fontaine tells Silencio to sit upon the crate, this man will cut his hair.

Silencio sits, trembling, as the thin dark man flicks at his hair with one of the Raton-things from his pockets, making small noises behind his teeth.

Silencio looks at Fontaine.

"It's okay," Fontaine says, unwrapping a small sharp stick of wood and inserting it into the corner of his mouth, "you won't feel a thing."

Silencio wonders if the stick is like the black or the white, but Fontaine does not change. He stands there with the stick in his mouth, watching the thin dark man snip away Silencio's hair with the scissors. Silencio watches Fontaine, listens to the sound of the scissors, and to the new language in his head.

Zodiac Sea Wolf. Case very clean. Screw-down crown. Original bezel.

"Zodiac Sea Wolf," Silencio says.

"Man," says the thin dark man, "you deep."

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18. SELWYN TONG

RYDELL had a theory about virtual real estate. The smaller and cheaper the physical site of a given operation, the bigger and cheesier the web site. According to this theory Selwyn F.X. Tong, notary public, of Kowloon, was probably operating out of a rolled-up newspaper.

Rydeil couldn't figure out a way to skip the approach segment, which was monolithic, vaguely Egyptian, and reminded him of what his buddy Sublett, a film buff, had called "corridor metaphysics." This was

- - one long-ass corridor, and if it had been physical, you could've driven a  
- - very large truck down it. There were baroque sconce lights, virtual scar-let wall-to-wall, and weird tacky texture mapping that tended to gold-flecked marble.

Where had Laney found this guy?



Eventually Rydell did manage to kill the music, something vaguely classical and swelling, but it still seemed to take him three minutes to

get to Selwyn F.X. Tong's doors. Which were tall, very tall, and mapped to resemble some generic idea of tropical hardwood

Teak my ass said Rydell

"Welcome," said a breathless, hyper-feminine voice, "to the offices of Selwyn FX Tong notary public"

The doors swung open Rydell figured that if he hadn't killed the

~ music, it would be peaking about now.

Virtually, the notary's office was about the size of an Olympic pool but scarce on detail. Rydell used the rocker-pad on his glasses to scoot

his POV right up to the desk, which was about the size of a pool table, and mapped in that same ramped-down wood look. There were a couple

-- pie of nondescript, metallic-looking objects on it and a few pieces of virtual paper.

"What's the 'F.X.' stand for?" Rydell asked. -

Francis Xavier said Tong who presented as a sort of deadpan cartoon of a small Chinese man in a white shirt black tie black suit His

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black hair and the black suit were mapped in the same texture, a weird effect and one Rydell took to be unintentional.

"I thought you might be in video" Rydell said, "like it's a nickname:

FX, 'effects,' right?"

"I am Catholic," Tong said, his tone neutral.

"No offense," Rydell said.

"None taken," said Tong, his plastic-looking face as shiny as his plastic-looking eyes.

You always forgot, Rydell reflected, just how bad this stuff could look if it hadn't been handled right.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Rydell?"

"Laney didn't tell you?"

"Laney?"

"Cohn," Rydell said. "Space. Laney."

"And . . . ?"

"Six," Rydell said. "Zero. Four. Two."

Tong's plastic-looking eyes narrowed.

"Berry."

Tong pursed his lips. Behind him, through a broad window, at a different rate of resolution,

Rydell could see the skyline of Hong Kong.

"Berry" Rydell repeated.

"Thank you, Mr. Rydell," the notary said. "My client has authorized me to give you this seven-digit identification number." A gold fountain pen appeared in Tong's right hand like a continuity error in a student film. It was a very large pen, elaborately mapped with swirling dragons, their scales in higher resolution than anything else in the site. Probably a gift, Rydell decided. Tong wrote the seven digits on one of the sheets of virtual paper, then reversed it on the desktop so that Rydell could read it. The pen had vanished, as unnaturally as it had appeared. "'Please don't repeat this number aloud," Tong said.

Why not?"

"Issues of encryption," Tong said obscurely. "You have as long as you like to memorize the number."

Rydell looked at the seven digits and began to work out a mnemonic. He finally arrived at one based on his birthday, the number of states when he was born, his father's age when he'd died, and a mental image of two cans of 7-Up. When he was certain that he'd be able to recall the number, he looked up at Tong. "Where do I go to get the credit chip?"

"Any automated teller. You have photo identification?"

"Yes," Rydell said. "Then we are finished." "One thing," Rydell said. "What is that?"

"Tell me how I get out of here without having to go back down that corridor of yours. I just want a straight exit, right?"

Tong regarded him blandly. "Click on my face."

Rydell did, using the rocker-pad to summon a cursor shaped like a neon green cartoon hand, pointing. "Thanks," he said, as Tong's office folded.

He was in the corridor, facing back the way he had come. "Damn," Rydell said.

The music began. He worked the rocker-pad, trying to remember how he'd killed it before. He wanted to get a GPS fix on the nearest ATM, though, so he didn't unplug the glasses.

He clicked for the end of the corridor.

- - The click seemed to trigger a metastatic surge of bit rot, every bland texture map rewritten in some weirder hand: the red carpet went gray-green, its knap grown strange and unevenly furry, like something at the bottom of a month-old cup of coffee, while the walls went from where house marble to a moist fish belly pallor the sconce lights glowing dim - - as drowned corpse candles. Tong's fake-classical theme cracked and

hollowed, weird bass notes rumbling in just above the threshold of the subsonic.

It all took about a second to happen, and it took Rydell maybe another second to get the idea that someone wanted his undivided

attention.

"Rydell." It was one of those voices that they fake up from found audio: speech cobbled from wind down skyscraper canyons, the creaking of Great Lakes ice tree frogs clanging in the Southern night Rydell

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had heard them before. They grated on the nerves, as they were meant to, and conveniently disguised the voice of the speaker. Assuming the speaker had a voice in the first place.

"Hey," Rydell said, "I was just trying to click out."

A virtual screen appeared in front of him, a round-cornered rectangle whose dimensions were meant to invoke the cultural paradigm of twentieth-century video screens. On it, an oddly angled, monochromatic view of some vast shadowy space, dimly lit from above. Nothing there. Impression of decay, great age.

"I have important information for you." The vowel in you suggested a siren dopplering past, then gone.

"Well," said Rydell, "if your middle name is 'F. X.,' you're sure going to some trouble."

There was a pause, Rydell staring at the dead, blank space depicted or recorded on the screen. He was waiting for something to move there; probably that was the point of it, that nothing did.

"You'd better take this information very seriously, Mr. Rydell."

"I'm serious as cancer," Rydell said. "Shoot."

"Use the ATM at the Lucky Dragon, near the entrance to the bridge. Then present your identification at the GlobEx franchise at the rear of the store."

"Why?"

"They're holding something for you."

"Tong," Rydell said, "is that you?"

But there was no answer. The screen vanished, and the corridor was as it had been.

Rydell reached up and disconnected the rented cable from the Brazilian glasses.

Blinked.

A coffee place near Union Square, the kind that had potted plants and hotdesks. An early office crowd was starting to line up for sandwiches.

He got up, folded the glasses, tucked them into the inside pocket of his jacket, and picked up his bag.

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19. INTERSTITIAL

CHEVETTE moves past the colorless flame of a chestnut vendor's charcoal fire, powdery gray burning itself down in the inverted, V-nosed hood of some ancient car.

She sees another fire, in memory: coke glow of a smith's forge, driven by the exhaust of a vacuum cleaner. Beside her the old man held the drive chain of some extinct motorcycle, folded neatly into a compact mass and fastened with a twist of rusty wire. To be taken in the smith's tongs and placed within the forge. To be beaten, finally, incandescent, into a billet of their strangely grained Damascus, ghosts of those links emerging as the blade is forged, quenched, shaped, and polished on the wheel.

Where did that knife go? she wonders.

She'd watched the maker craft and braise a hilt of brass, rivet slabs of laminated circuit board and shape them on a belt grinder. The rigid, brittle-looking board, layers of fabric trapped in green phenolic resin, was everywhere on the bridge, a common currency of landfills-. Each sheet mapped with dull metallic patterns suggesting cities, streets. When they came from the scavengers they were studded with components, easily stripped with a torch, melting the gray solder. The components fell away, leaving the singed green boards with their inlaid foil maps of imaginary cities, residue of the second age of electronics. And Skinner would tell her that these boards were immortal, inert as stone, proof against moisture and ultraviolet and every form of decay; that they were destined to litter the planet, hence it was good to reuse them, work them when possible into the fabric of things, a resource when something needed to be durable.

She knows she needs to be alone now, so she's left Tessa on the lower level, collecting visual

texture with God's Little Toy. Chevette can't hear any more about how Tessa's film has to be more personal, about her, Chevette, and Tessa hasn't been able to shut up about that,

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or take no for an answer. Chevette remembers Bunny Malatesta, her dispatcher when she rode here, how he'd say "and what part of 'no' is it that you don't understand?" But Bunny could deliver lines like that as though he were a force of nature, and Chevette knows she can't, that she lacks Bunny's gravity, the sheer crunch required to get it across.

So she's taken an escalator, one she doesn't remember, to the upper level, and is making her way, without really thinking about it, to the foot of their tower, the wet light having turned to a thin and gusting rain, blowing through the bridge's tattered secondhand superstructure. People are hauling their laundry in, where they've hung it, draped on lines, and there's a general pre-storm bustle that she knows will fade if the weather changes.

And so far, she thinks, she's not seen a single face she knows from before, and no one has greeted her, and she finds herself imagining the bridge's entire population replaced in her absence. No, there went the bookstall woman, the one with the ivory chopsticks thrust into her dyed black bun, and she recognizes the Korean boy with the bad leg, rumbling his father's soup wagon along as though it should have brakes.

The tower she'd ascended each day to Skinner's plywood shack is bundled in subsidiary construction, its iron buried at the core of an organic complex of spaces appropriated for specific activities. Behind taut, wind-shivered sheets of milky plastic, the unearthly light of a hydroponics operation casts outside leaf shadows. She hears the snarl of an electric saw from the tiny workshop of a furniture-maker, whose assistant sits patiently, rubbing wax into a small bench collaged from paint-flecked oak scavenged from the shells of older houses. Someone else is making jam, the big copper kettle heated by a propane ring.

Perfect for Tessa, she thinks: the bridge people maintaining their interstices. Doing their little things. But Chevette has seen them drunk. Has seen the drugged and the mad dive to their deaths in the gray and unforgiving chop. Has seen men fight to the death with knives. Has seen a mother, dumbstruck, walking with a strangled child in her arms, at dawn. The bridge is no tourist's fantasy. The bridge is real, and to live here exacts its own price.

It is a world within the world, and, if there be such places between

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the things of the world, places built in the gaps, then surely there are things there, and places between them, and things in those places too.

And Tessa doesn't know this, and it is not Chevette's place to tell her.

She ducks past a loose flap of plastic, into moist warmth and the spectrum of grow lamps. A reek of chemicals. Black water pumped amid pale roots. These are medicinal plants, she supposes, but probably not

- - drugs in the street sense. Those are grown nearer Oakland, in a sector

somehow allotted for that, and on warm days there the fug of resin hangs

- - narcotic in the air, bringing an almost perceptible buzz, faint alteration of perception and the will.

"Hey. Anybody here?"

Gurgle of liquid through transparent tubing. A silt-slimed pair of

- - battered yellow waders dangle nearby, but no sign of who hung them there. She moves quickly, her feet remembering, to where corroded aluminum rungs protrude from fist-sized blobs of super-epoxy.

The ball-chain zip pulls on Skinner's old jacket jingle as she climbs. These rungs are a back way, an emergency exit if needed.

Climbing past the sickly greenish sun of a grow lamp, housed in a corroded industrial fixture, she pulls herself up the last aluminum rung and through a narrow triangular opening.

It is dark here, shaded by walls of rain-swolkin composite.

- Shadowed where she remembers light, and she sees that the bulb,
- above, in this enclosed space, is missing. This is the lower end of
- Skinner's "funicular," the little junkyard elevator trolley, built for him by a black man named Fontaine, and it was here that she'd lock her bike in her messengering days, after shouldering it up another, less covert ladder.

She studies the cog-toothed track of the funicular, where the grease shows dull with accumulated dust. The gondola, a yellow municipal

recycling bin, deep enough to stand in and grasp the rim, waits where it should. But if it is here, it likely means that the current resident of the cable tower is not. Unless the car has been sent in expectation of a visitor, which Chevette doubts. It is better to be up there with the car up. She knows that feeling.

Now she climbs wooden rungs, a cruder ladder of two-by-fours,

until her head clears the ply and she wirces in wind and silvery light. Sees a gull hang almost stationary in the air, not twenty feet away, the towers of the city as backdrop.

The wind tugs at her hair, longer now han when she lived here, and a feeling that she can't name comes hile something she has always known, and she has no interest in climbing farther, because she knows now that the home she remembers is n longer there. Only its shell, humming in the wind, where once she lay wrapped in blankets, smelling machinist's grease and coffee and fresh-cat wood.

Where, it comes to her, she was sometimes happy, in the sense of being somehow complete, and ready for what another day might bring.

And knows she is no longer that, md that while she was, she scarcely knew it.

She hunches her shoulders, drawing her neck down into the carapace of Skinner's jacket, and imagines heiself crying, though she knows she won't, and climbs back down.

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-: 20. BOOMZILLA

BOOMZILLA sitting on the curb, beside the truck these two bitches say

- - they pay him to watch. They don't come back, he'll get some help and strip it. Wants that robot balloon the blonde bitch had. That's fine. Fly

- - that shit around.

Other bitch kind of biker-looking, big old coat looked like she got it off a dumpster. That one kick your ass, looked like.

Where they gone? Hungry now, wind blowing grit in his face, splashes of rain.

"Have you seen this girl?" Movie-looking white man, face painted dark like they do down the coast. How they dress when they had time to think about coming here, everything worn out just right. Leather jacket like he's left his old airplane around the corner. Blue jeans. Black T.

Boomzilla, he'd puke, anybody try to put him in that shit. Boomzihla know how he going to dress, time he get his shit together.

Boomzilla looking at the printout the man holds out. Sees the biker-looking bitch, but dressed

better.

Boomzilla looks up at the tinted face. See how pale the blue eyes look against it. Something say: cold. Something say: don't fuck with me.

Boomzilla thinks: he don't know it's they truck.

"She's lost," the man says.

You ass is, Boomzilla thinks. "Never seen her."

Eyes lean in a little closer. "Missing, understand? Trying to help her. A lost child."

Thinks: child my ass; bitch my momma's age.

Boomzilla shakes his head. How he does it serious, just a little, side to side. Means: no.

The blue eyes swing away, looking for somebody else to show the picture to; swing right past the truck. No click.

Man moving off, toward a clutch of people by a coffee stand, holding the picture.

Boomzilla watches him go.

A lost child himself, he has every intention of staying that way.

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21. PARAGON ASIA

SAN Francisco and Los Angeles seemed more like different planets than different cities. It wasn't the NoCal-SoCal thing, but something that went down to the roots. Rydell remembered sitting with a beer somewhere, years ago, watching the partition ceremonies on CNN, and it hadn't impressed him much even then. But the difference, that was something.

A stiff gust of wind threw rain into his face, as he was coming down Stockton toward Market. Office girls held their skirts down and laughed, and Rydell felt like laughing too, though that had passed before he'd crossed Market and started down 4th.

This was where he'd met Chevette, where she'd lived.

She and Rydehl had had their adventure up here, had met in the course of it, and the end of it had taken them to LA.

She hadn't liked LA, he always told himself, but he knew that really wasn't why it had gone the way it had.

They had moved down there, the two of them, while Rydell pursued the mediation of what they'd just gone through together. Cops in Trouble was interested, and Cops in Trouble had been interested in Rydell once before, back in Knoxville.

Fresh out of the academy, back then, he'd used deadly force on a stimulant abuser who was trying to kill his, the abuser's, girlfriend's children. The girlfriend had subsequently been looking to sue the department, the city, and Rydehl, so Cops in Trouble had decided Rydell might warrant a segment. So they'd flown him out to SoCal, where they were based. He'd gotten an agent and everything, but the deal had fallen apart, so he'd taken a job driving armed response for IntenSecure. When he'd managed to get himself fired from that, he wound up going up to NoCal to do temp work, off the record, for the local IntenSecure operation there. That was what had gotten him into the trouble that introduced him to Chevette Washington.

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So when Rydell turned up back in LA with a story to tell, and Chevette on his arm, Cops in Trouble had perked right up. They were moving into a phase where they tried to spin individual segments off into series for niche markets, and the demographics people liked it that Rydell was male, not too young, not too educated, and from the South. They also liked it that he wasn't racist, and they really liked it that he was with this really cute alt-dot kind of girl, one who looked like she could crush walnuts between her thighs.

Cops in Trouble had installed them in a small stealth hotel below Sunset, and they had been so happy, the first few weeks, that Rydehl could barely stand to remember it.

Whenever they went to bed, it had seemed more like making history than love. The suite was like a little apartment, with its own kitchen and a gas fire, and they'd roll around at night on a

blanket on the floor, in front of the fire, with the windows open and the lights out, blue flame flickering low and LAPD gunships drumming overhead, and every time he'd crawl into her arms, or she'd put her face down next to his, he'd known it was good history, the best, and that everything was going to be just fine.

But it hadn't been.

Rydell had never thought about his looks much. He looked, he'd thought, okay. Women had seemed to like him well enough, and it had been pointed out to him that he resembled the younger Tommy Lee Jones, Tommy Lee Jones being a twentieth-century movie star. And because they'd told him that, he'd watched a few of the guy's movies and liked them, though the resemblance people saw puzzled him.

He guessed he'd started to worry though, when Cops in Trouble had assigned a skinny blonde intern named Tara-May Ahlenby to follow him around, grabbing footage with a shoulder-mounted steadicam.

Tara-May had chewed gum and fiddled with filters and had generally put Rydell's teeth on edge. He'd known she was feeding live to Cops in Trouble, and he'd started to get the idea they weren't too happy with what was coming through. Tara-May hadn't helped, explaining to Rydehl that the camera added an apparent twenty pounds to anybody's looks,

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but that, hey, slre liked him just the way h~ was, ~lI beefy and solid. But she'd kept sugesting he try working out more. Why not go with that girlfriend of yours, she'd say, she's so buff, it hurs.

But Che~tte had never seen the in;ide of a gym in her life; she owed her buf~ess to her genes and a few years she'd spent pounding up and down ~an Francisco hills on a competitiom-grade mountain bike, its frame rollel from epoxy and Japanese constriction paper.

So now Hydell sighed, coming up on the co-ner of 4th and Bryant, and on Bryanl turning toward the bridge The bag on his shoulder was starting to demonstrate its weight, its cohIusi(n with gravity. Rydeli stopped, sightd again, readjusted the bag. Put t~oughts of the past out of his mind.

Just walk

NO trouble at all finding that branch of Lucky Uragon.

Couldn't miss it, smack in what hal been the middle of Bryant, dead center as you approached the entrance to the bridge. He hadn't been able to s~e it, coming along Bryant, ~ecaus~ it was behind the jumble of old coirrete tank traps they'd dropped thore after the quake, but once you got past those, there it was.

He coulc see, walking up to it, that it was m newer model than the one he'd worled in on Sunset. It had fev~er corrers, so there was less to chip off or med repair. He supposed that designing a Lucky Dragon module was ~bout designing something that would hold up under millions of uncaing and even hostile hanth. Ultirratly, he thought, you'd wind up witFsomething hike a seashell, hard and smooth.

The storton Sunset had had a finish that a:e graffiti. The gang kids would come and tag it; twenty minute~ later these flat, dark, vaguely crab-like pat:hes of dark blue would come gliding around the corner. Rydell had mver understood how they 'vorke4 and Durius said they'd been develo~ed in Singapore. They seemed to be embedded, a few millimeters dowi into the surface, which seas a scrt of non-glossy gel-coat affair, but abe to move around under there. Smart material, he'd heard that called. And they'd glide up to the tag, ~vi-iatever artfully abstract scrawl had been sprayed there to declare fealty or mark territory or swear

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revenge (Durius had been able to read these things and construct a narrative out of them) and start eating it. You couldn't actually see the crablegs move. They just sort of nuzzled in and gradually the tag started

to unravel, de-rez, molecules of paint sucked down into the blue of the Lucky Dragon graffiti-eaters.

And once someone had come with a smart tag, a sort of decal they'd somehow adhered to the wall, although neither Rydell nor Durius had

been able to figure how they'd done it without being seen. Maybe, Dunus said, they'd shot it from a distance. It was the tag of a gang called

the Chupacabras, a fearsome spiky thing, all black and red, insectoid

- -' and menacing and, Rydell thought, kind of good-looking, exciting-looking. He'd seen it worn as a tattoo, in the store. The kids who wore it favored those contacts, the kind gave you pupils like a snake's. When the graffiti-eaters came out after it though, it had moved.

They'd edge up to it, and it would sense them and move away. Almost too slow to see it happening, but it moved. Then the graffiti-eaters would move again. Durius and Rydell watched it, the first night, get all the way around to the back of the store. It was starting to work its way back around toward the front when they went off shift.

Next shift it was still there, and a couple of standard spray-bomb tags as well. The graffiti-eaters were locked on the smart tag and not

taking care of business. Durius showed it to Mr. Park, who didn't like it that they hadn't told him before. Rydell showed him where they'd logged

it in the shift record when they clocked off, which had just pissed Mr. Park off more.

About an hour later, two men in white Tyvek coveralls showed up in an unmarked, surgically clean white van and went to work. Rydell would've liked to watch them get the smart tag off, but there was a run of shoplifters that night and he didn't get to see what they did to it. They didn't use scrapers or solvents, he knew that. They used a notebook and a couple of adhesive probes. Basically, he guessed, they reprogrammed it, messed with its code, and after they left, the graffiti-eaters were back out there, slurping down the latest Chupacabra iconography.

This Lucky Dragon by the bridge was smooth and white as a new china plate, Rydell observed, as he came up to it. It looked like a piece

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of some different dream, fallen here. The entrance to the bridge had a weird unplanned drama to it, and Rydell wondered if there'd been a lot of meetings, back in Singapore, about whether or not to put this unit here. Lucky Dragon had some units on prime tourist real estate, and Rydell knew that from watching the Global Interactive Video Column back in LA; there was one in the mall under Red Square, that fancy Kdatn branch in Berlin, the big-ass one in Piccadilly, London, but putting one here struck him as a strange, or strangely deliberate, move.

The bridge was a dodgy place, safe enough but not "tourist safe." There was a walk-on tourist contingent, sure, and a big one, particularly on this end of the bridge, but no tours, no guides. If you went, you went on your own. Chevette had told him how they repelled evangelicals, and the Salvation Army and any other organized entity, in no entertain terms. Rydell figured that in fact that was part of the draw of the place, that it was unregulated.

Autonomous zone, Durius called that. He'd told Rydell that Sunset Strip had started out as one of those, a place between police jurisdictions, and somehow that had set the DNA of the street, which was why, sas you still got hookers in elf hats there, come Christmas.

But maybe Lucky Dragon knew something people didn't, he thought. Things could change. His father, for instance, used to swear that Times Square had been a really dangerous place.

Rydell made his way through the crowd flowing on and off the bridge and past the Global Interactive Video Column, daydreaming as he did that he'd look up and see the Sunset branch there, with PraiseGod beaming sunnily at him from out in front.

What he got was some skater kid in Seoul shaking his nuts at the camera.

He went in, to be immediately stopped by a very large man with a very broad forehead and pale,



almost invisible eyebrows. "Your bag," said the security man, who was wearing a pink Lucky Dragon fanny pack exactly like the one Rydell had worn in LA. As a matter of fact, Rydell's was in the very duffel the guy was demanding.

"Please," Rydell said, handing the bag over. Lucky Dragon security  
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were supposed to say that: please. It was on Mr. Park's notebook, and anyway when you asked somebody for their bag, you were admitting you

thought they might shoplift, so you might as well be polite about it. The security man narrowed his eyes. He put the bag in a numbered cubicle behind his station and handed Rydehl a Lucky Dragon logo tag that looked like an oversized drink coaster with the number five on the back. It was the size it was, Rydell knew, because it had been determined that this size made the tags just that much too big to fit into most ~ pockets, thereby preventing people from pocketing, forgetting, and \$~ wandering away with them. Kept costs down. Everything about Lucky

Dragon was worked out that way. You sort of had to admire them.

'You re welcome Rydell said He headed for the ATM in the back Lucky Dragon International Bank He knew it was watching him as he

walked up to it pulling his wallet from his back pocket

-- - "I'm here to get a chip issued," he said.

Identify yourself please Lucky Dragon ATMs all had this same voice a weird uptight strangled little castrato voice and he wondered why that was But you could be sure they d worked it out probably it

kept people from standing around, bullshitting with the machine. But Rydell knew that you didn't want to do that anyway, because the suck- - ers would pepper-spray you. They were plastered with notices to that effect too, although he doubted anyone ever actually read them. What the notices didn't say, and Lucky Dragon wasn't telling, was that if you tried seriously to dick with one, drive a crowbar into the money slot, say,

the thing would mist you and itself down with water and then electrify itself.

"Berry Rydell," he said, taking his Tennessee driver's license from his wallet and inserting the business end into the ATM's reader.

"Palm contact."

Rydell pressed his hand within the outline of a hand. He hated the way that felt. Bad cootie factor with those palm-scan things. Hand grease.

He wiped his palm on his trousers.

"Please enter your personal identification code."

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Rrdell did, working through his mremonic to the two cans of 7-Up.

"brocessing credit request," the thng said, sounding as if someone were queezing its balls.

14,rdell looked around and saw thathe was pretty much the only customei aside from a woman with gray lair and black leather pants, who was 'iving the checker a hard time in what sounded to Rydehl like Gernan.

"Iransaction completed," the ATN said. Rydell turned back in time to se~ a Lucky Dragon credit chip em~ge from the chip slot. He shoved it parway back in, to see the availablecome up on the screen. Not bad. Not a~l at all. He pocketed the chip put his wallet away, and turned toward the GlobEx concession, whid also doubled as the local USPO. Likethe ATM, this was another purpose-

built node or swelling in the same plastic wall. They hadn't had one of these on Sunset, and Prai.e.god had had to double as GlobEx clerk and/or USPO employee, the latter causing her occasionally to frown, as her parents' sect identified all things federal as aspects of Sitan.

The one who hesitates, Rydell's father had taught him, is safe, and Rydell had tried hard, in the course of his life, to practice that sort of benign procrastination. Just about everything that had ever landed him in deep shit he knew, had been the result of not hesitating. There was in him, he didn't know why, that which simply went for it, and somehow at the worst possible time.

Look before you leap. Consider consequences. Think about it.

