

DEATH IN THE PROMISED LAND

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The kid had had his choice of places to go--other countries, other worlds, even other universes, A la the legendary exhortation of e. e. cummings, oddly evocative in its day, spookily prescient now. But the kid's idea of a hell of a good universe next door had been a glitzed-out, gritted-up, blasted and blistered post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty. It wasn't a singular sentiment--post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty was topping the hitline for the thirteenth week in a row, with post-Apocalyptic Ellay and post-Apocalyptic Hong Kong holding steady at two and three, occasionally trading places but defending against all comers.

Dore Konstantin didn't understand the attraction. Perhaps the kid could

have explained it to her if he had not come out of post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty with his throat cut.

Being DOA after a session in the Sitty wasn't singular, either; immediate information available said that this was number eight in as many months. So far, no authority was claiming that the deaths were related, although no one was saying they weren't, either. Konstantin wasn't sure what any of it meant, except that, at the very least, the Sitty would have one more month at the number one spot.

The video parlor night manager was boinging between appalled and thrilled. "You ever go in the Sitty?" she asked Konstantin, crowding into the doorway next to her. Her name was Guilfoyle Pleshette and she didn't make much of a crowd; she was little more than a bundle of sticks wrapped in a gaudy kimono, voice by cartoonland, hair by Van de Graaff. She stood barely higher than Konstantin's shoulder, hair included.

"No, never have," Konstantin told her, watching as DiPietro and Celestine peeled the kid's hotsuit off him for the coroner. It was too much like seeing an animal get skinned, only grislier, and not just because most of the kid's blood was on the hotsuit. Underneath, his naked flesh was imprinted with a dense pattern of lines and shapes, byzantine in complexity, from the wires and sensors in the 'suit.

Yes, it's the latest in nervous systems, Konstantin imagined a chatty lecturer's voice saying. The neo-exo-nervous system, generated by hotsuit coverage. Each line and shape has its counterpart on the opposite side of the skin barrier, which cannot at this time be breached under pain of-- The imaginary lecture cut off as the coroner's cam operator leaned in for a shot of the kid's head and shoulders, forcing the stringer from Police Blotter back against the facing wall. Unperturbed, the stringer held her own cam over her head, aimed the lens downward and kept taping. This week, Police Blotter had managed to reverse the injunction against commercial networks that had been reinstated last week. Konstantin couldn't wait for next week.

As the 'suit cleared the kid's hips, the smell of human waste fought with the heavy odor of blood and the sour stink of sweat for control of the air in the room, which wasn't much larger than the walk-out closet that Konstantin had shared with her ex. The closet had looked a lot bigger this morning now that her ex's belongings were gone, but this room seemed to be shrinking by the moment. The coroner, her cam operator, the stringer, and DiPietro and Celestine had all come prepared with nasal filters; Konstantin's were sitting in the top drawer of her desk.

Putting her hand over her nose and mouth, she stepped back into the hallway where her partner Taliaferro was also suffering, but from the narrow space and low ceiling rather than the air, which was merely overprocessed and stale. Pleshette followed, fishing busily in her kimono pockets.

"So bad," she said, looking from Konstantin to Taliaferro. Taliaferro gave no indication that he had heard her. He stood with his back to the wall and his shoulders up around his ears, head thrust forward over the archiver while he made notes, as if he expected the ceiling to come down on him. From Konstantin's angle, the archiver was completely hidden by his hand, so that he seemed to be using the stylus directly on his palm.

Never send a claustrophobe to do an agoraphobe's job, Konstantin thought, feeling surreal. Taliaferro, who pronounced his name "tolliver" for reasons she couldn't fathom, was such a big guy anyway that she wondered if most places short of an arena didn't feel small and cramped to him. "Real goddam bad," Pleshette added, as if this somehow clarified her original statement. One bony hand came up out of a hidden pocket with a small spritzer; a too-sweet, minty odor cut through the flat air.

Taliaferro's stylus froze as his eyes swiveled to the manager. "That didn't help," he said darkly.

"Oh, but wait," she said, waving both hands to spread the scent. "Smellin' the primer now, but soon, nothing. Deadens the nose, use it by the pound here. Trade puts out a lot of body smell in the actioners. , Suits reek. " She gestured at the other doors lining the long narrow hall. "Like that Gang Wars module? Strapped the trade down on chaises, otherwise they'd a killed the ,suits, rollin' around on the floor, bouncin' off the walls, jumpin' on each other. Real easy to go native in a Gang Wars module."

Go native? Taliaferro mouthed, looking at Konstantin from under his brows. Konstantin shrugged. "I didn't see a chaise in there."

"Folds down outa the wall. Like those old Murphy beds?"

Konstantin raised her eyebrows, impressed that she was even acquainted with the idea of Murphy beds, and then felt mildly ashamed. Her ex had always told her that being a snob was her least attractive feature.

"Most people don't use the chaises except for the sexers," Pleshettewas saying. "Not if they got a choice. And there was this one blowfish, he hurt himself on the chaise. Got all heated up struggling, cut himself on the straps, broke some ribs. And that-" she leaned toward Konstantin confidentially "-that wasn't even the cute part. Know what the cute part was?"

Konstantin shook her head.

"The cute part was, his pov was in this fight at the exact, same time and broke the exact, same ribs." Pleshette straightened up and folded her arms, lifting her chin defiantly as if daring Konstantin to disbelieve. "This's always been non-safe, even before it was fatal."

"That happen here?" Taliaferro asked without looking up.

"Nah, some other place. East Hollywood, North Hollywood, I don't remember now." The manager's kimono sleeve flapped like a wing as she gestured. "We all heard about it. Stuff gets around."

Konstantin nodded, biting her lip so she wouldn't smile. "Uh-huh. Is this the same guy who didn't open his parachute in a skydiving scenario and was found dead with every bone in his body shattered?"

"Well, of course not." Pleshette looked at her as if she were crazy. "How could it be? That blowfish died. We all heard about that one too. Happened in D.C. They got it going on in D.C. with those sudden-death thrillers." She leaned toward Konstantin again, putting one scrawny hand on her arm this time. "You oughta check D.C. sources for death-trips. Life's so cheap there. It's a whole different world."

Konstantin was trying to decide whether to agree with her or change the subject when the coroner emerged from the cubicle with the cam op right on her heels.

"-shot everything I shot," the cam op was saying unhappily.

"And I said never mind." The coroner waved a dismissive hand. "We can subpoena her footage and see if it really is better than yours. Probably isn't. Go." She gave him a little push.

"But I just know she's in some of my shots-"

"We can handle that, too. Go. Now." The coroner shooed him away and turned to Konstantin. She was a small person, about the size of a husky ten-year-old-something to do with her religion, Konstantin remembered, the Church of Small-Is-Beautiful. The faithful had their growth inhibited in childhood. Konstantin wondered what happened to those who lost the faith, or came to it later in life.

"Well, I can say without fear of contradiction that the kid's throat was cut while he was still alive." The coroner looked around. "And in a palace like this. Imagine that. "

"Should I also imagine how?" Konstantin asked.

The coroner smoothed down the wiry copper cloud that was her current hair. It sprang back up immediately. "Onsite micro says it was definitely a knife or some other metal with an edge, and not glass or porcelain. And definitely not self-inflicted. Even if we couldn't tell by the angle, this kid was an AR softie. He wouldn't have had the strength to saw through his own windpipe like that."

"What kind of knife, do you think?"

"Sharp and sturdy, probably a boning blade. Boning blades're all the rage out there. Or rather, in there. In the actioners. They all like those boning blades. "

Konstantin frowned. "Great. You know what's going to be on the news inside an hour."

The coroner fanned the air with one small hand. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Gameplayers' psychosis, everybody's heard about somebody who got stabbed in a module and came out with a knife-wound it took sixteen stitches to close

and what about the nun who was on TV with the bleeding hands and feet. it's part of the modern myth-making machine. There've been some people who went off their perch in AR, got all mixed up about what was real and hurt themselves or somebody else. But the stigmata stuff-everybody conveniently forgets how the stigmata of Sister-Mary-Blood-Of-The-Sacred-Whatever got exposed as a hoax by her own order. The good sister did a turn as a stage magician before she got religion. There's a file about how she did it floating around PubNet-you oughta look it up. Fascinating rhythms. The real thing would be extremo ruptura, very serious head trouble, which the experts are pretty sure nobody's had since St. Theresa."

"Which one?" asked Konstantin.

The coroner chuckled. "That's good. 'Which one?' She shook her head, laughing some more. "I'll have my report in your in-box tomorrow." She went up the hall, still laughing.

"Well," said the night manager, sniffing with disdain. "Some people ought

better stick with what they know than mock what they don't know squat about. "

"My apologies if she offended your beliefs," Konstantin said to her. "Is there some other way into that room that nobody knows about-vents, conduits, emergency exit or access?"

Pleshette wagged her fuzzy head from side to side. "Nope."

Konstantin was about to ask for the building's blueprints when Taliaferro snapped the archiver closed with a sound like a rifle shot. "Right. Some great place you got here. We'll interview the clientele now. Outside, in the parking lot. "

"Got no parking lot," Pleshette said, frowning.

"Didn't say your parking lot. There's a car rental place down the block. We'll corral everyone, do it there." Taliaferro looked at Konstantin. "Spacious. Lots of room to move around in."

Konstantin sighed. "First let's weed out everyone who was in the same scenario and module with the kid and see if anyone remembers the kid doing or saying anything that could give any hints about what was happening to

him." She started up the hall with Taliaferro.

"You could do that yourself, you know," Pleshette said.

Konstantin stopped. Taliaferro kept walking without looking back." Do

what?"

"See what the kid was doing when he took it in the neck. Surveillance'll have it."

"Surveillance?" Konstantin said, unsure that she had heard correctly.

"Of course surveillance," the night manager said, giving her a sideways look. "You think we let the blowfish come in here and don't keep an eye on

them? Anything could happen, I don't want no liability for the bone in somebody else's head. Nobody does. "

"Can I screen this surveillance record in your office?" she asked.

"Anywhere, if all you want to do is screen it. " Pleshette frowned, puzzled.

"Good. Set me up for it in your office."

Pleshette's frown deepened. "My office."

"Is that some kind of problem?" asked Konstantin, pausing as she moved toward the open doorway of the room, where she could hear DiPietro and Celestine bantering with the stringer.

"Guess not." The night manager shrugged. "You just want to screen it, my office, sure."

Konstantin didn't know what to make of the look on Pleshette's funny little face. Maybe that was all it was, a funny little face in a funny little open-all-night world. A funny little open-all-night artificial world at that. For all Konstantin knew, the night manager hadn't seen true daylight for years. Not her problem, she thought as she stuck her head through the doorway of the cubicle where Celestine and DiPietro were now busy jockeying for the stringer's attention while the stringer pretended she wasn't pumping them for information and they pretended they didn't know she was pretending not to pump them for information. No one had to pretend the dead kid had been temporarily forgotten.

"Pardon me for interrupting," Konstantin said a bit archly. DiPietro and Celestine turned to her; in their identical white coveralls, they looked like unfinished marionettes.

"Attendants'll be coming for him. Before you do a thorough search of the room, you might want to, oh-" she gestured at the body --cover him up.-

"Sure thing," said Celestine, and then suddenly tossed something round and wrapped in plastic at her. "Think fast!"

Konstantin caught it by instinct. The shape registered on her before anything else. The kid's

head, she thought, horrified. The cut across his throat had been so deep, it had come off when they'd peeled him.

Then she felt the metal through the plastic and realized it was the kid's head-mounted monitor. "Oh, good one, Celestine. " She tucked the monitor under her left arm. "If I'd dropped that, we'd be filling out forms on it for a year. "

"You, drop something? Not this lifetime." Celestine grinned; her muttonchops made her face seem twice as wide as it was. Konstantin wondered if there was such a thing as suing a cosmetologist for malpractice.

"Thanks for the act of faith but next time, save it for church. " Konstantin went up the hall toward the main lobby, Pleshette following in a swish of kimono.

There were only two uniformed officers waiting in the lobby with the other three members of the night staff, who were perched side by side on a broken down, ersatz-leather sofa by the front window. The rest of the police, along with the clientele, were already down the block with Taliaferro, one of the uniforms told Konstantin. She nodded, trying not to stare at the woman's neat ginger-colored mustache. At least it wasn't as ostentatious as Celestine's muttonchops, but she wasn't sure that she would ever get used to the fashion of facial hair on women. Her ex would have called her a throwback; perhaps she was.

"That's all right, as long as we know where they are." Konstantin handed her the bagged headmount. "Evidence-look after it. There's some surveillance footage I'm going to screen in the manager's office and I thought I'd question the staff there as well-" The people on the couch were gazing up at her expectantly. "Is this the entire night shift?"

"The whole kitten's caboodle," Pleshette assured her.

Konstantin looked around. It was a small lobby, no hiding places, and presumably, no secret doors. Small, drab, and depressing-after waiting here for even just a few minutes, any AR would look great by comparison. She turned back to the people on the couch just as the one in the middle stood up and stuck out his hand. "Miles Mank," he said in a hearty tenor.

Konstantin hesitated. The man's eyes had an unfocused, watery look to them she associated with people who weren't well. He towered over her by six inches and outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds. But they were fairly soft pounds, packed into a glossy blue one-piece uniform that, combined with those gooey eyes and his straw-colored hair, gave him a strangely childlike appearance. She shook his hand. "What's your job here?"

"Supervisor. Well, unofficial supervisor," he added, the strange eyes looking past her at Guilfoyle Pleshette. "I'm the one who's been here the longest so I'm always telling everybody else how things work."

"So go ahead, Miles," Pleshette said, her voice flat. The kimono sleeves snapped like pennants in a high wind as she stretched out her arms and refolded them. "Say it-that if they promoted from within here, you'd be night manager. Then I can explain how they had to go on a talent search for an experienced administrator. It'll all balance out."

