

HARBINGERS

Severna Park

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In '06, Navardie and I found the aliens in a salty puddle at the top of a hill in what was, at the time, Tanzania. The hill was the only one for miles, spume from the meteor that had made Ngorongoro Crater Lake. Maybe the meteor had something to do with why they were there to begin with. We didn't notice them at first. It wasn't like they jumped out at us.

Navardie shaded her eyes against the noon sun and peered down at the blue eye of the lake in the valley below. "Look, Annmarie," she said. "Lions!"

I was stretched out, belly-down, still breathless from the climb. Maybe she could see lions way down there, but to me they were just little flecks in the colorless dust. I rolled over and wiped the sweat and dirt off the jack in my wrist. I hadn't been online in the six months since I'd been in Tanzania, but rubbing the metal bud was a habit, like fingering a charm.

I squinted down the other side of the hill where our pilot was contemplating the Piper-Nocturne's starboard engine which, for its own reasons, had decided to quit for the day. From where we were, the plane seemed to be floating in a sea of tall grass with only the cockpit and tailfin visible. In a minute it might have sunk out of sight, into the warm earth of the savanna.

Nav looked over my shoulder. "You could've rented a plane that worked, Annmarie."

"You're the one who wanted to go to Olduvai."

"I thought you wanted to come."

"I did," I said, "I do."

She rubbed her forehead and smeared white dust over her dark skin. "We'll never get back to Dar by sundown," she said. "What if someone finds out we're off base?"

"What're they going to do?" I said. "Kick us out of the country?"

They were going to anyway. Back in the capital, Dar es Salaam, the Tanzanian government was positioning itself to shut down the US YouthCorps, and that was us. Getting rid of us foreigners might appease the New African Congress guerrillas for a while, but everyone knew that US troops were waiting just north, in Kenya. If the NAC decided to flex its muscle in Tanzania like it had in Rwanda, and points south ... well. Tourist trips to Olduvai would be out of the question for a long time.

Nav sighed and smoothed her short hair. "I'm thirsty," said Nav. "Did you bring a canteen?"

I hadn't. I grinned at her. "Should I run and get you one?" I might have.

Nav was the kind of straight girl I get these terrible crushes on. She knew. I'm sure she knew. I angled a thumb at the lake below. "You could go down there."

"And get eaten by the lions?" She peered over the rocky edge of the hilltop. "There's water right here."

I looked. A pool of water cached in a hollow, shallow and hot blue, like the sky. It was just out of reach from where we were. "Probably contaminated," I said.

"Its fine," said Navardie. "It's just rain water."

She edged down over loose stones on her hands and knees. I sat up, worrying that there was a chance of her falling off the hill and plunging to her death.

"Wait a sec," I said, and scrambled down after her as she slid out of sight.

Nothing was growing around the puddle, which should have been a warning sign. Aliens below! Hell. I should have seen it coming.

She stuck her fingers in the water.

"Don't drink it," I said. "You know what kind of slime might be in there?"

She tasted her thumb. "It's salty."

"Mineral runoff," I said, and peered down, and saw them.

Just underneath the surface. No bigger than a big potato. Pale, soft, wrinkled like wads of paper. There were eight? Nine? Were they connected to each other?

I thought they were some kind of tuberous plant at first, or molting crustaceans, somehow trapped at 700 feet above sea level. Then I started thinking that they might be shallow-water cousins of those prehistoric fishes which traveling biologists "discover" on dinner dates with the local hunter-gatherers.

I also knew, even then, that the answer was none of the above.

"What the fuck are those things?" said Nav, her salty thumb frozen, inches from her mouth.

"Hell if I know."

In the distance, the Piper's engine choked, then roared, over-gassed, revving high so we could hear it.

Navardie steadied herself against the gravel slope and stood. "Let's go," she said.

I stared at the things under the water. Polyps? Worms?

I put my hand in the water.

Tepid.

"Annmarie!"

I reached deeper, and touched the nearest one.

Soft. Witherly-feeling. Like the skin of a very old woman. It didn't seem to have any teeth or stingers. I put my hand around it.

"I want to take it back to the plane," I said, and expected her to object.

When I looked up, she was rubbing her thumb—the one she'd dipped into the pool.

"It'll die," she said. "You can't take it out of there."

"It'll fit in a canteen," I insisted. "Will you get a canteen?"

She tucked her hand under her other arm. "Leave it, Annmarie."

I hesitated. And then I felt it.

A twinge of curt refusal where my palm was touching it.

The sensation was like a color, pale violet.

And then it disappeared.

Not that slick, spiny twist of muscle, as in escaping fish. The Grub just faded—and then my hand was numb. The numbness froze around the jack in my wrist and shot up to my elbow. I jerked out of the water—deeper than I'd thought and empty now. The things—the Grubs—were gone.

Navardie grabbed my hand with fingers I couldn't feel. The skin around my jack had puckered and turned blue.

"Let's go," I said, "let's go!"

We ran down the side of the hill, back to the plane. The pilot, who thought we were out of our minds anyway, turned right around and took us home to Dar es Salaam. We never got to Olduvai. Not on that trip, anyway.

The YouthCorps doctor said it was just an allergic reaction to something I'd touched, and the numbness went away after a few hours. He did ask a lot of questions about what exactly we'd put our hands into, but neither Nav nor I gave him very helpful answers.

I'm not sure why. I mean, I never said to myself, Annie-girl, you touched alien flesh back there at

Ngorongoro. I'm sure Navardie never said anything of the kind to herself either, or anyone else, but neither of us could shake the experience. The YouthCorps sent us out to do water sampling and crop evaluations for the locals, as usual, but nothing was the same.

