

Leviathan Wept

by Daniel Abraham

"Good crowd," Pael said, from Paris.

"Things are weird," Renz said, passing his gaze over that auditorium so that Pael could see it better.
"People are scared."

When Renz had first trained with the link—when he began what Anna called his split-screen life—he had wanted the display windows to show the other people in his cell instead of what they were seeing; to make him feel they were speaking face to face. It had taken months for him to become comfortable with the voices of people he couldn't see and the small screens in his own visual field that showed what they were seeing. Now it lent their conversations a kind of intimacy; it was as if they were a part of him. Pael and Marquez, Paasikivi and Thorn.

The auditorium was full, agents of CATC—Coordinated Antiterrorist Command—in almost every seat and so many others linked in that the feed was choppy from bandwidth saturation. The air was thick with the heat and scent of living bodies.

Of the other members of his cell, only Marquez was physically present, sitting beside him and tapping the armrest impatiently. Pael, Paasikivi, and Thorn were linked in from elsewhere. Pael was in his apartment, lying back on his old couch so that the rest of them were looking up at his dirty skylight and the white-blue Parisian sky. Paasikivi and Thorn were sharing a booth at a Denver coffee shop so that Renz could see each of them from the other's perspective—Thorn small and dark as an Arab, Paasikivi with her barely-graying hair cut short. Renz wondered how long they would all be able to pretend those two weren't lovers, then placed all the window in his peripheral vision so he wouldn't be distracted from the man on the stage.

"Renz. I heard Anna was back in the hospital," Paasikivi said. Her tone of voice made it a question.

"It's just follow-up," Renz said. "She's fine."

The man at the front tilted his head, said something into a private link, and stepped up to the edge of the stage. In Denver, Thorn stirred his coffee too hard, rattling the spoon against the cup the way he did when he was uncomfortable. Renz lowered the volume from the link.

"Good afternoon," the man said. "I'd like to welcome you all here. And I have to say I wish we had this kind of turnout for the budget meetings."

A wave of nervous laughter swept over the crowd. Without meaning to, Renz found himself chuckling along with the rest. He stopped.

"For those of you who don't know me, my name's Alan Andrews. I'm a tactical liaison for the Global Security Council's theoretical branch. Think of me as the translator for the folks in the ivory tower."

"Condescending little pigfuck, isn't he?" Pael said.

"By now I'm sure you've all heard about the anomalies," the speaker said. "OG 47's experience with the girls in New York, OG 80 and the old woman in Bali, the disruptions at the CATC root databases. I'm here to give you an idea what the theoretical branch has made of them."

"Yes, Pauli," Marquez muttered. "But are you sure about the pig? He looks more a chimp man to me."

"Would you two shut up," Renz said. "I want to hear this."

"The first thing I want to make clear," the man said, holding his hands out to the crowd, palms out, placating, "is that there are no direct ties between these incidents and any known terrorist network. Something's going on, and we all know that, but it's not a conspiracy. It's something else."

The man dropped his hands.

"That's the good news. The bad news is it's probably something worse."

.

Looking back, the first anomaly had been so small, Renz had hardly noticed it. It had presented as a series of small sounds at a moment when his attention had been a thousand other places. He had heard it and forgotten until later.

The town they had been in at the time was nothing remarkable; the Persian Interest Zone was peppered with places like it. Concrete apartment buildings and ruined mosques mixed with sad, pre-fab western strip malls. The asphalt roads had been chewed by tank treads sometime a decade before and never repaired. But intelligence said that an office building in the run-down central district was still running network servers for the al-Nakba.

Organizational Group 47—Renz, Marquez, Pael, Thorn, Paasikivi—were in an old van parked on a side street, waiting. Thorn and Pael—the only two who could pass for local—sat in the front playing the radio and smoking cigarettes. Paasikivi and Marquez squatted in the belly of the machine, using the three-foot-tall degaussed steel case of the EMP coil as a table for Marquez's chess set. Renz kept watch out the tiny tinted windows in the back. Waiting was the hardest part.

The operation was organized in a small-world network, the cells like theirs connected loosely with fifty or a hundred like it around the world and designed to behave organically, adjusting to contingency without need for a central authority.

It gave them, Renz supposed, the kind of flexibility that a war between networks required. But it cost them a solid timetable. They might be called up in the next thirty seconds; they might be waiting for an hour. It might be that allowing the target to survive would be a viable strategy, and they'd all pull quietly out without anyone knowing they'd been there.

Paasikivi sighed, tipped her king with a wooden click, and moved forward in the van, leaving Marquez to chuckle and put the pieces away.

"You're thinking about Anna," Marquez said.

Renz glanced back, shook his head, and turned to the windows again.

"No, I'm winding myself up about the mission."

"Should be thinking about Anna, then. Nothing we can do about the mission right now."

"Nothing I can do about Anna either."

"You going to spend some time with her when this is over?"

"Yeah," Renz said.

"Really, this time?"

It wasn't the sort of question Renz would have taken from anyone but Marquez. He shifted forward, staring out at the sun-drenched street.

"Really, this time," he said.