"Nobody ever died while I was acting night manager," Miles Mank said huffily.

"Yeah, that's true-everybody survived that riot where the company had to refund all the customers. But nobody died so that made it all good-deal-well-done. "

Miles Mank strode past Konstantin to loom over Pleshette, who had to reach up to shake her bony finger in his face. Konstantin felt that panicky chill all authorities felt when a situation was about to slip the leash. Before she could order Mank to stop arguing with Pleshette, the mustached officer tugged her sleeve and showed her a taser set on flash. "Shall I?"

Konstantin glanced at her nameplate. "Sure, Wolski, go ahead." She stepped back and covered her eyes.

The flash was a split-second heat that she found oddly comforting, though no one else did. Besides Guilfoyle Pleshette and Miles Mank, Wolski had also failed to warn her fellow officer, the other two employees, or Taliaferro, who had chosen that moment to step back inside. The noise level increased exponentially.

"Everybody shut up!" Konstantin yelled; to her surprise, everybody did. She looked around. All the people in the lobby except for herself and Wolski had their hands over their eyes. It looked like a convention of see-no-evil monkeys.

"I'm going to screen surveillance footage of the victim's final session in the manager's office, and then interview the rest of the staff," she announced and turned to Taliaferro. "Then I'd like to question anyone who was in the same module and scenario." She waited but he didn't take his hands from his eyes. "That means I'll be phoning you down the block, partner, to have select individuals escorted to the office." She waited another few seconds. "Understand, Taliaferro?" she added, exasperated.

"Let me do some prelims on the customers," he said, speaking to the air where he thought she was. He was off by two feet. "They're gonna be getting restless while you're doing that. We're going to have to give them phone calls and pizza as it is."

Konstantin rolled her eyes. "So give them phone calls and pizza." She turned back to Pleshette. "Now, can you show me to your office?"

"Who, me?" asked Miles Mank. "I'm afraid I don't have one. I've been making do with the employee lounge."

"Suffer, Mank," Pleshette said, peeking between her fingers. "No one was talking to you." She started to lower her hands and then changed her mind.

Konstantin sighed. Their vision would return to normal in a few minutes, along with their complexions, assuming none of them suffered from light-triggered skin-rashes. Perhaps she should have been more sympathetic, but she didn't think any of them would notice if she were.

She put her hand on Guilfoyle Pleshette's left arm. "Now, your office?"

"I'll show you," said Pleshette, "if I ever see well enough again."

Pleshette's office was smaller than the smelly cubicle where the kid had died, which was probably a good thing. It meant that Konstantin didn't throw anything breakable against the wall when she discovered the so-called surveillance footage was an AR log and not a live-action recording of the kid's murder. There would have been no point to throwing anything; unlike the living room where she and her ex had had their final argument, there wasn't enough distance to make a really satisfying smash.

She settled in to watch the video, every moment, including the instructional lead that told her that the only pov on monitor would be detached observer; she could use the editing option for any close-ups or odd angles, and there was a primer to pull down if she were feeling less than Fellini, or even D.W. Griffith.

How helpful, she thought, freezing the footage before the lead faded into the scenario. How excessively helpful. What was she supposed to do, decide how to edit the footage before she watched it?

But of course, she realized; this came under the heading of Souvenirs. Footage from your AR romp, video of your friend's wedding, pre-packaged quick-time scenics from a kiosk in the Lima airport for a last-minute gift before you boarded the flight home-you made it look however you wanted it to look. To whomever happened to be looking, of course. Maybe you didn't want it to look the same to everyone-a tamer version for one, something experimental to hold another's attention.

Konstantin tapped the menu line at the bottom of the screen. Options? it asked her, fanning them out in the center of a deep blue background. Pick a card, any card, she thought; memorize it and slip it back into the deck. There'll be a quiz later, if you survive. After a moment, she chose No Frills.

The image on the screen liquified and melted away into black. A moment later, she was looking at an androgynous face that suggested the best of India and Japan in combination. The name came up as Shantih Love, which she couldn't decide if she hated or not; the linked profile informed her that the Shantih Love appearance was as protected by legal copyright as the name. No age given; under Sex it said, Any; all; why do you care?

"Filthy job, Shantih, but somebody's got to." She tapped for the technical specs of the session. Full coverage hotsuit, of course; that would tell her when the kid had died. She scrolled past his scenario and module choices to Duration: four hours, twenty minutes. Yow, kid, that alone could have killed some people.

She tapped the screen for his vitals so she could note the exact time of death in the archiver. Then she just stared at the figures on the screen, tapping the stylus mindlessly on the desk. Shantih Love, the specs told her, had shuffled off all mortal coils, artificial and otherwise, just ten minutes into his four-hour-and-twenty-minute romp in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty. It didn't say how he had managed to go on with his romp after he had died. She supposed that was too much to ask.

Shantih Love and the kid powering him/her had both had their throats cut, but for Shantih Love the wound had not been fatal. Disgusting and gory, even uncomfortable, but not fatal.

Konstantin watched the screen intently as the sequence faded in. In the middle of a glitter-encrusted cityscape at dusk, the androgyne made his/her way toward some kind of noisy party or tribal gathering on the rubble-strewn shore of the Hudson River. The rubble was also encrusted with glitter; more glitter twinkled on the glass of the silent storefronts on the other side of a broad, four-lane divided thoroughfare partially blocked by occasional islands of wreckage. As Shantih Love swept off the sidewalk-ankle-length purple robe flowing gracefully with every step-

and crossed the ruined street, one of the wrecks ignited, lighting up the semi-dark. Shantih Love barely glanced at it and kept going, toward the gathering on the shore; Konstantin could hear music and, under that, the white noise of many voices in conversation. What could they possibly have to talk about, she wondered; was it anything more profound than what you'd hear at any other party in any other reality with any other people? And if it were, why did it occur only in the reality of post Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty?

Shantih Love abruptly looked back in such a way that s/he seemed to be looking directly out of the screen into her eyes. The expression on the unique face seemed somehow both questioning and confident. Konstantin steered the detached perspective from behind Shantih Love around his/her right side, passing in front of the androgyne and moving to the left side, tracking him/ her as s/he walked toward the multitude on the shore.

A figure suddenly popped up from behind the low concrete barrier running between the street and the river. Shantih Love stopped for a few moments, uncertainty troubling his/her smooth forehead. Konstantin tried adjusting the screen controls to see the figure better in the gathering darkness but, maddeningly, she couldn't seem to get anything more definite than a fuzzy, blurry silhouette, definitely human-like but otherwise unidentifiable as young or old, male, female, both or neither, friendly or hostile.

The shape climbed over the barrier to the street side just as Shantih Love slipped over it to the shore. The ground here was soft sand and Shantih Love had trouble walking in it. The fuzzy shape paced him/her on the other side of the wall and Konstantin got the idea that it was saying something, but nothing came up on audio. Shantih Love didn't answer, didn't even look in its direction again as s/he moved in long strides toward the crowd, which extended from the water's edge up to a break in the barrier and into the road.

The perspective had slipped back behind Shantih Love. Konstantin tapped the forward button rapidly; now she seemed to be perched on Shantih Love's right shoulder. The gathering on the beach appeared to be nothing more than

a ragged, disorganized cocktail party, the sort of thing her ex had loved to attend. Konstantin was disappointed. Was this really all anyone in AR could think of doing?

Shantih Love whirled suddenly; after a one-second delay, the perspective followed. Konstantin felt a wave of dizziness and the images on the screen went out of focus.

When the focus cleared, Konstantin saw that the figure was standing on top of the barrier, poised to jump. Shantih Love backed away, turned, and began stumbling through the party crowd, bumping into various people, some less distinct than others. Konstantin didn't have to shift the perspective around to know that the creature was chasing the androgyne. Now the pov seemed to be a few inches in front of the creature's face; she had a few fast glimpses of bandage-wrapped arms and hands with an indeterminate number of fingers as it staggered into the party after Love.

The pov began to shake and streak, as if it were embedded in the pursuing creature's body.

Frustrated, Konstantin pounded on the forward key, but the pov didn't budge. Someone had preordered the pov to this position, she realized. But whether it was the murdered kid who had done it or just the formatting she couldn't tell.

Worse, now that she was in the party crowd, almost every attendee was either so vague as to be maddeningly unidentifiable, or so much a broad type-barbarian, vampire, wild-child, homunculus-that anonymity was just as assured.

Shantih Love broke through the other side of the crowd two seconds before she did, and ran heavily toward a stony rise leading to the sidewalk. S/he scrambled up it on all fours, a heartbeat ahead of the pursuer.

Love vaulted the low barrier and ran along the middle of the street, looking eagerly at each wreck. There were more wrecks here, some ablaze, some not. Something moved inside each one, even those that were burning. Konstantin realized she was probably alone in finding that remarkable; living in a bonfire was probably the height of AR chic.

She tried pushing the pov ahead again and gained several feet. Shantih Love looked over his/her shoulder, seemingly right at the pov. The androgyne's expression was panic and dismay; in the next moment, s/he fell.

The pov somersaulted; there was a flash of broken pavement, followed by a brief panorama of the sky, a flip and a close-up of the androgyne's profile just as the pursuer pushed his/her chin up with one rag-wrapped hand. Perfect skin stretched taut; the blade flashed and disappeared as it turned sideways to slash through flesh, tendon, blood vessels, bone.

The blood flew against the pov and dripped downward, like gory drops of rain on a window.

Konstantin winced and pressed to try to erase the blood trails; nothing happened.

Shantih Love coughed and gargled at the sky, not trying to twist away from the bandaged hand that still held his/her chin. Blood pulsed upward in an exaggerated display of blood spurting from a major artery. The creature pushed Love's face to one side, away from the camera, and bent its head to drink.

Konstantin had seen similar kinds of things before in videos, including the so-called killer video that had supposedly been circulating underground (whatever that meant these days) and had turned out to be so blatantly phony that the perpetrators should have gone down for fraud.

But where the blood spilled in that and numerous other videos had looked more like cherry syrup or tomato puree, this looked real enough to make Konstantin gag. She put a hand over her mouth as she froze the screen and turned away, trying to breathe deeply and slowly through her nose, willing her nausea to fade. At the same time, she was surprised at herself. Her squeamish streak was usually conveniently dormant; in twelve years as a detective, she had seen enough real-time blood and gore that she could say she was somewhat hardened. Shantih Love's real-time counterpart-secret identity? veneer person?-had certainly bled enough to make anyone choke.

But there was something about this-the blood or the noises coming from Shantih Love, the sound of the creature drinking so greedily. Or maybe just the sight of such realistic blood activating the memory of that smell in the cubicle, that overpowering stench; that smell and the sight of the dead kid stripped of everything, skinned like an animal.

She collected herself and tried jabbing fast-forward to get through the vampiric sequence as quickly as possible. It only made everything more grotesque, so she took it back to normal just at the point where both the creature and the blood vanished completely.

Startled, Konstantin rewound and ran it again in slo-mo, just to make sure she'd seen it right. She had; it wasn't a fast fade-out or the twinkling deliquescence so favored by beginning cinematography students, but a genuine popper which usually happened by way of a real-time equipment failure or power-out. Common wisdom had it that the jump from AR to real-time in such an event was so abrupt as to produce extreme reactions of an undesirable nature-vertigo, projectile vomiting, fainting, or, worse, all three, which could be fatal if you happened to be alone.

Or a slashed throat, if you happened to be not alone with the wrong person, Konstantin thought, trying to rub the furrows out of her brow.

She repeated the sequence once more, and then again in slo-mo, watching the blood disappear right along with the creature, leaving Shantih Love behind. Konstantin called up the record of the kid's vitals and found that, as she had expected, they had quit registering at the moment the blood had disappeared.

Konstantin took her finger off the pause button and let the action go forward.

On the screen, the Shantih Love character sat up, its elegant fingers feeling the ragged edges and flaps of skin where its throat had been cut, mild annoyance deepening the few lines in its face. As Konstantin watched it trying to pinch the edges of skin together, she was aware that she was now thinking of the kid's AR persona as a thing rather than a human.

Presumed "it" until proven human? Konstantin frowned. So what was driving it now, anyway-a robot, or a very human hijacker?

She could watch video for the next three hours and see if anything would become clearer to her; instead, she decided to talk to people she was reasonably sure were human before taking in any more adventures of a dead kid's false pretending to be alive in a city pretending to be dead.

If the office had seemed cramped before, Miles Mank made it look even smaller by taking up at least half of it. When it became obvious that he actually knew next to nothing, Konstantin tried to get rid of him quickly, but he kept finding conversational hooks that would get her attention and then lead her along to some meaningless and boring point, at which he wouldn't so much conclude as change the subject and do it all over again. She was finally able to convince him that he was desperately needed at the parking lot to help sort out the clientele with her bewildered partner. Then she prayed that Taliaferro wouldn't use a similar excuse to send him back to her. She still didn't like his eyes.

The first of the other two employees was a silver-haired kid named Tim Mezzer, who was about the same age as the murder victim. He had the vaguely puzzled, preoccupied look of ex-addicts who had

detoxed recently by having their blood cleansed. Officially, it was a fast way out of an expensive jones. In fact, it made the high better on relapse.

"How long have you worked here?" Konstantin asked him.

"Three days." He sounded bored.

"And what do you do?" she prodded when he didn't say anything more.

"Oh, I'm a specialist," he said, even more bored. "I specialize in picking up everybody's smelly 'suit when they're done and get 'em cleaned. " Mezzler put a plump elbow on the desk and leaned forward. "Tell the truth-you'd kill to have a job like that instead of the boring shit you do. " Konstantin wasn't sure he was really being sarcastic. "Sometimes. Did you know the victim?"