Part of it was the planeloads of American troops at President Mwinyi International Airport. Part of it was the dream I was having. Up on the hill. Arm in the water. Thing disappears. Arm goes numb. Over and over and over. In two weeks, when the Tanzanian government decided we were spies and had to get out, I was almost too frazzled to care.

Navardie and I met Renata in the bar at The President Mwinyi Dar es Salaam Haven of Peace International Airport. We were waiting to be banished and I assumed that Renata was from the US Department of Foreign Affairs, which was why I answered her questions. She had a clipboard, and a cute little khaki outfit, and a nametag. Renata Frey. She had—I don't know—an aura of authority? It was more than that. The way her knee bumped mine under the table made my heart jump around. Brown eyes, a coffee-with-cream complexion, hair combed down with a minimum of fuss. She was maybe a year or two older than me. I thought she looked pretty darn good.

I could see her see through me and Navardie, deciding which categories we fit into. I could have told her what she wanted to know, but it was more interesting to watch her figure us out. Navardie and Annmarie. Both left-wing, middle class, US of A rebels. Both suckered into the YouthCorps on the pretext of international good works, and then turned out as spies. Both pissed off about that. Nav: mahogany-red and sunburned. Annmarie: sunburned-white, and smelling like aloe gel.

I saw it when Renata came to the conclusion that Nav and I were not sleeping together. I saw Nav slide into Renata's heterosexual column. Renata smiled her sparkly brown eyes at me, and I went into that other column.

"A shame you have to leave," she said. "Tanzania's a lovely country. This part of the continent is spectacular, if you know where to go."

"We were at Ngorongoro two weeks ago," said Nav, sipping on her third Kenya Extra Brau.

"Ah." Renata nodded at me. "Stunning, yes?"

"Yes," I said. "It's a shame we have to leave."

Renata flipped the pages on her clipboard. "It's not safe to stay, though. The New African Congress has a dozen nuclear warheads."

"That isn't true," I said. "It's a scare tactic by the guerrillas."

"Or a rumor started by the government," said Nav.

"I wouldn't want to hang around to find out for sure," said Renata. "The real tragedy is that this is the place where it all began. You know?"

"Cradle of human consciousness. Olduvai, homo erectus, the missing link and all that. A couple of warheads, and it's all gone." She snapped her fingers. "You look around and you just don't see a lot of progress in the last hundred thousand years. We might as well still be hitting each other over the head with rocks."

She gave Nav a challenging smile, and I could feel Nav decide never to be friends with her. If Renata hadn't been of a roundabout African descent, I think Nav would have nailed her right there for what bordered tentatively on racist comments.

"Progress?" I said, because Nav wasn't going to. "You mean the Africans in particular? There're wars like this everywhere."

"Exactly," said Renata. "There are wars like this everywhere. Don't you wonder why that is? After a hundred thousand years, shouldn't there be something new in the works?"

I glanced at Nav, who raised an eyebrow over the Extra Brau. This wasn't exactly the type of conversation one might expect to have with someone from the Department of Foreign Affairs.

"Uh," said Nav. "You mean, like, evolution?"

Renata nodded. "A lot of people are about to get killed for no good reason. You can make as many nice speeches about peace as you want. We still end up with dead bodies for the sake of food, mates, and territory."

"That's awfully simplistic," I started to say, but Nav'd had enough and was getting to her feet.

"Look at the time," she said. "When does our flight leave?"

I started to look at my watch, but Renata was taking an envelope off her clipboard. She opened it and put a photo on the table.

"Before you go," she said, "have a look at this."

I looked. The bar wasn't very bright and the picture wasn't very good, but I saw everything, instantly.

At the far end of a dark room was a fish tank—a big one. The Grubs floated, mostly below the surface, greenish, grayish, the color of internal organs. They were shaped like animal carcasses, without heads or legs, or tails. Wide in the middle, narrow at each end. They clung to each other the way elephants do, trunk to tail, trunk to tail, except it was impossible to tell the front from the back.

My arm went numb like it did in my dream.

Navardie rubbed her right hand, her face gone ashy under mahogany red.

"You saw them," said Renata.

We nodded.

"Where?" whispered Renata.

We looked at each other and back at her.

"Ngorongoro," said Renata, answering for us. "Two weeks ago." She got up fast enough to knock her chair over, flipped two business cards on the table, scooped up her photo and clipboard and all but ran out of the bar.

They were calling our flight. Navardie held my hand all the way to the gate. I couldn't figure out why I was so incredibly cold. Somewhere over the Atlantic, I finally looked at Renata's card.

Renata Frey, no phone, no address, no business or anything. Just a v-dress at the bottom—a net I've never heard of.

Brd.Lvndr.

"Board Lavender," said Navardie's crystalline image on my JackMac, via v-mail. "What is that? Some kind of cyberdyke thing? Have you logged on?"

Neither of us had mentioned it before, but I think we were both dwelling on it—them—Renata—for different reasons. It'd been four months since we came home, and now it was the very dead of winter. Almost Christmas. I was living in my mom's house in Arlington, Virginia. Nav was in Baltimore commuting to a civilian job at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds. I'd only seen her once since we'd gotten back, and I wasn't working. I didn't feel like it.

I missed the sun, the dust.

The breathless air of impending war.

I missed all that and my arm hurt. The skin around my jack looked infected—soft and swollen and hot, but the doc said no. Just an allergic reaction to something I'd touched.

I hadn't logged on to Board Lavender. I'd come close, though.

And today. Well.

Something about Nav's message pushed me into slow motion. I cleared the JackMac's screen and her message vanished. The feeling of metal under my wrist, plug to socket, was cool, a relief. A wet rag

to a fever.