An out-cell window flashed open. The blond man appearing in it looked harried as an air-traffic controller. Renz supposed the jobs weren't so different.

"OG 47, this is CG 60. Please begin approach to subject. Your target is fifteen minutes."

"Acknowledged," Paasikivi said for them all. Pael flicked his still-burning cigarette onto the sidewalk and started the van. Renz didn't shift his position at the rear, but as he watched the street flow away behind them, the old electric feeling of adrenaline and anticipation grew in his belly.

There were four stages to the operation: penetration, reconnaissance, delivery, and withdrawal. Or, more plainly, get in, look around, do the thing, and leave. They had all rehearsed it together, and everyone knew what to do.

The van turned the corner two minutes later, angled into a ramp down to underground parking. A security guard at the entrance frowned at Pael and barked something that wasn't Arabic but might have been Armenian. Pael replied in Farsi, managing to sound bored and put upon. The guard waved them through. Renz watched the guard turn his back to them.

"Twelve minutes to target," Paasikivi said.

Pael drove past the stairway leading up to the building proper, around a cinderblock corner, and parked across three parking spaces. The first stage was over; they were in. Without a word, Pael and Marquez got out and started walking. Renz increased the size of their windows. Marquez, whistling, moved around a corner and deeper into the parking structure. Pael went up the way they had come, toward the guard and the stairs.

"Pael, you have something at your ten o'clock."

The window with Pael's viewpoint shifted. Beside an old white Toyota, a woman in a birka was chiding a wiry man. The man, ignoring her, began walking toward the stairway.

"Civilians," Pael murmured, hardly loud enough for the link to pick it up.

"Are you sure?" Paasikivi asked.

"Of course not," he said.

"Nine minutes," Thorn said. Hearing the words through the link and in the van simultaneously made them seem to reverberate, carrying a sense of doom and threat they didn't deserve. He felt Thorn tap his shoulder, and, still watching Pael and Marquez, Renz shifted back, his hands resting on the cool metal carrying handles of the EMP coil, but not gripping them yet.

Marquez's window showed Arabic graffiti, oil-stained concrete, a few cars. More than half the lights were out.

"Looks good here," Marquez said.

In Pael's window, the guard glanced back, frowning. Renz watched Pael's hand rise in greeting.

"I'm going to go chat this bastard up, keep him busy," Pael said. "Apart from him, I think we're clear."

The second stage was complete. Paasikivi slid to the front, into the driver's seat. Renz looked across the steel case to Thorn. Thorn nodded, and Renz leaned forward and pushed the rear door open.

"All right," Thorn said. "Renz and I are coming out. If you see anyone about to kill us, speak up." Renz thought his voice sounded bored. It was only a few steps to the wall, but the coil was heavy. His wrists strained as they snugged the metal against the cinderblock wall.

Renz stepped back as Thorn slid adhesive packs around the base of the coil, and then between the side of the metal case and the wall. He checked the time. Six minutes to target.

There were five small, very similar sounds, quickly but evenly spaced. The guard with Pael scraped open a pack of cigarettes, the radio in the van beside Paasikivi popped as she put the key in the ignition, Thorn's adhesive packs went off with a hiss, a bit of gravel scraped under Renz's heel, and something like a cough came from deeper in the garage behind Marquez. Each sound seemed to pick up the next. A little musical coincidence that sounded like nothing so much as a man clearing his throat. Renz noticed it, and then was immediately distracted.

"Someone's back here," Marquez said. Renz caught a movement in Marquez's window. Someone ducking behind a car. "I think we may have a problem."

Everything happened at once, improvised and contingent but with the perfect harmony of a team acting together, so practiced it was like a single mind. Renz drew his sidearm and moved forward, prepared to lay down suppressing fire. Pael, at the front, shot the security guard twice in the chest, once in the head. Paasikivi started the van. Marquez, seeing that Renz was coming, moved quickly backward, still scanning the darkness for movement.

Within seconds, Renz was around the corner, Marquez fifteen or twenty feet ahead of him, a pistol in his hand. Behind them and around the corner, where they couldn't have seen without the link, Thorn had the rear doors of the van opened and waiting, and Paasikivi was turning it around to face the exit. Pael, at the base of the ramp, was dragging the guard out of the roadway.

Something moved to Marquez's left. Renz shifted and fired while Marquez pulled back past him to the corner. When Renz saw his own back in Marquez's window and Marquez braced to fire in Thorn's, he broke off, turned, and ran as Marquez opened up on the darkness. From listening, it would have been impossible to say when one had stopped shooting and the other started.

On the out-cell link, the blond man from OC 60 was saying that OG 47 had been compromised and Paasikivi was shouting at him that they had not. The coil was in place. They were withdrawing.

Marquez broke off as Renz reached the van, turned, and sprinted toward them, white tombstone teeth

bared in what might have been effort or glee. Renz and Thorn both knelt inside the van, guns trained on the corner, ready to kill anyone who came around it.

"Okay," Pael said from the ramp as Marquez reached the relative safety of the group. "Can you come get me now?"