"Dunno. What was his name?"

" Shantih Love."

Mezzler grunted. "Good label. Must have cost him to come up with one that good. Sounds a little like an expensive female whore-assassin, but still pretty good. Someday I'll be rich enough to be able to afford a tailor-made label. "

Konstantin was only half-listening while she prodded the archiver for the victim's reference file.

"Ali, here we are. Real name is-" she stopped. "Well, that can't be right."

"Don't be so sure." Mezzler yawned. "What's it say?"

"Tomoyuki Iguchi," Konstantin said slowly, as if she had to sound out each syllable.

"Ha. Sounds like he was working on turning Japanese in a serious way."

"Why?"

"Well, for post-Apocalyptic Tokyo, of course." Mezzler sighed. "What else?"

"There's a post-Apocalyptic Tokyo now?" Konstantin asked suspiciously.

"Not yet." Mezzler's sigh became a yawn. "Coming soon. Supposed to be the next big hot spot. They say it's gonna make the Sitty look like Sunday in Nebraska, with these parts you can access only if you're Japanese, or a convincing simulation. It's the one everybody's been waiting for."

Konstantin wondered if he knew that something very like it had already come and gone a good many years before either of them had been born. "How about you?" she asked him. "Is it the one you've been waiting for?"

"I don't know from Japanese. I'm an Ellay boy. Got all those gorgeous celebs you can beat up in street gangs. But the bubble-up on this is, there's some kinda secret coming-attraction subroutines for post-Apocalyptic Tokyo buried in the Noo Yawk, Hong Kong, and Ellay scenes and no non-Japanese can crack them. If they're really there. Shantih Love musta thought they were."

"But why would he take two fake names?" Konstantin wondered, more to herself.

"Told you-he was trying to turn Japanese. He wanted anyone who stripped his label to find his Japanese name underneath and take him for that. Invite him into the special Japan area." Mezzler put his head back as if he were going to bay at the moon and yawned once again. "Or he was getting that crazy-head. You know, where you start thinking it's real in there and fake out here, or you can't tell the difference. You need to talk to Body. Body'll know. Body's probably the only one who'd know for sure.

"What body?"

"Body Sativa. Body knows more about the top ten ARs than anyone else, real or not."

Konstantin felt her mouth twitch. "Don't you mean Cannabis Sativa?" she asked sarcastically.

Mezzler blinked at her in surprise. "Get off. Cannibal's her mother. She's good, but Body's the real Big Dipper." He smiled. "Pretty win, actually, that somebody like you'd know about Cannibal Sativa. Were you goin' in to talk to her?"

Konstantin didn't know what to say.

"Go see Body, I swear she's the one you want. I'll give you some icons you can use in there. Real insider icons, not what they junk you up with in the help files. "

"Thanks," Konstantin said doubtfully. "But I think I fell down about a mile back. If he was turning Japanese, as you put it, why would he call himself Shantih Love?"

Mezzler blinked. "Well, because he was tryin' to be a Japanese guy named Shantih Love. " He frowned at her. "You just don't ever go in AR, do you?"

"Can't add to that," said the other employee cheerfully. She was an older woman named Howard Ruth with natural salt-and-pepper hair and lines in a soft face untouched by chemicals or surgery. Konstantin found her comforting to look at. "Body Sativa's the best tip you're gonna get. You'll go through that whole bunch in the lot down the street and you won't hear anything more helpful." She sat back, crossing her left ankle over her right knee.

"Body Sativa wouldn't happen to be in that group, by any chance?"

Howard Ruth shrugged. "Doubt it. This is just another reception site on an AR network. Considering the sophisticated moves Body makes, she's most likely on from some singleton station, and that could be anywhere. "

"Come on," said Konstantin irritably, "even I know everyone online has an origin code."

Howard Ruth's smile was sunny. "You haven't played any games lately, have you?"

Konstantin was thinking the woman should talk to her ex. "Online? No."

"No, " agreed the woman, "because if you had, you'd know that netgaming isn't considered official net communication or transaction, so it's not governed by FCC or FDSA regulations. Get on, pick a name or buy a permanent label, stay as long as you like-or can afford-and log out when you've had enough. Netgaming is one hundred percent elective, so anything goes-no guidelines, no censorship, no crimes against persons. You can't file a complaint against anyone for assault, harassment, fraud, or anything like that."

Konstantin sighed. "I didn't know this. Why not?"

"You didn't have to." Howard Ruth laughed. "Look, officer-"

"Lieutenant. "

"Sure, lieutenant. Unless you netgame regular, you won't know any of this. You ever hear about the case years back where a guy used an origin line to track down a woman in realtime and kill her?"

"No," said Konstantin with some alarm. "Where did this happen?"

"Oh, back east somewhere. D.C., I think, or some place like that. Life is so cheap there, you know. Anyway, what happened was, back when they had origin lines in gaming, this guy got mad at this woman, somehow found

her by way of her origin line, and boom-lights out. That was one of the first cases of that gameplayer's madness where someone could prove it could be a real danger offline. After that, there was a court ruling that since gaming was strictly recreational, gamers were entitled to complete privacy if they wanted. No origin line. Kinda the same thing for fraud and advertising."

Konstantin felt her interest, which had started to wane with the utterance D.C., come alive again.

"What?"

"Guy ran a game-within-a-game on someone. I can't remember exactly what it was-beachfront in Kansas, diamond mines in Peru, hot stocks about to blow. Anyhow, the party of the second part got the idea it was all backed up in realtime and did this financial transfer to the party of the first part, who promptly logged out and went south. Party of the second part hollers Thief! and what do you know but the police catch this salesperson of the year. Who then claims that it was all a game and he thought the money was just a gift.

"And?" said Konstantin.

"And that's a wrap. Grand jury won't even indict, on grounds of extreme gullibility. As in, 'You were in artificial reality, you fool, what did you expect? Personally, I think they were both suffering from a touch of the galloping headbugs. "

Konstantin was troubled. "And that decision stood?"

"It's artificial reality-you can't lie, no matter what you say. It's all makebelieve, let's-pretend, the play's the thing." Howard Ruth laughed heartily. "You choose to pay somebody out here for time in there, that's your hotspot. Life is so strange, eh?"

Konstantin made a mental note to check for court rulings on AR as she pressed for a clean page in the archiver. "But if being in an AR makes people insane . . . "

"Doesn't make everyone insane," the woman said. "That's what it is, you know. The honey factory don't close down just because you're allergic to bee stings."

Konstantin was still troubled. "So when did those things happen?" she asked, holding the stylus ready.

"I don't know," Howard Ruth said, surprised at the question. "Oughta be in the police files, though. Doesn't law enforcement have some kind of central-national-international bank you all access? Something like Police Blotter?"

"In spite of the name," Konstantin said, speaking slowly so the woman couldn't possibly misunderstand, "Police Blotter is actually a commercial net-magazine, and not affiliated with law enforcement in any official way. But yes, we do have our own national information center. But I need to know some kind of key fact that the search program can use to hunt down the information I want-a name, a date, a location." She paused to see if any of this was forthcoming. The other woman only shrugged.

"Well, sorry I can't be of more help, but that's all I know." She got up and stretched, pressing her hands into the small of her back. "If anyone knows more, it's Body Sativa."

"Body Sativa," said the first customer interviewee. He was an aging child with green hair and claimed his name was Earl O'Jelly. "Nobody knows more. Nobody and no body. If you get what I mean."

Konstantin didn't bury her face in her hands. The aging child volunteered the information that he had been in the crowd by the Hudson that Shantih Love had staggered through, but claimed he hadn't seen anything like what she described to him.

Neither had the next one, a grandmother whose AR alter-ego was a twelve-year-old boy-assassin named Nick the Schick. "That means I technically have to have 'the' as my middle name, but there's worse, and stupider as well," she told Konstantin genially. "Nick knows Body, of course. Everybody knows Body. And vice versa, probably. Actually, I think Body Sativa's just a database that got crossed with a traffic-switcher and jumped the rails."

"Pardon?" Konstantin said, not comprehending.

The grandmother was patient. "You know how files get cross-monkeyed? Just the thing-traffic-switcher was referencing the database in a thunderstorm, maybe sunspots, and they got sort of arc-welded. Traffic-switcher interface mutated from acquired characteristics from all the database entries. That's what I say, and nobody's proved yet that that couldn't happen. Or didn't." She nodded solemnly.

Konstantin opened her mouth to tell the woman that if she understood her correctly, what she was describing was akin to putting a dirty shirt and a pile of straw in a wooden box for spontaneous generation of mice and then decided against it. For one thing, she wasn't sure that she had understood correctly and for another, the shirt-and-straw method of creating mice was probably routine in AR.

There was no third interviewee. Instead, an ACLU lawyer came in and explained that since the crime had occurred in the real world, and all the so called witnesses had been in AR, they weren't actually witnesses at all, and could not be detained any longer. However, all of their names would be available on the video parlor's customer list, which Konstantin could see as soon as she produced the proper court order.

"In the meantime, everyone agrees you ought to talk to this Body Sativa, whatever she is," the lawyer said, consulting a palmtop. "Assuming she'll give you so much as the time of day without legal representation. "

"I suppose I need a court order for that, too," Konstantin grumbled.

"Not hardly. AR is open to anyone who wants to access it. Even you, Officer Konstantin. " The lawyer grinned, showing diamond teeth. "Just remember the rules of admissibility. Everything everyone tells you in AR- "

--is a lie, right. I got the short course tonight already. " Konstantin's gaze strayed to the monitor, now blank. "I think I'll track this Body Sativa down in person and question her in realtime. "

"Only if she voluntarily tells you who she is out here," the lawyer reminded her a bit smugly.

"Otherwise, her privacy is protected."

"Maybe she'll turn out to be a good citizen," Konstantin mused. "Maybe she'll care that some seventeen-year-old kid got his throat cut."

The lawyer's smug expression became a sad smile. "Maybe. I care. You care. But there's no law that says anyone else has to."

"I know, and I'd be afraid if there was. Even so-" Konstantin frowned. "I do wish I didn't have to depend so much on volunteers."

She sent DiPietro and Celestine over to the dead kid's apartment building, though she wasn't expecting much. If he was typical, his neighbors would have barely been aware of him. Most likely; they would find he had been yet another gypsy worker of standard modest skills, taking temporary assignments via a city-run agency to support his various habits. Including his AR habit. Just to be thorough, she waited in Guilfoyle Pleshette's office for the call letting her know that the other two detectives had found a generic one-room apartment with little in the way of furnishings or other belongings to distinguish it from any other generic one-room apartment in the city. Except for the carefully organized card library of past AR experiences in the dustless, static-free, moisture- and fire-proof non-magnetic light-shielded container. Every heavy AR user kept a library, so that no treasured moment could be lost to time.

The library would go to headquarters to be stored for the required ten-day waiting period while a caseworker tried to track down next-of-kin. If none turned up, the card library would then be accessed by an automated program designed to analyze the sequences recorded on each card and construct a profile of the person, which would then be added to the online obituaries. Usually this would cause someone who had known the deceased to come forward; other times, it simply confirmed that there was no one to care.

The idea came unbidden to Konstantin, derailing the semidoze she had slipped into at whatever indecent A.M. the night had become. She plugged the archiver into the phone and sent the retriever to fetch data on the other seven AR DOAs.

Delivery was all but immediate—at this time of night, there wasn't much data traffic. Konstantin felt mildly annoyed that DiPietro and Celestine couldn't report in just as quickly. Perhaps they had taken the stringer with them and were even now playing to the cam in an inspection of the dead kid's apartment.

A bit of heartburn simmered in her chest; she imagined it was her blood pressure going up a notch. According to The Law Enforcement Officers' Guide To A Healthy, Happy Life (ON & OFF The Job!), sex was the number one stress reliever. The Guide had most likely meant the sort that involved one other person, Konstantin reflected and pushed away thoughts of her ex to survey the data arranging itself on the archiver's small but hi-res screen.

The first to suffer a suspicious death while in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty had been a thirty-four-year-old woman named Sally Lefkow. Her picture showed a woman so pale as to seem faded. She had passed most of her realtime hours as a third-rank senior on a Minneapolis janitorial team whose contract had included both the building where she had lived and the building where she had died. Konstantin wasn't sure whether to be amused, amazed, or alarmed that her online persona had been an evolved dragon; eight feet tall and the color of polished antique copper, it had been bisexual, able to switch at will. Sally Lefkow had died of suffocation; the evolved dragon had been in flight when it had suddenly fallen out of the sky into ft East River, and never come up.

Konstantin put the dead woman's realtime background next to the information on the dragon to compare them but found she was having trouble retaining anything. "In one eye and out the other," she muttered, then winced. Lover, come back. Youforgot to take the in-jokes along with the rest of the emotional baggage.

She marked the Lefkow-dragon combo and went on to the next victim, a twenty-eight-year-old gypsy office worker named Emilio Torres. Konstantin thought he looked more like an athlete. Or maybe an ex-athlete. He had died alone in his Portland apartment during an online session as-Konstantin blinked-Marilyn Presley. Even Konstantin had heard of Marilyn Presley. The hybrid had been an online flash-fad, hot for a day, passed forever after. But not, apparently, for Torres. He had persisted as Marilyn for six weeks, long after the rest of the flash followers had lost interest, and he had diedKonstantin blinked again-of an overdose of several drugs; the Marilyn Presley persona had gone inert in the middle of some sort of gathering that wasn't quite a street brawl but not really an open-air party, either. There was no follow-up on the persona, nothing to tell Konstantin if the rights to it had been acquired by someone else since.

Torres had died a month after Lefkow and half a continent away. The next death had occurred two months later, in a cheesy beachside parlor in New Hampshire. Marsh Kuykendall had been unembarrassed by his status as an AR junkie, supporting his habit with odd and mostly menial jobs.