I accessed mom's carrier, and typed in Renata's v-dress.

Brd.Lavender.

I felt a shock in the center of my palm.

Terminal Protocol?

I blinked but there was nothing on the screen. The ID request was all in my head, behind my eyes. I knew I was staring into space like a zombie. I certainly didn't know what the terminal protocol was. But there was a twinge in my arm. The air behind my eyes changed color.

And I was.

On Board.

Renata sits calmly on a big stone. Her eyes show the reflection of the landscape around us. The violet glass bowl of the sky. Dry hills and washed out gullies. I look around. This cyber site seems a lot like the scrub desert in southern California, but flatter. And hotter. The heat is curiously real. The stones and the horizon have crystalline edges like they would in an everyday piece of v-mail, but this locale has more sensory data attached. It's disorienting, like an acid trip. In the distance I see faint traces of archaeological digs.

"This is Olduvai," I say.

Renata leans forward, brown eyes intent. "Come back," she says.

"Come back?" I say. "Where? To Africa?"

"I need you." She's not responding to me. It's a recording. She points to the ground. An airline ticket is lying in the dust. The destinations are; Baltimore to London. London to Cairo. Cairo to Dar es Salaam. Tanzania. My heart pounds. My cyber palms sweat in the cyber heat. If I pick up the ticket, the reservation info will be on my screen when I open my eyes. I can pack in half an hour. I can be there. I kneel down, and touch the ticket.

Olduvai fades to purple, then black.

Nav met me at the Baltimore-Washington International Airport and put a hard-copy of the Baltimore Sun on the lunch counter. The headline on the end-page of the World section was:

COMPROMISE LIKELY BETWEEN TANZANIAN FACTIONS

"Don't you believe it," said Nav.

"I don't."

"What're you going to do when you get there?" she asked. "Take that woman up to the hill and show her what we saw?"

"I don't know."

"You'd better figure it out," said Nav, and lowered her voice. "What if she's the wrong person to find them? What if you're—I don't know—betraying them or something?"

"I think they belong to her," I said.

"Why can't she find them without you?"

Because I can feel those things in my arm. I'm like a weather vane or a divining rod. Renata can point me in the right direction and I can lead her right to them. "I have to go back," I said.

"You're going to get shot," she whispered.

"I'll be okay." I got up and gave her a nervous little kiss on the cheek. She walked me to the International gate, crossed her arms and watched me disappear down the corridor.

Tanzanian sunlight streamed into Renata's apartment. It tinted the whitewashed shadows, changing

them from dull gray to mauve and made the cheap flat look as opulent as a painting by Delacroix. Outside the window in the marketplace below, biting black flies tormented the black-clad women. Up here on the third floor, we were unmolested, but it was just as hot.

I sat on the bed by the window waiting for the periodic breeze from the fan on the corner table as it buzzed back and forth in the stifling afternoon. Renata sat across the room in the only chair, fidgeting with the dirty white wire that ran from the jack in her wrist to the black box in her lap as she waited for Board Lavender. Her cheeks were flushed with the heat and her eyes were closed, but it seemed as though she was staring intently at the water stain on the wall above the window. The one we both thought looked like a Grub.

Renata jerked in the chair and turned to me. "Jack in," she said. "I'm there."

I opened the JackMac next to me on the mattress and slid the chrome plug into the metal socket in my wrist.

The shock in the center of my palm was the connect signal.

The taste in my mouth was the dust.

Dry hills. Washed out gullies. Olduvai.

Nav hurries toward us, raising puffs of dust, panting. *You left too soon, Annmarie. The Grub things are here at Aberdeen.*

Again, the weird realism. Sweat is beading on Nav's upper lip. It glitters in the tight curls around her forehead. I can almost smell her perfume.

She makes a wildly impatient motion, and I can feel the current in the air as she moves. *I think they know I was at Ngorongoro. I think they know everything and they're waiting to see what I do next.*

How many Grubs do they have? asks Renata.

There were seven to begin with. Something happened to one of them. By the time they were put into the big tank—you know—the one you showed us in the picture at the airport.

She's so scared I can almost feel her heart pounding. I take her hand and my arm tingles where her thumb brushes it.

Calm down, says Renata. *Just think about it.* She makes an abstract motion with her hands, as though she's making an adjustment on a keyboard and a big window opens in the violet sky. Through it, I can see a long black table with a dozen people seated around it. Several are in uniform. One is an Army colonel. Everyone in the room has a three-inch-thick bound report in front of them.

This is the meeting they asked you to attend? says Renata.

Nav swallows, then nods.

Did they tell you why you were invited?

No, says Nav.

In the recording—or whatever it is—I can see Nav sitting uncomfortably at the edge of a wooden chair, a white lab coat over her blue suit. At the far end of the room, there are two fish tanks. One is small, a plexi travel tank on a wheeled cart. The Grubs are in that one, six of them, each about the size of a deflated football, floating mostly below the surface. The other one must have a hundred gallons of salt water in it, and Nav is right. I recognize it from the photo Renata showed us in the airport. The only thing that's different is that the Grubs are in the small tank.

I squint at the images, and feel the muscles in my face move uselessly.

The Grubs are the same. Greenish, grayish. The color of internal organs.

There were seven of those things at Ngorongoro, I say.

I know, says Renata.

A rustle of paper as the people around the table fold back the cover page of the report. Navardie

quickly does the same. The first line of the first page reads:

Genetic inconsistencies, anatomical differences, and unfamiliar DNA configurations make for a plausible argument that the Ngorongoro Organisms (N. O.) are not native to this biosphere.

They've done a dissection, says Renata. At least now we know for sure.