The van surged forward, tires squealing as they rounded the corner - the van coming into view in Pael's window; Pael silhouetted against the blaring light of the street in Paasikivi's.

"Pael! The stairs!" Renz said almost before he realized he'd seen something. There in Paasikivi's window, coming down from the building. He watched as Pael shot the girl—five years old? six?

Time slowed. If they had been compromised, Renz thought, the girl could be wired—a walking bomb. There wasn't enough room in the parking structure to avoid her. If she went off, they were all going to die. Fear flushed his mouth with the taste of metal.

He heard Thorn exhale sharply, and the van sped past the stairway. The dead girl failed to explode. A dud.

"Jesus," Marquez said, relief in the sound of the word. "Oh, sweet Jesus."

Paasikivi stopped for less than a second, and Pael was in the passenger's seat. Renz pulled the rear doors closed and latched them as they went up the ramp and out to the brightness of the street.

They were half a mile from the building when the trigger signal attenuated and the coil sparked out. With a shock like a headache, Renz's link dropped for a half second, leaving the disorienting sensation of only being inside his own head again. It felt like waking from a dream. And then the display windows were back, each showing slightly different views out the front while he alone looked back at a plume of white smoke rising from the town behind them.

By the time they reached the base in Hamburg, the news was on all the major sites. CATC under the orders of the Global Security Council had launched simultaneous attacks on the al-Nakba network, including three opium processing plants, two armories, and a training camp. Also the al-Nakba communications grid and network had suffered heavy damage.

The opposition sites added that a preschool near one of the armories had also been firebombed and that the training camp was a humanitarian medical endeavor. Eighteen innocent bystanders had died, including ten children from the preschool and two teachers.

There was also a girl shot in a minor raid in the Persian Interest Zone. Her name was Samara Hamze. Renz looked at the picture of her on the newsnets—shoulder-length black hair that rounded in at her neck, dark, unseeing eyes, skin fair enough she could have passed in the most racist quarters of Europe if she'd been given the chance. If she'd wanted to.

By the time they'd dropped Pael off in Paris and found seats in a transatlantic carrier, the news cycle had moved on, and the girl—the dud—was forgotten.

Renz had never expected to see her again.

.

"That's the good news. The bad news is it's probably something worse," said the man on the stage.

"Now, this is going to seem a little off-topic, but we may be in some strange territory before we're done here, so I hope you'll all indulge me. Ask yourselves this: Why aren't we all brilliant neurochemists? I don't mean why didn't we choose to go to med school—there are lots of reasons for that. I mean doesn't it seem like if you're able to *do* something, you must know about it? Aaron Ka can play great football because he knows a lot about football.

"But here we are, all juggling incredibly complex neurochemical exchanges all the time, and we're all absolutely unaware of it. I mean, no one says 'Oops, better watch those calcium channels or I might start getting my amygdala all fired up.' We just take ten deep breaths and try to calm down. The cellular layer just isn't something we're conscious of.

"And you can turn that around. Our neurons aren't any more aware of us than we are of them. If you ask a neuron why it fired or muscle tissue why it flexed, it wouldn't say 'Because it was my turn to run' or 'The bitch had it coming.' Those are the sorts of answers *we'd* give. If our cells could say anything, they'd say something about ion channels and charges across lipid membranes. And on that level—on the cellular level—that would be a fine explanation.

"The levels don't talk to each other. Your neurons don't know you, and you aren't aware of them. And, to torture a phrase, as above, so presumably below."

Renz felt Marquez shift in his seat. It wasn't impatience. Marquez was frowning, his gaze intent on the stage. Renz touched his arm and nodded a question.

"I don't like where this is going," Marquez said.

.

When Renz got back from the mission, Anna was sitting at the kitchen table—cheap laminate on peeling-chrome legs—scrolling through another web page on her disease. Outside the dirty windows, the streetlights of Franklin Base glowed bright enough to block out the stars. Renz closed the door behind him, went over and kissed his wife on the crown of her head. She smelled of the same cheap shampoo that she'd used since he met her. The sudden memory of her body when it was young and powerful and not quite his yet sent a rush of lust through him. It was embarrassing. He turned away, to the refrigerator, for some soda.

Anna turned off her screen and shifted. Her movements were awkward, disjointed. Her face was pinched and oddly expressionless. He smiled and lifted a bottle of soda. She shook her head—the movement took a second to get going, and it took a second to stop.

"Douglas Harper had Hulme's Palsy too," she said.

"The serial killer?"

"Yup," she said. "Apparently it's old news. Everyone in the support group knew about it. I'm still green compared to all of them. He wasn't symptomatic. They didn't diagnose it until after he'd been executed."

Renz pulled out a chair and sat, his heels on the kitchen table. The air conditioner kicked on with a decrepit hum.

"Do they think what ... I mean, was killing people related?"

Anna laughed. Her eyes wide, she made an overhand stabbing motion like something out of a murder flick. Renz laughed, surprised to find his amusement was genuine.

"They just think if it had progressed faster, some of those girls might have lived," she said.

Renz took a sip of his soda. It was too sweet, and the fizz was already gone, but it was cold. There wasn't more he could ask than cold. Anna dropped her hands to the table.