Acquaintances of the victim have all heard him say, at one time or another, that realtime was the disposable reality because it could not be preserved oorr replayed like AR, Konstantin read. "AR is humanity's true destiny. " "In AR, everyone is immortal."

If you don't mind existing in reruns, she thought. Kuykendall had owned a half dozen personas, all of them his original creations. Mortality had caught up with him while he had been acting out a panther-man fantasy. The pantherman had been beaten to death by some vaguely monstrous assailant that no one claimed to have seen clearly; in realtime, Kuykendall had taken blows hard enough to shatter both his headmounted helmet and his head. No one in the parlor had heard or seen anything. Victim number four had been in rehab for a year after a bad accident had left her paralyzed. Lydia Stang's damaged nerves had been regenerated, but she had had to relearn movement from the bottom up. AR had been part of her therapy; her AR persona had been an idealized gymnastic version of herself.

She had died with a broken neck, in AR and in real-time. Witnesses stated she had been fighting a street duel with a lizard-person. Even better, the lizard-person had voluntarily come forward and admitted to AR contact with the deceased. Stang had been online in Denver, while the lizard-person had been cavorting in a parlor not three blocks from where Konstantin was sitting. She double-checked to be sure she had that right, and then made a note to look up the lizard-person in real-time, if possible.

A moment later she was scratching that note out; the lizard-person was victim number five. Even more shocking, Konstantin thought, was the lack of information on the deceased, a former musician who had gone by the single name Flo. After Lydia Stang's death, Flo had given up music and taken up AR full-time, or so it seemed, until someone had suffocated her. Online, her reptilian alter-ego had been swimming. In the East River, Konstantin noted, which the Lefkow dragon had fallen into out of the sky. Maybe that meant something; maybe it didn't.

Victims six and seven would seem to have killed each other in a gang fight. Konstantin found this disheartening. In post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty, they had been a couple of nasty street kids, sixteen, just on the verge of adulthood. In real-time, they had been a pair of middle-aged gypsy office workers who had no doubt discovered that they had wandered into the cul de sac of life and weren't going to find their way out alive.

They had both lived in a nearby urban hive, got assignments through the same agency, did the same kinds of no-brainer files and data upkeep jobs-and yet, they apparently hadn't known each other offline. Or if they had known each other, they had deliberately stayed away from each other. Except online, where they had often mixed it up. They had stabbed each other in AR but someone else had stabbed each of them in the privacy of their own homes. The times of death seemed to be in some dispute.

And now here was number eight, a weird Caucasian kid with a Japanese name. Domo arigato, Konstantin thought sourly, and pressed for a summary of the common characteristics of each case. There wasn't much, except for the fact that each murder had occurred while the victim had been online in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty. Three of the previous murders had taken place locally; the kid's brought it up to four, fully half. And unless it turned out that the kid had been a brain surgeon, all of them had been lower level drones, not a professional in the bunch. She sat back and tried to think. Was serial murder back in style-again? Except whoever had been enjoying the pretend-murder of hijacking someone else's AR persona had decided to cross over? Or couldn't tell the difference?

Konstantin pressed for a table of similarities among the AR characters and came up with a Data Not Available sign. The note on the next screen told her there had been no work done in this area, either due to lack of software, lack of time, or lack of personnel. Undoubtedly no one had thought that it was particularly important to look into the AR personae-it wasn't as if those were actual victims ... were they? For all she or anyone else knew, Sally Lefkow's dragon would be more missed and mourned than Sally herself; likewise for the rest of them.

Sad, and somehow predictable, Konstantin thought. She made a note to send out for more background on the victims. While she was reviewing what information she had, DiPietro and Celestine called to tell her mostly what she had already known, except for one very surprising difference: upon arrival at the kid's apartment, they had found a nineteen-year-old woman in the process of ransacking the place. She would answer no questions except to say that she was the kid's wife. Konstantin checked quickly; as she had thought, the kid was the only-or the first-married victim. "Bring her down here," she told them. "Fast."

"Tommie was looking for the out door," said Pine Havelock. "Anybody was gonna find it, it would be him. And now look what's gone and happened. " Tomoyuki Iguchi's self-proclaimed wife was sitting in a plastic bucket of a chair hugging her folded legs tightly and staring at Konstantin over the bony humps of her knees with a half-afraid, half-accusing expression. Dressed in what looked like surplus hospital pajamas, she seemed to be completely hairless, without even eyelashes. Her eyes weren't really large enough to carry it off; she made Konstantin think of a mental patient who had fallen into a giant vat of depilatory cream.

"What out door would that be?" Konstantin asked her after a long moment of silence. "The one to the secret Japanese area?"

Havelock raised her head, staring oddly. "Get off."

"What out door?" Konstantin asked patiently, suppressing several inappropriate responses.

"Out. Out. Where you go and you'll stay. So you don't come back to something like this." She

looked around Guilfoyle Pleshette's office.

"Uh-huh. " Konstantin leaned an elbow on the desk and rubbed her forehead. "Where would you end up?"

"Out." The woman's forehead puckered in spots; Konstantin realized she was frowning. Without eyebrows, all of her expressions were odd. "You know-out. Where you don't need the suit or the top hat, because you're there. Not here."

Konstantin finally got it. "So you and Iguchi were looking for the magic door to the egress. Did you know of anyone else-"

"Egress," Havelock said, nodding vigorously. "That's it. Door outegress. That's what she called it."

"Who?" Konstantin asked, and then almost said the answer with her.

"Body Sativa."

"Sun's gonna come up," Guilfoyle Pleshette said threateningly. She looked tired. Even her hair was starting to lose its lift.

Still sitting at her desk in the minuscule office, Konstantin waved at her impatiently. "Sorry, Taliaferro, " she said into the phone while she scrawled notes in the archiver one-handed. "I didn't get the last thing you said. Repeat."

Taliaferro was surprisingly patient. Perhaps lack of sleep had simply made a zombie out of him. "I said, they're still running data on the other seven so we don't have anything solid yet. But the probability is running to 80 percent that anyone who frequented the Sitty as often as any of them would, at some point, have had AR contact with the persona or entity known as Body Sativa."

" 'Entity'?" said Konstantin incredulously. "Who's calling this thing an entity? The probability program or someone who's in a position to know?"

"Actually, I heard some of the clientele in the parking lot calling it that. Or her. Whatever." Taliaferro sounded a bit sheepish. "Probably it's some slicko with a lot of good pr. Famous for being famous, you know."

"You do much AR?" Konstantin asked him suddenly.

There was a moment of loud silence. "Is that a sincere question?"

"Sorry," Konstantin said. "Don't know what got into me."

Taliaferro hung up without replying. She turned to Guilfoyle Pleshette, who was yawning hugely and noisily. "Do you do much AR?"

"Yeah, sure. Employee discount here's pretty good."

"Do you spend much time in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty?"

Now the manager shrugged and looked at the ceiling almost coyly. "I guess I been known to. You gotta scan rated zone because when you get a virgin in, you gotta talk about what you know. I say that's the difference between a quality business and a ditch."

Konstantin nodded absently. Once a place got too popular, nobody would admit to going voluntarily, even in AR. "And Body Sativa?"

Pleshette shrugged one shoulder. "Everybody knows about her, but not as many really seen her as say so."

"But you have," Konstantin said.

"Of course. "

Of course. Konstantin managed not to smile. "You think you could introduce me?"

"Of course not." The woman was almost offended.

Now Konstantin shrugged. "It was worth a try."

"You got to understand here that anyone who knows Body and drags along every prole that wants to see her, won't know her for too long."

"I guess I can understand that. Suppose I go in and find her myself?"

Pleshette stared at her. "You think you can?"

"One of your employees offered me some secret insider icons. Whatever those are."

The manager straightened up. "Yeah? Who?" she asked sharply.

"The bored one. Mezzar. Tim."

"Oh, him. " Pleshette waved one hand. "You can find his so-called secret insider icons in the index of any online guidebook. I got stuff you can get around with."

"But will you loan any to me?"

The funny little face looked doubtful. "What're you gonna do with it?"

Konstantin took a breath. "All I want to do is ask this Body Sativa some questions. "

"What kind of questions?" the night manager asked suspiciously.

Now Konstantin felt as if she had fallen through a rabbit hole in time that had sent her back to the beginning of the situation, which she would have to explain all over again. "Questions having to do with the kid who died here tonight-Shantih Love, or Tomoyuki Iguchi, whichever you knew him as. "

"I didn't know him at all," said Pleshette. Konstantin felt like screaming. "And there's no insurance that Body Sativa did, either. But if that's all you really want to do, I can load some stuff for you. But you got to promise me, you won't misuse any of it."

"Misuse it how?" Konstantin asked.

"Poaching. "

"And what would that entail?"

"Getting stuff you're not entitled to get."

"Stuff? "In AR?" Konstantin felt completely lost now.

The night manager folded her arms again. "Yeah. Stuff in AR. In the Sitty. Everybody who goes in regular's got stuff in AR. So I got this nothing job. I got to put up with blowfish like Miles Mank. I live in a hive on Sepulveda. But I got stuff in AR. I got a good place for myself, I'm in the game with the name and the fame. I even got myself a few passwords. I put in plenty of time to get all that. I don't want it just slipped out from under me when I'm not there to defend it." The funny little face started to pucker unhappily. "You got stuff out here, you don't need to go poachin' my stuff in there. If you see what I mean."

Konstantin saw; it sent a wave of melancholy through her. "All I want to do is contact Body Sativa if I can. I don't want to do anything else."

Pleshette held her gaze for a long moment and then shrugged her bony shoulders hugely. "Yeah. Well, you know, it's not like I can't tell the difference between in there and out here, it's not like I think I can put that stuff in a bank or anything. But I put a lot of time in; I spent some big sums doin' it. If I give it away, then I got nothing. You see that?"

Konstantin saw. She couldn't decide, however, if it was the sort of thing a person might kill for.

Guilfoyle Pleshette found a clean hotsuit in Konstantin's size and helped her put it on, giving her a flurry of instructions in her little cartoony voice. Konstantin felt silly, even though she knew this was really just like any other information gathering operation, except it was more like using the telephone. Unless what happened to the kid happened to her, she thought unhappily. Tim Mezzar made good on his promise to supply icons and loaded the file into the headmount for her. "All you have to do is ask for your icon cat," he said, sounding less bored. "And if you're not sure which icon to try, ask for advice."

"Ask who?"

"The icons," he said, looking at her as if she should have known this. "They all have their own help files attached. But I gotta tell you, they're all pretty idiosyncratic, too. You know how it is, what some people call help. "

Konstantin was mildly alarmed to find that she actually understood what he was telling her. After loading her own information into the headmount, Pleshette took her to one of the deluxe cubicles-deluxe meaning it was half again as large and included an extra chair. She helped Konstantin get comfortable in it, fastened the straps just tightly enough to keep her from falling if she got overly energetic, and fitted her headmount for her. Konstantin tried to thank her, but the headmount muffled her too well. She felt more than heard the woman leave the room. Fear rippled through her, briefly but intensely, making her dizzy.

Then the screen lit up with a control panel graphic and she immediately regained her balance. She turned on the log. The log was an independent, outside operation with only an on-off access, so she'd have her own record that she could prove hadn't been tampered with later, if necessary. Funny how the first thing anyone had to do with taped evidence was prove that it hadn't been toasted, she thought.

The control panel graphic disappeared and the screen showed her the configuration menu. She made her choices-sighting graphic and help line on request-while the 'suit warmed up. This was a full-coverage 'suit, she realized, uncomfortable. Somehow, she hadn't given it any thought when she was putting it on and it was too late to do anything about it now. Besides, they were probably all full-coverage 'suits; full-coverage would be the big attraction in a place like this. As if to confirm her thoughts, a hotsuit ad replaced the configuration menu.

Because if you're not going to feel it all over, murmured a congenial female voice while a hotsuit, transparent to show all the sensors, revolved on the screen, why bother? Which, when you

thought about it, wasn't such an unreasonable question.

The head-mounted monitor adjusted the fine-tuning for her focal length by showing her the standard introduction in block letters on a background of shifting colors. Konstantin sighed impatiently. So much introductory material with the meter running-she could see the clock icon tagging along at the upper edge of her peripheral vision on the right side. You probably couldn't go broke operating a video parlor, she thought, unless you tried real, real hard.

The sign came up so suddenly that it took at least three seconds to register on her, and even then she wasn't sure right away whether she was really seeing it, or imagining it. Seeing in AR felt strangely too close to thinking.

WELCOME TO THE LAND OF ANYTHING GOES HERE THERE ARE NO RULES EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED

Ha, thought Konstantin.

You can choose to be totally anonymous.

You can tell the whole truth about yourself.

You can tell only lies.

The word lies flashed on and off in different colors before it evaporated.

No real crime is possible here. If you do something Out There as a result of events In Here, you are on your own. In the event of your persona's virtual death, you can request to be directed to central stores, where you can choose another. The time used in choosing a new persona or performing any reference

or maintenance task is not free, though a reduced rate may be available through your parlor operator. Consult the rate file in your personal area for more information.

Konstantin looked around for a speed-scroll option.

There is no speed-scroll option for this portion of your session. State and federal law specifically declare that all users must be advised of conditions in the gaming area. By reading this, you agree that you understand the structure and accept any charges, standard and or extra, that you will incur at your point of origin. Closing your eyes will only result in a full rescroll of the introductory material, at your own expense.

Blink-rate and eye-movements could reveal a great deal about a person's thoughts, especially when used in conjunction with vital signs, Konstantin remembered, feeling even more uneasy.

This concludes the introductory material. The next screen will be your destination menu. Bon voyage, and good luck.

The screen that came up showed her four doors labeled Post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty, Post-Apocalyptic Ellay, Post-Apocalyptic Hong Kong, and Others.