Nav looks at me, eyes wide. She doesn't say it, but her expression does. *We?*

The Colonel steeples his fingers and frowns across the table at Navardie.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of keeping this matter secure, he says. There is evidence already that the secrecy of this project has been compromised.

Why is he looking at you like that? I say.

Watch the Grubs, says Renata.

One Grub, one Ngorongoro Organism, quivers in the plexiglas travel tank. It disengages from its neighbor. No one in the room is watching except the recorded Nav, who I can feel is holding her breath. The colonel turns to the next page. Everyone else does the same—except for Nav, whose thumb has a twinge in it—a latent ache, like the pain in my arm. As she watches, the disengaged Grub slowly disappears. Just fades from view. And just as slowly, reappears in the big tank, plain as day.

One by one, the Grubs in the travel tank do the same. One by one, eyes around the long black table turn away from the Ngorongoro Organism report, and stare at the silent show at the end of the room.

Disengage. Disappear. Reappear.

No more spectacular than an eyeblink.

One, two, three.

Four, five, six.

The open window vanishes in the violet sky.

You have to get one of them out, says Renata. They'll kill them all.

Nav turns to her in disbelief. *How am I supposed to do that? Do you know how tight the security is?*

Don't try anything heroic, says Renata. The Grubs can "target" a similar saline environment within a 200 mile range and get away from Aberdeen on their own. All you have to do is take a sample of water from the tank and duplicate it in a bathtub—anything about that size—and wait. You'll only get one, but that's all we need. You'll have to hurry. The political situation here is deteriorating.

You're out of your fucking mind, says Nav, but Renata has disappeared, unplugged, expecting her will to be done.

Nav turns to me, sweat glittering under her lip. *Who the hell is she talking about when she says "we"?*

I don't have any idea.

You're sleeping with her, says Nav accusingly. Doesn't she let you ask questions?

The truth is, I'm afraid we'll stop having sex if I start asking questions like, "Renata, are the Grubs some kind of, um, you know, human-alien evolutionary link or something?" She'd laugh in my face and find herself another divining rod.

It just never came up in conversation, I say uneasily.

Jesus, Annmarie. You're sleeping with an insane woman who wants us to kidnap aliens for her, and you won't ask questions?

What can I say to that? "You're jealous"? But Nav is gone too. I fumble inside my wrist, unplug, and blink into the apartment where the suffocating waft from the corner fan blows across my face.

In the distance, I can hear gunfire.

Tonight the shots came from the next roof over, no more than ten yards away. Stray bullets came through the window, pok-pok-pok, embedding themselves in the far wall of our single room as Renata and I huddled together under the table. From the street, a man shouted in shrill Swahili.

Renata pressed against my shoulder, eyes closed. The wire from the black box bobbed against her wrist, moving with her pulse.

"Did they hit the dish?" I whispered. "Can't you connect?"

Renata didn't answer right away. She pushed her body against me, groped for my wrist socket and slid the plug home.

Not Board Lavender this time. We're in Nav's Baltimore apartment.

I look around to be sure. I've only been here once, but it's her place all right. It's a one-room efficiency with a battered green sofa bed, a dining table and two wooden chairs. There's a fake fireplace with carvings from Tanzania arranged on the mantel. Bolts of kinte cloth hang over the nasty peeling paint on the walls. Here and there she's left the plaster uncovered so she can tape up photos. Zebras and lions. There's a big eight by ten of her and me in front of the YouthCorps station in Dar. There are three doors. One leads to the bathroom, the other to the kitchen. The third, which leads to the staircase outside, is flanked by two small suitcases.

I was thinking at first that Nav had set this up as a virtual homesite, but the tech is too high for anything she could afford. I reach out to touch the wall, and it's solid. I turn to Renata, who's standing behind me.

What is all this? I whisper.

We're online, she says, as if that should explain everything. *Listen.*

For what? I can hear sirens outside—perfectly normal for this area. Nav lives three floors above East Baltimore Street. There's traffic day and night. The firetruck or police car, or whatever it is, fades, and I hear water running behind the closed bathroom door. I frown at the window shade pulled halfway down. It was night in our Tanzanian apartment. It should be broad daylight here and Nav should be at work. But it's dark outside.

According to the clock, it's a little after eleven.

She's here? I ask Renata. *But it should be daylight.*

It's twenty hours later, says Renata.

How? I ask, but she never tells me anything, and doesn't answer this time either.

Shouldn't we knock? I say.

You can try. Renata starts for the bathroom. I scuff nervously along behind her.

Hey Nav, I say. *Guess what?* My voice seems trapped inside my own head, the way it sounds when your ears are plugged. There's no resonance in the room. I don't think Nav can hear us. I realize I'm expecting to feel her presence—not just hear her. The realization is disorienting. For a second, I'm not sure we're here at all.

Renata pauses at the bathroom door, lays her palm against the surface, and then slides through the door without opening it.

Nav—? My palm goes through wood and chipped enamel paint as though it's air. So does the rest of me.

Inside, Nav has no idea we're watching. She's squirting the contents of a syringe into a half-filled bathtub. A fishtank thermometer floats under the faucet, showing ninety-eight point six degrees.

Renata nods. *Good. Just like the Aberdeen tank.*

Navardie stirs gingerly with the tip of the needle, swirling over the blue, no-slip flowers that spread like peculiar fungus over the bottom of the tub. The bathroom is blue, with one window that would look out over the busy street if it weren't painted aquamarine. Nav stands up, puts the empty syringe in the sink and smooths her hair in the mirror. Dull light from the aqua window edges her dark skin, making bluish tints in her blackness and green flecks in her eyes.