He thought about it. Someone had taken advantage of his brief but unwilling sojourn in Selwyn Tong's VR corridor to convey the suggestion that he should pick up his credit chip from this particular ATM, and then check GlobEx. This could most easily have been Tong himself, speaking as if were through a hack channel, or it might have been someone, anyone, else, hacking into what Rydell supposed was scarcely a world-class secure site. The hook of the change that had been wrought for Rydell's benefit, though, had had a hacker written all over it. In Rydell's experience, hackers just couldn't resist showing off, and they tended to get all arty. And, he knew, they could get your ass in trouble and usually did.

~~~~~LIAM~BSON

He looked at the GlobEx bulge there.

Went for it.

It took him less time than it had to get the credit chip, to show his license and get the hatch open. It was a bigger package than he'd expected, and it was heavy for its size. Really heavy. Expensive-looking foam-core stuff, very precisely sealed with gray plastic tape, and covered with animated GlobEx Maximum Express holograms, customs stickers. He studied the waybill. It had come from Tokyo, looked like, but the billing was to Paragon-Asia Dataflow, which was on Lygon Street, Melbourne, Australia. Rydell didn't know anybody in Australia, but he did know that it was supposed to be impossible, and definitely was illegal, to ship anything internationally to one of these GlobEx pickups. They needed an address, private or business. These pickup points were only for domestic deliveries.

Damn. Thing was heavy. He got it under his arm, maybe two feet long and six inches on a side, and went back to get his bag.

Which he saw now was open, on the little counter there, and the guard with the pale eyebrows was holding Rydell's pink Lucky Dragon fanny pack.

"What are you doing with my bag?"

The guard looked up. "This is Lucky Dragon property."

"You aren't supposed to open people's bags," Rydell said, "says so on the notebook."

"I have to treat this as theft. You have Lucky Dragon property here."

Rydehl remembered that he'd put the ceramic switchblade in the fanny pack, because he hadn't been able to think what else to do with it. He tried to remember whether or not that was illegal up here. It was in SoCal, he knew, but not in Oregon.

"That's my property," Rydehl said, "and you're going to give it to me right now"

"Sorry," the man said deliberately.

"Hey, Rydell," said a familiar voice, as the door was opened so forcefully that Rydell distinctly heard something snap in the closing mechanism. "Son of a bitch, how they hangin'?"

Rydehl was instantly engulfed in a fog of vodka and errant testos terone. He turned and saw Creedmore grinning fiercely, quite visibly free of the human condition. Behind him loomed a larger man, pale and fleshy, his dark eyes set close together.

"You're drunk," snapped the security guard. "Get out."

"Drunk?" Creedmore winced grotesquely, miming some crippling emotional pain. "Says I'm drunk. - ."  
Creedmore turned to the man behind him. "Randy, this motherfucker says I'm drunk."

The corners of the large man's mouth, which was small and strangely delicate in such a heavy stubbled face, turned instantly down, as if he were genuinely and very, very deeply saddened to learn that it was possible for one human being to treat another in so unkind a way. "So whump his faggot ass, then," the large man suggested softly, as if the prospect held at least some wistful possibility, however distant, of cheer after great disappointment.

"Drunk?" Creedmore was facing the security man again. He leaned across the counter, his chin level with the top of Rydell's bag. "What kinda shit you tryin' to lay off on my buddy here?"

Creedmore was radiating an amphetamine-reptile menace now, his anger gone right off the mammalian scale. Rydell saw a little muscle pulsing in Creedmore's cheek, steady and involuntary as some tiny extra heart. Seeing that Creedmore had the guard's undivided attention, Rydell grabbed his bag with one hand, the pink fanny pack with the other.

The guard tried to snatch them back. Which was definitely a mistake, as the attempt occupied both his hands.

"Suck my dick!" Creedmore shrieked, striking with far more speed and force than Rydell would've credited him with, and sank his fist wrist-deep into the guard's stomach, just below the sternum. Taken by surprise, the guard doubled forward. Rydell, as Creedmore was winding back to slug the man in the face, managed to tangle Creedmore's wrist in the straps of the fanny pack, almost dropping the bulky parcel in the process.

"Come on, Buell," Rydell said, spinning Creedmore back out the door. Rydell knew someone would've hit a foot button by now.

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"Motherfucker says I'm drunk," Creedmore protested.

"Well, you are, Buell," said the heavy man, ponderously, behind them.

Creedmore giggled.

"Let's get out of here," Rydell said, starting for the bridge. As he walked, he was trying to stuff the fanny pack back into his duffel and trying not to lose his precarious underarm grip on the GlobEx package. A twisting gust of wind blew grit into his eyes, and, blinking down to clear them, he noticed for the first time that the waybill was addressed

- - not to him but to "Cohn Laney."

Cohn space Laney. So why had they let Rydell pick it up?

Then they were in the thick of the crowd, headed up the ramp of the lower level.

"What is this shit?" Creedmore asked, peering up.

"San Francisco-Oakland Bay," Rydell said.

"Shit," Creedmore said, squinting at the crowd, "smells like a fuckin' baitbox. Bet you you could get you some weird-ass pussy, out here."

"I need a drink," the heavy man with the delicate mouth said softly.

"I think I do too," said Rydell. -

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22. VEXED

FONTAINE has two wives. I

Not, he will tell you, a condition to aspire to.

They live, these two wives, in uneasy truce, in a single establishment, nearer the Oakland side. Fontaine has for some time now been opting to sleep here, in his shop.

The younger wife (at forty-eight, by some five years) is a Jamaican originally from Brixton, tall and light-skinned, whom Fontaine has come to regard as punishment for all his former sins.

Her name is Clarisse. Incensed, she reverts to the dialect of her childhood: "You tek de prize, Fonten."

Fontaine has been taking the prize for some years now, and he is taking it again today, Clansse standing angrily before him with a shopping bag full of what appear to be catatonic Japanese babies.

These are in fact life-sized dolls, manufactured in the closing years of the previous century for the solace of distant grandparents, each one made to resemble photographs of an actual infant. Produced by a firm in Meguro called Another One, they are increasingly collectible, each example being to some degree unique.

"I don't want them," Fontaine allows.

"Listen up," Clarisse tells him, folding her dialect smoothly away, "there is no way you are not taking these. You are taking them, you are moving them, you are getting top dollar, and you are giving it to me. Because there is no way, otherwise, that I am staying where you left me, cheek by jowl with that mad bitch you married"

Who I was married to when you married me, thinks Fontaine, and no secret about it. The reference being to Tourmaline Fontaine, aka Wife One, whom Fontaine thinks of as being only adequately described by the epithet "mad bitch."

Tourmaline is an utter terror; only her vast girth and abiding torpor prevent her coming here.

"Clarisse," he protests, "if they were 'mint in box'--"

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"These never mint in box, idiot! They always played with!"

"Then you know the market better than I do, Clarisse. You sell 'em."

"You want to talk child support?"

Fontaine looks down at the Japanese dolls. "Man, those things ugly. Look dead, you know?"

"Cause you gotta turn 'em on, fool." Clarisse sets the bag on the floor and snatches up a naked baby boy. She stabs a long emerald-green fingernail into the back of the doll's neck. She is attempting to demonstrate the thing's other, uniquely individual feature, digitally recorded infant sounds, or possibly even first words, but what they hear instead is heavy, labored breathing, followed by a childish giggle and a ragged chorus of equally childish fuck-you's. Clarisse frowns. "Somebody been messing with it."

Fontaine sighs. "I'll do what I can. You heave 'em here. I'm not promising anything."

"You better believe I leave 'em here," Clarisse says, tossing the baby headfirst into the bag.

Fontaine glances into the rear of the shop, where the boy is seated cross-legged on the floor, barefoot, his head close-cropped, the notebook open on his lap, lost in concentration.

"Who the hell's that?" Clarisse inquires, noticing the boy for the first time as she steps closer to the counter.

Which somewhat stumps Fontaine. He tugs at one of his locks. "He likes watches," he says.

"Huh," Clarisse says, "he hikes watches. How come you don't have your own kids over here?" Her eyes narrow, deepening the wrinkles at their outer corners, which Fontaine desires suddenly to kiss. "How come you got some 'spanic fatboy likes watches instead?"

"Clarisse-"

"Clarisse my butt." Her green eyes widen in furious emphasis, a green pale as drift glass, DNA-echo of some British soldier, Fontaine has often surmised, on some chose Kingston night, these several generations distant. "You move these dolls or you be vexed, understand?"

She spins smartly on her heel, not easily done in the black galoshes she wears, and marches from his shop, proud and erect, in a man's long

tweed overcoat Fontaine recalls purchasing fifteen years earlier in Chicago.

Fontaine sighs. Something weighs heavy on him now, evening coming on. "Legal, here, be married to two women," Fontaine says to the empty, coffee-scented air "Fucking crazy, but legal." He shuffles over in his unlaced shoes and closes the front door, locks it behind her. "You still think I'm a bigamist or something, baby, but this is the State of Northern California."

He goes back and has another look at the boy, who seems to have discovered the Christie's auction.

The boy looks up at him. "Platinum tonneau minute repeating wristwatch," he says. "Patek Philippe, Geneve, number 187145."

"I don't think so," Fontaine says. "Kind of out of our bracket."

"A gold hunter-cased quarter repeating watch-"

"Forget it."

"-with concealed erotic automaton."

"Can't afford that either," Fontaine says. "Look," he says, "tell you what: that notebook's the slow way to look. I'll show you a fast way."

"Fast. Way."

Fontaine goes rummaging through the drawers of a paint-scabbed steel filing cabinet, until eventually he comes up with an old pair of military eyephones. The rubbery lip around the binocular video display is cracked and peeling. It takes another few minutes to find the correct battery pack and to determine that it is charged. The boy ignores him, lost in the Christie's catalog. Fontaine plugs the battery pack into the eyephones and returns. "Here. See? You put this on your head. .

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23. RUSSIAN HILL

THE apartment is large and has nothing in it that is not of practical use. Consequently, the dark hardwood floors are bare and quite meticulously swept.

Seated in an expensive, semi-intelligent Swedish workstation chair, he is sharpening the knife.

This is a task (he thinks of it as a function) requiring emptiness.

He sits facing a nineteenth-century reproduction of a seventeenth-century refectory table. Six inches in from its nearest edge, two triangular sockets have been laser-cut into the walnut at precise angles. Into these, he has inserted a pair of nine-inch-long rods of graphite-gray ceramic, triangular in cross section, forming an acute angle. These

hones fit the deep, laser-cut recesses perfectly, allowing for no movement whatever.

The knife lies before him on the table, its blade between the ceramic rods.

When it is time, he takes it in his left hand and places the base of the blade against the left hone. He draws it down, a single, 'smooth, sure

stroke, pulling it toward him as he does. He is listening for any indication of imperfection,

although this would only be likely if he had struck bone, and it has been many years since the knife struck bone.

Nothing.

He exhales, inhales, places the blade against the right hone.

The telephone rings.

He exhales. Places the knife on the table again, its blade between the hones. "Yes?"

The voice, emerging from several concealed speakers, is a voice he knows well, although it has been nearly a decade since he has shared physical space with the speaker. He knows that the words he hears come in from a tiny, grotesquely expensive piece of dedicated real estate somewhere in the planet's swarm of satellites. It is a direct transmission, and nothing to do with the amorphous cloud of ordinary human communication. "I saw what you did on the bridge last night," the voice says.

The man says nothing. He is wearing a shirt cut from very fine gray cotton flannel, its collar buttoned but tieless, French cuffs secured with plain round links of sandblasted platinum. He places his hands on his thighs and waits.

"They think you're mad," says the voice.

"Who do you employ to tell you these things?"

"Children," the voice says. "Hard and bright. The best I can find."

"Why do you bother?"

"I like to know."

"You like to know," the man says, adjusting the crease along the top of his left trouser leg, "but why?"

"Because you interest me."

"Do you fear me?" the man asks. "No," the voice says, "I don't believe I do." The man is silent.

"Why did you kill them?" the voice asks.

"They died," the man says. "But why were you there?"

"I wished to see the bridge." -

"They think you went there knowing you'd attract someone, someone who'd attack you. Someone to kill."

"No," says the man, a note of disappointment in his voice, "they died."

"But you were the agent."

The man shrugs. His lips purse. Then: "Things happen."

"'Shit happens,' we used to say. Is that it?"

"I am unfamiliar with that expression," the man says.

"It's been a long time since I've asked for your help."

"That is the result of maturation, I would think," the man says. "You are less inclined now to move counter to the momentum of things."

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A

Now the voice falls silent. The silence lengthens. "You taught me that," it says finally.

When he is positive that the conversation has ended, the man picks up the knife and places the base of its blade against the top of the right hone.

He draws it, smoothly, down and back.

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24, TWO LIGHTS ON BEHIND

THEY found a dark place that felt as though it hung out beyond where the bridge's handrails would've been. Not a very deep space, but long, the bar along the bridge side and the opposite all mismatched windows, looking south, past the piers, to China Basin. The panes were filthy, patched into their mulhions with yellowing translucent gobs of silicone.

Creedmore in the meantime had become startlingly lucid, reaiy positively cordial, introducing his companion, the fleshy man, as Randall James Branch Cabell Shoats, from Mobile, Alabama. Shoats was a session guitarist, Creedmore said, in Nashville and elsewhere.

"Pleased to meet you," said Rydell. Shoats'grip was cool and dry arid very soft but studded with concise, rock-hard calluses, so that his hand felt to Rydell like a kid glove set with rough garnets.

' "Any friend of Buell's," Shoats said, with no apparent irony.

Rydell looked at Creedmore and wondered what trough or plateau of brain chemistry the man was currently traversing and how long it would be until he decided to alter it.

"I have to thank you for what you did back there, Buell," Rydell said, because it was true. It was also true that Rydell wasn't sure you could say Creedmore had done it so much as been it, but the way things had worked out, it looked as though Creedmore and Shoats had happened along at exactly the right time, although Rydell's own Lucky Dragon experience suggested to him that it was far from over.

"Sons of bitches," Creedmore said, as if commenting generally on the texture of things.

Rydell ordered a round of beer. "Listen, Buell," Rydell said, "it's possible they'll come looking for us, 'cause of what happened."

"Why the fuck? We're here, them sons of bitches back there."

"Well, Buell," Rydell said, pretending to himself he was having to explain this to a stubborn and willfully obtuse six-year-old, "I'd just picked up this package here, before we had us our little argument, and then you poked the security man in the gut. He won't be too happy about

~1~WILLIAMGI~O~

' it, and chances are he'll recall that I was carrying this package. Big GhobEx logo here see? So he can look in the GIobEx records and get

video of me, voiceprint, whatever, and give it to the police."

The police? Sumbitch wants to make trouble we give it to im

~, right?"

"No," said Rydelh, "that won't help."

"Well, then," said Creedmore, resting his hand on RydeIl's shoulder, ~" "we'll come see you till you're out."

"Well, no, Buell," Rydell said, shrugging off the hand. "I don't think he'll bother much about the police. More he'll want to find out who we work for and if he could sue us and win.

"Sue you?"

" Us. ~

"Huh," said Creedmore, absorbing this. "You in an ugly place."

"Maybe not," said Rydell. "Matter of witnesses."

"I hear you," said Randy Shoats, "but I'd have to talk to my label, see what the lawyers say."

"Your label," said Rydell.

"That's right."

Their beer arrived, brown long necks. Rydell took a sip of his. "Is Creedmore on your label?"

"No," said Randy Shoats.

Creedmore looked from Shoats to Rydell, back to Shoats. "All I did was poke him one, Randy. I didn't know it had anything to do with our

- - deal."

"It doesn't," said Shoats, "long as you're able to go into the studio and record."

"Goddamn, Rydell," said Creedmore, "I don't need you comin' in here and fucking things up this way."

Rydell, who was fumbling under the table with his duffel, getting the fanny pack out and opening it, looked at Creedmore but didn't say

anything. He felt the Kraton grips of the ceramic switchblade. "You boys excuse me," Rydell said, "I've gotta find the can." He stood up, with the GlobEx box under his arm and the knife in his pocket and went to ask

- - the waitress where the Men's was.

~A~ALL TOMORROW S PARTIES 101

For the second time that day, he found himself seated in hut not using a toilet stall, this one considerably more odorous than the last. The plumbing out here was as makeshift as any he'd seen, with bundles of scummy-looking transparent tubing snaking everywhere, and NoCal NOT POTABLE stickers peeling off above the sink taps.

He took the knife out of his pocket and pressed the button, watching the black blade swing out and lock. Then he pressed it again, unlocking the blade, closed it, and opened it again. What was it about switchblades, he wondered, that made you do that? He figured that that was a big part of what made people want them in the first place, something psychological but dumb, monkey-brained. Actually they were kind of pointless, he thought, except in terms of simple convenience. Kids liked them because they looked dramatic, but if somebody saw you open one, then they knew you had a knife, and they'd either run or kick your ass or shoot you, depending on how they felt about it and how they happened to be armed. He supposed there could be very specific situations in which you could just click one open and stick somebody with it, but he didn't think they'd be too frequent.

He had the GlobEx box across his lap. Gingerly, remembering how he'd cut himself back in LA, he used the tip of the blade to slit the gray tape. It went through the stuff like a wire through butter. When he got it to the point where he thought he'd be able to open it, he cautiously folded the knife and put it away. Then he lifted the lid.

At first he thought he was looking at a thermos bottle, one of those expensive brushed-stainless numbers, but as he lifted it out, the heft of it and the general fineness of manufacture told him it was something else.

He turned the thing over, finding an inset rectangular section with a cluster of micro-sockets, but nothing else except a slightly scuffed blue sticker that said FAMOUS ASPECT. He shook it. It neither sloshed nor rattled. Felt solid, and there was no visible lid or other way to open it. He wondered about something like that going through customs, how the GlobEx brokers could explain what it was, whatever that was, and not something full of some kind of contraband. He could think of a dozen



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kinds of contraband you could stick in something this size and do pretty well if you got it here from Tokyo.

Maybe it did contain drugs, he thought, or something else, and he was being set up. Maybe they'd kick the stall's door in any second and handcuff him for trafficking in proscribed fetal tissue or something

He sat there. Nothing happened.

He lay the thing across his lap and searched through the fitted foam packing for any message, any clue, something that might explain what this was. But there was nothing, so he put the thing back in its box, exited the stall, washed his hands in non-potable bridge water, and left,

intending to leave the bar, and Creedmore and Shoats in it, when he'd picked up his bag, which he'd left them minding.

Now he saw that the woman, that Maryahice, the one from breakfast, had joined them, and that Shoats had found a guitar somewhere,

a scuffed old thing with what looked like masking tape patching a long

- - crack down the front. Shoats had pushed his chair back from the table

to allow himself room for the guitar, between the table edge and his belly, and was tuning it. He wore that hearing-secret-harmonies expression people wore when they tuned guitars.

Creedmore was hunched forward, watching, his wet-look streaked-blond hair gleaming in the bar gloom, and Rydell saw a look there, an

exposed hunger, that made him feel funny, like he was seeing Creedmore want something through the wall of shit he kept up around himself. It made Creedmore seem suddenly very human, and that somehow made him even less attractive.

Now Shoats, absently, produced what looked like the top of an old-fashioned tube of lipstick from his shirt pocket and began to play, using the gold metal tube as a slide. The sounds he coaxed from the guitar caught Rydell in the pit of his stomach, as surely as Creedmore had sucker-punched that security man: they sounded the way rosin feels on your fingers in a poolroom and made Rydell think of tricks with glass rods and the skins of cats. Somewhere inside the fat looping slack of that sound, something gorgeously, nastily tight was being figured out.

The bar, not crowded at this time of day but far from empty, had

ALL. TOMORROW'S PARTIES

gone absolutely silent under the scraping, looping expressions of Shoats' guitar, and then Creedmore began to sing, something high and quavering and dirge-like.

And Creedmore sang about a train pulling out of a station, about the two lights on the back of it: how the blue light was his baby.

How the red light was his mind.

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25 SUIT

HAVING abandoned sleep, Laney, neither a smoker nor a drinker, has taken to tossing back the contents of very small brown glass bottles of a patent specific for hangover, an archaic but still-popular Japanese remedy that consists of alcohol caffeine aspinn and liquid nicotine He knows somehow (somehow now he knows those things he needs to know) that this, along with periodic belts of a blue hypnotic cough syrup, is the combination he needs to continue.

Heart pounding, eyes wide to incoming data, hands cold and distant, he plunges resolutely on.

He no longer leaves the carton, relying both on Yamazaki (who brings medicines he refuses) and on a neighbor in the cardboard city, a

- - meticulously groomed madman whom he takes to be an acquaintance of the old man, the builder of models, from whom Laney has leased, or otherwise obtained, this space.

Laney doesn't remember the advent of this mad one, whom he thinks of as the Suit, but that is not something he needs to know.

The Suit is, evidently, a former salaryman. The Suit wears a suit, the one suit, always. It is black, this suit, and was once a very good suit

indeed, and it is evident from its condition that the Suit, in whichever carton he dwells, has a steam iron, lint rollers, surely a needle and thread, and the skill to use them. It is unthinkable, for instance, that this suit's buttons would be anything less than firmly and symmetrically

attached, or that the Suit's white shirt, luminous in the halogen of the master model-builder's carton, would be anything less than perfectly white.

But it is also obvious that the Suit has seen better days, as indeed must be true of any inhabitant of this place. It is obvious, for instance,

that the Suit's shirt is white because he paints it daily, Laney surmises (though he doesn't need to know) with a white product intended for the renovation of athletic shoes. The heavy black frames of his glasses are held together with worryingly precise ligatures of black electrical tape,

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upe cut to narrow custom widths with one of the old man's X-Acto knives and a miniature steel T-square and then applied with lapidary skill,

The Suit is as tidy, as perfectly squared away, as a man can be. But it has been a very long time, months or perhaps years, since the Suit has bathed. Every inch of visible flesh, of course, is scrubbed and spotless, but when the Suit moves, he exudes an odor quite indescribable, a high thin reek, it seems, of madness and despair. He carries, always, three identical, plastic-wrapped copies of a book about himself. Laney, who cannot read Japanese, has seen that the three copies bear the same smiling photograph of the Suit himself, no doubt in better days, and holding, for some reason, a hockey stick. Laney knows (without knowing how he knows) that this was one of those self-advertising, Sm ugly inspirational autobiographies that certain executives pay to have ghostwritten. But the rest of the Suit's story is occluded, to Laney, and very probably to the Suit as well.

Laney has other things on his mind, but it does occur to him that if it is the Suit he sends out to the drugstore as his more presentable representative, then he, Laney, is in bad shape indeed.

And he is, of course, but that seems, against the flood of data flowing Nile-wide and constantly through him, from inner horizon to inner horizon, scarcely a concern.

Laney is aware now of gifts without name. Of modes of perception that may never have previously existed.

He has, for instance, a directly spatial sense of something very near the totality of the infosphere.

He feels it as a single indescribable shape, something brailled out for him against a ground or backdrop of he knows not what, and it hurts him, in the poet's phrase, like the world hurts God. Within this, he palps nodes of potentiality, strung along lines that are histories of the happened becoming the not-yet. He is very near, he thinks, to a vision in which past and future are one and the same; his present, when he is forced to reinhabit it, seems increasingly arbitrary, its placement upon the time line that is Cohn Laney more a matter of convenience than of any absolute now.

1~

All his life Laney has heard talk of the death of history, but confronted with the literal shape of all human knowledge, all human memory, he begins to see the way in which there never really has

been any such thing.

No history. Only the shape, and it comprised of lesser shapes, in squirming fractal descent, on down into the infinitely finest of resolutions.

But there is will. "Future" is inherently plural.

And thus he chooses not to sleep and sends the Suit for more Regain, and he notices, as the Suit crawls out beneath the melon-tinted blanket, that the man's ankles are painted, in imitation of black socks, with something resembling asphalt.

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26. BAD SECTOR

CHEVETTE bought two chicken sandwiches off a cart on the upper level and went back to find Tessa. The wind had shifted, then died down, and with it that pre-storm tension, that weird elation.

Storms were serious business on the bridge, and even a gusty day would up the probability of someone getting hurt. In a rising wind the bridge could feel like a ship, anchored rock solid to the bottom of the bay, but straining. The bridge itself never really moved, no matter what (although she supposed it must have, in the quake, which was why it was no longer used for what it had been built for), but everything that had been added subsequently, all of that, with the wrong kind of luck, could move, and did sometimes with disastrous results. So that was what sent people running, when a wind got up, to check tumbuckles, lengths of aircraft cable, dubious webworks of two-by-four fir.

Skinner had taught her all that, more in passing than as formal lessons, though he'd had his way of giving formal lessons. One of those had been about how it had felt to be out here the night the bridge was first occupied by the homeless. What it had felt like to climb and topple the chainlink barriers, erected after the quake caused enough structural damage to suspend traffic.

Not that long ago, as years were measured, but some kind of lifetime in terms of concept of place. Skinner had shown her pictures, what the bridge looked like before, but she simply can't imagine that people wouldn't have lived here. He'd also shown her drawings of older bridges too, bridges with shops and houses on them, and it just made sense to her. How could you have a bridge and not live on it?

She loves it here, admits it now in her heart, but there is also something in her, watching, that feels not a part of. A self-consciousness, as though she herself is making the sort of docu Tessa wanted to make, some inner version of all the product Carson coordinated for Real One.

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Like she's back, but she isn't. Like she's become something else in the meantime, without noticing, and now she's watching herself being here.

She found Tessa squatting in front of a narrow shopfront, BAD SECTOR spray-bombed across a plywood facade that looks as though it's been painted silver with a broom.

Tessa had God's Little Toy, semi-deflated, on her lap and is fiddling with something near the part that holds the camera. "Ballast," Tessa said, looking up, "always goes first."

"Here," Chevette said, holding out a sandwich, "while it's still warm."

Tessa tucked the Mylar balloon between her knees and accepts the greasy paper packet.

"Got any idea where you want to sleep tonight?" Chevette asked, unwrapping her own sandwich.

"In the van," Tessa said, around a mouthful. "Got bags, foam."

"Not where it is," Chevette told her. "Kinda cannibal, around there."

"Where then?"

"If it's still got wheels, there's a place over by one of the piers, foot of Folsom, where people park and sleep. Cops know about it, but they go easy; easier for them if people all park in one place, to camp. But it can be hard to get a place."

"This is good," Tessa said to her sandwich, wiping grease from her lips with the back of her hand.

"Bridge chickens. Raise 'em over by Oakland, feed 'em scraps and stuff." She bit into her sandwich. The bread was a square bun of sourdough white, dusted with flour. She chewed, staring into the window of this Bad Sector place.

Flat square tabs or sheets of plastic, different sizes and colors, baffled her, but then she got

it: these were data disks, old magnetic media. And those big, round, flat black plastic things were analogue audio media, a mechanical system. You stuck a needle in a spiral scratch and spun the thing. Biting off more sandwich, she stepped past Tessa for a better look. There were reels of fine steel wire, ragged pink cylinders of

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wax with faded paper labels, yellowing transparent plastic reels of quarter-inch brown tape.

Looking past the display, she could see a lot of old hardware side by side on shelves, most of it in that grubby beige plastic. Why had people, for the first twenty years of computing, cased everything in that? Anything digital, from that century it was pretty much guaranteed to be that sad-ass institutional beige, unless they'd wanted it to look more dramatic, more cutting edge, in which case they'd opted for black. But mostly this old stuff was folded in nameless shades of next-to-nothing, nondescript sort-of-tan.

"This is bugged," sighed Tessa, who'd finished her sandwich and gone back to poking at God's Little Toy with the driver. She stuck out her hand, offering Chevette the driver. "Give it back to him, okay?"

"Who?"

"The sumo guy inside"

Chevette took the little micro-torque tool and went into Bad Sector.

There was a Chinese kid behind the counter who looked like he might weigh in somewhere over two hundred pounds. He had that big pumpkin head the sumo guys had too, but his was recently shaven and he had a soul patch. He had a short-sleeve print shirt on, big tropical flowers, and a conical spike of blue Lucite through the lobe of his left ear. He was standing, behind a counter, in front of a wall covered with dog-eared posters advertising extinct game platforms.

"This your driver, right?"

"She have any luck with it?" He made no move to take it.

"I don't think so," Chevette said, "but I think she pinpointed the problem." She heard a faint, rapid clicking. Looked down to see a six-inch robot marching briskly across the countertop on big cartoony feet. It had that man-in-armor look, segmented glossy white shells over shiny steel armatures. She'd seen these before: it was a fully remote peripheral, controlled by a program that would take up most of a standard notebook. It came to a halt, put its hands together, executed a perfect miniature bow, straightened, held up its little clip hands for the driver. She let it take the driver, the pull of the little arms somehow scary. It

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straightened up, putting the driver over its shoulder like a miniature rifle, and gave her a military salute.

Sumo boy was waiting for a reaction, but Chevette wasn't having any. She pointed at the beige hardware. "How come this old shit is always that same color?"

His forehead creased. "There are two theories. One is that it was to help people in the workplace be more comfortable with radically new technologies that would eventually result in the mutation or extinction of the workplace. Hence the almost universal choice, by the manufacturers, of a shade of plastic most often encountered in downscale condoms." He smirked at Chevette.

"Yeah? What's two?"

"That the people who were designing the stuff were unconsciously terrified of their own product, and in order not to scare themselves, kept it looking as unexciting as possible. Literally 'plain vanilla,' you follow me?"

Chevette brought her finger close to the microbot; it did a funny little fall-back-and-shuffle to avoid being touched. "So who's into this old stuff? Collectors?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?"

"Well?"

"Programmers."

"I don't get it," Chevette said.

"Consider," he said, holding out his hand to let the little 'bot offer him the driver, "that when this stuff was new, when they were writing multi-million-line software, the unspoken assumption was that in twenty years that software would have been completely replaced by some better, more evolved version." He took the driver and gestured with it toward the hardware on the shelves. "But the manufacturers were surprised to discover that there was this perverse but powerful resistance to spending tens of millions of dollars to replace existing software, let alone hardware, plus retraining possibly thousands of employees. Follow me?" He raised the driver, sighting down its shaft at her.

"Okay," Chevette said.

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"So when you need the stuff to do new things, or to do old things better, do you write new stuff, from the ground up, or do you patch the old stuff?"

"Patch the old?"

"You got it. Overlay new routines. As the machines got faster, it didn't matter if a routine went through three hundred steps when it could actually be done in three steps. It all happens in a fraction of a second anyway, so who cares?"

"Okay," Chevette said, "so who does care?"

"Smart cookies," he said and scratched his soul patch with the tip of the driver. "Because they understand that all that really happens, these days, is that ancient software is continually encrusted with overlays, to the point where it's literally impossible for any one programmer to fully understand how any given solution is arrived at."

"I still don't see why this stuff would be any help."

"Well, actually," he said, "you're right." He winked at her. "You got it, girl. But the fact remains that there are some very smart people who like to have this stuff around, maybe just to remind themselves where it all comes from and how, really, all any of us do, these days, is just fixes. Nothing new under the sun, you know?"

"Thanks for the screwdriver," Chevette said. "I gotta go see a little black boy now."

"Really? What about?"

"A van," Chevette said.

"Girl," he said, raising his eyebrows, "you deep."

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27. BED-AND-BREAKFAST

RYDELL sees it's dark, down here on the lower level, the narrow thoroughfare crowded and busy, greenish light of scavenged fluorescents seen through swooping bundles of that transparent plumbing, pushcarts rattling past to take up the day's positions. He took a flight of clanging steel stairs, up through a hole cut unevenly in the roadbed above, to the upper level.

Where more light fell, diffused through plastic, shadowed by the jackstraw country suspended above, shacks that were no more than boxes, catwalks in between, sails of wet laundry that had gone back up with the dying of the earlier wind.

Young girl, brown eyes big as the eyes in those old Japanese animations, handing out slips of yellow paper, "BED & BREAKFAST." He studied the map on the back.

He started walking, bag over his shoulder and the GlobEx box under his arm, and in fifteen minutes he'd come upon something announced in pink neon as the Ghetto Chef Beef Bowl. He knew the name from the back of the yellow flyer, where the map gave it as a landmark to find the bed-and-breakfast.

Line up outside Ghetto Chef, a place with steamed-up windows, prices painted in what looked like nail polish on a sheet of cardboard.

He'd only ever been out here once before, and that had been at night in the rain. Seeing it this way, it reminded him of some gated attraction, Nissan County or Skywalker Park, and he wondered how you could have a place like this and not have security or even a basic police presence.

He remembered how Chevette had told him that the bridge people and the police had an understanding: the bridge people stayed on the bridge, mostly, and the police stayed off it, mostly.

He spotted a sheaf of the yellow flyers, thumbtacked to a plywood door, in a wall set back a few feet from the front of Ghetto Chef. It wasn't locked, and opened on a sort of hallway, narrow, walled with taut

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white plastic stapled over a framework of lumber. Somebody had drawn murals on either wall, it looked like, with a heavy black industrial marker, but the walls were too close together to see what the overall sign was about. Stars, fish, circles with Xs through them. . . He had to hold his bag behind him and the GlobEx box in front, to go down the hallway, and when he got to the end he turned a corner and found himself in somebody's windowless kitchen, very small.

The walls, each covered in a different pattern of striped wallpaper, seemed to vibrate. Woman there, stirring something on a little propane cooker. Not that old, but her hair was gray and parted in the middle. Same big eyes as the girl, but hers were gray.

"Bed-and-breakfast?" he asked her.

"Got a reservation?" She wore a man's tweed sports coat, sleeves worn through at the elbows, over a denim jean jacket and a collarless lannel baseball shirt. No makeup. Looked windburned. Big hawk nose.

"I need a reservation?"

"We book through an agency in the city," the woman said, taking the wooden spoon out of whatever was coming to boil there.

"I got this from a girl," Rydell said, showing her the flyer he still held, clutched against his bag.

"You mean she's actually handing them out?"

"Handed me this one," he said.

"You have money?"

"A credit chip," Rydell said. "Any contagious diseases?" "No."

"Are you a drug abuser?"

"No," Rydell said.

"A drug dealer?"

"No."

"Smoke anything? Cigarettes, a pipe?"

"No."

"Are you a violent person?"

Rydell hesitated. "No."

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"More to the point, have you accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior?"

"No," Rydell said, "I haven't."

"That's good," she said, turning down the propane ring. "That's one thing I can't tolerate. Raised by 'em."

"Well," Rydell said, "do I need a reservation to stay here or not?" He was looking around the kitchen, wondering where "here" might be; it was about seven feet on a side, and the doorway he stood in was the only apparent entrance. The wallpaper, which had buckled slightly from cooking steam, made the space look like an amateur stage set or something they'd build for children in a makeshift day care.

"No," she said, "you don't. You've got a handbill."

"You have space?"

"Of course." She took the pot off the cooker, placed it on a round metal tray on the small, white-painted table, and covered it with a clean-looking dish towel. "Go back out the way you came. Go on. I'll follow you."

He did as she said and waited in the open door for her to catch up with him. He saw that the Ghetto Chef line had gotten longer, if anything.

"No," she said, behind him, "up here." He turned and saw her hauling on a length of orange nylon rope, which brought down a counter-weighted aluminum ladder. "Go on up," she said. "I'll send your bags."

Rydell put down his duffel and the GlobEx box and stepped up onto the ladder.

"Go on," she said.

Rydell climbed the ladder to discover an incredibly tiny space he was clearly expected to sleep in. His first thought was that someone had decided to build one of those Japanese coffin hotels out of offcuts from all the cheapest stuff at a discount building supply. The walls were some kind of light-colored wood-look sheathing that imitated bad imitations of some other product that had probably imitated some now-forgotten original. The tiny square of floor nearest him, the only part that wasn't taken up by wall-to-wall bed, was carpeted with some kind of ultra-low-

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pile utility stuff in a weird pale green with orange highlights. There was daylight coming in from the far end, by what he supposed was the head of the bed, but he'd have had to kneel down to make out how that was possible.

"Do you want to take it?" the woman called up.

"Sure do," Rydell said.

"Then pull up your bags."

He looked over and saw her loading his duffel and the GlobEx box into rusty wire hamper she'd hung on the ladder.

"Breakfast at nine, sharp," she said, without looking up, and then she was gone.

Rydell hauled the ladder, with his luggage, up on its orange rope. When he got his stuff out, the ladder stayed up, held by its hidden counterweight.

He got down on his hands and knees and crawled into his bedroom, over the foam slab made up with one of those micro-furry foam-core blankets, to where some sort of multi-paned, semi-hemispherical plastic bibble, probably part of an airplane, had been epoxied into the outer wall. It was thick with salt, outside, looked like a crust of dried spray. It let light in, but just a featureless gray brightness. It looked as though you left with your head right up in there. Okay by him. It smelled funny but not bad. He should've asked her what she charged, but he could do that later.

He sat down on the foot of the bed and took off his shoes. There were holes in the toes of both his black socks. Have to buy more.

He pulled the glasses out of his jacket, put them on, and speed-dialed Laney. He listened to a

phone ringing somewhere in Tokyo and imagined the room it was ringing in, some expensive hotel, or maybe it was ringing on a desk the size of Tong's, but real. Laney answered, nine ring~ in.

'Bad Sector,' Laney said.

'What?'

'The cable. They have it.'

'What cable?'

'The one you need for the projector.'

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Rydell was looking at the GlobEx box. "What projector?"

"The one you picked up from GlobEx today."

"Wait a minute," Rydell said, "how do you know about that?"

There was a pause. "It's what I do, Rydell."

"Listen," Rydell said, "there was trouble, a fight. Not me, another guy, but I was there, involved. They'll check the GlobEx security recordings and they'll know I signed for you, and they'll have footage of me."

"They don't," Laney said.

"Of course they do," protested Rydell, "I was there."

"No," Laney said, "they've got footage of me."

"What are you talking about, Laney?"

"The infinite plasticity of the digital."

"But I signed for it, My name, not yours."

"On a screen, right?"

"Oh." Rydell thought about it. "Who can get into GlobEx and alter that stuff?"

"Not me," said Laney. "But I can see it's been altered."

"So who did it?"

"That's academic at this point."

"What's that mean?" Rydell asked.

"It means don't ask. Where are you?"

"In a bed-and-breakfast on the bridge. Your cough sounds better."

"This blue stuff," Laney said. Rydell had no idea what he meant. "Where's the projector?"

"Like a thermos? Right here."

"Don't take it with you. Find a shop there called Bad Sector and tell them you need the cable."

"What kind of cable?"

"They'll be expecting you," Laney said and hung up.

Rydell sat there on the end of the bed, with the sunglasses on, thoroughly pissed off at Laney. Felt like bagging the whole deal. Get a job back at that parking garage. Sit around and watch nature in downtown Detroit.



Then his work ethic caught up with him. He took off the glasses, put them in his jacket, and started putting his shoes back on.

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28. FOLSOM STREET

FOOT of Folsom in the rain, all these soot-streaked RVs, spavined campers, gut-sprung vehicles of any description, provided that description included old; things that ran, if they ran at all, on gasoline.

"Look at that," Tessa said, as she edged the van past an old Hummer, ex-military, every square inch covered with epoxied micro-junk, a million tiny fragments of the manufactured world glittering in Tessa's headlights and the rain.

"Think there's a spot there," Chevette said, peering through the bad wiper wash. Tessa's van had Malibu-style wiper blades; old and hadn't been wet for quite a while. They'd had to creep this last block along the Embarcadero, when the rain had really started.