"I was going to make dinner for you," she said. "But ... well, I didn't."

"No trouble. I can make something," he said. Then, "Bad week?"

She sighed. She was too thin. He could see her collarbone, the pale skin stretched tight over it.

"The new immunosuppressants gave me the shits," she said, "and I think I'm getting another fucking cold. Other than that, just another thrilling week of broadcast entertainment and small town gossip."

"Any good gossip, then?"

"Someone's screwing someone else even though they're both married. I didn't really pay attention to the details. You? The news feeds made things look pretty good."

Anna's eyes were blue and so light that they made him think of icicles when they caught the light from the side. He'd fallen in love with her eyes as much as her tits and the taste of her mouth. He pushed the sorrow away before she could see it.

"We killed a kid. But things went pretty well otherwise."

"Only one kid? That thing with the preschool ..."

"Yeah, them too. I mean *we* killed a kid. My guys."

Anna nodded, then reached awkwardly across the table. Her fingertips touched his wrist. He didn't look up, but he let the tears come. He could pretend they were for the dud.

"So, not such a good week for you either, huh?"

"Had its rough parts," he said.

"You're too good for this," she said. "You've got to stop it."

"I can't," he said.

"Why not?"

He spoke before he thought. Truth came that way; sudden, unexpected. Like illness. "We'd lose the medical coverage."

Her fingertips pulled back. Renz watched them retreat across the table, watched them fold into her flat, crippled fist. The air conditioner hummed, white noise as good as silence. Renz swung his legs down.

"I wouldn't change anything," he said.

"I fucking would." There was pain in her voice, and it pressed down on him like a hand.

"You know, boss, I'm not really hungry," he said. "Let's go to bed. We can eat a big breakfast in the morning."

Once she was asleep—her breath slow and deep and even—he got gently out of bed, pulled on his robe, and took himself out the front door to sit on the rotting concrete steps. The lawn was bare grass, the street empty. Renz ran his hands over his close-cropped hair and stared up at the moon, blue-white and pale in the sky. After a while, he turned up his link, seeing if there was anyone online.

Paasikivi and Thorn were both disconnected. Pael's link was open with the video feed turned off, but it had been idle for three and a half hours—he was probably asleep. Only Marquez was awake and connected. Renz excluded the other three feeds, considering the world from Marquez's point of view. It looked like he was in a bar. Renz turned up the volume and thin country-pop filled his ears.

"Hey, Marquez," he said.

The video feed jumped and then settled.

"Ah! Renz. I thought you were actually here. Is that your street?"

He looked up and down the empty asphalt strip—block houses and thin, water-starved trees. Buffalo grass lawns that never needed mowing. His street.

"I guess so," he said, then more slowly, "I guess so."

"Looks like the same shit as last time."

"It's hotter. There's more bugs."

Marquez chuckled, and Renz wasn't really on the step outside his shitty base housing, Anna dying by inches behind him. Marquez wasn't entirely in the cheap bar. They were on the link together, in the unreal, private space it made, and it removed the distance between them.

"How's Anna?" Marquez asked.

"She's all right. I mean her immune system's still eating her nerves, but apart from that."

"You sound bitter. You're not cutting out on her, are you?"

"No. I said I'd stay, and this time I will. It just sucks. It all just sucks."

"Yeah. I'm sorry. It's hard when your woman's down."

"Not just that. It *all* sucks. That girl we killed. We call her a dud like she wasn't a kid. What's that about?"

"It's about how a lot of those kids have mommies who strap them up with cheap dynamite. You know that."

"Are we soldiers, Marquez? Are we cops? What the fuck are we doing out there?"

"We're doing whatever needs to get done. That's not what's chewing you, and you know it."

It was true, so he ignored it.

"I've been doing this for too many years," Renz said. "I'm getting burned out. When I started, every

operation was like an adventure from start to stop. Half the time I didn't even know how what I was doing fit in, you know? I just knew it did. Now I wonder why we do it."

"We do it because they do it."

"So why do they do it?"

"Because of us," Marquez said, and Renz could hear the smile. "This is the way it is. It's the way it's always been. You put people out in the world, and they kill each other. It's the nature of the game. Your problem, man, you never read Hobbes."

"The pissing cartoon kid?"

"Five hundred years ago, this guy named Hobbes wrote a book about how the only way to get peace was to give up all your rights to the state—do what the king said, whether it was crazy or not. Fuck justice. Fuck whether it made sense. Just do what you're told."

"And you read this thing."

"Shit no. There was this lecture I saw on a philosophy site. The guy said you build a government so motherfucking huge, it can *make* peace. Grind peace into people with a fucking hammer. Crush everyone, all the time. He called it Leviathan. He thought it was the only way to stop war."

"Sounds like hell."

"Maybe. But you got a better idea?"

"So we're making them be part of our government. And when we get them all in on it, this'll stop."

Marquez's window panned slowly back and forth—the man shaking his head.

"This shit isn't going to stop until Jesus comes back."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Come on, man. You know all this. I said it before; it's not what's really on your mind."