She runs her fingers along the grimy back edge of the mirror where it doesn't quite meet the wall and pulls out her passport. The ticket and list of connecting flights is there too. She spreads the paper open and I peer over her shoulder. From Baltimore, Air Egypt flight 382 to London, to Cairo, to Dar es Salaam.

She rubs at the lettering on the dark blue leatherette of the passport's cover like she could wipe it away with her thumb.

United States of America
YouthCorps Volunteer

She should have a different passport, I whisper, forgetting she can't hear. She can't fly into Tanzania with that. They'll shoot her as a spy. Can't you get her a new one?

Too late, says Renata. There's no time.

Outside, a police car rushes past, a meteoric, red-shift shriek in the street below.

There's a weird taste in the air, like raw fish and lime. Then the water in the tub ripples and I look down to see the Grub.

Grub in the tub.

Nav stares at it and almost laughs. She crouches down to examine it, but the thing shows no more sign of life than it did at Aberdeen. Its wrinkled grayish skin has dried on top where the salt water doesn't touch it, tinted blue by the streetlight through the painted window. At best, it appears to be some helpless, prematurely born thing.

Nav's JackMac is leaning against the bathroom wastebasket. She unplugs the electric toothbrush, connects the Mac's power cord, then plugs herself in.

Annmarie?

The bathroom fades to the glaring cyber-brightness of Olduvai. To my surprise, only the two of us are in the desert. Renata is still a plane away in the blue bathroom ghosting through, like a bad image on TV. The bathtub and the Grub floating in it flicker in and out of existence as a trough of water in the arid sand. Renata stands by the sink, half visible, but I am solid enough to cast a shadow.

Navardie! Now I can feel her. Sweat is starting under her breasts. She has a headache. I don't think she's slept recently.

There you are. She frowns past me. *There's something wrong. I can still see my bathroom.*

I wonder if she can see Renata. *I know. So can I.*

She looks around. *Where's your girlfriend?*

I point at Renata leaning over the tub. *Over there.*

Nav squinted and shrugged. *Just tell her I've got it. I'm taking it to the airport. Here's the flight number.* She writes it in the air with her finger—a swirl of pink neon. *See you both tomorrow.* She reaches for her socket, but I grab her arm.

Nav, listen—I have to stop myself. What am I going to say? We're in your apartment? I can feel everything you're doing?

Her arm stiffens and she jabs a finger down the shallow hill to the washed-out gully below.

Jesus! Who the hell is that?

Something is moving in the distance. Renata? I shade my eyes but I know there can't be anyone else here except for us. No one has access codes to Board Lavender and Renata has told me those codes

are hard-wired, right-brain, non-verbal recalls. We couldn't reveal them if we tried.

But it isn't Renata. She's much darker, broad-faced and naked to the waist. She's walking briskly along the dry riverbed, and seems human but smaller, somehow rougher-looking than she ought to be.

Renata? I say, because it can't be anyone else.

The woman looks up with a flat, almost retarded expression.

Who are you? demands Navardie. *What are you doing on this board?*

Take me home, replies the woman. *And hurry. Someone's coming.*

I feel Nav's heart seize and swell to fill her throat. She yanks the plug out of her arm. The desert blinks away and I'm a ghost again in her dark apartment.

Renata is elbow-deep in bathwater, her hands all over the Grub. The phone is ringing in the other room, and I have the feeling its been ringing for some time. Nav bolts out of the bathroom as her machine picks up the call, but the line disconnects. Seconds later, the phone rings again. The machine answers, but whoever it is, hangs up.

There was someone on the Board, *I say to Renata*, trying to yell for emphasis inside the deadened sound of my own head. *I thought it was you, but it was this woman—she wasn't quite—I don't know—she was—*

Renata looks up with an intense, strained expression. *Someone's coming*, she says.

Nav rushes in with an old thermos jug. It's big enough for the Grub, small enough to fit into carry-on luggage. The phone trumpets in the next room.

The thermos slips out of her sweaty hands and tumbles to the floor. The crunching glass inside is a defeating sound.

Navardie stands trembling by the tub while the phone rings, stops, and rings again.

Renata takes my hand. The apartment fades and she pushes me onto my back in the warm sand. The cut-glass color of Olduvai's sky presses down on me as her hands slide under my shirt.

What're you doing? What're you— I shove her away, but my fingers slip on her wet arms. Not her arms—the slick porcelain of the tub. In the desert, the water trough in the sand widens, darkens to a bathwater blue, lukewarm in the bright heat of the day. Fingers tangle in my clothes, and I feel Nav taking off her underpants, dropping them next to the sink. Grit inside my socks dissolves into the bottom of the smooth blue tub. Renata is touching and probing the part of me lying oblivious in her desert, while the rest of me slides inside of Nav.

Not the way I've fantasized it, though.

I find myself in Nav's blue dress, in Nav's dark body, standing with one leg knee-deep in warm water, steadying herself—myself—with one hand on the sill of the aquamarine window.

The Grub has drifted to the far end of the tub, near the drain under the chipped chrome faucet. Nav and I put our other foot in. The surface of the water is starting to feel nearly gelatinous. We bunch the skirt up around our thighs, not taking our eyes off the Grub, which is floating, iceberg-like, mostly submerged. We sit down, feeling weightless and ridiculous, stupid, if truth be told. The dress floats for a moment, then sinks, heaping into a warmish mass against the small of our back. Nav has no idea what she's doing in the tub, but I have a sneaking suspicion. In the desert, Renata pulls my pants all the way off. Inside Nav, I'm no more solid than a thought, and screaming at her to get out of the tub has no effect. She pulls her knees up against her chest, feet together, toes aimed at the mucus-colored glob. It floats closer with some non-existent current, drifts past her knees and touches the inside of her thigh.