It was drumming steadily on the van's flat steel roof now, but Chevette's sense of San Francisco weather told her it wouldn't last all that long.

The black kid with the dreads had earned his fifty. They'd found him crouching there like a gargoyle on the curb, his face somehow already as old as it would ever need to be, smoking Russian cigarettes from a red-and-white pack he kept tucked into the rolled-up sleeve of an old army shirt, three sizes too big. The van still had its wheels on and the tires were intact.

"What do you think he meant," Tessa said, maneuvering between a moss-stained school bus of truly ancient vintage and a delaminating catamaran up on a trailer whose tires had almost entirely rotted away, "when he said somebody was looking for you?"

"I don't know," Chevette said. She'd asked him who, but he'd just shrugged and walked off. This after determinedly trying to hustle Tessa for God's Little Toy. "Maybe if you'd given him the camera platform, he'd've told me."

"No fear," Tessa said, killing the engine. "That's half my share of the Malibu house."

Chevette saw that there were lights on in the tiny cabin of the cat-

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boat, through little slit-like windows, and somebody moving in there. She started cranking down the window beside her, but it stuck after two turns, so she opened the door instead.

"That's Buddy's space there," said a girl, straightening up from the catamaran's hatch, her voice raised above the rain, hoarse and a little frightened. She hunched there, under some old poncho or piece of tarp, and Chevette couldn't make out her face.

"S'cuse us," Chevette said, "but we need to stop for the night, or anyway till this rain lets up."

"Buddy parks there."

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"Why?"

"We'll be out of here dawn tomorrow," Chevette said. "We're just two women. You okay with that?"

The girl raised the tarp a fraction, and Chevette caught a glimpse of her eyes. "Just two of you?"

"Let us stay," Chevette said, "then you won't have to worry who else might come along."

"Well," the girl said. And was gone, ducking back down. Chevette heard the hatch dragged shut. -

"Bugger leaks," Tessa said, examining the roof of the van with a small black flashlight.

"I don't think it'll keep up long," Chevette said.

"But we can park here?"

"Unless Buddy comes back," Chevette said.

Tessa turned the light back into the rear of the van. Where rain was already pooling.

"I'll get the foam and the bags up here," Chevette said. "Keep 'em dry till later, anyway."

She climbed back between the seats.

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29. VICIOUS CYCLE

RYDELL found a map of the bridge in his sunglasses, a shopping and restaurant guide for tourists. It was in Portuguese, but you could toggle to an English version.

It took him a while; a wrong move on the rocker-pad and he'd wind up back in those Metro Rio maps, but finally he'd managed to pull it up. Not a GPS map, just drawings of both levels, set side by side, and he had no way of knowing how up-to-date it was.

His bed-and-breakfast wasn't on it, but Ghetto Chef Beef Bowl was (three and a half stars) and Bad Sector was too.

The lozenge that popped up when he clicked on Bad Sector described it as a source for "retro hard and soft, with an idiosyncratic twentieth-century bent." He wasn't sure about that last part, but he could at least see where the place was: lower level, not far from that bar he'd gone in with Creedmore and the guitar player.

There was a cabinet to put stuff in, behind the triple-faux paneling, so he did: his duffel and the GlobEx box with the thermos thing. He put the switchblade, after some thought, under the foam slab. He considered tossing it into the bay, but he wasn't sure exactly where you could find a clear shot to do that out here. He didn't want to carry it, and anyway he could always toss it later.

It was raining when he came out beside Ghetto Chef Beef Bowl, and he'd seen it rain on the bridge before, when he'd first been here. What happened was that rain fell on the weird jumble of shanty boxes people had built up there and shortly came sluicing down through all of that in big random gouts, like someone was emptying bathtubs. There was no real drainage here, things having been built in the most random way possible, so that the upper level, while sheltered, was no way dry.

This seemed to have thinned the line for the Ghetto Chef, so that he briefly considered eating, but then he thought of how Laney had him on retainer and wanted him to get right over to this Bad Sector and get that cable. So instead he headed down to the lower level.

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The rain had concentrated the action down here, because it was relatively dry. It felt like easing your way through a very long, very homemade rush-hour subway car, except over half the other people were doing that too, in either direction, and the others were standing still, blocking the way and trying hard to sell you things. Rydell eased his wallet out of his right rear pocket and into his right front.

Crowds made Rydell nervous. Well, not crowds so much as crowding. Too close, people up against you. (Someone brushed his back pocket, feeling for the wallet that wasn't there.) Someone shoving those long skinny Mexican fried-dough things at him, repeating a price in Spanish. He felt his shoulders start to bunch.

The smell down here was starting to get to him: sweat and perfume, wet clothing, fried food. He wished he was back in Ghetto Chef Beef Bowl, finding out what those three and a half stars were for.

He couldn't take much more of this, he decided, and looked over the heads of the crowd for another stairway to the upper level. He'd rather get soaked.

But suddenly it opened out into a wider section, the crowd eddying away to either side, where

there were food stalls, cafés, and stores, and there was Bad Sector, right there, done up in what looked to him like old-fashioned aluminum furnace paint.

He tried to shrug the crowd-induced knots out of his shoulders. He was sweating; his heart was pounding. He made himself take a few deep breaths to calm down. Whatever it was he was supposed to be doing here, for Laney, he wanted to do it right. Get all jangled, this way, you never knew what could happen. Calm down. Nobody was losing it here.

He lost it almost immediately.

There was a very large Chinese kid behind the counter, shaved almost bald, with one of those little lip beards that always got on Rydell's nerves. Very large kid, with that weirdly smooth-looking mass that indicated a lot of muscle supporting the weight. Hawaiian shirt with big mauvy-pink orchids on it. Antique gold-framed Ray-Ban aviators and a shit-eating grin. Really it was that grin that did it.

"I need a cable," Rydell said, and his voice sounded breathless, and

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somehow it was not liking to hear himself sound that way that took him the rest of the way over.

"I know what you need," the kid said, making sure Rydell heard the boredom in his voice.

"Then you know what kind of cable I need, right?" Rydell was closer to the counter now. Ragged old posters tacked up behind it, for things with names like Heavy Gear II and T'ai Fu.

"You need two." The grin was gone now, kid trying his best to look hard. 'One's power: jack to any DC source or wall juice with the inbuilt transformer. Think you can manage that?"

"Maybe," Rydell said, getting right up against the front of the counter and bracing his feet, "but tell me about this other one. Like it cables what to what exactly?"

'Tm not paid to tell you that, am I?"

There was a skinny black tool lying on the counter. Some kind of specialist driver. "No," Rydell said, picking up the driver and examining its tip, "but you're going to." He grabbed the kid's left ear with his other hand, pinched off an inch of the driver's shaft between thumb and forefinger, and inserted that into the kid's right nostril. It was easy hanging on to the ear, because the kid had some kind of fat plastic spike through it.

"Uh," the kid said.

"You got a sinus problem?"

"No."

"You could have." He let go of the ear. The kid stood very still. "You aren't going to move, are you?"

"No..

Rydell removed the Ray-Bans, tossing them over his right shoulder. "I'm getting sick of people grinning at me because they know shit I don't. Understand?"

"Okay."

"'Okay' what?"

"Just . . . okay?"

"Okay is: where are the cables?"

"Under the counter."

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'Okay is: where did they come from?"

"Power's standard hut lab grade: transformer, current-scrubber. The other, I can't tell you-"

Rydell moved the tool a fraction of an inch, and the kid's eyes widened. "Not okay," Rydell said.

"I don't know! Know we had to have it assembled to spec, in Fresno. I just work here. Nobody tells me who pays for what." He took a deep, shuddering breath. "If they did, somebody like you'd come in and make me tell, right?"

"Yeah," Rydell said, "and that means people are liable to come in and torture your ass into telling them things you don't even know..

"Look in my shirt pocket," the kid said carefully. "There's an address. Get on there, talk to whoever, maybe they'll tell you."

Rydell gently patted the front of the pocket, making sure there wouldn't be any used needles or other surprises. The massive pad of

muscle behind the pocket gave him pause. He slid two fingers in and came up with a slip of cardboard torn from something larger. Rydell saw the address of a website. "The cable people?"

"Don't know. But I don't know why else I'd be supposed to give it to you."

"And that's all you know?"

"Yes."

"Don't move," said Rydell. He removed the tool from the kid's nostril. "Cables under the counter?"

"Yes."

"I don't think I want you to reach under there."

"Wait," said the kid, raising his hands. "I gotta tell you: there's a 'bot under there. It's got your cables. It just wants to give 'em to you, but I didn't want you to get the wrong idea."

"A 'bot?"

"It's okay!"

Rydell watched as a small, highly polished steel claw appeared, looking a lot like a pair of articulated sugar tongs his mother had owned. It grasped the edge of the counter. Then the thing chinned itself, onehanded, and Rydell saw the head. It got a leg up and mounted the

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counter, pulling a couple of heat-sealed plastic envelopes behind it. Its head was disproportionately small, with a sort of wing-like projection or antenna sticking up on one side. It was in that traditional Japanese style, the one that looked as though a skinny little shiny robot was dressed in oversized white armor, its forearms and ankles wider than its upper arms and thighs. It carried the transparent envelopes, each one containing a carefully wound cable, across the counter, put them down, and backed up. Rydell picked them up, shoved them into the pocket of his khakis, and did a pretty good imitation of the robot, backing up.

As the kid's Ray-Bans came into his peripheral vision, he saw that they hadn't broken,

When he was in the doorway, he tossed the black driver to the kid, who missed catching it. It hit the Heavy Gear II poster and dropped out of sight behind the counter.

RYDELL found a laundromat-café combination, called Vicious Cycle, that had one hotdesk at the back, behind a black plastic curtain. The curtain suggested to him that people used this to access porn sites, but why you'd want to do that in a laundromat was beyond him.

He was glad of the curtain anyway, because he hated the idea of people watching him talk to people who weren't there, so he generally avoided accessing websites in public places. He didn't know why using the phone, audio, wasn't embarrassing that way. It just wasn't. When you were using the phone you didn't actually look like you were talking to people who weren't there, even though you

were. You were talking to the phone. Although, now that he thought about it, using the phone in the earpiece of the Brazilian glasses would look that way too.

So he pulled the curtain shut and stood there in the background rumble of the dryers, a sound he'd always found sort of comforting. The glasses were already cabled to the hotdesk. He put them on and worked the rocker-pad, inputting the address.

There was a brief and probably entirely symbolic passage through some kind of neon rain, heavy on the pinks and greens, and then he was there.

Looking into that same empty space that he'd glimpsed in Tong's

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corridor: some kind of dust-blown, sepulchral courtyard, lit from above by a weird, attenuated light.

This time though, he could look up. He did. He seemed to be standing on the floor of a vast empty air shaft that rose up, canyon-like, between walls of peculiarly textured darkness.

High above, a skylight he guessed to be the size of a large swimming pool passed grimy sunlight through decades of soot and what he took, at this distance, to be drifts of something more solid. Black iron mullions divided long rectangles, some of them holed, as by gunfire, through what he guessed was archaic wire-cored safety glass.

When he lowered his head, they were there, the two of them, seated in strange, Chinese-looking chairs that hadn't been there before.

One of them was a thin, pale man in a dark suit from no particular era, his lips pursed primly. He wore glasses with heavy, rectangular frames of black plastic and a snap-brim hat of a kind that Rydell knew only from old films. The hat was positioned dead level on his head, perhaps an inch above the black frames. His legs were crossed, and Rydell saw that he wore black wingtip oxfords. His hands were folded in his lap.

The other presented in far more abstract form: an only vaguely human figure, the space where its head should have been was coronaed in a cyclical and on-going explosion of blood and matter, as though a sniper's victim, in the instant of impact, had been recorded and looped. The halo of blood and brains flickered, never quite attaining a

steady state. Beneath it, an open mouth, white teeth exposed in a permanent, silent scream. The rest, except for the hands, clawed as in agony around the gleaming arms of the chair, seemed constantly to be dissolving in some terrible fiery wind. Rydell thought of black-and-white footage, ground zero, sb-mo atomic hurricane.

"Mr. Rydell," said the one with the hat, "thank you for coming. You may call me Klaus. This," and he gestured with a pale, papery-looking hand, which immediately returned to his lap, "is the Rooster."

The one called the Rooster didn't move at all when it spoke, but the open mouth flickered in and out of focus. Its voice was either the soundcollage from Tong's or another like it. "Listen to me, Rydell. You are now

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responsible for something of the utmost importance, the greatest possible value. Where is it?"

"I don't know who you are," Rydell said. "I'm not telling you anything."

Neither responded, and then Klaus coughed dryly. "The only proper answer. You would be wise to maintain that position. Indeed, you have no idea who we are, and if we were to reappear to you at some later time, you would have no way of knowing that we were, in fact, us."

"Then why should I listen to you?"

"In your situation," said the Rooster, and its voice, just then, seemed composed primarily of the sound of breaking glass, modulated into the semblance of human speech, "you might be advised to listen to anyone who cares to address you."

"But whether or not you choose to believe what you are told is another matter," said Klaus, fussily adjusting his shirt cuffs and refolding his hands.

"You're hackers," Rydell said.

"Actually," said Klaus, "we might better be described as envoys. We represent," he paused, "another country."

"Though not, of course," said the perpetually disintegrating Rooster, "in any obsolete sense of the merely geopolitical--"

"'Hacker,'" interrupted Klaus, "has certain criminal connotations--"

"Which we do not accept," the Rooster cut in, "having long since established an autonomous reality in which--"

"Quiet," said Klaus, and Rydell had no doubt where the greater authority lay. "Mr. Rydell, your employer, Mr. Laney, has become, for want of a better term, an ally of ours. He has brought a certain situation to our attention, and it is clearly to our advantage to come to his aid."

"\Alhat situation is that?"

"That is difficult to explain," Klaus said. He cleared his throat. "If indeed possible. Mr. Laney is possessed of a most peculiar talent, one which he has very satisfactorily demonstrated to us. We are here to assure you, Mr. Rydell, that the resources of the Walled City will be at your disposal in the coming crisis."

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"What city," Rydell asked, "what crisis?"

"The nodal point," the Rooster said, its voice like the trickle of water far down in some unseen cistern.

"Mr. Rydel!," said Klaus, "you must keep the projector with you at all times. We advise you to use it at the earliest opportunity. Familiarize yourself with her."

"With who?"

"We are concerned," Klaus went on, "that Mr. Laney, for reasons of health, will be unable to continue. We number among us some who are possessed of his talent, but none to such an extraordinary extent. Should Laney be lost to us, Mr. Rydell, we fear that little can be done."

"Jesus," said Rydell, "you think I know what you're talking about?"

"I'm not being deliberately gnostic, Mr. Rydell, I assure you. There is no time for explanations now, and for some things, it seems, there may actually be no explanations. Simply remember what we have told you, and that we are here for you, at this address. And now you must return, immediately, to wherever you have left the projector."

And they were gone, and the black courtyard with them, compacted into a sphere of pink and green fractal neon that left residuals on Rydell's retinas, as it shrank and vanished in the dark behind the Brazilian sunglasses.

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30. ANOTHER ONE

FONTAINE had spent most of the late afternoon on the phone, trying to lay Clarisse's creepy Japanese baby dolls off on a decreasingly likely list of specialist dealers.

He knew it wasn't the thing to do, in terms of realizing optimum cash, but dolls weren't one of his areas of expertise; besides, they gave him the horrors, these Another One replicas.

Specialist dealers wanted low wholesale, basically, so they could whip the big markup to collectors. If you were a collector, Fontaine figured, specialist dealers were nature's way of telling you you had too much money to begin with. But there was always a chance he'd find one who knew somebody, one specific buyer, to go to. That was what Fontaine had been hoping for when he'd

started dialing.

But now it was eight calls later, and he was reduced to talking to this Elliot, in Biscayne Bay, Florida, who he knew had once been put under electronic house arrest for something involving counterfeit Barbies. That was a federal rap, and Fontaine ordinarily avoided people like that, but Elliot did seem to have a line on a buyer. Although he was, as you'd naturally expect, cagey about it.

"Condition," Elliot said. "The three salient points here are condition, condition, and condition."

"Elliot, they look great to me."

"Great' is not on the NAADC grading scale, Fontaine."

Fontaine wasn't sure, but he thought that might be the National Association of Animatronic Doll Collectors. "Elliot, you know I don't know how to rate condition on these things. They've got all their fingers and toes, right? I mean, the fucking things look alive, okay?"

Fontaine heard Elliot sigh. He'd never met the man. "My client," said Elliot, speaking slowly, for stress, "is a condition queen. He wants them minty. He wants them mintier than minty. He wants them mint in box. He wants them new old stock."

"Hey, look," Fontaine said, remembering what Clarisse had said,

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"you don't get these things unused, right? The grandparents bought them as, like, surrogate offspring, right? They were big-ticket items. They got used."

"Not always," said Elliot. "The most desirable pieces, and my client owns several, are replicas ordered just prior to the unexpected death of the grandchild."

Fontaine took the phone from his ear, looking at it as though it were something dirty. "Fucking hell," Fontaine said, under his breath.

'What's that?' Elliot asked. 'What?'

"Sony, Elliot," Fontaine said, putting the phone back to his ear, "gotta take one on the other line. I'll get back to you." Fontaine broke the connection.

He was perched on a tall stool behind the counter. He leaned sideways to look at the Another One dolls in their bag. They looked horrible. They were horrible. Elliot was horrible. Clarisse was horrible too, but now Fontaine lapsed into a brief but intensely erotic fantasy involving none other, with whom he had not been conjugal in some while. That this fantasy literally involved Clarisse exclusively, he took to be significant. That it produced an actual erectile response, he took to be even more significant. He sighed. Adjusted his trousers.

Life, he reflected, was rough as a cob.

Through the sound of rain sluicing down around his shop (he'd rigged gutters) he could hear a faint but rapid clicking from the back room and noted its peculiar regularity. Each one of those clicks, he knew, represented another watch. He'd shown the boy how to call up auctions on the notebook, not Christie's or Antiquorum, but the living messy scrum of the net auctions. He'd shown him how to bookmark too, because he thought that picking what he liked might be fun.

Fontaine sighed again, this time because he had no idea what he would do about the boy. Having taken him in because he'd wanted a closer look at-well, had wanted, did want-the Jaeger-LeCoultre militar~ç Fontaine would have found it impossible to explain to anyone why he had subsequently fed him, gotten him showered, bought him fresh clothes, and shown him how to use the eyephones. Actually he couldn't explain it to himself. He was not inclined to charity, he didn't

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think, but sometimes he found himself moving as if to right a particular wrong in the world. And this never made sense to Fontaine, really, because what he made right, he made right only for a little while, and nothing ever really changed.

This boy now, he very likely had some sort of brain damage, and most likely congenital, but Fontaine believed that trouble had no first cause. There was sheer bad luck, he knew that, but often as not he'd seen how cruelty or neglect or hard-luck genetics came twining up through the generations like a vine.

Now he dug down deep, into the pocket of his tweed slacks, where he was keeping the Jaeger-LeCoultre. By itself, of course, so that nothing else would scratch it. He pulled it out now and considered it, but the tenor of his thoughts prevented the momentary distraction, the small pleasure, he'd hoped to take from it.

But how on earth, he wondered, had the boy gotten hold of something like this, such an elegant piece of serious collector's ordnance?

And the workmanship of the strap worried him. He'd never seen anything quite like it, for all that it was very simple. An artisan had sat down with the watch, whose lugs were closed not by spring bars but permanently soldered rods of stainless steel, integral parts of the case, and cut and glued and hand stitched however many pieces of black calf leather. He examined the inside of the strap, but there was nothing, no trademark or signature. "If you could talk," Fontaine said, looking at the watch.

And what would it tell him? he wondered. The story of how the boy had gotten it might turn out to be not the most unlikely adventure it had had. Briefly he imagined it on some officer's wrist out in the Burmese night, a star shell bursting above a jungle hillside, monkeys screaming...

Did they have monkeys in Burma? He did know the British had fought there when this had been issued.

He looked down through the scratched, greenish glass that topped the counter. Watches there, each face to him a tiny and contained poem, a pocket museum, subject over time to laws of entropy and of chance. These tiny mechanisms, their jeweled hearts beating. Wearing down, he

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knew, through the friction of metal on metal. I-be sold nothing unserviced, everything cleaned and lubricated. He took fresh stock to a sullen but highly skilled Pole in Oakland to be cleaned, oiled, and timed. And he did this, he knew, not to provide a better, more reliable product, but to ensure that each one might better survive in an essentially hostile universe. It would've been difficult to admit this to anyone, but it was true and he knew it.

He put the Jaeger-LeCoultre back in his pocket and slid from the stool. Stood staring blankly into a glass-fronted cabinet, the shelf at eye level displaying military Dinky Toys and a Randall Model 15 "Airman," a stocky-looking combat knife with a saw-toothed spine and black Micarta grips. The Dinky Toys had been played with; dull gray base metal showed through chipped green paint. The Randall was mint, unused, unsharpened, its stainless steel blade exactly as it left the grinding belt. Fontaine wondered how many such had in fact never been used. Totemic objects, they lost considerable resale value if sharpened, and it was his impression that they circulated almost as a species of ritual currency, quite exclusively masculine. He had two currently in stock, the other a hiltless little leaf-point dirk said to have been designed for the US Secret Service. Best dated by the name of the maker on their saddle-sewn sheaths, he estimated them both to be about thirty years old. Such things were devoid of much poetry for Fontaine, although he understood the market and how to value a piece. They spoke to him mainly, as did the window of any army surplus store, of male fear and powerlessness. He turned away now, seeing the dying eyes of a man he'd shot in Cleveland, possibly in the year one of those knives had been made.

He locked the door, put the CLOSED sign up, and went into the back room where he found the boy still seated, cross-legged, as he'd left him, his face hidden by the massive old eyephones cabled to the open notebook in his lap.

"Hey," Fontaine said, "How's fishin'? You been finding anything you think we should bid on?"

The boy continued to monotonously click a single key on the notebook, the eyephones bobbing slightly in time.

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"Hey," Fontaine said. "You gonna get netburn."



He squatted beside the boy, wincing at the pain it brought to his knees. He rapped once on the gray cowl of the eyephones, then gently removed them. The boy's eyes blinked furiously, swimming in the vanished light of the miniature video screens. His hand clicked the notebook a few times, then stopped.

"Let's see what you found," Fontaine said, taking the notebook from him. He absently touched a few keys, curious to see what the boy might have bookmarked.

He was expecting auction pages, each one with a scan and description of a given watch on offer, but what he found instead were numbered lists of articles that came up in an archaic font meant to recall typewriters.

He studied one list, then another. He felt something like cold air across the back of his neck and thought for a second that the front door was open, but then he remembered locking it.

"Shit," Fontaine said, pulling up more of these lists. "Shit, how'd you get this?"

These were bank records, confidential tallies of the contents of safety deposit boxes in banks of the brick-and-mortar sort, all apparently in midwestern states. And each list he saw contained at least one watch, very likely part of someone's estate, and very likely forgotten.

A Rolex Explorer in Kansas City. Some sort of gold Patek in a small town in Kansas.

He looked from the screen to the boy, aware of being privy to something profoundly anomalous.

"How'd you get into these files?" he asked. "This stuff is private. Should be impossible. Is impossible. How'd you do it?"

And only that absence behind the brown eyes, staring back at him, either infinitely deep or of no depth at all, he couldn't tell.

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31. VIEW FROM A HELLWARD STANCHION

HE dreams a vast elevator, descending, its floor like the ballroom of some ancient liner. Its sides are open, in part, and he finds her there at the rail, beside an ornate cast-iron stanchion worked in cherubs and bunches of grapes, their outlines softened beneath innumerable coats of a black enamel glossy as wet ink.

Beyond the black stanchion and the aching geometry of her profile, a darkened world spreads to every horizon, island continents blacker

than the seas in which they swim, the lights of great yet nameless cities reduced to firefly glimmers at this height, this distance.

The elevator, this ballroom, this waltzing host unseen now but sensed as background, as necessary gestalt, descends it seems down all his days, in some coded iteration of the history that brings him to this night.

If it is night.

The knife's plain haft, against his ribs, through a starched evening shirt.

The handles of a craftsman's tools bespeak an absolute simplicity, the plainest forms affording the greatest range of possibilities for the user's hand.

That which is overdesigned, too highly specific, anticipates outcome; the anticipation of outcome guarantees, if not failure, the absence of grace.

And now she turns to him, and she is in that instant all she ever was to him, and something more, for he is aware in that same instant that this is a dream, this mighty cage, descending, and she is lost, as ever, and now he opens his eyes to the gray and perfectly neutral ceiling of the bedroom on Russian Hill.

He lies dead straight, atop the blanket of gray lambs wool made up in military fashion, in his

gray flannel shirt with its platinum links, his black trousers, his black wool socks. His hands are folded on his chest

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like the hands of a medieval effigy, a knight atop his own sarcophagus, and the telephone is ringing.

He touches one of the platinum cuff links, to answer.

"It isn't too late, I hope," says the voice.

'For what?' he asks, unmoving.

"I needed to talk." "Do you?" "More so, lately" "And why is that?" "The time draws near."

'The time?' And he sees again the view from the huge cage, descending.

"Can't you feel it? You with your right place at the right time. You with your letting things unfold. Can't you feel it?"

"I do not deal in outcomes."

"But you do," the voice says. "You've dealt a few for me, after all. You become an outcome."

"No," the man says, "I simply discover that place where I am supposed to be."

"You make it sound so simple. I wish that it were that simple for me."

"It could be," the man says, "but you are addicted to complexity"

"More literally than you know~" says the voice, and the man imagines the few square inches of satellite circuitry through which it comes to him. That tiniest and mostly costly of principalities. "It's all about complexity now."

"It is about your will in the world," the man says and raises his arms, cupping the back of his head in his hands.

There follows a silence.

"There was a time," the voice says at last, "when I believed that you were playing a game with me. That all of that was something you made up for me. To annoy me. Or amuse me. To hold my interest. To ensure my patronage."

"I have never been in need of your patronage," the man says mildly.

"No, I suppose not," the voice continues. "There will always be

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those who need certain others not to be, and will pay to make it so. But it's true: I took you to be another mercenary, one with an expressed philosophy perhaps, but I took that philosophy to be nothing more than a way you had discovered of making yourself interesting, of setting yourself apart from the pack."

"Where I am," the man says to the gray neutral ceiling, "there is no pack."

"Oh, there's a pack all right. Bright young things guaranteeing executive outcomes. Brochures. They have brochures. And lines to read between. What were you doing when I called?"

"Dreaming," the man says.

"I wouldn't have imagined, somehow, that you dream. Was it a good dream?"

The man considers the perfect blankness of the gray ceiling. Remembered geometry of facial bone threatens to form there. He closes his eyes. "I was dreaming of hell," he says.

"How was it?"

"An elevator, descending."

"Christ," says the voice, "this poetry is unlike you." Another silence follows.

The man sits up. Feels the smooth, dark polished wood, cool through his black socks. He begins to perform a series of very specific

exercercises that involve a minimum of visible movement. There is stiff-ness in his shoulders. At some distance he hears a car go past, tires on wet pavement.

"I'm not very far from you at the moment," the man says, breaking the silence. "I'm in San Francisco."

Now it is the man's turn for silence. He continues his exercises, remembering the Cuban beach, decades ago, on which he was first  
- - - taught this sequence and its variations. His teacher that day the master

of a school of Argentine knife-fighting most authoritatively declared nonexistent by responsible scholars of the martial arts.

"How long has it been," the voice asks, "since we've spoken, faceto-face?"

"Some years," says the man.

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"I think I need to see you now. Something extraordinary is on the verge of happening."

"Really," says the man, and no one sees his brief and wolfish smile, "are you about to become contented?"

A laugh, beamed down from the secret streets of that subminiature cityscape in geosynchronous orbit. "Not that extraordinary, no. But some very basic state is on the brink of change, and we are near its locus."

"We? We have no current involvement."

"Physically Geographically. It's happening here."

The man moves into the final sequence of the exercise, remembering flies on the instructor's face during that initial demonstration.

"Why did you go to the bridge last night?"

"I needed to think," the man says and stands.

"Nothing drew you there?"

Memory. Loss. Flesh-ghost in Market Street. The smell of cigarettes in her hair. Her winter lips chill against his, opening into warmth. "Nothing," he says, hands closing on nothing.

"It's time for us to meet," the voice says.

Hands opening. Releasing nothing.

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- - 32. LOWER COMPANIONS

THE back of the van collected a quarter-inch of water before the rain quit. "Cardboard," Chevette told Tessa.

"Cardboard?"

"We'll find some, dry. Boxes. Open 'em out, put down a couple of layers. Be dry enough."

Tessa clicked her flashlight on and had another look. "We're going to sleep in that puddle?"

"It's interstitial," Chevette told her.

Tessa turned the light off, swung around. "Look," she said, pointing with the flashlight, "at least it isn't pissing down now. Let's go back to

the bridge. Find a pub, something to eat, we'll worry about this later." Chevette said that would be fine, just as long as Tessa didn't bring

God's Little Toy, or in any other way record the rest of the evening, and Tessa agreed to that.

They left the van parked there, and walked back along the Embarcadero, past razor wire and barricades that sealed (ineffectually,

Chevette knew) the ruined piers. There were dealers in the shadows there, and before they'd gotten to the bridge they were offered speed, plug, weed, opium, and dancer. Chevette explained that these dealers weren't sufficiently competitive to take and hold positions farther along,

nearer the bridge. Those were the coveted spots, and the dealers along the Embarcadero were either moving toward or away from that particular arena.

"How do they compete?" Tessa asked. "Do they fight?"

"No," said Chevette, "it's the market, right? The ones with good shit, good prices, and they turn up, well, the users want to see them. Somebody came with bad shit, bad prices, the users drive 'em off. But you can see them change, when you live here; see 'em every day, most of that stuff, if they're using themselves, it'll take 'em down. Wind up back down here, then you just don't see 'em."

"They don't sell on the bridge?"

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"Well," Chevette said, "yeah, they do, hut not so much. And when they do, they're quieter about it. You don't get offered on the bridge, so much, not if they don't know you."

"So how is it like that?" Tessa asked. "How do people know not to? Where does the rule come from?"

Chevette thought about it. "It isn't a rule," she said. "It's just you aren't supposed to do it." Then she laughed. "I don't know: it's just like that. Like there aren't too many fights, but the ones there are tend to be serious, and people get hurt."

"How many people actually live out here?" Tessa asked as they walked up the ramp from Bryant.

"I don't know," Chevette said. "Not sure anyone does. Used to be, everyone who did anything here, who had a business going, they lived here. 'Cause you have to. Have to be in possession. No rent or anything. Now, though, you get businesses that are run like businesses, you know? That Bad Sector we were in. Somebody owns all that stock, they built that storefront, and I bet they pay that sumo boy to sleep in the back, hold it down for them."

"But you didn't work here, when you lived here?"

"Nah," Chevette said, "I was messin', soon as I could. Got myself a bike and I was all over town."

They made their way into the lower level, past boxes of fish on ice, until they came to a place Chevette remembered on the south side. It had food sometimes, sometimes music, and it had no name.

"They do good hot wings in here," Chevette said. "You like hot wings?"

"I'll let you know after I've had a beer." Tessa was looking around at the place, like she was trying to decide how interstitial it was.

It turned out they had an Australian beer Tessa really liked, called a Redback, came in a brown bottle with a red spider on it, and Tessa explained that these spiders were the Australian equivalent of a black widow, maybe worse. It was a good beer though, Chevette had to agree, and after they'd both had one, and ordered another, Tessa ordered a cheeseburger, and Chevette ordered a plate of hot wings and a side of fries.

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This place really smelled like a bar: stale beer, smoke, fry grease, sweat. She remembered the first bars she'd ever gone into, places along rural highways back up in Oregon, and they'd smelled like this. The bars Carson had taken her to in LA hadn't smelled like anything much. Like aromatherapy candles, sort of.

There was a stage down at one end, just a low black platform raised about a foot above the floor, and there were musicians there, setting up, plugging things in. There was some kind of keyboard, drums, a mike stand. Chevette had never been that much into music, not any particular kind, although in her messenger days she'd gotten to like dancing in clubs, in San Francisco. Carson, though, he'd been very particular about what music he liked, and had tried to teach Chevette to appreciate it like he did, but she just hadn't gotten with it at all. He was into this twentieth-century stuff, a lot of it French, particularly this Serge Something, really creepy-ass, sounded like the guy was being slowly jerked off while he sang, but like it really wasn't even doing that much for him. She'd bought this new Chrome Koran, "My War Is My War," sort of out of self-defense, but she hadn't even liked it that much herself, and the one time she'd put it on, when Carson was there, he'd looked at her like she'd shit on his broadloom or something.

These guys, now, setting up on the little stage, they weren't bridge people, but she knew that there were musicians, some of them famous, who'd come out and record on the bridge just so they could say they had.

There was a big man up there, with a white, stubbly face and a sort of mashed-up cowboy hat on the back of his head. He was fiddling with an unplugged guitar and listening to a smaller man in jeans, wearing a belt buckle like an engraved silver dinner platter.

"Hey," Chevette said, indicating the bottle-blonde man with the belt buckle, "this girl gets molested in the dark, tells 'em it was a mesh-back did it. 'Well,' they say, 'how you know it was, if it was dark?' 'Cause he had a tiny little dick and a great big belt buckle!'"

"What's a meshback?" Tessa tilted back the last of her beer.

"Redneck, Skinner called 'em," Chevette said. "It's from those nylon baseball caps they used to wear, got black nylon mesh on the back, for ventilation? My mother used to call those 'gimme' hats. .

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"Why?" Tessa asked her.

"'Gimme one them hats.' Give 'em away free with advertising on them."

"Country music, that sort of thing?"

"Well, more like Dukes of Nuke 'Em and stuff. I don't think that's country music."

"It's the music of a disenfranchised, mostly white proletariat," Tessa said, "barely hanging on in post-post-industrial America. Or that's what they'd say on Real One. But we have that joke about the big buckles in Australia, except it's about pilots and wristwatches."

Chevette thought the man with the belt buckle was staring back at her, so she looked in the other direction, at the crowd around the pool table, and here there actually were a couple of the meshbacked hats, so she pointed these out to Tessa by way of illustration.

"Excuse me, ladies," someone said, a woman, and Chevette turned to face directly into the line of fire of some very serious bosom, laced up into a shiny black top. Huge cloud of blowsy blonde hair a Ia Ashleigh Modine Carter, who Chevette thought of as a singer meshbacks would listen to, if they listened to women, which she wasn't certain they did. The woman put two freshly opened Redbacks down on their table. "With Mr. Creedmore's compliments," she said, beaming at them.

"Mr. Creedmore?" Tessa asked.

"Buell Creedmore, honey," the woman said. "That's him over there getting ready to do the sound check with the legendary Randy Shoats."

"Is he a musician?"

"He's a singer, honey," the woman said and seemed to look more closely at Tessa. "You A&R?"

"No," Chevette said.

"Damn," the woman said, and Chevette thought for a second she might take the beers back. "I thought you might be from an alternative label."

"Alternative to what?" Tessa asked.

The woman brightened. "Buell's singing, honey. It isn't like what you probably think of as country. Well, actually, it's a 'roots' thing. Buell wants to take it back, back there past Waylon and Willie, to some kinda

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dark 'primal kinda heartland.' Kinda. Thing." The woman beamed, eyes slightly unfocused. Chevette got the feeling that all of that had been memorized, and maybe not too well, but that it was her job to get it out.

"Randy, he was teaching Buell one earlier, called 'There Was

Whiskey and Blood on the Highway, but I Didn't Hear Nobody Pray'

That's a hymn, honey. Very traditional. Give me goosebumps to hear it.

I think it's called that, anyway. But tonight's set is going to be 'more

upbeat, electric.'"

"Cheers," Tessa said, "ta for the lager."

The woman looked puzzled. "Oh. You're welcome, honey. Please do stick around for the set. It's Buell's Northern California debut, and the first time he's actually sung with his Lower Companions."

"His what?" Chevette asked.

"'Buell Creedmore and his Lower Companions.' I think it's a biblical reference, though I can't quote you chapter and verse." The woman

pointed her straining bosom toward the stage and resolutely followed it in that direction.

Chevette didn't really want another beer. "She bought us these because she thought we were A&R." She knew about that because of

Carson. A&R were the people in the music business who found and developed talent.

- Tessa took a pull on her beer and watched the woman, who'd stopped to talk to one of the boys from the pool table, one of the ones

who was actually wearing a meshbacked cap. "Do people like her live here?"

"No," Chevette said, "there's clubs in the city for this kind of thing, or sort of like it, but I've never seen a crowd like this out here before."

The sound check consisted of the man with the squashed cowboy hat playing guitar and the man with the belt buckle singing. They

stopped and started a few times, on the one song they did, for various twiddlings of knobs, but the guitarist could really play (Chevette got the feeling he wasn't really letting it out yet, what he could do) and the singer could sing. It was a song about being sad and being tired of being sad,

The bar, meanwhile, was starting to fill up, with what looked to be

a bunch of locals, regulars, and a hunch who weren't, who were here to hear the hand. The locals tended to tattoos, facial piercings, and asymmetrical haircuts, while the visitors tended to hats (meshback and cowboy, mostly), jeans, and (on the men, anyway) guts. The guts tended to be the kind that looked as though they had moved in while their owners were unaware and had taken up residence on otherwise fat-free frames. The kind of gut that hangs over the top of a pair of jeans with a reasonably small waistband, swelling the front of a flannel shirt but cinched back in, below, with one of those big buckles.

She'd started on Creedmore's Redback out of boredom, when she spotted the singer himself headed their way. He had borrowed someone's meshbacked cap and pulled it on backward, over his weirdly wet-looking bleach-blonde hair. He was wearing an electric-blue cowboy shirt with the store creases still in it, horizontal across the chest, and the white pearlized snaps open halfway down the front, revealing a pale, white, decidedly concave chest that wasn't at all the color of his face, which she figured was painted on. He had what looked like tomato juice in each hand, in a tall glass with ice. "How do," he said. "Saw that Maryalice over here. Thought I'd bring the old girl a drink. I'm Buell Creedmore. You ladies enjoyin' your beer?"

"Yes, thanks," said Tessa and looked in the opposite direction. Creedmore did a quick, and to Chevette very obvious, piece of mental calculation, Chevette coming up as the one more likely to be profitably hit on. "You hear about us in the city here or over in Oakland?"

"We're just here for the hot wings," Chevette said, indicating the plate of chicken bones in front of her.

"They any good?"

"They're okay," Chevette said. "But we're just leaving."

"Leaving?" Creedmore took a big swig of his tomato juice. "Hell, we're on in ten. You oughta stay 'n'hear us." There was some weird-looking, greenish-sandy stuff, Chevette saw, around the rims of the glasses, and now some of this was stuck on Creedmore's upper lip.

"Vs/hat you doin' with those Caesar's, Buell?" It was the big guitarist. "Now you promised me you wouldn't drink before the set."