"And what do *you* know about *my* mind?"

"I spend a lot of time there is all."

Renz sighed and scratched the welt on his arm growing where a mosquito had drunk from him. The moon sailed slowly above him, the same as it always had, seen or unseen. He swallowed until his throat wasn't so tight.

"She still turns me on," he said at last. "It makes me feel like I'm ... She's crippled. She's dying and I can't fix it, and all I want to do when I see her is fuck."

"So why don't you?"

"Don't be gross."

"She might want to, you know. It's not like she stopped being a woman. Knowing you still want her like that ... might be the kind of thing she needs."

"You're out of your mind."

"There is no sorrow so great it cannot be conquered by physical pleasure," Marquez said.

"That Hobbes?"

"Nah. French girl named Colette. Just the one name. Wrote some stuff was supposed to be pretty racy at the time. It was a long time ago, though. Doesn't do much compared to net porn."

"You read the weirdest shit."

"I don't have anyone to come home to. Makes for a lot of spare time," Marquez said, his voice serious. Then, "Go inside, Renz. Sleep next to your wife. In the morning, make her a good breakfast and screw her eyes blue."

"Her eyes are blue," he said.

"Then keep up the good work."

"Fuck off," Renz said, but he was smiling.

"Good night, man."

"Yeah," Renz said. "Hey, Marquez. Thanks."

"De nada."

Renz dropped the link but sat still in the night for a while, trailing his fingers over flakes of concrete and listening to the crickets. Before he went to bed again, he ate a bowl of cereal standing up in the kitchen and then used her toothbrush to scrape the milk taste off his tongue. Anna had shifted in her sleep, taking up the whole bed. He kissed her shoulder as he rolled her back to her side. To his surprise, he slept.

At 6:30 in the morning, central time, a school bus packed with diesel-soaked fertilizer exploded in California, killing eighteen people and taking out civilian network access for half of the state. At 6:32, a fifteen-year-old girl detonated herself twenty feet away from the CEO of the EU's biggest bank while he was finishing his breakfast at a restaurant in midtown Manhattan. At 6:35, simultaneous brushfires started outside ten major power transmission stations along the eastern seaboard. At 7:30, Renz was on a plane to New York. At ten minutes before ten, a ground car met him at the airport, and by noon, he was at the site of the attack.

The street should have been beautiful. The buildings soared up around them; nothing in Manhattan was built on less than a cathedral scale—it was the personality of the city. From the corner, he could just catch sight of the Chrysler Building. The café had been elegant once, not very long before. Two blackened, melted cars squatted at the curbside. The bodies had been taken away long before Renz and the others arrived, but the outlines were there, not in chalk but bright pink duct tape.

"Hey, Renz," Paasikivi said as they took in the carnage. "Sorry about this. I know you wanted to see Anna."

"Don't let it eat you," he said. "This is what they pay me for, right?"

Inside, the window of the café had blown in. Chunks of bulletproof glass three fingers thick lay on the starched linen, the wooden floors polished to a glow. The air still smelled like match heads.

The briefing had been short. OG 47 had done this kind of duty before. Renz pulled up an off-cell window on the right margin of his visual field so the forensics experts could demonstrate what they wanted. The

feeds from his cell were stacked on the left. OGs 34 and 102 were security, keeping the area clear while they worked, but he didn't open links to them; things were cluttered enough as it was.

Renz and his cell were the eyes and hands of the deep forensics team—men and women too valuable to risk in the field. A second attack designed to take out agents at the scene was a common tactic. Pael, still in Paris, joined in not because he was useful, but because he was a part of the cell and so part of the operation. He was good to talk with during the quiet times.

The next few hours were painfully dull. Paasikivi and Thorn, Marquez and himself—the expendables—all took simple instructions from the experts, measuring what they were told to, collecting samples of scorched metal and stained linen, glass and shrapnel in self-sealing bags, and waiting for the chatter of off-cell voices to agree on the next task to be done.

Renz and his cell were the eyes and hands, not the brain. He found he could follow the directions he was given without paying much attention. They drove his body; he waited.

They finished just after 8 p.m. local. There were flights out that night, but Paasikivi argued for a night in the city. Renz could feel Marquez's attention on him like the sensation of being watched as Paasikivi and Thorn changed reservations for the whole cell. Renz almost stopped them, almost said he needed to go home and be with his wife. When he didn't, Marquez didn't mention it. With the forensics team gone, Renz arranged the other in-cell windows at the four corners of his visual field. An hour later, they were scattered over the island.

Marquez was on the edge of Central Park, his window showing Renz vistas of thick trees, their leaves black in the gloom of night. Paasikivi was sitting in a coffee shop at the top of a five-story bookstore, watching the lights of the city as much as the people in the café. Thorn sat in a sidewalk restaurant. Renz himself was walking through a subway station, heading south to SoHo because Pael told him he'd like it. And Pael, in the small hours of Paris morning, had taken himself out to an all-night café just to be in the spirit of things.

"I've always wanted to walk through Central Park," Marquez said. "It's probably safe enough, don't you think?"