I can feel Renata's palms between my legs, cool in the desert heat.

The Grub is warmer than the water, thin and papery. I can feel it against Nav's crotch, not sure where it should go—even with Renata guiding it. Nav's fingers flutter over her belly, but she absolutely cannot bring herself to touch it. It blunders against her labia, then presses her vagina, slick and

insubstantial as a menstrual clot. We dare to peer down between our legs, but there's nothing there to see. Nothing in the tub but Navardie and a whitish trail of slime leading out from under her skirt. Inside, I can feel it moving around, and we realize it's searching for the next opening.

A massive cramp rolls through us as it finds the end of Nav's cervix and tries to squeeze through. Navardie shoves one finger and a thumb inside herself, finds the edge of the thin wet membrane and grabs it with her fingernails. The Grub squirms and I can feel it pulling. A spasm twists through us, clamping her uterus like a pair of pliers. I get a pincer grip on the Grub and a gray, damp piece of it comes away with my fingers. Nav lets out a shriek as it roils and blunders inside her. Then the cramps change. Deeper. Her belly swells like a bad cartoon. It's transferred, like it did from in tank at Aberdeen, and abruptly, Renata's gritty hands are gone. I'm out of Nav's swollen body. I'm a ghost in the apartment again.

Navardie leans back in the tub, panting, holding her belly. The saline content of her blood, her various uterine fluids must be within its parameters of survival. She lays her head against the cool porcelain, breathing hard.

At the door to her apartment, someone is knocking, calling her name, now pounding on the flimsy plasterboard. Navardie lurches out of the tub and grabs her passport, her wallet, awkwardly wringing out the heavy blue fabric of her dress. I follow her helplessly to the bedroom window where she doubles over pushing against fifty years of paint and her own pain.

The window opens halfway and she squeezes out onto the fire escape.

Below is a concrete alley, trashcans, garbage everywhere. One end of the alley opens on West Baltimore Street, where, under the sodium orange streetlights, I can see the featureless cars the military uses when it wants to be discreet.

I follow her down the black iron grillwork, not sure if the pounding on her door has stopped or if the approaching sirens are drowning it out. She scrambles down the wobbly metal stairs. The other end of the alley comes out between two apartment buildings on Pratt, where its easy to catch a cab to the airport.

One flight down. An old man sits inside the window, watching the evening news.

Compromise likely ...

Two flights down. A light comes on. Dogs bark frantically.

The last flight ends at a fifteen foot drop to the pile of garbage. Navardie stuffs the passport inside the top of the dress and squats. She inches forward until her knees are dangling over the orange-lit darkness and the scurry of startled rats. She slides over the end of the fire escape, scraping the backs of her legs. She turns and makes an ungraceful twist, half falling, grabbing the iron bars with both hands. Tires squeal in the street, red and blue lights glare over the somber sodium orange. A police car jerks to a stop at the mouth of the alley. For a moment, she swings there.

I crouch over her as she dangles, soaked and terrified, belly distended. The taste of raw fish is making me nauseated beyond description. I open my mouth to scream for Renata, and a stifling heat envelopes us, thick as dust, pale as violet. The alley brightens. Nav's hands slip on the rough iron and she drops out of sight.

Not into the garbage, or the arms of the police. Just out of sight.

I blink and open my eyes as Renata pulls the plug out of my wrist.

"What was that? What do you think you're doing?" I jumped up in the Tanzanian night, ready to sock her right in the mouth.

"Get down," she whispered. "You'll get hit."

Automatic weapons rattled in the street. She grabbed my wrists and pulled me onto the floor again. In the dim light from the street outside, she looked exhausted.

In that second I could see through her. She was as alien as the Grub, just as out of place here as it

had been in Nav's bathtub. She was just as scared as I was. I would have felt sorrier for her, but she was using me—me and Nav for something I had no way to define.

"Where's Nav?" I demanded.

"You can plug in and find out—"

"I don't want to plug in and find out. I want you to tell me."

Renata's body slumped against the cool plaster wall. "She's at the airport. She's safe. She'll catch her plane in half an hour. We know she lands in Dar tomorrow afternoon."

"We?" I demanded. "Who's we?"

Renata didn't answer. She moved closer, put her arms around me, and let out her breath against my ear.

Far below our window a man let out a rich, satisfied laugh.

The next day the marketplace was deserted except for the flies. Bullet holes stippled the near wall of the building next door. There was a dead body, too, but the angle of the window was wrong, and I couldn't tell if it was a human or some unlucky animal. All I could see were the flies.

Renata took the car keys out of her pocket and checked her watch again. "Are you ready?"

We'd waited as long as we could for Navardie's plane. We knew it took off from BWI on schedule and we knew she was on it. She'd connected in London, and should have taken off from Cairo hours ago. We would have known more about the fighting around us, but our satellite dish had been shot to pieces just before dawn and we couldn't eavesdrop on the BBC anymore. All I could find locally were a few foreign reporters online with their own board, daring each other to go out in the streets. We might have done better if we'd had something primitive, like a radio, or even a walkie talkie.

"They'll cut off the airport," I said for the fiftieth time. "It's the first thing they'll do."

"We'll come around from the other side, by the runway. It's easy."

None of this was going to be easy. "What if the plane doesn't come?" I said. "They must know what's going on. Don't you think they'll land somewhere else? Like Nairobi?"

"No," said Renata. "We know it lands here." She looked at her watch again.

"Let's go."

Outside, distant bullets whined through the hot morning air. Somewhere down the street, I heard a woman screaming.