"For Maryalice," Creedmore said, gesturing with a glass, "and this

here's for the pretty lady." He put the one he'd had the swig from down in front of Chevette.

"So how come you got that garlic salt on your mouth?" the big man asked.

Creedmore grinned and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "Nerves, Randy. Big night. Gonna be okay..

"It better be, Buell. I don't see some evidence you can hold your liquor, be the last gig you ever play with me." The guitarist took the drink out of Creedmore's hand, took a sip, made a face, and walked off, taking the drink with him.

"Sons of bitches," Creedmore said.

And it was at this point that Chevette saw Carson enter the bar. Recognition, on her part, was instantaneous and one-hundred-percent positive. It was not Carson as dressed for lounges that smelled like aromatherapy, but Carson dressed for the knowing exploration of the lower reaches. Chevette had actually been with him when he bought this outfit, so she'd had to hear about how the jacket was Alaskan steerhide (Alaskan steers having thicker hides, due to the cold winters), and a museum-grade reproduction of a 1940s original. The jeans were nearly as expensive, and more complicated in their sourcing, the denim woven in Japan on ancient, lovingly maintained American looms and then finished in Tunisia to the specifications of a team of Dutch designers and garment historians. This was the kind of stuff that Carson cared deeply about, this absolutely authentic fake stuff, and when Chevette saw him step through that entrance, she had absolutely no doubt that it was him.

And also, though she couldn't have said exactly how, she knew that she was in trouble. Maybe, she'd think later, it had been because he hadn't known she was looking, so he hadn't really been bothering to be the guy he had always pretended to be when he was with her, when he'd known she

was looking.

It was like seeing a different guy, a very scary, very cold, very angry guy, and knowing it was Carson. Carson turning to scan the bar- What she did next surprised her It must have surprised Creedmore even more The top of the huge silver buckle made a convenient

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handle. She grabbed it, pulled, and brought him down, loose-kneed, to kiss his mouth, throwing her arms around his neck and hoping the back of his head, in the backward meshback hat, was between her face and Carson's.

Creedmore's ready enthusiasm was, unfortunately, about what she'd have expected, had she had the time to think.

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33. DURIOUS

RYDELL was midway back, through that lower-level crunch, when his sunglasses rang. He got his back to the nearest wall, took them out, opened them, put them on.

"Rydell?"

"Yeah?"

"Durius, man. How are you?"

"Fine," Rydell said. The glasses were acting up; weirdly elongated segments of Rio street maps were scrolling down his field of vision.

"How are you?" He heard the whine of a drill or power driver, somewhere in LA. "You at the Dragon?"

Durius said, "we got major construction under way here." What for.

"Don't know," Durius said. "They're putting in a new node, back by the ATM. Where they had the baby food and child care products before, you know? Park won't say what it is; don't think he knows. All the

branches gettin' 'em, whatever they are. How's your ride up? How's that ~i Creedmore?"

"I think he's an alcoholic, Durius."

"No shit," Durius said. "How's the new job?"

"Well," Rydell said, "I don't think I've figured out much about it yet, but it's getting interesting."

"That's good," Durius said. "Well, just wanted to see how you're doing. Praisegod, she says hi. Wants to know if you like the glasses."

The Rio street maps shuddered, contracted, stretched again. "Tell her they're great," Rydell said. "Tell her thanks." "Will do," said Durius. "You take care."

"You too," Rydell said, the maps vanishing as Durius hung up. Rydell removed the glasses and put them away.

Beef bowl. Maybe he could grab some Ghetto Chef Beef Bowl on the way back.

Then he thought about Klaus and the Rooster and decided bed better check on the thermos first.

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WHATS this look like to you, Martial?" Fontaine asked his lawyer, Martial Matitse, of Matitse Rapelego Njembo, whose premises consisted of three notebooks and an antique Chinese bicycle.

Martial made tooth-sucking noises on the other end of the line, and Fontaine knew he was looking at the lists the boy had pulled up. "They seem to be lists of the contents of safety deposit boxes, as required under state law in various jurisdictions. Antiterrorist legislation. Keeps people from stashing drug precursors, nuclear warheads, like that. Plus it was supposed to help prevent money laundering, but that was when money could still be big stacks of green paper. But if I were you, Fontaine, I would be asking my lawyer a different question. To wit: am I not breaking the law by being in possession of these documents?"

"Am I?" Fontaine asked.

Martial maintained telephone silence for a few seconds. "Yes," he said, "you are. But it depends



on how you got them. And I have just determined that the actual owners of the listed properties, in every case, are dead."

"Dead?"

"Entirely. These are probate documents. Still protected by law, but I would say that some items on these lists are property to be auctioned off as the various estates are executed."

Fontaine looked over his shoulder and saw the boy, still seated on the floor, down his third iced-guava smoothie.

"How did you get these?" Martial asked.

"I'm not sure," Fontaine said.

"You aren't supposed to be able to decrypt files like this," Martial said. "Not unless you're the fed. If someone else does the decryption, it's merely a privacy issue insofar as you're concerned. But if you're doing this yourself, or are knowingly party to it, you are in possession of or are party to possession of proscribed technology which can earn you a stay

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34. MARKET DISCONTINUITIES

in one of those extremely efficient prisons the private sector has done such a fine job of building and maintaining."

"I'm not," said Fontaine.

"Be that as it may," said Martial, "if you were, you might be able, through judicious application, and with all due secrecy, to use said technology to reveal certain lucrative market discontinuities. Follow me, Fontaine?"

"No," said Fontaine.

"Put it this way: if you have a way of getting hold of documents nobody else can, you might want to talk about it with someone who'd have an idea of exactly which documents might be most lucratively obtained."

"Hey, Martial, I'm not into-"

"Fontaine, please. Anyone who sells secondhand cutlery and old rat-sucked toys, I understand it's an avocation. A calling. You are not in it for the money, I know. However, if you have a back channel into something else, I advise you to consult with your lawyer, me, at your very earliest. Hear me?"

"Martial, I don't-"

"Clarisse has been making inquiries of another partner in our firm, Fontaine. I tell you that in confidence."

Fontaine was not happy to hear it.

"She is talking divorce, my friend,"

"Gotta go, Martial. Customers."

Fontaine hung up. Martial's news about Clarisse was not all that new to Fontaine, but he had been so far successful in avoiding thinking about it.

He became aware of a soft, steady clicking and turned to see that the boy had put the eyephones back on.

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CHEVETTE hadn't closed her eyes when she'd pulled Creedmore down and kissed him, but with her arms locked around his neck, to hold him there and hide her from Carson, she couldn't see past the sleeve of Skinner's jacket. What she could see, past an out-of-focus view of Creedmore's cheekbone

and left ear, was an adrenaline-sharp shot of Carson's progress through the crowd. This was sufficiently arresting that she had managed to ignore Creedmore's response, which had his tongue trying apparently to subdue hers with a so-far unsuccessful combination of speed and leverage, and his hands, up under Skinner's jacket, hunting frantically for nipple.

The crystal-clear shot of Carson was eclipsed by a close-up of Tessa, eyes wide with amazement and about to burst out laughing, just as Creedmore found one of the nipples he was after, and Chevette, in pure reflex, let go of his neck with her left arm and punched him, as hard and as discreetly as possible, in the ribs, going in with all the knuckle she could leverage.

Creedmore's eyes flew open, blue and bloodshot, and Chevette let go of him, ducked off her chair, and rolled under the table, all on automatic now. She thought she heard Creedmore's head hit the table as he tried to follow her, but now that he didn't have his mouth actually on hers, she was aware of the taste of it, and something naggingly familiar there, but that was just something her mind was doing while her body took her out of there the quickest way it saw. Which was a scramble on hands and knees, still under the table; out on the floor, still crouching but getting up speed; sprinting, still bent low, arms up to block anyone who might try to stop her; out through the door.

Where instinct, something, some recollection, took her right, toward Oakland.

And she didn't slow down until she felt it was safe to, but by then she'd realized what the taste in Creedmore's mouth was: dancer, and she wondered how much of that she'd taken on. Not much, probably,

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35. ON AUTOMATIC

but she could feel it in the pounding of her heart, see it in a faint aura around every source of light now, and know it in the fact that none of what had just happened actually bothered her, very much.

Trouble could look abstract, on dancer.

Carson, she thought, was trouble, and seeing the look on his face then, a look she'd suspected, she now thought, but had never quite managed to catch there, had made her scared of him. She'd been scared of him since the time he'd hit her, but she hadn't understood it in quite the same way. He hadn't really hurt her much, not physically, when he'd hit her. She was coming from a place where she'd seen people maimed, hurt really bad, and this cute media boy, who didn't even know how to punch, how dangerous was that?

But now she saw, the residual drug in Creedmore's saliva having its effect, that what she'd been afraid of wasn't that he'd hit her that time, or the possibility he'd do it again, but some instinctive, underlying recognition that there was something wrong, something way worse. That he was bad news and covered it up. Always, more carefully even than he chose his clothes.

And Tessa, when Chevette had had the conversation with her that had resulted in her moving to Malibu, had said that she envied men the inability to get it up, when there was something wrong. Even if they don't consciously know, Tessa said, it won't happen. But we don't have that, so something can be just as wrong as can be, and we still stay. But you can't stay if he's hit you, because he'll do it again.

Walking on, toward Treasure now, the bridge gone spectral, monochrome, and maybe that was the dancer too, she didn't know.

"Out of control," she said. That was how she felt her life was now. She was just reacting to things. She stopped. Maybe she was just reacting to Carson.

"Hey. Chevette."

Turning to see a face she knew, though she couldn't put a name to it. Ragged pale hair above a thin hard face, bad scar snaking his left cheek. A sometime messenger from her Allied days, not part of her crew but a face from parties. "Heron," the name came to her.

"I thought you were gone," Heron said, displaying broken teeth.

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Maybe something broken in his head too, it struck her. Or maybe just some substance, tonight.

"I was," Chevette said.

"Where?"

"SoCal."

"You ride down there? Messenger?"

"No," she said.

"I can't ride now," Heron said and swung his left leg, rigid, forward, catching his weight on it, something wrong there with his knee. "Tangled with a cage." A car, and she thought how long it had been since she'd heard that.

"You get insurance?"

"Shit no, cage from DoJ City." The Department of Justice. "I got lawyers on it, but Crooked shrug. "One of my lawyers, Njembo, you know those three guys? Refugees from the African Union, right? Njembo, he knows that Fontaine. You know Fontaine, right?"

"Yeah," Chevette said, glancing back over her shoulder. "He still out by Oakland, wives and kids?"

"No," Heron said, "no, he's got a shop, just up there." He pointed. "Sleeps there. Sells stuff to tourists. Njembo says his wives are after his ass." He squinted at her, the scar on his cheek catching the light. "You look good. Hair's different."

Something in that flash of scar catching in the edge of Creedmore's spit-high; she shivered, the dancer dealing her cards of Carson walking this way, that same expression on his face, hands in the pockets of his leather jacket.

"Good to see you, Heron."

"Yeah," he said, something sullen and untrusting, maybe longing, evident there, and again the crooked shrug, maybe just to shake some pain from his shoulders. He looked down and set off back the way she'd come, and she saw how twisted the accident had left him, hobbling, swinging his stiff leg as he went.

She zipped up Skinner's jacket and went looking for Fontaine's shop, wondering if she'd know it if she found it.

ISO

36. FAMOUS ASPECT

RYDELL bought a white foam take-out beef bowl from Ghetto Chef, then had to figure out how to get up the ladder one-handed, without spilling it.

Climbing a ladder with something hot in one hand was one of those things that you never ordinarily thought about, but that turned out to be difficult. You can't safely tuck a hot beef bowl under your arm, and when you climb with only one hand, you've got to move that hand fast, keep catching those rungs.

But he got up there, didn't spill any, and then he put it down while he unlocked the two-by-four and chicken-wire security grid. This had a chrome-plated Nepalese padlock on either side, and he'd found the keys, earlier, hanging on a nail. It was one of those deeply pointless arrangements, in terms of security, because anyone who wanted in could boltcut the padlocks, pry their hasps out of the wood, or just yank the chicken wire until the staples pulled out. On the other hand, if you went out, left it unlocked, and somebody took your stuff with no effort at all, he guessed you'd feel even stupider.

When he got it open, he settled down on the foot of the bed with his beef bowl and the plastic spoon they'd given him. He was just inhaling the steam when it came to him he should check on the

thermos-thing. The projector, Laney had called it. He sighed, put his beef bowl down, and got up (well, he had to crouch).

The GlobEx box was in the cabinet there, beside his bag, and the spun-metal cylinder was in the GlobEx box.

He sat back down, with the GlobEx box next to him on the bed, and got to work on his beef bowl, which was worth waiting for. It was strange how this kind of shaved, basically overcooked mystery meat, which he guessed really was, probably, beef, could be tastier, under the right circumstances, than a really good steak. He ate the whole thing, every last grain of rice and drop of broth and figured the tourist-trap map had put their three stars and a half in the right place.

ALL TOMORROW~S PARTIES

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Then he opened the GlobEx box and got the thermos-thing out. He looked at the FAMOUS ASPECT sticker again, and it didn't tell him any more than it had before. He stood the thing up on its base, on the green-and-orange carpet, and crawled back up the bed to get the switchblade. He used that to slice open the plastic envelopes containing the two cables and sat there looking at them.

The one that was standard power just looked like what you used to run a notebook off the wall, he thought, although the end that went into the thermos looked a little more complicated than usual. The other one though, the jacks on either end looked serious. He found the socket that one end of this obviously went into, but what was the other end supposed to fit? If the sumo kid was telling the truth, this was a custom cable, required to jack this thing into something that it might not usually be required to jack to. This one was optical, it looked like.

The power cable, that was easy. What took a while was finding a socket up here, but it turned out there was one (well, actually the end of an industrial-grade yellow extension cord) in the storage cabinet.

No control on the thing, that he could see, no switches. He plugged the power cable into the wall socket, then sat on the bed, the other end in his hand, looking at the silvery cylinder.

"Hell," he said and plugged the cable into the cylinder. Just as he did, he had the clearest possible vision of the thing being, absolutely and no doubt, brimful of plastic explosive and a detonator, just waiting for this juice- But, no, if it had been, he'd be dead. He wasn't. But the cylinder wasn't doing anything either. He thought he could

hear a faint hum from it, and that was it. "I don't get it," Rydell said.

Something flickered. Neon butterfly. Torn wings.

And then this girl was there, kneeling, right up close, and he felt his heart roll over, catch itself.

The how of her not being there, then being there. Something hurt in his chest, until he reminded himself to breathe.

If Rydell had had to describe her, he would've said beautiful, and been utterly frustrated in the attempt to convey how. He thought she

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had to be one of Durius' examples of hybrid vigor, but saying which races had been mixed was beyond him.

"Where are we?" she asked.

He blinked, uncertain as to whether she saw and addressed him, or someone else, in some other reality. "Bed-and-breakfast," he said, by way of experiment. "San Francisco-Oakland Bay."

"You are Laney's friend?"

"I-Well. Yeah."

She was looking around now, with evident interest, and Rydell felt the hairs stand up along his

arms, seeing that she wore an outfit that exactly mirrored his own, though everything she wore fit her perfectly, and of course looked very different on her. Loose khakis, blue workshirt, black nylon jacket with a Velcro rectangle over the heart, where you stuck the logo of your company. Right down to black socks (with holes? he wondered) and miniature versions of the black Work-'N'-Walks he'd bought for Lucky Dragon. But the hair on his arms was up because he knew, he had seen, he had, that in the first instant of her being there,

she'd crouched before him naked.

"I am Rei Toei," she said. Her hair was coarse and glossy and roughly but perfectly cut, her mouth wide and generous and not quite smiling, and Rydell put out his hand and watched it pass right through her shoulder, through the pattern of coherent light he knew she must be. "This

is a hologram," she said, "but I am real."

"Where are you?" Rydell asked, withdrawing his hand. "I'm here," she said.

"But where are you really?"

"Here. This is not a broadcast hologram. It is generated by the Famous Aspect unit. I am here, with you. Your room is very small. Are you poor?" She crawled past Rydell (he supposed she could've crawled through him, if he hadn't moved aside) to the head of his bed, examining the salt-caked hemisphere of plastic. Rydell could see now that she literally was a source of illumination, though somehow it reminded him of moonlight.

"It's a rented room," Rydell said. "And I'm not rich." She looked back at this. "I meant no offense."

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"That's okay," Rydell said, looking from her to the projector and back. "I mean, a lot of people, they'd think I'm poor."

"But more would think you rich."

"I don't know about that--"

"I do," she said. "There are, literally, more humans alive at this moment who have measurably less than you do. You have this sleeping place, you have clothing, I see you have eaten. What is your name?"

"Berry Rydell," he said, feeling a strange shyness. But he thought he at least knew who she was, or was supposed to be. "Look, I recognize you. You're that Japanese singer, the one who isn't. . . I mean, the one who- "Doesn't exist?"

"I didn't say that. I mean, weren't you supposed to be married to that Irish guy, Chinese, whatever? In that band?"

"Yes." She'd stretched out on the bed, on her stomach, hands propping her chin a few inches from the occluded plastic bubble. (Rydell had a flash of that seen from the water below, like the glaucous eye of some behemoth.) "But we did not marry, Berry Rydell."

"How do you know Laney?" he asked her, hoping to bring it around to some footing that he could stand on as well, whatever that might be.

"Laney and I are friends, Berry Rydell. Do you know where he is?"

"Not exactly," Rydell said, which was true.

She rolled over, gorgeous and quite literally glowing, in her incongruous mirroring of what he wore, which looked, on her, like the first and purest expression of some irresistible new fashion, and fixed him with a sorrowful stare. He would, in that moment, have happily and willingly locked eyes with her for however long she wanted and have sat there, effectively, forever. "Laney and I have been separated. I do not understand why, but I must trust that it is for our mutual and eventual good. Who gave you the projector, Berry Rydell?"

"I don't know," Rydell said. "It was shipped here GlobEx, but in Laney's name. Address in

Melbourne, company called Paragon-Asia."

She raised her eyebrows. "Do you know why we are together in San Francisco, Berry Rydell?"

"No," he said, "do you?"

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"Laney believes that the world will end soon," she said, and her smile was luminous.

He couldn't help but smile back. "I think we went through that one when the century rolled over."  
"Laney says that that was only a date. Laney says that this is the real thing. But I have not  
spoken with him in weeks, Berry Rydell. I do not know how much closer we are now, to the nodal  
point."

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BOOMZILLA, with a little shit money tonight, debit chip he got off those truck bitches, goes down  
to Lucky Dragon. That's where he goes when he gets money, because they got all the shit.

Food he likes there, because it's not bridge food; food like on TV, out of a package. And  
everything: shit to look at, the games they got in there. Best place.

Someday he'll have his shit together right. He'll live in a house, and it will be clean as Lucky  
Dragon. All lit up like that, and he'll get those camera balloons like the truck bitches. Watch  
everybody's ass and nobody fuck with him.

Gets the chip out, walking up to the front, because if he has it in his hand, shows it to the  
security, security'll let him in. Security wants to know you're a player. Otherwise, you'd steal.  
Boomzilla understands that.

Tonight is different. Tonight a big white truck in front of Lucky Dragon. Biggest, cleanest truck  
he's ever seen. No writing on it, SoCaI plates, couple of securities standing out by it. Boomzilla  
wonders if this what they bring the new games in? Never seen this before.

So in the doors, holding up his chip, and heads over, like he does, first to the candy.

Boomzilla likes this Jap candy that's like a little drug lab. You mix these different parts, it  
fizzes, gets hot, cools. You do this extrusion-molding thing and watch it harden. When you eat it,  
it's just candy, but Boomzilla likes making it.

Gets six of those, pissed there's no grape, and a couple or two choccos. Spends a good long time by  
the machine that makes magazines, watching screens, all the different shit you can get put in your  
magazine. Then back to get his noodles, kind you add water and pull the string.

Back there, deciding between beef and chicken, he sees they've unfastened a whole piece of Lucky  
Dragon wall. Next to GlobEx and the cash machine.

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37. A LITTLE SHIT MONEY

So he thinks this is what the white truck is about, some new thing to put in there, and he wonders  
if it's maybe a game.

White men in white paper suits working on the section of wall.

Watches them, then goes back to the front, shows his shit. Checker runs his shit over the window  
that counts, takes Boomzilla's chip and debits it, There goes his shit money.

Takes his bag outside and finds a curb to sit on. Pretty soon he'll start making the first candy.  
Red one.

He looks past the white truck to the screens there, by the front, and he notices white trucks on  
half the screens. So all over the world now, these white trucks sitting outside Lucky Dragons, so  
it must mean something new is being put in all of them tonight.

Boomzilla unseals the candy and studies the multistage but entirely nonverbal instructions.  
Gotta get it right.

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38. VINCENT BLACK LIGHTNING

FONTAINE'S shop must be this narrow purple one with its high thin window caulked with enough

silicone to frost a wedding cake. The whole front of the place had been painted the same flat purple, blistered now by sun and rain, and she had some faint memory of its earlier incarnation as something else, used clothing maybe. They'd put that purple over everything: over the droops and gobs of silicone, over the hardware on the old wooden door with its upper panels replaced with glass.

If this was Fontaine's place, he hadn't bothered naming it, but that was like him. And the few things displayed in the window, under the beam of an antique Tensor, were like him as well: a few old-fashioned watches with their dials going rusty, a bone-handled jackknife someone had polished till it shone, and some kind of huge ugly telephone, sheathed in ridged black rubber. Fontaine was crazy about old things, and sometimes, before, he'd bring different pieces over, show them to Skinner.

Sometimes she'd thought he'd just done that to get the old man started, and then Skinner's own Stories would come out. He hadn't been much for stories, Skinner, but turning some battered treasure of Fontaine's in his hands, he'd talk, and Fontaine would sit and listen, and nod sometimes, as though Skinner's stories confirmed some long-held suspicion.

Made privy to Skinner's past, Fontaine would then handle the objects himself with a new excitement, asking questions.

Fontaine lived in the world of things, it had seemed to her, the world of the things people made, and probably it was easier for him to approach them, people, through these things. If Skinner couldn't tell Fontaine a story about something, Fontaine would make up his own story, read function in the shape of something, read use in the way it was worn down. It seemed to comfort him.

Everything, to Fontaine, had a story. Each object, each fragment comprising the built world. A chorus of voices, the past alive in every-

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thing, that sea upon which the present tossed and rode. When he'd built Skinner's funicular, the elevator that crawled like a small cable car up the angled iron of the tower, when the old man's hip had gotten too bad to allow him to easily climb, Fontaine had had a story about the derivation of each piece. He wove their stories together, applied electricity: the thing rose, clicking, to the hatch in the floor of Skinner's room.

Now she stands there, looking into the window, at these watches with their foxed faces, their hands unmoving, and she fears history.

Fontaine will fit her to history in some different way, she knows, and it is a history she has avoided.

Through the thick pane of the door, thick enough to bend light, the way water in a glass does, she sees that the lights are on in a space behind the shop. Another door there, not quite closed.

CLOSED/CERRADO says the dog-eared cardboard sign hung inside the glass on a suction-cup shower hook.

She knocks.

Almost immediately the inner door is opened, a figure silhouetted there against brightness.

"Hey, Fontaine. Chevette. It's me." -

The figure shuffles forward, and she sees that it is in fact him, this angular black man whose graying hair is twisted into irregular branches that hang like the arms of a dusty houseplant in need of water. As he rounds the flat gleam of a glass-topped counter, she sees that he holds a gun, the old-fashioned kind with the cylinder that turns as the bullets are fired manually, one at a time. "Fontaine? It's me."

He stops there, looking. Takes a step forward. Lowers the pistol. "Chevette?"

"Yeah?"

"Hold on." He comes forward and peers at her, past her. "You alone?"

"Yes," she says, glancing to either side.

"Hold on-" a rattling of locks, bolts undone, and at last the door

v Opens, and he blinks at her, mystified. "You back."

"How are you, Fontaine?"

"Fine," he says, "fine," and steps back. "Come in."

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She does. The place smells of machine oil, metal polish, burnt coffee. A thousand things gleam from the depths of Fontaine's history reef.

"Thought you were in LA," he says.

"I was. I'm back.

He closes the door and starts locking it, an elaborate process but one he can do in the dark, in his sleep perhaps. "Old man's gone. You know?"

"I know," she says. "How?"

"Just old," he says, tucking his pistol away now. "Wouldn't get out of bed, finally. Curled up there like a baby. Clarisse she came to nurse him. She been a nurse, Clarisse. Says when they turn to face the wall, that means it's over soon."

Chevette wants so badly to say something, but it will not come.

"I like your hair, girl," Fontaine says, looking at her. "Not so fierce now."

"IT's changing," Fontaine says, meaning the bridge and how they live on it. He's told her about the tendency to build these shops, how most of them are built with nonresident money, the owners hiring people to live there and maintain possession. "That Lucky Dragon," he says, cupping a white china mug of his bitter, silted coffee, "that's there because someone decided the money was there for it to make. Tourists buying what they need to come out here. That wouldn't have happened, before."

"Why do you think it is, that it's changing?"

"It just is," he says. "Things have a time, then they change."

"Skinner~" she says, "he lived out his life here, didn't he? I mean, when this was all what it was. He was here for all of that. Here when they built it."

"Not his whole life. Just the end of it. That jacket you're wearing, he got that in England, when he was younger. He lived there and rode motorcycles. Told me about it. Rode them up to Scotland, rode them all over. Real old ones."

"He told me a little about it, once," she says. "Then he came back here and the Little Big One came. Cracked the bridge. Pretty soon he was out here."

"Here," he says, "I'll show you something." Opening a cabinet.

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Brings out a sheath knife, greenish handles inlaid with copper abstracts. Draws it from the waxed brown saddle leather. Blade of Damascus steel, tracked with dark patterns.

The knife of Chevette's memories, its grip scaled with belt-ground segments of phenolic circuit board.

"I saw that made," she says, leaning forward.

"Forged from a motorcycle drive chain. Vincent 'Black Lightning,' 1952. Rode that in England. It



was a good forty years old too, then. Said there wasn't ever a bike to match it. Kept the chain till he found this maker." Passes the knife to her. Five inches of blade, five inches of handle. "Like you to have it."

Chevette runs her finger along the flat of the blade, the crocodile pattern of light and dark steel that had been formed as the links were beaten out. "I was thinking about this before, Fontaine. Today. How we went to where the smith worked. Burned coke in an old coffee can."

"Yes. I've seen it done." Hands her the sheath.

"But you need to sell this stuff." Tries to hand it back. "It wasn't for sale," he says. "I was keeping it for you."

FONTAINE has a strange boy in the shop's back room. Heavy, Hispanic, hair cut short. He sits the whole time, cross-legged, his head in an old eyephone rig that looks like it came out of some military robotics dump.

With a worn-out old notebook on his lap. Endlessly, steadily, clicking from one screen to the next.

"Who's this?" she asks when they're back, Fontaine putting on a

- - fresh pot of his terrible coffee. Thinking the boy can hear her.

"I don't know," Fontaine says, turning to regard the boy in the eye-phones. "He was outside this morning, breathing on my window."

Chevette looks at Fontaine, not getting it.

"He likes watches," Fontaine says, lighting the butane ring with a spark gun like a toy pistol. "Showed him how to hunt for watches this

- - morning, hasn't done much since." Fontaine crosses to where the boy sits, looks down at him. -

"I'm not sure how much he understands English," Fontaine says.

'Or he understands it but it gets through funny

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"Spanish maybe?"

"I had big Carlos by here," Fontaine says. "Didn't seem to make much difference."

"You live here now, Fontaine?"

"Yeah," he says. "Not getting along with Clarisse."

"How's your kids?"

"They're okay. Hell, Tourmaline's okay too, by anybody's standards but her own. I mean, not to live with, understand, but her health's pretty good."

Chevette picks up the sheathed Damascus boot knife and tries it in the inner, zippered pocket of Skinner's jacket. It fit, if you zipped the pocket shut, as far as you could, to hold it upright. "What's he doing with your notebook?"

"He's hunting watches. I started him looking on the net auctions, but now he's looking everywhere. Gets places I don't understand how he does."

"He gonna live here?"

Fontaine frowns. "I hadn't planned on it."

Chevette stands up, stretches, seeing the old man, Skinner, in memory, sitting up in his bed in

the room atop the cable tower. What dancer she'd gotten off Creedmore has long since worn off, leaving an edge of tiredness. Long day. Very long day. "We're sleeping in a van down the foot of Folsom," she says.

"You and who?"

"Tessa. Friend of mine."

"Know you're welcome here."

"No," she says, "Tessa'll be worried. I'm glad I saw you, Fontaine." She zips the jacket. "Thank you for keeping his knife." Whatever history it was she'd felt herself dodging, she hasn't found it. She just feels tired now; otherwise, she doesn't seem to feel.

"Your knife. Made it for you. Wanted you to have it. Told me." Looking up from beneath his sparse gray dreadlocks now. And gently says: "Asked us where you were, you know?"

Her fit with history, and how that hurts.

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39. PANOPTICON

LANEY'S progress through all the data in the world (or that data's progress through him) has long since become what he is, rather than something he merely does,

The Hole, that blankness at the core of his being, ceases to trouble him here. He is a man with a mission, though he readily admits to himself that he has no real idea what that mission may finally be.

This all began, he reflects, knocking back his cough syrup in the amniotic darkness of his cardboard hutch, with his "interest" in Cody Harwood. The first prickings of the so-called stalker syndrome thought to eventually afflict every test subject ever dosed with 5-SB. His initial reaction, of course, had been denial: this couldn't be happening to him, not after all these years. He was interested in Harwood, and for good reason; his awareness of the nodal points, the points from which change

was emerging, would repeatedly bring Harwood to his attention. It was

not so much that he was focusing on Harwood, as that things swung

toward Harwood, gently yet unavoidably, like the needle of a compass. His life, at that point, had been in stasis: employed by the management of Lo/Rez, the pop group, to facilitate the singer Rez's "mar-

riage" to the Japanese virtual star Rei Toei, Laney had settled into a life in Tokyo that centered around visits to a private, artificially constructed island in Tokyo Bay, an expensive nub of engineered landfill upon which

Rez and Rei Toei intended to bring forth some sort of new reality. That Laney had never been able to quite grasp the nature of this reality hadn't surprised him. Rez was a law unto himself, very possibly the last of the pre-posthuman megastars, and Rei Toei, the idoru, was an emergent system, a self continually being iterated from experiential input. Rez was Rez, and thereby difficult, and Rei Toei was that river into which one can never step twice. As she became more herself, through the inputting of experience, through human interaction, she~ grew and changed. Rez hadn't, and a psychologist employed by the band's man

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agement had confided in Laney that Rez, whom the psychologist characterized as having narcissistic personality disorder, wasn't likely to. "I've met a lot of people, particularly in this industry," the psychologist had said, "who have that, but I've never met one who had had it."

So Laney had climbed, each working day, from a Tokyo dock into an inflatable Zodiac. To skim across the gray metallic skin of the bay to that nameless and perfectly circular island, and there to interact with ("teach" was not the word, somehow) the idoru. And what he had done, although neither of them had planned it, was to take her with him, into that flow of information where he was most at home (or, really, farthest from his inner Hole). He had shown her, as it were, the

ropes, although they were not ropes that he or anyone else had names for. He had shown her nodal points in that flow, and they had watched together as change had emerged from these into the physical world.

And he had never asked her how it was, exactly, that she intended to "marry" Rez, and he doubted that, in any ordinary sense, she knew. She simply continued to emerge, to be, to be more. More present. And Laney fell in love with her, although he understood that she had been designed for him (and for the world) to fall in love with. As the amplified reflection of desire, she was a team effort; to the extent that her designers had done their jobs properly, she was a waking dream, a love object sprung from an approximation of the global mass unconscious. And this was not, Laney understood, a matter of sexual desire exclusively (though of course he felt that, to his great confusion) but of some actual and initially painful opening of his heart.

He loved her, and in loving her understood that his most basic sense of what that word might mean had changed, supplanting every previous concept. An entirely new feeling, and he had held it close, sharing it with no one, least of all the idoru.

And it had been toward the end of this that Cody Harwood, shy and smiling and gently elusive, someone Laney had never felt the least interest in, had begun to obsess him. Harwood, most often depicted as a twenty-first-century synthesis of Bill Gates and Woody Allen, had never previously been any more to Laney than a vague source of irritation, one

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of those familiar icons who loom regularly on the horizons of media, only to drop away until they next appear. Laney had had no opinion of Harwood, other than that he felt he had been glimpsing him all his life,

and didn't quite know why, and was vaguely tired of it. But as he spent more time cruising the aspects of the flow that were

concerned with Harwood, and with the activities of his firm, Harwood Levine, it had begun to become apparent that this was a locus of nodal points, a sort of meta-node, and that, in some way he had been unable

to define, something very large was happening here. His compulsive study of Harwood and things Harwoodian had led him to the recognition that history too was subject to the nodal vision, and the version of

history that Laney came to understand there bore little or no relation to any accepted version.

He had been taught, of course, that history, along with geography, was dead. That history in the older sense was an historical concept.

History in the older sense was narrative, stories we told ourselves about where we'd come from and what it had been like, and those narratives

were revised by each new generation, and indeed always had been. History was plastic, was a matter of interpretation. The digital had not

so much changed that as made it too obvious to ignore. History was stored data, subject to manipulation and interpretation.

But the "history" Laney discovered, through the quirk in his vision induced by having been repeatedly dosed with 5-SB, was something

very different. It was that shape comprised of every narrative, every version; it was that shape that only he (as far as he knew) could see.

At first, discovering this, he had attempted to share it with the idoru. Perhaps, if shown, she, this posthuman emergent entity, would

simply start to see this way as well. And he had been disappointed when she had finally told him that what he saw was not there for her; that his ability to apprehend the nodal points, those emergent systems of his

- -tory, was not there, nor did she expect to find it with growth. "This is human, I think," she'd said, when pressed. "This is the result of what

you are, biochemically, being stressed in a particular way. This is wonderful. This is closed to me."

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H And shortly after that, as her growing complexity continued to widen the distance he already knew she felt toward Rez, she had come to him and asked him to interpret the data as it flowed around herself and Rez. And he had done this, though reluctantly, out of love. Knowing somehow he would be saying good-bye to her in the process.

The flow around Rez and Rei ~vas ripe with nodal points, particularly at those junctures where queerly occulted data poured steadily in from the Walled City, that semi-mythical otherwhere of outlaw iconoH clasts. "Why have you connected with these people?" he'd asked.

"Because I need them," she'd said, "I don't know why, but I know that I do. The situation does."

H "Without them," he'd said, "you might not have a situation."

"I know." Smiling.

But as his obsession with Harwood had deepened, Laney had grown H less comfortable with his trips to the island and their forays together into

the fields of data. It had been as though he did not wish her to see him this way, his concentration warped from within, bent toward this one object, this strangely banal object. The sense of Harwood, of the information cloud he generated, swarmed in Laney's dreams. And one morning, waking in the Tokyo hotel in which Lo/Rez kept him billeted, he had decided not to go to work.

And sometime after that, he knew from Yamazaki, and from his own observation of the flow, the idoru had departed Tokyo as well. He had his own theories about that, about her conversations with the denizens (they would have insisted on the term, he thought) of the digitally occluded Walled City, and now, evidently, she was in San Francisco. Although he had known she would be, because of course she had

to be. Because San Francisco, he could see in the shape of things, was where the world ended. Was ending. And she was a part of that, and so was he, and Harwood as well.

But something would be decided (was being decided) there. And that was why he dared not sleep. Why he must send the Suit, immaculate and malodorous, with his ankles tarred black, for Regain and more of the blue syrup.

~160~LIAMGI~ON

SOMETIMES, now, beyond the point of exhaustion, he has started to enter, for what may be seconds but can feel like hours or days, some new mode of being.

It is as though he becomes a single retina, distributed evenly across the inner surface of a sphere. Unblinking, he stares, globally, into that eye, seeing that with which he sees, while from a single invisible iris appear individual, card-like images of Harwood, one after another.

Yamazaki has brought him pillows and fresh sleeping bags, bottles of water, an unused change of clothes. He is vaguely aware of these things, but when he becomes the eye that looks in upon itself, and upon the endless string of images, he has no awareness beyond that interiority, infinite and closed.

And part of him asks himself if this is an artifact of his illness, of the 5-SB, or if this vast and inward-looking eye is not in fact some inner aspect of that single shape comprised of every bit of data in the world?

This last he feels is at least partly confirmed by his repeated experience of the eye everting, turning itself inside out, in Moebius spasm, at which point he finds himself, invariably, staring at that indescribable shape.

But now, when he is the eye, he is starting to be aware of someone else watching. Someone else is very interested in those images of Harwood. He feels them register each one.

THE vintage plastic Gunsmith Cats alarm watch pulls him from the flow. He finds it in the dark and turns off the alarm. He wonders where it came from. The old man?

It is time to phone Rydell in San Francisco. He moves his fingers delicately over the disposables on the cardboard shelf, feeling for the used one with ten minutes left, How can that be?

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40. YELLOW RIBBON

REI Toei could make herself very small.

Six inches tall, she sat on Rydell's pillow, in the salt-frosted plastic dome of his room at the bed-and-breakfast, and he felt like a child.

When she was small, the projection seemed more concentrated; she was brighter, and it made him think of fairies in old anime, those Disney things. She could as easily have had wings, he thought, and fly around, trailing glowing dust if she wanted. But she only sat there, even more perfect at six inches tall, and talked with him.

And when he'd close his eyes, not intending to sleep but only to rest them, he could hear that her voice was actually coming from the projector at the foot of his bed. She was telling him about Rez, the singer she'd wanted to marry, and why that hadn't worked, but it was difficult to follow. Rez had been very interested in Rez, Rydell gathered, and not much else, and Rei Toei had become more interested in other people (or, he guessed, if you were her, in other things). But he kept slipping out of focus, falling asleep really, and her voice was so beautiful.

Before he'd stretched out here, and she'd shown him how she could get small, he'd pulled the chicken-wire gate into place and spread the curtains that were thumbtacked to it, some kind of faded nubby fabric printed with a pattern of ornate keys and strange, long-necked cats (he thought they were).

He didn't know how long the sunglasses had been ringing, and it took him several rings to locate his jacket in the dark. He was fully dressed, shoes and all, otherwise, and he knew he'd been deep asleep.

"Hello?" He put the glasses on with his left hand. With his right he reached up and touched the ceiling. It's paneling gave, slightly, when he did that, so he didn't do it again.

"Where are you?" It was Laney.

"Bed-and-breakfast," Rydell told him. With the sunglasses on, it was totally dark. He watched the low spark of his own optic nerve, colors without names.