"Wait until morning," Pael said. "It's too dangerous at night."

Renz could hear the longing in Marquez's sigh, imagined the way he would stuff his hands into his pockets to hide the disappointment, and found to his amusement that he'd done the same. Marquez's gesture seemed to fit nicely on his own evening. The first breeze of the incoming train started to wash the subway platform, fluttering the fabric of his pants.

"I hate days like this," Thorn said, cutting into a steak. In that window, Renz watched the blood well up around the knife and wondered what it smelled like. "The nights, however, go a long way toward making up for it."

Marquez had turned and was walking now, people on the streets around him that would have been a crowd anywhere else. Paasikivi pushed her coffee cup away, stood and glanced back into the bookstore. In Paris, Pael's waitress—a young woman with unlikely red hair—brought him his eggs benedict and poured him a cup of coffee. Thorn lifted a fork of bleeding steak to his mouth. The train slid up to the platform, the doors opening with a hiss and a smell of fumes and ozone.

"All I really want . . ." Renz began, and then let the sentence die.

The girl came out of the bathroom in Pael's Parisian diner at the same moment Renz saw her sitting in

the back of his half-full subway car. Paasikivi caught sight of her near the music department, looking over the shoulder of a man who was carrying her—he might have been her father. Thorn, looking out the restaurant window saw her on the street. Marquez saw her staring at him from the back seat of a taxi.

In all four windows and before him in the flesh, the same girl or near enough, was staring at him. Pale skin, dark eyes, shoulder-length hair that rounded in at the neck. Samara Hamze. The dead girl. The dud.

As one, the five girls raised a hand and waved. Renz's throat closed with fear.

Thorn's voice, deceptively calm, said, "Well that's odd."

"Pull back," Paasikivi snapped, "all of you get out of there."

"I'm on a moving train," Renz said.

"Then get to a different car."

The others were already in motion. Walking quietly, quickly, efficiently away from the visitations toward what they each hoped might be safety. He heard Paasikivi talking to an off-cell link, calling in the alert. Renz moved to the shaking doors at the front of the car, but paused and turned, his eyes on the girl at the back. There were differences. This girl had a longer face, eyes that made him think of Asia. The woman beside her—the girl's mother, he guessed—saw him staring and glared back, pulling the girl close to her.

"Renz!" Paasikivi said, and he realized it hadn't been the first time she'd said it.

"Sorry. I'm here. What?"

"The transit police will be waiting for you at the next station. We're evacuating the train, but before we start that, I want you out of there."

"This isn't an attack," Renz said, unsure how he knew it. The mother's glare, the protective curve of her body around her child. "I don't know what it is, but it's not an attack."

"Renz," Marquez said. "Don't get heroic."

"No, guys, really," he said. "It's all right."

He stood and walked down the trembling car. Mother and child watched him approach. The mother's expression changed from fierce to frightened and then back to a different, more sincere fierceness. Renz smiled, trying to seem friendly, and squatted in front of them. He took out his CATC agent's ID and handed it to the mother. The darkness outside the windows gave way to the sudden blurred pillars of a station.

"Ma'am," he said. "I'm afraid you and your girl are going to have to come with me."

The doors hissed open. The police rushed in.

.

"I don't like where this is going," Marquez said.

"Some of you may have heard of the singularity," the man on the stage said. "It's one of those things that people keep saying is just about to happen, but then seems like it never does. The singularity was supposed to be when technology became so complex and so networked, that it woke up. Became conscious. It was supposed to happen in the 1990s and then about once every five years since then. There's a bunch of really bad movies about it.

"But remember what I said before. *Levels can't communicate*. So, what if something did wake up—some network with humans as part of it and computers as part of it. Planes, trains, and automobiles as part of it. This girl is like an individual human cell—a neuron, a heart cell. That man over there is another one. This community is like an organ or a tissue; even before we were linked, there've been constant communications and interactions between people. What if conscious structures rose out of that. Maybe they got a boost when we started massive networking, or maybe they were always there. Call them hive minds. We might never know, just like our cells aren't aware that they're part of us.

"And these hive minds may have been going along at their own level, completely unaware of us for ... well, who knows? How long did we go along before we understood neurochemistry?

"I know we're all used to thinking of ourselves as the top. Molecules make up cells, cells make up tissues, tissues make up organs, organs make up people, but people don't make up anything bigger. Complexity stops with us. Well, ladies and gentlemen, it appears that ain't the case."

"Do any of you understand what the hell this guy's talking about?" Pael asked. From the murmur of voices in the room, the question was being asked across more links than theirs. The speaker, as if expecting this, stepped back and put his hands in his pockets, waiting with an expression like sympathy, or else like pity.

"He's saying there's a war in heaven," Marquez said.

"No, he isn't," Renz said. "This isn't about angels. It's minds. He's talking about minds."

The man stepped forward again, holding up his hands, palm out. The voice of the crowd quieted, calmed. The man nodded, smiling as if he was pleased with them all.

"Here's the thing," he said. "Some of you have already seen the hole in the model. I said levels of complexity can't talk to each other. That's not quite true. You do it every time you drink a glass of wine or go on antidepressants. We understand neurons. Not perfectly, maybe, but well enough to affect them.