A small bright icon appeared at the bottom right corner of her visual field, a graphic of a hand twisting a doorknob. Just below it, on the status line, was the word Cue! Feeling awkward, she reached for the Noo Yawk Sitty door and saw a generic whitegloved hand moving toward the knob. As the hand touched the knob, she felt it in her own hand, the sensors delivering a sensation to the palm side of her fingers that surprised her with its intense authenticity-it was more like touching a doorknob than actually touching a doorknob.

The next moment was a flash of chaos, a maelstrom of noise and light, countless touches and textures everywhere at once, over before she could react to any of it. Under her feet, she could hear the scrape of the gritty glitz, the glitzy grit of post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty; she could see the sparkle and glitter of it spread out before her-not Eliot's etherized patient awaiting dissection but a refulgent feast for her reeling senses.

HINT: In case of disorientation, amp your 'suit down and wait at least thirty seconds before attempting movement. Closing your eyes could result in vertigo. This message will be repeated.

She thought she heard herself make some kind of relieved noise as she stared at the setting marked decrease. In a few moments, all the settings on the suit had been re-adjusted to a more bearable level. Whoever had had this ,suit on last, she thought, had either been extremely jaded or suffering from some kind of overall senses-impairment disorder. Or-not so amazing in the era of the more-real-than-real experience-both.

Now that she could perceive her surroundings without being assaulted by

them, Konstantin was dismayed to find that she didn't seem to be anywhere near where Shantih Love had died. Instead, she was standing at the edge of an open area in the midst of a crowd of tall buildings festooned with enormous neon signs of a sort that had been popular seventy or eighty years before. Except for herself, there were no people, or at least none that she could see, and no sound except for a faint hum that might have come from the signs, or from some distant machine. Or possibly even from some loose connection in the headmount, she thought sourly. It would be just her luck.

The buildings were dark, showing the scars of fires, bullets, and bomb blasts, broken-out windows gaping like empty eye sockets, but the signs were brilliant, impossibly vivid with shifting colors that melted and morphed like living ropes of molten light. She had to look away or be hypnotized. Her gaze locked onto a silvery figure standing in an open doorway. At first, she thought it was someone wearing a skintight bio-suit but then the figure moved forward and she saw that its skin was the same color as the clothes it wore. The figure moved closer and she amended her perception: it was the same material as the clothes it wore.

"New in town?" it sang, approaching carefully.

"Maybe," she said, taking a step back.

"Oh, you're new. " The figure, which began to look more like it was made of mercury or chrome, gestured at something behind her. Konstantin turned to look.

The sight of the completely hairless and sexless creature in the dark glass made her jump; then embarrassment made her cringe. She had completely forgotten to choose a persona and the hotsuit, rather than choosing one for her, had let her enter AR wearing a placeholder. Her gaze darted around as she searched for the exit icon.

"It's not necessary to leave," the silvery figure said in its musical voice. Now that it was right next to her, Konstantin could see it was a sort of animated metal sculpture of a tall young girl, though she couldn't quite identify the metal. Chrome, mercury, or possibly platinum? "Pull down Central Stores and choose Wardrobe. Then just follow the directions."

"Oh. Thank you so much." Feeling awkward, Konstantin stuck out her hand. "I'm, uh, Dore. And you're right, I'm new here."

The silver girl seemed unaware of her extended hand. "I am a pop-up help-and-guide subroutine keyed to respond to situations and types of situations most often identified with new users of AR and/or post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty. I am also available on request. Pull down Help and ask for Sylvia. "

Konstantin started to thank her again but the girl made a fast gesture at eye-level and she found herself standing at a shiny white counter. The words TOUCH HERE FOR ASSISTANCE faded in on its surface, going from pale

pink to blood red and back to pale pink before disappearing. Konstantin gingerly put a fingertip on the spot where she estimated the middle of the 0 in FOR had been.

"Help you," said a hard-edged male voice; the short, plump man who appeared on the other side of the counter looked as if he were answering a casting call for a play about bank tellers in 1900. The green visor on his forehead cast a shadow that made it hard to see anything of his eyes but reflected pinpoints of light.

"Where's the rest of your hat?" Konstantin asked impulsively.

"This is an eyeshade, not a hat," he replied in that same sharp, almost harsh tone. "Its presence connotes items and equipment available to you in AR, some at a surcharge. Do you want to see a list of items and equipment with their corresponding surcharges? These can also be itemized on the hardcopy printout of your receipt. "

"I don't know. Is a persona classified as an item or as equipment?"

"Neither. A persona is a persona. Did you have someone in particular in mind or were you planning construction here? Morphing services within AR are available for a surcharge; however, there is no extra charge if you have brought your own morphing utility with you. Except, of course, for any extra time that might be consumed by the morphing process."

Konstantin suddenly found herself yawning; so far, her big AR adventure was turning out to be even more tiresome than the reality she was used to. "Does anybody really do anything in here besides listen to how much everything is costing them?"

"First-time users are advised to take the orientation sequence, and usually in some easier location." He sounded as bored as she felt.

"I want out of here," she said. "Out of the whole thing, I mean. Exit. End it. Good-bye. Stop."

Logging off. Out, out, out."

Abruptly, she was staring at a blank screen; her 'suit was in Suspend, she saw, but still turned on. Words began to crawl up the screen in a steady scroll.

Your time in your chosen AR location has been halted. Readings indicate a high level of tension and stress in a low level of situation. Generally this occurs when the user is confused or has not taken proper instruction in the use of AR. Do you wish to continue in AR, or do you wish to terminate the program and exit? Please choose one option and one option only.

She was about to tell it to terminate when she heard what sounded like a telephone ringing.

The words on the screen vanished and a new message appeared quickly, word by word. Realtime communication with you is being requested. Do you want to talk to the caller? Please answer yes or no.

"Who is it?" she asked and then added quickly, "Oh, never mind. Put them on. "

There was a click and she heard the familiar cartoony tones of Guilfoyle Pleshette. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Yeah, what I thought. Icons and passwords don't do you a bit of good if you don't know what you're doing. That's an advanced 'suit I put you in. It doesn't carry a pre-fab for you, you got to bring your own."

"My own what?" asked Konstantin worriedly.

"Your own persona. I thought you had one you wanted."

"I do.-

"Well, who is it?"

Konstantin took a breath. "Shantih Love."

Pleshette didn't even hesitate. "You want it with or without the cut throat?"

"With," Konstantin said. "Definitely with. And I want a copy of the surveillance footage loaded into a subroutine, too."

"You gonna run a sequence within a sequence?"

"I might. If it looks like it might get me some answers. Why?"

"Because that's a pretty expensive thing to do." Pleshette sounded both annoyed and worried.

"Who's gonna pay for all of this online time and fun and games?"

"You are," Konstantin said.

"What?"

"I said, the taxpayers are. Your tax dollars at work."

Pleshette's laugh was low but surprisingly harsh. "Not my tax dollars. I don't pay taxes, not on my salary. You want to impress some taxpayers, catch some criminals in there and drag them out with you when you sign off.-

Twenty (billable) minutes later, Konstantin stepped through a doorway onto the street where she had first seen Shantih Love. The feel of the Love persona in her 'suit was pleasurable in a way that kept her on edge. Being Shantih Love was close to seductive, even with the sliced throat, something she had not taken into consideration.

Real easy to go native in a Gang Wars module. Guilfoyle Pleshette's words came to mind unbidden. Not to mention unhelpfully, she thought; this wasn't a Gang Wars module. That she knew of, anyway. She was wondering now if she really knew anything at all. The piles of wreckage in the street were all aflame, burning in jeweltones, now and then sending sparks skyward, where they seemed to mingle with the stars. The glitter she had seen on the monitor looked somehow less gritty from the inside and more like delicate sprays of tiny lights, too exquisitely fragile not to

shatter in a light puff of a breeze, yet remaining, twinkling and shimmering against the black street, the pitted brick and the web-cracked glass of the buildings facing the burning wrecks, the coldstone texture of the barrier between the street and the alien shore of the Hudson River.

Konstantin went to the barrier and strolled along it in the direction Shantih Love had taken, looking around for anything like the figure of a shaggy beast that might take an interest in her. Rather than anything approaching, however, Konstantin had a sense of things drawing away from her, many watching with the knowledge that she was an impostor. And then again, she thought suddenly, how would anyone know, if the Shantih Love persona had gone on for another four hours after Iguchi's death? Maybe the only one who knew was the creature who had attacked and hijacked Shantih Love here in the first place.

She paused, leaning on the barrier and looking toward where she estimated the party had been. It was long over now, or perhaps this was no longer a hot place to be in the Sitty. Her purpose here was not to find a party, nor to act as a decoy to attract a creature that wasn't even real. Funny how easy it was to forget things or to keep focused here. If she waited much longer, she might even feel her concentration dissolve, break apart into tiny fragments and float away up to the stars with the sparks from the burning wreckage.

"Icon cat?" she asked.

It was there before her on the barrier, a big book full of symbols and their explanations. The page it was open to showed a flame within a halo; as she looked at it, it went from a line drawing to a vivid holo. The word Enlightenment came out of the flame and rippled for a moment. More words appeared on the facing page: You have only to ask.

Konstantin made a face, or thought she did; there was no real feeling above her neck. "Is this a help file?" she said aloud.

Now there was a new message on the page opposite the flame: Help with?Travel-Location-Contacts-Other

After a moment's thought, she touched-Contacts.

Contact-Who-What? the page wanted to know.

She pressed for-Who. The question mark moved to the end of the word. "Body Sativa," she said aloud.

A golden arrow pointing to her right materialized on the page. She turned it and found a map of the area with her own position highlighted. A dotted green line appeared, winding its way along the grid of streets to a location six blocks away; a green star flashed on and off.

"That was easy," she said, noting the address and the directions. It just figured. You have only to ask. So simple that it was too simple to think of.

The book disappeared into the back of the map. She picked it up and moved up the street toward the next three-way intersection. Three fiery humanish

shapes detached themselves from the burning ruins of a classic Rolls sandwiched between two antique sports cars and stood watching her. Konstantin had a sudden urge to whirl on them and claim she was selling encyclopedias or household cleansers. The idea was a tickle playing over her back, where she imagined she could feel their literally burning stares.

No, too simple; they might expect her to produce chips full of natural history quick-times or a bottle of something that looked like urine and smelled like ammonia. Not that she had smelled anything in here since she had arrived, not even anything burning.

She couldn't account for how she had come up with the idea of playing such a prank; she'd never had much of a sense of humor, or so her ex had always said.

Anything goes. You can even pretend you have a sense of humor, or that your ex isn't actually ex, and all while you look for someone with the improbable name of Body Sativa, or Love, or whatever.

She passed several brawls, a side street where a few hundred people seemed to be trying to stay as close together as possible and still dance-it looked as if they had decided nudity would do it-and a billboard-sized screen where half a dozen people were either collaborating on a quick-time or competing to see whose images could dominate. Someone among them was obsessed with mutant reptiles. Or were certain kinds of images contagious?

Or maybe, she thought as she passed someone that might have been the offspring of a human and a cobra, it was the mutants themselves that were contagious. She paused at a comer in front of a park surrounded by a black metal spiked fence and consulted the map.

"Sssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh . . ."

The noise was so soft, she wasn't sure that she had actually heard it. But then it came again, from somewhere in the dark contained in the spiked metal fence, and she found that the sensation of the small hairs standing up on the back of her neck was not necessarily something that the hotsuit had to produce for her.

"Sssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaannnnnnntiiiiiiih .

She was clenching her hands so tightly that if she had really been holding a map, it would have crumpled and torn in a dozen places. Come on, she told herself. This is nothing more than a scary story. You just happen to be in it.

"Sssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaannnnnnntiiiiiiih .

Apparently it didn't matter what she told herself; the hairs on the back of her neck were going to

stand up and jitterbug regardless. The chills seemed to be creeping down her backbone now. Konstantin tried to steel herself and shivered instead.

"Sssssshhhhhhhhaaaaaaannnnnntiiiiiih. Welcome back from the land of the dead. We've been waiting for you, darling. "

Konstantin forced herself to turn around. The faces grinning out of the darkness glowed moon-pale, with thick black circles around the eyes, which were also luminous. Or just the whites, anyway, Konstantin noticed, trying to see more detail in spite of the cold still flicking at the back of her neck and up onto her scalp.

As her eyes adjusted, she could see that there were half a dozen of them, in a roughly symmetrical formation around a picnic table with the one who had spoken in the center. They were all wearing black skintights over their idealized hardbodies, some of them indisputably female, others emphatically male. When Broadway choreographers go bad, said a tiny, mocking voice in her mind. More chills played over the back of her neck. Shuddering, she rubbed her neck with her free hand and felt the cut area in front separate a bit.

She covered her wounded throat with the map and moved closer to the metal fence. "Do I know you?" she asked, trying to sound calm.

"Shantih," said the one who had been doing all the talking in a sulky tone. Emphatically male, she saw. "After all we've meant to each other. I'm wounded. Mortally. We all are."

"And I'm dead," Konstantin answered. "You have any idea who did it?"

The glowing moon-colored face suddenly took on an uncertain expression. "Honey, you were there. Look at your footage. Relive every glorious moment. "

"I have. I'd invite you to watch it again with me, but I'm on my way to meet someone. Maybe we can connect later."

One of the women on the speaker's right straightened up from her catlike stalking pose and pushed both hands into the small of her back. "Oh, for crying out loud, Shantih. My back's killing me tonight. If you're not playing, just say so so we can go find somebody else."

"I'm not playing," Konstantin said, starting to turn away.

"Because you're not Shantih," said the speaker, hopping down from the table and going to the fence. "Are you." It wasn't really a question.

Konstantin shook her head. "You knew Shantih Love pretty well?"