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"Did you get the cables?"

"Yeah," Rydell said. He remembered being harsh with the sumo kid and felt stupid. He'd lost it. That claustro thing he got in crowds sometimes. Tara-MayAllenby had told him that was called agoraphobia, and it meant "fear of the mall," but it wasn't actually malls that did it to him. But he couldn't stand those little under-lip beards either. "Two of them."

"Use them yet?"

"Just the power," Rydell said. "The other one, I don't know what it jacks with."

"Neither do I," said Laney. "Is she there?"

"She was," Rydell said, looking around in the dark for his fairy star, then remembering he was wearing sunglasses.

His hand found a switch that dangled from a wire near his head. He clicked it. A bare fifty-watt bulb came on. He slid the glasses down his nose and peered over them, finding the projector still there and still plugged in. "The thermos-thing's still here."

"Don't let that out of your sight," Laney said. "Or the cables. I don't know what we need her to do there, but it's all around her."

"What's all around her?"

"The change." -

"Laney, she said you told her the world was going to end."

"Is going to end," Laney corrected.

"Why'd you tell her that?"

Laney sighed, the deep end of his sigh becoming a cough, which he seemed to choke off. "As we know it, okay?" he managed. "As we know it. And that's all I or anyone else can tell you about that. It's not what I want you thinking about. You're working for me, remember?"

And you're crazy, Rydell thought, but I've got your credit chip in my pocket. "Okay," he said, "what's next?"

"You have to go to the site of a double homicide, one that took place last night, on the bridge."

"What do you want me to try to find out?"

"Nothing," Laney said. "Just look like you're trying to find something

Out. Pretend. Like you're investigating. Call me when you're ready to go, I'll give you the GPS fix for the spot."

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"Hey," Rydell said, "what if I do find something out?"

"Then call me."

"Don't hang up," Rydell said. "How come you haven't been in touch with her, Laney? She said you two were separated."

"The people who, well, 'own' her, that's not quite the term, really, but they'd like to talk to me, because she's missing. And the Lo/Rez people too. So I need to be incommunicado at the moment, as far as they're concerned. But she hasn't tried to reach me, Rydel!. She'll be able to, when she needs to." He hung up.

Took the glasses off, left them folded on the pillow, and crawled to the end of the bed. "Hey," he said to the thermos-thing, "you there?" Nothing.

He started getting himself together. He unpacked his duffel, used the switchblade to cut a couple of slits in it, took off his nylon belt and threaded it through the slits, using it as a strap, so he could sling the bag over his shoulder.

"Hey," he said again to the thermos-thing, "you there? I'm gonna unplug you now." He hesitated, did. He put it in the duffel, along with the power cable, the other cable, and his Lucky Dragon fanny pack, this last because the thing had already saved his ass once, and it might be lucky. He put his nylon jacket on, put the sunglasses in his pocket, and, as an afterthought, gingerly put the switchblade in his right front trouser pocket. Then he imagined it opening there, thought about its lack of a safety catch, and, even more gingerly, fished it out and put it in the side pocket of his jacket.

AND found the place without too much trouble, though Laney's mode of C PS-by-phone was pretty basic. Laney had a fix on the spot (Rydell had no idea how) but no map of the bridge, so he triangulated Rydell's sunglasses somehow and told him to walk back toward San Francisco, lower level, keep walking, keep walking, getting warmer. Okay, turn right.

Which had left Rydell facing a blank plywood partition plastered with rain-stained handbills, in a

European language he didn't recognize, for a concert by someone named Ottoman Badchair. He described this to Laney.

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"That isn't it," Laney said, "hut you're really close."

There was a shop next door, closed, and he couldn't figure out what it sold when it was open, and then a gap. Rolls of plastic back in there. Lumber. Someone was building another shop, he thought. If this was it, the crime scene, there ought to be a yellow plastic ribbon with SFPD stapled up, but then he remembered that the police didn't come out here all that much, and he wondered what they did when they had a body to dispose of. Flipping them over the side wouldn't make the city too happy, although of course there was no way the city could prove a particular corpse had come off the bridge. Still, it bothered Rydell that there wasn't any yellow ribbon. He guessed he thought of it as a mark of respect.

He moved in, edging past the rolls of plastic, climbing over a low stack of plywood, and spotted, in the harsh light slung from the scavenged fluorescents closer to the pedestrian stroll, two frosty-looking white marks, something aerosoled over two darker stains, and he knew what that was. Kil'Z, this stuff you sprayed where bodily fluids had gotten out, in case the person who'd lost them was seropositive. He knew what Kil'Z looked like over blood, and this was that.

Not much of a crime scene. He stood there staring down at it and wondering how Laney expected him to look like he was conducting an investigation. He put the duffel with Rei Toei's projector down on the rolls of plastic.

Kil'Z residue was fairly waterproof, so the rain hadn't washed it away. But then he knew that the victims, whoever they had been, had died the night before.

He felt like an idiot. He really had wanted to be a cop once, and he'd dreamed of crossing the yellow line and looking at the scene. And

being able to do something. And now here he was.

He took out the glasses and called Laney. But now Laney, in whatever fine hotel he might be in, in Tokyo, wouldn't answer.

"No shit, Sherlock," Rydell said to himself, listening to a phone ring in Tokyo.

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"You do have a sense of humor," Harwood says, behind him. "I know it."

Leaning closer to the window, looking down. Foreshortened perspective up the side of this obelisk, this pyramid so-called, and midway the dark bulge of that Japanese material, placed to counter old quake damage. This is new, replacing earlier splines of polycarbon, and the subject of architectural and aesthetic scandal. Briefly fascinated, he watches as reflections of the lights of surrounding buildings shudder slightly, the thing's glossy surface tensing in response to winds he cannot feel. The truss is alive.

Turning to face Harwood, who is seated behind a broad dark plain of nonreflective wood, across which an accumulation of architectural

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41. TRANSAM

'HIS name is Rydell," Harwood says. "Image matching gave us that immediately. He was briefly associated with Cops in Trouble."

"Associated with whom?" The knife, with its sheath and harness, was secured in a twilit alcove off the central elevator stack, approximately eight hundred feet below.

"Cops in Trouble," Harwood says. "A cultural treasure. Don't you watch television?"

"No." He is looking east, from the forty-eighth and ultimate floor of the city's tallest building, toward the shadow of the ruined Embarcadero, the gypsy glow of the bridge, the feral darkness of Treasure Island.

Stepping closer to the window, he touches his belt. Stitched between two layers of black calf is concealed a ribbon of a very particular, very expensive material. Under certain circumstances, it ceases to behave as though it were some loosely woven, tissue-thin fabric, something a child might accidentally pull to pieces, and becomes instead thirty inches of something limber, double-edged, and very sharp. Its texture, in that state, its sleek translucency, has reminded him of fresh cuttlebone.

models and hillocks of documents suggest the courses of imaginary rivers: a topography in which might be read change in the world beyond the window, if meanings were known, and one were sufficiently concerned with outcomes.

Harwood's eyes are the most present thing about him, the rest giving an impression of existing at one remove, in some other and unspecific dimension. A tall man, he seems to occupy relatively little space, communicating from elsewhere via deliberately constricted channels. He is slender, with that agelessness of the aging rich, his long face free of tension. His eyes, enlarged by archaic lenses, are seldom still. "Why do you pretend to not be interested in this former policeman visiting the site of your recent activities?" On his wrist, gold and titanium catches the light; some multitasking bauble with intricate displays.

"I don't pretend." On the large flatscreen that stands to the left of the desk, four cameras present angles on a tall, sturdy-looking man who stands, chin down, as if brooding. The cameras would be no larger than roaches, but the four images, in spite of inadequate light, offer excellent resolution. "Who placed these cameras?"

"My bright young things."

"Why?" -

"Against exactly this eventuality: that someone might visit the site of these two utterly forgettable deaths and stand there, thinking. Look at him. He's thinking."

"He looks unhappy."

"He's trying to imagine you."

"You imagine he is."

"The fact that he's found his way to that spot at all is indicative of knowledge and motive. He knows that two men died there."

Amid the various models on Harwood's desk stands one in glossy red and white, rendered with functioning miniature video screens on the trademark pylon. Tiny images move and change there, in liquid crystal.

"Do you own the company that built this thing?" indicating the model with his index finger.

The eyes behind Harwood's glasses register surprise, from their

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peculiar distance. Then interest. "No. We advise them. We are a public relations firm. We did, I believe, advise on impact. We advised the city as well."

"It's horrible."

"Yes," says Harwood, "aesthetically, I agree. And that was an expressed concern of the municipal authorities. But our studies indicated that positioning it there would encourage walk-on tourism, and that is a crucial aspect of normalization."



"Normalization?"

"There is an ongoing initiative to bring the bridge community back into the fold, as it were. But the issue is sensitive. A matter of image really, and that of course is where we come in." Harwood smiles. "A number of major cities have these autonomous zones, and how a given city chooses to deal with the situation can impact drastically on that city's image. Copenhagen, for instance, was one of the first, and has done very well. Atlanta, I suppose, would be the classic example of what not to do." Harwood blinks. "It's what we do now instead of bohemias," he says.

"Instead of what?"

"Bohemias. Alternative subcultures. They were a crucial aspect of industrial civilization in the two previous centuries. They were where industrial civilization went to dream. A sort of unconscious R&D, exploring alternate societal strategies. Each one would have a dress code, characteristic forms of artistic expression, a substance or substances of choice, and a set of sexual values at odds with those of the culture at large. And they did, frequently, have locales with which they became associated. But they became extinct."

"Extinct?"

"We started picking them before they could ripen. A certain crucial growing period was lost, as marketing evolved and the mechanisms of recommodification became quicker, more rapacious. Authentic subcultures required backwaters, and time, and there are no more backwaters. They went the way of geography in general. Autonomous zones do offer a certain insulation from the monoculture, but they seem not to lend themselves to recommodification, not in the same way. We don't know

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why exactly." The little images shift, flickering.

"They shouldn't have put it there."

Harwood's eyes come in from their private distance. "I don't believe I've ever heard ~OU express so specific an opinion."

No reply.

"You'll have a second chance to see it. I want you to find out what our pensive friend here is thinking about."

"Is this concerned with what you implied when we spoke earlier, that something is on the verge of happening?"

"Yes."

"And what would that be?"

Harwood considers him from the distance behind his glasses. "Do you believe in forces of history?"

"I believe in what brings us to the moment."

"I seem to have come to believe in the moment myself. I believe we are approaching one, drawn to it by the gravity of its strangeness. It is a moment in which everything and nothing will change. I am seeking an outcome in which I will retain viability. I am seeking an outcome in which Harwood Levine will not have become four meaningless syllables. If the world is to be reborn, I wish to be reborn in it, as something akin to what I am today."

Thinking of the possible number and variety of crosshairs that must be trained on him now, hidden telepresent weapons platforms. He is fairly certain, nonetheless, that he could kill Harwood, if the moment required, though he also knows that he would almost certainly predecease him, if only by some fraction of a second. "I think you have become more complicated, since we last met."

"Complex," Harwood says, and smiles.

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42. RED GHOSTS OF EUROPEAN TIME

FONTAINE makes himself a cup of instant miso on the hotplate. This is what he drinks before bed, a soothing saltiness and bits of seaweed at the bottom. Thinking of Skinner's girl and seeing her again. Usually when people leave the bridge they don't come back. Weirdness around her departure but he forgets what exactly. Not good for the old man but his time nearly done then anyway.

Tick tick of the silent boy under the eyephones, hunting watches. Fontaine pours his miso into a cup missing its handle, savoring the aromatic steam. Tired now, he wonders where the boy can sleep here or if indeed he will. Maybe sit up all night hunting watches. Fontaine shakes his head. The ticking stops.

Carrying his soup, he turns to see what's arrested the ceaseless hunt.

There on the screen of the notebook, in the boy's lap, is a scan of a battered Rolex "Victory," an inexpensive wartime model for the Canadian market, worth a fair bit now but not in this condition. The steel case looks rough and the dial has faded unevenly. Black Arabics from one to twelve are crisp, but the inner chapter, red, European time, is almost gone.

Fontaine sips his miso, looking down, wondering what it is this boy sees to hold him, in the red ghosts of European time.

Then the boy's head sags under the weight of the eyephones, and Fontaine hears him start to snore. LANEY finds himself on an island in that mind-wide flow he ceaselessly cruises.

It is not a construct, this place, an environment proper, so much as a knotting, a folding-in of information rooted in the substrates of the oldest codes. It is something like a makeshift raft, random pieces thrown together, but it is anchored, unmoving. He knows that it is no accident, that it has been put in his path for a reason.

The reason, he soon finds, is that Libia and Paco wish to speak with him.

They are associates of the Rooster, junior denizens of the Walled City, and present here as a sphere of mercury in zero gravity and a black, three-legged cat, respectively. The sphere of mercury (Libia) has a lovely voice, a girl's, and the three-legged cat, who is also missing one eye and one ear (Paco) has a cunningly modulated growl Laney thinks he remembers from a Mexican cartoon. They are almost certainly from Mexico City, these two, if geography needs to be taken into consideration, and very likely belong to that faction of flaming youth currently opting for the re-flooding of the Federal District's drained lakes, a radical urban reconfiguration that for some reason had obsessed Rei Toei in her final month in Tokyo. She had developed a fascination with large human settlements in general, and Laney had been her guide through certain of the stranger info-prospects presented by what passes, this century, for town planning.

So he hangs here, at the juncture of these old code-roots, in a place devoid of very specific shape or texture, aside from Libia and Paco, and hears them.

"The Rooster tells us you feel someone is watching you watch Cody Harwood," says the sphere of mercury, pulsing as it speaks, its surface reflecting vehicles passing in some busy street.

"It might be an artifact," Laney counters, not sure he should have

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43. LIBIA & PACO

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brought it up with the Rooster, whose paranoia is legendary. "Something the 5-SB generates."

"We think not," says the cat, its one-eyed filthy head propped atop an arrested drift of data. It yawns, revealing grayish-white gums, the color of boiled pork, and a single orange canine. Its one eye is yellow and hate-filled, unblinking. "We have determined that you are, in fact, being observed in your observation."

"But not at the moment," says Libia.

"Because we have constructed this blind," says the cat.

"Do you know who it is?" Laney asks.

"It is Harwood," says Libia, the sphere quivering delicately.

"Harwood? Harwood is watching me watch him?"

"Harwood," says the cat, "dosed himself with 5-SB. Three years after you were released from the orphanage in Gainesville."

Laney is suddenly and terribly aware of his physical being, the condition of his body. His lungs failing in a cardboard carton in the concrete bowels of Shinjuku Station.

Harwood. It is Harwood whom he has sometimes imagined as the presence of God.

Harwood, who is...

Like him.

Harwood who sees, Laney now sees, the nodal points. Who sees the shapes from which history emerges. And that is why he is at the very heart of the emergent cusp, this newness Laney cannot quite glimpse. Of course Harwood is there.

Because Harwood, in a sense, is causing it.

"How do you know?" he hears himself ask, and wills himself beyond the failing strictures of his body. "Can you be sure?"

"We've found a way in," Libia chimes, the sphere distorting like a topographic learning aid, turning reflections of moving traffic into animated Escher-fragments that fly together, mirroring one another. "The Rooster set us to it, and we did."

"And does he know?" Laney asks. "Does Harwood know?"

"We don't think he's noticed," growls the cat, purple-brown scabs caked on the absence of its ear.  
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"Watch this," says Libia, making no effort to conceal her pride. The intricately lobed surface of the mirrored shape flows and ripples, and Laney is looking into the gray eyes of a young and very serious-looking man.

"You want us to kill him," the young man says. "Or do I misunderstand you?"

"You understand me," says Harwood, his voice familiar, unmistakable, though he sounds tired.

"You know I think it's a very good idea," says the young man, "but it could be done with greater surety if you gave us time for preparation. I

prefer to choose the time and the terrain, if possible."

"Not possible," Harwood says. "Do it when you can."

"You don't have to give me a reason, of course," the young man says, "but you must realize I'm curious. We've suggested his removal since you contracted with us."

"It's time," Harwood replies. "The moment."

Wind catches the young man's dark scarf. It flutters, strobing the image. "What about the other one, the rent-a-cop?"

"Kill him if it seems he's likely to escape. Otherwise, it might be

- useful if he could be questioned. He's in this too, but I don't see exactly how"

Libia becomes a sphere again, rotating.

Laney closes his eyes and gropes in the close electric dark for the blue cough syrup. He feels the hate-filled yellow eye watching him, but he imagines it as Harwood's.

Harwood knows

Harwood took the 5-SB.

Harwood is like him.

But Harwood has an agenda of his own, and it is from this agenda, in part, that the situation is emerging.

- Laney cracks the seal. Drinks the blue syrup. He must think now.

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44. JUST WHEN YOU THINK.

THE rain wasn't coming back, Chevette decided, shrugging her shoulders against the weight of Skinner's jacket.

She was sitting on a bench, behind a stack of empty poultry crates, and she knew she should be going somewhere but she just couldn't. Thinking about Skinner dying here, about what Fontaine had said. The knife in the inside pocket, its handle digging into her left collarbone, the way she was slouched. She straightened her back against the plywood behind her and tried to pull herself together.

She had to find Tessa and get back to the van, and she had to do that, if she could,- without running into Carson. It was possible, she figured, that he hadn't even seen her run out, even though she was sure somehow that when she'd seen him, he'd been looking for nobody but her. But if he hadn't seen her, and he wouldn't have found her there, then probably that bar would be the last place she should expect to find him now. And if he had seen her, then he wouldn't think she'd go back there either. Which would also put him somewhere else. And it was possible that Tessa, who liked her beers, would be there still, because she sure hadn't been keen on bedding down in the van. Probably Tessa thought that the bar was way interstitial, so it might just be that Chevette, if she was careful about it, could slip in there and get her, and get her back to the van. Carson wasn't too likely to come sniffing around the foot of Folsom, and if he did he was liable to run into the kind of people who'd take him for easy meat.

But it was no good sitting here, this close to chicken crates, because that was a good way to catch lice, and just the thought of it made her scalp itch. She stood up, stretched, smelling the faint ammonia tang of chicken shit, and set off through the upper level toward the city, keeping an eye out for Carson.

Not many people out now, and none of them tourists. The rain could do that, she remembered. Once again she got that feeling that she loved this place but wasn't really a part of it anymore. Kind of twisted

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in, like a hook, not a big feeling but sharp and deep. She sighed, remembering foggy mornings when she'd come down from the cable tower with her bike over her shoulder and pumped it over to Allied, wondering if Bunny'd have a scratch for her right off, a good ticket to pull, or if he'd give her a deadhead, what they called a pickup outside the city core. She'd liked a deadhead sometimes, because she got to see parts of town she might not have ridden before. And sometimes she'd wind up clean, what they called it when you didn't have any deliveries, and that could be great too, just go over to the Alcoholocaust or one of the other messenger bars and drink espresso until Bunny paged her. It had been pretty good, riding for Allied. She'd never even eaten it, wiped out bad, and the cops weren't as book-happy if you were a girl; you could get away with doing sidewalks and

stuff. Not that she could imagine going back to it now, riding, and that brought her mood back, because she didn't know what else she could do. Whatever, she wasn't going to star in any new versions of Tessa's docu.

She remembered this skinny tech named Tara-May, somebody Cops in Trouble had sent over to grab footage of poor Rydell, who'd only ever wanted to feature in a segment of that thing. No, she corrected herself, that wasn't fair, because she knew that what Rydell had really wanted was to be a cop, which was what he'd started out to be in Tennessee. But it hadn't worked out, and then his episode hadn't worked out, let alone the mini-series they'd talked about spinning off. Mainly, she supposed, because what Tara-May had shot had convinced the Cops in Trouble people that Rydell looked a little on the heavy side on TV. Not that there was any fat on him, he was all muscle and long legs, but when they shot him he didn't look like that. And that had driven him sort of crazy, that and Tara-May always going on about how Chevette should take speech and acting classes, learn all these martial arts, and give up drugs. When Chevette had made it clear she didn't do drugs, Tara-May had said that that would make networking a little harder, not having anything to quit, but that there were groups for everything and that was probably the best way to meet people who could help you with your Career.

But Chevette hadn't wanted a career, or not the way Tara-May

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meant it, and Tara-May just hadn't been able to get that. Actually there were a lot of people like Tara-May in Hollywood, maybe even most people were; everybody had something they "really" did. Drivers wrote, bartenders acted; she'd had massages from a girl who was really a stunt double for some actress Chevette had never heard of yet, except she hadn't really ever been called, but they had her number. Somebody had everybody's number, but it looked to Chevette like the game had all their numbers, every one, and nobody really was winning, but nobody wanted to hear that, or talk to you much if you didn't buy into what they "really" did.

Now she thought about it, that was part of what had gotten between her and Rydell, because he'd always buy into that, whatever anybody told him they really were. And then he'd tell them how he really wanted to do an episode of Cops in Trouble, and how it looked like he actually would, because Cops in Trouble was paying his rent now. Which nobody wanted to hear really, because it was a little too real, but Rydell never got that. And then they'd hit on him for phone numbers, names, intros, and start slipping him disks and lists of credits, hoping he was dumb enough to go back and try to show them to producers. Which he was, or anyway good-hearted enough, and that hadn't helped him any with the people at Cops in Trouble either.

And that, somehow, was how she'd wound up with Carson. Rydell sitting on the couch in that apartment with the lights off, watching one old Cops in Trouble after another, looking lost, and she just hadn't been able to handle it. It had been fine when they'd had things to do together, but when it came to just being together, that hadn't seemed to work, and Rydell going into that sad thing when it had started to look like it wasn't going to work out with the show...

But here was the bar, a small crowd around the door now and the sound of music she'd been hearing but not really listening to, which died as she got up close to the crowd.

Place was packed. She slid in sideways between a couple of Mexicans looked like truck drivers, had those steel chisel-toe things tacked to the front of their black cowboy boots. Inside, over the heads of the people packed on the floor, she could see Creedmore with a

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microphone in his hand, grinning out over the crowd. It was a dancer grin, ten thousand watts of bad electricity, and she saw he had the start of that thing that dancer did to your gums.

People were clapping and whistling for more, and Creedmore, his face running with sweat, looked like he was intending to give it to them.

"Thank you, thank you kindly," she heard Creedmore's amplified voice say. "Now this next number's one I wrote myself, and it's going out soon as our first single, Buell Creedmore and his Lower Companions, and it's called 'Just When You Think You've Got It Dicked..

Or anyway that was what she thought she heard him say, but then the band kicked in, loud, with the guitarist choking steely serpentine chords out of a big, shiny, old red electric, and she couldn't make out any of the words. Although she had to admit it sounded like Creedmore could sing.

They were jammed in here so tight, it made it hard to keep a lookout for Carson, but on the other hand it wasn't too likely he'd be able to see her either.

She kept moving, as best she could, trying to find Tessa.

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45. JACK MOVE

RYDELL had taken a surveillance course, back at the academy, and his favorite part had been going out and following people. It wasn't something you did alone, but with at least one partner, and the more partners the better. You learned how to trade off, somebody taking your place, and how to deak up ahead of the subject so you'd be ready when the next guy needed to trade off. That way the subject never had the same person behind him for too long. There was a definite art to it, and when you got it down it was sort of like a dance.

He hadn't really gotten the chance to put it into practice, in his very brief career as a police officer, or later when he'd worked for IntenSecure, but he felt like he'd been pretty good at it, and it had given him an idea of what it would feel like if you were being followed, and particularly if you were being followed by some people who knew how to do it right.

And that was what he found himself thinking about now, as he shouldered the duffel with Rei Toei's projector in it and prepared to depart this pathetic excuse for a crime scene. If Laney had wanted him to attract someone's attention by standing here, well, he'd stood here. But maybe now, he thought, he was getting that watched feeling because Laney had told him he'd be sure to be noticed if he came here.

Could be nerves. Maybe, but actually he didn't feel nervous, just tired. He'd driven all night up the coast with Creedmore, and all the downtime he'd had today had been when he'd fallen asleep listening to Rei Toei. What he felt like now was going back to his room, checking out the projector to see if she'd come back, then hitting the bed.

But there it was, that prickling at the back of his neck. He turned and looked back, but there was nobody, just the place where the Kil'Z had been sprayed over dried blood.

Guy going by in the direction of Oakland and Rydell's room.

Young guy with dark military-buzzed hair, black coat, black scarf up

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around his face. Seemed not to see Rydell, just kept walking, hands in

his pockets. Rydell fell in behind him, about fifteen feet.

He tried to imagine this place the way it had been before, when it was a regular bridge. Millions of cars had gone through here, this same space where he walked now. It had all been open then, just girders and railing and deck; now it was this tunnel, everything patched together out of junk, used lumber, plastic, whatever people could find, all of it lashed up however anybody could get it to stay, it looked like, and some-- how it did stay, in spite of the winds he knew must come through here.

He'd been back in a bayou once, in Louisiana, and something about the way it looked in here reminded him of that: there was stuff hanging

k everywhere, tubing and cables and things whose function he couldn't identify, and it was like Spanish moss in a way, everything softened at

~ the outline. And the light now was dim and sort of underwater-looking,

~ just these banks of scavenged fluorescents slung every twenty feet or so, some of them

dead and others flickering.

He walked around a puddle where a vendor had dumped about ten ~ pounds of dirty shaved ice.

Up ahead, he saw the guy with the black scarf turn into a café, one ~ ~of these tiny little places you got in here, maybe two small table~ and a counter that sat four or five Big blonde boy looked like a weight lifter was coming out as the scarf went in, and the weight lifter made just that little bit of eye contact with Rydell that told him.

They were doing him: the trade-off. He was being tailed, and by at ~least three people.

~: Weight lifter started in the direction of Rydell's bed-and-breakfast, '~Treasure Island, Oakland. Back of his neck as wide as Rydell's thigh. As ~Rydell passed the café, he looked in and saw the scarf ordering a cof~: fee. Just as normal as pie. So he didn't look behind him, because he

knew that if he did that, they'd know. They would. Just like he'd known, when the weight lifter blew it by looking him in the eye.

The belt he'd slung the duffel from was cutting into his shoulder, through his nylon jacket, and he thought about Laney and Klaus and

~ the Rooster, about how they all obviously thought the projector was

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really important, or valuable. Was that what he was being followed for, or was it about this mystery man of Laney's, his man who wasn't there? Otherwise, he didn't think he had any serious long-term enemies up here, though it was hard to be sure, and he didn't think these guys were ordinary jackers, because it looked to him like they really knew what they were doing. He reached into the jacket pocket and felt the knife. It was there, and he was glad he had it, though the thought of actually cutting somebody with it bothered him. The thing about knives was that the people who thought they wanted to use them on other people usually had no idea how much mess it made. It wasn't like in the movies; cut people bled like stuck pigs. He'd had to deal with a few cut people around the Sunset Lucky Dragon. And it could get tricky because who knew who was seropositive? He and Durius had these goggles they were supposed to put on, to keep people's blood from getting in their eyes, but usually it just happened all at once and they didn't remember the goggles until it was likely too late anyway.

But the main thing about knives, even ones that cut steel-belt radials like ripe banana, was that they weren't much good in a gunfight.

Someone had slung up an old anti-shoplifting mirror above a closed stall, and as he approached this he tried to see who might be following him, but there was enough foot traffic in here that he only got a generalized sense of people moving.

But what really bothered him now was that he was just doing what they'd probably expect him to: heading back to wherever he was going to spend the night (assuming they didn't already know where that was). And once he got there, what then? He'd be trapped, up in his room, no exit but that ladder, and they'd have him. He guessed he could just keep walking, but he didn't see what that would get him either.

What he needed, he thought, was something he could do that they weren't expecting. Something that put the shoe on the other foot, or anyway he should lose them, whoever they were. Then maybe he could raise Laney and get Laney's take on who they might be.

He'd had an instructor in Knoxville who'd liked to talk about lateral thinking. Which in a way wasn't that far off what Durius meant when

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he talked about serious users getting lateral, out on the sidewalk outside Lucky Dragon. Just losing it. What it took, sometimes, was just your basic jack move, something nobody, maybe even you, was expecting.

To his right now, he saw he was passing a stretch of wall that was actually canvas, like a sail or an old tent, stretched tight over lumber and maybe half an inch thick with however many coats of

paint it had had since it was put up here. Some kind of mural, but he wasn't noticing that. The switchblade sounded so loud, opening it, that he was sure they'd have heard it, so he just moved, sweeping the ceramic blade down, then sideways, to cut himself a backward "L." Through which he ducked and stepped, as if in a dream, the paint on the canvas crackling as he did so. Into warmth and a different light and these completely unexpected people seated around a table, cards in their hands, mother-of-pearl chips piled on the table in front of them. And one of them, a woman, the nipples of her bare breasts transfixed with surgical steel, the stub of a small cigar wedged into the corner of her mouth, met Rydell's eye and said: "I'll see you one and raise you one."

"Never mind me," Rydell heard himself say, as he saw a man with a tattooed scalp, still holding his hand of cards, raise his other hand, with a gun in it, from beneath the table. And simultaneously he realized that he still had the black knife, open, in his hand. He felt a weird wash of cold down his spine as his feet just kept moving, past the table and the man and the deep and somehow limitlessly large black hole in the winking ring of stainless steel that was the pistol's muzzle.

Through a thick brown velour curtain that smelled of ancient movie houses and he was still moving, apparently intact. Feeling his hand thumb the button, closing and cocking the blade against his hip as he went, something he wouldn't have thought of doing otherwise. Pocketing the knife. In front of him a ladder rough-sawn from two-by-fours. Straight to it and just climbing, as fast as he could.

Took him up through a square hole in a splintered timber deck, narrow walkway between walls cut from peeling billboards, a woman's huge stained paper eye faded there as if staring into infinite distance.

Stop. Breathe. Heart pounding. Listen.

Laughter. The card players?

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He started along the walkway, feeling a rising sense of triumph: he'd done it. Lost 'em. Wherever he was, up here, he'd be able to find his way back out, and down, and then he'd see how it went. But he had the projector and he'd lost them and he hadn't gotten his ass shot for interrupting somebody's poker game. "Lateral thinking," he said, congratulating himself, as he reached the end of the walkway and rounded a corner.

He felt the rib crack as the weight lifter hit him and knew that the black glove, like the ones he'd trained with in Nashville, was weighted with lead.

It sent him back against the opposite wall, his head slamming against that, and his whole left side refused to move when he tried.

The weight lifter pulled the black glove back for a roundhouse into Rydell's face. And smiled.

Rydell tried to shake his head.

Faintest look of surprise, maybe confusion, in the other's eyes, his face. Then nothing. The smile gone slack.

The weight lifter went suddenly and very heavily to his knees, swayed, and crashed sideways to the gray timber deck. Revealing behind him this slender, gray-haired man in a long smooth coat the color of old moss, who was replacing something there, the lapel held open with his other hand. Eyes regarding Rydell through gold-rimmed glasses. A deep crease up each cheek, like he smiled a lot. The man adjusted his beautiful coat and lowered his hands.

"Are you injured?"

Rydell drew a ragged breath, wincing as the rib seemed to grate. "Rib," he managed.

"Are you armed?"

Rydell looked into the clear, bright, unmoving eyes. "Knife in my right pocket," he said.



"Please keep it there," the man said. "Are you able to walk?"

"Sure," Rydell said, taking a step and almost falling on the weight lifter.

"Come with me, please," the man said and turned, and Rydell followed.

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CREEDMORE was into the climax of his number before Chevette spotted God's Little Toy cruising past overhead. The bar, like a lot of the spaces here on the original deck, didn't have a ceiling of its own, just the bottoms of whatever floor areas had been erected above it, with the result that what passed for a ceiling was uneven and irregular. The management had at some point sprayed all that black, and Chevette might not have noticed the floating camera platform if its Mylar balloon hadn't caught and reflected the stage lights. It was definitely under human control and looked like it might be jockeying to get a close-up of Creedmore. Then Chevette spotted two more of the silver balloons, these parked up in a sort of hollow created by a discontinuity in the floors above.

That meant, she thought, that Tessa had gotten someone to drive her back to the foot of Folsom. Then either she'd driven back or gotten a lift. (She was pretty sure Tessa wouldn't have walked it, not with the balloons anyway.) Chevette hoped the latter, because she didn't want to have to try to find a space to park the van a second time. Whatever Tessa was up to here, they were going to need a place to sleep later.

Creedmore's song ended with a sort of yodeling cry of brainless defiance, which was echoed back, amplified into a terrifying roar, by the meshback crowd. Chevette was amazed by the enthusiasm, not so much that it was for Creedmore as it was for this kind of music. Music was strange that way though; there were people into any damned thing, it seemed like, and if you got enough of them together in one bar, she guessed, you could have a pretty good time.

She was still working her way through the crowd, warding off the odd grope, looking for Tessa, and keeping an eye out for Carson, when Creedmore's friend Maryahce found her. Maryalice had undone a couple of extra increments of bustier, it looked like, and was presenting as very ample indeed. She looked really happy, or anyway as happy as you

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46. PINE BOX

can look when you're really drunk, which she definitely and obviously was.

"Honey!" she cried, grabbing Chevette by the shoulders. "Where have you been? We got all kinds of free drinks for our industry guests!"

Maiyalice clearly didn't remember Chevette having told her that she and Tessa weren't A&R people, but Chevette guessed that there was quite a lot, usually, that Maryalice didn't remember.

"That's great," Chevette said. "Have you seen Tessa? My friend I was here with? She's Australian-"

"Up in the light booth with Saint Vitus, honey. She's getting Buell's whole performance on those little balloon things!" Maryalice beamed. Gave Chevette a big, lipstick-greasy kiss on the cheek and instantly forgot her, face going blank as she turned in what Chevette supposed would be the direction of the bar.

But the light booth, now, she could see that: a sort of oversized matte-black crate tacked up against the angle of the wall, opposite the stage, with a warped plastic window running its length, through which she could see, quite plainly, the faces of Tessa and some bald-headed boy with mean-looking slitty black glasses. Just their two heads in there, like puppet heads. Reached, she saw, by an aluminum stepladder fastened to the wall with lengths of rusting pipe strap.

Tessa had her own special glasses on, and Chevette knew she'd be seeing the output from God's Little Toy, adjusting angle and focus with her black glove. Creedmore had launched into another song, its tempo faster, and people were tapping their feet and bobbing up and down in time.

Couple of men in those meshback caps, drinking beer out of cans, by that ladder, but she ducked under their arms and climbed up, ignoring the one who laughed and swatted her butt with the flat

of his hand.

Up through the square hole, her nose level with dusty, beer-soaked brown carpet. "Tessa. Hey."

"Chevette?" Tessa didn't turn, lost in the view in her glasses. "Where'd you go?"

"I saw Carson," Chevette said, climbing up through the hole. "I took off."

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"This is amazing footage," Tessa said. "The faces on these people.

Like Robert Frank. I'm going to treat it as mono and grain it down-

"Tessa," Chevette said, "I think we should get out of here."

"Who the fuck are you?" said the baldie, turning. He was wearing a sleeveless tube shirt and his upper arms were no thicker than Chevette's wrists, his bare shoulders looking fragile as the bones of a bird.

"This is Saint Vitus," Tessa said, as if absently bidding to forestall hostilities, attention elsewhere. "He does the lights in here, but he's the sound man at two other clubs on the bridge, Cognitive Dissidents and something else Tessa's hand dancing with itself in the black control glove.

Chevette knew Cog Diss from before. "That's a dancer bar, Tessa," she said.

"We're going over there after this," Tessa said. "He says it'll just be getting going, and it'll be a lot more interesting than this."

"Anything would," Saint Vitus said with infinite weariness.

"Blue Ahmed cut a single there," Tessa said, "called 'My War Is My

- War.'"

"It sucked," Chevette said.

"You're thinking of the Chrome Koran cover," said Saint Vitus, his voice dripping with contempt. "You've never heard Ahmed's version."

"How the fuck would you know?" Chevette demanded.

"Because it was never released," Saint Vitus declared smugly.

"Well, maybe it fucking escaped," Chevette said, feeling like she wanted to deck this diz-monkey, and thinking it might not be that hard to do, although you never knew what would happen if somebody tightened on dancer got really upset. All those stories about twelve-year-olds getting so dizzed they'd grab the bumper of a cop car and flip the whole

- thing, though these usually involved the kids' muscles popping out through their skins, which she sincerely hoped was impossible. Had to be: what Carson called urban legends.

Creedmore's song ended with a steely clash of guitar that drew Chevette's attention to the stage. Creedmore looked completely tightened now, staring triumphantly out as though across a sea of faces in some vast stadium.

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The big guitarist unslung his red guitar and handed it to a boy with sideburns and a black leather vest, who passed him a black guitar with a skinnier body.

"This here's called 'Pine Box,' " Creedmore said, as the big guitarist began to play. Chevette couldn't catch the words as Creedmore began to sing, except that it sounded old and doleful and was about winding up in a pine box, by which she took him to mean a coffin, like what they used to bury people in, but she guessed it could just as easily apply to this sound booth she was stuck in here, with Tessa and this asshole. She looked around and saw an old chrome stool with its pad of

upholstery split and taped over, so she planted herself on that and decided she was just going to keep quiet until Tessa had taped as much as she wanted of Creedmore's act. Then she'd see about getting them out of here.

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47. SAL SHING ROAD

LIBIA and Paco have shown Laney to a barbershop in Sai Shing Road. He has arrived here, of course, with no knowledge of the route involved; Sai Shing is in the Walled City, and he is a visitor, not a resident. The Walled City's whereabouts, the conceptual mechanisms by which its citizens have opted to secede from the human datascape at large are the place's central and most closely held secret. The Walled City is a universe unto itself, a subversive rumor, the stuff of legend.

Laney has been here before, although not to this specific construct, this barbershop, and he dislikes the place. Something in the underlying code of the Walled City's creation induces a metaphysical vertigo, and the visual representation is tediously aggressive, as though one were caught in some art school video production with infinitely high production values. Nothing is ever straightforward, in the Walled City; nothing is ever presented as written, but filtered instead through half a