"Well, the only theory that fits the kind of coordinated coincidences we've been seeing is this: something up there—one level of complexity up from us—is starting to figure out how to affect *us*."

.

When Paasikivi interrupted the debriefing and told him, Renz didn't immediately understand. He kept having visions of bombs going off in the doctor's office, of men with guns. It was the only sense he could make of the words *Anna's in the hospital. She's had an attack*.

Her room stank of disinfectant. The hum and rattle of the air purifier was almost loud enough to keep the noise of the place at bay. White noise, like the ocean. She managed a smile when she saw him.

"Hey," she said. "Did you see? Salmon are extinct again."

"You spend too much time on the net," he said, keeping his voice gentle and teasing.

"Yeah, well. It's not like you take me dancing anymore."

He tried to smile at it. He wanted to. He saw the tears in her eyes, her stick-thin arms rising unsteadily to him. Bending down, he held her, smelled her hair, and wept. She hushed him and stroked the back of his neck, her shaking fingers against his skin.

"I'm sorry," he said, when he could say anything. "I'm supposed to be here fluffing your pillows and stuff, not ..."

"Not having any feelings of your own? Sweetie, don't be stupid."

He was able to laugh again, a little. He set her down and wiped his eyes with his shirtsleeve.

"What do the doctors say?" he asked.

"They think it's under control again for now. We won't know how much of the damage is permanent for another week or two. It was a mild one, sweet. It's no big deal."

He knew from the way she said it, from the look in her eyes, that *It's no big deal* meant *There's worse than this coming*. He took a deep breath and nodded.

"And what about you?" she asked. "I saw there was some kind of attack that got stopped in New York. Did they try a follow-up to the restaurant?"

"No, it wasn't an attack," he said. "It was something else. It's really weird. They've got all the girls who were involved, but as far as anyone can tell there's no connection between them at all. It was some kind of coincidence."

"Girls?"

"Little ones. Maybe five, six years old."

"Were they wired?"

"No, they were all duds. And they weren't linked to any networks. They were just ... people," Renz said, looking at his hands. "I hate this, Anna. I really hate this. All of it."

"Even the parts you like?"

The memory of exhilaration passed through him, of setting the coil, of fear and excitement and success. The feeling of being part of something bigger and more important than himself. The warmth of Anna's body against him as they danced, or as they fucked.

"Especially the parts I like," he said. "Those are godawful."

"Poor sweetie," she said. "I'm sorry, you know. I wouldn't have it like this if I could help it. I keep telling my body to just calm down about it, but ..."

She managed a shrug. It was painful to watch. Renz nodded.

"Well, I wouldn't want to be in depths of hell with anyone else," he said.

"Now *that* was sweet," she said. Then, tentatively, "Have you thought about going to the support group?"

A lot of the people in my group have husbands and wives in it. It seems like it helps them."

"I'm not around enough. It wouldn't do any good."

"They've got counselors. You should at least talk to them."

"Okay. I'll talk to them. I've got leave coming up soon. I can soldier though until then."

She laughed, looked away. The light caught her eyes just right—icicles.

"What?" he asked.

"Soldiering through. It's just funny. You've got your war, honey, and I've got mine."

"Except you're the enemy too."

"Yeah, it does have that war-between-the-states feel to it," she said, and grinned. "There's a guy in my group named Eric. You'd like him. He says it's like having two people in the same body, one of them trying to live, the other one trying to kill the first one even if it means dying right along with."

"The good him and the bad him," he said.

"That's a matter of perspective. I mean, his immune system thinks it's being pretty heroic. Little white cells swimming around high-fiving each other. Hard to convince those guys to stop doing their jobs."

Renz shook his head. Anna's fingers found his, knitting with them. The air purifier let out a pop and then fell back to its normal grinding.

"Is everyone in your group that grim?"

"They haven't gotten to a place where they divide children into wireds and duds, but yes, there's a grimmish streak to them."

"Sounds like Marquez's kind of people."

"And how is the group mind?" Anna asked.

"Pretty freaked about the New York thing."

"So what exactly happened?"

He wasn't supposed to tell her. He did.

.

"Something up there—one level of complexity up from us—is starting to figure out how affect *us*," the man said. "The question is what we're going to do about it. And the answer is nothing. What we have to do is *nothing*. Go on with our work, the same as we always have. Let me explain why that's critically important.

"So far, the anomalies all have the same structure. They're essentially propaganda. We see the enemy approaching us in a friendly, maybe conciliatory manner. We start thinking of them as cute little girls and

nice old women. Or else we're flooded with death reports that remind us that people we care about may die. That we might.

"And maybe we take that into the field with us. In a struggle between two hive minds, that kind of weakening of the opposition would be a very good move. Imagine how easy it would be to win a fistfight if you could convince the other guy's muscles that they really liked you. The whole thing would be over like that," the man said, snapping.

"We all need to be aware. We all need to keep in mind what's going on, but if we change our behavior, it wins. Let the other side get soft, that's fine, but we can't afford to. If this thing up there fails, it may give up the strategy. If we let it get a toehold—if what it's doing works—there's no reason to think it'll ever stop.