The man adjusted something on himself at waist-level and Konstantin felt the chills that had been tormenting her suddenly vanish. " 'Knew'? Does that mean our usual Shantih gave up the character?"

"Gave up the ghost," Konstantin said. "The person you knew as Shantih Love in here has been murdered. For real. I--"

He turned away from her and swung his arm. The group surrounding the picnic table vanished, including the woman who had complained.

Then he turned back to her. "What kinda virgin are you, hon?" he asked, annoyance large on his white painted face.

"What kind?" Konstantin echoed, mystified.

"Yeah, what kind. Are you some senator's baby out for a good time, or are you some rich kid who bought out a regular? Thought you could get the game and the fame along with the name?"

Konstantin started to answer but he did something at waist-level again and a fresh wave of chills danced up her neck into her hair. Crying out, she stepped back, batting the air with her map as if ultrasonics were insects she could just swat away from herself.

"You stay away from me, you pseudo-rudo," he yelled at her.

"What?" she demanded. "I didn't do anything--"

"I hate you virgins, you all think you're the first who ever thought of saying the one you bought out got killed for real. You think we're all just gonna lead you to their stash, tell you, 'Oh, help yourself, take all the stuff, and if you don't know how to use it, just ask' He did something at his waist again and Konstantin retreated several more steps. At the same time, she understood that this should not have made a difference. Unless her 'suit was cooperating in the scenario and producing the ultrasonics--"

She shifted her gaze to the control for her 'suit and saw that it was giving her the chills. She readjusted the setting and the chills cut off immediately.

The man made a disgusted noise. "For god's sake, baby, if you can't take the sensation, why did you bother coming in?" He flickered out and she was alone. Moving on, Konstantin couldn't decide whether to feel relieved or chastized.

The place marked on the map turned out to be a subway station, or maybe just the post-Apocalyptic ruin of a subway station. From where she stood on the sidewalk looking down the stone stairs, Konstantin could hear the distant sound of people's voices and, even more distantly, music, but no trains. Maybe you could hike around post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty in the tunnels, and bring your own music with you.

She crouched at the top of the stairs with her map, absently pressing the flesh of her throat together. The cut edges felt a bit like putty or clay, but they wouldn't stay closed for very long. She wondered idly if she should try to find a place to have herself sewn up, or whether she might even try it herself. If it was the sort of thing that Shantih Love would do- There was a strange pressure all along her back, from her neck down to her feet. She stood up and turned around to see if some new weird experience had crept up behind her, but there was no one and nothing there. She was alone; the pressure was all in the suit, as if it were trying to push her down the steps into the subway.

"Help?" she asked, turning the map over. It became a book again in her hands. She found the section on the hotsuit almost immediately but she had to read it over three times to be sure she understood that the 'suit itself, being loaded with Shantih Love characteristics, was trying to give her a hint as to what to do next. At this point, apparently, Shantih Love would have descended into the subway.

Konstantin concentrated, placing her fingers on the sliced flesh of her throat and closing her eyes. There; now she could feel it. Now she could feel how the sensation of touching skin, touching flesh was all in the fingertips of the hotsuit. She wasn't really touching anything, or if she was, the AR sensation over-rode it sheerly by intensity, vividness, and the power of suggestion.

She opened her eyes and found herself looking down at a young Japanese man dressed in the plain garb of a laborer from about a hundred or so years before, but armed with what looked to her like a Samurai sword.

Konstantin pressed the book to her chest protectively; it became a map again. The man seemed not to notice. He gazed at her steadily, his expression mild, almost blank. He came up another step. She meant to retreat but something in his expression changed so that his face became slightly more severe, more wary, and she stayed where she was.

"Does this mean you've given up, Mr. Iguchi?" he asked in a soft, sarcastic voice. "Or have you just changed your strategy?"

"How do you know my name?" Konstantin asked him, wincing inwardly when she heard the tremor in her voice. It wasn't fear but cold-her 'suit seemed to have turned to ice.

The man came up another step. "Games again, Tom? It's always games with you."

"More like a malfunction, actually," she muttered, rubbing one arm. The temperature inside the suit was still dropping, as though it was trying to keep her cool inside a furnace.

"It's not cold tonight, Tom," the man said. "Are you sure it's not fear that's making you tremble?"

"Have it your way," Konstantin said desperately, hoping that might have some effect on the 'suit's wayward thermostat.

"Surely you're not afraid of me-or is it what I represent?"

Konstantin's teeth chattered "W-w-what would that be?"

"An old world that has nothing to do with what this world has become this world, or the one it's contained in, or the one that that one is contained in, boxes within boxes within boxes, all the way to infinity. " The man suddenly produced a strange coin between thumb and forefinger. It flashed silver for a moment; then Konstantin could see the symbol on it, like a figure 8 lying on its side. The man flipped it over and showed her the other side, a snake with its tail in its mouth.

"Though these are not Japanese symbols, there is still something very Japanese about what they represent. Old Japan, I'm talking about, not the hot icy flash of the nth generation of speed tribes, or the debauchery of the newest salarymen in the neon jungle that covered over the old signs and symbols. "

He held it out to her, as if inviting her to take it, but when she reached for it, he flipped it again and snatched it out of the air. Konstantin pulled her hand back, embarrassed and irritated. The man put both hands behind himself for a moment and then held them up. "Which hand, Tom? You

choose."

Konstantin tucked the map under her arm, trying to ignore the fact that she felt as if she were turning into an ice cube from the skin inward. "Let's see," she said, lifting her chin with bravado. "I used to be pretty good at this. Finding the tell, I mean. Everybody's got a tell. Even old Japan."

The man's eyes narrowed and he took a closer look at her. "You never used to be so smart, Tom. What happened since I saw you last-you take some genius pill somewhere? Something that's burning your brain cells out as you use them, maybe?"

Konstantin didn't answer; she scrutinized his right fist for a long time, and then his left. "Sometimes, it's a twitch, a tightening of the muscles. Sometimes, it's just that the person simply looks at the correct hand, whichever one it is.

Doesn't matter, you just have to know what to look for, what kind of tell it is. Most of the time, you know, the person doing it doesn't even realize it. But it's there. There's always a tell, and it tells you what the answer is. " Konstantin hesitated and then tapped the man's right fist. "I say there.

"You're not Iguchi," he said, not moving.

"Let's see it," said Kostantin. "I know I must be right. Otherwise, you wouldn't be delaying."

"You're not Iguchi. I should have seen it immediately. That's too smart for Iguchi. Where is old Tom tonight? Did he hire you, or did you buy him out? If you bought him out, I got to tell you, he stuck you with damaged goods there." He indicated her cut throat with a jab of his chin.

Konstantin felt more confident now. She stepped forward and tapped the knuckles of his right hand.

"Come on, let me see it. I know it's there. Give me the coin and you can call it a night."

"Call it a night?" The man smiled, raised his right hand, and opened it. It was empty. "Or call it in the air?" He looked at his left hand as it unfolded in the same position to reveal that it, too, was empty. He stayed that way, with both hands raised, as if he were at gunpoint, or perhaps surrendering. Annoyed, Konstantin stepped back and folded her arms.

"Fine," she said. "But I know, and you know, that until you cheated, that coin was in your right hand. You can go ahead and take it away with you, but we both know you cheated, and we'll always know it. We'll never forget, will we?" She went to take the map from under her arm and felt something funny in her palm. She looked down and opened her hand. The coin was there.

She picked it up and looked at both sides.

"I told you to call it in the air, " the man admonished her. "But the problem is, when you have a coin with infinity on one side, and Ouroboros on the other, how can you ever really know which side is heads, and which is tails?"

Konstantin said nothing. He burst out laughing, bowed to her, and walked away into the darkness. She could hear the echo of his laughter long after the shadows had swallowed him up.

She examined the coin again. Whatever else he might have said or done, he had given her the coin; she had just received some AR stuff. She wondered if this was the type of stuff Guilfoyle Pleshette was so enamored of, and if it were the sort of thing that someone might kill for. She descended the stairs, feeling every bump and irregularity in the bannister with her free hand as the sounds of voices and music bounced off the grimy tiles. Sometimes the sensory input was too authentic to be authentic, Konstantin noted, almost amused. Until she got to the bottom of the stairs and saw the empty platform beyond the broken turnstiles and the long unused token-seller's cage. There were no people anywhere to be seen in the unnatural light of the fluorescent tubes, no movement anywhere at all. Dust and dirt lay thickly on everything, suggesting that no one had come here for a long, long time-which had to be wrong, since her Japanese friend had just come up out of here.

Or had he only been waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs? Her or someone like her-no, he had definitely been expecting Shantih Love, for some reason.

She looked at the lights overhead. They didn't hum or buzz; they didn't even flicker. Strange, for a place so disused and abandoned.

The coin grew slightly warmer in her fist. No, too high a price, she thought, amused. "Icon cat?" she asked, and it was there under her arm. She took hold of it with her free hand and maneuvered it open. "Subway?"

The pages flipped and came to rest on a picture of a wooden nickel. She could tell it was made of wood by the lustrous grain.

Konstantin considered it and then shook her head. The pages flipped again and kept flipping, like a rotary card file in a high wind. Because there was a wind, she realized, coming from somewhere down in the old train tunnel. She could feel it and she could hear music again as well, except it was much thinner-sounding, just one instrument, either a guitar or a very good synthesizer. "Pause," she told the book; it closed quietly for her. She climbed over one of the turnstiles and walked out onto the platform, looking around. The man with the guitar was to her left, sitting cross-legged at the place where the platform ended and the tunnel began. His head was tilted back

against the wall and his eyes were closed, so that he seemed to be in a state of deep concentration as he played. Konstantin wondered if he were going to sing, and then wondered exactly what kind of strange kick a person could get from spending billable time in AR alone in a vacant subway station, playing a musical instrument for nobody. None, she decided. "Resume," she said, staring at the guitar player. "Empty subway, downtown." The pages flipped again and stopped to show her a bottlecap. CREAM SODA. It fell out of the book onto the tile floor at her feet. Down by the tunnel, the guitar-player paused and turned to smile at her. The lights changed, becoming just a bit warmer in color as the legend NOW ENTERING NEXT HIGHER LEVEL ran along the bottom of her vision like a late-breaking item on Police Blotter.

People were all over the platform, standing in groups, sitting on the turnstiles, grouping together down on the tracks, picking their way over the rails and ties to the opposite platform, where there were even more people. At first, she saw only the same types she had seen on the shore in Shantih Love's AR log, but after awhile, she discovered that if she didn't look directly at people too quickly, a good many of them had somehow metamorphosed into characters far more original and indecipherable. If there even were that many people, she thought, remembering the strange guy in white face and the gang that hadn't really existed. Maybe some of these people were carrying phantoms with them for company. If you could be your own gang in AR, was that another example of AR stuff.?

A seven-foot-tall woman whose long, thick, auburn hair seemed to have a life of its own looked down at her through opera glasses. "What sort of a creature are you?" she asked in a booming contralto.

"I think I've forgotten," Konstantin said and then winced, squirming. The ,suit was reminding her now that it was full-coverage and that Shantih Love would have responded to this woman. It was like a nightmare. Her ex might have laughed at her and told her that was no less than what she deserved for stealing someone else's life.

I didn't steal it. He lost it and I found it.

Yeah. Finders, weepers.

Konstantin wasn't sure if it were worse to have an imaginary argument with an ex after a break-up than it was to have the break-up argument, but she was fairly sure it was completely counter-productive to have it both on billable AR time and during a murder investigation. If that was what this really was, and not just a massive waste of time all around.

"Do you know Body Sativa?" she asked the tall woman.

"Yes." The woman gazed at her a moment longer and walked away.

The people down on the tracks were dancing now to something that sounded

like the rhythmic smashing of glass on metal. Konstantin hopped down off the platform onto the tracks and walked among them, keeping her gaze downward so that she could see them change in her peripheral vision. Most of the people down here seemed to be affecting what her ex had called rough and shoddy sugar-plum. Konstantin had to admit to herself she found the look appealing, in a rough and shoddy way.

She looked down at the ankle-length gown Shantih Love had preferred. In this light, it seemed to have more of a red tone, much more than she had thought. Even stranger was the texture-it looked like velvet but it felt like sandpaper, at least on the outside. Inside, the feeling was all but non-existent; the hotsuit was full-coverage but not so complete in the detailing that she felt the gown swinging and brushing against her ankles. For that, she supposed, you had to have some kind of custom job.

But at least she never tripped on the hem, Konstantin thought as she moved among the dancers, still holding the map. The display had not changed, even after she had gained access to this

level, where all the people were, so either Body Sativa was here, or there was something wrong with the map.

Getting someone's attention to find out, however, seemed to be another one of those tricks she hadn't learned yet. Down on the tracks, anyway. The people dancing there weren't just ignoring her, they seemed honestly unaware of her, as if she were invisible. Which would seem to indicate she had found another level within a level. Levels within levels and boxes within boxes. Was there any purpose to it, she wondered-any real purpose other than to intrigue people into spending more billable hours solving the puzzle.

The guitar player, she saw, was still sitting in the same place, and it looked as if he were still playing as well, though it was impossible to hear anything except the smash-clang everyone around her was dancing to. She made her way through the group over to where the guitar-player was. The platform was about as high as her nose. She tried boosting herself up but couldn't get enough leverage.

"Stay," said the guitar-player, eyes closed. "I can see and hear you fine where you are."

"Good," said Konstantin. "Tell me, if I look past you, will you change into someone else, too?"

"It's all in what you can perceive," he said, smiling. Then, while she was looking directly at him, he morphed from a plump, balding young guy to an angular middle-aged man with very long, straight steel-grey hair. He still didn't open his eyes. "You'd be surprised how few turns of the morphing dial that took."

"Maybe not," she said. "Do you know Body Sativa?"