- dozen species of carefully cultivated bit rot, as though the inhabitants were determined to express their massive attitude right down into the least fractal texture of the place. Where a clever website might hint at

- dirt, at wear, the Walled City luxuriates in apparent frank decay, in tex

- - Lure maps that constantly unravel, revealing of other textures, equally moth-eaten.

This barbershop, for instance, is shingled from overlapping tiles of texture, so that they don't quite match up at their edges, deliberately spoiling any illusion of surface or place. And everything here is done in a palette of rain-wet Chinatown neon: pink, blue, yellow, pale green, and the authoritatively faded red.

Libia and Paco depart immediately, leaving Laney to wonder how he, were he to bother, might choose to present himself in this environment: perhaps as a large cardboard carton?

Klaus and the Rooster put an end to this surmise, however, abruptly appearing in two of the shop's four barber chairs. They look as he remembers them, except that Klaus now wears a black leather version

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of his snap-brim fedora, its brim turned up all around, and the Rooster somehow looks even more like one of Francis Bacon's screaming popes.

"Whole new game here," Laney opens.

"How so?" Klaus appears to suck his teeth.

"Harwood's had 5-SB. And you know it too, because those chilango kids of yours just told me. How long have you known?"

"We operate on a need-to-know basis," the Rooster begins, in full geek-pontificator mode, but Klaus cuts him off: "About ten minutes longer than you have. We're anxious to know what you make of it."

"It changes everything," Laney says. "The way he's been successful all these years: the public relations empire, advertising, the rumors that he was pivotal in getting President Millbank elected, that he was behind the partition of Italy. .

"I thought that was his girlfriend," the Rooster says sullenly, "that Padanian princess-"

"You mean he's only picking winners?" Klaus demands. "You're suggesting that he's in nodal mode and simply gets behind emerging change? If that's all it is, my friend, why aren't you one of the richest men in the world?"

"It doesn't work that way," Laney protests. "5-SB allows the apprehension of nodal points, discontinuities in the texture of information. They indicate emerging change, but not what that change will be."

"True," agrees Klaus and purses his lips.

"What I want to know," Laney says, "what I need to know, and right now, is what Harwood is up to. He's sitting at the cusp of some unprecedented potential for change. He appears to be instrumental in it. Rei Toei is in it too, and this freelance people-eraser of Harwood's, and an out-of-work rent-a-cop. . . These people are about to change human history in some entirely new way. There hasn't been a configuration like this since 1911--"

"What happened in 1911?" the Rooster demands.

Laney sighs. "I'm still not sure. It's complicated and I haven't had the time to really look at it. Madame Curie's husband was run over by a horse-drawn wagon, in Paris, in 1906. It seems to start there. But if Harwood is the strange attractor here, the crucial piece of weirdness

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I things need to accrete around, and he's self-aware in that role, what is it he's trying to do that has the potential to literally change everything?"

"We aren't positive," the Rooster begins, "but--"

"Nanotechnology," Klaus says. "Harwood was a major player in Sunflower Corporation. A scheme to rebuild San Francisco. Very radical restructuring, employing nanotechnology along much the lines it was employed, post-quake, in Tokyo. That didn't fly, and, very oddly indeed, it looks to us as though your man Rydell was somehow instrumental in helping it not to fly, but that can wait. My point is that Harwood has demonstrated an ongoing interest in nanotechnology, and this has manifested most recently in a collaboration between Nanofax AG of Geneva--"

"Harwood front," the Rooster says, "run through a shell corporation in Antigua--"

"Shut up," and the Rooster does. "Between Nanofax AG of Geneva and the Lucky Dragon Corporation of Singapore. Lucky Dragon is a Harwood Levine client of course.

"Nanofax?"

"Everything the name implies," says Klaus, "and considerably less."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nanofax AG offers a technology that digitally reproduces objects, physically, at a distance. Within certain rather large limitations, of course. A child's doll, placed in a Lucky Dragon Nanofax unit in London, will be reproduced in the Lucky Dragon Nanofax unit in New York--"

"How?"

'With assemblers, out of whatever's available. But the system's been placed under severe legal constraints. It can't, for instance, reproduce functional hardware. And of course it can't, most particularly can't, reproduce functional nanoassemblers."

"I thought that they'd proven that didn't work anyway," Laney says.

"Oh no," says the Rooster, "they just don't want it to."

"They who?"

"Nation-states," says the Rooster. "Remember them?"

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RYDELL watched this man move ahead, in front of him, and felt something complicated, something he couldn't get a handle on, but something that came through anyway, through the ache in his side, the pain that grated there if he stepped wrong. He'd always dreamed of a special kind of grace, Rydell: of just moving, moving right, without thinking of it. Alert, relaxed, there. And somehow

he knew that that was what he was seeing now, what he was following: this guy who was maybe fifty, and who moved, though without seeming to think about it, in a way that kept him in every bit of available shadow. Upright in his long wool coat, hands in pockets, he just moved, and Rydell followed, in his pain and the clumsiness that induced, but also in the pain somehow of his adolescent heart, the boy in him having wanted all these years to be something like this man, whoever and whatever he was.

A killer, Rydell reminded himself, thinking of the weight lifter they'd left behind; Rydell knew that killing was not the explosive handshake exchange of movies, but a terrible dark marriage unto and perhaps (though he hoped not) even beyond the grave, as still his own dreams were sometimes visited by the shade of Kenneth Turvey, the only man he'd ever had to kill. Though he'd never doubted the need of killing Turvey, because Turvey had been demonstrating his seriousness with random shots through the door of a closet in which he'd locked his girlfriend's children. Killing anyone was a terrible and permanent thing to enter into, Rydell believed, and he also knew that violent criminals, in real life, were about as romantic as a lapful of guts. Yet here he was, doing the best he could to keep up with this gray-haired man, who'd just killed someone in a manner Rydell would've been unable to specify, but silently and without raising a sweat; who'd just killed someone the way another man might change his shirt or open a bottle of beer. And something in Rydell yearned so to be that, that, feeling it now, he blushed.

The man stopped, in shadow, looking back. "How are you?"

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48. IN THE MOMENT

"Fine," Rydell said, which was almost always what he said if anyone asked him that.

"You are not 'fine.' You are injured. You may be bleeding internally."

Rydell halted in front of him, hand pressed to his burning side. "What did you do to that guy?"

You couldn't have said that the man smiled, but the creases in his cheeks seemed to deepen slightly. "I completed the movement he began when he struck you."

"You stabbed him with something," Rydell said.

"Yes. That was the most elegant conclusion, under the circumstances. His unusual center of gravity made it possible to sever the spinal cord without contacting the vertebrae themselves." This in a tone that someone might use to describe the discovery of a new but convenient bus route.

"Show me."

The man's head moved, just a fraction. Some birdlike acuity. Light winked, reflected, in the round, gold-framed glasses. He reached into the open front of his long coat and produced, with a very peculiar and offhand grace, a blade curved, upswept, chisel-tipped. What they called a tanto, Rydell knew: the short version of one of those Japanese swords. The same light that had caught in the round lenses now snagged for an instant in a hair-fine line of rainbow along the curved edge and the angled tip, and then the man reversed the movement that had produced the knife. It vanished within the coat as though a segment of tape had been run backward.

Rydell remembered being taught how you had to use something anything if someone was coming after you with a knife and you were unarmed. If nothing else you were supposed to take off your jacket and

roll it around your hands and wrists to protect them Now he imagined using the projector, in its bag, as a sort of shield, to ward off the knife he'd just seen, and the hopelessness of the idea actually struck him as funny.

"Why did you smile?" the man asked.

Rydell stopped smiling I don t think I could explain he said 'Who are you~

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"I can't tell you that," the man said.

"I'm Berry Rydell," Rydell said. "You saved my ass back there."

"But not your torso, I think."

"He might've killed me."

"No," the man said, "he wouldn't have killed you. He would have rendered you helpless, taken you to a private location, and tortured you to extract information. Then he would have killed you."

"Well," Rydell said, uneasy with the matter-of-factness here, "thanks."

"You are welcome," said the man, with great gravity and not the least hint of irony.

"Well," Rydell said, "why did you do that, take him out?"

"Because it was necessary, to complete the movement."

"I don't get it," said Rydell.

"It was necessary," the man said. "There are a number of these men seeking you tonight. I'm uncertain of how many. They are mercenaries."

"Did you kill someone else, back there, last night? Where those patches of dried blood and Kil'Z are?"

"Yes," the man said.

"And I'm safer with you than I am with these guys you say are mercs?"

"I think so, yes," the man said, frowning, as though he took the question very seriously.

"You kill anybody else in the past forty-eight hours?"

"No," said the man, "I did not."

"Well," Rydell said, "I guess I'm with you. I'm sure not going to try to fight you."

"That is wise," the man said.

"And I don't think I could run fast enough, or very far, with this rib."

"That is true."

"So what do we do?" Rydell shrugged, instantly regretting it, his face contorting in a grimace of pain.

"We will leave the bridge," the man said, "and seek medical aid for your injury. I myself have a thorough working knowledge of anatomy, should it prove necessary."

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"Unh, thanks," Rydell managed. "If [could just buy some four-inch tape and some analgesic plasters at that Lucky Dragon, I could probably make do." He looked around, wondering when he'd next see or be seen by the one with the scarf. He had a feeling the scarf was the one he'd really have to watch out for; he couldn't say why. "What if those mercs scope us leaving?"

"Don't anticipate outcome," the man said. "Await the unfolding of events. Remain in the moment."

In the moment, Rydell decided he knew for a fact his ass was lost. Just plain lost.

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The 6B denoting a particular grade of movement, degree of accuracy, he knows, though the 346 is a

mystery. The broad arrow, central, the Queen's mark, her property. 53 the year of issue, but 172? Could the boy somehow pry knowledge from these numbers, if the question could be put to him? Somewhere out there, Fontaine knows, every last  
49. RADON SHADOW

FONTAINE finds the boy an old camping pad, left here by his children perhaps, and lays him back on this, still snoring. Removing the heavy eyephones he sees how the boy sleeps with his eyes half-open, showing the white; imagines watches ticking past, there, one after another. He covers him with an old sleeping bag whose faded flannel liner depicts mountains and bears, then takes his miso back to the counter to think.

There is a faint vibration now, though whether of the shop's flimsy fabric, the bones of the bridge, or the underlying plates of the earth he cannot tell: but small sounds come from the shelves and cabinets as tiny survivors of the past register this new motion. A lead soldier, on one shelf, topples forward with a definitive clack, and Fontaine makes a mental note to buy more museum wax, a sticky substance meant to prevent this.

Fontaine, seated on his high stool, behind the counter, sipping gingerly at his hot miso, wonders what exactly he would see, were he to follow the boy's course today via the notebook's recall function. That business with the lockboxes, and Martial getting all worked up. Where else might the boy have been? But nowhere really dangerous, Fontaine decides, if he's only chasing watches. But how was it he did that, got those lockbox lists? Fontaine puts the miso down and fishes the JaegerLeCoultre from his pocket. He reads the ordnance marks on its back:

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bit of information makes its way into the stream. He puts the watch down on his Rolex pad and takes up the salty miso again. Looking down through the scratch-frosted glass countertop, he notices a recent purchase, not yet examined. A Helbros from the 1940s, styled after military watches but not an "issue" watch. Something he bought from a scavenger, down from the Oakland hills. He reaches into the counter and brings it out, a shabby thing after the G6B.

Its bezel is badly dinged, probably too badly to benefit from buffing, and the luminous on the dull black dial has gone a shade of silvery ash. He takes his loupe from his other pocket and screws it into his eye, turning the Helbros under his ten-power Cyclops gaze. The caseback has been removed, screwed back in, but left untightened. He turns it out with his fingers, to check inside for minute graven records of its repair history.

He squints through the loupe: the last repair date etched into the inside back is August 1945.

He turns it over again and studies it. The crystal is synthetic, some sort of plastic, definitely vintage and very probably original. Because, he sees, holding it at just this certain angle to the light, radiation from the original radium numerals has darkened the crystal focally, each number having in effect radiographed itself in the accidental plate of the crystal.

And somehow this, combined with the hidden date, gives Fontaine a shiver, so that he puts the caseback back into place, replaces the Helbros in the counter, checks the locks on the door, finishes his miso, and starts to ready himself for bed.

The boy, on his back, is no longer snoring, and that is a good thing.

When Fontaine lies down on his own narrow bunk, to sleep, the Smith & Wesson Kit Gun, as it is every night, is at the ready.

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50. "MORE TROUBLE"

RYDELL'S father, dying of cancer, had told Rydell a story. He claimed to have gotten it from a book of famous last words, or if not famous then at least memorable.

This man was being executed in England, back in the old days, when execution was made as deliberately hard a thing as possible, and after being burned with hot irons, broken on the wheel, and various other horrific punishments, the man was shown the block, the heads-man's ax. And having been closed-mouthed and stolid throughout his various tortures, he had looked at the ax and the block and the burly headsman and made no reply at all.

But then another torturer arrived, carrying an assortment of terrible-looking tools, and the man was informed that he was to be disemboweled prior to his beheading.

The man sighed. "More trouble," he said.

"If they want me," Rydell said, wincing along beside the man with the tanto in his coat, "why don't they just grab me?"

"Because you are with me."

"Why don't they just shoot you?"

"Because we have, these men and I, the same employer. In a sense."

"He wouldn't let them shoot you?"

"That would depend," the man said.

Rydell could see that they were coming up on the nameless bar where he'd heard Buell Creedmore sing that old song. There was noise there: loud music, laughter, a crowd around the door, drinking beer and openly smoking cigarettes.

His side hurt with each step he took, and he thought of Rei Toei perched on his pillow, glowing. What, he wondered, did the projector slung over his shoulder mean to her? Was it her only means of manifesting here, of interacting with people? Did being a hologram feel like anything? (He doubted it.) Or did the programs that generated her

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somehow provide some greater illusion of being there? But if you weren't real in the first place, what did you have to compare not being there to?

But what really bothered him, now, was that Laney, and Klaus and the Rooster too, had thought that the projector was important, really important, and now here he went, Rydell, limping willingly along beside this killer, this man who evidently worked for whoever it was was after Rydell's ass, and probably after the projector as well, and he was just going along with it. Sheep to the slaughter.

"I want to go in here a minute," Rydell said.

"Why?"

"See a friend," Rydell said.

"Is this a bid for escape?"

"I don't want to go with you."

The man regarded him from behind the thin crystal rounds of his glasses. "You are complicating things," he said.

"So kill me," Rydell said, gritting his teeth as he slung his weight around and staggered past the smokers by the door, into the warm loud

beer smell and crowd energy

Creedmore was onstage with Randy Shoats and a bass player with sideburns, and whatever they were playing reached its natural conclusion at just that point, Creedmore jumping into the air as he let out a final whoop and the music crashed down around him, the crowd roaring and stomping and clapping. Rydell had seen Creedmore's eyes flash flat and bright as a doll's in the stage light. "Hey, Buell!" Rydell shouted. "Creedmore!" He shouldered someone out of his way and kept going. He was a few feet from the stage now. "Buell!" It was just a little thing, the stage, maybe a foot high, and the crowd

- wasn't that thick.

Creedmore saw him. He stepped down from the stage. The singer's pearl-button cowboy shirt was open



to the waist, his hollow white chest gleaming with sweat. Someone handed him a towel and he wiped his face with it, grinning, showing long yellow teeth and no gum. "Rydell,"

he said. "Son of a bitch. Where you been?"  
"Looking for you, Buell."

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The man with the knife put his hand on Rydell's shoulder. "This is unwise," he said.

"Hey, Buell," Rydell said, "get me a beer, okay?"

"You see me, Rydell? I was fuckin' Jesus' son, man. Fuckin' Hank Williams, motherfucker." Creedmore beamed, yet Rydell saw the thing that was waiting there to toggle into rage. Someone handed Creedmore two tall cans, already opened. He passed one to Rydell. Creedmore splashed cold malt liquor down his chest, rubbed himself with it. "Damn, I'm good."

"We can be too easily contained here," the man said.

"Leggo my buddy there," said Creedmore, noticing the man for the first time. "Faggot," he added, as if further taking in the man's appearance and seeming to have difficulty placing it in any more convenient category of abuse. "Buell," Rydell said, reaching up and grabbing the man's wrist,

"want you to meet a friend of mine."

"Looks like some faggot oughta be kilt with a shovel," Creedmore observed, slit-eyed and furious now, the toggle having been thrown.

"Let go of my shoulder," Rydell said to the man, quietly. "It doesn't look good."

The man let go of Rydell's shoulder.

"Sorry," Rydell said, "but I'm staying here with Buell and a hundred or so of his close personal friends." He looked at the can in his hand. Something called King Cobra. He took a sip. "You want to go, go. Otherwise, just kill me."

"Goddamn you, Creedmore," Randy Shoats said, stepping heavily down from the stage, "you fucking drug addict. You're drunk. Drunk and ripped to the tits on dancer."

Creedmore goggled up at the big guitar player, his eyes all pupil. "Jesus, Randy," he began, "you know I just needed to get a little loose—"

"Loose? Loose? Jesus. You forgot the words to 'Drop That Jerk and Come with Me'! How fucked do you have to be to do that? Fuckin' audience knew the words, man; they were singing along with you. Trying to, anyway." Shoats rammed his callused thumb into Creedmore's chest for

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emphasis. "I told you I don't work with diz-monkeys. You're toast, understand? Outta here. History."

Creedmore seemed to reach far down into the depths of his being, as if to summon some new degree of honesty, in order to face this moment of crisis. He seemed to find it. Drew himself more upright. "Fuck you," he said. "Motherfucker," he added, as Shoats, disgusted, turned and walked away.

"Buell," Rydell said, "they got a table or something reserved for you here? Someplace I could sit down?"

"Maryalice," Creedmore said, thoughts elsewhere, waving in the general direction of the back of the bar. He set off, apparently after Shoats.

Rydell ignored the man with the tanto and headed for the back of the bar, where he found Maryalice seated alone at a table. There was a hand-lettered sign, on brown corrugated cardboard, done in different colored felt pens, that said '~BUELL CREEDMORE\*~ & HIS LOWER COMPANIONS, each of the Os done in red as a little happy face. The table was solid, side to side, with empties, and Maryalice looked like somebody had just whacked her in the head with something th~it didn't leave a mark. "You A&R?" she asked Rydell, as if startled from a dream.

"I'm Berry Rydell," he said, pulling out a chair and unslinging the bag with the projector. "Met earlier. You're Maryalice."

"Yes," she smiled, as if pleased with the convenience of being so reminded, "I am. Wasn't Buell wonderful?"

Rydell sat, trying to find a way to manage it that kept the rib from killing him. "They got an outlet around here, Maryalice?" He was opening the duffel, pushing it down around the sides of the projector, pulling out the power cable.

"You're A&R," Maryalice said, delighted, seeing the projector, "I knew you were. Which label?"

"Plug this in there, please?" Rydell pointed to an outlet just beside her, on the scabrous wall, and passed her the plug end of the cable. She held it close to her face, blinked at it, looked around, saw the socket. Plugged it in. Turned back to Rydell, as if puzzled by what she'd just done.

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The man with the tanto brought over a chair, placed it at the table, and took a seat opposite Maryalice. He did it, somehow, in a way that occuppied as little of anyone else's consciousness as possible. "Now you," Maryalice said to him, with a quick glance down to check the state of her bodice, "you are pretty clearly a label head, am I correct?"

"Lapel?"

"I knew you were," Maryalice said.

Rydell heard the projector humming.

And then Rei Toei was there, standing beside their table, and Rydell knew that once again he'd seen her naked for a second, glowing, white, but now she wore an outfit identical, it seemed, to Maryalice's. "Hello, Berry Rydell," she said, then looked down and tightened the strings at the top of the black thing she wore.

"Hey," Rydell said.

"Well, suck me raw with a breast pump," Maryalice said, voice soft with amazement, as she stared at Rei Toei. "I swear to God I didn't see you standing there.."

The man with the tanto was looking at Rei Toei too, the light of her projection reflected in the round lenses.

"We are in a nightclub, Berry Rydell?"

"A bar," Rydell said. -

"Rez liked bars," she said, looking around at the crowd. "I have the impression that people in bars, though they seem to be talking to one another, are actually talking to themselves. Is this because higher brain function has been suppressed for recreational purposes?"

"I just love your top," Maryalice said.

"I am Rei Toei."

"Maryalice," Maryalice said, extending her hand. The idoru did likewise, her hand passing through Maryalice's.

Maryalice shivered. "Had about enough, this evening," she said, as if to herself.

"I am Rei Toei." To the man with the tanto.

"Good evening."

"I know your name," she gently said to the man. "I know a great deal about you. You are a fascinating person."

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He looked at her, expression unchanged. "Thank you," he said. "Mr. Rydell, is it your intention to remain here, with your friends?"

"Time being," Rydell said. "I have to phone somebody."

"As you will," the man said. He turned to survey the entrance, and just then the scarf came strolling in and saw them all, immediately.

More trouble, thought Rydell.

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51. THE REASON OF LIFE

LANEYS two favorite Tokyo bars, during the happier phase of his employment at Paragon-Asia Dataflow, had been Trouble Peach, a quiet sit-and-drink place near Shimo-kitazawa Station, and The Reason of Life, an art bar in the basement of an office building in Aoyama. The Reason of Life was an art bar, in Laney's estimation, by virtue of being decorated with huge black-and-white prints of young women photographing their own crotches with old-fashioned reflex cameras. These were such modest pictures that it took you, initially, a while to figure out what they were doing. Standing, mostly, in crowded streetscapes, with the camera on the pavement, between their feet, smiling into the photographer's lens and thumbing a manual release. They wore sweaters and plaid skirts, usually, and smiled out at you with a particularly innocent eagerness. Nobody had ever explained to Laney what this was all supposed to be about, and it wouldn't have occurred to him to ask, but he knew art when he saw it, and he was seeing it again now, courtesy of the Rooster, who somehow knew Laney liked the place in Aoyama and had decided to reproduce it, off the cuff, here in the Walled City.

In any case, Laney prefers it to the barbershop made of misaligned graphics tiles. You can just look at these girls, in cool monochrome renditions of wool and flesh and other textures of cities, and he finds that restful. It was strange though, to sit in a bar when you didn't have a body present.

"They're coy about it," the Rooster is saying, of Libia and Paco and how it may be that they've succeeded in hacking Cody Harwood's most intensely private means of communication. "They may have physically introduced an agent into Harwood Levine's communications satellite. Something small. Very small. But how could they have controlled it? And how long would it have taken, undetected, to effect a physical alteration in the hardware up there?"

"I'm sure they found a more elegant solution," Klaus says, "but the

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bottom line is that I don't care. Access is access. The means to access are academic. We've hacked Harwood's hotline. His red telephone."

"And you have a tendency to pat yourselves on the back," Laney says. "We know that Harwood's had 5-SB, but we don't know why, or what he's doing with nodal apprehension. You seem to be convinced it's something to do with Lucky Dragon and this half-baked Nanofax launch."

"Aren't you?" asks Klaus. "Nanofax units are going into every Lucky Dragon in the world. Right now. Literally. Most of them are fully installed, ready to go operational."

"With the faxing of the first Taiwanese teddy bear from Des Moines to Seattle? What's he hope to gain?" Laney concentrates on his favorite girl, imagining her thumb on the plunger of a hypodermic-style manual release.

"Think network," the Rooster puts in. "Function, even ostensible function, is not the way to look at this. All function, in these terms, is ostensible. Temporary. What he wants is a network in place. Then he can figure out what to do with it."

"But why does he need to have something to do with it in the first place?" Laney demands.

"Because he's between a rock and a hard place," responds Klaus. "He's the richest man in the world, possibly, and he's ahead of the curve. He's an agent of change, and massively invested in the status quo. He embodies paradoxical propositions. Too hip to live, too rich to die. Get it?"

"No," Laney says.

"We think he's like us, basically," Klaus says. "He's trying to hack reality but he's going strictly big casino, and he'll take the rest of the species with him, however and whatever."

"You have to admire that, don't you?" says the Rooster, out of the depths of his silent faux-Bacon scream.

Laney isn't sure that you do.

He wonders if the Rooster's reiteration of The Reason of Life incorporates the tiny, six-seater bar downstairs, the darker one where

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you can sit beneath very large prints of the pictures the girls themselves were taking: huge abstract triangles of luminous gelatin-printed white panty.

"Can you get me that kind of look-in on Harwood's stuff anytime?"

"Until he notices you, we can."

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52. MY BOYFRIEND'S BACK

CHEVETTE had had a boyfriend named Lowell, when she'd first lived on the bridge, who did dancer.

Lowell had had a friend called Codes, called that because he tumbled the codes on hot phones and notebooks, and this Saint Vitus reminded her of Codes. Codes hadn't liked her either.

Chevette hated dancer. She hated being around people when they were on it, because it made them selfish, too pleased with themselves, and nervous; suspicious, too prone to make things up in their heads, imagining everyone out to get them, everyone lying, everyone talking behind their back. And she particularly hated watching anyone actually do the stuff, rub it into their gums the way they did, all horrible, because it was just so gross. Made their lips numb, at first, so they'd drool a little, and how they always thought that was funny. But what she hated about it most was that she'd ever done it herself, and that, even though she had all these reasons to hate it, she still found herself, watching Saint Vitus vigorously massaging a good solid hit into his gumsT feeling the urge to ask him for some.

She guessed that was what they meant by it being addictive. That she'd gotten just that little edge of it off the country singer sticking his tongue in her mouth (and if that was the only way to get it, she thought, she'd pass) and now the actual molecules of diz were twanging at receptor sites in her brain, saying gimme, gimme. And she'd never even been properly strung out on the stuff, not how they meant it when they said that on the street.

Carson had coordinated on a Real One sequence about the history of stimulants, so Chevette knew that dancer was somewhere out there past crack cocaine in terms of sheer gotcha. The addiction schedule was a little less merciless, in terms of frequency, but she figured she'd still just barely missed it, chipping with Lowell. Lowell who'd explain in detail and at great length how the schedule he'd worked out for using it was going to optimize his functionality in the world, but never result in

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one of those ugly habit deals. You just had to know how to do it, and when to do it, and most important of all, why to do it. Powerful substance like this, Lowell would explain, it wasn't there just for any casual jack-off recreational urge. It was there to allow you to do things. To empower you, he said, so that you could do things and, best of all, finish them.

Except that what Lowell had mainly wanted to do, dizzed, was have sex, and the diz made it impossible for him to finish. Which had been okay by Chevette, because otherwise he tended to finish a little on the quick side. The Real One sequence had said that dancer made it possible for men to experience something much more like the female orgasm, a sort of ongoing climax, less localized and, well, messy.

Dancer was pretty deadly stuff, in terms of getting people into bed in the first place. Strangers doing dancer together, if there was any basis for attraction at all, were inclined to decide that that was basically a fine idea, and one to be acted on right away, but only provided the other party seemed agreeable to doing it until both were pretty well dead.

And people did wind up dead around the stuff; hearts stopped, lungs forgot to breathe, crucial tiny territories of brain blew out. People murdered one another when they were crazy on the stuff, and then in cold blood just to get some more.

It was one ugly substance and no doubt about it.

"You got any more of that?" she asked Saint Vitus, who was dabbing at the spit-slick corners of

his mouth with a wadded-up tissue, dots of blood dried brown on it.

Saint Vitus fixed her with his slitty glasses. "You've got to be kidding," he said.

"Yeah," said Chevette, pushing off the stool, "I am." Must've been the time of night. How could she even have thought that? She could smell his metallic breath in the sound box.

"Got it," said Tessa, pulling off the glasses. "Crowd's thinning. Chevette, I'll need you to help me get the camera platforms together."

Saint Vitus smirked. At the thought, Chevette guessed, of somebody else having to do something like work.

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"You haven't seen Carson, have you?" Chevette asked, stepping to the window. The dwindling crowd, seen from above, was moving in one of those ways that there was probably a logarithm for: milling and dispersing.

"Carson?"

She spotted Buell Creedmore, just in front of the stage, talking with a big guy in a black jacket, his back to the sound booth. Then the big guitar player, the one with the squashed cowboy hat, jumped down from the stage and seemed to be giving Creedmore a hard time. Creedmore tried to say something, got shut up, then managed to say something short, and by the look on his face, not too sweet, and the guitar player turned and walked away. Chevette saw Creedmore say something to the other guy, gesturing back in her direction, and this one turned and headed that way, his face concealed, from just this angle, by a dusty swoop of black-painted cable.

"He was here before," Chevette said. "That's why I Frenched the meshback and ran out the door. Didn't you wonder?"

Tessa looked at her. "I did, actually. But I thought maybe I was just getting to know you better." She laughed. "Are you sure it was him?"

"It was him, Tessa."

"How would he know we're up here?"

"Somebody told him at the house? You talked enough, before, about your docu."

"Maybe," Tessa said, interest waning. "Help me get the platforms tethered, okay?" She handed Chevette four black nylon tethers, each one tipped with a mini-bungee and a metal clip.

"Listen," Chevette said, "I'm not up for a night at Cognitive Dissidents, okay? I don't think you are either. I just watched your friend here gum enough dancer to wire a mule."

"Chevette," Tessa said, "we're up here to document, remember? We're going interstitial."

Saint Vitus sniggered.

"I think where we're going is to sleep, Tessa. Where's the truck?"

"Where we parked it."

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"How'd you get the balloons back here?"

"Elmore," Tessa said. "Has one of those caps, and an ATV to go with it."

"See if you can find him again," Chevette said, starting down the ladder. "We could use a lift back."

Chevette wasn't sure what it would actually take to get Tessa to give up on Cognitive Dissidents. Worst case, she might actually have to go there, if only to make sure Tessa was okay. Cog Diss was a rough enough place even if you didn't have your head buried in a pair of video glasses.

She went down the ladder and headed out onto the floor, where God's Little Toy was already descending, under Tessa's control. She reached up, got it tethered, and turned to signal Tessa, in the sound booth, to start bringing the others down.

And found he-self looking, for however many dreamlike seconds, before he hit her, into Carson's eyes.

Hard and in the face, just like he'd done before, and she saw those same colors, like a flashback; saw herself falling back, across the big beige couch in his loft-space, blood splashing from her nose, and still not believing it, that he'd done that.

Except that here she went over into a couple of Creedmore's remaining audience, who caught her, laughing, saying "Hey. Whoa," and then Carson was on her again, grabbing a handful of Skinner's jacket- "Hey, buddy," said one of the men who'd caught her, holding up his

spread hand as if to block the second punch that Carson, his face as calm and serious as she'd seen it in the editing booth at Real One, was aiming at her. And looking into Carson's eyes she saw nothing there like hatred or anger, only some abstract and somehow almost technical need.

Carson tried for her, past that stranger's upraised hand, and her protector yelped as one of his fingers got bent back. It deflected the blow, though, and gave Chevette time to twist out of that grip.

She backed off two steps and shook her head, trying to clear it. Something was wrong with her eyes.

Carson came after her, that same look on his face, and in that

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instant she knew that she knew neither who he was nor what it was that was wrong with him.

"You just didn't get it, did you?" he said, or that was what she thought she heard him say, feeling a tear run down from her swelling eye, her head still ringing.

She took a step back. He came on.

"You just didn't get it."

And then a hand came down on his shoulder and he spun around. And went down, the man behind him having done something that Chevette hadn't seen.

And she saw that it was Rydell.

It wasn't.

It was.

Rydell in a rent-a-cop's black nylon jacket, looking at her with an expression of utter and baffled amazement.

And Chevette got it, right then and absolutely, that she was dreaming, and felt the most enormous sense of relief, because now she would wake up, surely, into a world that would make sense.

On the floor, Carson, rolling over, got to his knees, stood up, shook himself, brushed a squashed cigarette-filter from the sleeve of his jacket, and suckerpunched Rydell, who saw it coming and tried to move aside, so that Carson's fist slammed into his ribs, rather than his stomach, as intended.

And Rydell screamed, in shrill animal pain, doubled over- And that was when the guy with the black leather car-coat, the

fresh-looking black buzzcut, black scarf knotted up high around his neck, this guy Chevette had never seen before, stepped up to Carson. "Mistake," she thought she heard him say. He took something from the pocket of his black coat. Then: "You're not on the menu."

And he shot Carson, right up close, without looking down at the gun in his hand.

And it was not a loud sound, not loud at all, more like the sound of a large pneumatic nail-gun, but it was final and definitive and accompanied by a yellow-blue flash, and Chevette could never remember,

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exactly, seeing this, though she knew she had: Carson blown back by however many thousand foot-pounds of energy trying to find their way to kinetic rest at just that one instant in his body.

But it didn't take, in memory; it did not stick, and she would be grateful.

And grateful too, though for other reasons, that this was when Tessa, in the sound booth overhead, killed the lights.

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53. (YOU KNOW I CAN'T LET YOU) SLIDE THROUGH MY HANDS

RYDELL knew that sound: a subsonic projectile through a silencer that slowed it even more, draining off the expanding gases of the ignited charge, and still the muzzle velocity would be right up there, and the impact, where it was localized.

He knew this through the pain in his side, which felt like a white-hot ax blade between his ribs; he knew it through his shock (he was literally in shock in a number of ways) at discovering Chevette (this version of Chevette, with really different hair, more the way he'd always wished she'd wear it). He knew it in the dark that followed the report, the dark that followed the death (he was pretty sure) of whoever the man was who'd gone after Chevette, the man he'd decked, the man who'd gotten up and, it felt like, driven Rydell's broken rib halfway through his diaphragm. He knew it, and he held on to it, for the very specific reason that it meant the scarf was a trained professional, and not just some espontaneo in a bar.

Rydell knew, in those first instants of darkness, that he had a chance: as long as the scarf was a pro, he had a chance. A drunk, a crazy, any ordinary perp, in a pitch-dark bar, that was a crapshoot. A pro would move to minimize the random factor.

Which was considerable, by the sound of it, the remaining crowd, and maybe Chevette as well, screaming and heaving and struggling to get out the door. That was bad, Rydell knew, and easily fatal; he'd been a squarebadge at concerts, and had seen bodies peeled off crowd barriers.

He stood his ground, nursing the pain in his side as best he could, and waited for the scarf to make a move.

Where was Rei Toei? She should've shown up in the dark like a movie marquee, but no.

And zooming past Rydell's shoulder, toward where he'd last seen the scarf, there she was, more comet than pixie, and casting serious light.

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She circled the scarf's head twice, fast, and Rydell saw him hat at her with the gun. Just a ball of silver light, moving fast enough to leave trails on Rydell's retina. The scarf ducked, as she shot straight in at his eyes; he spun and ran to the left. Rydell watched as the light expanded slightly, to whiz like cold, pale ball lightning around the perimeter of the dark bar, people moaning and gasping, screaming as she shot past. Past the struggling knot at the door, where several lay unconscious on the floor, and still no sign of Chevette.

But then the Rei-sphere swung in and down, and Rydell spotted Chevette on her hands and knees, crawling in the direction of the door. He ran over to her as best he could, his side feeling like it was about to split; bent, grabbed her, pulled her up. She started to struggle.

"It's me," he said, feeling the complete unreality of seeing her again, here, this way, "Rydell."

"What the fuck are you doing here, Rydell?"

"Getting out."

The blue flash and the nail-gun f-wut were simultaneous, but it seemed to Rydell that the flick of the slug, past his head, preceded it. In immediate reply, one tight white ball of light after another was hurled past him from behind. From the projector, he realized, and likely straight into the scarf's eyes.

He grabbed Chevette under the arm and hustled her across the floor, adrenaline flooding the pain in his side. The stream of projected light, behind him, was just enough to show him the wall to the right of the door. He hoped it was plywood, and none too thick, as he pulled the switchblade from his pocket, popped it, and drove the blade in overhand, just at eye level. It punched through, up to the handle, and he yanked it sideways and down, hearing an odd little sizzle of parting wood fiber. He made it down to waist height, twisted it, back to the left, and three-quarters of the way up the other side before he heard the glasslike tink of the ceramic snapping.

"Kick. Here," he said, striking the center of his cutout with the stub of the blade. "Brace up against me. Kick!"

And she did. She could kick like a mule, Chevette. The section gave way with her second try, and he was boosting her up and through, try-

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ing not to scream at the pain. He was never sure how he made it through himself, hut he did, expecting any second one of those subsonics would find him.

There were people unconscious, outside the door, and other people kneeling, trying to help them.

"This way," he said, starting to limp in the direction of the ramp and the Lucky Dragon. But she wasn't with him. He swung around, saw her headed in the opposite direction. "Chevette!"

He went after her but she didn't slow down. "Chevette!"

She turned. Her right eye swelling, bruised, swimming with tears; the left wide and gray and crazy now. As if she saw him but didn't register who it was she saw. "Rydell?"

And all this time he'd thought about her, remembered her, having her there in front of him was something completely different: her long straight nose, the line of her jaw, the way he knew her lips looked in profile.

"It's okay," he said, which was absolutely all he could think of to say.

"It's not a dream?"

"No," he said.

"They shot Carson. Somebody shot him. I saw somebody shoot him."

"Who was he? Why'd he hit you?"

"He was-" She broke off, her front teeth pressing into her lower lip. "Somebody I lived with. In LA."

"Huh," Rydell said, all he could manage around the idea that the scarf had just shot Chevette's new boyfriend.

"I mean I wasn't with him. Not now. He was following me, but, Jesus, Rydell, why'd that guy. . . Just walked up and shot him!"

Because he was going after me, Rydell thought. Because he wanted to wail on me and I'm supposed to be theirs. But Rydell didn't say that. "The guy with the gun," he said, instead, "he'll be looking for me. He's not alone. That means you don't want to be with me when he finds me."

"Why's he looking for you?"

"Because I've got something-" But he didn't; he'd left the projector in the bar.

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"You were looking for me, back there?"

I've been looking for you since you walked out. I've been working up and down the face of the waking world, every last day, with a tiny little comb, looking for you. And each day shook out empty, never never you. And he heard in memory the sound those rocks made, punching into the polymer behind the Lucky Dragon on Sunset. Pointless, pointless. "No. I'm working. Private investigation for a man named Laney."

She didn't believe him. "Carson followed me up here. I didn't want to be with him. Now you. What is this?"

Laney says it's the end of the world. "I'm just here, Chevette. You're just here. I gotta go now--"

"Where?"

"Back in the bar. I left something. It's important."

"Don't go back there!"

"I have to."

"Rydell," she began, starting to shake, "you're ... you're-" And looked down at her open hands, the palms dark with something. And he saw that it was blood, and knew that it would be the boyfriend's, that she'd crawled through that. She started to sob, and wiped her palms down her black jeans, trying to get it off.

"Mr. Rydell?"

The man with the tanto, carrying Rydell's duffel in the crook of his arm as though it were a baby.

"Mr. Rydell, I don't think it would be advisable for you to attempt to leave the bridge. A watch has almost certainly been posted, and they will shoot you rather than permit the possibility of your escape." The pallid glare of the fluorescents chained overhead winked in the round lenses; this lean and concise man with perfectly blank, perfectly circular absences where eyes should be. "Are you with this young woman?"