"Now, there is some good news. Some of you already know this. There are chatter reports that these incidents are happening to terrorist brigades too, so maybe one of these things is on our side. If that's the case, we just need to make sure the bad guys get soft before we do."

Renz shook his head. His mind felt heavy, stuffed with cotton. Marquez touched his arm.

"You okay?"

"Why does he think there's two?"

"What?"

The man was going on, saying something else. Renz leaned in to Marquez, whispering urgently.

"Two. Why does he think there are two of these things? If there's only one, then it's not a war. If this is ... why would it be a fight and not a disease? Why couldn't it be telling us that this isn't supposed to be the way things are? Maybe the world's like Anna."

"What's the difference?" Marquez asked.

"With a disease you try to get better," Renz said. "With a war, you just want to win."

"Now before we go on," the man on the stage said, "there are a couple of things I want to make clear."

He raised his hand, index finger raised to make his point, but the words—whatever they were—died before he spoke them. Renz's link dropped, Pael and Paasikivi and Thorn vanishing, Marquez only a body beside him and not someone in his mind. There was a half-second of dead silence as each agent in the room individually realized what was happening. In the breathless pause, Renz wondered if Anna was on the net and how quickly she would hear what had happened. He heard Marquez mutter *shit* before the first explosions.

Concussion pressed the breath out of him. The dull feeling that comes just after a car wreck filled him, and the world turned into a chaos of running people, shouted orders, the bright, acidic smell of explosives. Renz stumbled toward the exits at the side of the hall, but stopped before he reached them. It was where they'd expect people to go—where many of the agents were going. Marquez had vanished into the throng, and Renz reflexively tried to open the link to him. Smoke roiled at the high ceiling like storm cloud. Another more distant explosion came.

The auditorium was nearly empty now. A series of bombs had detonated on the right side of the hall - rows of seats were gone. The speaker lay quietly dead where he'd stood, body ripped by shrapnel. Fire spread as Renz watched. He wondered if the others were all right—Paasikivi and Thorn and Pael.

Maybe they'd been attacked too.

There were bodies in the wreckage. He went through quickly, the air was thickening. Dead. Dead. Dead. The first living person was a man a little older than he was, lying on the stairs. Salt-and-pepper hair, dark skin, wide hands covered in blood.

"We have to get out," Renz said. "Can you walk?"

The man looked at him, gaze unfocussed.

"There's a fire," Renz said. "It's an attack. We have to get out."

Something seemed to penetrate. The man nodded, and Renz took his arm, lifted him up. Together they staggered out. Someone behind them was yelling, calling for help.

"I'll be back," Renz called over his shoulder. "I'll get this guy out and I'll be right back."

He didn't know if it was true. Outside, the street looked like an anthill that a giant child had kicked over. Emergency vehicles, police, agents. Renz got his ward to an ambulance. The medic stopped him when he turned to go back.

"You stay here," the medic said.

"There's still people in there," Renz said. "I have to go back. I'm fine, but I have to go back."

"You're not fine," the medic said, and pulled him gently down. Renz shook his head, confused, until the medic pointed at his arm. A length of metal round as a dime and long as a pencil stuck out of his flesh. Blood had soaked his shirt.

"Oh," Renz said. "I ... I hadn't noticed."

The medic bent down, peering into his eyes.

"You're in shock," he said. "Stay here."

Renz did as he was told. The shapes moving in the street seemed to lose their individuality—a great seething mass of flesh and metal, bricks and fire, moving first one way and then another. He saw it as a single organism, and then as people, working together. Both interpretations made sense.

Firemen appeared, their hoses blasting, and the air smelled suddenly of water. He tried to link to Marquez, but nothing came up. Someone bound his arm, and he let them. It was starting to hurt now, a dull, distant throbbing.

He caught sight of a girl as she slipped into a doorway. So far, no one else seemed to have noticed her. Renz pushed himself up with his good arm and walked to her.

But she wasn't the same—not another ghost of Samara. This child was older, though only by a year or two. Her skin was deep olive, her hair and eyes black. Flames glittered in her eyes. Her coat was thick and bulky even though it was nearly summer. She looked at him and smiled. Her expression was beatific.

"We have to stop this," he said. "It's not war, it's a sickness. It's a fever. We're all part of the same thing, and it's dying. How are we going to make this *stop*?"

He was embarrassed to be crying in front of a stranger, much less a child. He couldn't stop it. And it was

stupid. Even in his shock, he knew that if there was something up there, some hive mind sick and dying in its bed, he could no more reach it by speaking to this girl than by shouting at the sky. Could no more talk it out of what was happening than he could save Anna by speaking to her blood.

Renz saw the girl before him shift inside her coat, and understood. An Arab girl in New York in a bulky coat. A second attack to take out the emergency services answering the first one.

"Please. We have to stop this," Renz said. "You and me, we have to stop." The girl shook her head in response. *No, we don't.*

"God is great," she said, happily. Like she was sharing a secret.

The End