"Know her, or know of her?"

"Know her. Personally, or casually." She paused. "And have you seen her in here recently?" He tilted his head, his closed eyes moving back and forth beneath his eyelids, as if he were dreaming, while his fingers played over guitar strings that appeared no thicker than spidersilk. Konstantin realized she couldn't hear the music coming from the guitar, but she could feel it surround her, not unpleasantly, and then disintegrate. "I was a dolphin in a previous incarnation," he said after a bit.

"Why did you change?"

"We all have to, sooner or later. I would have thought you'd know that as well as anyone. What were you before you passed on to your present manifestation?"

Konstantin barely hesitated. "A homicide detective."

"Ah. That accounts for the interrogation." He chuckled. "You know, the idea is to go on to something different, not just do the same thing behind a new mask."

Words to live by, Konstantin thought. Perhaps she could print them on a card and send it to her ex. She smiled. "That's pretty good for a guitar playing land dolphin."

He stopped playing and pulled something out of the hole in the center of the instrument. "Here," he said, leaning forward and holding it out to her; it looked like a playing card. "You're not necessarily smarter than the last one who had your face, but the quality of your ignorance is an improvement."

"It is? How?" Konstantin asked, taking the card from him.

"You might actually learn something."

She studied the card, trying to see it clearly, except the image on it kept shifting, melting, changing. It looked like it might be some kind of Oriental ideogram. "What is this?" she asked.

"Cab fare," he said.

"Cab fare? In a subway station?"

"Trains aren't running tonight. Or didn't you notice?" He laughed.

She looked down at her map again. The display still hadn't changed. "I was supposed to find somebody I needed here. My map says she's still here."

The guitar player shook his head. "Sorry, you misunderstood. There's a locator utility here, for help in finding someone in the Sitty. That's what your map says is here." He shrugged. "There are locator utilities in all the subway stations."

Konstantin managed not to groan. "Where?"

"Somewhere. It's all in what you perceive."

"You're a big help."

"I am. If you get it figured, you have cab fare to get to wherever it is you need to go."

Cabfare, Konstantin thought. Cabfare. Did it include tip, she wondered, or was that what the coin was for? She looked down at it in her other hand.

The man stopped playing. "When did you get that?"  
"Just now. Upstairs. Outside. " Konstantin closed her fist around it again. "Why?"  
"Because even in here, certain things are perishable. Like milk, or cut flowers. "  
"Or people with cut throats?" Konstantin added.  
He smiled. "No, you may have noticed that death doesn't have to put a crimp in your party plans. On the other hand, it's not generally an accepted practice to start out dead. If you want to be dead, custom dictates that you die here."  
"Here in the subway, or here in AR?-"  
"It's all in what you perceive."  
He was going to say that once too often, Konstantin thought unhappily. "What about this coin?" she asked him. "Were you telling me just now that it's going to expire?"  
"Conditions," he said after a moment. "It's the conditions under which it would be ... effective. Conditions won't last. "  
"More words to live by," Konstantin muttered to herself. "I want to find the locator utility. How do I do that?"  
"You have only to ask."  
Konstantin frowned. "Who should I ask?"  
"Me."

She hesitated. "All right. How do I find the locator utility."  
"You have only to ask," he said again serenely, fingers picking at the strings of the guitar again.  
"I just did," Konstantin said impatiently. "How-" She cut off. "No. Where is Body Sativa?"  
The guitar player jerked his chin at her, still with his eyes closed. "Hail a cab, and when you're asked where you want to go, give the driver that. "  
Konstantin looked at the card again. The ideogram was still shifting. Suddenly she felt very fired and bored. "Are you sure this'll do it?"  
"Oh, yeah. That'll take you right to her."  
"It's that simple."

The guitar-player nodded. "It's that simple."  
"Strange, nothing else in here seems to be."  
"What you want is simple. All you had to do was state it in the proper place at the proper moment. In the proper form, of course. That's just elementary programming. "  
"Programming," Konstantin said, giving a short, not terribly merry laugh.

"I should have known. You're the locator utility and the help utility, aren't you?"  
"That's about what it comes down to," he said agreeably.  
"And I had only to ask."  
"Because it's what you want that's simple. You just want to meet up with another player so I gave you a tracer. Obviously you're not the usual Shantih Love, or even the usual player. The usual players don't want anything so simple. The usual players come down here looking for the secret subroutine to the Next Big Scene, or even the mythical out door. Then my job becomes something different. Then my job is to give them something that will stimulate a little thrill here and there, play to their curiosities and their fondest wishes and desires."  
"And make them spend more billable hours," Konstantin said.  
"The more hours people spend in here doing complicated things, the more interesting the Sitty becomes."  
"Why don't you just tell people that, instead of playing to their wish fulfillment fantasies about finding the egress or the secret subroutine to post Apocalyptic Peoria, or wherever?"  
"First of all, it's not my job to volunteer information. It's my job to answer questions. And I can only answer with what I know. I don't know that there's an egress . . . but I don't know that there isn't. I can't prove there isn't, I'm a utility. I wasn't created to determine whether my universe is finite or not."  
I'm talking philosophy with a utility, Konstantin thought. "But surely you know whether there are secret subroutines?"  
"If they're secret, they certainly wouldn't tell me. I'd tell anyone who asked and then they wouldn't be secret any more."  
"All right," Konstantin said slowly. "Have there ever been any secret subroutines in the Sitty that you've found out about?"  
"Some players have claimed to have accessed them."

"Were they telling the truth?"

"I'm not a lie detector."

"Wouldn't matter if you were, would it. Because it's all lies in here. Or all truth."

He went on playing, still with his eyes closed. Konstantin supposed he was the AR equivalent of blind justice-blind information. Which was probably much more accurate, all told.

"Have you ever met Shantih Love before?" she asked and then added quickly, "I mean, have you ever met a player named Shantih Love before I came in here?"

"I don't really meet anyone. I have everyone's name."

Konstantin thought for a moment. "Has anyone ever asked you to locate Shantih Love?"

"I don't remember."

"Why not?"

"I don't have to. There's no reason to."

"But if you can put a tracer on someone's location for another player, isn't there some record of that? Some, uh, trace?"

"Only while the tracer's active. But that record would be kept elsewhere in the system. You know, if you're so interested, there are schools you can go to to learn all about how AR works."

"I thought you didn't volunteer information," Konstantin said suspiciously.

"You call that information?"

She laughed in spite of herself. "You're right. Thanks for the cab fare." She started to walk away and then paused. "Where's the best place to get a cab in post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty?"

"I don't know."

"All right." She sighed resignedly. "Where's the nearest I can find a cab?"

"I don't know. Cabs aren't players."

Konstantin nodded. She should have known, she thought.

She came up out of the subway into the middle of a not.

Where the streets had been deserted before they were now full of people running, screaming, chasing each other, hurling furniture and other heavy objects from sixth and seventh story windows, from rooftops, from mid-air for all she knew.

Level access, she realized. When she had accessed the new level in the subway station, she had stayed there. If she went back to Times Square now, it wouldn't be deserted this time. Anxiously, she looked around for some clear route of escape, and then wondered if there really was any-maybe the riot was Sitty wide, what with everything being post-Apocalyptic.

She sighed. What she should really do, she thought, was exit. This wasn't her kind of interest, she couldn't get into the spirit of it even for the sake of information-gathering on behalf of some poor murdered kid. And walking around disguised as the victim-the more she thought about it, the more it seemed like an act of grave-robbing, desecration. Better just to leave word in a number of message centers and hope that Body Sativa, or someone who knew her, would get in touch, and if so, that there would be some useful information to be gained. From her experience here, though, she didn't think that there would be. This had nothing to do with anyone's life, not anyone's real life. So how could it have anything to do with a kid's death? Or with seven other deaths?

Coincidences by way of statistical incidence? Her ex had always said that statistics bred coincidences. Konstantin wondered if familiarity breeding contempt was a coincidence as well. A Molotov cocktail sailed over her head and shattered on a nearby brick wall, making a perfect wave circle of flames. The effect of the heat was so realistic she could have sworn her face was flushed. She put an arm up defensively and turned away-

It took her all of a second to register the blow followed by the impact of her body on the street; the punch in her upper chest had been so abrupt and powerful that her legs had flown out from under her and she'd hit the ground on her back. It hurt, as badly as the real thing would have. She thought she had run into one of the rioters and the program had authenticated the logical result. But then a half-circle of grinning faces appeared above her as she tried to sit up and catch her breath, and she couldn't believe it. Of all the damned things that could go on in this ridiculous scenario and she would go and trigger one of the least imaginative.

Before she could ask for the icon cat, they hauled her to her feet and began shoving her around so that she rebounded from one into another like a pinball in a very small machine. Still breathless, she tried to get a good look at them but they were pushing her around too quickly. The Molotov cocktail had ignited something and she could see others, some people and some not quite, watching

in the firelight as her attackers played with her.

There had to be something in the icon cat that would help, she thought, something for protection, self-defense, something. Too bad, she realized, that she hadn't thought of that sooner and used some precautions.

They were shoving her around harder now, their hands slapping, punching, pummeling and the pain was only too real. In a situation like this, it was hard to remember that the sensation was all artificial, delivered via select stimulation of certain nerves in a certain way, coupled with elements that contributed to the power of suggestion. This was too authentic; she wondered if Tomoyuki Iguchi had had some kind of masochistic streak that he had indulged as Shantih Love-

And suddenly, she wasn't sure that it wasn't happening for real. Maybe Shantih Love hadn't been able to tell the difference there on the shore of the Hudson River, not until it was too late and he couldn't feel how the real blood was flowing along with the virtual, even though he could see, perhaps until the moment of his death, the virtual attacker who had come to hijack his persona. But why.

A leg kicked out as she stumbled sideways and she went down again. One of her attackers started to pull her up; she twisted away and fumbled the icon cat out onto the ground where she could see it. It fell open to a fierce image that looked somehow a bit cartoony at the same time. She had a vague idea that it was a talisman of protection and grabbed for it, just as her attackers bellowed in triumph and tore the icon cat away from her.

Too late, she understood that the catalog with its treasure trove of iconsits stuff-was probably what they'd been after all along. She scrambled up but a heavy boot caught her in the midsection and she sat down hard.

One of them crouched down and shoved a face that looked like the product of a mating between a troll and a gargoyle up close to hers. "Hey, you never heard that expression, be seated?"

She scooted backward, trying to get away. He advanced on her with the rest of them behind him, one holding up her icon cat so she could see that they had taken the whole thing from her.

All but one page that she was still clutching in one hand, so hard that her knuckles hurt, a pain that was real, produced not by the hotsuit but by the way she was clenching her hand in this unreal place, a pain that paled next to the jazzy high-res authenticity of the 'suit but went deeper, all the way to the bone, to spread up her arm to her shoulder and over her chest. They are killing me. They are really killing me!

The thought was a scream in her head. What was going on, out there beyond the bounds of the headmount and the neo-exo-nervous system, what was happening out there, how many were out there, why hadn't she figured there could be more than one, hidden in the air-processing ducts perhaps, with the cooperation of some insider, maybe bored and bitter Miles Mank, or even Pleshette, not bitter, just very bored. Or the two of them, yes, that would be perfect, pretending to be enemies but killing together-one covering the AR while the other one handled things out there.

And if so, what did they have in store for her? Her attackers were grabbing at her, jabbing and poking, laughing at her frightened reactions, their broad, crude faces impossibly ugly, as if cruelty itself had been a model for their formation, a base to elaborate from, a setting from which the morphing dial could be turned. What kind of sad, sick specimen of humanity would pay to be something so horrible-

The employee discount here, she remembered suddenly, was pretty good. She had to admire the boldness, to kill someone again so soon after the last one, and the detective investigating the case, no less! Ideal, though-the partner was too claustrophobic to jump right on the crime scene and they knew it. So by the time someone else, Celestine and DiPietro perhaps, arrived, they'd have jiggered the evidence, massaged the data, and she'd be more grist for the AR urban legend mill. Ya hear about the homicide detective who was killed in AR investigating a murder? Yeah, incredible galloping headbugs. Yeah, I think it happened in D.C., you know how life is so cheap there-

Now the chief troll-gargoyle was waving around something that looked

like a jagged fragment of mirror, poking it at her face. Her rational mind kept telling her that he couldn't possibly cut her face but her rational mind had shrunk to the size of a quark. The rest of her was buying it, believing it, really really believing it to the point where she could feel the small cuts on her face, the bloody murderous troll had cut her face and in a moment he

would cut her throat, by the power of suggestion she would believe her throat was cut and so much for extremo ruptura, that they were all so sure that no one had had since St. Whoever. There just hadn't been any AR up until now that could compete with the faith of a fanatic saint with stigmata, but now there was, now there was, and let the coroner come in here, let them all come in here and see if the power of their own belief, their galloping head-bugs, let them survive it- The tom page in her hand suddenly transformed into a claw. She let go with a scream and the claw grabbed her arm, pulled her up off the street, and then pulled her into the air. She screamed again as she felt her feet leave the ground; her inner ear went into the same frenzy it had that one and only time her ex had talked her into riding a roller coaster.

Post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty spread out below her, revealing itself. Exposing itself, she thought, looking at the fires and the bursts of light on the skinny roadways below, and had a short laughing jag. It cut off as she looked up thinking she might get a look at the moon and saw the bizarre pointed head and on either side, the wings that suggested nightmares about bats or things satanic.

She seemed to be dangling in its claws. The way they gripped her around her shoulders and arms should have hurt, but did not, as if there were padding. It flew on smoothly, quickly and no matter how she tried to concentrate on where the real sensation was, her imagination overrode her rational mindgrown to the size of a pea now, perhaps?-and she did feel the wind on her face. "I was supposed to be a pterodactyl," said the creature conversationally, "but my designer got carried away."