Renata's car was parked in an alley behind our building. She'd shown it to me before, but I'd never thought it worked. It was a roofless old Toyota LandCruiser with an unmuffled engine, and when she started it, it was so loud there was no way to pretend we might casually drive through Dar without being noticed.

I fastened my seatbelt thinking maybe I shouldn't. If armed guerrillas attacked us, I planned to leap from the car and run run run until I found Nav. Nothing would stop me.

Renata shoved the car into gear, but I put a hand on her arm.

"Look," I yelled over the engine. "You're from the future, right? You must have all kinds of doodads and technology. Why do we have to drive through a war zone for you to get your alien? Just zap them out! Why do you have to risk your neck? Or my neck?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. Sweat trickled down her cheek. "Zap?" she shouted.

"You know what I mean."

She wiped her face. Her hand was trembling. "Stay here if you're afraid."

As if she'd really let me do that. I had a sudden flash of my body under hers in her desert while the rest of me slid into the tub with Nav. Why was she even letting me argue? "Why the hell am I part of

this?" I demanded. "And why did you make Nav take that thing inside her body? Why didn't you do it?"

Her tidy mask of self control disappeared. She opened her mouth and shrieked at me. "My real contacts were executed before I got here! How else was I supposed to get it over three thousand miles of water?"

I stared at her while the engine roared. She stopped looking at me, and glared over the steering wheel instead. I watched as she gulped down all that desperation and fury and made her face settle into its usual fearless pragmatism.

"We're going to get killed," I said. "Is that right? I mean, do you already know?"

She shook her head. More like a shudder. She slammed the Toyota into gear.

"I don't think so."

"You don't think so?" I yelled, and we roared out onto the narrow street.

On a good day, in normal traffic, The President Mwinyi Dar es Salaam Haven of Peace International Airport was a good hour away. Now, with most of the shooting on the rooftops along the main streets, Renata gunned the car through the deserted souks, avoiding the fighting downtown. I thought the trip would take hours, except I'd never driven with her before.

She'd punch the accelerator down, yank the handbrake up, and heel the Toyota into screeching right-angle turns. It was too loud to complain, so I just hung on, one hand cemented around the rollbar, one clamped to my side of the windscreen, not trusting the stringy seatbelt as it cut into my vital organs.

I blinked away from the oncoming rush of narrow walls long enough to see the strip of sky above us, interrupted by laundry lines. Smoke from the burning buildings downtown was blowing in like bad weather.

Another corner and the empty alleyways were history. Under the dust and lowering smoke, donkeys and chickens, dogs and bicycles blocked the way ahead. Crowds of burdened women crammed the street, their youngest children slung across their backs, their worldly goods balanced on their heads in baskets.

We inched along until Renata found a narrow drive between two houses and squeezed the Toyota into it, scraping the walls with the stubs of her rearview mirrors. We bumped over a stack of metal poles and came out on the shallow banks of a stream. The stream was apparently open drainage for the neighborhood, and goats wandered through the big stones, searching for trash. There were no people. Only wooden houses patched with corrugated tin and plastic bags cluttering the far side of the bank. Beyond them, the airport fence quivered in the midday swelter.

We both looked up as the plane came into view, tilted ever so slightly for its final approach to the airport.

"Is that the one she's on?" asked Renata.

"Why are you asking me?"

Impatience flickered over her face. "Because you should be able to feel her. You should be able to feel them both."

I looked up at the plane again and across the unprotected stretch of dry gully. Of course I could feel her. I was afraid to close my eyes because if I did I would find myself in the seat next to Nav. I would be able to see our satellite dish shattered like an eggshell, and I would feel Nav's panic solidify. What was she supposed to do if the plane was allowed to land? Show her passport, give her charming smile and move on? She'd already torn the passport to shreds and thrown it into the chemical waters of the toilet. The Grub was making her as sick as a truly pregnant woman, and if I blinked, I'd be able to see the clear combination of vomit and torn paper, floating in viscous blue liquid.

I swallowed against the taste of puke in my throat. "You can't cross here," I said. "It's full of snipers."

"We don't have a choice," said Renata. "Hang on."

She gunned the Toyota over the rocky drainage ditch, and I grabbed whatever I could to keep from being thrown out of the car. The slums of Dar jounced in nauseating, unfocused motion. Up ahead, I could make out the blurry, leaping forms of the goats as they rushed across this ditch to get out of our way.

Rocks scraped the bottom of the car and something came loose with a high-pitched rattle. I turned to Renata, mouth open to tell her. She ducked sideways and bullets chattered through her side of the windshield.

I yanked open the seatbelt, but I didn't jump out of the car and run. I shoved myself under the dashboard, cheek and elbows pressed against the torn vinyl seat. Renata drove like hell unchained, crouched over sideways, her head sticking out the door. She veered in between two high cinderblock walls, hit the brakes and stared at me, jammed under the dashboard. Her dark hair stuck out in all directions. Her face was waxy and damp as fresh bread dough. "Are you hurt?" she whispered, and pulled me up, with slick, quivering hands.

Further ahead, the houses thinned out and we found the maintenance gate for the runway. It had already been broken open by someone with a much larger vehicle. Twisted chainlink hung like a tangle of gray string.

Renata pulled through the rip in the fence, stopped and took a pair of binoculars out from under the seat. Between us and the concrete walls of the blockhouse terminal, soldiers swarmed around a dirty white DC-10. The passengers stood underneath the tail section, the only shade on the asphalt tarmac.

Renata squinted over the black eyepieces and sucked a breath through her teeth. "I think they're collecting passports."

"Can you see her?"

Renata shook her head and gave me the binocs.

The breathless waves of heat made the image about as clear as objects under rushing water. I squinted and focused, searching the blurs for Navardie's face.