"Yes," Rydell said.

"We must start toward Oakland," the man said, handing Rydell the duffel, the solid weight of the projector. Rydell hoped he'd gotten the power cable as well. "Otherwise, they will slip past and cut us off."

Rydell turned to Chevette. "Maybe they didn't see us together. You should just go."

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"I wouldn't advise that," the man said. "I saw you together. They likely did as well."

Chevette looked up at Rydell. "Every time you come into my life, Rydell, I wind up in She made a face.

"Shit," Rydell finished for her.

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THE Gunsmith Cats alarm watch taped to the wall of Laney's box brings him home from the Walled City. It buzzes to announce the Suit's impending arrival. The Suit has no watch of his own but is relentlessly punctual, his rounds timed to the clocks of the subway, which are set in turn by radio, from an atomic clock in Nagoya.

Laney tastes blood. It is a long time since he has brushed his teeth, and they feel artificial and ill-fitting, as though in his absence they have been replaced with a stranger's. He spits into a bottle kept for this purpose and considers attempting the journey to the restroom. Importance of grooming. He feels the stubble on his cheeks, calculating the effort required to remove it. He could request that the Suit obtain an electric disposable, but really he prefers a blade. He is one of those men who has never grown a beard, not even briefly. (And now, some small voice, one always best ignored, suggests: he never will.)

He hears the old man, in the next box, say something in Japanese, and knows that the Suit has arrived. He wonders what model the old man is building now, and sees, in his mind's eye, with hallucinatory clarity, the finishing touches being put on a model of Cohn Laney.

It is a "garage" kit, this Laney kit, a limited run produced for only the most serious of enthusiasts, the otaku of plastic model kits, and as such it is molded from styrene of a quite nauseous mauve. The plastic used in garage kits tends to uniformly ghastly shades, as the enthusiast-manufacturers know that no kit, assembled, will ever remain unpainted.

The Laney the old man is detailing is an earlier Laney, the Laney of his days in LA, when he worked as a quantitative analyst for Slitscan, a tabloid television show of quite monumental viciousness: this Laney wears Padanian designer clothing and sports a very expensive pair of sunglasses, the frames of which are even now being picked out in silver by the old man's narrowest sable, scarcely more than a single hair.

But this waking dream is broken now by the advent of the Suit's  
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54. SOME THINGS NEVER HAPPEN  
head, his hair like the molded pompadour of some archaic mannequin. Laney feels, rather than sees, the precision with which the Suit's black eyeglass frames have been most recently mended, and as the Suit crawls in, beneath the flap of melon blanket, Laney smells the rancid staleness the Suit's clothing exudes. It is strange that any odor produced by a warm body should suggest intense cold, but the Suit's somehow does.

The Suit is bringing Laney more of the blue syrup, more Regain, several large chocolate bars laden with sucrose and caffeine, and two liters of generic cola. The Suit's painted shirtfront seems faintly self-luminous, like the numerals of a diver's watch glimpsed far down in the depth of a lightless well, a sacrificial cenote perhaps, and Laney finds himself adrift for just an instant in fragments of some half-remembered Yucatan vacation.

Something is wrong, Laney thinks; something is wrong with his eyes, because now the Suit's luminous shirt glows with the light of a thousand suns, and all the rest is black, the black of old negatives. And still somehow he manages to give the Suit two more of the untraceable debit chips, and even to nod at the Suit's tense little salaryman bow, executed kneeling, amid sleeping bags and candy wrappers, and then the Suit is gone, and the glare of his shirt, surely that was just some artifact of whatever process this is that Laney is here to pursue.

LANEY drinks half of one of the bottles of cough syrup, chews and swallows a third of one of the candy bars, and washes this down with a swallow of the lukewarm cola.

When he closes his eyes, even before he puts the eyephones on, he seems to plunge into the flow of data.

Immediately he is aware of Libia and Paco, directing him. They do not bother to speak or to present, but he knows them now by a certain signature, a style of navigation. He lets them take him where they will, and of course he is not disappointed.

A lozenge opens before him.

He is looking down into what he takes to be Harwood's office, in San Francisco, at Harwood seated behind a vast dark desk littered with

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architectural models and stacks of printout. Harwood holding a telephone handset.

"It's an absurd launch," Harwood says, "but then it's an insane service. It works because it's redundant, understand? It's too dumb not to work."

Laney does not hear the reply, and takes this to mean that Libia and Paco have hacked a security camera in the ceiling of Harwood's office. The audio is ambient sound, not a phone tap.

Now Harwood rolls his eyes.

"People are fascinated by the pointlessness of it. That's what they like about it. Yes, it's crazy, but it's fun. You want to send your nephew in Houston a toy, and you're in Paris, you buy it, take it to a Lucky Dragon, and have it re-created, from the molecules up, in a Lucky Dragon in Houston. . . What? What happens to the toy you bought in Paris? You keep it. Give it away. Eviscerate it with your teeth, you tedious, literal-minded bitch. What? No, I didn't. No, I'm sorry Noriko, that must be an artifact of your translation program. How could you imagine I'd say that?" Harwood stares straight ahead, stunned with boredom. "Of course I want to give the interview. This is an exclusive, after all. And you were my first choice." Harwood smiles as he calms the journalist, but the smile vanishes the instant she begins to ask her next question.

"People are frightened of nanotechnology, Noriko. We know that. Even in Tokyo, seventeen-point-eight of your markedly technofetishistic populace refuses to this day to set foot in a nanotech structure. Here on the coast, I'd point to the example of Malibu, where there's been a very serious biotech accident, but one which is entirely unrelated to nanotech. It's actually being cleaned up with a combination of three smart algae, but everyone's convinced that the beaches are alive with invisible nanobots waiting to crawl up your disagreeable pussy. What? 'Unfriendly cat'? No. There's something wrong with your software, Noriko. And I do hope you're only writing this down, because we negotiated the interview on a nonrecorded basis. If any of this ever turns up in any recorded form at all, you'll not be getting another. What?

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Good. I'm glad you do." Harwood yawned, silently. "One last question, then."

Harwood listens, pursing his lips.

"Because Lucky Dragon is about convenience. Lucky Dragon is about being able to purchase those things you need, really need, when you need them, twenty-four seven. But Lucky Dragon is also about fun. And people are going to have fun with these units. We've done enough research that we know that we don't really know what, exactly, Lucky Dragon customers will find to do with this technology, but that's all part of the fun." Harwood explored the recesses of his left nostril with the nail of his little finger but seemed to find nothing of interest. "Blow me," he said. "'Inflate'? I don't think so, Noriko, but I'd have that software checked, if I were you. 'Bye.'" Harwood puts the phone down, stares straight ahead. It rings. He picks it up, listens. Frowns.

"Why doesn't that surprise me? Why doesn't that surprise me in the least?" He looks, to Laney, as if he's on the verge of laughing. "Well. You can try. You can certainly try. Please do. But if you can't, then he'll kill you. All of you. Every last one. But I shouldn't worry about that, should I? Because I've got your brochure here, and it's really a wonderful brochure, printed in Geneva, spare no expense in presentation; full-color, heavy stock, and it assures me that I've hired the best, the very best. And I really do believe that you are the best. We did shop comparatively. But I also know that he is what he is. And God help you."

Harwood hangs up.

Laney feels Libia and Paco tugging at him, urging him elsewhere.

He wishes that he could stay here, with Harwood. He wishes that he and Harwood could sit opposite one another across that desk, and share their experience of the nodal apprehension. He would love, for instance, to hear Harwood's interpretation of the node of 1911. He would like to be able to discuss the Lucky Dragon nanofacsimile launch with Harwood. He imagines himself sending a replica of the garage kit Laney-though "sending" isn't the word, here-but where, and to whom?

Libia and Paco tug him to the place where that thing is growing,

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and he sees that it has changed. He wonders if Harwood has looked at it recently: the shape of a new world, if any world can be said to be new. And he wonders if he will ever have the chance to speak with Harwood.

He doubts it.

Some things never happen, he reminds himself.

But this one always does, says the still small voice of mortality.

Blow me, Laney tells it.

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55. BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS

LATER Fontaine would remember that when he woke, hearing the sound at his door, he thought not of his Smith & Wesson but of the Russian chain gun, plastered away beneath gypsum filler and gauze some four months earlier, out of sight and out of mind.

And he would wonder about why that was, that he'd thought of that particular ugly thing as he became conscious of something clicking urgently against the glass of the shop door.

"Fontaine!" A sort of stage whisper.

"Spare me," Fontaine said, sitting up. He rubbed his eyes and squinted at the luminous hands of a soulless black Japanese quartz alarm, a gift of sorts from Clarisse, who liked to point out that Fontaine was frequently late, particularly with the child support, in spite of owning such a great many old watches.

He'd gotten about an hour's sleep.

"Fontaine!" Female, yes, but not Clarisse.

Fontaine put his trousers on, slid his feet into his cold clammy shoes, and picked up the Kit Gun. "I'll say it was self-defense," he said, glancing back to see his mystery boy sprawled whale-like on the camping pad, snoring again but softly.

And out through the shop, where he made out the face of Skinner's girl, though somewhat the worse for wear, really major serious shiner going there, and looking anxious indeed.

"It's me! Chevette!" Rapping on his glass with something metal.

"Don't break my damn window, girl." Fontaine had the gun out of sight, by his side, as was his habit when answering the door, and he saw now that she was not alone; two white men behind her, the one a big, brown-haired, cop-looking person, and the other reminding him of a professor of music known decades before, in Cleveland. This latter causing Fontaine a prickling of neck hair, though he couldn't have said exactly why. A very still man, this one.

"Chevette," he said, "I'm sleeping."

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"We need help."

"We' who, exactly?"

"It's Rydell," she said. "You remember?"

And Fontaine did, though vaguely: the man she'd gone down to Los Angeles with. "And?"

She started to speak, looked lost, glanced back over her shoulder.

"A friend," the one called Rydell said, none too convincingly. He was hugging a cheap-looking drawstring bag, which seemed to contain a large thermos, or perhaps one of those portable rice cookers. (Fontaine hoped that this wasn't going to be one of those pathetic episodes in which he was mistaken for a pawnbroker.)

"Let us in, Fontaine. We're in trouble."

You probably are trouble, by now, Fontaine decided, after whatever it was got you the black eye. He started unlocking the door, noticing how she kept glancing either way, as if expecting unwanted company. The cop-looking one, this Rydell, was doing the same. But the professor, Fontaine noted, was watching him, watching Fontaine, and it made him glad to have the Kit Gun down by his leg.

"Lock it," Chevette said, as she entered, followed by Rydell and the professor.

"I'm not sure I want to," Fontaine said. "I might want to show it to you."

"Show it to me?"

"You in the plural. Show you the door. Follow me? I was sleeping."

"Fontaine, there are men on the bridge with guns."

"There are indeed," said Fontaine, as he rubbed his thumb over the knurls atop the little double-action's hammer.

The professor closed the door.

"Hey," Fontaine said, in protest.

"Is there another exit?" the professor asked, studying the locks.

"No," Fontaine said.

The man glanced back through the shop, to the rear wall, beyond the upturned toes of Fontaine's guest. "And on the other side of this wall, there is only a sheer drop?"

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"That's right," Fontaine said, somehow resenting the ease with which the man had extracted this information.

"And above? There are people living above?" The man looked up at the shop's painted plywood ceiling.

"I don't know," Fontaine admitted. "If there are, they're quiet. Never heard 'em."

This Rydell he seemed to be having trouble walking He made it over to the glass-topped counter and put his duffel down on it.

"You don't want to break my display there, hear?"

Rydell turned, hand pressed into his side. "Got any adhesive tape? The wide kind?"

Fontaine did have a first-aid kit, but it never had anything anyone ever needed. He had a couple of crumbling wound compresses circa about 1978 in there and an elaborate industrial eye bandage with

instructions in what looked like Finnish. "I got gaffer tape," Fontaine said.

"What's that?"

"Duct tape. You know: silver? Stick to skin okay. You want that?" Rydell shrugged painfully out of his black nylon jacket and started

fumbling one-handed with the buttons of his wrinkled blue ~hirt. The girl started helping him, and when she'd gotten the shirt off Fontaine saw the yellow gray mottling of a fresh bruise up his side A bad one

"You in an accident?" He'd tucked the Smith & Wesson into the side pocket of his trousers, not a safe carry ordinarily but a convenient one under the circumstances. The worn checkered walnut of the butt stuck out just enough to get a handy purchase, should he need it. He got a roll of tape out of the top drawer of an old steel filing cabinet. It made that sound when he pulled out a foot or so of it. "You want me to put this on you? I taped fighters in Chicago. In the ring, you know?"

"Please," said Rydell, wincing as he raised the arm on the bruised side.

Fontaine tore the length of tape off and studied Rydell's rib cage. "Tape's mystical, you know that?" He snapped the tape taut between his two hands, the darker, adhesive-coated side toward Rydell.

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"How's that?" Rydell asked.

"Cause it's got a dark side," Fontaine said, demonstrating, "a light side," showing the dull silver backing, "and it holds the universe together." Rydell started to yell when the strip was applied, but caught it. "Breathe," Fontaine said. "You ever deliver a baby?"

"No," Rydell managed.

"Well," said Fontaine, readying the next strip, this one longer, "you want to breathe the way they tell women to breathe when the contractions come. Here: now breathe out. .

It went pretty fast then, and when Fontaine was done, he saw that Rydell was able to use both hands to button his shirt.

"Good evening," he heard the professor say and, turning with the roll of tape in his hand, saw that the boy was awake and sitting up, brown eyes wide and empty, staring at the man in the gray-green overcoat. "You look well. Is this your home?"

Something moved, behind the boy's eyes; saw, retreated again.

"You two know each other?" Fontaine asked.

"We met last night," the man said, "here, on the bridge."

"Wait a minute," Fontaine said. "He get a watch off you?"

The man turned and regarded Fontaine evenly, saying nothing.

Fontaine felt a wave of guilt. "It's okay," he said. "Just keeping it for him."

~'I see."

"That's quite a watch," Fontaine said. "Where'd you get it?"

"Singapore."

Fontaine looked from the smooth gaunt wolfish face of the man who very probably wasn't a music professor to the blank and unlined face of the boy, beneath its new haircut.

"I see that you have a pistol in your pocket," the man said.

"I'm just glad to see you," Fontaine said, but nobody got it.

"What is its caliber?" "Twenty-two long rifle." "Barrel length?" "Four inches." "Accurate?"

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"It's not a target pistol," Fontaine said, "but for four inches of barrel, it's not too bad." This was making him very nervous, and he very badly wanted the gun in his hand, but he thought that if he touched it now, something would happen. Something would.

"Give it to me," the man said.

"Forget it," Fontaine said.

"An undetermined number of armed men are searching for Mr. Rydell tonight. They would like to capture him alive, in order to question him, but they would certainly kill him to prevent his escape. They will kill anyone they find with him. That would simply be a matter of housekeeping for them. Do you understand?"

"Who are they?"

"'Bright young things,'" the man said.

"What?"

"They are mercenaries, in the pay of someone who regards Mr. Rydell as being in the employ of a competitor, an enemy."

Fontaine looked at him. "Why you want my gun?"

"In order to kill as many of them as I can."

"I don't know you from Adam," Fontaine said.

"No," said the man, "you don't."

"This is crazy" Fontaine looked at Chevette. "You know this guy?"

"No," Chevette said.

"You. Rydell. You know this guy?"

Rydell looked from Fontaine to the man, back to Fontaine. "No," Rydell said, "I don't. But you know what?"

"What?"

"I'd give him the gun."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Rydell said, and something seemed to catch in his voice. "I just know I would."

"This is crazy" Fontaine said, repeating himself, hearing the pitch of his own voice rising. "Come on, Chevette! Why'd you come in here? You bring these people--"

"Cause Rydell couldn't walk fast enough," she said. "I'm sony, Fontaine. We just needed help."  
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"Fuck," said Fontaine, pulling the Smith & Wesson from his pocket, its blue steel warm with his body heat. He opened the cylinder and ejected the five cartridges into his palm. Fragile bits of brass less than

the thickness of a pencil, each one tipped with its copper-coated, precisely swaged and hollowed segment of lead alloy. "This is it, right? All the ammunition I've got." He passed the man the revolver, barrel pointed at the ceiling and cylinder open, then the cartridges.

"Thank you," the man said. "May I load it now?"

"Gentlemen," said Fontaine, feeling a frustration that he didn't understand, "you may start your fucking engines."

"I suggest," the man said, inserting the five cartridges, one after another, "that you lock the door after me and conceal yourselves, out of the sight lines for the door and window. If they determine you are here, they will try to kill you." He closed the cylinder, sighted down the barrel at a blank patch of wall.

"Pulls a little to the left," Fontaine said, "single-action. You want to compensate in the sight picture."

"Thank you," the man said and was gone, out the door, closing it behind him.

Fontaine looked at Rydell, whose eyes were bright with what Fontaine suddenly saw were brimming tears.

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56. KOMBINAT PIECE

MR. Fontaine," Rydell said, "you wouldn't have another gun around here, would you?"

The three of them were sitting on the floor, in a row, their backs to the wall nearest Oakland, in

the back room of Fontaine's little shop. Between Rydell and Fontaine, the duffel with the projector. The kid who'd been sleeping on the floor there was sitting up in Fontaine's narrow bunk, back against the opposite wall, clicking through something on a notebook; had one of those big-ass old military displays on, made him look like a robot or something, except you could see the bottom half of his face, see he kept his mouth open while he was doing it. The lights were all off, so you could see the steady pulse of pixel-glow leaking from the helmet, from whatever it was he kept pulling up.

"I don't deal in firearms," the black man said. "Vintage watches, knives by name makers, die-cast military..

Rydell thought he'd had enough to do with knives already. "I just don't like sitting here, waiting."

"Nobody does," Chevette said beside him. She was pressing a wet cloth against her eye.

Actually what bothered Rydell most about sitting was that he wasn't sure how easy it would be to get back up. His side, with the duct tape on it now, didn't hurt too badly, but he knew he'd stiffen up. He was about to ask Fontaine about the knives when Fontaine said: "Well. "Well what?" Rydell asked.

"Well," Fontaine said, "it isn't actually part of my stock, you know?"

"What isn't?"

"I've got this lawyer, he's African Union, you know? Forced out by politics."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Fontaine said, "but you know how it is, people come out of a situation like that, all that ethnic cleansing and shit. .

"Yeah?"

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"Well, they like to feel they got protection, something happens."

Rydell was definitely interested.

"Trouble is," Fontaine said, "they got this overkill mentality, over there. And my lawyer, Martial, he's like that. Actually he's trying not to be, understand? Got him a therapist and everything, trying to learn to walk around without a gun and not feel he's liable to get his ass blown away by tribal enemies, right? Like this is America, here, you know?"

"I think you're still liable to get your ass blown away by tribal enemies, in America, Mr. Fontaine."

"That's true," Fontaine said, shifting his buttocks, "but Martial's got that post-traumatic thing, right?"

"You help him with these problems? You help him by holding a weapon for him, Mr. Fontaine? Something he wouldn't want to keep on his own premises?"

Fontaine looked at Rydell. Pursed his lips. Nodded.

"Where is it?"

"It's in the wall, behind us."

Rydell looked at the wall between them. "This is plywood?"

"Most of it," Fontaine said, swinging around, "See here? This part's a patch, gypsum wall filler. We built a box in here, put it in, plastered it over, painted."

"Guess someone could find it with a metal detector," Rydell said, remembering being trained how to search for stashes like this.

"I don't think it has a lot of metal in it," Fontaine said, "anyway not in the delivery system."



"Can we .see it?"

"Well," said Fontaine, "once we get it out, I'm stuck with it."

"No," Rydell said, "I am."

Fontaine produced a little bone-handled pocketknife. Opened it, started digging gingerly at the wall.

"We could get a bigger knife," Rydell suggested.

"Hush," Fontaine said. As Rydell watched, the point of the knife exposed a dark ring, the size you'd wear on your finger. Fontaine pried it up and out of the hardened plaster, but it seemed to be fastened to something. "You pull this, okay?"

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Rydell slid his middle finger through the ring, tugged it a little. Felt solid.

"Go on," Fontaine said. "Hard."

Plaster cracked, tore loose, as the fine steel wire attached to the ring pulled out around the patch, cutting through it like dry cheese. A rough, inch-thick rectangle coming away in Rydell's hand. Fontaine was pulling something out of the rectangular recess that had been exposed. Something wrapped in what looked like an old green shirt.

Rydell watched as Fontaine gingerly unwrapped the green cloth, exposing a squat heavy object that looked like a cross between the square waxed-paper milk cartons of Rydell's childhood and an industrial power drill. It was a uniform, dusty olive-green in color, and if it was in fact a firearm, it was the clumsiest-looking firearm Rydell had yet seen. Fontaine held it with what would've been the top of the milk carton pointed up at an angle, toward the ceiling. There was an awkward-looking pistol grip at the opposite end, and a sort of grooved, broom-handle affair about six inches in front of that.

"What is it?" Rydell asked.

"Chain gun," Fontaine said. "Disposable. Can't reload it. Caseless:

this long square thing's the cartridges and the barrel in one. No-moving parts to it: ignition's electrical. Two buttons here, where the trigger would be, you just point it, press 'em both the same time. It'll do that four times. Four charges."

"Why do they call it a chain gun?"

"What this is, Martial says, it's more like a directional grenade, you understand? Or sort of like a portable fragmentation mine. Main thing he told me is you don't use it in any kind of confined space, and you only use it when there's nobody in front of you you don't mind seeing get really fucked up."

"So what's the chain part?"

Fontaine reached over and tapped the fat square barrel lightly, once, with his forefinger. "In here. Thing's packed with four hundred two-foot lengths of super-fine steel chain, sharp as razor wire."

Rydell hefted the thing by its two grips, keeping his fingers away from those buttons. "And that-

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"Makes hamburger," Fontaine said.

"I heard a shot," Chevette said, lowering her wet cloth.

"I didn't hear anything," Rydell said.

"I did," Chevette said. "Just one."

"You wouldn't hear much, that little .22," Fontaine said.

"I don't think I can stand this," Chevette said.

Now Rydell thought he heard something. Just a pop. Short, sharp. But just the one. "You know," he said, "I think I'm going to take a look."

Chevette leaned in close, her one eye purple-black and swollen almost completely shut, the other gray and fierce, scared and angry all at once. "It's not a television show, Rydell. You know that? You know the difference? It's not an episode of anything. It's your life. And mine. And his," pointing to Fontaine, "and his," pointing at the kid across the room. "So why don't you just sit there?"

Rydell felt his ears start to burn, and knew that he was blushing. "I can't just sit here and wait-

"I know," she said. "I could've told you that."

Rydell handed the chain gun back to Fontaine and got to his feet, stiff but not as bad as he'd expected. Fontaine passed him up the gun. "I need keys to unlock the front?"

"No," Fontaine said. "I didn't do the dead bolts."

Rydell stepped around the shallow section of partition that screened them from the window in the door and the display window.

Someone in the shadows opposite cut loose with something automatic, something silenced so efficiently that there was only the machine-like burr of a slide working, and the stitching sounds of bullets. Both Fontaine's windows vanished instantly, and the glass front of the counter as well.

Rydell found himself on the floor, unable to recall getting there. The gun across the street stopped abruptly, having chewed its way through a full clip.

He saw himself down in the basement range at the academy in Knoxville, ejecting a half-moon clip from the stock of a bull-pup assault rifle, pulling out another, and slapping it into place. How long it took. The number of movements, exactly, that it took.

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There was a high, thin, very regular sound in his ears, and he realized that it was Chevette, crying.

And then he was up, shoving the milk-carton nose of Fontaine's lawyer's Kombinat gun over the bottom of the square hole in the door where the glass had been.

One of the two buttons, he thought, must be a safety.

And the other filled the air outside with flame, recoil close to breaking his wrist, but nobody, really nobody, was going to be reloading anything.

Not over there.

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57. EYE

AND when they are cleaning up, the next day, Fontaine will find a cardboard canister of coarse Mexican salt, holed, on the floor, in the back room.

And he will pick it up, the weight wrong somehow, and pour the salt out into the palm of his hand, through the entrance hole in the side, until out falls the fully blossomed exotic hollow-point slug that had penetrated the plywood partition, then straight into this round box of salt, upon its shelf, spending its energy there as heat. But it will be cold then, like a fanged bronze kernel of popcorn, evidence of the ways in which its makers intended it to rend flesh.

And he will place it on a shelf beside a lead soldier, another survivor of the war.

But now he can only move as in a dream, and what comes to him most strongly in this silence, this tangible silence through which he feels he moves as if through glycerine, is the memory of his father, against his mother's ardent fear, taking him briefly out, into the yard behind a house in Tidewater Virginia, to experience the eye of a hurricane.

And in that eye, after the storm's initial rage, nothing moves. No bird sings. Each twig of each leafless tree defined in utter stillness, yet perhaps on the very edge of perception there can be some awareness of the encircling system. Something subsonic; felt, not heard. Which will return. That is certain.

And it is like that now as he rises and moves, seeing the boy's hands frozen, trembling, above the notebook's keys, head still helmed with that old military set. And thinks for a moment the boy is injured, but he sees no blood. Frightened only.

All guns exist to be fired, he knows, and Rydell has proven this by firing Martial's, that ugly thing, Russian, vicious booty out of the Kombinat states by way of Africa, out of wars of an abiding stupidity, ethnic struggles smoldering on for centuries, like airless fires down in the heart of a dry bog. A gun for those unable to be trained to shoot.

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Reek of its propellant charge in the hack of his throat, harsh and chemical. A frosting of shattered glass beneath his shoes.

Rydell stands at the door, the ungainly chain gun dangling from his hand like a duelist's pistol, and now Fontaine stands beside him, looking out into the bridge's narrow covered thoroughfare as into a tableau or diorama, and opposite, there, all glitters with red. Though surely in the shadows one would find more solid, substantial evidence, bone and gristle perhaps, and that automatic gun.

"Chevette," Rydell says, not to her but as if reminding himself of her, and turns, crunching back through the glass, to find her.

Fontaine blinks at the queer red glitter over there, the smear that someone has so instantly become, and catches something moving, high up in the periphery of vision. Silver.

Flinches, but it's a balloon, a cushiony oblate of inflated Mylar, with, it looks like, little caged articulated props and a camera. This draws even with the front of his shop, halts itself with reversing props, then neatly rotates, so that the lens looks down at him.

Fontaine looks up at the thing, wondering if it has the wherewithal to hurt him, but it simply hangs there, staring, so he turns and surveys the damage to his shop. All this glass is the most evident breakage, bullet holes themselves being not so visible. Two of them, though, have punched through a round enamel Coke sign that previously would've rated an eighty percent, but now is scarcely "very good."

It is the counter that draws him, though he dreads what he will find:

his watches there beneath shards of glass, like fish in a shattered aquarium. Plucking up a Gruen "Curvex" by its faux-alligator band, he finds it not to be ticking. He sighs. Clarisse has been after him for some time now, to buy a fire safe in which to place his more valuable stock at night. Had he done so, the watches would still be ticking. But this one is, the Doxa chrono with the gently corroded dial, a favorite of his which customers pass over repeatedly. He holds it to his ear, hearing the sound of a mechanism assembled years before his own birth.

But here he sees something which will make Clarisse more unhappy still: her Another One babies lie tumbled in a heap, like some tabloid photo from a nameless atrocity, their ruptured heads and torsos

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oozing silicone (which is either a liquid that behaves like a solid or vice versa, Fontaine can never remember which). Not one of them has survived intact, and as he bends for a closer look he hears one repeating, endlessly, an apparent single syllable, though whether in Japanese or English he cannot tell. This briefly and deeply fascinates him, and he remembers a similar feeling, as a

child, when he viewed through a police line the rubble of a movie theater in Harlem; the fire that had gutted the place had stopped short of the candy counter, but everything in that counter had melted, had poured out and solidified into a frozen stream of refined sugar, smelling much better, even over the sourness of damp ashes, than this silicone does.

And hears Chevette and Rydell talking, arguing it seems, and he wishes they would stop.

He is in the eye, and he wishes simply to know it.

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THE close-up, hand-held, shows Laney this small blue absence just in from the corner of the dead man's eye, like some radical experiment with mascara. A bullet hole, entry wound, of the most modest circumference.

"You'll note the lack of powder burns," says the one holding the camera. "Done from a distance."

"Why are you showing me this?" Harwood asks, once more the disembodied voice.

The frame pulls back, revealing the dead man, blonde in a black leather jacket, reclining against some vertical surface fogged with whorls of aerosol enamel. He looks surprised and slightly cross-eyed. Pulls back farther, revealing a second body, this one in a black armored vest, facedown on worn pavement.

"One shot each. We weren't expecting him to have a gun."

"The bridge isn't noted for adherence to firearms regulations, you know."

The man with the camera reverses it, his face appearing from an odd angle, shot from the level of his waist. "I just wanted to tell you 'I told you so.'"

"If he leaves the vicinity alive, your firm will find itself in more than contractual difficulties. You signed on to take care of anything, remember?"

"And you agreed to listen to our suggestions."

"I listened."

"I came out here with a five-man team. Now two of them are dead, I've lost radio contact with the other three, and I've just heard what sounded like an explosion. This environment is inherently unstable: an armed anthill. These people have short fuses and no coordinating authority. We could have a riot on our hands, and once that happens, we'll have no hope at all of taking out your man, or of capturing Rydell."

"Recapturing Rydell, you should say."

"I have one last suggestion." The man raises the camera slightly, so

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58. SMALL BLUE ABSENCE

that his face fills the screen, his black scarf blanking the bottom third of the image.

"Yes?"

"Burn it."

"Burn what?"

"The bridge. It's a tinderbox."

"But wouldn't that take time to arrange?"

"It's already arranged." The man shows the camera a small rectangle, a remote, that he holds in his other hand. "We've been planting radio-activated incendiaries. We like to cover the options."

"But aren't our two men likely to escape in the ensuing confusion? You tell me you're afraid of a

riot, after all. .

"Nobody's getting off this thing. It'll burn from both ends, from Bryant Street to Treasure Island."

"And how are you getting off yourself?"

"That's been taken care of."

Harwood falls silent. "Well," he says, at last, "I suppose you should."

The man thumbs a button on the remote.

Laney flicks away from the lozenge, panicking, looking for Libia and Paco.

The projector is still here, still on the bridge. He still doesn't know what part it plays, but Rei Toei must have a presence in the impending cusp.

And he sees that Harwood knows that, or feels it, and is moving, has moved, to prevent it.

He pulls the eyephones from his head and gropes through the colors of darkness, searching for a phone.

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59. THE BIRDS ARE ON FIRE

CHEVETTE kept looking at the holes in the plywood partition between the front and the back of Fontaine's shop, noticing how the bullets had taken out long splinters of plywood on each side of the actual holes; extending lines, in her mind, through those holes and on back through the room.

She couldn't figure how she'd missed catching one. What it had done, though, was give her the shakes; she kept shivering, and if she didn't keep her teeth together they'd actually chatter, and she had hiccups as well, and both these things embarrassed her, so she was taking it out on Rydell and feeling sorry for him at the same time, because he looked like he was in his own kind of shock.

She was vaguely aware of people coming up to the door of the shop and looking in, but then they'd see Rydell with the chain gun and go away, fast. These were bridge people, and this was how they reacted to something like this. If they hadn't seen an armed man there, they'd have asked if everyone was okay and could they help, but otherwise it was about taking care, as Skinner had liked to put it, of your own side of the street.

She felt like she'd split in half, the part of her that was ragging Rydell for getting her into this kind of crazy shit again, and the part of her that just kept looking around and wanting to say: look at this, and how come I'm alive?

But something started beeping, in Rydell's pocket, and he took out a pair of sunglasses, black frames with cheap chrome trim, and put them on. "Hello?" he said. "Laney?"

She looked over as the one who'd talked Fontaine out of his gun opened the door, glass grating beneath it, and stepped in, looking exactly the same as when he'd left, except he had a long fresh scratch down the side of his face, where blood was beading. He took the skinny little revolver out of his pocket and handed it to Fontaine, holding it sideways

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with his hand around the thing you put the bullets in. "Thank you," he said.

Fontaine brought the gun up beneath his nose, sniffed at it, and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"I've adjusted the windage," the man said, whatever that meant. "No need now to compensate for the pull."

Fontaine clicked the bullet-thing out and ejected five empty brass cartridges into his palm. He looked at these, looked up at the man. "How'd you do?"

"Three," the man said.

"I think they've got one," Rydell was saying. "There's this kid here on it. You want me to try the cable? You talk to her, Laney? She told me you used to talk with her a lot. . ." Rydell looked idiotic, standing there talking to the ~ir in front of him, one hand up to hold the ear bead in, the other letting that crazy-ass gun hang down. She wished he'd put it somewhere, back in the wall, anywhere.

"Come on, Rydell," she said, but then she saw that God's Little Toy was up against the ceiling in the front of the shop, watching her. "Tessa? Tessa, you hear me?"

There was a burst of squawky static, like a parrot trying to talk.

"Tessa?"

"I'm sorry," the man in the long coat said. "The men who attacked you communicate on a number of specific channels. I am employing a jammer at those frequencies." He looked at God's Little Toy. "This device's control frequencies are unaffected, but voice communication is currently impossible."

"Tessa!" Chevette waved frantically at the balloon, but it only continued to stare at her with its primary lens.

"What do you mean, burn it?" she heard Rydell say. "Now? Right now?" Rydell pulled the sunglasses off. "They're setting fire to the bridge."

"Fire?" She remembered Skinner's caution around that, how careful people were with cooking gas, matches; how a lit butt thrown down could earn you a broken nose.

But Rydell had the sunglasses on again. "I thought you said to get

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out? What do you mean, leave her? Damn, Laney, why don't you make some sense for once? Why-Laney? Hey?" She saw Rydell's tension as he took off the glasses. "Listen up. Everybody. We're leaving now. Laney says they're setting fire to the bridge." Rydell bent, wincing, and opened his bag, hauling this silver thing out. She saw it glint in the light from outside. Like a big steel thermos. He pulled out some coiled cables and tossed her a length. "Find a socket." He had another cable in his hand now and was standing over the boy with the old military eye-phone rig. "Hey. Kid? We have to borrow the notebook. Hear me?" The helmet came up and seemed to regard him blindly but sentiently, like the head of a giant termite. Rydell reached down and took the notebook, unhooking the lead to the helmet. Chevette saw the boy's mouth close. The notebook's screen showed the black dial of a clock. No, Chevette saw, it was an old-fashioned watch, enlarged to the size of a baby's face.

Rydell studied the two ends of the cable he held, then tried a socket on the back of the notebook. Another. It fit. Chevette had found an outlet, set crookedly into one of Fontaine's walls. She plugged the cable in and passed Rydell the other end. He was plugging the cable from the notebook into the silver canister. He plugged the power cable in beside it. She thought she heard it start to hum.

And a girl was there, pale and slim, glowing with her own light, naked for an instant between them. And then she wore Skinner's jacket, faded horsehide. Black jeans, a black sweatshirt, lug-soled runners. Everything cleaner and somehow sharper than what Chevette wore, but otherwise identical.

"I am Rei Toei," the girl said. "Berry Rydell, you must leave the bridge now. It is burning."

"You said that you knew my name," the man in the overcoat said, the long thin scratch on his face black in the light she gave off. "In the tavern."

"Konrad," the glowing girl said, "with a 'K.'"

The man's eyebrows rose, above his round gold glasses. "And how do you know that?"

"I know many things, Konrad," the girl said, and as she said it,

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became, for a few seconds, another girl, blonde, the irises of her blue eyes ringed with black.

The man seemed carved from some incredibly dense wood, heavy and inert, and Chevette thought for some reason of dust motes floating in sunlight in an old museum, something she'd seen once but could not remember where or when. "Lise," he said, a name as if dredged from some deep place of pain. "Yesterday. I dreamed I saw her, in Market Street."

"Many things are possible, Konrad."

Rydell had taken a pink fanny pack from his duffel and was strapping it around his waist. It had a grinning cartoon dragon screened on the front. As Chevette watched, he zipped it open and unfolded a pink bib, which he fastened around his neck. The bib said LUCKY DRAGON SECURITY in square black letters. "What's that?" Chevette asked him.

"Bulletproof," Rydell said. He turned to the glowing girl. "Laney says I should leave the projector here. But that means we leave you-"

"That is what I want," she said. "We are about to find our way to the heart of Harwood's plan. And change it. And change everything." She smiled at Rydell then, and Chevette felt a twist of jealousy.

Chevette became aware of noise approaching, the revving and whining of overtaxed electric engines. There was a crashing of metal on wood, and Fontaine sprang away from the door. A three-wheeled ATV slammed to a halt outside, Tessa straddling its seat behind a moon-faced boy who wore a black meshbacked cap, backward, and a black T-shirt. Tessa was wearing her input glasses and had a control glove on either hand. She pulled off the glasses and pushed hair back from her eyes. "Come on, Chevette."

"Get off the damn trike, honey," the round-faced boy said. "Don't have a lot of turning radius in here."

Tessa hopped off the bike and stepped into the shop, looking up at God's Little Toy. "I'm not getting any audio," she said.

The boy punched the engines mounted in the ATV's rear hubs, reversing one. The trike lurched around and back, then forward, turning so that he faced back toward San Francisco. "Come on, honey," he said.

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"I'm picking up flames on two cameras," Tessa said. "This sucker's on fire."

"Time to go," Rydell said, putting his hand on Chevette's shoulder. "Mr. Fontaine, you get you a ride here with Chevette."

"I'm not going anywhere, son," Fontaine said.

"It's on fire, Mr. Fontaine."

"It's where I live."

"Come on, Rydell," Chevette said, grabbing him by his waistband.

Tessa had climbed back on, behind her meshbacked driver, and was putting her input glasses on. "Jesus," Tessa said, "I don't believe the angles I'm getting. .

Chevette tugged Rydell through the door and climbed on the back of the ATV~ sort of sidesaddle, leaving room for Rydell. "Wait," Rydell said, "we can't just leave them here."

"We'? Hey, boy, I'm not carrying you-" But the moon-faced boy saw the chain gun then and stopped.

"Go on," said Fontaine, who stood now with his arm around the shoulder of the boy who'd worn the helmet, whose eyes regarded Rydell with a sort of animal calm. "Go on. We'll be okay here."

"I'm sorry," Rydell said. "I'm sorry about your shop

"Your ass be sorry, you don't get out of here."

Chevette heard a woman start screaming, toward San Francisco. She yanked his waistband, hard. The fly button popped off his khakis. He climbed on the back of the ATV opposite her, hanging on with one hand, the chain gun in the other.

The last she saw of the glowing girl, she was saying something to the man she'd called Konrad. Then Tessa's meshback popped it and they took off toward the city. "Good-bye, Fontaine," Chevette shouted, but she doubted he ever heard her.

Remembering the night of a hill fire above the sharehouse, the birds in the brush all around the house waking in the dark, sensing it. All their voices.

And now through the plywood patchwork overhead she hears it too:

the drumming of conflagration.

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60. RATS KNOW

FONTAINE knows the bridge is burning when he looks out and sees a rat streak past, toward Oakland. Then another, and a third. Rats know, and the bridge rats are held to be most knowing of all, through having been hunted so thoroughly by the bridge's host of feral cats and by innumerable equally feral children armed with slingshots cobbled from aircraft aluminum and surgical tubing. These bridge slingshots are lethal not only to rats, their users favoring balls of dense damp clay, a trick held over from the Middle Ages and not to be underestimated.