"Oh. Really. " Konstantin was amazed at how calm her own voice sounded. But then it wasn't her own voice, it was Shantih Love's; she was living a Shantih Love adventure and maybe Shantih Love traveled by mutant pterodactyl regularly. "Are you a device in the game or an employee of the company that licenses the Sitty out to parlors?"

"Now that would be telling," said the pterodactyl, sounding amused but at the same time a bit stiff, "and I thought you would know already, since you summoned me."

"You're an icon?" Konstantin asked.

"You got lucky. I'm a rescue. I make sure you don't get caught in dead

end loops that eat up billable time and don't deliver much in return. If you must know. If you really need to spoil the effect."

"Sometimes it's not such a tragedy to spoil the effect," Konstantin murmured. "Where are you taking me?"

"The destination is stipulated by your cab fare. And if you don't mind spoiling the effect that much, why didn't you just signal for the exit?"

"Well ... I think I got sucked into the story and wanted to see how it would come out."

"A common ailment," said the pterodactyl wisely. "Do you know about the joke that ends in the punchline, 'The food here is terrible, and in such small portions'?"

"What?" Konstantin was bewildered.

"Never mind. You're here." The wings enfolded her so that she couldn't see anything at all. Then the darkness lifted and she saw that the creature had set her down right next to the barrier that separated the street from the shore of the Hudson River.

Just past the barrier was the party that had been invisible to her on the first time through. People spread inward from a very long pier to the barrier itself. If she listened carefully, Konstantin could almost make out bits of conversation that may have been fascinating, if only she could have heard enough.

She sat on the barrier, unsure of what to do next. Take a walk and see if someone came to hijack Shantih Love again?

All up and down the street, wrecked vehicles were still burning, somehow never diminishing, the flames shifting but still never really changing. In a place where supposedly anything could happen, did anything happen?

Konstantin looked at the party again. "Redisplay," she said quietly. "Full mode. "

Guilfoyle Pleshette must have been screaming, she thought as the AR log of Shantih Love's murder rolled in and settled like fog. Redisplaying a log within a running AR scenario probably doubled the hourly rate and there was no charge account number designated to cover it. But if she were screaming, Konstantin couldn't hear it. Their respective realities were sound-proof.

But apparently not leak-proof, she thought, touching her sliced throat as the redisplayed Shantih Love appeared in front of her, close enough to touch, close enough for Konstantin to see the

flawless texture of that burnished copper/gold skin and the flecks of gold in those custom-made eyes, beautiful but wary.

The redisplayed Shantih Love started the ill-fated walk along the barrier and Konstantin joined in, pacing the image on the right. Her virtual body mirrored Love's movements such that she had no doubt she was reliving Tomoyuki Iguchi's walk in almost every detail. Iguchi just hadn't known his virtual self was going to be hijacked and killed. Which meant he couldn't know now, and yet the redisplayed Shantih Love seemed more apprehensive than she had remembered. Or was that just the fact that Full Mode was letting her see more and see it better than the small flat No Frills images she had viewed in Pleshette's office?

Beyond the redisplayed view of the shore and the party, she could see the current party-goers turning to look and maybe wonder who the show-off with the deep pockets was, doing a redisplay within a scenario. It was strange and extravagant even for post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty, where time d civilization had come to an end and the twilight of the gods was currently in progress. Except judging by the parties she kept coming across, Konstantin thought it might be more like the happy hour of the gods.

And then again, maybe her ex had been right in saying that she couldn't believe in anything because she had no respect for anything.

A small flood of people detached themselves from the party and ran to join the redisplay, melting in almost seamlessly. There wasn't time to be discomfited-the vague creature was already on top of the barrier, except it didn't look terribly vague any more. It looked an awful lot like Miles Mank after six very bad weeks on a binge.

Straddling the barrier a few feet away from him was a tattooed woman watching his every move intently. Konstantin had never seen the character before but she knew just by the posture and the tilt of the head that it had to be a stringer from someplace like Police Blotter. Whether it was the same one from the parlor or a different one from a competing network, she didn't know and it really didn't matter anyway.

As if sensing her thoughts, the tattooed woman turned in Konstantin's direction, smiling speculatively.

Konstantin saw the tattoos were in motion, melting and changing. In spite of everything, she took a moment to wonder what the point was.

Then she took a step forward, uncertain of what she meant to do-try to intimidate the stringer into leaving, ask her nicely to back off, promise her exclusive interviews with everyone involved, living or dead, if she'd refrain from broadcasting. But as she moved toward the barrier, the redisplayed Shantih Love took a step back and Konstantin found herself suddenly enveloped by the image.

It seemed as if everything around her took a giant step in every direction at once, including up and down. Then her surroundings refocused sharply. The shaggy creature jumped down and she found herself turning within the redisplayed Shantih Love and running, staggering through the sand, unable to do anything else. Some glitch had merged her program with the redisplay-Some glitch? Or the panting, sobbing creature behind her? Or even something else completely?

Her heart pounded so hard as she pulled herself up the stony rise to the street that she wondered how many people had sustained heart attacks just imagining that they were moving on a physical level they were incapable of in realtime.

Desperately, she tried to pull out of the redisplayed Shantih Love image but it was like being caught in a powerful magnetic field that worked on flesh-on thoughts, on both. Boxes within boxes, levels within levels, a guy pretending to be Japanese pretending to be a hermaphrodite named Shantih Love, and a cop pretending to be a hermaphrodite named Shantih Love pretending ... what?

It took forever to hit the ground and it hurt. She tried to scramble up and cry out for help, but Mank was on her and the blade was in his hands. She had nothing now, no rescue, no icon cat, no help files-

Something flashed in her open hand; she could see it just barely out of register with Love's redisplayed hand and hope surged through her like an electric current. The difference, the one thing that was different now between her image of Shantih Love and the redisplayed image, the thing that could change what had already gone before ... sort of.

But she'd have to call it in the air, and she wasn't sure she could. When you have a coin with infinity on one side, and Ouroboros on the other, how can you ever really know which side is heads, and which is tails? There wasn't time to figure it out. As the blade touched her throat, she tore her arm free of the recording's, hurled the coin at the night sky, and called it. The word that came out of her mouth was not what she had been expecting, but then, she hadn't really known what to expect, nor did she recognize it. Whatever it was--the term for the link between alpha and omega, the secret name of Ourobouros, or the nine billionth name of God--it had come with the coin as both property and function, and she could not have called it until now, when somehow, conditions were right. The knife blade descended, but she was receding from it at the speed of thought and it never reached her.

Had she receded from it, from that level? Or had all of it receded from her? There was no real way to tell. The only feeling she had now was a sense of acceleration that wasn't quite flying and wasn't quite falling. Her inner ear kept wanting to go crazy on her, but something would pull it back from the brink at the last moment, sending thrills through the back of her neck.

Konstantin tried curling into the fetal position, just for the sake of being able to feel her body. There were several moments of uncertainty and disorientation while she tried to locate her extremities. Then abruptly, she found herself seated in an old-fashioned leather chair at a large round table. Across

from her was a woman with deep brown skin and long black hair brushed back from her face like a lion's mane.

Konstantin stared, unable to speak.

"I understand you've been looking for me." The quality of the woman's voice was like nothing Konstantin had ever known before; it was sound, but translated into several other modes and dimensions, delivered all at once in a way that both enveloped and penetrated. It felt to Konstantin as if the woman's voice were coming through from the fabric of reality itself, any reality, including that of Konstantin's own thoughts.

After a while, Konstantin managed to nod. She wasn't sure how long it had taken her to do that, but it felt as if it had been a very, very long time. Body Sativa didn't seem to mind. However long something took here was how long it took.

"Things that happen, happen. Some things cannot be breached under pain of the consequences of procedure that is ... improper. It is a matter of finding the route. The connection. The connecting matter. Road? Bridge? Tunnel? Or Something Else?"

Something Else was not exactly what Body Sativa had said, but it was the only thing that would come through Konstantin's ear. She watched as Body Sativa spread her arms over the table, palms outward. It took another unmeasurable period of time for Konstantin's eyes to adjust, but when they did, she saw that the surface of the table was more like a large video screen, or telescopic window. Or, as was more likely in the land of the Ouroboros coin, both.

Konstantin realized that whatever it was, she was looking at another aerial view of post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty, every square inch and pixel revealed. Eliot's etherized patient after all, but prepared on the banquet table, not the operating table. The consumed and the consumers--it just depended what side of the table you were on ... didn't it?

"Look deeper."

Her point-of-view seemed to fly out from her in the way she had heard out-of-body experiences described, though this was more matter-of-fact than filled with wonder. It zoomed down into the Sitty and the tiny, vein-sized roadways grew into canyons, with cliff-faces made of mirrored glass and carved stone gargoyles, gables, spires, columns, pitted brick splattered with glitter that did not quite obscure the bum marks, the blasted places, the dirty words.

Wreckage in the roadways ignited, the flames rising to form complex shapes, lattices, angles that opened and closed on each other, here and there icons, some of which she recognized. And in other places, ideograms.

There they are, Iguchi, those special places they said you had to be Japanese to find, she thought. Maybe this means we've both turned Japanese. For my next magical trick, I will find the egress. The out door.

As if in direct response, her pov flew straight toward a door, which opened at the last moment, admitting her into a split-second of darkness and then into a badly lit room where she saw the

person strapped in the chair, sitting forward so that the straps pulled taut, but comfortably, in a way that supported more than restrained. The headmount moved slowly upward, the person raising her head to look up.

It was too easy, though, too bizarrely ... expectable, Konstantin thought. But then, it was just a story.

Her nerves had become Holy Rollers. Just a story or not, she wasn't ready to see this. Maybe she wasn't Japanese enough.

In the next moment, her pov had snapped back like a rubber band and she was looking across the table at Body Sativa again. The woman looked younger now, more like a girl than a grown woman. This post-Apocalyptic stuff was really something. No wonder so many people liked it. It was downright eerie. Like the story of the man who didn't open his parachute in an AR skydive, or the kid who got his throat cut because he'd gotten his AR throat cut.

Body Sativa seemed amused. "You have the coin. When you're ready to come back, call it in the air."

It took an hour for Konstantin to open her mouth and say, "Wait!" Her voice sounded unpleasantly flat in her own ears. "Someone killed--

"Yes. Someone did. When you're ready to know, call it in the air."

She was lying on her back on the road; Shantih Love was walking away, holding his/her sliced flesh together. But when s/he turned around and looked back, the face was unmistakably the creature's, the ridiculously benderedout features of Miles Mank, still on a binge.

"End it," Konstantin whispered, her voice still sounding funny to her. "End it, exit, outa here." She lay on her back for a very long time before she felt the road transmute into the chair with the restraints. Moving slowly, she undid the clasps on the headmount and was startled to feel someone helping her lift it off her head.

Taliaferro stood over her with the headmount in his hands, which was even more startling, and perhaps the most impossible of everything she had seen. By way of explanation, he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a white plastic inhaler. "When I've got my anti-claustrophobia medicine, I can do anything. "

"Words to live by," Konstantin whispered. There seemed to be nothing more to her voice than a rough whisper. She looked past him, but there was no one in the doorway.

"So, did you learn anything?" he asked her, sounding just slightly condescending. Perhaps that was a function of his medicine as well. She didn't hold it against him.

"Oh, yeah." She slipped out of the restraints and went over to the wall to her left. The control that let down the chaise was just slightly below eye level for her. She hit it with the side of her hand and it swung out and down in a way that reminded her of the way kids might stick out their tongues. Nyah, nyah, nyah.

"It was actually very simple," she said wearily, "but Celestine and DiPietro weren't thorough enough. The killer hid inside the Murphy style compartment, waited until Iguchi was all wrapped up in what he was doing, and then sliced him." Nyah, nyah, nyah.

Taliaferro was nonplussed. "You sure about that?"

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah. It's Occam's Razor is what it is. The simplest explanation is the explanation."

"Any idea who might have been hiding in there with Occam's Razor?"

Her moment of hesitation was so short, she was sure that Taliaferro didn't notice it, but at the same time, it was very long, incredibly, immeasurably long, of a duration that only Body Sativa could have understood and waited patiently enough for. "Yeah. It was Mank. He was bitter about not being the manager and not too stable. He frequented post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty on the generous employee discount enough times that he got a bad case of gamers' psychosis. He was killing in there and it spilled over to killing out here."

"You sound awful sure about all that," Taliaferro said doubtfully.

"You'd have to go in and see it for yourself. There's all kinds of-of stuff in there. Including memes for murder. Mank got one. Let's grab him and see if we can have him all tucked in before Police Blotter does an update. I think there was a stringer following me around in there."

Taliaferro grunted, took a hit off his inhaler, and dropped it into his pocket. "Okay. I guess that's it, then."

"Yeah," Konstantin said. "That's it."

"Okay," he said again. Pause. "I'll send someone back here with your clothes. "

"Thanks. " But she was talking to the air. Taliaferro had run off. Apparently there was only so much an inhaler could do. There was only so much anything could do. Anything, or anyone. Even Occam's Razor. But then, the murder weapon hadn't been the same in the other seven murders anyway. No indeed. And Mank looked good for this one, she insisted to herself. He looked too good. The

image of him in the Sitty was too identifiable not to be damning. The ego of the man, using his own face. Although that might be a more widespread practice than anyone realized. But could anything really be surprising in the land of anything goes, she

thought. The fabled promised land of AR, where they had everything there was in realtime-including death-and more besides.

If anything goes, then let anyone go as well. Mank looks good for it, and if the state can't prove its case against him, then it can't. But let him be the one who goes this time. For now. Until-well, when?

In her mind's eye, she saw the image of the coin again, the loop of infinity on one side, Ouroboros on the other. Maybe until you were ready to know which came first when you called it in the air.