I found three or four middle-aged white men. A family from India. Three women, very dark, all too tall to be Navardie.

"She has to be there," said Renata.

"She is." I couldn't see her, but I could feel the Grub. "How're we going to get her out of there? We'll never get her out."

Renata caught my wrist in her sweaty fingers. She pulled me around in the torn vinyl seat so we were facing each other, and pressed her thumb over the socket in my wrist. She clapped her hand over my eyes before I could say anything, pressing my eyelids down like I was a corpse already. A pain like sharp needles stabbed up the length of my arm.

I didn't even need Board Lavender anymore.

I was inside Nav's body, sweating and nauseated in the shadow of the plane. She swayed in the blast-furnace afternoon and I smelled the subtle odor of other peoples' fear as the soldiers moved through the crowd with a satchel of confiscated identity papers.

Can she feel me? Does she know I'm here? Nav? I want to shake her, to make her trembling legs move. But she'll just get shot in the back if she tries to escape. The most I can do is show her the Toyota, a long way off, quivering like a mirage. She blinks and takes a sharp breath, but we both know it's too far.

At least it is for her.

The Grub twists underneath her blue dress. We're melting like a candle with this thing churning inside while the heat penetrates the soles of our shoes, our clothes, her skin. Anyone, she thinks, anyone can tell this creature is not a child. They may shoot her because it's so obvious that she's carrying a monster in her belly.

A soldier steps in front of her. "Passport."

He's taller than she is, but she can't look up because any motion will make her faint. All she can see is his rumpled uniform shirt hanging loosely over dusty farmer's trousers.

"Passport." This time the gun comes up.

She tries to spread her hands and shrug, but her fingers only get as far as her belly. They flutter, not protective, but pointing out the culprit who brought her here.

The soldier in his farmer's trousers grabs her shoulder and shakes her. Behind him, four more men are pointing rifles at her.

The Grub moves back and forth in her womb, like an animal in a cage. Ngorongoro is a three hundred miles away. It can't make the leap home any more than Nav can make a run for the Toyota.

*Annmari*e, says Renata's voice, very clearly. *Take it.*

"What?" I hear myself saying. *What?*

The Grub lunges and Nav shrieks in agony. Hot fluid sluices down her legs. Her belly heaves, unearthly and demonic. The soldier lets go, stepping back in horrified amazement. He brings his rifle up. In very slow motion, we watch him pull the trigger. The second lags, stretching like taffy, and I can feel the Grub separate. A rushing breath of freshly-turned earth invades Nav's lungs and envelopes her, thick and purple as fog.

And that thing was in me. It filled me from the inside out, swelling like a water balloon under my clothes, stretching and pressing every organ I had. All I could do was scream my head off as Renata drove down the runway, faster than any bullet. She flew through the tangled gate, past the crumbling urban edge of Dar, and through waist-high grass of the surrounding plains, heading due north, to Ngorongoro.

"Nav!" I shrieked. "Where's Nav?" Because I couldn't feel her anymore.

"She's gone," shouted Renata.

"Shot!" I screamed. "You let them shoot her, you bitch!"

"No," she said. "I let it save her."

It took a week to reach the hill at Ngorongoro, driving overland from Dar. The troops on the road kept us off the highway most of the time. We ran out of gas and had to steal more. It all seemed like a useless exercise. We should have headed for the Kenyan border and gone to Nairobi where it was safer. But Renata was driving, not saying much. It was the Grub that was speaking to me, showing me things. Cyber things. It had me up at Ngorongoro and back in the car. It flew me over the points in between—Kilimanjaro, and every little town, from Singida to Oldeani. If the Grub could have had an emotion, I guess I would have said it was excited to be going home.

Finally it showed me Nav, with her toes in the salty pool on top of the hill.

I opened my eyes in the afternoon heat. Renata had stopped under the only tree for fifty miles and was drinking from a canteen.

"I saw her," I pushed myself and my belly up straight in the seat. "I just saw her. Where is she?"

"It'll be easier to explain once we get to Ngorongoro," said Renata. "You can jack in and talk her when we get there."

"But she's dead," I said.

Renata dabbed at a drop of water under her lip. "Not exactly."

"What the hell do you mean by that? I just saw her on your board."

"It's hard to explain," said Renata. "But it's not a board. It's a bridge. Or a tunnel."

"To where?"

"To my time," she said.

I leaned back in the seat to stare at the flawless sky. The ache in my arm, the beating of the hot, dry wind—everything was starting to merge into an unbelievable hallucination where Renata was a time traveler and the Grubs had the power to change—everything.

"I don't believe you," I said.

"I know," said Renata. "It really doesn't matter what you believe. Except that your friend isn't really dead."

Cyber Kilimanjaro rises in the crystalline north and for the first time in a long time, Navardie is relaxing. The gravel slopes of the hill crumble downward, merging far below with the sapphire eye of Ngorongoro crater. Days have passed, she's fairly sure, but she can't decide how long she's been here.

She's keeping an eye out for the Toyota. Annmarie will give birth to whatever it is when she gets here with Renata, so Nav keeps a close watch on the valley below. She's been seeing a lot of things down there in the meantime. Lions. Zebras. A giraffe or two.

As for the Grub ... as distant as it is inside of Annmarie's body, Nav can tell that it's changed. The indistinct bloat is more defined. It has an arm, a leg, a small, soft skull. It kicks now instead of lunging.

Nav shades her eyes in the low cyber sun. There's that woman again. Navardie can see her clearly from up here. Flat-faced. Dark skinned. She gets closer every day, shambling but purposeful. A midwife, thinks Nav.

She looks for all the world like a cross between a chimpanzee and something slightly more than human.

Perhaps that's exactly what she is.