Fontaine watches the rats flash past and sighs. He has a fire ax here, somewhere, salvage from a tug sank in China Basin in 2003, and an extinguisher too, but he can't imagine these will be of much use, although chopping a hole in the back wall and falling into the bay is a possibility. He wonders if there actually are sharks there, as the bridge children like to believe. He knows for a fact there are mutant fish, warped, it is said, by oxides leaching off the piers of the cable towers.

But Fontaine has survived many disasters, both municipal and marital, and there is in him that which believes, against all odds or hope, that all will simply, somehow, be well. Or that in any case there is usually not much to be done about certain things, or in any case not by him.

So, now, rather than digging through the closet, where he remembers, possibly, putting that fire ax, he picks up his push broom and begins tidying the front of the shop, sweeping as much of the glass as possible into a single drift beside the door. Glass, he reflects, sweeping, is one of those substances that takes up relatively little space until you break it. But it is also, he recalls being told, if considered over truly cosmic stretches of time, a liquid. All the glass in every pane in every window, everywhere, is in the infinitely slow process of melting, sagging, sliding down, except it would be unlikely that any one pane survive the millennia required to be reduced to a solid puddle.

While outside the rats are being joined by fleeing humans, as diverse a company of them as only the bridge can offer. He hopes that

24.8

Clarisse and the children are safe; he's tried to phone, but no answer, and there seemed little point in leaving a message, under the circumstances.

He looks back and sees Rydell's hologram girlfriend kneeling beside the bunk, talking to the boy. Beside the boy sits the professor who had borrowed the Kit Gun, and they strike Fontaine just then as a family group, unlikely perhaps but not without warmth. Fontaine has lived long enough with technological change that he really doesn't question the why or what of the girl: she is like a game program that comes out and sits in your room, he thinks, and some people would like that just fine.



Now he comes to an obstacle in his sweeping: the butchered Another One dolls in their puddle of consensual silicone. At least none of them are talking now. It looks terrible, cruel, when he pushes the broom up against them, amid shards of glass, so he leans the broom against the counter, fishes one from the glass by its limp arms. He carries the faux Japanese baby outside and stretches it on its back in front of the shop. The others follow, and he is laying out the last when a fat woman, fleeing heavily toward Treasure Island, clutching what appears to be a bedsheet-load of wet laundry, notices what he is doing and starts to scream. And screams all the way out of sight, and can still be heard as he turns back into the shop, thinking of Tourmaline, his first wife.

There is smoke in the air now, and maybe it is time to find that ax.

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THAT shape that Laney sees when he looks at Harwood, at the idoru, at Rydell, and these others, has never before been a place for him, an inhabitable space. Now, driven by a new urgency (and augmented by virtually the entire population of the Walled City, working in a mode of simultaneity that very nearly approximates unison) he succeeds in actually being there, within a space defined by the emerging factors of the nodal point. It is a place where metaphor collapses, a descriptive black hole. He is no more able to describe it to himself, experiencing it, than he would be able to describe it to another.

Yet what it most nearly resembles, that place where history turns, is the Hole he has posited at the core of his being: an emptiness, as devoid of darkness as it is of light.

And Harwood, he knows immediately, though without knowing how he knows, is there.

-Harwood?

-Cohn Laney. An evening for miracles. The unexpected.

-You told them to burn the bridge.

-Is there no privacy?

-You're trying to stop her, aren't you?

-I suppose I am, yes, although without knowing exactly what it is I'm attempting to stop her from doing. She's an emergent system. She doesn't know herself.

-Do you? Do you know what you want?

-I want the advent of a degree of functional nanotechnology in a world that will remain recognizably descended from the one I woke in this morning. I want my world transfigured, yet I want my place in that world to be equivalent to the one I now occupy. I want to have my cake and eat it too. I want a free lunch. And I've found the way to have it, it seems. Though you have too. And what, we have to ask ourselves, went wrong there?

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61. FUTUREMATIC

-You chose it. You chose to take 5-SB. In the orphanage, we volunteered to be test subjects, but we had no idea what we were taking.

-And I chose to take 5-SB based on results collected from you, Laney. You and a girl named Jennifer Mo, who subsequently became the homicidally obsessed stalker of an astonishingly boring actor named Kevin Burke. She committed suicide while holding him hostage at a meditation retreat in Idaho.

Laney knows the story of Jennifer Mo; it has haunted him since he first read it, several years ago, as a classified government document.

-Why hasn't it gotten you, Harwood? Why hasn't it kicked in?

-Perhaps because I'm too perfectly self-obsessed to become interested in anyone else. It's been all gravy for me. The next best thing to knowing the future. Better, actually: just that little

degree of free will and we're so much more happy, aren't we? And looking backward is very nearly as much fun as looking forward, though our digital soup does thin out rather rapidly, that way down the time-line. Amazing, though: that business around Curie's husband... Changed everything, and who knows? I ask you, Laney, who knows?

-We do.

-Yes, we do.

-It's changing again. Tonight.

-This morning, rather. Pacific Standard. Very early. But, yes, it is. And I'm here to see that it changes in the directions I prefer it to, and not in others.

-We're going to try to stop you.

-Of course. That's the shape of things tonight, isn't it? I couldn't expect otherwise.

Now Laney feels two things simultaneously: a coldness, physical and inescapable, rising beneath his heart, and the secret, ranked presence of the individual inhabitants of the Walled City, arrayed behind him like clay soldiers set to march forever across the floor of an emperor's tomb. Yet these will move, should Laney require them, and he senses as well the presence of Rei Toei, and he knows that the configuration is not yet complete.

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-She's here, Laney. She's in the flow. You've done that, you and your friends. But it won't help now, because I'm going where you won't find me. For the duration. Till the deal is done. Your friends aren't the only ones who learned how to secede.

And with the cold rising around his heart, Laney knows that this is true, that Harwood is going now, inverting himself into an informational wormhole of the sort the Walled City exists within- And reaches down (it seems like down, though in this place there

is neither direction nor ordination), a legion reaching with him, to find-

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62. LOS PROYECTOS

SILENCIO is remembering the rusting cans of fire, in the yards of los proyectos, how the men stand and spit and warm their hands. Playboy and Raton he had met around such a fire, and now there is the smell of the cans in this room, and he is frightened, and even this kind one, who makes her own light and speaks to him in the language of his mother (but kind) will not keep the fear away, and he wishes only to return to the watches, to their faces and conditions and values, this universe that has discovered him, this mode of being, without which there is only the fear.

Crouching here on the black man's bed, the kind one glowing beside him, he feels the fear come very big, and the black man in the closet, throwing things out, and Silencio wants only the watches.

At the edge of his mind wait men with dog's teeth and wings, their faces blacker than the face of the black man with the watches. Their faces are the black of the drug men rub into their gums.

"Bring the projector closer," she tells the man, this one who stilled Playboy and Raton, and Silencio sees that for the time she speaks she is another, her hair smooth gold, the bones of her face another's bones. "Bring the notebook. Be very careful of the cable." And the man shifts the silver thing Silencio fears (now Silencio fears everything) closer, and brings the watch finder to the bed, still on its wire.

"Connect the eyephones. Quickly!" The man puts the wire from the hat into the watch finder and hands Silencio the hat. Inside, Silencio sees, are the pictures that fit against the eyes, and they are pictures of the watch on the screen of the finder, and Silencio feels relief, the fear moving away, back to the edge of things where the dog-toothed men are. He puts the hat over his eyes.

And is in another place, nothing up or down, but something spreading forever, wider than the yards of los proyectos or any other. space he has ever seen.

But the one who shines is there, and beside her another, less clear.

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"This is Mister Laney," she says, in the language of Silencio's mother. "You must help him. He needs to find a watch. This watch." And she holds in her palm the watch Silencio had seen on the screen. It is a LeCoultre "Futurematic," a back-winder, black dial, with wind reserve. Silencio knows its serial number, its bid history, its number in today's auction. "Someone is taking it away, and you must follow it."

Silencio looks from the beautiful face of the Futurematic to the face of the woman.

"You must find it for him--"

And the watch is gone, and she is gone, and the other with her, leaving Silencio in that place that is only wide, and without color or shape, and Silencio thinks he might cry now.

But very far away, he feels it, the watch. He knows it, and it is there still, but only this distance, these gray fields of light. Gone again.

No. There is the system: the system of all the watches. Similarities. Differences. The words. A coding. Nothing is lost within the system, and the Futurematic rises inside as though it were lifting through clear water. It is within his grasp.

And gone again. Blankness.

No. He wants it. He enters the system again.

He crosses the gray fields, seeing only the Futurematic. Where it has gone...

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RYDELL had had a certain amount of riot-control training in Knoxville and knew something, in theory anyway, about fires and natural disasters, but nothing had prepared him for the weirdness of clinging one-handed to the back of an ATV, while Elmore, the meshback Chevette's friend had somehow talked into driving, gunned it back toward Bryant Street through the bridge's upper level. Rydell had never seen a vehicle here before, aside from bicycles, and he suspected that under normal circumstances they wouldn't have been allowed to get very far.

But these were not normal circumstances, nor was this in any way a normal place. People were boiling out of the upper parts of the squatter's community like ants out of a broken nest, and what struck Rydell about it now was the quiet with which they were doing it. These were not, in some sense, civilians, but hardened survivors used to living on their own in a community of similar people. There were a few people screaming, and probably running the wrong way, or in circles, but from the moving vantage point of the bucking, pitching ATV~ it was hard to tell. Rydell's impression was mainly of determination; they'd decided that the place was burning, and they'd decided they were getting out. Most people seemed to be carrying something. A few were carrying small children, more carried household goods, and Rydell had seen at least three carrying guns.

Elmore's style of getting through the crowd was straightforward; he'd gun it toward whoever was in his way, sounding an irritating little horn that Rydell suspected nobody was hearing anyway, and trust that people would get out of his way. Which they managed to do, some just barely, until the ATV's right back wheel clipped a stack of yellow plastic vegetable crates and brought that down on top of a couple of heavily tattooed characters in lederhosen and paint-splattered construction boots. Elmore had to hit the brakes then, and Rydell saw Chevette flip off; he couldn't grab her, because he had the chain gun in the hand nearest her and no way to put it down.

Blocked by the pile of empty yellow crates, Elmore whipped it into

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63. FUNICULAR

reverse, pulled back about four feet, and popped it, plowing into the crates and the men in lederhosen, who promptly went lateral, swarming over the pile of crates and grabbing Elmore, who didn't look to Rydell like fighting material. "Get off him," Chevette's girlfriend shouted, trying to keep from being pulled from the saddle with the driver. Rydell slung the chain gun up and put it in the face of one of the tattooed men. The guy blinked at it, looked

Rydell in the eye, and started to go after him, but some cop reflex caused Rydell to bellow "LAPD! Get on the ground!"-which made absolutely no sense under the circumstances, but seemed to work. "This is a gun," he added, and remembered Fontaine's advice that the chain gun was anything but directional.

"You people are crazy," snapped one of the tattooed men, barechested and elaborately inked, scrambling over the yellow crates, the light catching on a round steel stud in his lower lip. His partner was right behind him.

Rydell jumped down and found Chevette struggling to extricate herself from what seemed to be a pile of squashed eggplant. As he was turning back to the ATV, he saw a woman with a crew cut and serious biceps tackle Elmore, who went over into the crates.

"Where's Tessa?"

"I don't know," said Rydell, taking Chevette's hand. "Come on." As soon as they were away from the ATV, which in any case wasn't going anywhere, Rydell began to get the idea that something was seriously wrong here. While most of the way from Fontaine's, people had been running toward Bryant, now he saw they were running back, and now you could see the fear. "I think it's burning there, by the ramp," Rydell said. You could see the smoke now, and Rydell noticed how quickly it was thickening.

"Where's Tessa?"

"Lost her."

A young girl came running, screaming, with her shirt on fire, from the direction of the city. Rydell tripped her, handed Chevette the chain gun, and bent to roll the girl over, smothering the flames. The girl just kept screaming, and then she was up and running, though Rydell saw that her shirt had been extinguished. He took the chain gun back from

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Chevette. "We don't want to try that way," he said. He didn't want to think about what might be happening there, if the crowd was trying to force its way through flame. "Come on, let's try this." He tugged her through the doorway of a café, deserted, cups of coffee on the tables, music playing calmly, steam rising from a pot of soup on a hotplate behind the counter. He pulled her behind the counter, and into the tight little kitchen, but found that while there were windows, they'd been barred against thieves with elaborately welded grids of rebar. "Shit," he said, leaning to peer through the salt-crust pane, trying to estimate the drop here, in case they could find a way.

Now it was her turn to grab him, pull him out, but she pulled him out into the path of a fresh batch of panicked bridge people, fleeing whatever was happening toward Bryant. They both went down, and Rydell saw the chain gun drop through a hole sawn in the deck to admit a bundle of sewage-tubing. He braced for an explosion when the thing hit bottom, but none came.

"Look," Chevette said, getting to her feet, pointing, "we're at the foot of Skinner's tower. Let's try to get up there."

"There's no way off that," Rydell protested, his side killing him as he got up.

"There's nothing to burn, either," she said, "once you're past the 'ponics operation."

"Smoke'll get us."

"You don't know that," she said, "but down here it'll get us for sure." She looked at him. "I'm sorry, Rydell."

"Why?"

"Because I was trying to make all this your fault."

"I sure hope it's not," he said.

"How've you been?"

Rydell grinned, in spite of everything, that she'd ask him this now.

"I missed you," he said.

She hesitated. "Me too." Then she grabbed his hand again, heading for the plastic around the foot of the cable tower. It looked as though people had cut their way out. Chevette stepped through a five-foot slit. Rydell ducked to follow her. Into warm jungle air and the smell of

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chemical fertilizer. But there was smoke here too, swirling under the glare of the grow lights. Chevette started coughing. Shadows of people fleeing raced across the translucent plastic. Chevette went to a ladder and started climbing. Rydell groaned.

"What?" She stopped and looked down.

"Nothing," he said, starting up after her, biting his lip each time he had to raise his arms.

In the distance he could hear sirens, a weird, rising cacophony that blended together, wove in and out, like a concert performed by robot wolves. He wondered if it had sounded like that in the minutes after the Little Big One.

He really didn't know how much of this ladder he could manage. It was metal, stuck to the wall with that super-goop they used here, and he looked up and saw Chevette's plastic-cleated feet vanish through a triangular opening.

And he realized he was smiling, because that really was her and those really were her feet, and she'd said she'd missed him. The rest of the way didn't seem so hard, but when he got up and through, sitting on the edge for a breather, he saw that she'd started climbing up the slanted girder, hanging on to either side of the blunt-toothed track that the little car, which he could make out up at the top, ran on.

"Jesus," Rydell said, imagining himself having to follow her.

"Stay there," she said, over her shoulder, "I'll try to bring it down for you." Rydell watched her climb, worried about grease, but she just kept going, and soon she was there, climbing into the car, which from here looked like one of the waste bins out behind Lucky Dragon, but smaller.

Rydell heard an electric engine whine. With a creak, the little car, Chevette in it, started down.

He got to his feet and the smoke caught in his lungs, his side stabbing him each time he coughed.

"Somebody's been up here," she said, when she reached the bottom. "The grease shows it. I was up here earlier, looking around, and there was dust on it."

"Somebody probably lives here," Rydell said, looking around at the dark flimsy walls that sheathed the tower twelve feet up from the plat

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form he stood on. He climbed into the car, and she pushed a button. The car groaned, creaked, and started up the girder.

The first thing Rydell wasn't prepared for, as they cleared the screening wall, was the extent of the fire. It looked as though the end by Bryant was completely aflame, huge clouds of black smoke billowing up into the night sky. Through that he could see the lights of emergency vehicles, dozens of them, it looked like, and above the creaking of the cog wheel he could still hear the concert of wailing sirens. "Jesus," he said. He looked in the other direction, toward Treasure, and that was burning too, though it didn't seem as intense, but maybe that was just distance.

"You got a flashlight?" Chevette asked.

He unzipped his Lucky Dragon fanny pack and fished out a little Lucky Dragon disposable he'd helped himself to back in LA. Chevette twisted it on and started up the ladder that led to the hole in the floor of the little tower-top cube she'd lived in when Rydell had met her. Just a square opening there, and he saw her shine the light into it. "It's open," she said, not too loud,

and that made Rydell start up after her.

When he climbed through, into the single room, she was shining the light around. There was nothing here, just some garbage. There was a round hole in one wall, where Rydell remembered there had been an old stained-glass window before.

He saw the expression on her face in the glow from the flashlight. "It's really not here anymore," she said, as if she didn't quite believe herself. "I guess I thought it would still be here."

"Nobody lives here now" Rydell said, not sure why he had.

"Roof hatch is open too," Chevette said, shining the light up.

Rydell went to the old ladder bolted to the wall and started up, feeling damp splintery wood against his palms. He was starting to get the idea this might have been a very bad idea, climbing up here, because if the whole bridge were going to burn, they probably weren't going to make it. He knew the smoke was as dangerous as the fire, and he wasn't sure she understood that.

And the second thing he wasn't prepared for, as he stuck his head up through the hatch, was the barrel of a gun thrust into his ear.

His buddy with the scarf.

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64. TAG

AND as Harwood recedes, and the rest of it as well, amid this spreading cold, and Laney feels, as at a very great distance, his legs spasming within their tangle of sleeping-bags and candy wrappers, Rci Toci is there, and passes him this sigil, clockface, round seal, the twelve hours of day, twelve of night, black lacquer and golden numerals, and he places it on the space that Harwood occupied.

And sees it drawn in, drawn infinitely away, into that place where Harwood is going; drawn by the mechanism of inversion itself, and then it is gone.

And Laney is. going too, though not with Harwood.

"Gotcha," Laney says, to the dark in his fetid box, down amid the subsonic sighing of commuter trains and the constant clatter of passing feet.

And finds himself in Florida sunlight, upon the broad concrete steps leading up to the bland entrance to a federal orphanage.

A girl named Jennifer is there, his age exactly, in a blue denim skirt and a white T-shirt, her black bangs straight and glossy, and she is walking, heel to toe, heel to toe, arms outstretched for balance, as if along a tightrope, down the very edge of the topmost step.

Balancing so seriously.

As if, were she to fall, she might fall forever.

And Laney smiles, to see her, remembering the orphanage's smells:

jelly sandwiches, disinfectant, modeling clay, clean sheets...

And the cold is everywhere, now, somewhere, but he is home at last.

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65. OPEN AIR

FONTAINE, wielding the ax now, reflects that he has lived quite a long time and yet this experience is new: to lift the heavy head above his own and bring it down against the shop's rear wall, the plywood booming. He's a little surprised at how it simply bounces off, but with his next swing he's reversed the head, so that the sharp, four-inch spike, rather than the blade, contacts the wall, and this digs most satisfyingly in, and on a third blow penetrates, and he redoubles his efforts.

"Need us some air," he says, as much to himself as to the two seated on his bunk, the gray-haired man and the boy with his head down, lost in the helmet again. To look at these two, you'd think there was no problem, that the bridge wasn't burning.

Where'd that hologram girl go?

Still, this chopping is getting somewhere, though his arms are already aching. Hole there the size of a saucer, and getting bigger.

No idea what he'll do when he's got it big enough, but he likes to keep busy.

And this is the way it always is, for Fontaine, when he knows that things are bad, very bad indeed, and very likely over. He likes to keep busy.

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66. BULKL]FT

CHEVETTE climbs through the hatch in the roof of Skinner's room to find Rydell kneeling there in his Lucky Dragon security bib, but the critical factor here is the man from the bar, the one who shot Carson, who's got a gun pressed into Rydell's ear and is watching her, and smiling.

He's not much older than she is, she thinks, with his black buzz cut and his black leather coat, his scarf wrapped just so, casual but you know he takes time with it, and she wonders how it is people get this way, that they'll stick a gun in someone's ear and you know they'll use it. And why does it seem that Rydell finds people like that, or do they find him?

And behind him she can see a plume of water arcing higher than the bridge, and knows that that must be from a fireboat, because she's seen one used when a pier on the Embarcadero burned.

God, it's strange up here, now, with the night sky all smoke, the flames, lights of the city swimming and dimmed as the smoke rolls. Little glowing red worms are falling, winking out, all around her, and the smell of burning. She knows she doesn't want Rydell hurt but she isn't afraid. She just isn't now, she doesn't know why.

Something on the roof beside her and she sees that it's a glider up on its own little frame, staked to the asphalt-coated wooden roof with bright sharp spikes.

And other things piled beside it: black nylon bags, what she takes to be bedding. Like someone's ready to camp here, if they need to, and she understands the buzz-cut boy wanted to be covered, if he had to stay, to hide. And it comes to her that probably he's responsible for the burning of the bridge, and how many dead already, and he's just smiling there, like he's glad to see her, his gun in Rydell's ear.

Rydell looks sad. So sad now.

"You killed Carson," she heard herself say.

"Who?"

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"Carson. In the bar."

"He was doing a pretty good job putting your lights out."

"He was an asshole," she said, "but you didn't have to kill him."

"Fortunately," he said, "it isn't about who's an asshole. If it were, our work would never be done."

"Can you fly this?" Pointing at the glider.

"Absolutely. I'm going to take this gun out of your ear now," he said to Rydell. He did. She saw Rydell's eyes move; he was looking at her. The boy with the buzz cut hit him in the head with the gun. Rydell toppled over. Lay there like a big broken doll. One of the glowing red worms fell on his stupid pink bib, burned a black mark. "I'm going to leave you here," he said. He pointed the gun at one of Rydell's legs. "Kneecap," he said.

"Don't," she said.

He smiled. "Lay down over there. By the edge. On your stomach." The gun never moved.

She did as she was told.

"Put your hands behind your head."

She did.

"Stay that way.

She could watch him out of the corner of her eye, moving toward the glider. The black fabric of its simple triangular wing was catching a breeze now, thrumming with it.

She saw him duck under the kite-like wing and come up within the carbon-fiber framework extending beneath it. There was a control-bar there; she'd seen people fly these on Real One.

He still had the gun in his hand but it wasn't pointed at Rydell.

She could smell the asphalt caked on the roof. She remembered spreading it with Skinner on a hot windless day, how they heated the hard bucket of tar with a propane-ring.

The world Skinner had helped build was burning now, and she and Rydell might burn now with it, but the boy with the buzz cut was ready to fly.

"Can you make it to the Embarcadero with that?"

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"Easily," he said. She saw him shove the gun into the pocket of his black coat and grip the bar with both hands, lifting the glider. The breeze caught at it. He walked into the wind, reminding her somehow of a crow walking, one of those big ravens she'd grown up seeing, in Oregon. He was within a few feet of the edge now, the side of Skinner's room that faced China Creek. "You and your friend here caused me a great deal of trouble," he said, "but you're either going to burn to death or asphyxiate now, so I suppose we're even." He looked out, stepped forward.

And Chevette, without having made any conscious decision at all, found herself on her feet, moving, drawing the knife Skinner had left for her. And ripping it down, as he stepped from the edge, through the black fabric, a three-foot slash, from near the center and straight out through the trailing edge.

He never made a sound, then, as he went fluttering down, faster, spinning like a leaf, until he struck something and was gone.

She realized that she was standing at the very edge, her toes out over empty air, and she took a step back. She looked at the knife in her hand, at the pattern locked there by the beaten links of motorcycle chain. Then she tossed it over, turned and went to kneel beside Rydell. His head was bleeding, from somewhere above the hairline. His eyes were open, but he seemed to be having trouble focusing.

"Where is he?" Rydell asked.

"Don't move your head," she said. "He's gone."

The breeze shifted, bringing them smoke so thick the city vanished. They both started to cough.

"What's that sound?" Rydell managed, trying to crane his neck around.

She thought it must be the sound of the fire, but it resolved into a steady drumming, and she looked out to see, just level with her, it seemed, the block-wide impossible brow of a greasy-gray bulkliifter, OMAHA TRANSFER painted across it in letters thirty feet high. "Jesus Christ," she said, as the thing was upon them, its smooth, impossibly vast girth so close she might touch it.

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And then it jettisoned its cargo, close to two million gallons of pure glacial water destined for the towns south of Los Angeles, and she could only cling to Rydell and keep her mouth shut against the weight and the surge of it, and then she was somewhere else, and drifting, and it seemed so long, so long since she'd slept.

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67. SILVER CASTLE

IN the gray fields Silencio finds a silver castle, an empty place and somehow new. There are no people here, only empty hallways, and he wonders why someone would build such a thing.

The system of the watches leads him deeper, deep within, each hallway like the last, and he is tired of this, but the Futurematic is there still, and he will find it.

And when he does, at last, in a very small room at the root of the silver world, he discovers that he is not alone.

There is a man, and the man looks at Silencio and does not believe Silencio is there, and the man's eyes fill with a fear that Silencio feels must mirror his own fear, and Silencio wishes to tell the man he has only come here to find the watch, because it is part of the system of hands and faces and applied numerals, and Silencio means no harm, but the man's eyes are like the eyes of those to whom Raton shows the knife, and someone coughs behind Silencio. And turning, Silencio sees a terrible man, whose head is a cloud of blood, and whose mouth is open in a red-toothed scream, and the mouth does not move when this man says, "Hello, Harwood."

But now somehow he is with the bright one again.

She tells Silencio to remove the hat, and he does, inside it the pictures of the castle, fading, and the room is filled with smoke, and out through the broken door is more smoke, and the black man, the gray branches of his hair hanging limp now, has cut a hole in the wall with his ax. Not a big hole but he puts his head and shoulders out through it now, and Silencio sees him jerk as if something strikes him. And he draws back inside, eyes wide, and wet, wet, running with water, and water is falling past the hole and the gray hair sticks in its tangles to the man's face, and now more water comes down, into the tunnel like a street, beyond the door, so much water.

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And the man in the long coat is standing there, hands in his pockets, and he watches the water come down, and Silencio sees the lines in this man's cheeks deepen. Then this man nods to Silencio, and to the black man, and goes out through the broken door.

Silencio wonders if it is wet in the silver castle too.

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68. THE ABSOLUTE AT LARGE

BOOMZILLA in the Lucky Dragon, back in there for what he knows is the first time they work this Lucky Dragon Nanofax, not a game but how you copy solid shit from one store to another. Not sure he gets that but there's free candy and big drinks for the kids, of which he is opting to be very definitely one, right now, but it's gone sideways with the bridge burning, and those motherfucker bulklifters come drop a fuckload of water on it, got about a hundred fire trucks and everything here, police, tactical squads, helicopters up in the air, so Lucky Dragon can't do the special thing for the first time they use the Lucky Dragon Nanofax, manager's going lateral, walks the aisle talking to himself. But the store's doing business big-time, home office won't let him close, and Boomzilla's started eating candy bars free because the securities are watching the smoke still rise off the wet black garbage, all that's left this end, so you can see the real bridge there, the old part, black too, hanging out in the air like something's bones.

And finally the manager comes and reads from a notebook, ladies and gentlemen, this momentous occasion, jaw jaw, and now they are placing the first object in the unit in our Singapore branch (Boomzilla sees on TV, out on the pylon, it's a gold statue of the Lucky Dragon himself, smiling) and it will now be reproduced, at a molecular level, in every branch of our chain throughout the world.

Checker and two securities, they clap. Boomzilla sucks on the ice in the bottom of his big drink. Waits.

Lucky Dragon Nanofax has a hatch on the front Boomzilla could fit through, he wanted to, and he wonders would that make more Boomzillas other places and could he trust those motherfuckers? If he could, he'd have a tight posse but he doesn't trust anybody, why should they?

Light over the hatch turns green, and the hatch slides up and out crawls, unfolds sort of, this butt-naked girl, black hair, maybe Chinese, Japanese, something, she's long and thin, not much titties on her the

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way Boomzilla likes but she's smiling, and everybody, the manager, checker, securities, they jaw-hang, eyes popped: girl straightening up, still smiling, and walks fast to the front of the store, past the security counter, and Boomzilla sees her reach up and open the door, just right on out, and it'll take more than a naked Japanese girl get anybody's attention out there, in the middle of this disaster shit.

But the crazy thing is, and he really doesn't get this, standing looking out through the doors at the video pylon, so that he has to go outside and fire up his last Russian Marlboro to think about it, after, is that when he sees her walk past the screens there, he sees her on every last screen, walking out of every Lucky Dragon in the world, wearing that same smile.

Boomzilla still thinking about this when his Marlboro's done, but thinks it's time for a Lucky Dragon Muff-Lette microwave, he thinks of that as his businessman's breakfast, and he's got the money but when he gets back in they got no Muff-Lette, fucking firemen ate them all.

"Fuck that," he tells them. 'Why don't you fax me one from fucking Paris?"

So security throws his ass out.

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69. EVERYTHING TAKES FOREVER

RYDELL wakes to pain, in what has been the nearest approximation of heaven he's known, this miraculously dry, brand-new, extremely high-tech sleeping bag, curled beside Chevette, his ribs on fire, and lies there listening to the helicopters swarming like dragonflies, wondering if there's maybe something bad for you in the stuff that holds duct tape on.

They'd found this bag, hermetically sealed in its stuff sack, in the wake of the flood, snagged on one of the spikes that held the scarf's hang-glider rack to the roof. And no more welcome find there ever was, to get out of wet clothes and into dry warmth, the bag's bottom water-and probably bullet-proof as well, a very expensive piece of ordnance. And lie there watching two more bulklifters come, huge, slow-moving cargo drones diverted from their courses, it will turn out, according to a plan arrived at several years before by a team of NoCal contingency planners, to dump still more water, extinguishing the fire at the Treasure end and damping down the central span as well. And each one, depleted and limp, starting to rise immediately, free of ballast, in a sort of awkward elephantine ballet.

And held each other, up there, into the dawn, sea breeze carrying away the smell of burning.

Now Rydell lies awake, looking at Chevette's bare shoulder, and thinking nothing much at all although breakfast does begin to come to mind after a while, though he can wait.

"Chevette?" Voice from some tinny little speaker. He looks up to see a silver Mylar balloon straining on a tether, camera eye peering at them.

Chevette stirs. "Tessa?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she says, voice sleepy. "What about you?"

"It's a feature," the voice from the balloon says. "Action. Big budget. I've got footage you won't believe."

"What do you mean it's a feature?"

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"I'm signed. They flew up this morning. What are you doing up there?"

"Trying to sleep," Chevette says and rolls over, pulling the bag over her head.

Rydell lies watching the balloon bob on its tether, until finally he sees it withdrawn.

He sits up and rubs his face. Rolls out of the bag, and stands, stiffly, a naked man with a big patch of silver duct tape across his ribs, wondering how many TV screens he's making, right now. He hobbles over to the hatch and climbs down into darkness, where he relieves himself against a wall.

"Rydell?"

Rydell starts, getting his ankle wet.

It's Creedmore, sitting on the floor, knees up, wet-look head between his hands. "Rydell," Creedmore says, "you got anything to drink?"

"What are you doing up here, Buell?"

"Got in that greenhouse thing down there. Thought there'd be water there. Then I figured my ass would boil like a fucking catfish, so I climbed up here. Sons of bitches."

"Who?"

"I'm fucked," Creedmore says, ignoring the question. "Randy's canceled my contract and the goddamn bridge has burned down. Some debut, huh? Jesus."

"You could write a song about it, I guess."

Creedmore looks up at him with utter despair. He swallows. When he speaks, there is no trace of accent: "Are you really from Tennessee?"

"Sure," Rydell says.

"I wish to fuck I was," Creedmore says, his voice small, but loud in the hollow of this empty wooden box, sunlight falling through the square hole above, lighting a section of two-by-fours laid long way up to make a solid floor.

"Where you from, Buell?" Rydell asks.

"Son of a bitch," Creedmore says, the accent returning, "New Jersey."

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And then he starts to cry.

Rydell climbs back up and stands on the ladder with just his head out, looking toward San Francisco. Whatever Laney was on about, that end of the world thing, everything changing, it looked like it hadn't happened.

Rydell looks over at the black mound of sleeping bag and reads it as containing that which he most desires, desires to cherish, and the wind shifts, catching his hair, and when he climbs the rest of the way, back up into sunlight, he still hears Creedmore weeping in the room below.

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70. COURTESY CALL

IN the cab to Transamerica he closes his eyes, seeing the watch he gave the boy, where time arcs in one direction only across a black face, interior time gone rudderless now, unmoored by a stranger's reconstruction of Lise's face. The hands of the watch trace a radium orbit, moments back-to-back. He senses some spiral of unleashed possibility in the morning, though not for him.

The bridge, behind him now, perhaps forever, is a medium of transport become a destination: salt air, scavenged neon, the sliding cries of gulls. He has glimpsed the edges of a life there that he feels is somehow ancient and eternal. Apparent disorder arranged in some deeper, some unthinkable

fashion.

Perhaps he has been too long in the pay and the company of those who order the wider world. Those whose mills grind increasingly fine, toward some unimaginable omega-point of pure information, some prodigy perpetually on the brink of arrival. Which he senses somehow will never now arrive, or not in the form his career's employers have imagined.

In the atrium he describes the purpose of his visit as a courtesy call. He is disarmed, searched, cuffed, and taken, per Harwood's orders, by his seven captors, into an elevator.

And as its doors close he feels grateful that they are excited, and inexperienced, and have cuffed his hands in front, rather than behind his back.

By the time the express elevator reaches Harwood's office floor, he will be alone.

He touches the buckle of his belt, and thinks of the simple yet perfectly efficient tool concealed between the layers of fine Italian calf.

And exists in the moment.

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71. YAMAZAKI

YAMAZAKI. grim and nervous, descends into the early morning rush hour accompanied by a very large Australian, shaven-headed, with one mutilated ear.

"You knew he was here?" the large man asks.

"He desired secrecy," Yamazaki says. "I am sorry."

Yamazaki leads the Australian to the cardboard city and points out Laney's carton and its entrance.

"This one?"

Yamazaki nods.

The Australian produces a knife that telescopes silently at the touch of a button, both its edges serrated. He slits the top from Laney's carton, lifting it like the lid of a box of cereal, and Yamazaki sees the stickers of Cody Harwood that he glimpsed once before.

The Australian, much taller than Yamazaki, stands staring down into the carton. Yamazaki himself is not yet ready to look.

"What was he running from?" the Australian asks.

Yamazaki looks up at the man's small, fiercely intelligent eyes, set in a face of the most abiding brutality. "Toward," Yamazaki says. "He ran toward something."

A train arrives in the depths of the system, shunting a wall of stale warm air toward the surface streets and a new day.

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FONTAINE comes back from the blackened ribs toward Bryant with a jug of water and two Red Cross sandwiches. It's strange out there, very much the post-disaster scenario and not to his liking. Media vehicles outnumber emergency, though there are plenty of those. The body count is remarkably low, he gathers, and puts this down to the nature of bridge folk, their seriousness in survival and a certain belief in unorganized cooperation. Probably, he thinks, he'll never know what any of this was about, in terms of causality, though he's sure he's been witness to something.

He hopes Chevette and her boyfriend have made it through, but somehow he assumes they have, and the professor has gone, off about whatever business a man of his sort pursues, and that is business best not known about. Martial will have to be told that his chain gun is gone, but that's just as well. (Opposite his shop, someone has sprayed a great deal of that stuff called KiI'Z, lest the smear that the chain gun left there prove seropositive in any troublesome way.)

As he comes up to the shop he hears the sound of someone sweeping broken glass, and sees that it

is the boy, flatfooted in his big white shoes, and sees that the kid's done quite a good job of it, really, down to rearranging things on the surviving shelves. That silver piece of hardware, like an oversized cocktail shaker, enjoys pride of place, up behind the glassless frame of Fontaine's counter, between lead soldiers and a pair of trench-art vases beaten from the Kaiser's cannon casings.

"Where'd she go?" Fontaine asks, looking up at this.

The boy stops sweeping, sighs, leans on his broom, says nothing.

"Gone, huh?"

The boy nods.

"Sandwiches," Fontaine says, handing one to the boy. "We're going to be roughing it out here, for a while." He looks up at the silver cannister again. Somehow he knows it no longer contains her, whoever, whatever she was. It has become as much history, no more, no less than

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72. FONTAINE

the crude yet wistfully dainty vases pounded out of shell casings in some French trench. That is the mystery of things.

"Fonten."

He turns, sees Clarisse there with a shopping bag in her arms. "Clarisse."

Something troubled there, in her sea-green eyes, some worry or concern. "You okay, then?"

"Yes," he says.

"I thought you dead, Fonten."

"No."

"I brought you food."

"The kids okay?"

"Scared," she says. "They with Tourmaline."

"I'd be scared too, then."

A smile twitches the corner of her mouth. She comes forward, shifting the bag aside. Her lips brush his.

"Thank you," he says, taking the heavy bag, from which fine smells arise. "Thank you, Clarisse."

He sees tears in the corners of her eyes. "Bastard," she says, "where's my dolls?"

"I'm sony," he says, as gravely as he can manage, "but they were victims of the terrible fire."

And then they both start to laugh.

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73. SILENCIO

WHERE did you find it?"

"Treasure Island," the boy lies, passing the watch, a solid brown wafer of corrosion, across the glass countertop.

Silencio peers through his loupe at the damp biscuit of metal. He scores the rust with a diamond scribe. "Stainless," he admits, knowing the boy will know that that is good, though not good as gold. Worth the price of a meal.

"I want to see you fix it," the boy says.

Silencio twists the loupe from his eye and looks at the boy, as if noticing him for the first time.

"I want to see you fix it." The boy points down, indicating the watches arrayed beneath the glass.

"The bed," Silencio says. "You were here with Sandro, when we restored that Vacheron."

Silencio brings the restoration bed from the rear of the shop, a square cushion, ten inches on a side. He places it on the counter and the boy bends close, to see the velvety green surface made up of millions of manipulators.

Silencio places the watch on the bed. They watch as it rises smoothly on edge, as if of its own accord, and then seems to sink, impossibly, as if through the shallow bed and the glass beneath. Vanishing like a coin set into soft mud...

Silencio looks at the watch on his wrist, a military Jaeger-LeCoultre, RAAF. "Nine minutes," he said. "There's coffee."

"I want to watch," the boy says.

"Nothing to see."

Within the bed, the rusted disk of the watch is being read and disassembled. Molecules are moving. In nine minutes it will rise again, bright and perfect as the day it first left its factory in Switzerland.

"I want to watch," the boy says.

Silencio understands. He goes to get the coffee.

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